

Sunday February 7th, 2021

Ecclesiastes 6
Series: What If?
Sermon: "What is My Destiny?"

The story goes there was a man who made his wife's life miserable because he was so miserly. The man refused to spend a nickel on anything unless he was forced to, and there was no money available, he claimed, simply for enjoying life. As you can imagine, as time went on the man accumulated considerable financial assets, all the while begrudging his wife any happiness. The day came though when the man was diagnosed with a terminal illness.

On his death bed, he took his wife's hand and made her promise that when he died, she would take all his money and bury it with him. The wife was not very keen with the idea, but after much pleading from her husband she reluctantly agreed. Soon after the man died, and just before they closed the casket, the now widowed wife asked the undertaker to wait a moment while she placed a cardboard box into the coffin.

After the service, the woman's nearest and dearest friend approached her and asked, "You didn't actually put all his money into the casket to be buried, did you?" The widow replied, "Yes I did. I am a Christian woman and I made a promise to him." Then with a smirk she said, "I wrote out a check to him, for the full amount, and tossed it into the box." It is no accident that the word miser and miserable come from the same root word.

One of the most famous reclusive misers that ever lived, was the American, Howard Hughes, portrayed in the movie *The Aviator*. Hughes had quite a life; dating movie stars, working on top-secret CIA projects. He was incredibly wealthy, owning many hotels, and even an airline, TWA. He was a billionaire, but his life became one of the most pathetic ever recorded. In the end, Hughes lived shut off from the world, living in dark hotel rooms.

He stopped cutting his hair and beard, and his finger nails reached two inches in length. When he died, he was so unfamiliar to everyone that only dental records could be used to ID him. Hughes would spend his time watching the same movies over and over again, (*Ice Station Zebra* was his favourite) sitting in the dark naked, because he claimed clothes caused him pain, and because he was deathly afraid of germs. He simply wasted away, addicted to drugs, and at 67 died for lack of a medical device his own company had helped develop.

He died without a will, and no children, but he had two ex-wives and many distant relatives. It took over 30 years to finally settle his estate. When I read Ecclesiastes 6, the first person it reminded me of was Howard Hughes. I recognize that Hughes had some serious psychological issues, but these issues were exasperated, I think, by a sickness eating away at his soul. Hughes' life demonstrated time and time again that as the Preacher writes, "his soul was not satisfied".

Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase *The Message* translates verse 7 as "We work to feed our appetites; meanwhile our souls go hungry." The Hebrew word for "soul" used here, is an important word. Its full meaning is the "complete life of a being". This is how it is to be understood at the beginning in Genesis 2:7. "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."

Sunday February 7th, 2021

The point in Genesis is that when God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life, the man or Adam, became a complete living being. Adam was whole. In our passage today the same meaning for soul applies. As the Preacher has been doing all along in our journey in Ecclesiastes, he identifies several things that people try to use to bring satisfaction, or wholeness to their being, or souls.

I am restating the obvious, but in today's passage we are reminded of the vanity, the futility in thinking wealth can complete us, or give us satisfaction. We know from last week, and other passages in scripture, that all we have comes from the hand of God. There is no such thing as a self-made man or woman. In 1 Chronicles 29:12 we read, "Wealth and honour come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength, and power, to exalt and give strength to all." But as we see today, just because we receive these things, doesn't mean we will be able to enjoy them.

You can accumulate a great deal, only to die and have it all go to others. Putting your hope of satisfaction on wealth is meaningless. It almost sounds as if the Preacher is accusing God of unfairness doesn't it. Why would God give all these good things to people and then yank them away? But the Preacher already explained that in chapter 2:25-26. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without him? For to a person who is good in His sight, He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy...

Another way the Preacher says people try fruitlessly to fill the emptiness in their lives is with children. Unfortunately, in our culture, children are often seen as an imposition or burden, but to a Jewish person in the days of the Preacher's children, especially sons, were seen as a blessing. Psalm 127:3-5 reads, "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.

Have you ever heard of a man by the name of Daad Mohammed Murad Rahman from the United Arab Emirates? Well, this gentleman has really taken this Psalm to heart. At 65 years old, he has already fathered 96 children with fifteen wives. He has had to divorce these wives as he goes along to remain within the legal limit of four wives the Emirates permits. At last report he was trying to line up two more wives to try and sire 100 children by 2015. In the Emirates' newspaper on the 28th of January this year, he was still trying to reach one hundred children.

But the preacher says that having 100 children will not automatically bring satisfaction to the soul or any contentment. Just think of all the allowances and parent-teacher conferences. The gift of family is a great blessing in our lives, but if we are not careful, it is very easy to make even our families, an idol if we separate them from our relationship with God. There is a great modern example of this idolatry of children.

Have you ever heard of Nadya Suleman the so called "Octo Mom"? She became famous a few years back because, even though she was already blessed with six children, that just didn't satisfy her. She went and found, what I think was an unscrupulous fertility doctor, who would help her bear eight more children at one time. This despite the fact that she was already living on social assistance and barely making ends meet.

Sunday February 7th, 2021

If Octo Mom continues to try and find satisfaction apart from God, not even 14 children will be enough for her. There is another thing that some people think will give their lives meaning. In Deuteronomy 6:2 God made a promise to Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land. God states, "So that you, your children, and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live, by keeping the decrees and commands that I give you, and so you may enjoy a long life." To some people the true mark of a satisfactory life is in its longevity.

The Preacher talks about a man who lives 2000 years, over twice as long as Methuselah lived. At the other extreme is a still-birth, someone who never drew one breath. The Preacher makes the point that both have the same fate; they die. There is no inherit value in living a very long life, if that life is not lived for God. This is a very important matter for we modern scientific people. Never has medical science done as much as it has recently to prolong life.

We do a great number of things to prolong our lives, or at the very least make the years we have more vital. We exercise, we take supplements, we try to eat healthy. We have drugs, and medical treatments unheard of just a decade ago. I am constantly meeting people who have undergone surgery, or treatments, that I had previously never heard of. And there is nothing wrong with these efforts. All life is worth preserving and supporting within reason.

The issue for the Preacher is that if all this effort is undertaken to simply prolong life, it will not bring satisfaction. What is always more important than how long we live; is how we live. If these things mentioned are what you are trying to gain life's satisfaction from, you are going to come up empty. They are like a cracked cistern, always leaking away. If, as the bible says, our lives are but a vapor, a mist that passes in front of God, then we had better find something a bit more satisfying and purposeful than money, children, or old age.

The true source of satisfaction for our souls is learning to trust entirely in the sovereignty of God. As the Preacher moves to verse 10, and onwards, he stresses the fact that we have limitations on us, but there are no limitations on God. This is one of the key principles running through the whole book of Ecclesiastes. Remember back in chapter one how the Preacher pointed out the futility of any of us trying influence the natural cycles of life God has ordained.

Since God is sovereign, and his plans cannot be altered, or stopped by any of us, it makes sense to just trust in whatever God is doing. We must trust that whatever we are going through, no matter how difficult it is, can be used by God for a greater good. It is also important that we learn by faith to not try and argue with God, or tell him how foolish his plan is when he can see far more than we can, and bigger plans are always in the works.

Paul picked up this idea in Romans 9:20-21. "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? 'Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" Did you understand what Paul is writing? We are fearfully and wonderfully made but we are still made beings.

We are made and owned by God, and it is his right to fashion us as he pleases and use us as he pleases. Job understood this principle when his whole life came crashing down around him.

Sunday February 7th, 2021

Job's wife seeing her husband's distress, but his unwillingness to revoke his faith, said to him. "Curse God and die!" Do you remember what Job said to her? "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said. (Job 2:10) Can we not see the logic in what the Preacher is saying? If we cannot find true satisfaction and contentment apart from God, it only makes sense to trust in God's sovereignty. Trusting everything that comes from God, no matter how unpleasant. Trusting God that whatever he is doing is for a greater good than I can see.

So much of our heartache, stems from placing our hope in finite things. Whether it is wealth, our children, or our long lives or whatever. The famous theologian Paul Tillich described Idolatry in a very helpful way, at least for me. He simply pointed out that idolatry is worshipping anything less than Almighty God. Idolatry is placing our energy, our love, our hope, or our trust in anything less than God. Why rely on the temporary when the eternal is available to us?

Part of the reason we struggle with letting go of our idolatry is that we cannot control our desires. Over time our desires build until they consume our souls. George Bernard Shaw wrote "There are two tragedies in life: one is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it." So, if we cannot control our appetites, our desires, and these are destroying our contentment, what are we to do? The answer is simple really, and maybe expressed better in Psalm 37:4.

"Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give the desires of your heart." We have to be careful with this verse. Some people use it as a way to "name it and claim it". In other words, they think it tells them to just delight in God and he will give you your every heart's desire. But I think the verse is really saying that the more we delight in God, the more our heart's desire will be for him and our souls will be satisfied.

In Psalm 73:26, 26 we read, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." In his book *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, Randy Alcorn quotes a persecuted Romanian pastor who said, "95% of believers who face the test of persecution pass it; 95% who face the test of prosperity fail it."

No wonder the Preacher concludes by calling us to live in the present instead of yearning for the future. We can only find true contentment when we accept and live in the moment. There is no guarantee what tomorrow will bring, or even if there will be a tomorrow on this earth for us. We will never be at peace if we are always focusing on what we don't have.

In Proverbs 30:8,9 we find these wise words, "...give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and dishonour the name of my God." Both poverty and riches will pull us away from God if we let them. Both poor folk and rich folk have trouble reigning in their desires.

Both are tempted to try and gain more or hold onto what they have even if it means violating God's moral standard. For both, and for all of us, the solution is straight forward. Live in the present.

Sunday February 7th, 2021

Acknowledge that what you have, be it great or small, comes from God, and trust in the sovereignty of God's plan. So, are you satisfied today? Do you trust God, or are you preferring to worship an idol? Maybe you are like the Rolling Stones who warbled away with what are really pretty simple lyrics, "I can't get no satisfaction".

When I am drivin' in my car
And the man comes on the radio
And he is tellin' me more and more
About some useless information
Suppose to fire my imagination
I can't get no satisfaction.
And I try and I try, but I can't get no satisfaction.

You can try all you want, to make your life one of satisfaction, but in the end everything you try is like chasing the wind. You will never be content, until you surrender to God and accept his destiny for you.