

# Has my life been meaningless?

## A personal pilgrimage

Suppose I were to die tomorrow. It could happen. Everybody has to die sometime. What would my life amount to? Can I die in peace?

How do you measure a life? Lots of people have different ideas. I have seen a bumper sticker, "He who dies with the most toys wins." Then I guess I lose, and we all lose except for Bill Gates. But who says toys make you a winner? There's another saying, "You can't take it with you." That one is certainly true. If the meaning of my life consists of heaping up a big pile of toys that will be left behind, that seems pretty empty. If I have the most toys, all I've done is prove that I'm the most childish.

Then there is the line from *It's a wonderful life*, "No man is a failure who has friends." Sounds good, but how good are my friends? Do any of them really understand me, or really care about me? If I were to really fail, would they stick with me or talk behind my back? And what if my friends are losers? Should I trade them away for better friends, and be a false friend myself, or should I count it as a success to be permanently associated with a bunch of losers?

A lot of older people brag about their kids and grandkids. Is that what makes my life worthwhile? Should I just count numbers, and whoever has spawned the most wins? What if my kids are jerks? Should I pretend they are good, and make excuses for them? Even if they are all fine and good, will any of my family remember me or care about me when I am gone after a few years? How much do I remember my own relatives who are gone?

Some people count memories. I suppose I could add up all the things I wanted to do and succeeded, and

subtract all the things I wanted to do but didn't, and subtract all the things that I did that weren't so exciting once I really did them, and see if the net sum is positive. What if the net comes out negative? What if I never get that elusive experience that makes my life meaningful? What if I do have a great experience, and it fades from my memory?

Have I done great things? There are a few things that I have done that I think I can be proud of, but in the grand scheme of things, how great were they? There have been kings who ruled countries, and heroes who saved people, whose names nobody remembers. But I'm not even as important as those kings and heroes. I could spend my whole life trying to be famous person, and never make it to the top, or I could get to the top and have somebody knock me off right away.

Am I good? I suppose I could add up all the bad things I did and all the good things I did, and if the good things came out more than the bad things, then I could say I was a good person. But what if I have done some really bad things? If I am really honest, can I say that I am good? I can make excuses for everything I have done, but sometimes I get tired of making excuses, and just get depressed about myself.

It seems that no matter how I judge myself, when I think about adding it all up, I just get depressed. To avoid getting depressed, sometimes I fill my life with activity and fun, or just watch TV, so that I don't have to think about it. You know what they say: "You only go around once in life, so grab all the gusto you can get." Excitement! Don't stop to think about anything, just run from one kind of diversion to the next! Buy! Sell! Millions of people are starving overseas, but what does that matter? Indulge yourself again! But I don't want to have to run from thinking. All my fun and activities to avoid thinking just seem so empty.

It all seems so meaningless. Am I just a blot to be erased, a puff of smoke in the wind, not really good, not really great, with nothing to claim that makes

my life worthwhile, when all is said and done? What makes a life meaningful?

I think that what I really want is to feel that something in my life is *permanent*, that something is *lasting*. I want to be able to feel that there is an *eternal purpose* for my life. But that seems impossible. Everything in the world seems to fade away eventually. Things break down, friends come and go, and I get older and weaker.

Of course, religious people say there is a life after this one, a heaven and hell that last forever. I could argue all day about whether it is intelligent to believe in God and heaven, but I can't deny that there is a part of me that *wants* it to be true, that wants to have hope, to believe that the story has a happy ending. When I look at the beauty in nature, or the way people are designed, it doesn't seem so hard to believe.

At the same time, I also can't deny that there is a part of me that hates the idea, a part of me that is scared to death by the thought of God judging me. If there is a God, what if he is not friendly? Everybody always says God is loving, but how do they know? Doesn't the way the world is, with all its violence and suffering, seem more like the work of an angry God, who has put us under a curse?

Not only that, but when I read the Bible, it is full of curses and anger from God. That seems so old-fashioned. Modern people believe God is nice to everybody. But to be honest, all the suffering in the world seems more in agreement with the Bible's curses than with the idea that God is trying to make us happy. Some people say that God is just too weak to be able to make us happy; he's trying his best but just can't get the job done. But if that is true, then things seem just as meaningless as if there was no God. If God is not in control of the universe now, what will Heaven be like? More of the same? If God is just one more confused being in a world out of control, ultimately everything is still meaningless.

Some people say that God is just an impersonal

Force, with no intentions or purpose. Some say that there is an equal and opposite bad force. Others say there are many gods, and maybe in some cases men who became gods. Those ideas may work for some people, but they don't satisfy my desire for an eternal purpose to my life. A purpose means a plan. If God is a force with no intentions and purposes, then there are no eternal purposes. If an evil force constantly fights against the good, then no good thing can last forever. If many gods are working across purposes, then who knows what will happen, who will win? None of those gods really controls the universe, so if they are all there is, then the universe is out of control.

Suppose God really does exist, and that he really does get angry. What a scary thought. There would be nothing I could do against him, and not only that, I have probably already done things to make him angry. I get mad and defensive when somebody tells me I have sinned. I can make an argument to excuse everything I have done—I had to do it all, for one reason or another. But what if God didn't listen to my arguments? I couldn't shout him down with my excuses like I can with some people. Therefore it is easier not to believe in God, to not think about that possibility. But what if it is *true* that God will judge me? My wishing it isn't true won't make it not true.

The Bible gives this very old-fashioned idea that God must be appeased, that we must atone for our sins or else be punished. That sounds so archaic, but at the same time, when I have done something really bad, I find myself wanting to atone for it, maybe by doing some religious deed, or by doing something good for others, or by giving myself some painful assignment, just to cancel out the bad. I want to think well of myself, to have "self-esteem", which means that I want to feel that I can either justify all the things I have done, or that I have canceled them out by some good thing I have done. So by wanting to cancel the bad things with the good, I am really feeling that atonement is right, after all. Not only that, but if somebody else

gets off the hook when they have done something bad, without being punished at all or paying for it, it makes my blood boil. So if God is just in his final judgement, I have to agree that he shouldn't just let people off the hook.

If I could really cancel out my bad deeds and bad parts of my nature, I would have no fear of standing in God's judgement. But I fear that the things that cancel them out in my mind wouldn't really stand up in God's eyes. Sometimes I have outright gotten mad at God and defied him, when he wouldn't give me what I wanted, or when I wanted to do something really bad that my conscience told me was wrong. Even when I wasn't sure if he existed, I still got mad at him. If he does exist, how could I cancel out those times of defiance? What if God has a long memory?

The Bible gives the so-called Gospel, that Jesus died as the atonement for my sins. That sounds good, but it also raises a lot of problems. First of all, how could it be just for God to punish somebody else for my sins? It couldn't be right for God to punish some third party. The only way punishing Jesus for my sins could be right is if Jesus was not actually a third party at all, but Jesus was actually God, paying for my sins himself. If Jesus wasn't God, his death is not a good story, it is an abomination, a total injustice.

The next problem is then how come some people still go to hell? Didn't Jesus die for everybody? Of course, some churches teach that nobody does go to hell. But that seems so out of line with the Bible, which is full of hell and curses all over, especially in Jesus' words. If you are going to ignore that much of the Bible, then why bother with it at all? And if everybody like Adolph Hitler goes to heaven, I'm not sure I want to go there.

Some churches teach that Jesus just died for *part* of our sins, and we have to atone for the rest ourselves. I'm afraid that if that is true, then even the part that is left might be too much for me to cancel out by good deeds. I like to think of myself as mostly good, but

still, I worry that if God were to judge all my secret thoughts and everything I ever did, I might not come out that well, even if Jesus paid for part of my sins.

Other churches teach that you only get the forgiveness of Jesus if you follow some magic formula, like saying the right words of a "sinner's prayer" or being baptized the right way, or having some emotional experience. That seems totally unjust. How could a just God condemn some people just because they didn't follow a magic formula, and excuse other people who are evil, just because they did? I know some really hypocritical people who say that they know they are going to heaven just because they said the right words about Jesus. That goes totally against the places all through the Bible that condemn hypocrites, people who say they have faith in God but have no love and are just self-centered pigs. If all I ever did was say a few words about believing in Jesus, and then did whatever I felt like, then I would be one of those hypocrites too.

Somehow there has to be a way for me to really *be* good, for God to not be a liar in *calling* me good, if he is going to judge me. Then it would be true that the good people go to heaven. But how can that be, when the whole problem is that God says we are so bad that Jesus had to die to atone for our sins?

This is a deep point in the Bible that doesn't often get heard these days. I can really be good if Jesus lives in me. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit can actually come into me, to make me united with Jesus. Then I am really good because Jesus is really good.

The Bible even goes further to say that I do not have to do some great religious work or magic ritual to have the Spirit bring Jesus into my life. Anyone can have him come in just by asking. But there is a catch. If he comes in, he comes in to clean house. When I read his words in the Gospels, he is very uncompromising. The Bible uses all kinds of sayings such as, "You must take up your cross and die daily" and "Be transformed to the image of the Son" and "He came to save you by turning you from your sins." It means that I can't

have Jesus in my heart at all unless I am willing to turn over my whole life to him to change around. He wants to make me love doing good, to make me love people and to make me love worshipping God and giving him praise. If I won't let him do that, he won't come into my life at all.

Now I can see why some people go to hell, even though they could be forgiven through Jesus' death. I don't want to go to hell, but I also don't want to change. I hate change, and I hate admitting I need to change. I don't want to be that different from other people. I don't want my friends and relatives to think I am some kind of religious nut. I don't want to stop doing certain things that I like, things that I am afraid the Spirit would make my conscience feel guilty about. In some ways it is easier to think about going to hell, shaking my fist in God's face, saying at least "I did it my way."

I can see two possible paths before me. If I asked God to come into my life, I would have that sense of meaning and eternal purpose, the hope of heaven and the certainty of being forgiven by God. I want that very much. On the other hand, I can see it would mean a lot of changes in my life. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit will help me, will make me able to do it. But it would be easier just to forget about it. After all, I have lots of good reasons to not think about God or eternity. Everybody says the existence of God is not proven. Everybody says religious people are just nutty, or hypocrites. Society would be on my side if I forget about God and heaven and all that. It's easier just to not think about these things at all.

But oh sometimes I still wish for that sense of meaning and purpose. It's a great story. The wicked people turn from their wicked ways. The king saves them, and leads them all triumphantly to an eternal kingdom, where they all live happily ever after. Instead of avoiding thinking about death, I could face death with hope. I suppose I could at least think about it some more, read the Bible, and maybe talk to a real

Christian. That would already be a step in a frightening direction, a direction that might lead to having Jesus change me forever.

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