

The Great Questions of Life
“What is the Meaning of Life?”

Kevin Haah
John 1:1-4



February 4, 2018

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[Slide Title] We are in the middle of the series called, **The Great Questions of Life**. We are looking at some of the first order questions of life. A lot of people go through life without thinking about the most important questions. We already talked about: The question of origin: Where do we come from? The Question of Authority: How do I know what is right and wrong? The Question of Identity: Who am I? And we will talk about The Question of Destiny: Where are we going?

[Slide] Today, I am going to focus on the question of meaning: **“What is the Meaning of Life?”** In other words, what is the reason for life?

If I ask you to meet with me at Starbucks tomorrow, you would ask me why? Why do you want to meet? I understand that you want to know the reason for the meeting. It would be weird to go to a meeting unless you know the reason for the meeting. It doesn't have to be anything profound. If it's just to hang out; that's a reason. But, you need a reason. You need to know the reason for a one-hour meeting. Yet, many of us go on living our entire lives without even thinking about the reason for our lives. We are so busy living that we don't have time to think about the meaning of life. What is the point of life?

In 1879, Leo Tolstoy wrote his confessions, somewhat near the end of his life. He talked about a huge crisis he had in his life when he was about my age. He had a pretty good life from the world's perspective. He was a celebrity writer, very famous, influential, wealthy, had a great wife and kids. Then, he crashed. It wasn't because of something that happened in his life. He crashed and got depressed because he had time to pause and pondered the meaning of life. He said in his book, Confession, he says something like this:

“The question brought me to the edge of the abyss when I was 50 years old. The question is, ‘What will come of what I do today and tomorrow? What will come of my entire life?’ Or, to put it another way, ‘Is there any meaning in my life that will not be destroyed by my inevitably approaching death? ... My deeds,

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whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more. Why then do anything? I, therefore, could not attach a rational meaning to a single act of my entire life. The only thing that amazed me was how I had failed to realize this from the beginning. How could anyone fail to see this? That's what is amazing! It's possible to live as long as life intoxicates us. But once we're sober, we cannot help seeing it's all a delusion. There's nothing funny or witty about it at all. It's only cruel and stupid."

That's Tolstoy. He goes on and tells the story of how he discovered the meaning of life in Jesus.

In the last episode of *Cheers*, the last few minutes, there's a place where they're all sitting around the bar, and Frasier says, "Some people think all life is an accident and, therefore, all existence and everything we do is meaningless." Somebody says, "There's a cheerful thought," and everybody laughs. Tolstoy says it's not funny.

He says we live our lives intoxicated. But, we need to sober up and pause and think about the meaning of life. It's not just a question that philosophers ask. It is something that we all need to ask. In many ways, it is a mark of a great thinker to ask this first order question of life.

[Slide] I am going to talk about two ways to approach this question of the meaning of life: (1) the modern way; and (2) the gospel way.

[Slide] First, the modern way. If you don't believe that there is a god or a god that you can know, if God is out of the picture, and you want absolute freedom in your life, you have to face the reality of the meaninglessness of life. Albert Camus wrote a book called, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In it, he tells the story of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was caught by the gods of revealing secrets of the celestial to mortals. So, as punishment, he had to roll up a huge boulder up the mountain and when he got near the top, it rolled back down, and he had to repeated this over and over again every day of his life. Right when he almost got to the top, the boulder rolled down. It's like you are working on a computer coding project, and you work on it all day long, and right before at the end of the day when you are almost done, the computer crashes, and next day, you have to start

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all over and it happens again and again. The point of the story is that hell is a place where you have to do something that is pointless over and over again without achieving anything. Albert Camus, in telling the story of Sisyphus, is saying that our lives are like this. If there is no God or no God who cares, and there is no eternity, no heaven, we might feel like we are free, but our lives are meaningless. That's what Camus said and that's what Tolstoy said.

[Slide] Bertrand Russell put it this way. “We’re the product of causes that had no prevision of the end they were achieving. That is, our origin, our growth, our hopes and fears, our loves, our beliefs are all but the outcome of the accidental collocation of atoms. All of our labors, all of our devotion, all the genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul’s habitation be safely built.”

Of course, it is impossible to live this way. **[Slide]** Stephen Jay Gould, who teaches at Harvard, wrote an article just a few years ago in *Life* magazine on the meaning of life. He said,

“We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because comets struck the earth and wiped out dinosaurs, thereby giving mammals a chance not otherwise available; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a ‘higher’ answer—but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling, if not terrifying, is ultimately liberating and exhilarating. We cannot read the meaning of life passively in the facts of nature. We must construct [the meaning of life] ourselves—from our own wisdom and ethical sense. There is no other way.”

If we follow this logic, it says this. There is no meaning but it is sort acknowledging that that we all need meaning. We can’t live without meaninglessness! But, he is saying that we get to create that meaning. We don’t look into God to find meaning, we create it. You don’t have to mope around and despair in meaninglessness. You can create it. For

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some, it is to raise a child. Maybe it's to be an agent of social justice. Maybe it is to help people who are marginalized, something beyond ourselves that will outlast us. You create meaning in life.

Question: Is it true that if there is no God and there is no meaning for human being, you can still have meaning in life? I think the answer to that question is yes and no, but a bigger no than a yes.

It's a yes because you can create meaning and feel better about yourself and the world. There is a book called, *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande. In that book, he tells a story of a nursing home where patients are just withering away and dying. The director of the nursing home had dogs, cats, pets, birds and created planters in every floor and had people feed the pets and take care of them and work on the gardens. And over the next couple of years, death rate went down 20%. The quality of life went up and the use of pain medication went down 40%. What Dr. Gawande said in the book is that people need meaning in life. Creating meaning by having them feed the pets and take care of the garden helped the quality of life. He defined meaning of life like this: something that gives us purpose and makes a difference, something that lives beyond our life.

But, the answer is also no. If it is true that there is no God, and therefore, there is no meaning for human beings, you can't create real intellectually honest and durable meaning in life.

First, I think it is not intellectually honest to believe that there is no meaning but believe that you can create meaning. A French Philosopher Luc Ferry said you can always ask the question: what's the point of that? So, you say you want to fight for justice. What's the point of that? Well, I want people to be treated with equal dignity? What's the point of that? That leads to a just society? What's point of that? Luc Ferry says that you can go on and on until you get to the point that it is pointless. If there is no God, and this world is all there is, in the end, it does not matter if you are a good person or a genocidal maniac. It doesn't matter if you sacrifice your life for the poor or spend your life oppressing other people. In the end, no one will remember you. Because this universe is going to end up in a cold dark death anyway. I think Ferry is being

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intellectually honest. He saying that yes, even if you can say that there is a point to what you are doing, but if you keep asking what's the point of that, eventually, there is no point.

You might say that I am not going to think like that. That's why I don't study philosophy. That stuff just makes me depressed. You are just avoiding to think out the implication of your view of life. If you really don't think there is meaning for humans, there is no meaning for you either.

Second, I think created meaning is less durable than discovered meaning. If you create meaning in life, then, your meaning in life is something in this world. You can say, I live for my family, for a cause or something. But, this means that suffering can totally destroy the meaning in life. If you are living for your pet or for your child, and your pet or child dies, you have no meaning of life left. If your meaning is discovered from God, failure can actually help to get to that place. You can get closer to God to seek his comfort. Viktor Frankl is a Jewish doctor and holocaust survivor. He wrote a book called, *Man's Search for Meaning*. In the concentration camp, he said people responded to the horror in different ways: some people became evil; some people just lost hope; but some people became noble, brave, and self-sacrificing. When he got out, he tried to figure out why this was the case. What made people like what they were? He concluded that it was how people processed the meaning of life. If you had a meaning of life that the death camp that take away from you, and any created meaning is, then you either become evil or lose hope. He discovered that those who had meaning in life in something transcendent like faith in God made it possible to survive and even be noble.

So, while the modern approach can create meaning in life, it is not intellectually honest and it is less durable than discovering meaning from God.

Let's talk about the gospel approach.

Let's go to John 1:1-4:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made;

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without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The word translated as Word is the word Logos, where we get the word logic. It could actually be translated as logic. When John, a disciple of Jesus and one of his closest friends, said made this proclamation, he spoke into the debate among the Greek philosophers of his time. The Greek philosophers at the time of the writing debated what the Logos of life was. Logos was this spiritual structure or logic or reason behind the material universe. In other words, logos is the reason for life, the meaning of life.

Now, why is it important to know the logos of life? The reason for life? I am a coffee addict. I have one of those Keurig Coffeemakers. I love my coffeemaker. Let's say that instead of using it to make coffee, I used it as a door stopper. That would mean that I didn't know the logos of the coffeemaker, the reason for the coffeemaker. That would undermine the fullness of the logos of my coffeemaker. It would be waste of a perfectly good coffeemaker.

Let's say that I have a space heater in my office. Instead of using it to warm up the room, I used it to cook steak over it. It's not designed to cook steak on it. It would be dangerous. The steak would probably not taste that good. It's probably not hot enough. The point is that it is not the designed to be a BBQ grill. It is not the logos of the space heater.

Unless you know what the coffeemaker is for, what the space heater is for, you will not realize their full potential. Unless you know what our life is for, unless you realize the logos of our life, you will not realize the full potential of your life.

At the time of John's writing, there were two major schools of thought on the Logos of life. The Epicureans said, there are no answers. The only thing to do is to have a good time, to live for pleasure.

There was another school called the Stoics. The Stoics were nobler; they said, "Even though there are no answers we have to live actually as if there is right and wrong. Be strong. Be moral. Be generous. Be good. Live that way or else the world is an

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intolerable place, and not only that, life is intolerable. There are no answers, but let's live as if there are.”

Isn't it interesting that that's how we think now. There are the moral types and the wild types. If there is no logos, if there it is all meaningless, all we can do is either live for pleasure or goodness that we construct. In other words, we can only create meaning in life.

It is in this context, and in our context, that Apostle John starts out his book about Jesus and proclaims that Jesus is the logos of life! He is saying that the logos of life is not a philosophy. It is not an abstract idea. It is a person.

It's in a relationship with a person, to know him, to be known by him, to love him, and to be loved by him. The logos is not an idea; it is a divine person who came from up there and came down here. John is saying that while Christianity answers the first order philosophical question of our time, he is not a philosophy. He is the son of God who preexisted creation, and in fact, is the Creator, and is the source of all meaning and life. If you have a relationship with him, if you follow him, if you serve him, he will fill you up with life, he will guide you, he will give you light, he will give you redemption, you will live out your design. He said, I am the truth, the life, and the way! He is the alpha and the omega! He is the reason to get up in the morning.

Is Jesus your logos? Is he your first priority? Is he the source of life for you? Is he the truth in your life? Do you make decisions based on the logos of life, Jesus Christ? Is he the reference point from which you view life? Is he who you are living for? Is he your life's greatest love?

If he is not your logos, you have to construct your own logos.

While I was practicing law, I went to a funeral of a client's son. It was one of the saddest funerals I've been to. There were just a few people there. There was no program. The client and his wife just sat in front of the coffin, and stared, for hours. I remember thinking how empty it was. How meaningless life felt like to him.

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If you try to manufacture some other logos, other than the one the John proclaimed, you will end up staring at the coffin. You will end up staring into the emptiness of life.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, starts out the letter with a prayer. He said in Ephesians 1:17-23,

¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

There is so much more to life when we make him the logos of life.

There is a relationship with our Creator—to know him better. There is hope. There is community. There is great power. As we live in the logos of life, there is meaning for life. There is purpose for life. There is guidance for life. There is future for life.

Do you want to make Jesus the logos of your life?