

Family Bible Series for Sept. 18: Finding purpose starts with loving God

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Finding purpose starts with loving God

- Ecclesiastes 3:10-14, 12:13-14; Mark 12:28-34

By Donald Raney

Westlake Chapel, Graham

Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? These are some of the nagging questions that have haunted humanity for centuries. As we have seen in the previous lessons, humanity has spent a great deal of time and effort seeking the answers to these questions in a variety of pursuits that have failed to lead them to their divinely created purpose.

As we look back to the book of Ecclesiastes and into the words of Jesus today, we find that our purpose has less to do with what we pursue in life and more to do with the condition of our hearts and attitudes. Discovering this may well help us to put the first things first in our search for meaning in life.

Ecclesiastes 3:10-14, 12:13-14

The writer of Ecclesiastes certainly appears to have had what many would consider to be an enviable life. His descriptions paint a portrait of a person with the means and ability to spend much of his time in the somewhat philosophical pursuit of the meaning of life.

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In chapters 1 and 2, Qoheleth describes how he had sought for significance and purpose in a personal quest to acquire wisdom, pleasure, possessions and personal achievements. These pursuits, however, did not lead him to fulfillment but to the realization of the futility of such activities.

Before continuing his description of other specific examples, the writer offers a few of his general observations and conclusions. Qoheleth begins chapter 3 with his well-known presentation of opposites.

Through his endeavors, the writer has learned there is an appointed time for everything that happens, whether positive or negative. God has established a world in which both constructive and destructive activities are needed. The implication of this seems to be that one should thus not be surprised by whatever happens.

Yet to prevent humanity from claiming any exhaustive understanding of God and God's actions, God has placed a sense of eternity in the heart of humanity. This sense of the eternal continually reminds us of the brevity of human life. Because of this brevity, the best thing for a person is to enjoy both the life and the work which God grants as a gift from God.

God has specially blessed humanity and allows each person to uniquely participate in creation. All that God has done is complete and lasting. Through their efforts, humanity cannot add nor take away from God's creative acts. Yet humanity was created with a divine purpose. Humanity is to live in reverent fear of God and to follow God's commands. This will bring each person to a sense of purpose in life.

Mark 12:28-34

While Qoheleth had reached a conclusion which seems to have satisfied him, questions of the purpose of life continued to be asked for centuries by people from all backgrounds. Wherever he went, Jesus quickly was perceived as being a wise teacher as well as a miracle worker. Many people appear to have recognized him as a rabbi. Because of this, Jesus often faced many questions about God and the meaning of life.

On one particular occasion, a scribe approached Jesus and asked him which of God's commandments was most important. While such questions often were posed to Jesus as a means of building a case against him using his own words, this scribe appears to have been genuinely interested in what Jesus might say.

Even by the first century, Jewish tradition had long held that the way to experience blessings and fulfillment in life was through adherence to the law passed down from God to Moses at Mount Sinai. That tradition held that the purpose of humanity was to please God by obeying God's law. Thus the scribe may have been asking for Jesus' thoughts on which of the laws was most effective in securing divine pleasure on an individual.

In answering the scribe's question, Jesus did not point to one of the Ten Commandments or to any of the specific laws found in the Torah. Jesus instead recited the Shema. This statement of faith, found in Deuteronomy

6:4-5, has served as the foundational declaration of Judaism even through today.

This one statement clearly summarizes both the uniqueness and unity of Israel's God as well as humanity's essential purpose in relationship to that God. All of the other commandments of God were seen as incorporated into this declaration.

According to Jesus then, humanity's primary purpose is to love God with all of our being and to demonstrate that in all we do, say and think. Jesus then goes on to give the scribe the second most important commandment: Love your neighbor. For Jesus, all other laws pale in the light of these two. Jesus was telling the scribe that God's law is not about a legalistic system of dos and don'ts. It is simply about living a life of love for God and others that reflects our relationship to the God who is love.

So, what is the purpose of life? It is not found in any overt quest or specific action. It is found only in a renewed perspective on life by which we love God with all we are and in all we do. It is what we were created for. It involves taking on a lifestyle that sets its focus on things higher than those which we experience as part of this world. God grants us the freedom to choose where we invest our energies in seeking meaning and purpose. But there is only one place where true significance can be found. That is when we accept all of life (the good and the bad) as a gift of God and choose to love him with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Discussion questions

- What does "he has set eternity in their hearts" mean to you?
- What changes do you need to make in order to put the first things first?

- What does it mean to love God with all of your heart? All of your soul? All of your mind? All of your strength?

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