



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
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Dr. Mark E. Gaskins
Senior Pastor

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“The Search”
Ecclesiastes

In his book *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, Shel Silverstein offers this little poem he calls “The Search”:¹

I went to find the pot of gold
That's waiting where the rainbow ends.
I searched and searched and searched and searched
And searched and searched, and then—
There it was, deep in the grass,
Under an old and twisty bough.
It's mine, it's mine, it's mine at last . . .
What do I search for now?

If you haven't already started it, you who are soon-to-be graduates are about to set out on your own search.

We human beings are searchers, aren't we? We're always searching for something—for love, for security, for hope, for significance—and maybe most of all, for *meaning*.

Can life have any real meaning? When you read the book of Ecclesiastes, particularly 1:2 (NIV), it makes you wonder:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.
“Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!”

When we look around us, it seems that many people today, especially young adults in this postmodern era, feel the same kind of hopelessness and wonder if life has any real meaning. But if you want to know the truth about it, it's not just them.

Almost everybody wants to be remembered when we're gone. It gives us a sense of meaning. So people through the ages have long sought for “immortality” in human eyes. Some did great deeds, some built great monuments to themselves, some tried to live their lives in ways that would better the human condition.

¹ Shel Silverstein, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 166.

All these things are part and parcel of the search for meaning. Some people try to attain it by achievement, some by advancement, some by accumulation, some by abandon to pleasure. But do any of these really work?

Solomon's search

Well, the book of Ecclesiastes gives us the testimony of someone who was searching for meaning—King Solomon the Teacher. The teachers of his day said there were many ways to find meaning. So in search of meaning, *he tried them all*.

First, he tried *wisdom*. He devoted himself **“to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven”** (1:13, NIV). There was actually a whole movement within ancient Judaism that dealt with wisdom as a way of understanding how to live the best life.

Knowledge was only a part of the process; learning how to apply that knowledge to everyday existence to lead to a well-rounded and blessed life was what was ultimate in the wisdom movement.

As he tried wisdom, the Teacher found that it was certainly better than folly, just as light is better than darkness (2:13). But when it came to providing meaning, wisdom came up short.

So the Teacher decided to try *worldly pleasure*. He tried to cheer himself with wine. He playfully engaged in foolishness. Whatever he wanted, he went after it. But it all came up short.

Then he thought that maybe the answer for him could be found *in work and accomplishment*. So he undertook great projects – building great houses, planting vineyards and gardens and parks, building irrigation reservoirs to sustain the things he planted. And for the moment, he found joy and satisfaction in what he had accomplished; but then we read these chilling words from his hand (2:11, NIV):

**Yet 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.**

Work and achievement came up short as well.

So the Teacher decided to try to find meaning *in earning and accumulating great possessions*. He amassed great wealth and acquired all the status symbols of his day—silver and gold, slaves and singers, cattle and wives. By the standards of his day, he had become greater than anyone in Jerusalem, and still had his wisdom to boot! He was like someone today with the best education, the most expensive jewelry and cars and electronic gadgets, the biggest house, and constant access to entertainment and amusement. But when he stopped to take stock, it was all *meaningless* to him.

He had abandoned himself to *whatever he wanted*, but nothing brought real meaning to his life. No matter how successful he was or how much he enjoyed himself for the moment, when he looked around him and saw the human condition, *all he could see was meaninglessness*. No matter how upright a person was, no matter what he or she accomplished or accumulated, the uncertainties and injustices of life just multiplied, and everybody's life finally culminated in the very same destiny—*death*.

He tried it all! But it all came up short. It was **“meaningless and like chasing after the wind . . .”** (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16, NIV).

Something—or Someone—else

All the while through his search, something else kept sticking in his heart and mind. Or really it was *Someone* else. It was this *incredible sense of God*—of God as someone so *other than humanity*, the one who created and sustains all things, who is beyond what we finite humans can fathom. It was a sense that God is so much bigger than the boxes we humans try to put him in, that he is beyond *our* control—indeed, that when it's all said and done, *he* is the one who is ultimately *in control!*

Somehow it kept coming to the Teacher that *God was God and he was not!* He couldn't explain it; somehow he just knew it. All the frailties and difficulties of human existence were still there. But somehow, in ways the Teacher in all his wisdom couldn't begin to understand or explain, *God was in the midst of it all.*

God had made human beings upright, and put eternity in their hearts. But rather than seeking God, humanity had gone off in search of many schemes (3:11; 7:29). Just as the Teacher had done, they were searching for meaning on their own terms. And that was a futile search.

Drawing some conclusions

So the Teacher began to draw some conclusions. They weren't particularly satisfying conclusions, but they did point him in the right direction.

He concluded that *a person should revere and obey God, and enjoy life as much as possible* in light of all the limitations and injustices in this world.

Isn't that amazing when you think about it? This brilliant Teacher had searched extensively for meaning in life, trying every possible means of finding it, only to conclude that *there is none apart from God.* Was he a pessimist? Or a cynic? Or was he, in truth, a realist?

He had come to understand that *apart from God, life has no meaning!* For you see, no matter what we achieve or attain or acquire or accumulate, *life lived apart from God and his creative and redemptive purposes is ultimately meaningless.*

Finding meaning

For our lives to have real meaning, two things have to happen.

First, *we have to lose our illusions*, just as the Teacher did. In his book *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Ministry*,² Eugene Peterson points out that many of the religious leaders of the Teacher's day were giving formulas for finding meaning and fulfillment that *sounded* like God's word, but were utterly divorced from it.

Sometimes what sounds like God's word to us isn't really God's word. And that confuses us. We develop illusions that separate the blessings of God (which we all want) from the God of blessing (whom few want). We come to believe that if we just say and do the right things, things will turn out our way. Those illusions have to be exposed and crushed! They're a kind of *magic*, trying to control the supernatural for our own benefit, rather than *faith*, through which we submit ourselves to God.

The reality is that in this real, fallen world, life is filled with both good and bad, with mystery and questions. If you haven't already experienced it, somewhere along the way as you go through your life, things will happen that seem to have no meaning, things that we can't understand.

² Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 149-189. I am indebted to Peterson for these basic ideas of this part of the sermon.

And it's usually then that we want a quick fix, quite apart from selfless, total devotion to a God who calls us to trust him even when we don't understand what's going on around us!

Several years ago, a notice ran in a community college continuing education bulletin here in our state that read:

The Fundamental Laws of Prosperity and How to Apply Them to Your Business and Personal Life . . . Dr. Frances . . . will explain five crucial universal laws of prosperity and show you how they apply to your *financial, spiritual, mental, physical, and family life* . . . He will discuss each . . . and show how they apply to a happy and balanced life. Does it sound like this just might make a huge difference in your life? You bet it does—and if you attend this seminar, *your life will be changed forever*.

The sad thing is that there were probably some people who took that course!

Once we lose our illusions, *we have to live in the realization that the God who created and rules the universe—however he did it—has created us and has a purpose for us*.

Throughout his search, the Teacher kept coming back to Genesis 2—that God has created humanity and has provided the world for our responsibility and enjoyment (2:24-26; 3:12-14; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9). He also emphasized that God has created in us a consciousness of eternity, but not the ability to fathom all that God has done, or even all that goes on “**under the sun**” (3:11; 8:16-17). Indeed, God is *totally other* than us; he and his ways are beyond our finite human comprehension. But it's precisely when we realize and accept this truth that we can be sure that there *is* meaning, *even if we don't know what it is!* It's as though this understanding forms the edges of the puzzle, so that even if we don't have all the pieces to get all the details of the picture, we can still get a sense of it. So the Teacher concludes his extensive account of his search with 12:13-14 (NIV)—

**Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.**

You see, in the final analysis, the only way to find real, ultimate, lasting meaning in life is *in a right relationship with God*.

In *Five Smooth Stones*, Eugene Peterson quotes Floyd Mallot in advocating the idea that maybe we should bind Ecclesiastes at the beginning of the New Testament just as Psalms is often bound with it at the end. Why? Because it sweeps away all our illusions and prepares us to hear the good news of Jesus!

And what is that good news? It's the message that though we rebelled and sinned against the God who created us, choosing our way over his, and though we can do nothing to right that wrong and save ourselves, God in his eternal plan sent his Son Jesus Christ to live a perfect life, die for us on the cross, and rise from the dead so that we could be set right with God. It's the assurance that when we stand before God in the Judgment, he will welcome us as his own because we're trusting in Christ. It's the promise of his presence with us through his Holy Spirit,

the reality of the abundant eternal life he gives us, that we begin to experience in the here and now.

And it all comes through faith in Christ. But understand that this faith is a two sided coin. On one side, it's total dependence on Christ to forgive us, save us from our sins, and keep us. On the other, it's total submission to him as our Lord, who has both say and sway over our lives. It's coming to him on *his* terms, *not* our own.

He was the son of a pagan father and a Christian mother. He lived from A.D. 354-430. He intensely desired to find happiness and meaning in life. He tried education. Early on he pursued a very immoral life. Later he studied a religious philosophy called Manicheism that promised truth but proved false, then another, nobler philosophy called Neo-Platonism. But none of these things worked.

When he was about 32, a series of events had brought him to a point of despair. Finally, he found what brought true rest and meaning when he became a Christian, returning to the faith he had been taught as a child.

His name was Aurelius Augustine, known to history as Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa (present day Algeria). Later he would write his *Confessions*, beginning the first book with a prayer of praise that would include these words: "You have formed us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you" (I.1).

What will *you* search for now?

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