

# "I Need Help Figuring Out the Meaning of MY Life"

Jerry Solomon,

I read your essay entitled, "[What's the Meaning of Life?](#)" and was encouraged. I see that you wrote the piece over five years ago; but of course the content is ageless.

If you have a few minutes, I'd like to share my story with you and perhaps solicit some advice from you.

I'm 43. I became a believer when I was 8. I've walked closely with Jesus for most of those years. I have a wife of 22 years and three fantastic teenage children. Vocationally, I've been [details edited out]. In addition to many other blessings, God has blessed us financially—so much so that the financial need to work has diminished, leaving me time (and emptiness) to consider "meaning" questions.

I ask God, "What's next?" but I don't seem to be getting throughor at least I don't understand His answer(s). Most men (including my believing dad) are very uncomfortable talking to me about "meaning" questions. I sense that it's scary for them to face such crucial issues head on. I've read *Purpose Driven Life* and am re-reading Piper's *Desiring God*. *Purpose Driven Life* was good; but it didn't offer me any new perspectives. Piper's book is challenging; but I'm not sure how to "activate" the whole idea of "enjoying God."

I'm taking a month off work to try to figure out what happens next. I would be honored if you would take time to comment or share spiritual insights you (or your staff) might have.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

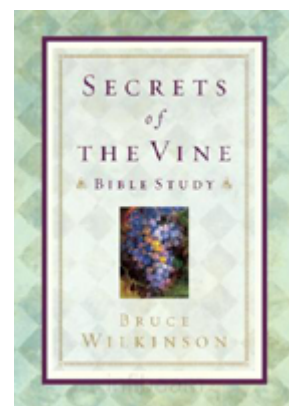
Thank you for your comments and expression of gratitude upon

reading Jerry's article. In a following paragraph to his article we explain that Jerry is no longer with Probe and that within 2 years of leaving Probe for an associate pastor's role in a local church, the Lord took him home after a 6 month battle with pancreatic cancer. I will respond to your query as best I can.

You are correct in your observation that many men are uncomfortable considering questions of meaning. Basically they are afraid of what they might discover and that their life has been focused on the wrong things. Who wants to discover that?! This is especially so for someone like your dad who is late in life with little time to correct his perspective.

You are also correct in your intuition that discovering life's meaning for you has to go beyond reading a book. *Purpose Driven Life* is great for those who have never even considered these things. But for those who have followed Him with some perseverance over many years will find the book a little stale and repetitive. It really is for baby Christians.

I would like to suggest a different book you can read in an hour or so but the application at the end could last several years. The book is Bruce Wilkinson's *Secrets of the Vine*. It's an exposition of John 15 that outlines four stages to a believers life: (1) little fruit, (2) no fruit due to discipline brought on by sin, (3) pruning to produce more fruit, and (4) full abiding. My suspicion is that you are desiring a fully abiding relationship with your Lord, and Wilkinson's description of his own crisis and his solution will be enlightening and empowering to you.



Unfortunately, in my experience, few Christians get to the place where full abiding is where they want to be. It scares them. It is a full relinquishing of ourselves to Him and Him alone. Abiding truly is just being with Him and not

necessarily looking for more ways to serve, more things to accomplish. Abiding is getting to the point where we realize that if we simply pursue Jesus, all He wants from us will flow with almost no effort because we are yielded to Him.

This requires a sharpened sense of knowing His will. To do that one needs to spend time with Him, truly know Him. Wilkinson embarked on a journey of journaling his thoughts with the Lord. I am working on developing that skill. It's not easy for me, having grown up with a loving but non-communicative father. I'm still learning how to talk to my heavenly Father as a person and not some kind of heavenly czar.

I have led several groups of men through this book, and some get it and get it big. Most, however, are intrigued, enlightened, but non-committal.

Quite simply, yet frustratingly, the meaning of life is Jesus. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Ultimately, knowing Him and pursuing Him is the only thing that can bring true meaning, fulfillment, and joy in this life, no matter what we actually do, day in and day out.

Respectfully,

Ray Bohlin, PhD

**Thank you very much for your very thoughtful response. I was very encouraged by your comments and felt like you really understand the struggle. Wow, what a breath of fresh air, that another brother understands. I look forward to getting and reading Bruce Wilkinson's *Secrets of the Vine*. Thank you for taking the time to respond.**

© 2005 Probe Ministries

---

# What's the Meaning of Life?

*Former Probe staffer Jerry Solomon explains how Christianity answers the biggest question of them all: What is the meaning of life?*

Cathy has been married to her husband Dan for twenty years and is the mother of two teenagers. She is very involved in family, church, and community activities. Many consider her to be the model of one that “has it together,” so to speak. Unknown to her family and her many friends, lately she has been thinking a lot about her lifestyle. As a result, she has even questioned whether there is any ultimate meaning or purpose underlying her busyness. At lunch one day she finds herself in an intimate conversation with a good friend named Sarah. Even though they have never talked about such things, Cathy decides to see how Sarah will respond to her questioning. Let's eavesdrop on their conversation.

*Cathy:* Sarah, I've been doing some serious thinking lately.

*Sarah:* Is something wrong?

*Cathy:* I don't know that I would say something is wrong. I just don't know what to make of these thoughts I've been having.

*Sarah:* What thoughts?

*Cathy:* This may sound like I'm going off the deep end or something, but I promise you I'm not. I've just started asking some really heavy questions. And I haven't told another soul about it.

*Sarah:* Well, tell me! You know you can trust me.

*Cathy:* Okay. But you promise not to laugh or blow it off?

*Sarah:* Stop being so defensive. Just say it!

*Cathy:* Sarah, why are you here? I mean, what is your purpose in life?

*Sarah:* (She pauses before responding flippantly.) You're right, you *have* gone off the deep end.

*Cathy:* Sarah, I need you to be serious with me here!

*Sarah:* Okay! I'm sorry! I'm just drawing a blank. Actually, I try *not* to think about that question.

*Cathy:* Yeah, well, denying it doesn't work anymore. It just keeps rolling around in my head.

*Sarah:* Cant you talk to Dan about it?

*Cathy:* I've thought about it, but I don't want him to think there's something wrong between *us*.

*Sarah:* Well, what about talking to your pastor? I bet he'd have some answers.

*Cathy:* Yeah, I've thought about that too. Maybe I will.

Is Cathy really "weird," or is she an example of people that rub shoulders with us each day? And what about Sarah? Was her nervous response typical of how most of us would respond if we were asked questions about meaning and purpose?

James Dobson relates an intriguing story about a remarkable seventeen-year-old girl who achieved a perfect score on both sections of the "Scholastic Achievement Test, and a perfect on the tough University of California acceptance index. Never in history has anyone accomplished this intellectual feat, which is almost staggering to contemplate."[\[1\]](#) Interestingly, though, when a reporter "asked her, What is the meaning of life? she replied, I have no idea. I would like to know

myself.”{2}

This intellectually brilliant young lady has something in common with Cathy and Sarah, doesn't she? She is able to understand complicated subject matter, but she has no idea if life has any meaning.

Our goal in this essay is to see if there is an answer for them, as well as all of us.

## The Questions Around Us

As I was driving to my office one day I heard a dramatic radio advertisement for a book. It began something like this: “Would you like to find meaning in life?” As I listened to the remainder of the ad I realized that the book's author was focusing on New Age concepts of purpose and meaning. But the striking thing about what was said was that the advertisers obviously believed that they could get the attention of the radio audience by asking about meaning in life. Some may think it is advertising suicide to open an ad with such a question. Or perhaps the author and her publicists are on to something that “strikes a chord” with many people in our culture.

Questions of meaning and purpose are a part of the mental landscape as we enter a new millennium. Some contend this has not always been the case, but that such questions are an unprecedented legacy of the upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.{3} Others assert that such questions are a result of man's rejection of God.{4}

Even though most of us don't make such issues a part of our normal conversations, the questions tend to lurk around us. They can be heard in songs, movies, books, magazines, and many other media that permeate our lives. For example, Jackson Browne, an exceptionally reflective songwriter of the 60s and 70s, wrote these haunting lyrics in a song entitled *For a Dancer*:

Into a dancer you have grown  
From a seed somebody else has thrown  
Go ahead and throw  
Some seeds of your own  
And somewhere between the time you arrive  
And the time you go  
May lie a reason you were alive....{5}

Russell Banks, the author of *Affliction* and *The Sweet Hereafter*, both of which became Oscar-nominated films, has this to say about his work: "I'm not a morbid man. In my writing, I'm just trying to describe the world as straightforwardly as I can. I think most lives are desperate and painful, despite surface appearances. If you consider anyone's life for long, you find its without meaning."{6}

Woody Allen, the film writer, director, and actor, has consistently populated his scripts with characters who exchange dialogue concerning meaning and purpose. In *Hannah and Her Sisters* a character named Mickey says, "Do you realize what a thread were all hanging by? Can you understand how meaningless everything is? Everything. I gotta get some answers."{7}

Even television ads have focused on meaning, although in a flippant manner. A few years ago you could watch Michael Jordan running across hills and valleys in order to find a guru. When Jordan finds him he asks, "What is the meaning of life?" The guru answers with a maxim that leads to the product that is the real focus of Jordan's quest.

Even though such illustrations can be ridiculous, maybe they serve to lead us beyond the surface of our subject. We often get nervous when we are encouraged to delve into subject matter that might stretch us. When we get involved in conversations that go beyond the more mundane things of everyday life we may tend to get tense and defensive. Actually, this can be a good thing. The Christian shouldn't

fear such conversations. Indeed, I'm confident that if we go beyond the surface, we can find peace and hope.

## Beyond the Surface

Listen to the sober words of a famous writer of the twentieth century:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy... I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.[\[8\]](#)

These phrases indicate that Albert Camus, author of *The Plague*, *The Stranger*, and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was not afraid to go beyond the surface. Camus was bold in exposing the thoughts many were having during his lifetime. In fact, his world view made it obligatory. He was struggling with questions of meaning in light of what some called the "death of God." That is, if there is no God, can we find meaning? Many have concluded that the answer is a resounding "No!" If true, this means that one who believes there is no God is not living consistently with that belief.

William Lane Craig, one of the great Christian thinkers of our time, states that:

Man cannot live consistently and happily as though life were ultimately without meaning, value or purpose. If we try to live consistently within the atheistic worldview, we shall find ourselves profoundly unhappy. If instead we manage to live happily, it is only by giving the lie to our worldview.[\[9\]](#)



Francis Schaeffer agrees with ' analysis, but makes even bolder assertions. He also maintains that the Christian can close the hopeless gap that is created in a persons godless worldview. Listen to what he wrote:

It is impossible for any non-Christian individual or group to be consistent to their system in logic or in practice. Thus, when you face twentieth-century man, whether he is brilliant or an ordinary man of the street, a man of the university or the docks, you are facing a man in tension; and it is this tension which works on your behalf as you speak to him.{10}

What happens when we go “beyond the surface” in order to find meaning? Can a Christian worldview stand up to the challenge? I believe it can, but we must stop and think of whether we are willing to accept the challenge. David Henderson, a pastor and writer, gives us reason to pause and consider our response. He writes:

Our lives, like our Daytimers, are busy, busy, busy, full of things to do and places to go and people to see. Many of us, convinced that the opposite of an empty life is a full schedule, remain content to press on and ignore the deeper questions. Perhaps it is out of fear that we stuff our lives to the walls—fear that, were we to stop and ask the big questions, we would discover there are no satisfying answers after all.{11}

Let's jettison any fear and continue our investigation. There are satisfying answers. It is not necessary to “stuff our lives to the walls” in order to escape questions of meaning and purpose. God has spoken to us. Let us begin to pursue His answers.

## **Eternity in Our Hearts**

The book of Ecclesiastes contains numerous phrases that have

entered our discourse. One of those phrases states that God “has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart. . .” (3:11). What a fascinating statement! Actually, the first part of the verse can be just as accurately translated “beautiful in its time.” Thus “a harmony of purpose and a beneficial supremacy of control pervade all issues of life to such an extent that they rightly challenge our admiration.”[{12}](#) The second part of the verse indicates that “man has a deep-seated sense of eternity, of purposes and destinies.”[{13}](#) But man can’t fathom the vastness of eternal things, even when he believes in the God of eternity. As a result, all people live with what some call a “God-shaped hole.” Stephen Evans believes this hole can be understood through “the desire for eternal life, the desire for eternal meaning, and the desire for eternal love.”[{14}](#)

The desire for *eternal life* is the most evident manifestation of the need for God. Deep in our hearts we feel death should not be, was not meant to be. The second dimension of our craving for eternity is the desire for *eternal meaning*. We want lives that are eternally meaningful. We crave eternity, and earthly loves resemble eternity enough to kindle our deepest love. Yet earthly loves are not eternal. Our sense that love is the clue to what its all about is right on target, but earthly love itself merely points us in the right direction. What we want is an *eternal love*, a love that loves us unconditionally, accepts us as we are, while helping us to become all we can become. In short, we want *God*, the God of Christian faith.[{15}](#)

We must trust God for what we cannot see and understand. Or, to put it another way, we continue to live knowing there is meaning, but we struggle to know exactly what it is at all times. We are striving for what the Bible refers to as our future glorification (Rom. 8:30). “There is something self-defeating about human desire, in that what is desired, when achieved, seems to leave the desire unsatisfied.”[{16}](#) For

example, we attempt to find meaning while searching for what is beautiful. C.S. Lewis referred to this in a sermon entitled *The Weight of Glory*:

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.{17}

Lewis's remarkable prose reminds us that meaning must be *given* to us. "Meaning is never intrinsic; it is always derivative. If my life itself is to have meaning (or a meaning), it thus must derive its meaning from some sort of purposive, intentional activity. It must be endowed with meaning."{18} Thus we return to God, the giver of meaning.

## Meaning: Gods Gift

Think of all the wonderful gifts that God has given you. No doubt you can come up with a lengthy record of God's goodness. Does your list include meaning or purpose in life? Most people wouldn't think of meaning as part of Gods goodness to us. But perhaps we should. This is because "only a being like God—a creator of all who could eventually, in the words of the New Testament, work all things together for good—only this sort of being could guarantee a completeness and permanency of meaning for human lives."{19} So how did God accomplish this? The answer rests in His amazing love for us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Consider the profound words of Carl F.H. Henry: "the eternal and self-revealed Logos, incarnate in Jesus Christ, is the

foundation of all meaning.”[\[20\]](#) Bruce Lockerbie puts it like this: “The divine nature manifesting itself in the physical form of Jesus of Nazareth is, in fact, the integrating principle to which all life adheres, the focal point from which all being takes its meaning, the source of all coherence in the universe. Around him and him alone all else may be said to radiate. He is the Cosmic Center.”[\[21\]](#)

Picture a bicycle. When you ride one you are putting your weight on a multitude of spokes that radiate from a hub. All the spokes meet at the center and rotate around it. The bicycle moves based upon the center. Thus it is with Christ. He is the center around whom we move and find meaning. Our focus is on Him.

When the apostle Paul reflected on meaning and purpose in his life in Philippians 3, he came to this conclusion (emphases added):

7...whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value *of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order *that I may gain Christ*, 9 *and may be found in Him*, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, 10 *that I may know Him*, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 *in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead*.

Did you notice how Christ was central to what Paul had to say about both his past and present? And did you notice that he used phrases such as “knowing Christ,” or “that I may gain Christ?” Such statements appear to be crucial to Paul’s sense of meaning and purpose. Paul wants “to know” Christ

intimately, which means he wants to know by experience. "Paul wants to come to know the Lord Jesus in that fulness of experimental knowledge which is only wrought by being like Him." [\[22\]](#)

Personally, Paul's thoughts are important words of encouragement in my life. God through Christ gives meaning and purpose to me. And until I am glorified, I will strive to know Him and be like Him. Praise God for Jesus Christ, His gift of meaning!

## Notes

1. James Dobson, *Focus on the Family Newsletter* (May 1996).
2. Ibid.
3. Gerhard Sauter, *The Question of Meaning*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).
4. Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985).
5. Jackson Browne, "For a Dancer," in James F. Harris, *Philosophy at 33 1/3 rpm: Themes of Classic Rock Music* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), 68.
6. Russell Banks, in Jerome Weeks, "Continental Divide," *The Dallas Morning News* (2 March 1999), 2C.
7. Woody Allen, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, in Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 54.
8. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1960), 3-4.
9. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 71.
10. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968), 122.
11. David W. Henderson, *Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 186.
12. H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids,

MI: Baker, 1952), 90.

13. Ibid., 91.

14. C. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 58-60.

15. Ibid.

16. Alistair McGrath, *A Cloud of Witnesses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 127.

17. C.S. Lewis, in "The Weight of Glory," quoted in Alistair McGrath, *A Cloud of Witnesses*, 127.

18. Morris, 57.

19. Ibid., 62.

20. Carl F.H. Henry, *God Revelation and Authority*, Vol. III (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), 195.

21. D. Bruce Lockerbie, *The Cosmic Center: The Supremacy of Christ in a Secular Wasteland* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1986), 127-128.

22. Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Volume Two (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 93.

©1999 Probe Ministries.