

Does Life Have a Purpose?

Ecclesiastes 1:2-11

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Today, we're joining about forty other Texoma-area churches in a new series called "Explore God." The aim is to start conversation about some big questions in life. We begin the series with the question, "Does life have a purpose?"

The producers of Explore God asked these questions of a variety of people and recorded their responses. Let's watch this short video about life's purpose and meaning. (see it here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhHjjFnbBrM&feature=player_embedded)

How would you answer? Does life have purpose and meaning or not? Does *your* life have purpose and meaning?

Michael Lindvall tells about a childhood memory that he says seems like a dark parable for life itself. When he was about six or seven, he faithfully watched a kids' TV show called *Axel's Tree House*. Where I grew up, we watched *Torey and Gus*, a show out of Kansas City. Michael was a kid in the early fifties and *Axel's Tree House* was live, local programming, unrehearsed, unprofessional, and unpredictable. Axel was an old man, probably about forty, who lived in a tree house and spoke with a fake Swedish accent. Two or three times during the show, Axel would look through a hand-held telescope and say, "I tink I see dem Little Rascals out dere." And a Little Rascals adventure would appear on the screen.

At the beginning and end of the show, the camera would pan to a small set of bleachers where Axel's "friends" sat—about twenty-five cheering seven to ten-year olds. The kids would cheer when the Little Rascals came on. They would laugh at Axel's jokes and appear stumped by his riddles. At the end of the program, Axel would take a microphone taped to a three-foot stick and ask if any of the kids would like to say hello to their family or friends "out dere in TV land."

One day when Axel asked this question, a seven-year-old shot his hand in the air. Axel poked the microphone in front of the kid and the camera came full-face on the youngster. "Vat's your name?"

"Jimmy," the kid said.

"And vat would you like to say?" asked Axel.

Jimmy didn't say anything at first. Then he smiled broadly, made a certain vulgar hand gesture directly into the camera and said, "This is for you, Herbie, and I really mean it."

Immediately the screen went black. It stayed black for about three minutes. When the show came back on, Axel started to interview other kids, and tell jokes and riddles. Jimmy was gone. There wasn't even an empty spot in the bleachers where he had been. No one even mentioned Jimmy or what he had done. It was as if Jimmy had vanished from the earth, as if Jimmy had never existed.

In telling this story, Michael Lindvall was having a bad day and said his life felt like Jimmy, that someday they would pull him off the bleachers and everybody would budge over to cover his spot. No mention would be made of him and the show would go on as if he had never been there (*The Good News from North Haven* 21-23).

Are we just here for a little while then gone without a trace? That's how some people have seen human life for a long time. An Anglo-Saxon historian in the 8th century recorded the saying of a pagan chieftain who said existence is like a sparrow flying into one end of a banquet hall and out the other. Everything springs from cold black nothingness, enters into a brief moment of warmth and light called life, and then returns to the dark void (The Venerable Bede, cited in Ralph Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien* 15).

In more recent times, Ernest Hemingway wrote, "Life is just a dirty trick, a short journey from nothingness to nothingness"

(<http://www.exploregod.com/resources-for-churches/community-outreach/multi-church-initiative> , sermon outlines, p. 3).

At one time or another, we all wonder who we are, where we came from, why we're here, where we're going. I have a memory from when I was very young—maybe six or seven years old. It's more a memory of a feeling

than something I can articulate. I was looking at myself in a mirror and feeling these questions really more than asking them. Who am I really? What is my life?

We find these kinds of questions in the Bible. If you were going through the Bible for the first time and came across Ecclesiastes, wouldn't you be surprised at its tone and what it says? Even if you're familiar with the Bible, Ecclesiastes can be kind of jarring. It starts out, "Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless." The word translated "meaningless" or "vanity" appears around forty times in this book. It literally means "a vapor" or "puff of air" or "a bubble." The writer is saying that everything is temporary, unreliable, empty, without meaning. It's saying that there is no purpose. That theme runs through the whole book: "Everything is meaningless."

Fred Jenkins was the manager of a UM camp in Missouri. He told me one time about the church he attended. There were many interesting characters in that church—and he was one of them. One day in Sunday School there, a woman named Gladys said that her favorite Bible verse was Ecclesiastes 2:11, "All is vanity, a chasing after the wind." After worship that day, the people were leaving and a strong wind came up and blew Gladys' wig off her head and down the sidewalk. As she tried to catch it, Fred said, "Why, Gladys! How prophetic! All is vanity, a chasing after the wind."

Ecclesiastes presents a pessimistic or cynical view of life. It sounds like the view of a lot of people today. The writer of Ecclesiastes, who at least calls to mind King Solomon, says that he tried everything—pleasure, wisdom, power, wealth, and status—but nothing satisfied. Solomon had all those things in abundance, but he ended his life a failure. If someone like Solomon couldn't find significance in all that, neither will we.

Some see Ecclesiastes as being in the Bible in order to show a contrast to the way of life the rest of the Bible offers. Others see the author as including that contrast in his writing. He intentionally portrays life apart from God as meaningless, empty and brief. But he answers that pessimistic view by showing that God is good and generous and calling on people to "remember your Creator in the days of your youth..." (12:1). Then he writes, "Here is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is

the duty of every person. God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad” (12:13-14 New Living Translation).

Ecclesiastes takes seriously the emptiness of life apart from God and hints at something beyond that emptiness. It begins to point to life with God where we find purpose and meaning.

Purpose speaks of a reason for being and a goal to reach. Christians believe that God created the universe, and us, for a reason and that God has a goal for the universe. We believe that people are created in God’s image—to know God, to be in relationship with God, to be able to respond to God, to represent God. That’s the glory of being human, which is a reflection of God’s glory. An early Church writer said, “For the glory of God is a living [person]; and the life of [humans] consists in beholding God” (Irenaeus, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.vi.xxi.html>). Later, a gathering of English theologians would ask, “What is the chief end [or purpose] of humans?” And their answer was, “To glorify God and enjoy him forever” (The Westminster Shorter Catechism, 1647).

Can you believe that part of your purpose, your reason for being is to *enjoy* God? We begin to realize who God is and what God is really like as Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer and Lord. Then we want to glorify God in worship for God’s love and faithfulness, goodness and mercy. Our worship becomes intimate when we joyfully experience who God is and what God is like. Our joy in knowing and worshiping God leads to our desire to glorify God by serving him. Our faithful obedience becomes our enjoyable response to God. We can enjoy God because God enjoys us. What do you think of that?

God’s enjoyment of us is never conditional as ours is with each other. He created us for a relationship with Himself and is continually working to convince us of how precious we are to Him so that we might enjoy Him. He knows that if we deeply believed that He enjoys us, we’d spend our lives bringing joy to Him by enjoying our status as His cherished people. (Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Enjoying God* 5)

Christians believe that we see and experience God's image and glory most fully in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Colossians 1:15). Hebrews says, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being..." (1:3). We find our purpose as we know God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus taught us about real life. In the section we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that life is more than food and clothes and the stuff we accumulate. He says not to worry about all that. Then he says, "Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). We find purpose in pursuing God's rule, God's active, dynamic will being done. And in God's righteousness. That's God's justice, but also right relationship with God.

We lose our sense of purpose when we rebel against God, disobey God, turn from God's way. And we all do that. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The image of God in us gets tarnished and cracked. We no longer reflect God's glory. It's hard to enjoy God when we're alienated from him.

But we regain our sense of purpose and the meaning of our lives when we turn back to God by his grace, the power of God's Holy Spirit working in us. God in grace restores us to right relationship with himself and God starts restoring us to the kind of people he means for us to be.

God also invites us to join him in his work of restoring all of creation to what God wants. One speaker in an Explore God video tells about building a pinewood derby car with his son. They worked together on that project and accomplished something. But even more, they just spent time together, enjoying each other. He sees that as a picture of our purpose. We join God in God's project of recalling, repairing and renewing the world. We each have a part to play in that project. But maybe most important is that we can spend time with God and get to know our Maker and Friend, our Father, better and better.

Christians believe that life does have a purpose. God gives purpose to life and there is meaning in life with God. Everyone's purpose is to know God, to love God, to enjoy God in the relationship that God created us, calls us and redeems us for. Within that overall purpose, we can each find our

role, our part, our place, our unique contribution as we hear God's call, receive God's gifts and pursue the passion God gives us.

We live in a time when our society says we shouldn't show confidence in what we believe. That's seen as arrogance or just uncool. We're not supposed to say that we know the truth. But if Jesus is for real, then we do know truth. We can be confident. Hopefully, we're humble enough to admit that we don't know it all and we depend on God for what we know and believe and experience. But we can share faith, connection to reality, and purpose with people who are seeking.

Don't You Wish You Had the Answers?

Look out your window, see the earth.
Where did it come from, who gave it birth?
Where did it come from, where will it go, where will it go?
Don't you wish you had the answers, well, I know.

See how the rain falls, who made the sky?
It's never ending, and you wonder why.
Where did it come from, where will it go, where will it go?
Don't you wish you had the answers, well I know.

Just look out past the stars, look to the one who put them there.
He, He made them all, and He gave them to us to share.
Yes He made them all, and He's gonna take them all back someday.

Don't you just wonder, what lies ahead?
There's peace in knowing what Jesus said.
Where did you come from? Where will you go, where will you go?
Don't you wish you had the answers?
Don't you wish you had the answers?
Don't you wish you had the answers?
Well, I know.

(Keith Green, on *The Ministry Years: Vol 1*)

Another Explore God speaker said that she had a friend who was always giving her Bible verses. She got tired of it. But one day the friend gave her Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future." Somehow that touched her. She kept going back to it. She started taking it personally. Though she had seen herself as a "throw away person" because of rejection in her family, she dared to think that God valued her and maybe she should try this "God thing." She didn't know the right words to say, so she just lifted her hands and said, "Yes." She's been saying yes to God ever since and she believes that's her ultimate purpose.

Would you say "Yes" to God and keep saying "Yes"? That's where you'll find real meaning and purpose.