

The Purpose of Life

Here is a quote I saw recently in the NZ Herald: "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why", wrote author Mark Twain.

Mark Twain had a way with words, and some clever one-liners. Have you found out why you were born? I know we all have, but it is such a basic and significant question that it is worth reviewing from time to time. And it is a subject that shows the dramatic difference between someone who has God's Spirit and someone who doesn't.

We are amazingly blessed to know the purpose of life when you consider what other people think about it.

In 1988, U.S. Philosophy Professor Hugh Moorhead compiled a book entitled *The Meaning of Life According to Our Century's Greatest Writers and Thinkers*. He asked 250 leading academics to respond to the question "What is the meaning of life?", and published their replies.

Philosopher Carl Jung wrote back, "Really, I don't know what the meaning or purpose of life is, but it looks exactly as if something were meant by it."

And poet and essayist T.S. Eliot responded that this is a question "which one spends one's whole life in finding the answer for, and he is sorry he has not yet got to the point where he can sum it all up on a flyleaf."

Novelist Joseph Heller said he had no answers to the meaning of life "and I no longer want to search for any."

Many philosophers have tackled this most basic of all questions, but they really struggle with the answer.

Sigmund Freud even said "The moment a man questions the meaning and value of life, he is sick." Freud is also famous for saying: "The goal of all life is death".

Walter T. Stace, former Professor of Philosophy at Princeton University, summed up the modern view of the meaning of life in this way: "The picture of a meaningless world and a meaningless human life is, I think, the basic theme of much modern art and literature. Certainly it is the basic theme of modern philosophy. According to the most characteristic philosophies of the modern world from Hume in the eighteenth century to the so-called positivists of today, the world is just what it is and that is the end of all inquiry. There is no reason for its being what it is."

Noted palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould wrote: "We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures. We may yearn for a higher answer, but none exists."

British Philosopher Bertrand Russell referred to the universe as "purposeless" and "void of meaning." He said about mankind, "His growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms..."

That's what you would expect from people who don't know God. If there is no God, how can there be any purpose? But with God in the picture, it is different. That's what the famous Russian author Leo Tolstoy discovered.

In his book *A Confession*, Tolstoy asked, "What is the meaning of my life? What will come of my life? Why does everything which exists exist and why do I exist?" After spending many years searching for the answer to this quandary, in the end Tolstoy concluded that the solution was found in religion and faith –it had to do with God, and so he became a Christian.

It's a very sensible conclusion. If there is a God, surely he would have a purpose in creating life? But in the absence of a God, logic suggests that the only explanation for the universe is that it got here by chance. In that case, it is devoid of meaning or purpose, but something that just "happened, a cosmic "accident".

Ecclesiastes 1:2 says: "Meaningless, meaningless. Everything is Meaningless." It goes on to say that there is no meaning in wisdom, wealth or pleasure, because ultimately it all ends in death.

You wouldn't expect to find statements like this in the Bible!

Ecc 2:4-9. King Solomon wrote these words out of frustration after spending a huge amount of time and resources in search of the purpose of life, and how to find true happiness. Solomon was an extremely wealthy king, and had plenty of resources to call on. So he was able to throw everything at this problem. He built mansions, gardens, parks and vineyards. He bought more animals than anyone else in memory, had numerous slaves serving him, amassed piles of gold and silver, and even took on a harem, consisting of hundreds of women. "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired", he said. Yet when he surveyed all of this, he concluded that it was all meaningless, and hadn't brought happiness and fulfilment. (Ecc 2: 10-11).

There is one vital key at the end of this account that puts it all in perspective. The author begins to sum up: "Now all has been heard, here is the conclusion of the matter." (Ecc 12:11). Then he brings God into the picture, and declares that the whole duty of humans is to honour their heavenly father. (Ecc 12:13).

The lesson is clear: apart from God, everything is meaningless. But with God in the frame, everything is full of meaning and life has a wonderful purpose after all.

Stephen Hawking indicated God is the answer when he concluded his book, *A Brief History of Time*: "If we find the answer to that (the question of why we and the universe exist), it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God."

So there are only two sensible alternatives. Either the world began by random chance, in which case life has no meaning, or it was brought into being by God, in which case it would seem likely that he did it for a reason and it does have meaning.

So what does the Bible say about God's purpose for making the world?

Genesis 1:26 says "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground".

God made man to live on a higher level than the animals, "in the image of God", in other words, possessing godly attributes which weren't given to the animals, things such as the ability to think and

reason abstractly, to imagine, to appreciate beauty, to love and to have a concept of and even a relationship with God.

One of these remarkable attributes was described by wise King Solomon, when he observed that God had “set eternity in the hearts of men”. (Ecc 3:11). That explains our fascination with the vast and seemingly limitless universe and our ability to grapple with concepts such as infinity and eternity. No wonder we think about the desirability and feasibility of living forever. God has equipped our minds to deal with these thoughts and concepts, of which animals have absolutely no inkling. The very fact we ask ourselves “What is the meaning of life?” highlights our remarkable capacity to contemplate and explore such intangible things.

C.S. Lewis touched on this concept with the following words in his book *Mere Christianity*: “If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be a word without meaning.”

Three thousand years ago, King David of Israel recorded his musings on the meaning of life in one of his poems. Referring to God, he said, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? (Ps 8:3-4).

He went on to boldly tackle the age-old question about the purpose of life. “You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honour. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet”. (vv 5-6)

This is a rather grandiose statement, claiming that everything is put under the control of mankind and we are crowned with glory and honour. But it is obvious that we don’t have control of everything that happens around us, not even our own desires and emotions!

In Hebrews 2:6-7 this statement is repeated, and then in verse 8 it is expounded with the note that although things aren’t fully this way yet, David’s poem foreshadowed or pointed to what will occur in the future. It adds that God is “bringing many **sons and daughters** to glory”. (v. 10)

The Bible refers in a number of places to humanity as “**children**” of God. For instance, John 1:12-13: “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become **children of God** — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God”.

In Rom 8:16 Paul called the church members “**God’s children**” and went on to say in verse 17: “Now if we are children, then we are **heirs** — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory”.

In other words, the Bible shows the reason God created human beings is that he is producing a **family**, with whom he is going to share the universe! He is a God of love and wants to share all of his wealth and property with others.

Romans 8 is a great chapter on the purpose of life. It continues in verse 22:

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in this hope we were

saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

This is our “hope”, the reason we were born.

Included in this promise is the opportunity to live forever, as we see in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”.

At the very end of the Bible, this amazing plan or purpose of God for mankind is repeated: “Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.” (Rev 21:7)

What a marvellous promise! God is going to share everything he has with the human beings he has created. We are destined to inherit everything he possesses and live in an intimate family relationship with him forever. According to the Bible, that is the purpose of life.

You might remember the “Inside Life” cover, “What’s it all about, Alfie?” (Issue 3).

Alfie was a 1966 movie. Many people can hum the tune and remember the opening words, “What’s it all about, Alfie? Is it just for the moment we live?”

In this song, the character Alfie stands for all of us. We can even change the question by rearranging two of the letters of his name, to make it, “What’s it all about, a life?”

Interestingly, the lyrics of the hit vocal point to the answer we have just seen in the Bible! They include the words, “I believe there’s a heaven above, Alfie”, and “I know there’s something much more, something that even non-believers can believe in”. This “something” turns out to be love. “I believe in love, Alfie.”

The Bible verses we have just looked at can be summed up in the word “love” too. God is going to share the universe with his children because he loves them. The reason God is having a family is no different from the reason we humans have families – because of love.

As another famous song accurately puts it, “love makes the world go round”. Love is what makes life worthwhile and meaningful.

The Alfie lyrics continue with the sentiment: “Without true love we just exist, Alfie”. When people find true love, it gives wonderful new meaning and purpose to their lives. No longer do they just exist, but suddenly there is a reason, a meaning for life.

The song continues, “Until you find the love you’ve missed you’re nothing, Alfie”. In other words, life has no meaning and we are of no value without love. The reference here is to love on the human level, which is vitally important, but the Bible talks about a “love that we’ve missed” which is even greater than that. People who read the Bible and understand it come face to face with the love of God. When they see that love demonstrated by the sending of Jesus into our world as a human being to die for us so that we can live forever as his brothers and sisters (1 John 3:1; 4:9-11; Romans 5:8), they begin to see wonderful new meaning and purpose for their lives.

In the light of Mark Twain’s comment on the importance of the day you find out why you were born, it is pertinent to note the Bible statement: “It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we’re living for.” (Eph 1:11)

Acts 17:28 puts it another way: ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'

Rom 8:29 shows why we were born: "God chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters".

Even better than appreciating the meaning or purpose of human life as a whole, Christians are encouraged to find that God assigns special meaning to each and every individual life. For example, God declares, "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and to give you hope and a future." (Jer 29:11). In context this is addressed to all of Israel at a specific time in history, but I'm sure it also applies generally.

Matthew 10:29-31 shows that each of us has great value—there is a purpose for every life. But that is just an individual part of the grand purpose for all humanity!

What is the best way to sum up that purpose? It seems to me the best verse to put it in a nutshell is Rom 8:16. We are here to receive the Holy Spirit, who makes us the children of God, which means the heirs to inherit God's riches, and brothers and co-heirs with Jesus, so we go through his sufferings in this age, but our destiny is to share in His glory. And that glory is absolutely unsurpassed!

In summary, we have two choices set before us. On the one hand, the universe and life appeared by blind chance and life is meaningless, or on the other hand God created us through his love, for the tremendous purpose of sharing the universe and his boundless love with us forever. It's quite a contrast, isn't it?

It certainly is a wonderful blessing to know the purpose of life! Let's be sure to always live with that purpose in mind.