

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Genesis 2:8-17 on September 24, 2017 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Soul Searching
Today's Focus: Meaning – Why Are We Here?

“You Were Made to Worship”

In college I had a professor who didn't appreciate it if you came into class late and interrupted his lecture. So I'll never forget being in his class early one morning as one of my classmates sauntered in about 15 minutes late after very apparently just rolling out of bed. At that moment the professor closed the notes on his podium and said, "...And that's the meaning of life, everyone" as if to say, "And this poor fellow just missed out because he overslept."

Because the meaning of life—that's kind of a big deal, isn't it? And not just for college students trying to figure out where they fit in the world. But for human beings in general. For a lot of people "What's the meaning of life?" isn't just a big question. It's perhaps *the* question. And underlying that question are our cravings for purpose and significance. For anything in life to be meaningful we human beings have this craving to know, "What's this *for*?" "Is this really making a difference?"

These are age old questions. We see people in the Bible wrestling with them thousands of years ago. Take King Solomon for example. There's a whole book of the Bible about his search for the meaning of life. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon tries to find the meaning of life "under the sun" – in other words in a world where you take God out of the picture. It's his attempt to find a meaningful life within the confines of this material world just like atheism does today. So he explores sexual pleasure and entertainment, philosophy and learning, work, achievement, and wealth. He says,

⁴ I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards... ⁸ 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 my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil.
(Ecclesiastes 2:4,8,10)

Yet he concludes, **¹⁷ So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind... ²⁰ So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun.** (Ecclesiastes 2:17, 20)

And what's interesting isn't just that Solomon was battling a sense of meaninglessness. He was battling what one author has called "the disappointment of success." (phrases from "The Happiness Hypothesis" by Jonathan Haidt) Without God in the picture, even a "successful" life can lead a person to despair about the point and purpose of it all especially when you realize that death is inevitably going to put an end to it all anyway. So it shouldn't be a surprise that throughout history many people have ended up feeling like life is meaningless just like Solomon did.

Now to be fair, not all atheists are like this, are they? In fact I'm guessing many of you have atheist friends who would say that they are happier than ever because they don't believe in God anymore. And

this goes along with the prevailing philosophy of thought in our world today which is called postmodernism. Have you heard that term before?

Postmodernism basically says, "There is no such thing as absolute truth. So don't torture yourself trying to find the Meaning of life because there is no capital "M" Meaning anyway. Just create your own meaning. When you realize that there isn't any Meaning of life then you're free to forge whatever meaning you prefer. Stop worrying about whether it's true as long as it's true for you."

But there are a couple serious problems here. Do you see them? Postmodernism claims there is no universal truth. There is no Meaning. But then it asserts that everyone must be free to forge whatever meaning they want for themselves. What else is this really but saying that the universal truth about the meaning of life is that you are free to determine your own meaning? This is inconsistent. And it doesn't correspond to reality either. We are not completely free to just impose our own meanings on the world. For example, you are free to think that you can walk on the tracks in front of an oncoming freight train and that it's going to bounce off of you because you're so strong...but this is an unworkable philosophy of life, isn't it? That's why Ravi Zacharias says, *Nobody really wants a postmodernist for a pilot. "Yeah I know my instruments say ten thousand feet, but why believe the instruments? I have a feeling it's not ten thousand feet."*

Here's a quote that I think summarizes fairly and accurately where we're at in our world today: *"The point is this: If God does not exist, then life is objectively meaningless; but man cannot live consistently and happily knowing that life is meaningless; so in order to be happy he pretends life has meaning. But this is, of course, entirely inconsistent—for without God, man and the universe are without any real significance."* - William Lane Craig

You get what he's saying? There is no real meaning of life when you just come up with your own created meaning. And like Solomon expresses in Ecclesiastes, when that's how you try and find your purpose and significance, in your own created meaning...your life cannot be ultimately meaningful. You will eventually end up empty if you actually think about the implications of your life in a world without God.

So is there an alternative? Friends, the good news is yes. The alternative to creating your own meaning in a world without God is discovering the revealed meaning that God gives to all of us. That's what we begin to see in the Christian worldview where we left off last week in Genesis chapter 2 of the Bible:

⁸ Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹ The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰ A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters.

¹¹ The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold.

¹² (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) ¹³ The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. ¹⁴ The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

So what do we find here about the meaning of life? You and I were made to worship. In this we will find a purpose and significance bigger than ourselves. Let’s think about Adam, and shortly after this, Eve, whom God creates. God makes them in his own image. He also gives them souls. We talked about these amazing facts last week that make human beings the special objects of God’s love, more than mere animals, the very crown of his creation! Then we hear about how God puts them in this lovely garden, the Garden of Eden, which is nothing less than a paradise. Why? Because the LORD God wants them to know that he is intent to make their lives supremely blessed and happy. Not just superficially satisfied. Not just an instant gratification kind of satisfaction where you become addicted to pleasure like a drug so that you need more and more of it to get the same high and then you feel more and more depressed that you can never achieve that same level of pleasure as before and you find yourself a slave. No, not like this, God wants you to be ultimately and supremely blessed!

Here in the Garden of Eden, God doesn’t just meet their basic needs for food, shelter, and things like that though he certainly does that. He goes above and beyond and makes it as aesthetically pleasing as possible. The trees were good for food *and* pleasing to the eye. How delightfully wonderful! God didn’t have to do that. He wanted to. He’s that kind of God. Not a stingy miser. He’s a generous giver. Not a dull pragmatist. An artist. A creator. A loving Father who provides for his children! The Garden of Eden was a lush, beautiful, generously appointed place. Nearby was ready access to many additional treasures such as gold and incense, etc. So many things to discover, to use, to enjoy!

And here in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were free. So free. God said, **You are free to eat from any tree in the garden**. Think about this. Before there is any prohibition or restriction there is permission. Grand, broad, sweeping permission! God puts them there to work the garden and take care of the garden as they lived out the image of God as stewards of all that God had made. And this responsibility would be a joy and delight, a blessing from God. Work without exhaustion and toil. Can you imagine? Work that would be meaningful and satisfying. This would be an opportunity for human beings to put all their God-given faculties of body and mind to use for God’s glory and delight. That’s why to some extent we can include work as one of the ways in which we can still at least to some degree find meaning and purpose and life, so long as we don’t miss out on the bigger picture and turn work into an idol that we worship. You see that’s so often the problem. You and I were made to worship. But our worship only works when we worship our God who made us.

So let’s talk about that tree. Because some of you want to blurt out, “Everything you were saying all sounds great, but what about that tree? The tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Why did God put that there? Why did he say, ‘You must not eat from that tree?’ What’s that all about?”

You see, friends, this was Adam and Eve's opportunity to worship. To worship God and to be fulfilled in doing so. Imagine you're in a room filled with a 100 million M and M's from floor to ceiling all around and God says, "Go ahead and eat as many as you'd like whenever you'd like. Just don't eat this one purple one." Hopefully you'd be like, "Thanks God, this is amazing! You are amazing. You are kind and good and generous" That's why Martin Luther depicts the tree in his typically colorful manner. He says, *"But this tree of the knowledge of good and evil was Adam's church, altar, and pulpit. He here was to yield to God the obedience he owed, give recognition to the Word and will of God, give thanks to God, and call upon God for aid against temptation."* In other words this was Adam and Eve's opportunity to live out the purpose for which they were made. To worship God.

To look around and say, "Wow, how blessed we are! Look at all that God has done for us. Oh, how he must love us! Sure, he has given us the command, "You must not eat from this tree" but look at the all other trees he has given to us to eat to freely eat from! There is more here than we could eat in a lifetime. There is more fun to be had in meaningful activities here than we could imagine in an endless succession of days. He is not giving us this single command because he's trying to take all the joy out of the life. He is not holding anything back from us so as to prevent us from being supremely happy. He's giving us an opportunity in this solitary tree to show our thanks to him. He's giving us an opportunity to willingly, lovingly, freely worship him with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. We get to love him. We get to love each other. We get to work in this beautiful world he has made out of gratitude because he first loved us. This is what we were designed for"

Perhaps an analogy will help. A fish was designed to breathe oxygen in water through its gills, right? Should it complain then that it doesn't get to breathe oxygen in the air with lungs? Would anyone ever say, "It's sure narrow minded of God to restrict a fish from breathing air"? I don't think so, because while the fish may be confined under water there it finds that it is free to roam and live out its purpose as a fish." But let's pretend a stubborn fish said, "No, I am free to create my own purpose. I don't want to breathe in water. I am going to breathe air." Would it survive? Not for long.

See what if you and I were designed by God to find our true purpose in worshiping him and I'm not just talking about on Sunday mornings at church but in every aspect of our lives? What if worshiping God is the oxygen that keeps us spiritually alive? It would not then be greedy for God to give us opportunities to put into practice the very purpose for which we were made. They would be opportunities to discover the meaning of our lives. If you were designed by God to worship, thank, praise, and honor him in everything reflecting his love to others...it would be only pure love for him to give us opportunities to do so.

Friends, how's your worship life? I want you to understand that worship is more closely related to the meaning of life than you might think. You and I were made to worship. But worship yourself, your own self-fulfillment, your own goals, your own wants and needs and desires and demands and then you're ultimately like a fish that it trying to survive on land outside the ocean. You and I were made to worship. But we were made to be fulfilled by worshiping God and recognizing him as the source of every blessing in everything.

His grace and love and forgiveness is like the oxygen our souls need to breathe. That's exactly what we receive weekly when we come here to church to receive through word and sacrament and this is vital to a healthy spiritual life. The problem is we then goof it up all week long when we start worshipping created things, including ourselves, instead the Creator himself. When we start worshipping the gifts instead of the Giver. When put God on the back burner of our own priorities list but still expect him to bless us as we keep worshipping our idols. We try to fill the meaning shaped void in our lives with our own self-created meaning and purpose instead of with God and his grace. We suffocate our souls with our self-centered sinfulness.

Yet Jesus said, **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"** (John 8:31-32). Why did he say *free*? What does this mean? Well first of all he's talking about freedom as that which comes when you find the truth. In other words according to Jesus, truth exists. This is contrary to postmodernism which says there is no truth. But the truth is we are sinners. We are far worse off on our own than we would ever willingly admit until God smashes our pride and brings it the light. And as such our worship of God has lagged far behind our worship of the people and pursuits of this world.

But the truth of the gospel is that through Jesus Christ who willingly died on the cross for us, we have the forgiveness of sins and a gracious God again who continues to pour out more blessings than we could ever deserve in a thousand lifetimes. God is the One who made you, the One who redeemed you at the cross of Christ, the One who has set you free to worship him because this is what you were made for. The One who continues to offer you his forgiveness through the words you hear your pastor speak and the forgiveness that you see, touch, and taste in Holy Communion.

Friends, when you understand how gracious God has been for you in Christ, you know what happens then? The meaning of life becomes death proof. You see I think the biggest problem with an atheist's view of created meaning is that's it's fragile. It's brittle. It's easily destroyed. A diagnosis. A natural disaster. A recession. The death of a loved one. Even something like criticism or a mean comment that can make you crumble. Literally anything can take away the meaning of your life if it's what you created for yourself. And then what? What happens when it's destroyed? You feel destroyed. Suffering especially can make life feel frustration, futile, and meaningless.

But in Jesus Christ we have a God who knows what suffering is like and whose own seemingly senseless death infuses our lives with a profound sense of meaning no matter what. Because let's be honest, we all wrestle with these feelings of meaningless and purposelessness, don't we? I do too. But it's then, and especially then in the midst of suffering, that we need to remember our dear Savior who fulfilled the purpose of God's plan for our eternal salvation, our everlasting life with God in heaven.

And the thing that's so special about Jesus is that he's not a philosophy you have to know so much as he is a person to be known. The more we get to know Jesus the more we start to become like him. Imagine what would happen then in your life! The more our worship overflows into every aspect of our life. The more we see the opportunities to love others unconditionally, because that's how Jesus first loved us. When we put Jesus first then we can find purpose and significance in just about anything, even suffering. Everything becomes an opportunity to worship God. It's what you and I were made for. Amen.