Real Life

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John 20:30-31

Sermon Series:
iBelieve – A Study of the Apostles’ Creed

Finding meaning and purpose in life is essential to our being.


Bill went to India to look for the meaning of life, but returned empty-handed. On his way home from the airport, he passed a Texaco gas station. This was during a promotional campaign when Texaco was advertising, “As you travel ask us.” Bill thought to himself, why not and pulled into the service station. “I’m a traveler,” Bill announced to the young man behind the counter, pointing to the sign outside. “I’d like to ask you a question. What is the meaning of life?” The young man shrugged his shoulders and said, “Sorry, I’m new here.” Bill went to another Texaco station and asked the identical question. The clerk threw up his hands, “I don’t recall that question in the operating manual.”

A few days later, Bill received a call from the Texaco Customer Service Department. “We understand that you’ve been asking our dealers questions and receiving unsatisfactory answers,” said the man on the phone. “If you send to our corporate office your question in a self-addressed, stamped envelope, we’ll do some research and send you an answer.” Bill did as he was told and mailed in his question on life’s meaning. A month later, Bill received his self-addressed, stamped envelope in the mail. Inside his self-addressed, stamped envelope was a credit card application.

I’m quite sure Bill didn’t find the answer to his question in a credit card application. It doesn’t surprise me that he couldn’t find it at a filling station. Finding meaning and purpose in life is essential to our being.

Anthony Kronman is a law professor at Yale University, who wrote a provocative book entitled Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life. Tony believes the question to life’s meaning is foundational to living. Yet, this question in his opinion is being systematically eliminated from college classrooms, judging it unfit for organized study. Instead, a research-driven
model now predominates. Although I disagree with his conclusions about faith; he admits to being agnostic toward God. Yet, I commend his attempt to restore the question about life’s meaning to the curriculum of higher education.

We come today to the last phrase in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in…life everlasting.” Some of you have asked why we’ve invested four months worth of sermons on this second century baptismal creed. For starters, I love history. I tire of people in our day acting as if our generation is the most sophisticated and enlightened age in history. C.S. Lewis and his friends came up with a phrase to describe this bias against the old. They called it “chronological snobbery.”

I’ve also become convinced that our 21st century bears little resemblance to the 20th century. The growing secularity and pluralism of our day more closely resembles the pre-Christian, 1st century culture in which the early church was born. If we do our homework, the early history of the church will again unlock mysteries to presenting the gospel in our modern era.

Some of us envision everlasting life to be not substantially different than the life we know now. The great skeptic and atheist Bertrand Russell said the worst thing he could think of was an eternity that did not end. He imagined eternity to be incredibly boring. Eternity wouldn’t hold much appeal if it proves to be boring. Scripture declares eternity to be anything but boring.

Jesus doesn’t only offer ever-lasting life. He promises life in all of its fullness. He’s not merely concerned with its quantity and duration. Life with Jesus makes a qualitative difference.

There are two Greek words for life in the New Testament. One word is bios, where we derive our word biology. Bios refers to natural, physical life. We measure bios life in terms of years. Bios life has primarily to do with chronology.

The other Greek word, zoe, is where our English word zoology originates. Zoe refers to life in its fullness and essence. Zoe has to do with real life; the life that God gives people.

When Jesus talks about life in his ministry, he rarely if ever speaks about bios life. He talks almost exclusively of zoe life. What Jesus offers people is a whole new quality of life. This new life is epitomized in Jesus’ words, “I have come that you may have life (zoe) and have it more abundantly” (10:10).

There is a tendency when we think about life everlasting to conceive of it as something far away and distant. Eternal life is something you enter into only after you die. Jesus
doesn’t principally speak of eternal life as something future; he describes it as a present reality. Consider these three passages from John’s gospel: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (3:36), “Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (5:24) and “Whoever believes has eternal life” (6:47).

Each of these passages speaks about eternal life in the present tense. Eternal life is intended to be a present reality for believers. We don’t have to wait until we die to enter into this life. Jesus doesn’t offer us an afterlife. He offers us abundant life.

The Scripture lesson I read earlier is a case in point. It’s the closest thing to a purpose statement anywhere in John’s gospel. For 20 chapters, John has been telling the story of Jesus’ life. Yet, at the end of his gospel, John steps out of the story to address his readers: “These things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

Jesus offers his followers a new quality of life. He speaks of it as a present reality, not only as something for the sweet hereafter.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Let’s return once more to the question of life’s meaning. Real life, the abundant life Jesus offers, is lived in relationship with God. Nothing else will ultimately satisfy the deepest longing of our hearts.

When Jewish psychiatrist Viktor Frankl was arrested by the Nazis in World War II and placed in Auschwitz, the infamous death camp, Frankl had everything taken from him. He was forced to surrender his clothes and wear drab prison garb. Frankl had been working on a book about life’s meaning, which he hid in the lining of his coat. When his clothes were taken from him, his manuscript was lost forever. He was given the coat of an inmate who had been sent to the gas chamber. In the lining of the coat was hidden a copy of Deuteronomy 6, “Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Frankl interpreted such a ‘coincidence’ as a challenge to live his thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper.

Frankl survived this prison ordeal and wrote a book about his experiences entitled, Man’s Search for Meaning. This best-selling book is now in its third printing and has been translated into 20 languages. Frankl was rather surprised by the enormous popularity of his book. He didn’t see it so much as an achievement on his part, but as
an expression of people’s hunger for a book whose very title promises to deal with life’s meaning. He said, “It must be a question that burns under their fingernails.” Frankl reflected on his prison camp ordeal with these words, “There is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions, as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one’s life….He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

Do you have a why to live for? Let me suggest one: Love God. Follow Jesus Christ. Live for things that matter.

Today, we are confirming 42 high school students into the membership of this church. Let me speak for a moment to our students. People will sidle up to you and make the audacious claim—Here is life. Live for this. Try that. Let me save you a lot of heartache. Love God. Follow Jesus Christ. Live for things that matter.

I wish I could supply you the details of all the people who have showed up at my office through the years to enumerate that money and status doesn’t bring them the satisfaction they are seeking. Pleasure-seeking amusements only count for so much. Hedonism falls on its own sword.

Maybe you’ve seen the singles dating service in our area that advertises, “Single? Want happiness?” The last line supplies the name and number of the dating service. A dating service offering happiness is quite a come-on. What an incredibly bogus offer.

Another person cannot possibly give you happiness. A different job or locale cannot possibly bring you true delight. Only God can give you the desires of your heart. There is nothing God can give us beyond Himself to satisfy us. And since God cannot give us anything beyond Himself, He gives us Himself.

Ask yourself: got purpose? It’s time to cash in counterfeit happiness for life’s real meaning. There is no greater delight than to love the Lord and love the people, to serve the Lord and serve the people.

Happiness becomes strangely elusive if it becomes the sole focus of our quest. People don’t find happiness simply by pursuing it. Happiness is the by-product of living with purpose and meaning. Helen Keller said it well: “Many people have the wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.”

**Love God. Follow Jesus Christ. Live for things that matter.**