

The Search for Meaning

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Loving God, fountain of every blessing,
Open to us your life-giving word,
and fill us with your Holy Spirit
so that living water may flow out of our hearts—
a spring of hope for our thirsty souls and our thirsty world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

There was a cartoon that depicted a cow and a bull in a field. The cow was donned in fine jewelry, and both bovines held in their hooves cocktails. The cow casually makes this confession to her husband, the bull:

"Wendell, I'm just not content..."

Contentment. Joy. Meaning. Purpose. They're all rather elusive, aren't they? The book of Ecclesiastes repeatedly gives us many reminders in our search for significance:

—Joy and contentment are not found in external circumstances.

True happiness, a meaningful life, is created internally. As one person says, "It's an inside job." More specifically, meaning is in how you choose to see things and who you look to for strength to face your days. King Solomon in Ecclesiastes experiments with a number of paths to reach meaning. First, he tries the Path of Philosophy—meaning knowledge and education. Although he was the wisest man on earth, Solomon ends up saying,

"For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow."

Then he explores the Path of Pleasure: wine, women, and song. For a while it's great, but it gets old. *"I said of pleasure, 'What use is it?'"* He was searching for something more. From there Solomon traverses the Path of Possessions: the accumulation of "stuff," you know: toys, tvs, gadgets, cars, clothes, and iPhone 13s. The wise and world-weary king came to this conclusion about all of his possessions:

"Everything is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

A fourth road is ventured upon the Path of Production. Work, career, status, success, accomplishments, accolades, and awards. Was he happy? No.

"When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind: nothing was gained under the sun."

All four paths—philosophy, pleasure, possessions, and production left King Solomon bankrupt and hollow.

Wow, John, thanks for getting my Sunday morning off to a great start!

Okay, we got the bad news out the way. Here's the good news:

Solomon helps us cross off the list of what doesn't work. We're reminded of an important lesson: don't go there. These tempting paths are dead-end roads. So let's turn to what does give us joy and contentment in our search for meaning.

There has been a considerable amount of research on happiness. The latest psychological research says this:

10% of our happiness comes from external circumstances— Money, health, job, friends, good looks, education, home, climate, etc.

Generally speaking, changing your external circumstances won't make you much happier, at least in the long run.

50% of your happiness is based upon... *drum roll please...* genetics.

Some of us are just naturally chipper and optimistic and easy to work with, while others are wired to be more serious, cynical, or difficult. Each of us has a genetic set point that we usually revert back to. If good things happen, we go up a bit, then settle back down to our default. The same when bad things happen—then we go back up to our set point after a bit.

What I want to talk about here is the remaining 40%. This is where it's at. This is where the rubber meets the road in the search for meaning.

40% of our sense of contentment and purpose is found in our attitude and our actions. We can control this. And we can get divine help with this. In fact, we need help from above here below the sun. Studies and Scriptures confirm, meaning and contentment come from such life-giving practices, as:

- Using trials for growth opportunities.
- Cultivating hope in the midst of uncertainty.
- Engaging the present.
- Practicing forgiveness.
- Being generous.
- Tending relationships—with family, and friends.
- Expressing gratitude.
- Caring for our bodies.
- Caring for our souls.

The poem we're about to read is one of the most famous in Scripture. Whenever I hear it read, I feel almost mesmerized. The totality of the human experience is described so beautifully. Life is listed in fourteen pairs of twenty-eight aspects of life. Notice that these numbers are multiples of seven. In scripture the number seven is symbolic of perfection. There's an equal number of good and bad—but their order is random. Just like life.

So let's hear the word of the Lord from ...

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 (NRSV)

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – The Search for Meaning

It was 1967 and Johnny Cash had crawled into Nickajack Cave to kill himself. The last year had been filled with as much darkness as the cave Cash found himself in. Sure, he was famous—legendary. But things had gotten out of control: drug addiction, cancelled shows from erratic behavior, and his wife Vivian filed for divorce.

Overwhelmed with shame and grief, Johnny Cash wanted to end it all. Granted, it wasn't the most cogent of plans. He was, after all, stoned when he concocted it.

He would crawl deep into the belly of the cave, get lost in the maze of tunnels, and never find his way back to the light of day again. Johnny Cash entered and kept going until the batteries of his flashlight died. Utterly alone in the darkness, he waited to die. And right there, in the pitch black, Cash heard a still, small voice whisper to him:

"I am still here."

Though he'd wandered far from God, Johnny Cash couldn't escape God—even in a cave. God hadn't abandoned him.

*"I am still here—even in this season of your life.
Even in this darkest of hours."*

The voice that Johnny Cash heard in Nickajack Cave was a turning point for him. After hearing the still small voice in the dark, he was able to crawl his way out of his almost tomb and into the light—and there find direction and meaning for his life again. So the Man in Black began his journey of recovery that would continue for the remaining thirty-six years of his life.

We find our meaning in God—that God is present with us in all of life's seasons. The good, the bad, and the neutral. The desirable and undesirable. God is with us, helping us navigate the ups and downs of all our relationships, in our East of Eden lives that are beautifully flawed and terribly complex.

In the beginning, in the end, and in everything in between:

"I am here."

Immanuel, God with us.

Jesus entered into time and space—bringing God's presence to all the seasons and situations we human beings face. It's also an "aha" moment for us when we realize that we're not in control. Yes, we can and should make decisions, take initiative, exercise agency, and embark on new ventures. We don't want to live passive and helpless lives. But whatever our level of skill or initiative, our real masters seem to be the seasons and times mentioned in Ecclesiastes:

- Birth and death,
- Sowing and reaping,
- Planting and uprooting,
- War and peace.

We're not in control of them. Usually, they're thrust upon us.

I like how one commentator on Ecclesiastes put it:

"Many of our frustrations rise from our blindness to the change of season or to the joy or pain of them, and we struggle against our expectations."

We all have a favorite season—enjoy that season. But we must also prepare ourselves for the next season—whether it be autumn or winter or spring or summer. Because it's a comin'. Guaranteed. You could be a prince, princess, or pauper. Seasons change—whether you want

them to or not, whoever you are. You can't live your life jumping from mountaintop to mountaintop. There are going to be some valleys and canyons and chasms in between. And they're gonna have to be traversed and scaled and hiked through, not just jumped over. Our lives become coherent and purposeful when we can recognize these seasons that are often times thrust upon us. So our task then is to perceive them, to roll with them, and to make meaning of them, rather than shake our fist at them.

*"To everything there is a season,
and a time to every purpose under heaven."*

—everything.

Frustration and depression often come when we rail against these inevitabilities. Denial, refusal to adapt, or anger. They only make these inevitable seasons more painful than they already are.

Remembering that God is the Creator and we are the created, we can live a little healthier, a little more realistically, with realistic expectations in our lives that are less likely to set us up for a world of hurt. We meet flawed characters along the way. Sometimes we're that character. We can be surprised by joy—how did I end up doing this? Relationships that we thought were forever, end. At a memorial service—we might feel both joy and deep sorrow intermingled. Interruptions happen, curve balls happen and through all the changes, God is present—an eternal constant. Christ is right by our side. *"I am still here."*

And so we find greater meaning when we realize perpetual change doesn't have to be unsettling. Rather, it's to be expected and even God-given in this world of ours. Change comes with the territory. King Solomon reminds us we can't keep things forever the way we want them. Even kings can't. The good times in life can't be forever frozen in time. We've got to "let it go," right? The person we dance with, we will someday mourn the loss of. The program or tradition we create, will one day be concluded or shuttered. Life is developing and dynamic, predictably unpredictable. There are ebbs and flows, times of sowing, blossoming, ripening, reaping, and uprooting. Beginnings and endings. Eternity is in our hearts, says Ecclesiastes, yet we are creatures of time. Nothing is ours that we can keep forever. So wisdom perceives and embraces the timing and meaning of these seasons, patterns, and cadences.

This side of heaven, life under the sun, we can never fully get the big picture, we can never grasp the full scope of things like God does who is outside of time. We're curious, and that's good, we want to learn and grow, but we're also able to live with mystery, too. In other words, we find meaning when we trust God in the uncertainty, where we give to God the gaps. So we loosen that vice grip, we give it to God. And we find ourselves freed to courageously face reality. Reality in us and reality around us. And we find serenity. We do the best we can do and we enjoy it—seeing life as it is: perfectly imperfect.

It "satisfices." It satisfies and suffices. Without being complacent, we're content. We can appreciate the small things, for their limited shelf-life. We know nothing of ours is forever under the sun. We can be in sync, rather than having our timing off. We can be fluid rather than forced. We can be in the flow of the Holy Spirit, engaged with God, engaged with ourselves, engaged

with others, and engaged in the moment. So we can cry when we need to cry and laugh when we need to laugh. And like the sons of Issachar in the Hebrew Scriptures, we'll understand the times and we'll have the knowledge of what to do, in season and out of season.

Helen MacDonald in her memoir *"H is for Hawk"* shares about how she decided to raise and train a hawk in honor of her father who passed away. It's a story about grief, loss, acceptance, and healing. Early in the hawk training regimen, Helen took a friend. Everything failed. The hawk wouldn't fly. It was a waste. Disappointed she walked back with her friend to the parking lot. Then her friend stopped dead. What's wrong Stuart? Look! Look at that! "What, I can't see anything." Look towards the sun. I am. Look down Helen. And then she saw it. It wasn't up in the falconless sky. It was in the entire field before them. It was spiders, not falcons, that left a message that day. The entire field was blanketed in gossamer spider webs—almost like a suspended snowfall hovering over the grass. Millions of shining threads covering every inch of soil and grass. It was like silk that was quivering all around her. It was a thing of unearthly beauty. And Helen MacDonald stared at the field, not the sky, for a long time. And that's what she needed in that particular season and time. Earth, not sky.

The change of seasons and times, literal and figurative, that helps us to step aside of ourselves and observe ourselves—to take it all in. To be filled with awe and wonder. To get a new perspective on things and to be okay with that. It doesn't have to be on our terms. It's God the scripture says, that makes all things beautiful and appropriate for their time. It's God that is aware of all that happens in our lives. It is not lost. Times and seasons will not always be fun. They won't always be easy or pleasant or even fully understood. But no matter what it is, we can do our time well. We can be mindful. Thoughtful. Prayerful. Thankful. Aware. And we'll then find ourselves enjoying the simple things in their season and in their time. A delicious dinner with friends, a child's performance, a job well done, a family gathering, a funeral, a wedding, a baptism. We'll find ourselves filled with gratitude and gravitas, celebration and sorrow, reverence and rejoicing, and we're gonna hold it all lightly. Just like in Jane Kenyon's poem in your bulletin, this is a gift—but it's not forever. At least on this side of heaven.

Amen.

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