

A Search For The Meaning Of Life(3) - Managing Life's Frustrations

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[0 : 00] Let's sing once again to God's praise. We're singing this time Psalm 77. Psalm 77, that's in the Sing Psalms version. Singing verses 6 to 14, the tune is Glencairn.

Throughout the watches of the night, my songs I call to mind. I ponder deeply while my heart an answer try to find. Forever will the Lord reject and never show his grace. Has he withdrawn his steadfast love and turned from me his face? For all time has his promise failed. Is God no longer kind? Has he in his great wrath dismissed compassion from his mind? Then to my heart there came this thought. On this I will rely. The years of the right hand of power of him who is most high.

So Psalm 77 verses 6 to 14 to God's praise. Praise God, program PDF Ninevees.

[1 : 07] Throughout the watches of the night, my songs I call to mind.

To a ponder, dear, they wide my heart and answer my to-bite.

Forever will the Lord reject and never show His grace.

As He withdrawn His steadfast love and turned from me His face.

But all time has His promise filled, His God no longer died.

[2 : 17] As He in His great righteousness, compassion from His mind.

Then to my heart, dear, in this thought, on this I will rely.

The years of the bright and the path of Him who is most high.

I will recall the Lord's great deeds, pure works of love and hope.

I'll meditate on all your hands, pure mighty deeds I'll show.

[3 : 33] O God, most holy are your ways, what God compares with you.

You are the God of miracles, who's power of the nations you.

O God, most holy are your ways, pure and true. O God, most holy are your ways, pure and true.

Let's turn now to the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 1. And today we're looking at the passage from verse 12 through to the end of that chapter, verse 18.

Let's just read through these verses. Book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 1 from verse 12. I, the preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

[4 : 56] I have seen everything that is done under the sun. Behold, all is vanity and is thriving after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

I said in my heart, I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me. And my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.

I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation. And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Somebody had once written on a blackboard, or what the equivalent of a blackboard was.

They don't have much to do with blackboards nowadays. It's smart boards, but days when there were blackboards. Somebody had, this was in a university lecture theater, I think it was. A student had written, Jesus is the answer.

[6 : 04] And then somebody else had come in later, and written underneath, yes, but what is the question? Jesus is the answer, but what is the question?

And what Ecclesiastes is doing is asking lots of questions. But actually, as we'll see from this study today, sometimes questions just cannot be answered.

There is no answer to every question that comes into our lot in life. And indeed, sometimes we look for answers, but begin with the wrong questions.

Jesus was the expert, as you read in the Gospels, of answering people's questions, not in the way that they wanted, or in the way that they might have expected.

He answered the question in terms of the question that they ought to have asked in the first place.

For example, you remember, someone came to him and said, Lord, are there few that be saved?

[7 : 07] How did he answer? He didn't say, yes or no, he said, strive to enter in at the narrow gate. In other words, here was somebody with a question about how many people would be saved, how many people would be lost.

Are there few that be saved? Are there many that be saved? And Jesus, in his answer, is really saying to him, effectively, you've started with the wrong question. The question is, will you be saved?

You strive to enter in at the straight gate, the narrow gate. That's where you begin looking for answers. And you come through this book of Ecclesiastes, we've seen already some of it, and Ecclesiastes is really asking the question, we might say, summarizing it, asking the question, what is the purpose?

What is the meaning of human life? What is life about? Searching for the meaning of life. And as we see in this passage, we're looking at today's, here's a preacher we take to be Solomon, who wrote the book, having looked at all that he himself had come to experience, and coming to conclusions from what he had come to know.

Here he is, he's saying, I applied my heart to seek and search out, by wisdom, all that is under heaven. Now we've seen already the importance of that phrase, under the sun.

[8 : 26] He's not taking God into the reckoning just for argument's sake. He's leaving God out of it until he comes near the end of the book, or sometimes through the book you'll find references to God.

But by and large, he's not referring to God. He's not taking God into his search for answers, his search for the meaning or the purpose of human life, just to see what sort of conclusions he'll come up with if he leaves God out of it.

And the wisdom that he speaks about here is human wisdom. It's wisdom without the wisdom that God gives. Because that's why he comes to conclude here that much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

The more we come to know, the more we come to understand, even if we're correct in our conclusions, the more we come to know, the more we realize there's lots yet that we don't know.

And the more your knowledge increases, the more sometimes problematic life becomes. This is really what the preacher here, this search for the meaning of life, is about.

[9 : 32] And he's detailing here in these verses some of the conclusions he's come to. In verse 13 here he's saying, as he applied this, it is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

And then verse 16 as well, he had acquired great wisdom, and he applied this wisdom to the world in which he lived. So he's seeking through human wisdom to find an answer to these questions, these frustrations in human life.

The question now is, how far will that wisdom take us? How far will that human wisdom itself take us? How far will we get in looking at life's problems and life frustrations and our needs as human beings?

How far will our own reasoning, how far will our own wisdom take us if we keep leaving God out of the picture? We can call our study today, Managing Life's Frustrations.

Because he's going to talk about some of the frustrating things we come across in our daily experience. That's the first point I want to make. Life, according to this passage, life is frustrating.

[10 : 50] Find that in these verses, at the beginning of the passage especially. Verse 13, It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

That's the first emphasis. Life, he says, as you look at it in this way, is a bad business. Not talking simply about unhappy in terms of the opposite, if you like, of joy or of gladness.

There is that element to it. But the word that's used here for unhappy is a word that means really essentially evil or bad. There is something bad about human experience. There is something bad about life in this world as we know it. There are many things to enjoy, but then there is frustration. And these things, as we'll see in the book of Ecclesiastes, don't necessarily always lead to happiness at the end of the day, and certainly not to ultimate happiness. Life is bad. There are certainly bad things that happen. Things like war, things like human cruelties. [11:54] Many things in life make it bad in character. But why? Why is it like that? Why does life have this bad character to it?

Why is life so unhappy? Why is there all the bleakness? What's the answer to that question? Well, the answer to that question is what we read in Romans. And it goes back to Genesis, doesn't it? Genesis 3, here in Romans chapter 8, where we read Paul actually dealing with the question of the creation as he knows it, and how that creation is groaning at the moment, but it's in a certain state of being under God's curse.

What he says in Romans 8 and from verse 20, he's talking about the sufferings of this present time. What he says, the creation was subjected to futility or vanity.

Very similar to the words used in Ecclesiastes. The creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.

[12:58] In other words, God imposed this upon the creation. When did he impose that on the creation? Why did he impose that on the creation? Why is there the frustration? Why is the creation as it is, so full of bad things, so full of frustration?

Well, it goes back to Genesis chapter 3, as you know, where God actually, in consequence of our human sin, our human rebellion against God, as indeed God had said and promised, the day that you eat of what I have forbidden you to eat, this is the test for man, will he be obedient to God? Will he go his own way? Will he want to be God himself? Or will he be willing to live under the direction of the God who created him? That's the position that he gave to Adam and to Eve. What were they going to do with this prohibition?

He only, he put a prohibition only over one tree in the garden. And the serpent, and the devil in the serpent, Satan in the serpent, using the serpent, came to the woman, first of all, and said, has God indeed said?

See, where the doubt is immediately placed before her, is it really the case that God has done this? Why has he kept that one tree?

[14:15] Why didn't he give you the whole of the garden to enjoy? Surely he's being vindictive, cruel, surely he's being restrictive.

And of course, Adam, with whom God had made the arrangement, listened to Eve, and they took and ate of the fruit, and immediately they became sinners.

Their relationship with God was thrown into turmoil. And enmity came between themselves and between themselves and God. That's why the creation, and then God specified, the creation itself would prove frustrating for Adam.

In the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread until you return from, to the ground from which you were taken. That's why it's as it is.

It's a consequence of our sin. And you see, that's why if you leave God out of it, you don't get that explanation. Or at least if you do, you don't believe it. That's why many people in the world choose not to live by the Bible, not to live by God, because it just seems to them that it's being very restrictive to place your life under the God of this Bible.

[15:33] That's where the lie came from in the very beginning. Has God indeed said, is God not being somewhat restrictive?

Is He not denying you something that's your right? That's the argument of the devil. That's the argument of evil. And it comes to confront ourselves pretty much on a daily basis.

And you'll find these frustrations expressed by the psalmist, the psalm we read, Psalm 77, the psalm we sang. The psalmist there is asking serious questions. He's experienced something in his life, difficulty in his life, trauma in his life, that has caused him to ask such questions.

Has God forgotten to be gracious? Is He no longer kind? Is He never again going to remember me? And then he stops himself and he reflects and he thinks back on how good God had been to him in the past.

This, he said, is what I will do. I'll remember the years of the right hand. I'll remember the blessings. Where did they come from? They didn't come from secularism.

[16:51] They didn't come from atheism. They came from God. I'll remember this, he says. I'll go back to this. I will look, in the words of the other sign, I will look to the hills, to God, from where my strength, my security comes.

So that's really why you find the creation full of frustration, full of what you might call bad, evil, all the things that cause us trauma and anguish.

Let me go back to Romans because we didn't quite finish what it says there. It says that the creation has been subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it.

That's God. But you see, the next thing is in hope. He subjected it to futility, but it's in hope.

It's looking to the future because something is going to happen that's going to release the creation itself from this bondage of corruption, as it calls it in that passage.

[17:55] This curse that God has imposed upon it in consequence of our human sin is not going to last forever. It's going to be lifted at last. When is it going to be lifted? When Jesus returns, because the creation itself will be released, as it says, there into the glorious liberty or the liberty of the glory of the children of God.

What sin has caused or brought about, what God has imposed due to our sin, is not everlasting. But his life is.

Salvation is. Freedom in Christ Christ is. So life is an unhappy business, it says there. And then verse 14, another aspect of the frustration of life is that life's meaning eludes human wisdom.

I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. Striving after is a word that in Hebrew can be translated different ways.

Feeding on wind, trying to gather the wind. In other words, it doesn't matter how you translate it, what he's doing is really trying to control the wind or direct the wind or chase after the wind and catch up with the wind.

[19:12] You just can't do it. It frustrates you. Even when you think you've got there in life, at times something else happens and what you are seeking to achieve runs ahead of you and you still haven't caught up with it.

It's the, remember when Garibust we used to have chickens and one of the frustrating things, it's minor compared to this, but it's illustrative of what he's saying here.

It's a vanity and a striving at trying to gather together the wind. If you try and gather chickens together just when you seem to have got them to where you want them to go into their wee hut or whatever, one just starts out and the rest just follow, it's an impossibility, virtually an impossibility to actually gather them together because inevitably one is going to escape and the whole thing just have to start again.

Well, it's the same he says here with the wind or gathering the wind or striving after wind. If you look at everything under the sun, if you don't take God into your reckoning, if you just look at it in terms of human wisdom, if you look at life as it's lived under the sun, what you're left to conclude is that you cannot see any meaning in it.

You can't gather it together. You can't really tie it up because it always seems to run away from you. You can't gather it to your satisfaction. Human wisdom fails to find the right conclusions and answers to a human problem, especially the problem of our sin.

[20:43] So secondly, along with life being frustrating, we have to look at living for the future. We have to look at living for the future.

It doesn't mean that living in the present and for the present is unimportant, but I'll explain this as I go along. Living for the future because there are two things we have to remember about life as we know it, life in this world, life under the sun.

First of all, life brings things to us that we cannot change. Life brings things to us that we cannot change.

Even if you wanted to change them, you have to come to the conclusion you cannot change them.

It's a striving after wind, trying to gather things together that prove impossible to put together.

That's the first thing. You have to live for the future because life brings us things we cannot change, so you have to look to what God has provided and how that provides a future and security for His people.

[21 : 38] Secondly, life brings us questions that we cannot answer. Life brings us questions that we cannot answer. First of all, life brings us things we can't change.

Look at verse 15. What is crooked cannot be made straight and what is lacking cannot be counted. Life contains hard realities.

We know of life in this world as sometimes very hard, sometimes exceedingly difficult, sometimes nothing short of traumatic, and we know that there are things that happen in life that we cannot ever more straighten out in this life.

There are personal failings that we've come across and have entered into ourselves that we know cannot be undone. There are failings in the church. There are splits in the church.

There are divisions in the church. There are wranglings in the church. There are things that happen in the church that you realize that you cannot straighten out. You have to leave them. Do the best you can with them, but move on.

[22 : 38] Marriage breaks down. Family life breaks down. Death is something we're very familiar with. War.

Devastation. So many things that we cannot change. You cannot straighten them out. By human wisdom, you cannot undo them.

You can't go back to the past and try and live it again. I was asking somebody at a wedding reception just the other evening, somebody who's been a Christian for a long time, would you like to be young again?

Would you like to start your life all over again? And she said, no. One life is enough. And that's so very true. You can't go back and live your life again.

You have to accept the mistakes that we've made ourselves personally and the things in life that you cannot straighten out and move on from them. And as we'll see, commit things to God.

[23 : 42] You can't just live life sometimes as you would like it to be. Remember Mary and Martha, the two sisters who lost their brother Lazarus. And they had been obviously discussing the matter in relation to Jesus not being there.

Because each of them said to Jesus the same thing when they met him different times. Martha went out to meet him when she heard that she was coming and she said to him, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

If you had been here, my brother would not have died. You see, that really captures for us, doesn't it, what comes up so often in our thing, if only. If only the Lord had been here, my brother would not have died.

If only such and such a thing had happened, this would not have come to what it is. If only I had done things differently. If only I had been wise enough to have done things a different way.

If only I had warned them in time. If only they had taken another route. If only they had left at some other time. Or if you go back to the Isle Air.

[24 : 53] If only they had just been a few more yards. Further on, they might have made it to the shore. If only. Life is full of if only's.

And what if's. And God is not going to change that past for us. He's not going to take us back there and do things differently like you would see in some films like Back to the Future.

Whatever. Giving you the opportunity to undo the mistakes. And not to go through the traumas and the difficulties and the testings.

It's not like that. It's not what life's about. God will not take us into the past. And God will not change the past. But what he will do is that he will if we trust in him.

He can change our response to the past. He can change how we view the past so as to live for the future. He can change us so as to accept his will and to realize that he is wise.

[26 : 03] That he has all the answers. That he has the right not to explain everything to us that we might want explained. So we have to look above the sun as we refer to it.

Here is life lived under the sun. Looking no higher than the things of this life itself. Leaving God out of the picture. But this is what you come to. Frustration.

Things that are bent that can't be straightened out. Things that you want to have that can't actually be counted. Things that are lacking that you can't bring about yourself.

But here is the great thing. God does straighten what is bent. God can bring something into his own hands that is absolutely twisted and rotten to the core as our life is as sinners.

God can bring that relationship that we have with himself that we broke through our sin. He can bring that about so that it is mended. He can bring about a curing of our spiritual lostness and sinfulness.

[27 : 15] What is rebirth? This is not some fancy philosophy from the far east. What did Jesus say to Nicodemus? How did he actually begin that wonderful interview in John chapter three?

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Or later on, except a man be born of water and of the spirit, the spirit of God.

He cannot enter into the kingdom of God. But you see, behind that there is the possibility, not just the possibility, but the certainty of those that God changes.

They are brought into the kingdom of God. Their life is straightened out. What does God do when he converts somebody? When he comes into your life and takes over your life?

When he comes to make you willing to place yourself into his great hands, these hands of the creator, what is that doing? You are placing yourself in his hands to straighten you out.

[28 : 16] That doesn't mean all your problems are solved, all your questions are answered. That doesn't mean that to the end of your life in this world you will still not come across serious problems.

It doesn't mean that you will not have any more trauma. It doesn't mean that your health will suddenly be improved a hundred percent that you'll be young again.

But it does mean that you will have God's strength living in you, God's direction to your life. And it means especially this, you see, in looking at life under the sun, when you can't find an answer to the problem or to the question, if it's just life under the sun, if it's just a secular view of life or a secular wisdom applied to life, where do you go ultimately with your problem?

There is no one there but yourself and your fellow human beings. But when life's failures come to really strike you and you don't have the answer to them and I don't have the answer to them and the church doesn't have the answer to them, what do you do?

You go to God and you say, Lord, I'm thankful that you know, that you in your wisdom know the end from the beginning, the reason why things are as they are, that you are the one who can and will ultimately straighten out my life.

[29 : 48] And as you give me to know Jesus and to know the life that's in him, you are taking a crooked life, Lord, a twisted life, a sinful life and making it holy, to take away the defects, to replace them with righteousness and holiness and Christ likeness.

That's what God is about, that's what God is doing in the lives of his people. He's even using the traumas in their life as a contributing factor towards straightening things out.

It doesn't mean they're come to understand everything that they're going through and why in this life, but they are persuaded that God indeed, as Paul said, is making even our light afflictions.

They weren't light, they were very heavy, but in terms of what our life will yet be, our light affliction is working for us, a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

While we look not at the things which are seen, which are temporal, but at the things which are unseen, which are eternal. Life brings us things we cannot change, but God is the God of change, the God of rebirth, the God of new life, of new beginnings.

[31 : 19] That's where we need to place ourselves amongst all the frustrations and the unanswered questions, questions. The wisdom of God in Christ is to be our foundation, surely.

Secondly, life brings us questions that we cannot answer. Verses 17 and 18, I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. This is not to do with insanity or mental derangement.

What he's doing here is applying his heart to know wisdom and madness and folly. In other words, putting together, examining right and wrong by human wisdom, examining, if you like, what morality itself is about.

And what you're left with is if it's just a secular morality, all it does is just add to your frustrations. It doesn't ever and never will bring you proper satisfaction.

Only God can do that. Only Jesus can do that. And there are questions that remain even for those who've known of rebirth and who know the Lord and who walk with Christ.

[32 : 23] And who live and love God, live with God and love God. There are still questions to which there are no answers. I don't have an answer to certain things that happened in my own experience.

I can't come to the pulpit and say, look, I've been through all of these things, so here are the answers to the kind of questions that you were asking just now. Because there are answers, there are questions that are not answered.

And you know, God doesn't actually owe us an explanation for everything. He's God. Why should He be under obligation to explain everything of what's happening in our lives to us?

What we're thankful for is that He has given us explanations sufficient to direct us to Him and be directed by Him in His Word.

But you see, the Christian life is basically not as it lives by faith, as we live by faith. We're not living ultimately by explanations, though there are explanations of certain things in the Bible.

[33 : 39] But faith is not based on explanation so much as on promise. You live by God's promises. promises. And you know that God's promises will not fail.

And that God will not Himself be untrue to His promises. Even if He has not explained meantime why certain things are as they are in my life or in your life. Even if you see others that have a very different experience to yours.

Even if there are families that go through great turmoil in the course of their life, while other families seem relatively free of those things. Why? Why is it like that?

Why that arrangement? Why that dissonance? That lack of order, if you like, or compatibility? I don't know.

But He does. God knows. But He doesn't owe us an explanation for every item like that.

[34 : 42] Remember, going to see the late Mr. Macaulay, who was ministering back for many years. I'd been my minister when I was a youngster there. And in the latter time of his life, he lived in Donation care home.

And when he went to see him, one of the things he frequently said to me, I don't know why he's leaving me here. This would be him well up in the 90s.

I don't know why he's leaving me here, he says. Look at where Alec died when he was quite young. Look at Callum Madison, God took him away when he was quite young.

And he's leaving me here, why? And then he would say, I don't know, he said, but God is wise. And so it is. It's God's arrangement, not ours.

It's God's wisdom, not ours. And so we live by faith, by faith in God's promises, not in explanations. And when we said, as we've said, secularism and atheism really cannot provide an answer to the questions of life, there's no use just avoiding them as if they weren't real questions at all, as if the traumas of life were really just no business at all of a faith approach to them.

[36 : 08] Remember, one of the great passages in the Bible is when many disciples, followers of Jesus, in John's gospel, turned their back on him.

They couldn't accept his teaching anymore. Many disciples went away from him and walked no more with him. And Jesus turned to the twelve disciples and he put this question to them, will you also go away?

Is this what you're going to do as well, when you don't accept or cannot understand my teaching? And Peter spoke and said, Lord, to whom shall we go?

You have the words of eternal life. Aren't you thankful today that you have someone to go to who is greater than yourself?

That you have someone to go to who will wrap your life round in his love and in his wisdom? That you have someone to go to who has the answers, even if he's not given you the answers to every question?

[37 : 27] That you have someone to go to who's been through all of life's traumas, more than we can ever imagine, and come through them unscathed, victorious, that you have Jesus, or do you?

God? That's the big question, isn't it? And we'll come back to it this evening when we look at the first letter of John and the next passage there, the passage that asks us the serious question too, do I know God for myself?

Is he my friend? Is he my companion? Is my life safe with him? Let's pray. O Lord, our God, we acknowledge as we have read in your word that life poses so many problems and questions for us. We are so small and so incapable, Lord, of handling the great issues of life, or even putting the items of our lives together in a meaningful way.

We thank you that all is known to you. You are our creator and our God. You are infinitely wise and powerful. You are the one who keeps your people safely and brings them onwards through this life

and this world under the sun so that they are looking forwards in their lives to living with you above the sun in the glory of heaven.

[39 : 13] Bless us now, we pray, as we part from this place and bring us out this evening to hear again what you have to say to us from your word. For Jesus sake, amen.

Let's conclude our service singing in Psalm 119, Psalm 119, and from verse 137. That's in the Scottish Psalter, page 165.

The tune is Marell. 137 to 144. O Lord, you are the righteous one. The statutes that you give are just.

You lay down laws of righteousness entirely worthy of our trust. Psalm 119, at verse 137. O Lord, you are the righteous one. O Lord, you are the righteous one.

The statutes that you give our trust. You need that laws of righteousness entirely worthy of our trust.

[40 : 36] My seal you consume and wish me out because my thoughts forget you Lord.

Your promises are bright and through God, guide yourself and love them Lord.

love I am lowly and despised Your precepts I do not forget eternal is your righteousness through is the law that you have said.

Distress and trouble press me down but your commands are my delight and wisdom so that I may live your statu time forever rise I'll go to the door to my left this morning.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore. Amen. Amen.