

## Searching for Satisfaction

The search for satisfaction is one of the most powerful motivators in the human spirit. People everywhere are engaged in the pursuit of goals. They want more. Jesus Christ taught us to reach for eternal goals, which are rewarding in this life (irrespective of circumstances) as well as the next.

### *High fliers*

It has been my privilege to serve in positions that have enabled me to meet many interesting people. They have included princes, prime ministers, renowned authors, internationally popular singers, one of the first men to walk on the moon, business leaders and sporting record holders. In the “game of life” they were the stand-out winners, the exemplars of “success”. It is given to very few to achieve true greatness, by human standards, as distinct from mere popularity, inherited wealth and serendipitous discoveries. These were people who had “made it”.

Westminster Abbey in London is another good place to meet the rich and famous, only this time they are dead. Plaques and busts tell of their remarkable achievements. They were unique in their times. But now they are history.

It is hard to be exceptional. For example, more scientists are currently alive than have ever lived and died throughout the human story. On the business front, the *Fortune 500* list shows the staggering profits that top companies make today. It is not even a big deal to be a millionaire any more. Nevertheless, notions of success are just as addictive, just as intoxicating, regardless of where you stand on the ladder. We have come to believe that the key to satisfaction is to have a household name, a bright future, wealth, social status, popularity and access to pleasure. Looking at the tombs of great men and women, whether in abbeys, pyramids or the graves of leaders such as Napoleon, one is reminded that even those who “have it all” are not guaranteed lasting fulfillments, security or immortality. They are just as dead as the most obscure people of their generations. Men are soon forgotten when they die.

### *A man who had it all*

Let's consider the life of one man deemed eminently successful in his day.

Solomon (an historical figure) was arguably the greatest king in the history of ancient Israel. He was incredibly gifted. He was well educated. He had position, authority and fame. He had an army, navy and expansive public service at his beck and call. He was a good administrator. Solomon was the richest man in the world in his day (in one year alone he amassed 23,000 kilos of gold, for his own use). His throne was made of ivory and overlaid with gold. (No mere silver drinking goblets for this potentate.) He had a private zoo and an abiding interest in science and the arts. He established a personal commercial emporium that was the envy of the world. His intellectual achievements and prowess were legendary.

Solomon founded universities and other centers of excellence. He was known as the wisest philosopher who ever lived (he wrote or assembled over 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs). The high and mighty came from other countries to observe his wisdom and marvel at his assets. He indulged in every sensual pleasure. He employed singers, dancers and orchestras to entertain him. He had an eye for the beautiful girls and ended up accumulating seven hundred wives (not to mention a stable of three hundred concubines). He owned 40,000 horses and 1,400 chariots and commanded 12,000 charioteers. Solomon employed experts in horticulture, architecture, zoology and mining. He paid 153,000 men over seven years to build the most elaborate temple in his nation's history. Building his palace took nearly twice as long. It must have been magnificent. His houses were filled with the treasures of Egypt. The people of his day were known for their technological development – and he led them. To top it all off, he lived in a time of peace and security, so there were few threats to the stability of his kingdom. I have visited some of the world's most elaborate palaces, but they were nothing compared with Solomon's treasure houses.

Solomon was also religious. He had a godly father (King David). As a child he dreamed of building a great temple where God could come and take up residence, a dream he would see realized. He had powerful personal encounters with God. However, over time, his many wives turned his heart away from the One True God, in favour of their own deities. Solomon's heart was eventually so corrupted by his lifestyle that he lost his objectivity and sense of reality and ultimately forfeited his relationship with God.

### *Having everything and enjoying nothing*

The English poet Percy Shelley (1792-1822) wrote a famous poem about an ancient ruin. It is worth reproducing here, because it underscores the fleeting nature of man's achievements, in the light of the Eternal.

I met a traveller from an ancient land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;

And on the pedestal these words appear:  
"My name is Ozymandius, king of kings:  
Look on my words, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
Nothing else remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Nothing was left except the emptiness of former remnants of greatness and the reality of the builder's insignificance in the context of eternity. Power is transitory. Life is short. Even Shelley, who discerningly penned these words died prematurely, at only 29 years of age.

Solomon was an enigma. Like the king in the poem, he boasted great achievements, but they did not last. (The federation he led split into two shortly after his death.) He reached all the supreme goals people set for themselves, then much more, but he never seemed to find out who he was and why he had been created.

In the end King Solomon concluded (sadly) that success in life was no better than a bag of wind, that the things for which people strive are ultimately empty, futile, frustrating and devoid of eternal value. How tragic. One day Solomon sat down and compiled his thoughts on the matter. The book of Ecclesiastes is a dramatic autobiography of someone out of fellowship with God.

Solomon may have been wise, but he forsook God and lived and died foolishly. Materialism, fatalism and polytheism did not bring lasting fulfillment. He lived for success, but came to believe that the whole of his life was, in fact, characterized by deep sorrow, grief and restlessness (Ecclesiastes 2:23), hardly a fitting tribute for a man who felt satisfaction with his achievements for so long.

Sadly, Solomon was not alone. Many people who achieve their life's ambitions come to realise that their assets are empty, that they have spent all their lives climbing a ladder, only to realise too late that it is up against the wrong wall. Too late to start over.

Like Solomon, many of us invest the best of our lives seeking assets and other goals that are transitory. The Bible says that the things we see are "temporal" (only there for a while, transitory), whereas what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18).

In our day we have witnessed the apotheosis of greed. However, true happiness apart from Christ is impossible to attain, whether one is rich or poor, educated or unlearned, influential or obscure.

A rock star dies of a drug overdose. A political leader shakes his head with disbelief and openly cries in front of television cameras when people he has served repudiate him and vote for another candidate. A great writer goes blind at the height of her creativity. A beautiful actress quits because she loses the appearance of youth and is no longer sought out for lead roles. The Bible says that charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting (Proverbs 31:30). Achievement is illusory and seductive.

Solomon came to believe that he would be better off dead; better still never to have been born (Ecclesiastes 4:2, 3). He added that, if a man should live one thousand years (or twice that), it would be futile, for we all die in the end. How depressing! The thrill and anticipation were gone.

### *Checking motivation*

What are the things that motivate and fulfill you? What do you dream of achieving? Where does God fit into the picture? Accumulated wealth can feel very nice to hold but leave its owner spiritually and morally bankrupt. What we see around us will not last. The things for which we strive (possessions, position and passions) are destined to pass away. Priceless objects, personal attainments, achievements, notoriety, everything will go. Everything eventually wears out (Colossians 2:22).

It is possible to get to heaven without health, wealth, fame, a great reputation, education, huge earnings, beauty, culture, friends and ten thousand other things for which people spent their entire lives striving. But you can never get to heaven without God's help. Solomon ended up spending a lot of his life away from God. No wonder he complained of depression and sounded jaded and dissatisfied. The Bible says that people from around the known world sought audiences with Solomon, just to listen to this man who spoke with such wisdom out of what God had placed in his heart (1 Kings 10:24), but all the while he was thinking that the entire enterprise was empty. Wealth, achievement and popularity did not impart character or proper perspective. In fact, they became stumbling blocks. Maybe that is why God inspired to Prophet Jeremiah to counsel one of the leaders of his day not to seek greatness (Jeremiah 45:5).

After years of soul-searching, Solomon concluded that, "the whole duty of man", the attitude and aims that count at the end of the day, is to, "fear God and keep His commands" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). This is the beginning of wisdom and true knowledge. It took him a long time to realise that life without God is vacuous.

It is not wrong to search for happiness. We all have basic physical and emotional needs that make us human, such as the need for food, shelter, clothing, acceptance and love. These are needs that our Creator has built into our wiring. The problems emerge when we search in the wrong places, when we substitute satisfaction for relationship with him, when we break the moral codes to get what we want, when we confuse the legitimate inner longings that everyone has, such as a desire for social significance (a romance, a friendship) with justification for breaking God's laws and principles (such as an extramarital affair to achieve it). We burden achieving goals with unrealistic expectations; a spouse, job, car or degree may be entirely legitimate, but they will not meet our every inner need. The deepest needs are spiritual. Only relationship with God will provide the ultimate fulfillment everyone craves. Only spiritual fulfillment will enable us to accept who we are and to be content with what we have when we get what we need (Philippians 4:11-13).

### *Being successful for God's glory*

The Biblical Christian believes that God does not want us to be failures (read Joshua 1:5-9, Psalm 1:3; Proverbs 3:1-10; 3 John 2), but that everything we have and achieve should be subject to His Lordship and priorities.

Financial, political and educational success can be used to glorify Him or function as ends in themselves. If we are blessed, it is so that we can be a blessing and influential for good in public and private life. The important thing, from God's perspective, is attitude. The Bible says He resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5). In fact, humility is often the starting point. "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that He may exalt you in due time", says 1 Peter 5:6. Instead of waiting till we have everything and then deciding to do the work of God, He asks us to start with what we have (see Exodus 3:2-5), so that the success we enjoy is attributable to Him. It takes a special skill set to be blessed materially and remain thoroughly submitted to God's Lordship. We can only do so with the Holy Spirit's help.

Solomon couldn't really enjoy what he had, because he all too often ignored God in the process. The key to true satisfaction as a Christian is to use what we have and are to serve God. The Bible says that we belong to Him; whether we live or die we are the Lord's (Romans 14:7, 8). Jesus said that we are to seek God's Kingdom and its righteousness ahead of everything else (Matthew 6:33). The air we breathe comes from Him. We are not our own, because we have been "bought with a price" (12 Corinthians 6:19-20; 7:23), the precious blood of Christ. We are called to use our faculties, talents and energies to serve Him. Not as mediocre believers, but with the whole heart, filled with the Holy Spirit and equipped to make a difference in our generation. Our strength comes from Him (Habakkuk 3:19).

Jesus said that He only did what God the Father told Him and lived in a way that pleased the Father. The Bible says that He did not please Himself (Romans 15:3). He did nothing and said nothing that was inconsistent with total obedience to God. His life was driven by this single purpose.

Are you prepared for a challenge? To stop listening to the reverberations of your own echo chamber and think beyond yourself, into the realm of faith? Let God plant a seed in your life that will grow into something bigger than you can ever accomplish in your own strength. Live for God and pursue a lifestyle and priorities that will have eternal consequences and touch the lives of others. Jesus said that those who seek to keep their own lives will lose them. But those who are prepared to lose their lives for and in Him, in whatever field of human endeavour they commit themselves, will find them (Mark 8:35). I believe that those who are prepared to allow their dreams to die and be sustained in God's higher purposes will find true satisfaction.

Years ago I attended a church service in Hong Kong, where I was given a bookmark that remained in my Bible for many years, a constantly reminder of what is genuinely important. It contained an aphorism that remains true today:

*Short life. Soon past. Only what's done for Christ will last.*