



Part 13: The Meaning of Life

Word ALIVE



Turn, Turn, Turn



Background Notes -

PURPOSE: To present three philosophies of life, pondered by the Israelites mostly during and after the restoration. The three philosophies addressed are life as meaningless (Ecclesiastes), life as suffering (Job), and life as loving (Song of Songs).

AUTHOR: The true author of these three books is not known, but the pseudonym Solomon is used for Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs (also called Song of Solomon).

DATE: Cyrus allowed the return of the Judeans in 538 BC.

STYLE: Job is a play set in patriarchal times. The play was written after the restoration, and the character of Job is probably fictional. Like Ecclesiastes, the style is philosophical reflection. Song of Songs, on the other hand, is a secular romantic poem, included in the Bible because it reflects the passionate romance between God and his people in the form of the two lovers!



Opening Quotes -

“The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!” Job 1:21

“Will you never look away from me, or let me alone for an instant? If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O watcher of men?” Job 7:17

“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” Ecc 1:2

“What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?” Ecc 2:22

“There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven.” Ecc 3:1

“Everything comes from the dust, everything returns to the dust. Who knows if the human spirit mounts upward or if the animal spirit goes downward to the earth?” Ecc 3:20

“When things are going well, enjoy yourself, and when they are going badly, consider this: God has designed the one thing no less than the other so that we should take nothing for granted.” Ecc 7:14

“Fear God and keep his commandments, for that is the duty of everyone. For God will call all our deeds to judgment, all that is hidden, be it good or bad.” Ecc 12:13

“Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand.” Songs 7:1

“Set me as a seal upon your heart; for love is strong as death.” Songs 8:6

the BIG PICTURE		← : LAW, History, Writings, Prophets		← : key covenants in our Father's plan	
12 Periods ▼	Plot ▼	Other books related to period ▼		stories in each period ▼	
BC	🌐 THE BEGINNINGS	GN 1-11	Ps 8, 104	Creation, Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, Noah's ark, Tower of Babel	
1850	👤 THE PATRIARCHS	GN 12-50		Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel), Joseph, Melchizedek	
1250	⚠️ EXODUS FROM EGYPT	EX		Moses, the burning bush, the plagues, passover, exodus	
1200	♣️ JOURNEY TO CANAAN	NM, Jos	LV, DT	Sinai desert, 10 commandments, Levites, Law, Joshua	
1100	👤 THE JUDGE CYCLE	Jg	Ruth	12 tribes, Gideon, Samson, Ruth, Samuel	
1030	👤 KINGS & PROPHETS	1 & 2 S	1 Ch, Ps, Prov	Saul, David, Solomon, Jerusalem, the Temple	
1000	⬛ THE DIVIDED KINGDOM	1 Kg	2 Ch, Prov,	Israel (N), Judah (S), Elijah & Elisha, Isaiah, Assyrian exile	
721 587	🌀 BABYLONIAN EXILE	2 Kg	2 Ch, Tob, Hos, Am, Hab, Is, Jer, Lam, Jl, Mic, Zp, Jon, Nah, Ob, Ez, Dan, Bar	Babylonians, "major" prophets, Isaiah (to Israel), Jeremiah (to Jerusalem), Ezekiel (to the Exiles)	
538	⚙️ THE RESTORATION	Ezr, Neh	Est, Judith, Hag, Zech, Mal, Job, Ecc, Songs	Cyrus, 2 nd temple, 2 nd Law, "minor" prophets, new writings	
163 63	👤 THE REPURIFICATION	1 Mac	Dn, 2Mac, Sirach, Wisdom	Greeks, Maccabean revolt, Hasmonean Dynasty, Romans, Jewish sects (Pharisees, Saducees, Zealots, Essenes)	
AD	👤 JESUS CHRIST	LK	MT, MK, JN	Incarnation, Good News, New Law, Cross & Resurrection	
33 70	👤 APOSTOLIC CHURCH	Acts	Rm, 1&2Co, Ga, Ep, Phil, Col, 1&2Th, 1&2 Tm, Ti, Phm, Hb, Ja, 1P, 2P, 1,2&3J, Jd, Rv	Pentecost, council, journeys, epistles, Body/Bride of Christ	



The Story of Part 13: The Meaning of Life



We now meet three interesting books in the Bible: a play about suffering, a treatise on the uselessness of life, and the saints' favorite book, an erotic love song.

We begin with **Job**, the play on suffering. Satan accuses God of bribing the man Job to keep his faith. God allows Satan to test Job by letting him suffer, as long as he doesn't kill him. Job, we are told, is a good man, and this is what makes his suffering so difficult. To make matters worse, he's got three friends who are trying to convince him that he must be guilty of something since he is suffering so much. The classic arguments come up: God doesn't make mistakes; God rewards good and punishes evil; our suffering is the consequence of our own actions. The three friends were theologically correct. But they were dead wrong about Job. Job's suffering went against the conventional wisdom, and only Job knew it. But Job's faith is even stronger than his suffering. He does not ask God if he had abandoned him, but rather, he complains to God for staring at him so hard! He knows he is under God's magnifying glass, and is complaining that God is withholding fair treatment.

Job did not understand that God does not desire evil, but because of our free will, *allows* it, and draws good from it. While this does not prevent suffering, it presents an opportunity to test our faith. The key question posed by this play is a question posed to the Israelites in light of their tragic loss of the promised land. It is a question God asks us all today: "Will you trust me in the middle of the trouble I have allowed into your life?"

God finally makes his dramatic entrance at the finale of the play. "Were you there," God asks, "when I laid the foundations of the world?" God doesn't apologize, or even answer the question of why Job was allowed to suffer! But Job, who throughout the play had no problem pressing God for answers, suddenly humbles himself in the presence of the Answerer. And just to reassure the Jewish reader that the theological law of just rewards was true, Job was given even more wealth than what was taken away from him at the beginning. But even in the life of the Jews, justice was questionable.

If there is one question as basic as "Why do good people suffer?" it would have to be "What is the meaning of life?" The answer "Useless!" comes back from **Ecclesiastes**, by a Palestinian Jew living after the restoration, like the author of Job. While Job recognized God by his great works in nature, Ecclesiastes is jaded and bored with the sun rising and falling day in and day out, and the same things in life happening over and over again. Life is vain, and figuring it out is like chasing the wind. And the more you know, the sorrier you are. In light of Jewish history, there was no way he would accept the classic theory that God punishes the wicked and rewards the upright, *at least not here on earth*.

Ecclesiastes then plays the role of the wise King Solomon and proceeds to tell us that after all the riches and pleasures that he took part in, he found himself asking, "Is this all there is?" It seemed to make no difference whether he lived wisely or foolishly, so why not live foolishly since it was easier? "I have come to hate this useless life" was his only conclusion. But despite the futile feeling he experiences, Ecclesiastes retains his faith in God, for even when he says that the only happiness is to eat and drink, he recognizes that this comes from God, which somehow justifies enjoying it, provided we obey his commandments and accept the suffering of life.

In fact, there's a time for everything – a time for laughter, a time for tears, a time for gathering, a time for breaking down, a time for being born, a time for dying, a time for peace, and a time for war. Furthermore, there would be a time, not necessarily on this earth, when the upright and the wicked would be truly judged. But while we are here, let's face it. It is useless to try to grasp the meaning of life.

If Job's lesson was trusting God in the midst of suffering, Ecclesiastes is the reminder that everything is on loan, and we should be thankful for what we have by obeying God. But without the perspective of eternity, gratefulness and faith quickly lose their meaning, taking us back to Ecclesiastes' question, why bother with faith? The answer, like in Job, is the Answerer. And the Answerer is, in a word, *love*.

This is the great revelation of the Song of Songs. With no mention of God, the Hebrews who canonized this book knew well that it was saturated with his essence, for God is love. In the form of erotic interludes between lovers, Yahweh (symbolized by Solomon) and his bride (symbolized by the woman), pledge their undying love to one another. There is no relationship more physically intimate between humans than marriage, a relationship referred to by the prophets, continued in the New Testament with the New Israel, the Church, being the Bride of Christ, bound for an eternal exchange of heavenly bliss which pales the most passionate love on earth.

Song of Songs answers the question posed by Ecclesiastes: the meaning of life is *love*. And since God is love, the meaning of life is *God*. There can be no higher goal, for he created everything. Our souls will never find peace until they are reunited with the one who made us. The Jews knew that God loved them, and allowed them to suffer for their own good. This was their faith, their hope, and their love, which conquered any doubts in the hearts of the faithful.

God was slowly preparing his people, for he was, as in the book of Job, about to enter the play he wrote called life.



Defending the Faith: Perfect Happiness

"In light of all the injustice in the world, how can there be a good God? If he exists, why did he make us? What's the purpose of life? Where is true happiness found? Money? Health? Family? Friends?"

Being angry at God at least acknowledges his presence, as it did with Job. In fact, the only plausible explanation of evil is that good exists first. Evil cannot exist on its own, since existence is good, and non-existence is not evil (it is simply nothing). Goodness is, in a sense, itself. Evil is only a distortion of good. "There is evil, so there is no God" doesn't make sense. "There is good, so there is God" – does.

As for all of the injustice in the world, it can hardly be explained *if* this life is all there is. Common sense and simple justice inform our consciences that there must be something more. The idea of reincarnation suggests that suffering could be due to a past life, but this sounds like Job's friend who said Job was being punished for some sin in his past. How can anyone learn not to repeat a sin which he does not remember?

The related idea that pain is just an illusion also doesn't work because the pain is still experienced, illusion or not, and it does not always correlate to an individual's goodness. It only makes sense for God to permit this *uneven* distribution of good and evil if there really is a life after death where he will compensate *all* inequalities (Mt 5:6, Heb 9:27).

Given this one life and the reality of suffering, how could anything but God himself be our greatest good, the meaning of life, and our ultimate happiness? All tried substitutes for God have failed. Some think they will be perfectly happy if they get everything they want. But when they get it – pleasure, health, wealth, fame, family, friends, etc – they find that there is still something missing that the soul thirsts for. These things instead become like salt water to a thirsty man,

increasing instead of satisfying the thirst for happiness. Anything less than eternal happiness will not do. There is just no substitute for God. The secret of life is out and out simple: I come from God, I must live for God, I shall go back to God.

This is precisely what the prophets said was the purpose for Israel's deliverance: the glory of God's own name. If anyone thinks this is selfish of God, they forget what selfish means. Selfishness is when you think yourself greater than you are. But there is nothing greater than God. To direct everything to the glory of his name is not selfishness, it is the only thing that makes sense! To deny him the glory we owe him is what is selfish, and in the end, it is to deny ourselves the only source of absolute happiness!

The Catechism puts it well: "The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for. For if a man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live *fully* according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his creator." (Catechism, no. 27) Put more simply: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Hell is for those who "want it all." Heaven is for those who only want Him and really do get it all! "You have made us for yourself," St. Augustine once said, "and our heart is restless until it rests in you."



Expressing the Faith: Turn, Turn, Turn

The Byrds quote Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 in this song that reminds us that there is a time and place for everything.

***To everything, turn, turn, turn,
there is a season, turn, turn, turn,
And a time to every purpose under heaven.***

*A time to be born, a time to die;
A time to plant, a time to reap;
A time to kill, a time to heal;
A time to laugh, a time to weep.*

(Chorus)

*A time to build up, a time to break down;
A time to dance, a time to mourn;
A time to cast away stones,
a time to gather stones together.*

(Chorus)

*A time of love, a time of hate;
A time of war, a time of peace;
A time you may embrace,
a time to refrain from embracing.*

(Chorus)

*A time to gain, a time to lose;
A time to ruin, a time to sew;
A time for love, a time for hate;
A time for peace, I swear it's not too late.*

➡ **Next time: "Handbook of Prayers"** ↩