

## **Short and hasty ... and useless?**

Ecclesiastes 1:2-11

September 10, 2017

*Useless, useless, said the Philosopher.*

I used to be a philosopher. I was a student of philosophy at Yale University. There were few of us then and probably even fewer now. I was so thrilled when I found out that Cole Highnam was studying philosophy and loving it.

Philosophy used to be called the queen of the sciences, but now it is deemed an afterthought or an oddity, an esoteric and rather useless area of study. Now it's all about STEM -- science, technology, engineering, mathematics. Now it's all about turning out efficient and productive workers that can grow the economy, cogs in the machine of human progress. Now it's all about empowering and overcoming: overcoming obstacles, solving problems, making everything work better, faster, bigger.

Now it's all about developing technologies that will allow us to extract more and more power and wealth from the earth, to cure more and more diseases and to prolong life, in other words, technologies that will allow us to rein in nature and push back death, to overcome nature and overcome death, to control our own destinies instead of being at the mercy of the elements around us and the brevity of our own lives.

It's all about hubris! We are striving for nothing less than invincibility and immortality. So how is it working? Are we invincible? Are we any closer to immortality? Who gets the last word? Nature or us? Death or us?

Is bigger, faster, and better better for us? Do our technologies serve us or do we serve them? Are our lives richer, fuller, better than they were before smartphones, before the internet, before nuclear power, before 5-hour energy shots?

We seek knowledge or, more accurately, we seek know-how, because we believe knowledge is power, because we believe know-how pays off. But pays off for whom? Power for whom? And do power and pay-off even matter?

We need to ask other questions, not just "How can we do it?" but "What will happen if we do it?" or "How will doing it change who we are or how we are or how we are together?" or even "Should we do it?"

These are the kinds of questions a philosopher asks and more, not "How can we put it to use?" but "What is it, in itself?" "What gives it value and meaning?" A philosopher looks at the big picture, how one thing, one person, fits into a universe of things and a universe of people, and a philosopher asks different questions, not "What do we know?" but "How do we know what we know?" and "Can we really know anything at all?"

A philosopher begins with doubt, questioning assumptions, questioning appearances, questioning motives, purposes, values, questioning everything, so that anything that is not what it seems to be may be exposed, so that the core of what does matter, what does have value, what does have meaning, may be revealed, so that we may live wisely. That's the philosopher's goal: not knowledge, but wisdom.

The Philosopher in the book of Ecclesiastes, probably a contemporary of Socrates and Plato, is a part of the Hebrew wisdom tradition. He doubts everything, questions everything, and finds it lacking -- "useless, all useless."

*You spend your life working, laboring, and what do you have to show for it?*

What do I have to show for it? What difference have I made? What will be remembered, what will matter, at all after this short and hasty life?

*The wind blows south, the wind blows north -- round and round and back again.*

Are we going anywhere? Or are we simply coming and going, going and coming, living and dying, in this circle of life? Or is it a circle of death?

*There is nothing new under the sun.*

Is there? Once you look past appearances and trappings and cultural accoutrements, is there anything new? This is an actual headline from four days ago: "We're freaking out over these new iPhone features!" Freaking out? Over a phone? As if a phone is going to change your life? It's just a gadget, not something to freak out over, just a gadget just like any one of a myriad of gadgets that have proliferated through the centuries. Have any of them really changed us?

Are we as human beings any different than we ever have been? Is what it means to be human any different than it ever has been? Have we addressed any of our flaws, any of our frailties?

We are what we have always been -- dust, just dust. Just God-breathed dust. And that's what makes the difference. That's what makes us what we are. That's what gives our lives meaning. God in us, not anything we can make or change or do.

*No one remembers those who lived in the past and in days to come no one will remember you.*

Listen to him. Don't just argue with him. The Philosopher is questioning everything: challenging easy assumptions, pulling away easy comforts, tearing down all the pretenses by which we make out this short and hasty life to be more than it really is.

Do you put your hope in being remembered? Do you measure your value by what you have accomplished? Is it because you have made some kind of difference that you matter? Or is it something else? Do hope and value come from something else? And does it even matter if you matter? You are. You are, and doesn't that matter?

*Life is useless, all useless.*

Would you want a Bible that contained Ecclesiastes as its only book? Hardly! But would you want a Bible that didn't have Ecclesiastes in it? This is the wonder of the Bible, the glory of the Bible, that it challenges its own assumptions, that it challenges its own orthodoxies.

It was the foundation of Jewish law that faithfulness earns God's blessing and unfaithfulness God's anger, but Job asks: "What if it isn't so?"

And it is the assumption of most all religious people that working hard and living well and doing our best to please God makes a life meaningful, but the Philosopher asks: "What if it isn't so?" What if it is useless, all useless? And if it is, what then? Then is life not worth living?

As you will see, that is not at all the Philosopher's conclusion. The Philosopher is and remains a believer. And the Philosopher does have something useful to offer to us, two things.

First, the book of Ecclesiastes offers a touchpoint, a landing place for people who ask the same questions. It is a place where skeptics and doubters find someone who understands them, where people disillusioned by life find someone who sympathizes with them, even where people who are depressed may find a kindred soul. None of these things -- doubt or disillusionment or depression -- are disqualifying for faith. This believer understands you. This believer knows you. This believer is you!

And second, the book of Ecclesiastes does us a service by popping balloons, by tearing down edifices, by exposing flawed assumptions, by challenging orthodoxies, so that we will put our faith in no orthodoxy, but in God and God alone. Do you hear? So that we will put our faith in no orthodoxy, but in God and God alone.

The Philosopher tears down everything in which we might put our hope, questions everything in which we might put our faith, so that all that is left is ... the only thing that matters.

What makes a life worth living? Nothing. No thing. Life just is. Useless. All useless. All wonderfully useless!