

Vision Series 2023

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] I have been put under strict instructions not to sing, not to dance or even attempt to air guitar this morning.

Much as it would bring no satisfaction to my family, I'm sure it would to you, I'm convinced. It would be great if you could turn to your St Paul's app if you've got it in front of you and get an outline for today's talk and to keep the Bibles open at John 6 and Ecclesiastes 2.

I think I mentioned before, there was an article in the Sydney Morning Herald a number of years ago now. In fact, it was 2015. It was just before, this is pre-COVID, right? And the article was titled Cheer Up Sydney.

Sydney. The article suggested that Sydneysiders possessed a legendary preference for complaint. Things like the cost of living, I mean, it was a lengthy article, cost of living, traffic, housing affordability, the most pressing concerns.

That's, again, before COVID. And for some, it was just the general frustration with the pace and the stress of life. Now, ironically, this is also mentioned in the article, ironically, Sydney is regarded, it was ranked, regularly ranked among the top 10 livable cities in the world by reputable things like the Economist Intelligence Unit.

[1 : 30] And so one of the conclusions in the article by psychologist Susie Green, who's the CEO of the Sydney Positivity Institute, said that Sydneysiders have got plenty of reasons to cheer up.

And so this is a quote from her. We live in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. We aren't living in a war-torn country. In other words, cheer up, Sydney.

It's not Ukraine. That's kind of the conclusion. Sense of satisfaction is from the circumstances around us right now. You should be happy. You should be content.

You should be satisfied because the circumstances in which you live call for you to be happy. So just cheer up. So what happens if the circumstances aren't lining up?

Is there no place for contentment at that point? Is it possible to have deep satisfaction in life that isn't based on circumstances?

[2 : 29] Now, I want to say yes. I want to say Jesus is all about satisfaction. If you just joined us right now, if you're just connecting online for the first time or you just joined us in the building for the first time, we are partway through our annual vision series.

The first week of this series laid the foundation, if you like. We saw that there is no 100% watertight argument for the existence of God. You can't prove it as an experiment.

You can't stick it in a laboratory and prove it empirically. But neither is there 100% watertight argument for the non-existence of God. You can't prove that by experiment either.

So both the religious person and even the atheist views the world through a system of belief. Every single person views the world through a system of belief.

So which belief system delivers the best solution to what every human being needs to flourish in life? And today, I want to look briefly at is it possible to have a satisfaction in life that is so deep, deep enough to endure even the most difficult circumstances in life?

[3 : 49] So let's get going. First of all, can't get no satisfaction. I've had that song from 1965, Rolling Stones, can't get no satisfaction, rolling around in my head all week.

And I've tried, and I've tried, and I've tried, and I can't get it out. In his book, The Happiness Hypothesis, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt looks at the history of both Eastern and Western thought to see how people approach the issue of satisfaction in life.

So he scanned the centuries, if you like. And he concluded that the consensus of the ancient philosophers and sages of time, that even if all the deepest desires of success and love are fulfilled, it won't be enough.

Eastern and Western thought. You get everything you possibly can, and it still won't be enough. A person will still be deeply, deeply dissatisfied.

He even quotes from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes chapter 2, which we just read out. A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in all of their toil, because that's it.

[5 : 14] There's nothing else. And yet that satisfaction that Ecclesiastes 2 is talking about will still elude you anyway.

A little earlier in the chapter, the writer describes a life of success, a life of accomplishments and pleasure that very few in our world would ever experience.

I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers and a harem as well, the delights of a man's heart.

I denied myself nothing that my eyes desired. Very few can ever say that in life. I denied myself nothing that my eyes desired.

Then in verse 17, we read, I hated life because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. And all of it is meaningless.

[6 : 16] A chasing after wind. Again, verse 20. My heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. So the author of Ecclesiastes, and I think this is a real crucial point.

The author of Ecclesiastes wasn't just battling the fear of meaninglessness. He was battling the disappointment of success.

There is a very weak correlation between wealth, fame, success, and satisfaction.

But this, of course, is not just an ancient problem. It's a modern problem too. Cynthia Heimel, a columnist for the Village Voice in New York, knew a few, three particularly, but probably a bit more than that, great celebrities in the 1980s.

Big celebrities who weren't big celebrities but became big celebrities. And she knew them before they became big celebrities. And this is what she wrote about the success and fame and what it did to them.

[7 : 25] I pity celebrities. No, I really do. Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, Barbara Streisand, she knew them all. Were once perfectly pleasant human beings.

But now their wrath is awful. I think when God wants to play a really rotten practical joke on you, he grants you your deepest wish and then laughs merrily when you realize that you want to kill yourself.

You see, Sly, Bruce, and Barbara wanted fame. They worked. They pushed. That giant thing that they were striving for, that fame thing that was going to make everything okay, that was going to make their lives bearable, that was going to provide them with personal fulfillment and happiness, had happened to them and still, and they were still them.

The disillusionment turned them howling and insufferable. Wealth, power, achievement, family, material comfort, security, the external goods of the world can only lead to a momentary satisfaction which fades away.

And later on in the article, in the words of Cynthia Hemel, fades away, leaving you emptier than if you had never tasted it in the first place.

[8 : 50] Emptier. C.S. Lewis sort of summarized the idea of the ancients in his BBC radio program during World War II. Most people, if they really learn how to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want and want acutely something that cannot be had in this world.

There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love or first think of some foreign country or first take up some subject that excites us are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning can really satisfy.

I'm not speaking of what would ordinarily be called unsuccessful marriages or trips or so on. I'm speaking about the very best possible ones. There is always something that we grasp at in that first moment of longing that just fades away into reality.

The spouse may be a good spouse. The scenery may be excellent. It has turned out to be a good job, but it, the it, still evades us.

So what happens when we discover the successes and desires in life don't give us the satisfaction that we hope for? There are really two basic ways over history that people have sought to deal with

their dissatisfaction.

[10:19] The traditional way is to live with the conviction that there is no it out there to be got, and that is the sense that deep satisfaction is in fact not possible in life.

The modern way is to live with the modern way is to live life assuming that deep satisfaction is possible and it is out there and that it can be got.

And so the Sylvester Stallone's and the Barbra Streisand's, well, they just missed something. The traditional ways to include that our expectations of the world are out of line and our desires need to be suppressed.

And so there are three ways to live if that's the case for you. Firstly, it's altruism. You start out in life seeking advancement, but this thing called a midlife crisis hits, and you discover it is all dissatisfying.

And so you turn away from it into social causes, basically seeking the advancement of others for their satisfaction. Now, of course, I want to encourage those things, but problems can soon arise when people turn to benevolence, social activism, as a way to find more fulfillment for themselves.

[11:47] The irony of that. The poor and the vulnerable get exploited to improve my satisfaction in life.

It's about me, not about them. Secondly, cynicism. This is where a person just lowers their expectation of life.

But what makes us human beings is, in fact, that we want joy. We want meaning. We want fulfillment. And if we decide that that's not possible, our hearts become hard and we dehumanize ourselves.

And thirdly is detachment. This is the suggestion not to love anything or hope for anything too much. Cynicism moves to detachment. Cynicism moves to detachment. The Greek philosopher Epictetus wrote, What harm is there while you are kissing your child to murmur softly, tomorrow you will die?

See what he says there? In other words, don't love too much and you won't experience dissatisfaction too much. Keep everything, every love at an arm's length.

[13:03] This ultimately hardens your heart and it dehumanizes you. The modern way is the opposite. We deal with our dissatisfaction by attempting to pursue satisfaction with everything we've got.

And there are four ways you do that. If you're young, the normal way is to start the outer life thinking. If I get the right love partner, if I get the right spouse, if I get the right career and I make some money, then I'll be satisfied.

That is, in our modern era, the pursuit of jobs, family, sex and so on are the usual distractions by which we hide from ourselves the emptiness of our modern life.

I spoke a while ago with someone who, in their own confession, had slept with more than a thousand women.

And he said it just got emptier and emptier and emptier and emptier and emptier. We may be quite discontent in life, but we don't recognise it because we are so, so busy in the process of getting ready to be satisfied.

[14:38] We think we've just got to get over this hill, just got to get around that bend and then things will be great.

Then you move from the young. The next step is the resentful. As time goes by, we begin to realise that we're getting, we are not getting it.

Yeah, sure, the mortgage is paid off, the kids are growing up, I've got a stable job and yet I am still restless. One of the main reactions is to blame the obstacles that have kept us from achieving the things that we think will satisfy us.

We'll identify social structures or individuals who have blocked our progress or who have wronged us in some kind of way. We blame them saying, I would be quite satisfied if it wasn't for religion or if it wasn't for this job or it wasn't for that relationship or it wasn't for the fact that I was dropped on my head as a baby or something.

And so when that happens, we need a third strategy. And that is the driven. What happens if we find we reach many of our material goals and we still find something is significant happens?

[15:54] Missing, sorry. What do we do? Many people blame the things that they have, the things themselves, not other things, but the very things that they have. We assume that if you've got a

better spouse, we get a better job, if we get a better income, a better home, then we will feel much better.

Constantly renovating our places. And if you take that path, we may become among society's most productive members, the most driven members of society.

And for the driven, life is like running on a treadmill. The change of speed does happen, but the location never does. Go faster, you're still in the same spot.

And you run harder to maintain your position and eventually become too weary to keep on going. And all that's left now is despair.

Rather than blaming other things, rather than blaming other people and other structures, rather than blaming the things that are in front of me, I start to blame myself. I might be a deeply unsettling feeling that there is something wrong with me.

[17:13] I haven't done well enough. I haven't gone far enough up the career ladder. I haven't attracted the best romantic partners. I am the failure.

However, most people don't allow themselves to slow down long enough so that they can hear that voice reverberating around in their hearts and hear the cry of despair.

We just jump on the treadmill again and keep going harder and harder. Oh, the crucial, crucial part of a day of rest and reflection to assess life, to hear in the quietness of the heart what's going on.

Wow, that silence is amazing. It's remarkable how deep this issue of dissatisfaction is.

When you scan the centuries, you scan the centuries from the ancients until now, how remarkable little progress we've made on this issue.

[18:18] We have surpassed our ancestors in our accomplishments in travel, science, medicine, communication. We are unimaginably wealthier and more comfortable, and yet not a single person is suggesting that we are more content than what they were.

Not a single philosopher is saying that. Well, let me go back to one ancient.

The great Christian philosopher, St. Augustine, wrote that the reason our dissatisfaction is so deep in life is because our loves are disordered.

Augustine taught that we are most fundamentally shaped not by what we believe, not by what we think, not even by what we do, but we are most fundamentally shaped by what we love.

Now, that is a very clear word to us reformed evangelicals who love to think. We are what we love.

[19:36] The dissatisfaction of our lives is caused by the disorder of loves. We often love less important things more and the more important things less.

And every cultural system does it differently, but we all fail to order our loves correctly. There is nothing wrong with loving your work, but if you love it more than your family, then your loves are out of order and you may in fact ruin your family.

If you love money more than you love justice, then you will exploit your employees. But the ultimate disordered love and the ultimate source of our discontent in life is a failure to love the first thing first.

And that is a failure to love God supremely. The Bible says that human beings are made in the image of a tripersonal God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From all eternity, these divine three persons of the Trinity have been loving each other in infinite degrees of joy and glory and contentment.

They are fully, completely satisfied in and of themselves. Human beings were created to know that joy of being loved infinitely and the joy of loving and glorifying God preeminently.

[21:06] And since we were created for that love and for that joy, we will always look for the infinite joy that we were designed by God to enjoy elsewhere.

You don't stop becoming a worshipping being. You just change the direction of your worship. This is all Augustine. If we reject God, which we all do, then we will look elsewhere to fill that void.

And the reason even the best possible things in this world will not satisfy is because we were created for a degree of delight and satisfaction that this world cannot produce.

The most famous modern expression of Augustine's view was the ending of C.S. Lewis's World War II radio talk.

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger. Well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim.

[22:20] Well, there's such a thing as water. A man feels sexual desires. Well, there's such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable

explanation is that I am made for another world.

Augustine also helps us to see how it's possible to become deeply satisfied. Don't harden your heart against love, Augustine says, but don't give your heart ultimately things that you will lose. That you will lose and you can never, that can never satisfy you. Very simply, even the best, the very best marriages in this world, the very best marriages in this world, always end badly. They always do. One is going to be left without the other.

Most of the time. To the degree that we move towards loving God supremely as the deepest source of our satisfaction is the degree to which we can enjoy his gifts for what they are.

[23 : 41] Money and career, for example, become just what they're supposed to be. Work becomes work, a great way to use your gifts to be useful for others for the advancement of society. Money becomes just money, a great way to support your family, feed the poor, advance the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the ends of the earth.

Some have changed, sorry, some have charged that religion itself drains ordinary life of its joy and satisfaction.

And it does it by devaluing the things of this world. So it's a straitjacket on you that means you can't enjoy life. For sure, I think that there are some religions that value detachment from the world. Buddhism is one of those. This is not true for Christianity. It is not true for Christianity. In fact, Christianity does not say that we merit blessing through depriving ourselves and turning our backs on the world to earn heaven.

Christianity teaches that we are saved by God's free grace and pardon. Christianity says, against the ancients and against the modern, Christianity says, don't love anything less instead learn to love God more.

[25 : 00] And you will love other things with far more satisfaction. That's it. That's the unique contribution of Christianity. You won't over protect those things and you won't over expect things from them.

You won't be constantly furious at those things for not being what you hoped that they would be. Redirect your greatest love towards God by loving him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Not just for what he can give you, but purely because of who he is. He is. And only then satisfaction will start to come. You see, the Christian view, the Christian worldview avoids the pitfalls of both the ancient strategy of satisfaction through detachment from the world and the modern strategy of satisfaction through acquisition.

because the fundamental of the Christian gospel is it's a gift. It's not a, you don't acquire it, it's a gift. It's where it all starts.

And when you see life as a gift and the grace of God as a gift, you see everything that flows from his hand as a gift. But they are gifts from the good gift giver. So how then do we love God?

[26 : 25] Well, in the same way that children learn to speak. Only by responding to speech. And learning to love only by reciprocating love.

We cannot love God just by thinking of an abstract deity who is loving and kind in general. We must grasp and be gripped by the true story of God's actual sacrificial saving love for us in Jesus Christ. In John chapter 6, which Anne read out for us, verse 35, Jesus speaks to a crowd about the bread of life such that whoever eats it will never go hungry.

Eat this bread and you'll always be satisfied. Drink from this well and you'll never be thirsty. He's talking metaphorically about something that gives both strength and delight an image of fulfillment and satisfaction.

He also observes that human beings seek this in all the wrong places. He warns against in verse 26, sorry, 27, working for food that spoils.

[27 : 38] In other words, for trying to find satisfaction from that stuff. And then he says, I am the bread of life.

And he holds out a piece of bread in Luke chapter 22. This is my body given for you. You see, the heart of the Christian faith is a simple gospel message of sin and grace.

Sin and grace. Because we fail to love God supremely and our neighbor as ourselves, we sin and for God to forgive our sin, the Son of God became human and graciously died in our place on a cross.

And there are two ways that this message can bring about the love relationship with God which solves our satisfaction dilemma. Firstly, the knowledge of sin against our Creator starts to soften

our hearts.

If there is a God who created us and keeps us alive every minute, then the love that we owe this God is infinitely great.

[29 : 02] To not love Him supremely is infinitely wrong. If you believe that, you begin to see how much you have wronged Him by loving the gifts He has made rather than Him, the gift giver.

And it begins to draw your heart outward towards Him in humility and grief. But then secondly, the knowledge of His grace just ignites your heart.

It ignites your heart. for God to forgive us, He had to pay the debt Himself because we can't do it. Jesus Christ pays it on the cross for us.

I wonder if it dawns on you at least three times a day that outside of salt and a few minerals, everything that goes in your body has died so that you can live.

Ever thought about that? If you're eating bread, not only did the grain die, but the bread must be broken up into pieces.

[30 : 20] If the bread stays whole, you starve. If the bread is broken into pieces, you take it in, then you live. So when Jesus Christ says, I'm the bread of life broken for you, He is saying, I'm your God broken for you.

I die so that you might live. Seeing and savoring what He has done for us begins to change your heart. He suffered and He died for your sake.

At the very least, friends, it's why we just prayed, be today my daily bread. Not just give it to me, but be my daily bread. It's why we keep encouraging you to have a devotional life four or more times a week to have that gospel message of God and His goodness to you hit you again and again and again and be reminded of it because you are confronted every single day with images and words that are saying, be satisfied with this, with this, with this.

face. If you don't have your face in the Bible, you are already losing the battle. You cannot force your heart to love, but it's the good news of Jesus Christ that will change it.

The love of Jesus Christ draws out our hearts and it draws out our hearts and takes them off inordinate attachments to other things, good things but not ultimate things.

[32 : 02] And to the degree that we find our satisfaction in Jesus Christ is the degree to which we will be radically generous with our time, our talents, our testimony and our treasures.

And so once again, I commend to you the project card. the more satisfied we are in Christ, the more free we are with all of our possessions.

To the degree that we find our satisfaction in Jesus Christ is the degree to which we can say with the psalmist, because your love is better than life, I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods. friends, we're going to pause and then we're going to pray. Just bow your heads for a moment and just take a moment to allow that to sit and reflect in your hearts.

gentle extent, do you love teaspoon of love ■■■■■■■■, you can't hvor Maybe perhaps maybe transmit you or your love how yourself maybe like