

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

The Problem of Skepticism

1. Whether our lives have an ultimate purpose is the most basic question of our existence. It is *the* question.
 - a. The question is really threefold.
 - (1) Assuming the universe exists, does it have a purpose?
 - (2) Assuming mankind exists, does mankind have a purpose?
 - (3) Assuming I exist, do I have a purpose?
 - b. Additional questions arise regarding our knowledge of purpose.
 - (1) Assuming the universe has a purpose, how do we discover and confirm that purpose?
 - (2) Assuming mankind has a purpose, how do we discover and confirm that purpose?
 - (3) Assuming I have a purpose, how do I discover and confirm that purpose?
 - c. Other ways the question may be stated are:
 - (1) Is there an ultimate goal to which we are heading?
 - (2) Given all of us die, and the universe will come to an end, does anything matter?
 - d. The purpose question confronts us all. We can't run from it.
 - (1) Your children and grandchildren will wrestle with this question. Do you have an answer for them?
 - (2) When your 15 year-old child asks you the purpose question, what will you say?
2. More and more people, particularly in the West, believe there is no ultimate purpose.
 - a. Traditionally, in the Christian West, the purpose of man's life was to love, honor, and serve God, the Creator of the universe who is both personal, present, and communicative.
 - b. Christianity took a big hit with Galileo, Darwin, and contact with the East.
 - (1) After Galileo, no longer was the earth at the center of the universe.
 - (2) After Darwin, no longer was man different in essence from animals.
 - (3) After contact with the East, no longer did the West have all the answers.
 - c. In the arts, literature, music, and philosophy, skepticism reigns.

“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.”¹

¹ William Shakespeare, “Macbeth,” 5.5.16–27, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1337.

- d. “Dust in the wind. All they are is dust in the wind.”²
3. The brutal facts are all will die, and the current space-time universe will come to an end.
- Deep inside we hear: “You don’t really matter. No one does. There is no purpose. There is no meaning. All is emptiness and darkness.”
 - “[L]ife is just a dirty trick, a short journey from nothingness to nothingness.”³
 - “What is life for? To die? To kill myself? No, I’m afraid of death. To wait for death till it comes? I fear that even more. Then I must live. But what for, in order to die?”⁴
 - “They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more.”⁵

“I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
Till then I see what’s really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.”⁶

4. Many New Zealanders have given up on the purpose question. They won’t even discuss it. To think about ultimate purpose is too painful. The assumption is there is no purpose. Despair is the result.
- “For many years I looked at life like a case at law. It was a series of proofs. When you’re young you prove how brave you are, or smart; then, what a good lover; then, a good father; finally, how wise, or powerful or [whatever.] But underlying it all, I see now there was a presumption. That one moved...on an upward path toward some elevation, where...God knows what...I would be justified, or even condemned. A verdict anyway. I think now that my disaster really began when I looked up one day... and the bench was empty. No judge in sight. And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself, this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench... Which, of course, is another way of saying—despair.”⁷
 - “Most people live lives of quiet desperation.”⁸
5. Despair over the purpose question often results in mental illness or suicide.

² Kerry Livgren of Kansas, “Dust in the Wind” (1977).

³ Ernest Hemingway.

⁴ Leo Tolstoy.

⁵ Samuel Beckett.

⁶ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 208.

⁷ The character Quentin in Arthur Miller, *After the Fall* ([]).

⁸ Henry David Thoreau.

- a. “My question—that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide—was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man from the foolish child to the wisest elder. It was a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: ‘What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?’ Differently expressed, the question is: ‘Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?’ It can also be expressed thus: ‘Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?’”
6. On the purpose question, skeptics have little to say, and this is their biggest problem.
 - a. The worldview of skepticism assumes accident, chance, and randomness.
 - b. Skeptics cannot answer the purpose question and they laugh at those who try.
 - c. Science on its own lacks the capacity to answer the purpose question.
 - d. Skeptics deny the supernatural realm, and the natural realm can’t answer why. So skeptics have nowhere to turn. They can describe what is and how it works, but they cannot explain why it is.
 - e. Skeptics stubbornly refuse supernatural explanations, even though natural explanations fail.
 7. Finally, skeptics tell us to invent a purpose, even though there really isn’t a purpose.
 - a. “Even though we all know there is no ultimate purpose, let’s deceive ourselves into thinking we can create or invent a purpose so that we can get through life.”
 - (1) “Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet. Never give up work. Work gives you meaning and purpose, and life is empty without it.”⁹
 - (2) “There is something infantile in the presumption that someone else has a responsibility to give your life meaning and point. . . . The truly adult view, by contrast, is that our life is as meaningful, as full and wonderful as we choose to make it.”¹⁰
 - (3) “For me, I am driven by two main philosophies. Know more today about the world than I knew yesterday. And lessen the suffering of others. You’d be surprised how far that gets you.”¹¹
 - (4) “The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for.”¹²
 - b. Some skeptics are more honest than others.
 - (1) “Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve

⁹ Stephen Hawking.

¹⁰ Richard Dawkins.

¹¹ Neil deGrasse Tyson.

¹² Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."¹³

(2) "During the minute it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive; others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear; others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites; thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease.... In a universe of 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 we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."¹⁴

8. Having rejected Christianity and having found skepticism inadequate, many Westerners are turning to Eastern pantheistic monism or New Age spirituality (e.g., mindfulness). They are encouraged not to turn back to Christianity.
9. Deep inside, we want there to be a purpose. It seems to us there should be a purpose.
 - a. Why do we desire a purpose? Why do we even care? Why does a lack of purpose cause anxiety, despair, and fear in our lives?
 - (1) In other words, why would an accidental collocation of atoms care about purpose in the universe?
 - b. The fact we so desperately want a purpose is a great proof there is a purpose.
 - (1) "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. ...If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. ...If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. ...I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same. ...All your life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness. The day is coming when you will wake to

¹³ Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man's Worship* (1903).

¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (London: Phoenix, 1996), 131-32.

find, beyond all hope, that you have attained it, or else, that it was within your reach and you have lost it forever.”¹⁵

(2) **Ecclesiastes 3:11** 11 [God] has put eternity into man’s heart.

¹⁵ Armand Nicholi, *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life*, Kindle ed. (Free Press, []), [].

Solomon's Journey

1. Solomon's experiential inquiry into the purpose of life is recorded in Ecclesiastes.
 - a. "Ecclesiastes contains reflections of an old man, the 'Preacher,' as he considered the question of meaning in life. He looked back and saw the futility ('vanity') of chasing after even the good things this life can offer, including wisdom, work, pleasure, and wealth. Even if such things are satisfying for a time, death is certain to end this satisfaction."¹⁶

2. Consider some of Solomon's insights:
 - a. **Ecclesiastes 1:2-3** 2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. 3 What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?
 - b. **Ecclesiastes 1:8-9** 8 All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 9 What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.
 - c. **Ecclesiastes 1:11** 11 There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.
 - d. **Ecclesiastes 1:14** 14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.
 - e. **Ecclesiastes 2:16-17** 16 Of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! 17 So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.
(1) Solomon must have been on the verge of suicide.
 - f. **Ecclesiastes 2:18-19** 18 I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, 19 and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?
 - g. **Ecclesiastes 2:22-23** 22 What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? 23 For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

3. The pursuit of human wisdom left Solomon empty.
 - a. **Ecclesiastes 1:16-17** 16 I said in my heart, I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. 17 And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

4. The pursuit of pleasure, laughter, and wine left Solomon empty.
 - a. **Ecclesiastes 2:1-3** 1 I said in my heart, Come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. But behold, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, It is mad, and of pleasure, What use is it? 3 I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might

¹⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ec.

see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

5. The making of great works (houses, vineyards, gardens, parks) left Solomon empty.
 - a. **Ecclesiastes 2:4-6** 4 I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.
6. The pursuit of wealth and material possessions left Solomon empty.
 - a. **Ecclesiastes 2:7-8** 7 I bought male and female slaves and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces.
7. The pursuit of entertainment and sex left Solomon empty.
 - a. **Ecclesiastes 2:8** I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.
8. Solomon surpassed all who were before him, and yet he was completely miserable.
 - a. **Ecclesiastes 2:9-11** 9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. 10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it. And behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.
9. Solomon came to recognize that God alone provides meaning and purpose in life.
 - a. **Ecclesiastes 2:24-26** 24 There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat, drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, 25 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 26 For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom, knowledge, and joy, but to the sinner [unbeliever] he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God [a believer]. This also [for the unbeliever] is vanity and a striving after wind.
10. See also Ecclesiastes 3:10-14; 5:10; 12:1, 7, 13.

The Biblical Hope

1. The biblical worldview answers the purpose question better than any other worldview.
 - a. The assumption on every page of the Bible is that our lives are purposeful.
2. Under the biblical worldview, man's primary purpose is to know, love, and serve the personal Creator God forever and ever.
 - a. **Genesis 1:1** 1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
 - b. **Genesis 1:26-28** 26 Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the heavens, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. 27 So God created man in his own image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them. 28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.
 - c. **Genesis 1:31** 31 God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.
 - d. "Why would such an infinitely good, perfect, and eternal being create?... Here Edwards drew on the Christian Trinitarian conception of God as essentially interpersonal.... The ultimate reason that God creates, said Edwards, is not to remedy some lack in God, but to extend that perfect internal communication of the triune God's goodness and love.... God's joy and happiness and delight in divine perfections is expressed externally by communicating that happiness and delight to created beings.... The universe is an explosion of God's glory. Perfect goodness, beauty, and love radiate from God and draw creatures to ever increasingly share in the Godhead's joy and delight.... The ultimate end of creation, then, is union in love between God and loving creatures."¹⁷
3. Sin prevents us from fulfilling our purpose. As sinners, we cannot fulfill our purpose.
 - a. **Jeremiah 2:12-13** 12 Be appalled, O heavens, at this. Be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares Yahweh. 13 For my people have committed two evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.
 - b. "All that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.... The reason why it can never succeed is this. God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, 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."⁷
 - c. "The human heart is an idol factory."
4. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus, the Son of God, has reconciled believers to God so that they may once again fulfill their purpose.

¹⁷ George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (Yale University Press, 2003), 462-63.

- a. **John 3:16** 16 God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
 - b. **John 17:3** 3 This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Messiah whom you have sent.
5. Christianity is not slavery but freedom to fulfill our God-designed purpose... forever.
- a. “If we are unexcited Christians, we should go back and see what is wrong. We are surrounded by a generation that can find ‘no one home’ in the universe. If anything marks our generation, it is this. In contrast to this, as a Christian I know who I am; and I know the personal God who is there. I speak, and He hears. I am not surrounded by mere mass, nor only energy particles, but He is there. And if I have accepted Christ as my Savior, then though it will not be perfect in this life, yet moment by moment, on the basis of the finished work of Christ, this person to person relationship with the God who is there can have reality to me.”¹⁸
 - b. “God created me—and you—to live with a single, all-embracing, all-transforming passion—namely, a passion to glorify God by enjoying and displaying his supreme excellence in all the spheres of life.”¹⁹
6. God’s has a general plan for each one of us.
- a. The Great Confession.
 - (1) **Matthew 16:13-18** 13 When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, Who do people say that the Son of Man is? 14 And they said, Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. 15 He said to them, But who do you say that I am? 16 Simon Peter replied, You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. 17 And Jesus answered him, Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock [Peter’s confession] I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.
 - (2) **John 20:31** 31 These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.
 - b. The Great Commandment.
 - (1) **Matthew 22:37-40** 37 [Jesus] said to [the lawyer], You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.
 - c. The Great Commission.
 - (1) **Matthew 28:19-20** 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

¹⁸ Francis Shaeffer.

¹⁹ John Piper, *Pierced by the Word* (Multnomah, 2003), 25-26.

7. God has a special plan for each one of us.
 - a. **Acts 9:15** 15 The Lord said to [Ananias], Go, for he [Saul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the nations, kings, and the children of Israel.
 - b. “Our greatest fear should not be failure but of succeeding at something that ultimately doesn’t matter.”²⁰

8. Is there a purpose? Yes. A thousand times yes!
 - a. Consider the stars. Consider a newborn baby. Consider the beauty of creation.
 - b. Where skepticism says no, Christianity says yes!

9. Personality is at the center of purpose.
 - a. “In Christianity God is not an impersonal thing nor a static thing— not even just one person—but a dynamic pulsating activity, a life, a kind of drama, almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance. . . . [The] pattern of this three-personal life is. . . the great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very center of reality.”²¹

10. History is driving towards the new heavens and the new earth.
 - a. “...Christianity is not only about getting one’s individual sins forgiven so we can go to heaven. That is an important means of God’s salvation, but not the final end or purpose of it. The purpose of Jesus’s coming is to put the whole world right, to renew and restore the creation, not to escape it. It is not just to bring personal forgiveness and peace, but also justice and shalom to the world.”²²
 - b. “...[A]s C. S. Lewis put it, all the adventures we have ever had will end up being only ‘the cover and the title page.’ Finally we will begin ‘Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.’”²³
 - c. See *The Bookends of the Bible*.

²⁰ Joe Allen.

²¹ C. S. Lewis, “The Good Infection,” in *Mere Christianity*.

²² Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, Kindle ed. (Penguin Publishing Group), 221.

²³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, Kindle ed. (Penguin Publishing Group), 224.

Bibliography

Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Beacon Press, 2006.

Keller, Timothy. *The Reason for God*. Kindle ed. Penguin Publishing Group.

Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*.

Lewis, C. S. *Surprised by Joy*.

Nicholi, Armand. *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life*. Kindle ed. []: Free Press, [].

Ortberg, John. *The Life You've Always Wanted*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997.

Warren, Richard. *The Purpose-driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002.

Websites

<https://www.explorethegod.com/meaning-and-purpose>

Notes