

My Life is Unfulfilled

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[0 : 00] Okay, so for this morning we're going to continue looking at the theme of ordinary Christians. We started last week and we're going to do it for the four Sundays in August, just a kind of mini series looking at this theme.

Last week we just looked at my life being ordinary. This week my life is unfulfilled. Then we're going to look at, I have no gifts and I'm a spiritual disappointment. My life's a spiritual disappointment. Quite a number of people have said, you must have a really rotten holiday, Derek. Coming back with this depressing theme. That's not really the case. I hope it's not, although there have been many times in my life where I can resonate with these particular statements.

But it is something that I am aware of both in my own heart and life and also in the lives of many of the Christians that I will pastor or speak to and or hear from.

It's the testimony of many of us. Maybe the complaints, shall we say, of us as ordinary Christians. And today we're going to look at this theme, my life is unfulfilled as a Christian.

[1 : 12] It's disappointing. It may be that I sense a bitterness against God because of that. I don't know answered prayers, lots of unanswered personal prayers that we suspect in our lives.

Maybe the rottenness of our job, our intimate relationships are poor. We have broken dreams. We've had lots of dreams as we were younger and they seem to have been broken either our health or our children or our family life or our lack of family life, our singleness or a marriage or a failed marriage.

It may be lots of different things that make us feel this great sense of unfulfilled, lack of fulfillment spiritually in our lives.

Maybe not a typical theme for a congregation whose average age is much younger than mine. It may be that already in your lives as young people and maybe some of us as older people sense that lack of fulfillment and that might come out in your Christian life itself.

As you've come to God with lots of hopes and with lots of desires for fulfillment and with the promises of His Word and you feel far from God in your life.

[2 : 33] You don't sense His presence in your day to day living. He glimpses of it now and then but you don't really, you're cynical about the spiritual claims of spiritual giants in your eyes or people that are professionals or preach.

You come to church and you hear preachers speaking about fulfillment and love and grace and joy and hope in the Spirit and you say, what do they know? What do they know about real life?

What do they know about my life? You go from God's house drained and emptied because you don't really believe in your heart that God loves you.

How could your life, how can my life possibly be so full of sadness and a lack of fulfillment if He loves me? His claims to love me are and redeem me are hollow and I sense an emptiness there and at best as a Christian I'm going through the motions for the sake of others or even for my own sake until maybe sometime in the future things will change.

Are these trivial considerations you have in your life or that I might have in my life? No, absolutely not. They are very real for us and in preaching this sermon and in preaching this theme I'm making no judgments on what you are experiencing or in any way belittling them and all of us as Christians when we come across others who complain bitterly in this way, our response should always be one of love and empathy and care and prayer rather than judgment and dismissal and disinterest in them.

[4 : 21] Is it trivial? No, absolutely not. Is it hopeless? Your bitterness and disappointment? Is it so deep that there is no way back for you?

Absolutely not. Absolutely not as we look at our own experiences and God's word this morning.

So this is a theme, okay? We're not going through a book. We're not taking a deep look at one small section of Scripture, one verse. It's a theme and I think it's important for us sometimes to look at themes because themes in the Bible are not restricted to one verse.

You'll not find all there is about disappointment in one verse in the Bible and yet the reality of that comes through so many different passages of Scripture.

But I am going to focus primarily on the chapter we read about Naomi. Now it was not that long since we studied and went through the book of Ruth in that remarkable story of redemption and personal relationship with God.

[5 : 24] I just want to look briefly to kind of set the scene in the life of a believer in the life of Naomi because Naomi is recorded in Scripture.

I do think sometimes this book should have been called Naomi, not Ruth, because Naomi is the theme of the book from beginning to end. It ends with Naomi and it starts with Naomi. Or of course it could have been called God, but then all the books would have been God and you wouldn't be able to choose which one to go to.

So they're differentiated and this one's called Ruth and we know the story many of us have Ruth. But Naomi in this chapter where we come to in this chapter knows deep and dreadful sadness and disappointment in her life and in her faith.

For her it was worse than her dreams not being fulfilled. It was her dreams were fulfilled and then taken from her. So it was that she had what she was looking for in her life and it was taken from her. She was in love. She was married. She had two beautiful sons. She was living in her home country. All that someone in that day and generation as a believer under God as part of God's covenant people could have wanted and would have wanted in her life.

[6 : 41] And then the country to which she belonged was struck with famine. Now we're not told anything about this famine, but often biblically for the people of God a famine was related to God's intervention and judgment for them because he had taken them into a land flowing with milk and honey, a great place of provision.

And he said as they followed him they would know blessing and as they turned from him they would know discipline and judgment and famine often at least pointed to their lives spiritually as to what they should do.

She was her and her family with poverty and with famine and this desperate decision to leave the promised land.

Was that done prayerfully and spiritually? We're not told, but it doesn't seem so. She went into a foreign country and there she knew a period of joy and happiness.

Her sons got married and a new celebration and blessing as her family was broadened, but then her sons died.

[7 : 57] Worse than disappointing, isn't it? Her sons died. She's let her husband die. She's left alone with her two daughters in law in a country that she can't call home.

Now we might sometimes say, it's better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all.

But it didn't seem so for her, did it? Did it seem so? That it was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? Sure, but it certainly seemed bleak for her.

But what is the turning point in the whole of the story of Ruth is that she heard that the Lord had been gracious to her people and that the famine had ended and she decided to return to the Lord. She saw that and recognized that. She says, I will go back to the land that the Lord has given me.

[9 : 02] She recognized and saw that and she returned home. But she returned home a very different believer, a very different person, and her life at this point is bereft.

That's all we can say. She is shattered in her life and she is alone except for her daughter-in-law Ruth who is with her. Her dreams have been destroyed.

She's empty. She is hugely unfulfilled. She says, don't call me Naomi, call me Mara. Call me, just means bitter.

Call me bitter. I went away full. The Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord is testifying against me? Almighty has brought this calamity upon me.

She had known physical famine as she left the land and she returns knowing a spiritual famine in her life, a lack of fulfillment and a distance from God.

[10 : 03] She can't feel that God is close to her. Now, I'm not sure, very poetically and powerfully phrased, I'm not sure if you would phrase your own experiences and this lack of fulfillment similarly

if that is the case.

And I sincerely hope that's not the case. But many people will say, if God loves me, why is my life the way it is? Why do I sense such letdown and disappointment?

It isn't what it says on the tin. It's different. What can we, how can we respond to that? How does God and His Word speak into a lack of fulfillment and a lack of a sense of God's love and grace in our lives?

Now, speaking primarily here to you, if you're a Christian and to myself as a Christian, if you're not a Christian this morning, if you're not someone who would acknowledge Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, there is a more fundamental and a deeper reason that may be behind your lack of fulfillment.

And even if you don't sense that, there is a real separation from God and from hope and forgiveness and from grace that is crucial to consider in your life as a person made by God and made in His image, that I hope you would do even as you listen onwards in this sermon and do take time if that's how you feel to speak to me or someone else before you leave the building this morning and the claims of Jesus.

[11 : 43] How does God and His Word speak into such an unfulfilled life? Unfulfilled life. Well, God doesn't trivialize it. We recognize that God doesn't treat us as weaker or hopeless or rubbish Christians if these are the experiences and the testimony we have.

There's huge sections of Scripture devoted to these issues and we mustn't forget that. There are huge sections of Scripture. There's a whole book devoted to it, the book of Job, one of the greatest books of the Bible that we took time to look at ourselves not that long ago.

It's the theme of many of the Psalms, one of which we sung today. It's the recorded experience of so many believers. We don't have in Scripture the testimony of lots of supersonic Christians, supersonic believers who know no lack of fulfillment and who only know blessing and success and glorious living in their lives.

It's the theme of so much of the Bible. God doesn't trivialize it, nor should we. Remember if you remember anything about the book of Job, remember the way God spoke to the Job's comforters, the people that were supposed to be channeling Him back towards God.

He thrashed them. He thrashed them for their lack of compassion and their lack of grace and their lack of understanding. He reminded them that Job was innocent and he said, he placed God as the one who would intercede on their behalf.

[13 : 20] And there's just a stinging rebuke for the kind of casual, careless, shrugging off of Job's complaints by his comforters. Oh, you just lack faith, you don't understand, and throwing kind of Bible truisms at him thoughtlessly.

And you know for you and for I, if that's what we're going to do, God will thrash us in the sense that he'll not really use us in comforting or counseling or helping others who are struggling.

Throwing aimless Bible verses at people will not really be the answer and shrugging off their complaints, exposing their weakness and priding ourselves in our faith and strength is not really how God deals with it.

How do we deal with this lack of, the struggle that maybe you're having, I am having, we have, have had, will have in the future at some point in this Christian life which is a battle for us.

Well, the key I believe from God's word for us is to face home. That's what we need to do.

[14 : 35] That's the mentality, that's the attitude we always have to have. We need to face home. We need to face back towards our spiritual home and our relationship with the living God through Christ.

That's the key to this book of Ruth is Naomi. When she heard what was happening back in her home and that God had been gracious to them and provided them, she went back. She went back empty.

She went back with lots of complaints. She went back not knowing what lay ahead for her, but she returned to the one place that she could go.

Now, I'm not suggesting here, and please be aware of this, I'm not suggesting that the lack of fulfillment you may experience or the great disappointment is always going to be as a result of rebellion or sin in your life.

That's clearly not the case. Jesus taught against that when he was speaking about the Tower of Siloam and the fact that many people had been killed and his disciples asked him, what had they

done wrong?

[15:40] Whose sin was it that caused this? And Jesus said, no, they're no more guilty than anyone else unless you two repent. That was the significance.

These things happen and it needn't be deliberately as a result of us turning away from God. However, there may be a direct link between the lack of fulfillment in your life, your distance from God and your life in rebellion and disobedience to Him.

That may have been the case with Naomi as they left the Promised Land when they were never commanded to leave the Promised Land to look for their help in another country rather from the living God.

But it's certainly the case with the prodigal, isn't it? The prodigal who left his father's home and wanted just to sow his wild oats and live exactly as he wanted until he was brought to that place where he faced his father and faced home and the love of home and the acceptance of home. So it may be in this great disappointment of your Christian life that you need to look for the living God to search your heart and to, I need to search my heart and be open to being convicted of wrongdoing in a lifestyle or in a way of thinking.

[17:03] It may be, we've been unconscious of it up to this point. It may be that we are deliberately choosing to live in a way that is in contradiction to our relationship with the living God and in a sinful way.

It's a great thing to own our own failures. That's a great thing for a Christian to do. We can just own our own mistakes. We don't need to be afraid of them. We don't need to hide them. We can't hide them.

We need to just own them and confess them before the living God and turn to Him because He's our Father and He loves you. And He loves us. He has given Himself for us on the cross. He has died for our sins. And He's looking for that return. He's looking simply for us to own our failures and give them to Him and be forgiven and to be cleansed.

But even where there isn't a deliberate and conscious awareness of living out of fellowship with Him, as we face home, as we come into His presence in prayer and in fellowship, as we come into the Father's presence, it always changes our perspective.

[18:07] You know, Job is declared as innocent in the book of Job yet he comes to God as Father and says, I repent in dust and ashes because the closer he was to the great light of the world, as we've said often here, the darker we recognize our own hearts to be, even if we are an inverted commas innocent.

That is that we aren't deliberately walking against the Lord. We're covered in the righteousness of Christ. We still recognize as we face home that daily walk of repentance.

That's what we do, isn't it? Are you living your life as a Christian in a daily walk of repentance? You should be and I should be. Not because, you know, we're deliberately necessarily rebelling against God, but in His presence we recognize that there is so much that we require from His hand in terms of forgiveness.

And that will, for me, and biblical is always, it's always the key. Your circumstances might not change one iota.

The experiences that have caused you disappointment might not dissolve away, they probably won't. But take your disappointment and your emptiness to the living God and complain to Him as the Samus does and as Job did and as we're given a license to do biblically.

[19:26] Take them and experience His grace and experience His love and experience the beauty of His not rejecting you and not dismissing your complaints.

You have, we have to, on a daily basis, be going back to Him, whatever your feelings, your doubts, your misgivings about His love and His commitment and what He has done.

Go back to the place where you first experienced His grace. Bow your knee at the foot of Calvary and go back there. Go back to the people who are Jesus' people.

Go back to the Bible, go back to worship, go back to the secret place, go back to these times of corporate worship and stay there. You know the great thing I can say today?

I don't know the answers. I don't know what He'll say and I can't give you any hint of what that experience might be but it's the only place as a servant of the living God that I can turn you to because it's the only place of life and hope and because there is no alternative.

[20 : 37] That's the reality. There is no alternative for us, the author of life and the author of salvation. One of these online phone devotionals from the U version of the Bible that I'm doing with some others, there's a great little sentence this week when speaking about the secret place, that is the place of prayer.

It said, success in the secret place is not getting an emotional feeling or sensing a new righteousness, success is simply showing up. Isn't that great?
And that's what I'm saying. Success is simply showing up. It's simply going into God's presence and leaving God to provide the answers and recognize Him in our life.

The easiest thing for us to do is to say famine, run away from God. Now you owe me famine, run away from God, run away from the land that's supposed to flow with milk and honey, run away. And it's the easiest thing for us to do in our lives in disappointment, run out, turn our backs on God. God can't exist. God doesn't love me. God isn't fulfilling His promises and we turn our backs.

[21 : 46] That's the easiest thing for us to do. What Scripture and what Jesus pleads with us to do is to keep turning towards Him, keep looking to Him, keep relying on Him and allow Him to transform you to experience it.

Because then we will see things differently. I don't know what you'll see, but you will see things differently as you keep coming and relying on the living God in a real dependent relationship. I believe that the Bible teaches that clearly. Naomi came to see that because you remember this is not the end of the book of Ruth. It's only the beginning.

Naomi came to experience as she turned back to the Lord in ways she could never have expected or planned that God loved her and had a purpose for her in a little bit.

We see things differently. We see what fulfillment looks like. 1 Peter 2 verse 9. Fulfillment is recognizing by God's grace that we are chosen a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession that we may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

[23 : 02] So that's what we are. And that's fulfillment can look like that being God's own possession and being brought into the light of his love and of his grace in our experiences.

Now, it's easy to say that. It's easy for me to repeat that verse, isn't it? And you can say it's easy for you to repeat that verse, but look at my life. I don't feel like a chosen person.

I don't feel like I've been brought into the light of life. You're probably right. You're probably right. That's exactly how you feel or how you don't feel.

But there was a reflection that I meant to put on the bulletin sheet this morning, but it didn't go on, but it's a good reflection and I'm going to mention it. And it's a quote from Tim Keller.

Okay. You don't know Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have. You don't know Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have.

[24 : 03] What fulfillment looks like can change as we come into his company. As we turn to him and as you cry out to him, he begins to change what we're looking for in fulfillment.

He begins to change our desires so that they look differently and fulfillment becomes something different. And I think we see the future therefore differently as well.

You know, you've come to church today, maybe you feel like this, maybe you feel like this, maybe you do feel specifically like this today. And I'm saying, well, it's not the end of your life story. It wasn't the end of Naomi's life story.

It's only chapter one of this book. We stopped there, but she came to see the hand of God and the hand of God's love, even in the darkness of where she had to go, and came back to see fulfillment and love, a grandson, a place in the family, the blessing of God, the fulfillment of dreams, not the way, surely, she expected them to be fulfilled.

But as we delight in him, our desires and what we look for in life change might not be when and where and how you expect Psalm 37 verse 4, one of the Psalms, which is not a Psalm of complaint and a Psalm of doubt, reminds us as we delight ourselves in the Lord, He will give you the desires of your heart.

[25 : 34] But what comes first? It's delighting in the Lord and seeing fulfillment and passions changed. When it goes on to remind us of an unimaginably great future, I think, as we consider him.

I think Naomi's experience is in an earthly way a picture, a heavenly blessing, and 1 Corinthians 2, 9 reminds us, and we've said this again, you know, again, again, no eye has seen, no ear has heard, the heart of man has not imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.

That's what we can look for in Jesus Christ. But I think not only does it change what the future looks like, I'm just about finished, nearly done. It reminds us what I think as we turn to him, it reminds us what faith can look like as well.

Last week I was up in our broth at the Angus Bible Week and I was asked to preach two sermons on Daniel and that great, great verse in Daniel chapter 3 where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are throwing out, are going to be throwing out in the fire because they've worshiped the living God and they're not willing to give up.

It's a great picture of a great perspective for faith. You know, they say, you know, if that's what you're going to do, okay, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace and He will deliver us out of your hand, okay, but if not, be it known to you, okay, we will not serve your gods or worship the old image that you set up.

[27 : 09] They're not demanding of God the answer. They're not asking Him to do this great miracle. They're saying He can, He will, but if He doesn't, then we're still not going to bow down and it's a great perspective of faith that enables us to look at disappointments in a different way.

You know, going in a fry furnace, it's pretty disappointing. It's not a great end to the day and yet they could take that and they could look at that and they could swallow the reality of that because they knew who God was and they knew the kind of God that they served and we have far more experience than they have of the love and grace and commitment of the living God to us in Christ. And lastly also, it changes, I think, what's suffering and what we regard as a lack of fulfillment looks like, 2 Corinthians 4. For this light momentary affliction is preparing us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

It's a perspective and a reality that doesn't belittle or demean suffering as if it's insignificant. It remains unwelcome.

It's a reminder of the brokenness in which we live. The opposition we face, the internal struggles and the reality of exile, but suffering does not disprove his love for us.

[28 : 35] And the lack of fulfillment that leads us to suffer spiritually is not an evidence that he doesn't love and care and save us from death and from eternal separation from it.

It's the truth of a thousand texts of Scripture. It's the reality of every believer in the Bible that God redeems even the darkest experiences of our lives for his good and for his glory and for our good in our experience.

He suffered and died alone to enable us to know his company and his presence in our suffering until he returns and dispels it forever.

This only intensifies the pain. He alone gives us peace to see things differently. So there's nothing new in what we say, but the challenge for you and for me today is to be people who are turners, repenters, turning, but always going to, don't look for your spiritual dynamism and energy and wisdom in yourself or in your church or in the, per se, in the Bible intellectually, but beyond that, in the presence and the company of the living God who loves you and has died for you and who promises you and promises me life.

I mean, let's bow our heads as we pray. Father God, we pray and ask that we would be people who are strong in turning to you in our weakness, that we would find his strength and we pray that it would transform our lives to do so even in terms of our mentality.

[30 : 30] Keep us from being people who turn away from you in the seeming disappointments and in the real disappointments and in our questions about no answered prayer and a lack of evident blessing and grace and what's the advantage of being a Christian for me when I feel like this.

These kind of things, maybe take them to you and maybe respond to your teaching and your word and your expression of yourself to us in our lives.

Help us to understand you as God and remind ourselves of the emptiness and the loneliness of seeking to live without you in this impersonal and unloving world as it rejects you.

So help us God, we pray and bless us in our worship as we conclude and respond and praise and in adoration to you for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.