

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote this morning prayer in the 1890s, **PP The day returns and brings us the petty round of irritating concerns and duties. Help us to play the man, help us to perform them with laughter and kind faces, let cheerfulness abound with industry. Give us to go joyously on our business all this day, bring us to our resting beds weary and content and undishonored, and grant us in the end the gift sleep.** The day returns and brings us the petty round irritating concerns and duties, in other words, those small and seemingly unimportant things that feel like they are leading us nowhere.

Opening DVD: Movie: Up in the Air—Time: 1.21.20-1.22.50

PPThe movie: “Up in the Air”. The scene: a groom with cold feet. Hours before his wedding he sits in a kindergarten classroom and wonders if it’s all worth it—after all, when you look at life and look where things are headed is it’s just one moment after another until finally there is death. As the groom says there is no point. But George Clooney has to rescue the situation. His way of rescue: to agree that there is no point but he will tell the screwing with cold feet that life is better with company, that you need a copilot to do life with. This bit of insight changes everything and the wedding goes on and joy returns.

Life is better with company. It gets the wedding back on track, but it doesn’t answer the question, it doesn’t deal with the problem of life being pointless. We might ask ourselves why can’t this groom just be happy, he’s getting married, a woman loves him, if you watch other parts the film you discover he has a dream for the future and more. He has, what we are told over and over again in our culture, exactly what he needs: safety, feeling good, happiness, and a positive attitude about himself. He is living the dream of being happy and feeling good about himself. As one person who has been looking closely at what Americans believe has written, **PP "This is not a religion of repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of a sovereign divinity, of steadfastly saying one's prayers, of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering, of basking in God's love and grace, of spending oneself in gratitude and love for the cause of social justice, etc. Rather, what appears to be the actual dominant religion in the U.S. is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people."**

PPSo what’s this guy’s problem? According to the dominant religion in America he’s got it all together. His problem: he let his soul be quiet for a few moments and a quiet soul needs deeper answers; it is not satisfied with a “well as long as you are happy” kind of answer. The soul longs for something deeper, more substantial than happiness. In the quiet our souls wonder what is life all about, does my existence matter, do we live and die and our memory is forgotten in a generation or two. These are the kind questions our souls ask when things get quiet. That’s the reason we don’t let them get quiet very often. It is too troubling, too uncomfortable, and it is too revealing of how willing we have been willing to settle for a shallow life that carries little meaning.

PPWhile we don’t like to let our souls get quiet, finally we have no choice. There will be times when our world suddenly becomes quite. Lying in bed at night and you can’t fall asleep and the questions come. Laying a hospital bed waiting for surgery, they put in

the IV, the anesthesiologist gets ready to put you out and the questions come. Some pain, some tragedy, some sorrow strikes and you begin to wonder, you begin to question is life really about feeling good, happy, secure; is life really about just a sense of personal well-being and getting along nicely with others, or is there something more.

One day, one way or another, our souls are going to get quiet. Maybe your soul already has. Whether the day is coming, has come, or keeps coming back it seems a good idea to listen to our soul's questions now so we head our lives off in the right direction. Our soul's question is pretty much is the same question the groom was asking, "Is life basically pointless?" This is a question that the Bible itself asks. We hear the question in the book of Ecclesiastes, **PP** *The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: 2 "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." 3 What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? 4 Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. 8 All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. 9 What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. 11 There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow.* **PP** In the book of Ecclesiastes we find the teacher experimenting with every part of life from sex to wealth, from learning to art, from government to gardens, from study to work to see if any part of life has meaning. He spares no expense in his pursuit. Yet every time he comes close to finding some meaning he comes to the same conclusion that everything is meaningless.

PPThe book of Ecclesiastes when carefully read reveals why the teacher finds everything meaningless. It is because the teacher disconnects life from God. He examines all of life under the sun, as he calls it, which means we start with ourselves and end with ourselves leaving God out of the picture. And while many people don't like to hear it the simple truth is that human autonomy makes life meaningless. If people are the center of all things in life ends up not having meaning. Or thinking of this a different way if we live in an "I" centered world life has no point. When we live in an "I" centered world we assume that God doesn't exist, I am the measure of all things, human beings are the center of the universe. The problem is "If there is no God, there is no purpose, no meaning". Go to the whole evolution thing with me. Without getting into the arguments about Intelligent design and Darwinism and all that stuff, pretty much anyone who is honest about this deal admits that if we came into being by random chance, that some cells happened to come together at the right moment and so life began, if that's the case then our random beginning means that our lives really have no meaning. We can try to invest them with meaning, pretend they have meaning, but they don't--for ultimately this universe will burn out and all that has been done will be gone, and from a short term perspective, from a groom with cold feet perspective: you are born, you live, you die and you are gone. As the apostle Paul once said, *"If there is no resurrection from the dead let's eat and drink for tomorrow we die."*

PPThe Bible fully gets our soul's question, gets it so much that it asks the question itself. But it doesn't stop with asking the question it brings an answer. An answer we find in Ecclesiastes, and many other places in the Bible. One of those places is the book

of Ephesians where Paul writes, *In [Christ] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.* God, the divine sovereign of the universe, has a plan, has a purpose, and he chooses a people to be part of that plan and purpose. As we live our lives as part of that plan and purpose we are formed into people who as Paul says earlier in Ephesians are adopted as children of God, are being shaped into people who are holy and blameless, a people who enjoy forgiveness, and the riches of God’s grace. Not only so but this people chosen by God also have an inheritance waiting for them, which they already have a taste of now through the Holy Spirit. An inheritance that one theologian speaks of this way, “... **many Christians in the Western world have imagined that the aim or goal of being a Christian is simply to go to heaven when you die, the New Testament holds out something much richer and more interesting. Yes, those will belong to Jesus in this life go to be with him once they die—that’s a promise made in various places in the New Testament. But that’s only the start of it. In the end—after most of us have had a time of rest and refreshment in the presence of Jesus himself—God has promised to give the entire world, the whole created order, a complete makeover. It will be renewed from top to bottom, so that it is filled at last with the presence of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. And what will happen to us then? We will be given new bodies in which to live with the light and power in God’s world. That, as I fully appreciate, is a much bigger and fuller picture of the ultimate future hope that many Christians have cherished, but it’s the one the New Testament promises us.**

PP There is in this a distinct change from the “I” centered world of American religion, of the groom with cold feet, and of the teacher in Ecclesiastes who lives life under the sun. In Ephesians 1.3–14 we find over and over again that all that is happening is to the praise of God’s glory. In other words all the gifts we enjoy cause us to focus not on ourselves but to turn our eyes on God and praise him; his character, and his plan. Since God’s plan is so complete and full as we’ve just heard living out his plan now means that every part of our lives is lived in line with that plan and for the praise of his glory. It means we understand that the “I” centered world is gone and the God centered world is what really exists. A God centered world is a world where my faith is involved in every aspect of my life from education to business to charity to entertainment to recreation to how I spend my weekends. We can summarize this in the words of Contemporary Testimony, **Jesus Christ rules over all. To follow this Lord is to serve him wherever we are without fitting in, light in darkness, salt in a spoiling world.** In a God centered world we serve Christ wherever we are and whatever we do, whether we are an electrician, a teacher, a stay at home parent, unemployed, we do all we do, live out the fullness of our lives in a God filled world. It is a world where I’m willing to take unpopular stands to defend my faith—even if it goes against the general American belief that we should cause no waves based on our faith. But in a God centered world, God filled world Chris-

tians have to gain their voice. In a world where HIV AIDS devastates communities, creates orphans, is passed on not only for promiscuity, but especially because of poverty, injustice, and a broken understanding of the world Christians need to gain their voice and speak recognizing God's call in the book of Amos, justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a never failing stream. In a world of HIV AIDS, and the world of Dafur and the Congo and as we'll see in a few moments gang violence in Guatemala Christians need to gain their voice and speak out of their faith, even if others would have us be silent. It is a world where I am willing to dig deeply to discover what God wants me to do. In a God filled world I recognize that God has given me certain strengths and abilities. I need to discover the strengths and abilities, develop them, and use them to further his purposes. To sit on the sidelines, to not be involved in building what God has given me, not only robs me of life it robs God. It is a world where I'm willing to dig deeply to discover more about God and what he wants for his world. One of the struggles of our general American religion where our goal was to be safe, happy, and feel good about ourselves is that as long as we feel safe, happy, and good about ourselves we see no reason to learn more about God. We already have what we want. In a study done about the religious life of American teenagers the authors note, **American teenagers are incredibly inarticulate about their religious beliefs, and most are virtually unable to offer any serious theological understanding. "To the extent that the teens we interviewed did manage to articulate what they understood and believed religiously, it became clear that most religious teenagers either do not really comprehend what their own religious traditions say they are supposed to believe, or they do understand it and simply do not care to believe it. Either way, it is apparent that most religiously affiliated U.S. teens are not particularly interested in espousing and upholding the beliefs of their faith traditions.... [This is hardly surprising since] the faith many of them have in mind effectively helps to achieve a primary life goal: to feel good and happy about oneself and one's life. It is also no wonder that most teens are so religiously inarticulate. As long as one is happy, why bother with being able to talk about he belief content of one's faith? (Small Groups)** But before we pick on teenagers too much those who did the research discovered that teenagers simply reflected what was going on in the lives of their parents when it came to the understanding of faith. When we understand that this is a God filled world, that the only way of finding meaning is living in his world, finding our place in his story, that we are here for the praise of his glory then we become those who want to learn more about this God whether life is going well or badly.

PPA world where we begin to understand that if the story we are living is to have meaning it has to be God's story and not ours. When our soul asks, "Does life to point?", Our answer is, "Life has a point when we find our place in God's story. For it is God's story that gives meaning to life."

PPIn 1954 leaflets were dropped on the presidential palace in Guatemala City demanding the resignation of the President. It was the beginning of the Civil War that would last more than 30 years. 200,000 people lost their lives during the Civil War. But even though the war has ended the devastation continues. It is seen in poverty, in gang violence that is claiming more lives than the war did, in a sense of hopelessness and

brokenness. Many people in Guatemala can’t imagine a religion that has as its goal being safe, happy, and feeling good about yourself. Instead their lives are a daily struggle to survive. One wonders what our groom with cold feet would have to say in the face of the pain of Guatemala. Whatever he would say to those who are finding a life filled with meaning as they serve those who continue to suffer the devastating fallout of Guatemalan Civil War. Let’s get just a little insight into that by watching a promotional clip for a movie that tells the story of what happened and is happening in Guatemala.

<http://athentikos.com/media-video.php>

PPAs you watch that promo clip you do not get the sense that these people who are serving are struggling with the question of the groom with cold feet, instead they find themselves engaged in a life that is filled meaning and a life that brings meaning to others. A life lived in a God centered world where these people found their place in God story. By the way, each time you put money in the offering plate you join with these people who found their place in God’s story. Because the guy in the video works for Christian Reformed World Missions and some of your offering goes to support CRWM. He heads up the project to restore and bring hope to Guatemala.

PPIn those moments when your life gets quiet and your soul wonders “does life have a point?” Tell your soul the truth that life has a point when we find our place in God’s story. And then pray a prayer for yourself and for all of our children. A prayer that seeks God’s strength to live our lives with God’s story at the center—in days when all is going well and when all has fallen apart. The words of this prayer, a prayer that we use at baptism, go like this,

Father in heaven, we pray that you will never destroy us in our sin as with the flood, but save us as you saved believing Noah and his family, and spare us as you spared the Israelites who walked safely through the sea.

We pray that Christ, who went down into the Jordan and came up to receive the Spirit, who sank deep into death and was raised up Lord of life, will always keep us and our little ones in the grip of his hand.

We pray, O holy Father, that your Spirit will separate us from sin and openly mark us with a faith that can stand the light of day and endure the dark of night.

Prepare us now, O Lord, to respond with glad hope to your promises so that we, and all entrusted to our care, may drink deeply from the well of living water. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen!