

Can't Get No Satisfaction **Ecclesiastes 1:1-11**

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

That's what he said. These were the words, not of a philosopher but a man who sometimes mused philosophically. His name was Leon and he was a leader in the black community in Winston-Salem. We had become good friends because we happen to have many of the same interests. He taught tennis on the black side of town and I taught on the white side. He taught in run down courts. I taught at the elite country clubs. But on several occasions he would join me at the plush clubs or I would help him with a clinic in the black neighborhoods. Eventually I would become the only white player in the tennis league he founded that played throughout big cities in the southeastern region of the United States. I was affectionately called by my teammates, “the token white boy.”

He had been one of the young black activists in the mid-1960s and had been one of these black statistics, arrested for simply sitting at a lunch counter in Greensboro when he was a student in college. Later he would serve in Vietnam, returning as a WIA, Wounded in Action – he was deaf in one ear. We had long talks about tennis, the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, and, of course, religion.

On that particular day we were in my car, having just pulled up to his small house in East Winston. Then he mused aloud that statement: “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” He went on to explain. He said, “Look around the neighborhood. What do you see?”

“A bunch of houses,” I said.

He said, “That's right, a bunch of houses, a bunch of houses filled with blacks. There are no whites in this neighborhood. The buses now all blacks to sit in the front and restaurants seat blacks at their tables.”

The point he was making was that despite the fact that integration had taken place, de jure, according to the laws, it still existed de facto, according to the facts.

Even though things had changed, things were still somehow, ironically the same. The more things change, the more things stay the same.

There was another philosopher that said much the same thing. His name was Ecclesiastes, which is the Greek word for “preacher.” Ecclesiastes was a preacher/teacher in the town assembly or school. Many people say this “Preacher” was Solomon, Son of David. Others think he was simply a descendant of the wisdom tradition in Israel that began in the days of Solomon. Whichever is true, the “Preacher” questioned the pervading beliefs of his times and he sought to find a reason for living. He desperately searched for this reason and ultimately created a hit song copied by Mick Jagger and Mark Richards 3000 years later:

“I can't get no satisfaction,

Cause I try and I try and I try and I try,
I can't get no, I can't get no."

I've wondered why that song was named the number one rock song of all-time. Certainly some of it had to do with the charismatic appeal of the entertainer Mick Jagger. It has a catchy tune and pulsating rhythm. But I believe underneath the charisma of Jagger and the genius of Mark Richards we have a song that speaks to the universal lament of finding satisfaction on earth. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes and the Priest of Rock-n-Roll are really singing the same song, lamenting the same plight of humanity. They try and they try and they try and they try. They are seeking some kind of lasting satisfaction in life.

Perhaps there are some here today who are searching, searching for meaning, searching for something real, searching for satisfaction. You have dreamed and fantasized about a life other than the one you have. The idea that the grass is greener on the other side is an appealing thought that begs to be tested. The everyday routine, the monotonous schedule slowly grinds you to a halt. And so you drift away on a journey to find answers, if not physically and in reality, at least, in fantasy. Yet the search will probably end where it started. A search for meaning inevitably ends up at your own doorstep, in your own heart. Many of you have discovered that so I ask that you bear with me as I convey this message to those who are still discovering that truth.

I. The Search

I should tell you before hand that the journey this "Preacher" took, while mind-boggling, left him deflated, depressed, and disillusioned. The best word is empty . . .his favorite and most oft repeated phrase in his journal. I'm partial to the KJV translators begin the sermon:

Vanity of vanities . . .

Vanity of vanities, all if vanity (1:2)

In today's English that would translate, "empty. . .a wisp of vapor, a hollow empty nothingness." That's the way the "Preacher" felt before he began his journey to find meaning, while he endured his journey, and it's how after he had completed his journey. Nothing satisfied. There was nothing that he saw, discovered, attempted, or concluded as a result of his lengthy search for personal satisfaction.

But before we reach some depressing conclusion ourselves we should ask why he came up with nothing, emptiness, vanity of vanities. Why wouldn't this man who had unlimited resources of knowledge and wealth find something – anything – that would indicate life had a purpose.

His problem was his perspective, and unfortunately it's the perspective the world most accepts and follows. To quote from his own testimony, it's an "under – the –sun" perspective. It's a signature idiom in Ecclesiastes occurring 29 times, in contrast to its complete absence in the rest of the OT. Time after time, the Preacher mentions his

horizontal, strictly human viewpoint. In virtually every major section of this book he uses words “under the sun” and “under heaven.” This phrase has been interpreted to mean many things, but I think that it meant “under God” or “without God.” Everything under the sun was visible – materials, people, books – or touchable – pleasures – or everything or idea that was human – philosophy, reason, knowledge, etc. Because he seldom looks “above the sun” to find reassurance, life seems drab and depressing, hopelessly meaningless. In spite of the extent to which he went to find happiness, because he left God out of the picture, nothing satisfied.

It never will. Satisfaction in life under the sun will never occur until there is a meaningful connection with the living God “above the sun.” Still, we like this Preacher, continue to try to find meaning in life, only to wind up on a dead-end road called Emptiness. You can’t get no satisfaction as Jagger sings. Vanity of Vanities as the preacher sings.

I happen to believe the Preacher’s words are just as relevant as Jagger’s words. Ecclesiastes has today’s world woven through the fabric of every page. Whether or not we’re willing to admit it, deep within most of us there is this restless, adventurous itch. Deadlines and daily responsibilities plague us – we’re ready to chase after memories or dreams that exclude God. “Surely if I can just experience this or that, I can shake these chains that make my life so mundane.” But before we jump in the car of adventure the Preacher warns us that it’s all a pipe dream, a big puff of nothingness. There is no satisfaction under the sun without God.

II. Nature

The first place the Preacher looked to find meaning was in nature. He looked around and saw boys becoming old men and girls becoming old women. They come and go and it makes no difference at all. Life is the same. The more things change, the more things stay the same. Notice how he said it in verse 4:

*A generation goes and a generation comes,
But the earth remains forever.*

The sun came up every morning in the same place and every night it went down on the other side of the earth. The trees that were in his yard on Monday were in his yard on Tuesday. When the winds came in from the North they brought cold air and when they came in from the South they brought warm air. The streams always flowed downhill and they eventually wound up back in the sea. But the sea was never filled. Rivers and streams continually ran into the sea, yet the sea never got enough.

This seems strange to us. Nature is full of wild and wonderful things. When I look at the world I see a beautiful array of God’s glory and majesty. But remember, the Preacher who is searching for satisfaction is looking only “under the sun.” He was searching for beauty and meaning and satisfaction without God. He went to the woods to find meaning. All he saw were trees. All the trees had roots, all the roots went into

the ground, and all the trunks shot up in the sky. “Boring,” he thought. “I can’t get no satisfaction.

III. History

Next, the Preacher tried history. He went to the big university in downtown Jerusalem and dug a hole in the library. For days on end he traversed across the annals of time reading about Israelites kings and Egyptian pharaohs. He read about the wisdom of the Persians and the fierceness of the Babylonians. He read about God and gods, battles and wars, economic depressions and expansions. And he concluded that nothing in history was new. The thing that happened yesterday is going to happen tomorrow. Notice what he said in v. 9:

“What has been will be again, What has been done will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun.”

And to make matters worse he came out from the library only to find out that all the students were downtown at the coliseum. It seems there was a ballgame being played and all the students were there. And after the game the winners got blitzed to celebrate their victory and the losers were in the bar down the road drowning their sorrows. They didn’t care about school. They didn’t care about history and all the things that had taken place in the past. They didn’t know and they didn’t care about anything that had occurred in history. To them the “Egyptian Pyramids” were a soccer team they had played in the preseason. What’s history? They were lucky if they remembered who won the game last night?

The Preacher sank further into a state of depression. Verse 11 reads:

“There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow.”

IV. Hedonism, Fatalism, Humanism

After seeing all this the Preacher decided to have a mid-life crisis. He bought a Porsche, some \$200 sunglasses, and a new outfit that hid the extra pounds and he unbuttoned his shirt and extra button. He went cruising looking for fun and finding it. He tried hedonism – total pleasure. Maybe if he could experience every pleasure possible it would bring satisfaction. In 2:10 he said:

“I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.”

But it was vanity. He tried fatalism, humanism, and every other philosophy promoted at the local bookstore. But all led to the same dead-end. Vanity of vanity all is vanity. He even tried settling down as a hard, honest worker. Even this life was vanity because, as he put it, *“For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it.”* (2:21). He concluded even the straight life is a puff of wind. One writer described the straight life like this:

“The straight life...is washing dishes three times a day; it is cleaning sinks and scouring toilets and mopping floors; it is chasing toddlers and mediating fights between preschool siblings...The straight life is driving your SUV to school and back 23 times per week; it is grocery shopping and baking cupcakes for the Christmas party. It is pulling your tired frame out of bed, five days a week, fifty weeks a year to work for people who don't appreciate you. It is earning a two week vacation in August, and choosing a trip that will please the kids. It is spending your money wisely when you'd rather indulge in a new recliner. It's taking your kids to the park on Saturday and cleaning the garage out when you return. The straight life is dealing with head colds, crab grass, income tax forms, and taking the family to church on Sunday when you've heard every idea the preacher has already. It's giving a portion of your income to God when you already wonder how you are going to make ends meet. The straight life isn't for wimps. The straight life for the ordinary person is all this,and more.” (Adapted from *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives*, James Dobson).

Conclusion

The Preacher finally concluded his journey under the sun and realized a few things. He basically concluded that we should try to enjoy every year that we have (11:8) and that we should obey God and have reverence for him. As I see it, he found what had been at his front doorstep all along. If only everyone could heed the Preacher's advice. But they seldom do. Many will still take that painful path that's free to walk. They will still have to learn for themselves that those highways of adventure and new vistas of experience don't bring anything but wisps of vapor. Vanity of vanities. Escaping reality always leaves us shortchanged.

What I learn from the Preacher Solomon and Rock-n-Roll legend Mick is that satisfaction can't be found under the sun. Nothing in this world is big enough to satisfy except God. Life without God can bring no satisfaction, no matter how you try and you try and you try.

The Bible declares that life is too important to build around anyone or anything less than Jesus Christ. John wrote in his gospel, “In him was life, and that life was the light of all people” (John 1:4). Jesus said, I have come to give you abundant life.” In other words, I have come to give you a life that satisfies, a life filled with meaning and purpose, a life that overflows in joy. It's a life based on giving, more than receiving. It's a life based on serving, more than being served. It's a life based on knowledge of God, rather than knowledge of men. This is the life God offers to all who come to him. It's not a matter of trying harder, it's a matter of receiving his love, and living in his grace. It's available to you, today.