

the Meaningful Life

A STUDY ON IF GOD MATTERS

Part 1. Everything Is Meaningless

A Thought to Get Us Started

*You breathe, you learn, you lose.
You take, you break, you choose.
And as, you learn, and cry.
You do, your best, and try.*

*And as, the days, go by.
It makes you, wonder why.
You try so hard, so hard.
To mend what's bound to fall apart.*

*Ooh maybe it's time to let it go
Ooh maybe it's time for taking it slow
Ooh maybe it's time, time, time
For anything at all
Time, time, time, to let it all fall
Where it may.*

*And as, the world, goes on.
You try, to walk, and sing along.
And hope, some things, will stay.
And every tune that you play.*

*And as, your life, goes on.
You deal with, what comes along.
Some friends, they come, and stay.
Some leave and, go their way.*

“Broken Chair,” by Chris and Thomas

Have you ever noticed pop music today at times involves an interesting inversion between the sound and the lyrical content? The music for this song expresses the perfect positive vibes to make you feel emotionally engaged, like something epic and important and meaningful, something with a transcendent eternal quality, is taking place. But But what do the actual lyrics of the song communicate?

Does this song describe a world in which relationships are dependable or rarely last? And when in life do we try “to mend what’s bound to fall apart”? And finally, how does the title, “Broken Chair,” add to understanding how Chris and Thomas see the world?

Are Chris and Thomas right? Are things “bound to fall apart”? Is it “time to let it go,” time to “let it all fall where it may”?

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-11

The words of the Teacher, son of David,
king in Jerusalem:

² “Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.”

³ What does man gain from all his labor
at which he toils under the sun? —

⁴ Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.

⁵ The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.

⁷ All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.

⁸ All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.

⁹ What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there anything of which one can say,
“Look! This is something new”? —

It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.

¹¹ There is no remembrance of men of old,
and even those who are yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow.

What does the title **Teacher** (Qoheleth) tell us about King Solomon? And what about Solomon made him uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit to write this poem?)

under the sun: a phrase which will appear more than 25 times in Ecclesiastes. Solomon is telling us to look at things with a certain point of view. What is that point of view?

Why begin a poem on the meaningless of life talking about **nature**? What lessons can be learned from streams, the sun, and the wind?

This is something new: Is this true? Don’t we come up with new ideas, stories, inventions, etc. all the time?

CORE CONCEPT

Under the Sun

The phrase Solomon uses when he is describing life *as it appears* apart from God’s providence or the biblical metanarrative.

Defining the Question

When we ask the question, “What’s the meaning of life” or make the statement, “I live a meaningful life,” what exactly are we saying? There’s three general ways we use the word ***meaning*** in this context.

Short-term meaning:

Cosmic meaning:

Moral meaning:

Consider the following quotes from thinkers, writers, and celebrities. In what ways do you think they’re using the word ***meaning***?

- “Being a mom makes me feel whole and like I understand the meaning of life.” Rebecca Romijn
- “Work gives you meaning and purpose and life is empty without it.” Stephen Hawking
- “Life takes on meaning when you become motivated, set goals and charge after them in an unstoppable manner.” Les Brown
- “Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another.” Thomas Merton
- *Sittin’ on the interstate,
The end of another day—
Feeling tired, feeling beat up, feeling small.
Sick of running this rat race
And coming in last place,
Feeling like I don’t matter at all.*

*And then I walk through the door.
She says, “I missed you, where ya been?”
And just like that
My life has meaning again.*
Brad Paisley, “Meaning Again”

Solomon begins his poem, *Ecclesiastes*, with the phrase: “everything is meaningless.” In which sense of the three above is he saying that life is meaningless?

The Hebrew word *hēbēl* can be translated as *breath* or *vanity*. Why translate it *meaningless*?

NIETZSCHE: THE MAD MAN

"Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: 'I seek God! I seek God!'---As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter...

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him--you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning?...There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us---for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time."

The Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche published the words above in 1882. What events is he describing when he says, "We have killed him [God]," and, "I have come too early... This tremendous event is still on its way"? Has this last event finally arrived? And why call this man mad (insane)?

CORE CONCEPT

The Death of God

Nietzsche's way of describing modernity's removing God from philosophy, science, and ethics, and thus trying to do academics without a transcendent God to ground things like meaning, morality, and values.

LYOTARD: POSTMODERNISM

CORE CONCEPT

Metanarrative

An overarching story that explains all other stories. Postmodernists deny there is such a thing as a metanarrative. The Bible provides a metanarrative.

"I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."

The philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote the words above. If there are no metanarratives and no objectively determined essences, can there be cosmic meaning? How about moral meaning?

Revisit Solomon's phrase, "Everything is meaningless." *When* is everything meaningless for a person, and why? And what's needed for there to be transcendent, objective, *cosmic* meaning in our lives, not just fleeting moments of meaningfulness?

Part 2. Wisdom Is Meaningless

A Thought to Get Us Started

I think people ask that question on the assumption that meaning is something you look for and then can find . . . And it doesn't consider the possibility that maybe meaning in life is something you create . . . And so when I think of meaning in life, I ask, "Am I learning something today that I didn't know yesterday?" bringing me a little bit closer to all that can be known in the universe . . . If I live a day and I don't know a little bit more than the day before, I think I wasted that day . . . Your meaning in life will be enhanced if you are given as much freedom as possible to explore the world. Then, when you get older, you will become so close to how the world works, that when a problem arises that needs a solution, you will say, "I know how to solve that; I've been thinking of that before . . ." You owe it to yourself and everyone else to continue to stay curious, and by doing so you will have created meaning in life that others think is waiting under a rock for them one day, and you would have made it happen all on your own.

Neil deGrasse Tyson, Jan 15. 2015

During a Q&A session, a six year-old boy asked science and physics popularizer Neil deGrasse Tyson what the meaning of life was. Above is part of his answer. What's your first reaction to his answer? Is he on to something? Is there something that seems to be critically missing?

Review our different ways of interpreting the phrase, "What's the meaning of life." In Tyson's answer, what reflects short-term, moral, or cosmic meaning?

Tyson is an agnostic: he doesn't know whether or not God exists. But further, he seems to care very little about whether or not God *does* exist, mainly because he doesn't think the question can be studied in any satisfying way like typical scientific questions. How does whether or not God exist affect his answer above?

ECCLESIASTES 1:12-18

¹² I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

¹³ I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! ¹⁴ I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

¹⁵ What is twisted cannot be straightened; —
what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶ I thought to myself, “Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.” ¹⁷ Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

¹⁸ For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; —
the more knowledge, the more grief.

Look at v15. What are some of the lessons learned after a lifetime of learning?

I what ways does wisdom lead to sorrow and grief?

ECCLESIASTES 2:12-16

¹² Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom,
and also madness and folly.

What more can the king’s successor do
than what has already been done?

¹³ I saw that wisdom is better than folly,
just as light is better than darkness.

¹⁴ The wise man has eyes in his head,
while the fool walks in the darkness;
but I came to realize

that the same fate overtakes them both. —

¹⁵ Then I thought in my heart,
“The fate of the fool will overtake me also.
What then do I gain by being wise?”

I said in my heart,
“This too is meaningless.”

¹⁶ For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long
remembered;

in days to come both will be forgotten.
Like the fool, the wise man too must die!

*What same fate overtakes both fool and wise man?
How does this affect whether seeking wisdom is a
meaningful goal in life? Look ahead to v16.*

See also ECCLESIASTES 9:13-18

Wisdom and Why We're Here

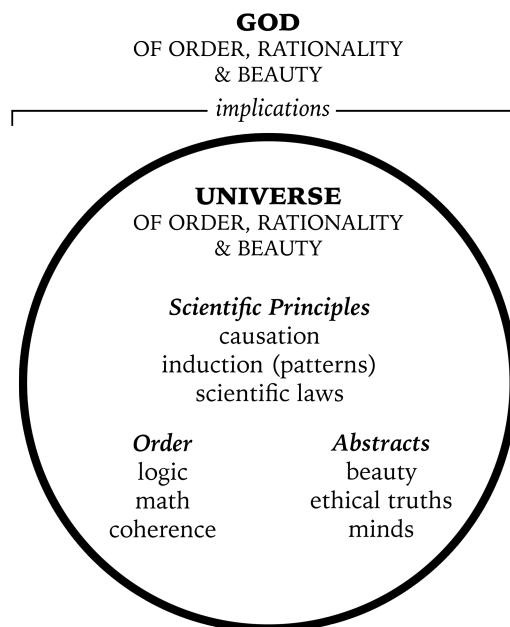
Why is wisdom (knowledge about this world) meaningless or a source of grief? If wisdom is meaningless or a source of grief, why aren't your professors miserable?

What's particularly ironic about King Solomon saying that wisdom is meaningless? Why is it radical that *he* would come to this conclusion? (Read 1 Kings 3:5-14) What could be the only reason that *Solomon*, of all people, would say wisdom is meaningless?

1 Kings 4:29-35 *God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.*

Other than just to satisfy our curiosity, why are humans so interested in gathering *wisdom*, such as Solomon's interest in biology (mentioned above)? How does believing the Metanarrative of Salvation change how you look at wisdom? In particular, how does remembering for what purpose the first humans were created help us understand why we're so interested in science, exploration, and discovery?

Why are Christians justified in believing that God created a world in which we can *do* science? Consider the illustration below.



HUME'S GUILLOTINE

"In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is, and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence. For as this ought, or ought not, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it."

CORE CONCEPT

Naturalistic Fallacy

Statements of fact concerning the natural world cannot lead to ethical principles. Popularized by the work of David Hume.

David Hume, from *A Treatise of Human Nature*

The Philosopher David Hume made a startling observation. Any argument that begins with "is" premises and ends with an "ought" conclusion is said to violate the *naturalistic fallacy*, first articulated here by Hume. If Hume is right (and almost all philosophers agree), then there is no possible way to derive ethical "oughts" (statements of what people *ought* to do) from scientific "is-es" (statements or descriptions of what the world is like). This divide between *this is* statements and *you ought to* statements has been called the *naturalistic fallacy* or *Hume's Guillotine*. If this divide exists, how can a person come to know what she *ought* to do?

NAGEL: MATERIALISM AND MEANING

CORE CONCEPT

Scientific Naturalism

a worldview that holds the universe is composed of (and can be fully explained in terms by) matter and nothing more. This worldview usually assumes atheism, since God is an immaterial being.

"The conflict between scientific naturalism and various forms of antireductionism is a staple of recent philosophy. On one side there is the hope that everything can be accounted for at the most basic level by the physical sciences, extended to include biology. On the other side are doubts about whether the reality of such features of our world as consciousness, intentionality, meaning, purpose, thought, and value can be accommodated in a universe consisting at the most basic level of physical facts--facts, however sophisticated, of the kind revealed by the physical sciences."

Thomas Nagel, from *Mind and Cosmos*

In the above quote, philosopher Thomas Nagel is lamenting that biology and scientific research is incapable of explaining the things in life that give meaning and purpose. What kinds of things does Nagel believe scientific naturalism (or materialism) will never be able tell us about? Is it possible to live without believing in an explanation for these kinds of things?

Part 3. Pleasures Are Meaningless

A Thought to Get Us Started

I believe that life exists to be enjoyed, and that the most important thing is to feel good about yourself.

Without the latter, little else gets done.

Each person will have his or her own vehicles for achieving both, and those vehicles will change over time. For some, the answer will be working with orphans, and for others, it will be composing music. I have a personal answer to both—to love, be loved, and never stop learning—but I don’t expect that to be universal.

Some criticize a focus on self-love and enjoyment as selfish or hedonistic, but it’s neither.

Enjoying life and helping others—or feeling good about yourself and increasing the greater good—are no more mutually exclusive than being agnostic and leading a moral life. One does not preclude the other.

Tim Ferriss (author of The 4-Hour Work Week), from “Filling the Void”

It’s common stock in our culture these days to hear that the purpose of life is happiness or enjoyment, like Ferriss says above. Do you think that’s true?

Review our different ways of interpreting the phrase, “What’s the meaning of life.” In Ferriss’s answer, what reflects short-term, moral, or cosmic meaning?

Ferriss is an agnostic: he doesn’t know whether or not God exists. But unlike Tyson (see the previous study), for Ferriss this is an important question for him. How does whether or not God exist affect his answer above?

ECCLESIASTES 2:1-11

I thought in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. ² “Laughter,” I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?” ³ I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.

If we are only looking at the world under the sun, how is laughter foolish?

⁴ I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵ I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶ I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. ⁸ I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man. ⁹ I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

*A constant theme in Ecclesiastes is **the shortness of life**. How does life having only “a few days” affect whether or not what we do with our lives is meaningful?*

¹⁰ I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;

I refused my heart no pleasure.

My heart took delight in all my work,

and this was the reward for all my labor.

¹¹ Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done

and what I had toiled to achieve,

everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;

nothing was gained under the sun.

After gaining so much, why does Solomon declare that he has gained nothing?

King Solomon's (Land)mines

Solomon asks, "What does pleasure accomplish?" If the answer is "nothing," why do we spend so much of our lives pursuing it?

Read some of the biography of Solomon's life below. What's particularly interesting is Ecclesiastes gives us a glimpse into the heart of Solomon at the height of his wealth and prosperity. Why are the Queen of Sheba's remarks so remarkable, especially given who she attributes Solomon's wealth to?

1 Kings 10:1-13 *When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions. Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the Lord, she was overwhelmed.*

She said to the king, "The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness." . . . King Solomon gave the queen of Sheba all she desired and asked for, besides what he had given her out of his royal bounty. Then she left and returned with her retinue to her own country.

How applicable is one of the richest men in history's musings on the meaninglessness of wealth for us today? You might respond: "I'm no Solomon! I'm just trying to make ends meet! What does Solomon's wealth and a rich man's angst have to do with me?"

Concerning the Western world in the 1930s, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset wrote, "With more means at his disposal, more knowledge, more technique than ever, it turns out that the world to-day goes the same way as the worst of worlds that have been; it simply drifts." His point was that he saw Western culture as immensely wealthy, educated, and technologically advanced compared to past cultures, yet we just 'drift' through life without purpose. Do you agree? And why/why not?

EPICURUS: HEDONISM

“pleasure is the beginning and end of the blessed life. We recognize pleasure as the first and natural good; starting from pleasure we accept or reject; and we return to this as we judge every good thing, trusting this feeling of pleasure as our guide.”

Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus”

CORE CONCEPT

Hedonism

A school of thought or lifestyle that privileges pleasure over all other things, often as the goal of living. The purpose of life is to maximize personal (or collective) pleasure and minimize pain.

Epicurus was an ancient Greek philosopher for a school of thought called **hedonism**. How would you define “the good life”? How would you respond to a friend that says the good life is basically pleasurable experiences (as Epicurus might say)?

PLANTINGA: PLAY AND ENJOYMENT

CORE CONCEPT

Reductionism

This is a logical fallacy of explaining an event or thing with a simple rationalization (which might be partly true) as the entire explanation for that event or thing. E.g., the mind is nothing but the brain; love is nothing but chemicals, etc.

“The argument [for God’s existence] from Play and Enjoyment: Fun, pleasure, humor, play enjoyment. (Maybe not all to be thought of in the same way.) Playing: evolution: an adaptive means of preparing for adult life (so that engaging in this sort of thing as an adult suggest a case of arrested development). But surely there is more to it than that. The joy one can take in humor, art, poetry, mountaineering, exploring, adventuring (the problem is not to explain how it would come about that human beings

enjoyed mountaineering: no doubt evolution can do so. The problem is with its significance. Is it really true that all there is to this is enjoyment? Or is there a deeper significance? The Westminster Shorter Catechism: the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him (and his creation and gifts) forever).”

Alvin Plantinga, *Two Dozen (Or So) Arguments*

The above are notes from a lecture given by Alvin Plantinga. (It’s not meant to be a well-polished essay; that’s why it sounds so funny.) Plantinga argues that an evolutionary explanation for play and joy seems entirely inadequate to explain its significance. Plantinga’s point is a version of the fallacy of *reductionism*. There seems to be something seriously wrong with reducing the explanation and value of DaVinci’s Sistine Chapel or the joy I feel flying a kite with my son to simply evolutionary explanations of nature selecting activities both physiologically pleasurable and beneficial for survival. Within the Christian metanarrative, what explanations might we suggest?

Part 4. Work Is Meaningless

A Thought to Get Us Started

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias"

What is the point of Shelley's poem above? What is Shelley trying to stress? Is his poem only for people striving for empires and power, or does it have some kind of application to everyday people in their everyday work?

Review our different ways of interpreting the phrase, "What's the meaning of life." In Shelley's poem above, how is Shelley describing the building of empires? Short-term, moral, or cosmically meaningful?

How does whether or not God exist affect the strivings of Ozymandias?

ECCLESIASTES 2:17-26

¹⁷ So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ¹⁸ I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. ²⁰ So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. ²¹ For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. ²² What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? ²³ All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

²⁴ A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? ²⁶ To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

I must leave them: What's the problem with making one's life goal the leaving of a legacy?

If this universe will go on for billions of years more, how does this compound this problem?

without him: Why do we need God to find satisfaction in our work?

ECCLESIASTES 6:1-6

I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men: ² God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.

³ A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. ⁴ It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded. ⁵ Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man— ⁶ even if he lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?

Do not all go to the same place? What's the significance of this question when it comes to amassing wealth and legacy?

Is Meaningful Work Enough for a Meaningful Life?

What's the problem of making life's goal leaving a legacy for children (or a community or country or whoever)? And what's the problem of making life's goal amassing wealth for yourself to enjoy?

John D. Rockefeller, considered the richest person in modern history, was purportedly asked on his death bed, "How much money is enough?" to which he responded, "A little more." Compare Rockefeller's words to Solomon's below. What's the danger in seeing work as a means to amassing wealth?

Ecclesiastes 5:10 *Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless...*

What is the proper way for Christians to understand their work and the fruits of their labor? What is the Christian teaching of *vocation*, and how does this change how we look at labour? Consider 1 Peter 2:9.

1 Peter 2:9 *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

At the start of our study together, we examined some of the quotes below. How might you respond to a friend or neighbour who might say something similar?

- "Work gives you meaning and purpose and life is empty without it." Stephen Hawking
- "Life takes on meaning when you become motivated, set goals and charge after them in an unstoppable manner." Les Brown

CAMUS: THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

"The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor..."

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his fortune. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth..."

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

Albert Camus, from "The Myth of Sisyphus"

The atheist French Existentialist, Albert Camus, draws on the Greek myth of Sisyphus to wrestle with the idea of work in a meaningless world. After calling Sisyphus and his work absurd, Camus finds beauty and fulfillment in Sisyphus continuing to push the rock. Why would Camus come to such a contradictory conclusion?

NAGEL: THINKING ABOUT THE WHOLE THING

"Even if you produce a great work of literature which continues to be read thousands of years from now, eventually the solar system will cool or the universe will wind down or collapse, and all trace of your efforts will vanish. In any case, we can't hope for even a fraction of this sort of immortality. If there's any point at all to what we do, we have to find it within our own lives."

The problem is that although there are justifications and explanations for most of the things, big and small, that we do within life, none of these explanations explain the point of your life as a whole -- the whole of which all these activities, successes and failures, strivings and disappointments are parts. If you think about the whole thing, there seems to be no point to it at all. Looking at it from the outside, it wouldn't matter if you had never existed. And after you have gone out of existence, it won't matter that you did exist."

Thomas Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?*

Philosopher Thomas Nagel is lamenting that, *under the sun*, our lives can find no over-arching meaning. Why is this impossible to do without God?

Part 5. Human Life Is Meaningless

A Thought to Get Us Started

To be, or not to be—that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep—
No more—and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep—
To sleep—perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.

William Shakespeare, from "Hamlet"

In the scene from Hamlet where the soliloquy above has been taken, Hamlet knows he is being watched and must act like a man struggling with suicide. What kinds of thoughts does Hamlet believe a suicidal person struggles with?

Shakespeare gives Hamlet extremely memorable phrases. What are:

- "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortunes"
- "the rub"

How does whether or not God exist affect how a person views death?

ECCLESIASTES 3:16-22

¹⁶ And I saw something else under the sun:

In the place of judgment—wickedness was there,
in the place of justice—wickedness was there.

¹⁷ I thought in my heart,

“God will bring to judgment
both the righteous and the wicked,
for there will be a time for every activity,
a time for every deed.”

¹⁸ I also thought, “As for men, God tests them so
that they may see that they are like the animals. ¹⁹

Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate
awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All
have the same breath; man has no advantage over
the animal. Everything is meaningless. ²⁰ All go to
the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all
return. ²¹ Who knows if the spirit of man rises
upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down
into the earth?”

²² So I saw that there is nothing better for a man
than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For
who can bring him to see what will happen after
him?

In the place of judgment... What experience in life
is Solomon describing?

How are men *like the animals*, according to
Solomon? What does God want us to recognize by
which he tests us?

ECCLESIASTES 4:1-3

Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was
taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter.

² And I declared that the dead, —
who had already died,
are happier than the living,
who are still alive.

³ But better than both
is he who has not yet been, —
who has not seen the evil
that is done under the sun.

How are the dead better than the living?

How are those who have never been the best off?

See also ECCLESIASTES 9:1-6

Is Meaningful Work Enough for a Meaningful Life?

One of the main themes in the verses above is suffering and injustice. How does suffering and injustice come into the conversation of whether human life is meaningful or meaningless?

Take a look at the verses below. How does Jesus' suffering completely change our view of suffering? How does Jesus' suffering completely change our view of the worth and value of human life?

Hebrews 2:9-11 ⁹ *But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. ¹⁰ In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. ¹¹ Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.*

Isaiah 53:10-12 ¹⁰ *Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. ¹¹ After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*

DAWKINS: PITILESS INDIFFERENCE

"During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering in fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease... In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference."

Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinist's View of Life*

If nature can be described as a world of pitiless indifference, as Dawkins describes it, what does that mean for our own lives?

SARTRE: EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE

"What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees he is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is... Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself... [T]o say that we invent values means neither more nor less than this; that there is no sense in life a priori. Life is nothing until it is lived; but it is yours to make sense of, and the values of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose."

Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism"

List all the implications on human life without God that Sartre mentions. Without God, can we regain what was lost? Compare See William Lane Craig's comments on Sartre below.

"We saw that without God, life has no meaning. Yet philosophers continue to live as though life does have meaning. For example, Sartre argued that one may create meaning for his life by freely choosing to follow a certain course of action. Sartre himself chose Marxism. Now this is utterly inconsistent. It is inconsistent to say that life is objectively absurd and then to say that one may create meaning for his life. If life is really absurd, then man is trapped in the lower story. To try to create meaning in life represents a leap to the upper story. But Sartre has no basis for this leap. Without God, there can be no objective meaning in life. Sartre's program is actually an exercise in self-delusion. For the universe does not really acquire meaning just because I happen to give it one. This is easy to see: for suppose I give the universe one meaning, and you give it another. Who is right? The answer, of course, is neither one. For the universe without God remains objectively meaningless, no matter how we regard it. Sartre is really saying, 'Let's pretend the universe has meaning.' And this is just fooling ourselves."

William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*

Part 6. Everything is Meaningful

A Thought to Get Us Started

- *Please draw seven straight lines, all perpendicular.*
- *The rarest, but not impossible to find, figure in geometry is the round square.*
- *Married life can be a drag. Single life can get lonely. Maybe the solution is to become a married bachelor.*
- *God does not exist, but that doesn't stop the existence of this universe from having a purpose.*
- *God does not exist, but that doesn't stop my life from having a value apart from people's opinions on it.*
- *God does not exist, but this universe still has transcendent meaning.*

Take a look at the phrases above. What do they all have in common? What does this tell us about the relationship between God's existence and life having meaning?

Is it just as absurd to say, "God exists, *and* some things are meaningless"?

ECCLESIASTES 12:1-7, 13-14

¹ Remember your Creator —
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
“I find no pleasure in them” —
² before the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;
³ when the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow
dim;
⁴ when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when men rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;
⁵ when men are afraid of heights
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms
and the grasshopper drags himself along
and desire no longer is stirred.
Then man goes to his eternal home
and mourners go about the streets.
⁶ Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,
or the golden bowl is broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
or the wheel broken at the well,
⁷ and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it...
¹³ 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.
¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil.

Why is the phrase **Remember your Creator** so important for this book of the Bible. Why start the ending of it with these words?

Scan the section. What are the times in life in which it is important to *remember your Creator*?

How is **fearing God** the conclusion of the matter? And what *matter*?

Remember your Creator

Take a look at the passages below. What do they help us remember about our Creator? For each one:

- What aspect of our Creator does the passage help us remember?
- When in a person's life will remembering that aspect help?
- Why is that aspect so important for that time in life?

PSALM 25:8-9

⁸ Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.
⁹ He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.

PSALM 90:2

Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

ISAIAH 40:13-14

¹³ Who has understood the mind of the Lord,
or instructed him as his counselor?
¹⁴ Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him,
and who taught him the right way?
Who was it that taught him knowledge
or showed him the path of understanding?

1 JOHN 4:8b-11

God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

JOHN 15:15-16

¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.