

# WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?

## CHAPTER 14 (Part 2)

**“What does bring joy, peace and meaning to our lives?”**



In the book of Ecclesiastes, the writer deals with all the things that we think ought to bring joy and renders them meaningless. This leaves us asking, “O.K., Mr. Pessimistic, what does bring happiness, joy and meaning?”

The writer of Ecclesiastes answers this question two ways. First, in the midst of telling us what does not bring meaning, he sprinkles verses throughout the book with part of the answer. Look at the following verses that create a common thread throughout Ecclesiastes:

2:24-25: *“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, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment.”*

3:12-13: *“I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil – this is the gift of God.”*

3:22: *“So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because this is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?”*

5:18: *“Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him – for this is his lot.”*

8:15: *“So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.”*

9:7-9: *“Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love...”*

Where can we find meaning and joy? I believe we have some answers here.  
It almost sounds too simple.

Ecclesiastes basically says, “*Look around you! Look at the blessings God has given you today. Enjoy these blessings! Be glad and thankful about them.*”

Mike Cope<sup>i</sup> once pointed out that God didn’t have to make eating fun. We could have been created to just suck up nutrients like plants. But eating is fun.  
How many of you ate a meal in your car last week? We are a fast food culture. We pride ourselves with working through lunch.

Ecclesiastes is saying: “Stop! Put the cell phone down. Let the answering machine pick up. Enjoy your meal with your family! This is a gift from God!”

How many of you went to work last week? This book is saying: “your job is a gift from God, you should try to enjoy it or try to find a job that you do enjoy.”

How many of you spent time with your wife or husband or your kids or with good friends? Those moments were gifts from God.

Joy, meaning, peace and life can’t be found in wealth, fame, power, money, wisdom or education. It can’t be found in dwelling in the past or living for the future. However, it can be found in this day.

The author of Ecclesiastes reminds us that we can’t control a lot of things in life. So, what does he suggest... enjoy life. ***Don’t let the things you can’t control destroy what you can enjoy.***<sup>ii</sup>

Too often, we miss that and we want what we want (or what we think we want) *right now*.

John Lennon once said, “*Life is what’s happening while we’re busy making other plans.*”

One of my favorite books on the shelf is *The Book of Virtues*. It is a collection of great moral stories from around the world. One of my favorites is the following French story about the danger of impatience and discontentment.

## The Magic Thread<sup>iii</sup>

Once there was a boy named Peter. Peter did not enjoy going to school and he was forever daydreaming.

“Peter, what are you dreaming about this time,” his teacher would say to him.

“I’m thinking about what I’ll be when I grow up,” Peter replied.

“Be patient. There’s plenty of time for that. Being grown up isn’t all fun, you know,” the teacher said.

But Peter found it hard to enjoy whatever he was doing at the moment, and was always hankering for the next thing. In the winter, he longed for summer. In the summer, he looked forward to skating, sledding and the warm fires of winter. He was never content. One day, he was walking through the woods. He sat down by a tree and was dreaming about the future, when he fell asleep. When he woke up, there was an old woman and in her hand she held a silver ball, with a golden thread dangling from it.

“See what I have got here, Peter,” she said, offering the ball to him. “What is it?” he asked curiously. “This is your life thread. Do not touch the golden thread and time will pass normally. But if you wish time to pass more quickly, give the thread a pull and an hour will pass like a second. But I warn you, once the thread has been pulled out, it cannot be pushed back in again. The ball is for you; if you want it,” the old lady replied.

Peter said joyfully, “Give it to me!” He put the ball in his pocket and ran home.

The following day at school, he started to get bored with the lesson. He thought, if only it was time to go home...He decided to pull the string. And just like that...he was home. Peter was overjoyed. “This is great! How easy life would be now!” From that day forth he began to pull the thread, just a little, every day.

One day, it occurred to him that if he gave it a harder tug, school would be over altogether. So that night he did. The next morning he awoke to find himself a trained carpenter in town. He loved his new life. But sometimes payday seemed so far away. So he would pull just a little each week.

During that time, Peter met a girl. He couldn’t wait to marry her. So, one night, he gave the string a big tug and when he woke up, it was his wedding day.

On the day of his wedding, everyone, including Peter, was happy. At the wedding feast he glanced over at his mother. He noticed for the first time how gray her hair was. Peter felt a pang of guilt that he had pulled the thread so often. Several months later, his new wife announced that she was going to have a child. Peter was overjoyed and could hardly wait... You know what happened. He pulled the string and there was a beautiful child. When the child was born, he felt that he could never want for anything again. But sometimes the child was ill or cried through the sleepless night. So Peter would give the thread a little tug, just so the baby would be well and happy again.

Then hard times came. Business was bad. Peter’s family grew. Peter found himself again dissatisfied and discontent. It seemed as soon as one trouble was solved another seemed to grow in its place. One day, he thought how much easier life would be if all his children were grown up and had careers of their own. So Peter gave the thread a mighty tug.

The following day, Peter woke up. He looked in the mirror. His hair was almost white. He looked at his wife and she was old and very ill. His parents were now gone. He felt so sad and guilty that he decided to go for a walk in the forest to think things over. He noticed on his walk that all the trees had grown up. It was hard to even find the path. He was old and his bones were weak so he sat down by a tree and fell asleep. He awoke to someone calling his name, "Wake up, Peter. You will be late for school. You were sleeping like the dead!" When he awoke, his youthful mother was bending over him, shaking him gently. As Peter walked to school that morning, he noticed what a bright spring morning it was. It was the kind of morning when it felt good to be alive.

Someone once said:

"I used to be dying to get out of college.  
Then I was dying to get married.  
Then I was dying to get a good job.  
Then I was dying to get a promotion.  
Then I was dying to get the kids off to college.  
Then I was dying to retire.  
Now, I'm dying and I realize that I forgot to live."

With these things in mind, I believe one of the most important Biblical teachings is found in Psalm 118:24:

***"This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalms 118:24)***

Every single day, even the hard ones, has its blessings. A few years ago there was a popular Kodak commercial. The scene was a mother and a dad desperately trying to get themselves and the kids ready to go somewhere. The kids were holding up progress every step of the way...pillow fights, jumping on the bed, dancing, and so on. Finally, a smile came on the mother's tired face and she took a picture of the laughing kids. Then the narrator's voice said ... "Stop, look around. This is the good stuff. Don't miss it."

### **THIS MOMENT**

I may never see tomorrow; there's no written guarantee,  
And the things that happened yesterday belong to history,  
I cannot predict the future, I cannot change the past,  
I have just the present moment, I must treat it as my last,  
I must use this moment wisely for it soon will pass away,  
And be lost to me forever as part of yesterday,  
I must exercise compassion, help the fallen to their feet,  
Be a friend unto the friendless, make an empty life complete,  
The unkind things I do today may never be undone,  
And friendships that I fail to win may nevermore be won,  
I may not have another chance on bended knee to pray,  
And thank God with humble heart for giving me this day.

--Author Unknown

Ecclesiastes ends with this conclusion. Here, says the teacher, is the meaning of life:

***“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.” (Eccl. 12:13)***

When we have a good relationship with God, life becomes peaceful, hopeful, joyful and meaningful. In other words, we will not enjoy life until we learn to enjoy God.

Psalm 37:4 reminds us of this promise:

***“Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.”***

Ecclesiastes reminds us that we will never find ultimate meaning in life “under the sun.” This book drives us to the conclusion that to find meaning, joy, peace and life we must look outside of our self and search for answers “beyond the sun.” Perhaps, we are not content and happy here because we’re not supposed to be. Have you ever considered that God has designed us to be empty, frustrated and discontent without Him? We were meant for more than life “under the sun.” We were created to live forever in heaven, not in this fallen world.

Alister McGrath summed it up this way:

*“Many have found that the awesome sight of the star-studded heavens evoke a sense of wonder, an awareness of transcendence, that is charged with spiritual significance. Yet the distant shimmering of stars does not itself create this sense of longing; it merely exposes what is already there. They are catalysts for our spiritual insights, revealing our emptiness and compelling us to ask whether and how this void might be filled.*

*Might our true origins and destiny somehow lie beyond those stars? Might there not be a homeland, from which we are presently exiled and to which we secretly long to return? Might not our accumulation of discontentment and disillusionment with our present existence be a pointer to another land where our true destiny lies and which is able to make its presence felt now in this haunting way?*

*Suppose that this is not where we are meant to be but that a better land is at hand? We don’t belong here. We have somehow lost our way. Would not this make our present existence both strange and splendid? Strange, because it is not where our true destiny lies; splendid, because it points ahead to where that real hope might be found. The beauty of the night skies or a glorious sunset are important pointers to the origins and the ultimate fulfillment of our heart’s deepest desires. But if we mistake the signpost for what is signposted, we will attach our hopes and longings to lesser goals, which cannot finally quench our thirst for meaning.”<sup>iv</sup>*

*“On the surface we seem quite different; but deep down we are fundamentally the same - We are all desperately unhappy about something—and we don’t know what it is. In every person there is this nameless, unsatisfied longing; this vague discontent; this something lacking; this frustration; this something that only Jesus Christ can satisfy.”<sup>v</sup>*

**Ultimately, only Jesus Christ can satisfy a person’s spiritual hunger and thirst. In Christ the hunger and thirst disappear. The human heart at last finds what it has been searching for – Peace, Hope, Forgiveness, Meaning and Life.**

*“Thou has made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”* – Augustine

*“Happiness is neither within nor without us – it is in God and only when God is in us is happiness within and without us...All of us have been created with a God shaped vacuum that only God can fill.”*

-- Blaise Pascal, seventeenth century mathematician, father of the modern computer

*“A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other.”* -- C. S. Lewis

*“Anything that endures for a shorter time than the soul does is incapable of satisfying the soul.”<sup>vi</sup>* -- Dr. Ravi Zacharias

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**A personal note to young people from the author:**

I'm sure many of you remember the terrifying tragedy that played out at the bottom of the Barents Sea in the late summer of 2000. On August 12<sup>th</sup>, after a series of explosions, the giant Russian nuclear powered submarine called the K-141 *KURSK* drifted to the bottom of the sea. Most of the one hundred and eighteen sailors were instantly killed. However, tapping noises detected in the icy waters and, later, a note in the pocket of Lieutenant DR Kolesnikov revealed that at least 23 men remained alive after the initial explosions. These sailors were trapped aboard with little hope and no means of communication to the outside world. It is almost unbearable to think about what these men were going through. Yet, think about this for a moment. Imagine the overwhelming joy those men would have felt if they heard a voice from the outside through radio transmission saying, *"It's going to be all right. I know you're down there and I know what you're going through. Don't worry! I'm going to try to save you. I've sent someone down to help you and to get you. Listen to what he says, follow his instructions and you will live."* **Imagine the cheering that would have followed that message.**

Young people, some of your professors, friends and peers will try to convince you that our universe is just like that submarine. They will try to convince you that we live in a closed system called the universe and we are drifting aimlessly through space without meaning, purpose or ultimate destination. They will tell you that there is no voice out there to speak to us, comfort us, help us or guide us. They will try to convince you that there is no hope for life outside this system. They will claim that we are on our own and our few days in this world is all we've got.

**Young people don't be deceived. God is and He has spoken.** There is a voice from outside this system and that voice has said, *"It's going to be all right. I know you're down there and I know what you are going through. Don't worry! I'm going to try to save you. I've sent someone down to help you and to get you. Listen to what He says, follow His instructions and you will live."*

That someone is Jesus Christ and there should be great rejoicing because of that message.

That very voice may be calling you today to become a Christian or to recommit your life to Him. If that is the case please don't ignore this voice. Listen to what He says, follow His instructions and you will find forgiveness for the past, an abundant life in the present, and hope for the future.

May God's richest blessings be upon your life!

This book is a work in progress and I would love to hear your comments about it. If you noticed any mistakes, have any further questions or something was unclear or left out please let me know. Also, if your faith in God, His Word and/or His Son has grown as a result of reading this book, please write and encourage me by telling me about it!

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Much of this lesson was inspired by and adapted from a wonderful sermon by Mike Cope entitled “*Carpe Diem Joy*” (Preached February 9, 1997 at a college student retreat called Gateway Get-a-Way).

<sup>ii</sup> Tommy Nelson, *Navigating the Icebergs of Life* (Audio lesson series on the book of Ecclesiastes) (Denton, TX: Media Ministry of Denton Bible Church, 2003).

<sup>iii</sup> William J. Bennett (Editor), “The Magic Thread,” *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 57-63.

<sup>iv</sup> Alister McGrath, *Glimpsing the Face of God*, 51, 53. As cited in Lee Stroble, *The Case for a Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 292.

<sup>v</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, Vol. 1-The Daily Study Bible Series*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 155.

<sup>vi</sup> Ravi Zacharias, *Sense and Sensuality – Jesus Talks with Oscar Wilde on the Pursuit of Pleasure* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2002), 70.