

## Meaning, Purpose, and Fulfillment

Deep in your heart, you know that your life is meant to have meaning and purpose and that pursuing and achieving your life goals and ambitions should result in a profound sense of personal fulfillment. This God-given dream for the “full” life (that Jesus came to make possible – John 10:10) drives you to pursue many goals. Getting married, raising a family, pursuing a career, and buying a home are all examples of the goals most of us pursue because we believe attaining such goals will contribute to realizing that dream that resides within us. Most people, however, never arrive at a point where they feel they have fully accomplished the dream in their hearts. Most people feel like they are missing something. Some continue searching, while others merely settle for whatever they have already accomplished. The problem we all face is this: ***the only way we can fully realize the dream within our hearts is by following God’s Plan for our lives – not the plans we make for ourselves.*** Before going into detail about how we can understand and follow God’s Plan for our lives, we need a deeper understanding of the kinds of experiences and practices from which meaning, purpose, and fulfillment are derived.

To have ***meaning*** is to have value, to be significant. Meaning is the interpretation, significance, or value we associate with a word, object, or experience. We say that something is “meaningful” to us when (and to the extent that) it contributes to our understanding of our present circumstances and how we might direct our lives toward experiencing more significant levels of satisfaction. Your life has meaning to the degree that you can ***ascribe value or significance to the activities and experiences of your life.*** The greater value you place on some experience, the greater meaning it will have for you.

Meaning can be derived from many different types of experiences. The most obvious ways are experiences like parenting, where you recognize the importance of how your interactions with your children contribute to developing their character and personalities. You can also find meaning in the ***challenges you face*** throughout your day. For example, suppose you recognize that God is using difficult circumstances at your workplace to develop your character or to help you develop a deeper understanding of a significant life truth (e.g., how to appeal to a person in a position of authority). In that case, each day contains many opportunities for creating meaning. In general, the more directly you recognize the connection between an event and how it can lead to accomplishing your dream, the more meaning you will ascribe to that event.

The critical point is that as you believe God has a specific goal for your daily experiences, you will experience more significant meaning in your life. ***Meaning in life blossoms, then, as you grow in your ability to see how God is working to accomplish important, identifiable goals through your daily activities.*** This is also true of the meaning we can discover from reflecting on past experiences. One biblical

passage that affirms this truth is Philippians 2:13, “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.” God’s “good pleasure” involves moving you towards experiencing the “full” life He has planned for you. Our need, then, is to become more aware of how God is “at work in you” – guiding your life to accomplish His good purposes for you.

To have ***purpose*** means that one’s ***planned activities*** are intentionally ***directed*** in ways that advance essential life goals. Regardless of your life goals, you will feel that your life has purpose to the degree that you see a connection between your planned activities and life goals. For example, if you desire to become a teacher, then your years of preparation in college will provide a sense of purpose for all the challenges you experience along the way. The more your life goals align with God’s plan (which depends on your awareness of His plan), the more you will feel that your life has a purpose. The “connection” between your life goals and God’s plan for your life is affirmed in Jeremiah 29:11,

“For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.’”

If you recognize that God is using your daily challenges and activities to advance His plans ***for*** you and ***in*** you, you will sense both meaning and purpose in your daily plans and activities! Discovering God’s plans and goals and maintaining an awareness of His workings are crucial to sensing that your life has meaning and purpose. Without understanding God’s direction and involvement in your life, you will continue to experience low levels of meaning and purpose, and your satisfaction from reaching goals will quickly fade.

Since it is the ***awareness of God’s plans*** for your life that will lead to finding purpose, you will need to develop the capacity to connect with God in ways that enable you to understand what God is presently working on in your life, as well as His long-range plans for you. When you know God’s plans for your life, each goal you set, and every plan you put into motion will be rich with meaning and purpose. It might be worth pointing out here that God’s purposes are first directed toward growing your character and second to using you in ways that advance His Kingdom ***purposes***. God must do a more profound work ***in*** us before He can do a significant work ***through*** us. If we fail to develop Christ-like character, the works we accomplish are more likely to lead to pride and personal character failures rather than fulfillment. You will discover that as you appropriately respond to God’s challenges to develop your character (finding the true meaning and purpose in your daily activities and experiences), He will direct your life in ways that will produce greater fulfillment.

**Fulfillment** is a feeling of completion, happiness, and satisfaction. In its simplest form, fulfillment results from completing a task – like finishing your laundry or washing your car. There is always some level of satisfaction and fulfillment that comes from completing a task – checking something off your “to-do list.” But most people are

searching for something much more profound. Many people mistakenly believe that fulfillment can only be experienced through some noteworthy achievement or receiving acclaim from someone of high status. This belief, however, is a prime example of a faulty mental framework. In reality, the “magnitude” of the fulfillment we experience from completing tasks is related more to the correlation between the task and God’s Plan for our lives than the “magnitude” of the accomplishment itself.

For example, many of us are inclined to believe that fulfillment in life grows as we achieve a significant income level or a greater professional or social status. However, we all discover there is never “enough” of any personal achievement to fully satisfy our deepest longings for the “full” life. We tend to search for something “more” or “different” to satisfy that inner hunger. One of the truths we need to discover is that ***pursuing life fulfillment in our own power and wisdom will always fall short of fulfilling the dream that resides deep within our hearts.*** King Solomon expresses his understanding of this truth in his writing in the Book of Ecclesiastes. In Chapter 2, he says,

<sup>10</sup> “All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. <sup>11</sup> Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.”

Likewise, everything we pursue based solely on our own understanding will lead to futility instead of fulfillment. But ***each time we engage in a God-ordained task – a task that is part of God’s plan for our lives – we will experience a sense of fulfillment!*** That is why it is essential to understand what God is calling you to do!

Because of the way God created us, experiencing a deep sense of fulfillment in one’s life results optimally from engaging in actions that express the person God created us to be. If God created you to be an artist, you will experience fulfillment as you create art. If God created you to be a teacher, you will experience fulfillment as you teach. If God created you to be a craftsman, you will experience fulfillment as you perform your craft. However, if God created you to be an artist and you work as an accountant, you will not find much fulfillment in completing daily tasks. Instead, you will just be relieved when the day is finished!

The more your daily activities are consistent with who God created you to be and how those activities advance God’s purposes in the lives of others, the more fulfillment you will experience. Your spiritual gifts, for example, influence how you will find fulfillment in life. (In a later chapter, we will examine spiritual gifts and other factors in discovering who God created you to be in greater detail.) However, if you are *self-directed* – as opposed to being *God-directed* – using your spiritual gifts will bring a measure of fulfillment. On the other hand, ***if your activities are a direct outgrowth of***

***obeying a directive from God, the fulfillment you experience will be much more profound.*** A personal example might be helpful.

One of my spiritual gifts is teaching. I was a high school and college math teacher for most of my adult life. Becoming a teacher was a self-directed goal; I never felt God called me to be a math teacher. In fact, I wasn't even a Christian when I decided to become a teacher. However, because teaching was a spiritual gift – part of who God made me to be – I found a measure of fulfillment throughout my professional teaching career. But honestly, much of the time I was teaching, it just felt like work! My personal “calling” (we will examine that in greater depth later), however, is to use my teaching gift to help others understand how God is at work in their life and identify what might be blocking their spiritual growth. So, later in my career, after I became a Christian and had a one-on-one conversation with one of my students focused on some aspect of their personal life, I experienced a much deeper sense of fulfillment. And when I could help them understand a life principle that God was trying to show them – when I could actually be God's instrument for assisting them to grow closer to Him – the fulfillment I experienced was immense! ***You will experience meaning, purpose, and fulfillment – to an ever-deepening degree – as you increasingly see God is at work in how you plan and live out your daily life and the long-range plans you set.***

To summarize the three main ideas in this chapter, your life has meaning to the extent that you can connect your daily (or past) experiences to significant, personally held values and goals. Your life has purpose to the extent that you can connect your planned activities to goals you deeply value. You experience fulfillment to the extent that the accomplishment of your daily activities and your short- and long-term goals are aligned with who God created you to be and what He is calling you to do. Therefore, your life will have increasing levels of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment as your daily activities become more closely aligned with both short- and long-term goals that you value now and will continue to value in the future – God's Plan for your life.

Since no person can know what they will value in the future, the only way we can choose wisely now is to follow Someone who knows the future. This synthesis between daily experiences and short- and long-term goals is what makes following God so vitally important. Since He knows “the end from the beginning” (Isaiah 46:10), we have the assurance that ***the activities God directs us to accomplish each day will result in an ever-deepening sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment.*** Not only today but also in the future.

I hope you can see from this brief discussion that the most significant amount of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment comes from understanding how God is at work in your life and following through with His plans for you. For us to know God's plans, however, we need to be able to connect and interact with Him in profound ways. Before we can connect with God in ways that will enable us to clearly understand what He is calling us to do, we need to remove obstacles that prevent our faith from growing and develop

some basic understanding of how God designed a relationship with Him to develop and flourish. The following two chapters are intended to accomplish these two outcomes.

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If this discussion has been helpful, I'd like to let you know about a book I've written that explores this and other closely related topics in greater depth. The title of the book is: "Finding Meaning, Purpose, and Fulfillment: Making Sense of God, Life, and Success."

My goal in writing this book was to help people better understand how God designed life to be lived and what He expects from each of us. In its broadest sense, God designed life as a journey of discovery with Himself as our guide, counselor, and primary resource. You and I are called to be students of life with God as our teacher!

If you didn't enjoy going to school, let me assure you that having God as your life teacher will be substantially better than any previous educational experiences. God is not angry with you, He is not disappointed in you, and He will never pressure or embarrass you. He is genuinely a kind, loving, and supportive teacher – more so than any teacher, coach, counselor, or parent you have ever known. A big part of your life as a student is discovering how truly awesome God is!

My book highlights the most important life principles God has established, guides readers in building and deepening their relationship with Him, and outlines ways to adjust their life practices to further God's purposes in and through their lives. ***In short, my book addresses one central question: What is life really all about?***

Each of us recognizes that we are responsible for how we live our lives. We each must find answers to the most profound and important questions of life. But what are the most critical questions for which we must find answers?


As I reflected on my life experiences in the months leading up to my retirement from teaching and pastoring, the Holy Spirit helped me realize that everything of value I had ever learned was an answer to one or more of four questions. In my book, I refer to these as the "Four Essential Life Questions."

1. Who Is God?
2. How Has God Designed Life to be Lived?
3. Who Am I?
4. What Is God Asking Me to Do?

***What profoundly impacted me was the realization that as I have found answers to these Essential Questions over time, and followed God’s guidance to bring my life into alignment, meaning, purpose, and fulfillment have grown in my life.*** I believe that is how God wants to bring meaning, purpose, and fulfillment into your life as well.



**Who Is God?**



**How has God  
Designed Life to  
be Lived?**



**Who Am I?**



**What is God  
Calling Me to  
Do?**

The Essential Questions serve as containers. The more you fill these containers with answers and align your life accordingly, the more meaning, purpose, and fulfillment will grow. You will experience the “full life” Jesus died to secure for you as you allow God to reveal answers to the Essential Questions and then follow His guidance. The book also provides detailed guidance on how to incorporate the Essential Questions into your daily life.