

From the Beginning • John 1:1–4

Life is like a race. It begins, not with the crack of a gun, but with birth. From that moment onward, whether we choose to or not, the race presses forward. During the first year of life, or of that race, we are carried, but at about the age of one, we are expected to walk. From that point on, we run the race ourselves. From experience and testimony, the longer the race is run the more difficult it becomes. Sometimes it is extraordinarily painful. There are some people who want to give up along the way. They want to sit down in the middle of the track and call the race off. But it presses on. There is no quitting; there's no getting out of it.

The goal line, contrary to what some people think, is not death. Death is merely the final buzzer at the end when the clock has run out. Instead, the goal line of the race of life is meaning, so that every breath, every step, every action, every decision, every moment, every thing that we do in the race of life presses on for the quest of meaning, even though that is sometimes both a distant and a difficult goal to achieve.

People look many different places for the meaning in life, discovering that this race of life is not run like a high school track that goes round and around in a well-marked course. Rather it is something that we often must figure out for ourselves. It is more like plotting a journey from Boston to San Diego where there are a thousand different exits and five thousand different forks in the road. You can go north or south, east or west. You can circle back or you can press ahead or you can stall along the way. It's all-consuming. It becomes the passion of life.

While it is true that some people pursue it with greater vigor than others, there are none who are exempt. As people make their choices, it is amazing the diversity with which and from which they choose. Some, for example, seek to find the meaning in life through wealth. They think that if enough money is accumulated then that will give meaning to life, and it can be said that my net worth in life is so many dollars.

The story of Leona Helmsley has been a vivid reminder of the futility of such a quest for meaning in life. She, who through multiple marriages and business deals successfully accumulated millions of dollars, became overwhelmed with greed until

she cheated the government and others and mistreated people all around her. She was then convicted of numerous felonies and sentenced to jail. In a radio interview it was sad to hear her say that she was lonely and desperate. She and Howard Hughes and others have sought the meaning of life and have accumulated extraordinary wealth only to discover that they are alone and that they have given all of life running the race in a direction that lead to futility.

Some would say that the meaning of life is to be found in power. When you're at the low end of the hierarchy, you look up to those who seem to have great power to control the lives of other people and to impose their will upon everyone else, and it seems like a worthy way of marking what is the meaning of life. Therefore, many people climb that ladder as part of the race to find meaning. But again we hear stories of the extraordinary futility of those who have reached the top. Names like Honaker in East Germany, Ceaucescu in Romania, and Noriega in Panama. The interesting part of their stories is not so much the power that they achieved or the quick and terrible falls that they experienced. The interesting part of their stories comes from revelations of what their lives were like and what they did to the people around them, for those who were at the pinnacle of power became paranoid. They

became addicted to drugs. They moved from location to location trying to find some meaning to life and direction beyond the astonishing power which they finally,

finally succeeded in getting.

Others take a very different route through sex. They are the ones who seek to bed as many partners as they can or who are addicted to pornographic magazines or are regularly renting videos somehow hoping there will be meaning in life through that. People like Hugh Hefner who claims a thousand different sexual partners in his life, or the sad stories of those in San Francisco parks who have homosexual sex with a half dozen different individuals on the same night but never speak a word nor know a name. How sad. How pathetic. Have they found meaning? I think not.

It isn't always things that are bad or misused. Sometimes there are those who seek meaning in life through knowledge. They are the ones who vo-

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raciously consume all the information that's in the media and are up to date on all the books and are scholarly in their research. They're the ones who sometimes accumulate degree after degree only to find out, as is the inevitable discovery of those who get great knowledge, that they know so very little. It is said that even the brightest and most knowledgeable people in all the world have far less than one percent of the knowledge that is available. It is like trying to drink up the sea; it is something that simply can never be done.

There are those who seek to find meaning in the world of drugs and alcohol. These people want to escalate the pleasures of life or escape the pains of life. You know well the testimony of those whose lives have been stolen with needles and joints and with bottles and with pipes who will say that it is not the way to find the meaning of life nor is it the route that ought to be run.

The quest for the meaning in life through sex and through knowledge and through drugs and through power, through money and through all the things that we sometimes think are so modern is as ancient as ancient can be. Even in AD 90 all of the same routes were being taken. There is nothing unusual about the times in which we live.

It is no wonder that an old man in ancient times got excited because he was convinced that he had the answer. It was John who wrote in his first epistle that the ultimate meaning to life, the ultimate meaning, is to be found in fellowship with God and one another. If he was right, he had made an astonishing discovery for he claimed it to be the exclusive way that human life can have meaning. If he was wrong, he was simply another philosopher who was running down a dead end street. I think we ought to hear him out and decide for ourselves.

In I John chapter 1 we read:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.

He doesn't tell us at first what he's talking about. He's going to get to that later. He starts out by explaining that whatever it is that gives meaning to

human life has been around since before humans were around. "That which was from the beginning," and you obviously ask, what's the beginning? What's he talking about? Is he talking about the beginning of humankind or is he talking about the beginning of the earth or maybe he's referring to the beginning of the universe or maybe he's talking about the beginning of time.

John would say, any beginning you want to choose, any beginning at all. You name it. You choose it. Whatever beginning you select, the meaning of life was already. It existed before the beginning came.

When I was fourteen years old, although I was not old enough to drive, I bought my first car. \$55.00 – a big investment, at the time. Of course, when I was fourteen that was worth a lot more than it is now. It was a 1941 Plymouth coupe, great car. I wish I had it today. It would be worth a whole lot more than \$55. It was a good car; it started. It was not perfect; it didn't stop. There were no brakes that worked. Because I wasn't old enough to drive, someone else had to drive it home for me. That was something of an exciting adventure all of its own without any brakes that would work. When we got it home, it was parked next to my parents' home, the house where I grew up, in an adjacent field. I would slowly drive it around into the driveway, being careful that I would not build enough speed to need brakes in order to get it into the garage so I could work on repairing it.

Now at the time I knew very little about automobiles. At first I didn't even know how to start this thing. It had a key that you turned on, but the starter was a plunger type thing that was above the accelerator. You had to work that with your toe. Then, with your heel, you would adjust the accelerator and with your left hand you would adjust the choke. But it started. I would get it started and move it back and forth, but when it came time to fix the brakes I had a lot of learning to do.

I bought a motor manual. I bought some tools. I talked to a friend of the family who knew a lot about cars and he told me some of the steps that I needed to do. I went to a rental place and rented a wheel puller to pull off the wheel drum. The problem was in the back brakes. I rebuilt the brake cylinders, put new pistons in and all of that and it worked. I mean, I fixed it. It was great. It took quite a bit of time and, unfortunately, by the time I was able to get the car to stop, it would no longer start which created a whole new project at the other end of the car.

So again I went to the motor manual and my friend and over a number of weeks I replaced and set the points and put in new plugs. I tried to guess, since it wouldn't start, what the timing should be and ran the battery down so that it was completely dead. I didn't have a battery charger so when my parents weren't around I got their car, which had a 12-volt battery, with this car, which had a 6-volt battery. It wouldn't start, but I'll tell you it sure did turn over great! Nothing that I could do seemed to work so I got someone to push me, thinking maybe I could jump-start it. We weren't real successful in this other than having his bumper go over my bumper and smash in the deck lid in the back of the car, but we did get it back in the garage. Nothing would get that thing started.

After all this frustration, one day my father was on his way somewhere and walked out of the house and into the garage, and he said, "You want some help?" Now I was 14. He was an old man. He was 46 at the time. Old! And I knew he knew nothing about cars. I mean, how could he possibly know what I knew? I had never seen him work on a car. My father would trade in his car when the tires got worn. But I wanted to be nice to him, though I knew he could not help me, and so, partially out of courtesy and partially out of desperation, I said, "Sure, why not?"

He walked over to the car, looked at this little engine in this huge compartment underneath the hood, and said, "You need to connect the ground wire and the distributor."

I didn't say anything. I waited till he left. I was sure it wouldn't work, but I'd tried everything else. So I tried it, and low and behold, that thing started right up! That amazes me to this day. I think it is probably the only thing he knew about cars.

Now the interesting thing is, he knew that when I was out there smashing the thing up, spending all my money, when I was replacing the plugs and the points, when I was there with the booster cables, when I was there wrecking the deck lid of the car. He knew it before I did any of those things. He knew it before I bought the car. He even knew it before I was born. I am wasting all this time and he had the answer from before the beginning.

And that's what John is saying here. Before the

beginning, any beginning you want to choose. Here's the answer, the answer to the meaning of life. While people are going up this road and down that road and spending all their time and all their money and wasting their lives the answer already was.

Okay, you say. From the beginning. What are we talking about here? This is what I proclaim to you concerning the Word of life. The Word of life? What is that? Well, a Greek probably wouldn't have asked the way we would ask, "What is this Word of life that is from before the beginning?" The term in Greek is logos. The term means word, but that's an inadequate translation. It's meaning. It's a comprehensive notion. It's all of the meaning of life; it's the understanding; it's the knowledge; it's everything that makes life what it is.

Actually, we've brought that over into English, so in college you sign up for a zoology course. The word zoology uses the Greek word logos, which means to discover the information and the meaning of animal life. Or you take a biology course, which is a study of the meaning of living organisms. We use the word chronology, which is the meaning of time, or theology, the meaning of God, or sociology, the meaning of society, or psychology, which is the meaning of the mind. But all of these words use logos, which the Greeks would say was the meaning, all of those meanings, all of them brought together in the meaning of human life itself.

Now put it together.

That which was from the beginning, this we proclaim concerning the logos of life. "Now wait a minute!" the Greeks say, shouting down through the centuries. The logos? Oh yeah, well that's a concept that is riddled all through the writings of our ancient philoso-

phers, but the logos, that's a notion, that's an idea, it's a concept, it's a dream, it's an abstract. It's not real; there are no logos. I mean, it doesn't actually exist, it's just something that philosophers and people have thought up, that which is comprehensive to give meaning to all truth and all of life.

"Not so," John says. The logos are real. We have heard; we have seen with our eyes; we have looked and our hands have touched; the life appeared and we have seen it and testify to it and we proclaim to

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you the eternal life which was with the Father and has appeared to us. And we are here talking about something either very significant or very stupid.

No Greek had ever seen the logos. No Greek had ever thought the logos could be seen. But here is John, saying that the logos - the meaning to life, that which can do for us everything that power and knowledge and sex and drugs and everything and far more could never do - the logos is real. Not a philosopher's idea, not a dreamer's scheme, not imagination but something seeable and hearable and touchable, and this is the testimony, an eye witness, a real logos.

In 1967 Charleen and I moved to Colorado. At that time the usual way to go west out of Denver to the western slope or to ski areas like Breckenridge and Vail and Aspen was on U.S. Highway 6 which goes over Loveland Pass. Loveland Pass is a wonderful place to go, especially in the summer time. A lovely place to go if you don't like trees or things like that because there is just nothing there. In the wintertime it is not a lovely place because it is very risky. You can slide off the road into deep snow. They find you in the spring, but by then it is too late. You can be stopped along the way in the middle of a blinding snowstorm that was not forecast. Sometimes the State Police have closed the highway, or they say you have to put on chains and you don't have those chains. It's scenic, but it's scary. We have driven it many times - over Loveland Pass to the western slope of Colorado.

In the mid and late 1960's when we lived in Denver, the Denver Post and Rocky Mountain News often had articles about an idea, a scheme, a notion, a dream, a plan. It was to cut a tunnel underneath the mountain, and I remember the controversy. There were editorials and there were articles and there were hearings. There was controversy between the state of Colorado and the Federal government about funding. There were arguments galore from engineers on whether the technology was in place to do this.

It was not until some years later, long after we had moved away from Colorado, that we were back there on a trip and drove west out of Denver. The highway was no longer Highway 6 but now Interstate 70. Driving along I was caught by surprise to discover that, rather than taking the elevated road up to Loveland Pass, we went into a tunnel, 8,960 feet long, the Eisenhower Memorial Tunnel. It's real. It is no longer a dream, no longer a scheme, no longer somebody's idea, no longer a point of controversy. It's there. I've seen it. I've driven it. I've

experienced it. It's real. And it's a whole lot better and a whole lot more in terms of safety and speed than Loveland Pass ever could be.

And that's kind of what John is here saying. The logos are real. You don't any longer have to take the scary way. You don't any longer have to take the dangerous way. It's no longer just a notion or scheme. This logos is real. "The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us."

What John is here doing is building up to the answer that speaks to the meaning of all of life. He has said that the way to meaning is through fellowship, which was from the beginning, an answer that always was. He is saying that the answer is in the logos and the logos are real. He has seen it for himself. He has touched it. And as he moves up to his major point we kind of struggle and think, this is getting kind of technical. How do we understand all of this? And there's a temptation to mentally shut off until we realize that what here he is talking about is the meaning of life. We may shut off when we are talking about the schedule for next Tuesday, or about whether to take a pill or pay a bill, but when we are talking about the essence of life, what it's all about, we need to diligently listen. We must listen when he says, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son."

And then he reaches the highest point of all, Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ who gives meaning to life. The ultimate meaning to life is through this gate of fellowship. The Greek word is *koinonia*; it means common. It's that which is held in common.

In the 1960's and 70's, especially in Europe, there was a lot of existential literature that was written. Much of it was from France, some of it was from the United States, a lot of plays, a lot of things that you may have read and been touched by. What the existentialist was saying is that there is a quest, a human desire for a shared experience in life and people spend all of life trying to grab hold of that, except most existentialists say all of life ends up in desperation and futility because it can't be done. So what we do is try to have life in common with somebody else. We try to have friendships; we try to have partnerships; we try to have marriages. We try to do all of these things to somehow experience that we are not alone, that we don't stand as an island to ourselves. And we discover from our own experience and from those who analyze human ex-

perience that the worst thing is to be alone. There is something frightening, horrifying, about loneliness and about desperation. Fellowship is the offer that we can share with somebody else, that we are not alone, that a piece of us can be connected and bound and shared in common with someone else. What we are here offered is the meaning of life when life is shared in a koinonia, a common-ness, a fellowship with God and with one another. It is what gives meaning to life, and that deep fellowship can come only through Jesus Christ.

Let me offer to you a simple arithmetic problem, a review from grade school. I'd like you in your mind to add together two fractions, $1/2$ and $7/8$. Now you know you have to do something before you can add them together because as they stand you can never put together $1/2$ and $7/8$. First, you must convert the $1/2$ to the common denominator, which in this case is 8. So, $1/2$ must be converted to $4/8$. Only when that conversion takes place and only when there is a common denominator can addition occur. And so it is true in finding meaning in life that the only common denominator that will ever put us together with God and anybody else is Jesus Christ. He is the only common denominator.

There are people galore who are trying to put together friendships without there being that common denominator. They give their lives to finding meaning in friendships only to be bitterly disappointed by a close friend that turns against them. People are constantly doing that in marriage where one is a Christian and the other is not a Christian or where neither one is a believer or where there are two believers, one of whom gives priority to Jesus Christ and the other doesn't. It is as frustrating trying to make that marriage work as it is to add together $1/2$ and $7/8$ without first coming to the common denominator. There are people who are chasing down every religion of the world trying to find God, never realizing that the only common denominator that enables us to have fellowship with God is Jesus Christ. You can try every other means and it will not work. You can play with paper and pencil and calculator for eternity. The only common denominator is Jesus Christ himself.

Let's look at these verses again:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the logos of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has ap-

peared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

Now John is either right or he's wrong. If he's wrong, skip it. Try all the other routes. Try the power and the wealth, the knowledge and the drugs and the sex and anything else you can think of. But if he's right, then we ought to go for Jesus because he is the only common denominator and he is the only meaning to life.

Now I wish I had some fancy and memorable way to impress upon all of our minds that all of our lives are either going to have meaning in Jesus Christ or they're not. We've got to make that choice with life itself. Are we going to live for all of the other things and chase down all the other routes or is Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone going to give meaning to life?

If you have never received Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, obviously that's the place to begin. I invite you to do that right now. If you have been following some other way, if you have been seeking some other meaning in life, I invite you to resolve to find meaning in life in Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ alone.

Father, don't let us get caught up in tangled words. Don't let us miss the point because we have some other stresses or pressures that are pushing on us. By your Holy Spirit, target in on our hearts and our minds to understand that the only meaning for our lives, the only hope of a shared experience with you and with each other, the only way is Jesus Christ. Hear us as we resolve for Jesus Christ to be our all. Amen

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