

I WANT MY LIFE TO HAVE MEANING

Ecclesiastes 2:10 & Luke 10:25-28

Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz spent an entire summer driving 10,000 miles across America in a rented car. In 30 states they interviewed 1,000 people asking them just one question: What is the meaning of life? Those they asked were amazingly willing to talk. They ranged from young to old, blue-collar workers to CEOs, residents of Boston, Atlanta, Chicago, Portland and a whole bunch of places in between. The answers became the basis for their very readable book, *Search for the Meaning of Life*.

The answers were not always what might be expected. Virtually no one defined the meaning of life in terms of money, possessions, power or success. Those who did were careful to say that all these things were to be used to benefit others, not themselves.

They also found that many people didn't have any answer at all. They didn't have a meaning to their lives. Interestingly, the interviewers found that those who didn't know were pretty evenly divided between religious people and non-religious people. Maybe it's just that some people aren't good at answering questions, but it does seem that being religious doesn't necessarily mean that you can articulate why you are alive.

One interview was with the owner of a successful hi-tech business in Portland, Oregon. The interviewers said, "There was intensity and pressure in the air throughout the office as deals were being made and business was transacted. But behind the closed door of his private office, this business owner was still and somber. We had just asked him the question: What is the meaning of life?"

At first this businessman refused to answer the question. Then he shared what had happened to him a week earlier. "I was having my annual physical. Just when I thought the doctor had finished, he said he had one more question for me. 'Are you doing what you were put on earth to do?' I couldn't give him an answer. I just cried."

We all want life to count for something. We want to live for a reason. We want to matter. At the end of our lives, we want to have made some kind of difference.

If Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz had interviewed you, how would you have answered the question: What is the meaning of life? More personally, what is the meaning of your life?

We don't get a lot of help from a man who was purported to be the wisest man who ever lived. His name was Solomon, and he was actually a very frustrated wise man.

Solomon lived about 3,000 years ago. He was the king of Israel when Israel hit its economic and political peak. Because of the military successes of his father David, Solomon ruled during a period of peace. His army was strong enough to protect the nation from any aggressor. It was a period of enormous prosperity when Solomon became one of the richest men in the world. He was a renaissance man long before the Renaissance. He was into art, literature, botany, philosophy, politics and religion. He was renowned for his wisdom—philosophers and monarchs traveled from all over the world to come and hear what he had to say. Relationally he was a major polygamist with a thousand wives and concubines—most acquired as a way to seal political treaties with other nations.

Some say that Solomon “had it all”. Fame. Fortune. Culture. Relationships. Sex. Power. If anyone could answer the question about the meaning of life, surely Solomon could.

Solomon wrote a philosophical treatise that found its way into the Jewish Old Testament and therefore into our English Bible. The book he wrote is called Ecclesiastes. It is Solomon's attempt to answer the meaning-of-life question. There should be a sense of anticipation because of all this wisdom and all this experience. Here's what he wrote: “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

To document his perspective on the meaninglessness of life he wrote about each meaningless pursuit of his life. If you have a Bible like mine it contains short subject headings. Take a look:

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 . . . Everything is meaningless.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 . . . Wisdom is meaningless.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 . . . Pleasures are meaningless.

Ecclesiastes 2:17-26 . . . Toil is meaningless.

Ecclesiastes 5:6-12 . . . Riches are meaningless.

What a total bummer! This guy had it all and tried it all and summed up everything as zero. He's like some modern superstars who get everything they're after and end up deeply disappointed with life. All of this is to say that the search for meaning may not be satisfied by looking in the usual places.

Have you ever really wanted something and then been deeply disappointed when you finally got it? At least from Solomon's experience, all the big successes of life don't make life meaningful. He tried it all and came up empty. There must be a better answer.

A lawyer once asked Jesus the meaning of life in a different way in Luke 10:25: "On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"

It sounds like this lawyer was less than sincere. It was a test—testing and tricking more than asking or seeking. That's okay; some people are like that. In most ways, it doesn't much matter. At least he was talking to Jesus and at least he was asking questions. It was a good question regardless of his motives.

When he asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, it sounds like he was trying to get himself written into God's will so he could live forever. But, there's more to it than that. The original words in the New Testament for "eternal life" literally mean "the life of the ages". It's true that eternal life lasts forever, but that is not its main feature. **The main feature of eternal life is that it is the life of eternity. It's the "good life", the meaningful life**". It is much more about quality than quantity.

Compare this to a foreigner seeking to become an American citizen. I have talked with many citizens of other countries trying to get a visa, a Green Card and eventual citizenship. It is the American way of life they seek. The visa, Green Card and citizenship are really the means to seek and seize the quality of life that America offers. Here they can get a job; here they can have freedom; here they can have a home and a car and a family and education and more. It's this quality of life that they're after. When they say they want America they don't mean an American prison with a life sentence; they mean they want the very best America has to offer.

When this lawyer asked Jesus how to get eternal life, he didn't mean living forever in hell. He meant getting the good life of heaven. He wanted the life of God. He wanted a life that meant something.

While he used different words than those used by the two researchers who traveled America, he could have asked Jesus the same question: What is the meaning of life? Either way, Jesus' answer comes out pretty much the same. In Luke 10:26-28 we read:

"What is written in the Law?" (Jesus) replied. "How do you read it?"

(The lawyer) answered, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

Another way of putting it: Do this and life will have meaning.

The lawyer then asked a follow-up question. He was treating Jesus like a witness in a courtroom. He was digging into the technical definition of “neighbor” because there were some very religious people in Jerusalem who taught that your neighbor is only someone who is like you. There were Jews who were willing to love other Jews but no one else.

Some people take the same approach today. They are willing to love people they like but they hate the people they don’t like.

Jesus answered with the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. You can read it for yourself in Luke 10. From that story **Jesus taught that real love is best demonstrated when we are dealing with the least lovable people not the most lovable people.** The neighbor that we’re supposed to love is the person that’s not like us and the person that’s not very likable.

But let’s not get into the lawyer’s word games and get so bogged down in the definitions and technicalities that we fail to grasp the main point that Jesus is making. Jesus is here teaching that the meaning of life is centered in loving God and in loving others. The meaning of life is not in pursuing what we want. It’s living for somebody else.

There is a mystery here. The mystery is that if we focus totally on ourselves, then life ends up being meaningless. **If we don’t focus on us, but instead focus on God and others, then life will have meaning and satisfaction.**

When people move from southern climates to northern states like Minnesota it is necessary for them to learn how to safely drive on slippery roads. One of the basic lessons is to turn into a skid. It is counter-intuitive. Experience and instinct tells us that if the car is skidding to the right we should turn the car hard left. It is the worst thing we can do. Turn into the skid to get control of the car. There is a technical explanation that we may or may not understand, but the bottom line is that it works.

The same logic and reality applies to finding meaning in life. Our instincts tell us to turn into ourselves and take care of ourselves and then life will be meaningful and good. It is the

worst thing we can do. Turn into God and into others and life will have meaning. There are theological explanations that we may or may not understand, but the bottom line is that it works.

Let's consider a "sidebar". (In magazines, sidebars are those columns inside of articles that give a relevant and related nugget of information that may or may not be in the article.) The sidebar is that Jesus called us to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind."

Each of us is different. Some of us live out the meaning of life and the love of God as parents. Others do it as singles. Some are laborers, some are educators, some are artists and some are professionals. God has individualized each one of us. Just as we have physical DNA in every cell in our bodies we also have individual DNA in our souls, strengths and minds. There is DNA to each aspect of who we are. And what we need to do is be who God designed us to be and love God and others out of our distinctiveness.

Wayne Gretzky is nicknamed "The Great One" because of his amazing ability to play hockey like no one else. Some say he is the greatest hockey player in the history of the sport. But growing up in Canada his life's ambition was to be a baseball player. Fortunately, he was smart enough to play the sport God designed him to play rather than the one he wanted to play.

Each of us needs to ask God who we are and what God wants us to do well; then live out the love of God by being us. Don't try to be Wayne Gretzky or Bill Gates or your cousin Pete. Be you—and love God and others with all your heart, your soul, your strength and your mind.

One more sidebar. We are all tempted to compare ourselves to other people in our quest for meaning in life. Sadly, we make the comparison on the basis of gender, profession, title and society's rankings of success. That's all wrong. The comparison is not in what we do but in how we do it. Be the best gardener, astronaut, author, job seeker or disabled person you can be for God. Live out the love of God and others in whatever you do.

So, how does all this give us meaning in life? Well, loving God and others has a long list of benefits. And while we're not primarily seeking the benefits, the benefits significantly accrue. Number one, God is loved and God is pleased. Another benefit is that our neighbors—those around us: our family and friends—are loved and benefited. And, in addition to all of that, we have satisfaction of our hearts, our souls, our strength and our minds.

On the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many of the public speeches and the follow-up headlines quoted from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address saying that

those who died did not die in vain. In other words, their deaths had lasting meaning. That's what happens to us when we love God and love others. Our lives have lasting meaning. We are not living in vain. "Vain" means "empty" or "meaningless". The key to a full life, a meaningful life and an eternal life is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself."

So how are we going to do this? It begins with a personal commitment of life to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. To be committed to Jesus Christ is not unlike becoming the citizen of a nation. You deliberately declare your life and allegiance to something new. It will change your identity, how you live, what you say and even the taxes you pay. Life will never again be the same. Become a Christian with that kind of a life commitment to Jesus. Then, be who you are designed to be, only be that person for God and others more than for yourself. Got a heart? Be passionate for God and others. Got a soul? Be spiritual for God and for others. Got strength? Be strong for God and for others. Got a mind? Be thoughtful for God and for others.

But, back to Solomon. When he came to the end of writing his frustrations in Ecclesiastes, his intelligence and wisdom finally kicked in. Despite all the pessimism of most of his twelve chapters, he finishes with some very different words (which is probably the only reason his writing made it into the Bible!). Here's what he wrote in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14:

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

Solomon says that at the end of life the last page of every one of our individual biographies will be written and God will read and review our stories. When that happens to you, when God in his judgment reviews your life, may he put down that volume with your name on the cover and say that your life fulfilled what he put you on earth to do. May God be pleased with all that your life means to him and may your neighbors and your friends and your family cheer and affirm God's delight. Then, and now, may your life have meaning . . . for Jesus' sake!