

In Quest for Meaning

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At an exhibition in Switzerland the sculptor Tinguely presented a gigantic and strange machine. It consisted of metal bars, fly wheels, sheet metal, chains, and gear wheels. A crowd of visitors surrounded the strange construction. When the sculptor was asked what the machine would produce, he responded, "Nothing." The artist had manufactured a kind of symbol: in our world so many wheels are spinning that it can be frightening. We live in a system that proceeds with an immense speed. There is always motion, action, noise, and intoxication. But there is no real aim, meaning, and fruit. Why am I here? What is the meaning and purpose of my life?

I. Wrestling with the Quest for Meaning

1. Ignoring the Quest

- It is important to ask this question, otherwise our life may become meaningless. Victor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, held that "the search for meaning is the 'primary motivation' of human life."¹
- However, some people believe that ultimate meaning cannot be found. But meaninglessness creates emptiness, boredom, and a vacuum. And a vacuum will be filled with other things that again cannot create meaning: anger and hatred, busyness and conformity, pleasure and entertainment, power and monetary success.

2. Preliminary Answers

Some people have found preliminary answers, but these answers do not solve the problem. Rather the problem of meaning has been moved to the next level.

- Some claim that to live for their nation, their family, or their profession would give meaning to their lives. However, such meaning is at most preliminary, because the next questions would be: *What is the meaning and purpose of the existence of a nation and of humanity? What is the meaning of the lives of my family members? If I do not know why I live and why others live, why should I, for instance, become a physician and help others to live?*
- In an obituary it was stated that the deceased person's life consisted exclusively of work and taking care of his beloved ones. This is poor. It could be an obituary for a horse, as someone said. What is the meaning of life?
- Some people claim that the only meaning of life is to enjoy it to the fullest.
Eccl 2:10, 11 Already Solomon recognized this to be meaningless and chasing after wind.

3. Searching for Answers

We have to search for good answers to really live a fulfilled and happy life. A young man said: "What I have is not life: Monday mechanic, Tuesday mechanic, Wednesday mechanic, Thursday mechanic, Friday mechanic, Saturday soccer, and Sunday theater and girlfriend. Monday mechanic, Tuesday mechanic, Wednesday mechanic . . ." He was right.²

II. The Quest for Meaning and Its Consequences

1. *False Values and Desperation*

- If we do not know why we live, we tend to have wrong priorities in life. We tend to have a false value system and become desperate. As soon as people have enough to live, they find out that they do not know what to live for. Those who manage to find meaning live a fulfilled life; those who do not end up in despair.
- If life is meaningless, what difference does it make if I die today instead of in ten years?

2. *Utmost Seriousness*

- We have one life only. This life counts. Therefore we must be dead serious.
- One's paper that the professor has marked with red ink all over can be thrown away; one can start again. But not so with life! Because life is irreplaceable, we have to handle it with utmost seriousness.
- Matt 24:38, 39 These people were content to have their private peace and prosperity. But is it sufficient to work, eat, have some fun, and when death comes, all is gone?

III. Toward Meaning in Life

What is the meaning of life? We offer two responses that belong together. Without the first the second becomes pointless. The meaning of life is:

- (1) to become children of God and live with Him and
- (2) to live for others.

1. *The Meaning of Life is to Become Children of God and Live with Him*

Gen 1:27 In Paradise Adam and Eve lived fulfilled lives. What gave them meaning was being created in the image of God. This implied intimate relationship with God and as God's representatives on earth they took care of God's creation.

Gen 3:8 God would walk in the garden. Before the Fall Adam and Eve lived in the presence of God.

Ps 63:1 Sin ruptured this relationship and robbed humanity of meaning. While we are still God's creatures by nature, we are not automatically His children. Since then we have been searching for something ultimate gives perspective to who we are and what we do. As water is the element for a fish to live and to swim in, so being connected to God is our element as humans. As a fish without water is destined to die, so we ruin ourselves, if we try to live without God.

Augustine: "You [God] have created us for union with yourself, and our hearts are restless until we find rest in you"³

Gen 3:15 God, knowing that with sin and separation from Him our lives had become meaningless and would end in eternal death, stepped in. He promised that the Messiah would come and make things right again.

John 10:10 When Jesus lived among us, died for us, and showed us God the Father, he brought life in fullness.

John 6:35, 47 Meaning of life is found in Jesus (see also John 14:6).

John 1:12 We receive ultimate meaning and a future beyond death through a decision for the One who is the life and by constantly living with Him. Then we are God's children with all the privileges coming along with this status.

A young man has just graduated from high school. His uncle asks him about his future plans. "I will study law," the young man answers.

"Good," says the uncle, "Then what?"

"I will become a lawyer or a prosecutor."

"Good," says the uncle, "Then what?"

"I will marry and start a family."

"Good," says the uncle, "Then what?"

"Hopefully I will become famous."

"Good," says the uncle, "Then what?"

"I will get older and will retire."

"Good," says the uncle, "Then what?"

"I will move to a nice area, build a new home, and plant strawberries."

"Good," says the uncle, "Then what?"

The young man gets angry. "One day people die."

"So," says the uncle, "Then what?"⁴

What is the meaning of my life? First, the meaning of life is to become a child of God and live with Him.

2. *The Meaning Is to Live for Others*

Second, if we live with God and Jesus lives in us, then living for others is very meaningful and rewarding.

Acts 10:38 This verse summarizes Jesus' earthly life. It was about doing good, caring for others. And He left us an example that we are to follow and emulate. Albert Schweitzer: "It is not enough merely to exist. It's not enough to say, 'I'm earning enough to support my family. I do my work well. I'm a good father, husband, mother, wife, churchgoer.' That's all very well. But you must do something more. . . You must give some time to your fellow human beings. For remember, you don't live in a world all your own. Your brothers and sisters are here, too."⁵

Matt 25:40 Living for others! At the end of our lives we have to leave behind all material possession, power, and fame. What we can take with us is our own character and the persons who have found the Lord through us. What lasts should have top priority in our lives.

Matt 28:19, 20 Jesus' Great Commission

John 15:8, 16 Bearing fruit

Matt 4:19 Fishers of men

2 Tim 2:2 The chain of witnesses through which the gospel has reached us needs to be continued by us. We are links in this chain, to pass on to others the good news of salvation, fellowship with God, and meaning of life.

Conclusion

In a small German town at Lake Constance, a pastor and a deaconess were involved in a conversation. Suddenly she pointed to the water and said, “Here my life took the decisive turn.” In the water old tombstones were seen. Obviously they had been removed from their places and thrown into the lake when space for new graves was needed. She continued, “When I was a young lady, I stood here in this very place. I noticed a specific tombstone. The name was already gone, but the dates were still readable: 1789–1821. And then it happened. It became clear to me that an entire human life is just a line between two numbers—so little. I also understood which enormous responsibility we have to make the best of this little line. So I committed my life to the Savior and decided to place it into His service.”⁶

Why am I here? What is the meaning and purpose of my life? The ultimate meaning of life is to become children of God, live with Him, and live for others. We could also express it differently: The ultimate meaning of life is to live with God and glorify Him (John 17:4; 1 Cor 10:31; 1 Peter 4:11), or as Jesus has expressed it: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30, 31). What are you going to do with your life?

¹T. H. West, *Jesus and the Quest for Meaning* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 2.

²Cf. Wilhelm Busch, *Jesus unser Schicksal* (Galdbeck: Schriftenmissions-Verlag, 1971), 59.

³Philip Hefner, *Technology and Human Becoming* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 86.

⁴Cf. Wilhelm Busch, *Jesus unser Schicksal*, 48, 49.

⁵G. Marshall and D. Poling, *Schweitzer: A Biography* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 299.

⁶Wilhelm Busch, *Unter Menschen* (Stuttgart: Quell-Verlag, 1958), 70, 71.