

# What's 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. Lets eavesdrop on their conversation.

*Cathy:* Sarah, Ive been doing some serious thinking lately.

*Sarah:* Is something wrong?

*Cathy:* I dont know that I would say something is wrong. I just dont know what to make of these thoughts Ive been having.

*Sarah:* What thoughts?

*Cathy:* This may sound like Im going off the deep end or something, but I promise you Im not. Ive just started asking some really heavy questions. And I havent 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.) Youre right, you *have* gone off the deep end.

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

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

*Cathy:* Yeah, well, denying it doesnt work anymore. It just keeps rolling around in my head.

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

*Cathy:* Ive thought about it, but I dont want him to think theres something wrong between *us*.

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

*Cathy:* Yeah, Ive 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.”<sup>{1}</sup> 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.”<sup>{2}</sup>

This intellectually brilliant young lady has something in common with Cathy and Sarah, doesnt 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 books 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 millenium. 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.<sup>{3}</sup> Others assert that such questions are a result of mans rejection of God.<sup>{4}</sup>

Even though most of us dont 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....<sup>{5}</sup>

Russell Banks, the author of *Affliction* and *The Sweet Hereafter*, both of which became Oscar-nominated films, has this to say about his work: “Im not a morbid man. In my writing, Im 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 anyones life for long, you find its without meaning.”<sup>{6}</sup>

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.”<sup>{7}</sup>

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 Jordans 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 shouldnt fear such conversations. Indeed, Im 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.<sup>{8}</sup>

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 Craigs 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 wallsfear that, were we to stop and ask the big questions, we would discover there are no satisfying answers after all. {11}

Lets 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 it's 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' 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: God's 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 God's 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 Phillipians 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 Pauls 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, Pauls 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 OBrien (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 Gods 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, *Wuests Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Volume Two (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 93.

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