

“Life: I Want a Refund!” Eccl. 1, 3; Ps. 137:1-4

There seems to be a lot of discontent with life these days. A couple of fictional characters portray this common sentiment pretty well. One is Eeyore, the gloomy donkey in the “Winnie the Pooh” stories. In one story, Owl says, “Christopher Robin is giving a party.” Eeyore responds, “Very interesting. I suppose they will be sending me down the odd bits which got trodden on. Kind and Thoughtful. Not at all, don’t mention it.” Another such character is Puddleglum, introduced in C.S. Lewis’ children’s book, The Silver Chair. He wakes up first-time guests in his home by saying, “Good morning, Guests. Though when I say *good* I don’t mean it won’t probably turn to rain or it might be snow, or fog, or thunder. You didn’t get any sleep, I daresay.”

Or, take this comic from “Over the Hedge.” Verne, the turtle, is finishing up a story, “And they all lived...” RJ, the raccoon, jumps in, “tedious, mundane lives that never matched the excitement and romance of the preceding story...” Hammy, the squirrel, worries, “What? What’s going to happen?” RJ answers, “Someday her prince will leave.” Verne responds, “I’ve got to get new friends.”

We laugh at these somewhat cynical insights, but there has been a lot of serious thinking about the problem of life not living up to our expectations. Existential philosophers like Jean-Paul Satre and Albert

Camus took their belief that there is no Creator to the logical conclusion that there is no real meaning in life. And this led to a sense of despair, a pervasive discontent with life. If there is no ultimate meaning in life, then why try? Why try to be good? Why try to achieve anything? Why try to connect with anyone, if it means nothing and counts for nothing? For Camus, a tempting option to life's lack of meaning was suicide.

While we may not go as far as Camus, we must admit that there is a lot of suffering and disappointment in life, and that life often appears to be random, without design or justice. M. Scott Peck began his best-seller, The Road Less Traveled, like this: "Life is difficult. This is a great truth. One of the greatest truths." And Peck is right. For example, there is a great deal of violence in our world, and in many parts of our world, there is no escape from it. Grinding poverty and hunger are a reality for many. And, we experience profound disappointments with life right here in Gettysburg. Marriages become loveless, and sometimes our partner betrays us. Friends are selfish. Politicians and other leaders- even church leaders!- inevitably disappoint us. Work seems pointless, or loads us up with stress. And then there are our bodies, which let us down as we age. We may lose hearing, sight, mobility, and stamina, causing us pain and disability. And they eventually stop working altogether, and we die. Even our relationship with God goes through times when we can't sense God's presence at all.

Life seems filled with disappointment, and that can lead to despair. If this is all there is, we want our money back!

Now many of you know that my wife, Bonnie, reads my sermons for me. When she got to this point in the sermon, she wrote me a little note that said, “David, if this sermon is going to be totally depressing, I’m not coming.” As always, I appreciated the encouragement!

Well, perhaps the Bible has something to say about this that will help us. It actually has quite a lot to say. But some of what it says may surprise you. It turns out that these feelings of disappointment with life, or of struggling to figure out the meaning of life, aren’t new after all! They’re found throughout the Bible!

Consider the 137th Psalm. It was written just after the Babylonians conquered and razed Jerusalem and the holy hill of Zion in 586B.C. Most of the Israelites were carted off to Babylon, where they served the Babylonians. Here’s what one of them wrote,

By the rivers of Babylon—

there we sat down and there we wept

when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there

we hung up our harps.

*For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’*

*How could we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land? (Ps. 137:1-4)*

God’s people were in the strange land of Babylon. They didn’t want to be there. Their faith had been shaken to its core, because they believed that God would never allow Jerusalem and God’s great temple to be conquered. They were wrong. The prophets warned them that they needed to repent and turn away from their worship of idols and their oppression of the poor, but they refused to listen. So God allowed this calamity to fall on them.

There are a number of other Psalms of lament, as they are called, and an entire book of the Bible called “Lamentations” is comprised of songs lamenting the fall of Jerusalem. Life is hard. But in this case, the horrors that befell them had a cause- their own unfaithfulness to God. However, that is not always the case.

The book of Ecclesiastes asks deep and searching questions about suffering and the meaning of life. It appears to be written by the “Debbie Downer” of the Bible! Listen to the opening verses.

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ²Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. ³What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

⁴A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. ⁵The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises. ⁶The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. ⁷All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. ⁸All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

⁹What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. ¹⁰Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us. ¹¹The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them. (Eccl. 1:1-11)

Pretty uplifting stuff, huh? The author continues to search for meaning in life through the whole book. He tries self-indulgence and pleasure, but discovers that nothing ultimately satisfies him. He pursues wisdom, which he says is like chasing the wind. Maybe meaning can be found in work. Nope. He writes this about it, ²²*What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?* ²³*For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.*” (Eccl. 2:22-23) He wonders if meaning can be found in following strong leaders, but concludes that political leaders cannot be trusted. He can’t find meaning anywhere. At times he even admits to giving into despair, although he doesn’t stay there. But he just can’t escape the gnawing feeling that everything in this life is futile.

Now some Christians prefer to ignore parts of the Bible like this one. They prefer a religion that is always upbeat and confident. But that’s not the faith that has been passed on to us in the Bible. Faithful people in the Bible struggled to understand the meaning and purpose of their lives. And we need to pay attention to those parts of our story.

So, where do we go from here? Well, I could have concluded the sermon here, but, as I noted earlier, Bonnie wouldn’t let me! There are some hints of hope in Ecclesiastes. Consider these well-known words from chapter 3.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ²a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; ⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. (Eccl. 3:1-8)

That first phrase appears on the banners in the front of our sanctuary. “*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.*” The writer of Ecclesiastes finds some comfort in the fact that although there are many disappointments in life, and although we often can’t discern the reasons for much of what happens in this world, God is still in control. God has assigned times and seasons for all of life’s variety. There is purpose in living, although God’s purposes are often hidden from us.

However, that doesn’t change the fact that many people, perhaps you, often find life to be disappointing, and struggle to find meaning in it. This morning we’ve seen that this is not a new struggle, but one that goes back almost to the beginning of time! And I believe that this discontent with

life is very important, for it tells us that we are designed for something more, for something better. That there is something wrong, terribly wrong, with this world. If it seems like things are out-of-joint, it is because they are out-of-joint!

This morning we are beginning a series of sermons that addresses this problem and overviews God's plan to remedy the situation, to redeem the world he loves so much. So, there is good news coming! Next week, Lou's sermon will explore at least part of the reason that things are the way they are. Then we'll take a look at what God has chosen to do about it, and finally, how we should respond. I hope you'll come back and check it out! It might be life-changing for you.