

How We Process Life

God, in His infinite wisdom, recognizes that our thinking significantly influences who we are and how we live. Therefore, He places significant attention on transforming our thinking.

Isaiah 1: ¹⁸ “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD. (NASB)

Romans 12: ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

1 Corinthians 14: ²⁰ Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.

Before delving deeper into understanding the four Essential Questions of life and how they lead to finding meaning, purpose, and fulfillment, I want to explain (from a biblical perspective) how our thinking moves from simplistic to more complex – or from less to more mature. I have discovered that my thinking fluctuates between four different levels of reasoning as I respond to life experiences. Understanding this stratification of thinking processes can help you process your thoughts and feelings more productively. In the following explanation, I will interchangeably use various forms of the terms thinking, questioning, reasoning, and rationality.

Levels of Rationality

Level 1 thinking (questioning) occurs naturally throughout each day. “What should I wear?” “What’s the weather going to be like?” “I wonder how bad traffic will be on my morning commute?” “What should I plan for dinner?” Thousands of questions like these come to mind automatically as we plan and live out each day. However, Level 1 thinking can also be generated by our emotions. “I *hate* that she did that; how can I get even with her?” “I wonder why he’s acting like *that*?” “What’s *his* problem?” Our minds automatically respond to many life experiences by generating questions that guide our response (if any) to these occurrences. The “answers” that come to mind in response to the questions our minds generate often dictate our actions. Depending on our level of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual maturity, a “filter” may kick in and cause us to wonder whether we should act on any given thought or “switch” our thinking to another (more “mature”) level. That shift, if it occurs, moves us to Level 2 thinking.

Level 2 reasoning occurs when we “catch ourselves” motivated to respond to a situation in ways we suspect may not be the “right” thing. For example, we know from experience that when acted upon, strong feelings like anger, fear, frustration, or jealousy can direct us to take actions we will later regret. Based upon such experiences, people often pause when they begin to experience powerful negative emotions to consider

whether a more reasonable course of action is warranted. One might label this a “moral filter” that prevents us from reacting immediately to our life experiences. For example, caught up in strong negative emotions, a mature person will initiate Level 2 thinking by asking questions like, “How **should** I respond?” Level 2 thinking, for the Christian, switches us from living a self-directed life to trying to live a more God-directed life.

As we mature in our walk with God, we move more quickly from Level 1, **reacting** to life experiences, to Level 2, **reasoning**. The “answers” generated from our Level 2 reasoning are often based on “rules” we have been taught to follow. The more we read and understand the Bible and desire to follow God, the more our actions will “line up” with our understanding of biblical truths. And the longer we practice Level 2 thinking, the “better” we will get at living by biblical truths.

But as we mature as Christians, we understand God is more interested in our relationship with Him than in our behavior. The motivation to “know” God and relate to Him personally moves us to **Level 3** thinking. (Before we examine the next level of thinking, I want to point out that non-Christians and less mature Christians rarely advance beyond Level 2 thinking. They are “stuck” merely trying to align their behaviors to a set of “standards” they have chosen to accept as “true” or “right.” And many of those “standards” are followed because they believe they will be “rewarded” in some way for doing so.)

As Christians become more aware of biblical truths – by reading Scripture, attending a biblically “healthy” church, interacting with mature Christians, and other biblically sound practices – they become aware that God desires a personal relationship with them. This awareness moves them to begin the process of personally and intentionally reaching out to God in the search for a deeper understanding of who He is and how they should plan and live their lives. The change from “rules-based” reasoning to a God-focused “relationship-based” reasoning initiates **Level 3** thinking. Non-Christians are incapable of engaging in Level 3 thinking due to their lack of a relationship with God – which is established when one is born again.

Level 3 thinking involves a 4-step process as we attempt to interact with God on a personal level.

Step 1: “Switching” your focus from yourself to God and directly asking Him what He wants you to do.

Step 2: Pausing until some “answer” is received.

Step 3: Obeying (to the best of your ability) whatever you believe God is directing you to do.

Step 4: Returning to God (later) to “process” the experience and get directions for what you should do next.

Although this process may seem straightforward, it can sometimes take many months to complete all four steps, especially when dealing with a particularly complicated issue or life experience. For example, before we are ready to receive God’s “answer” regarding what He wants us to do in response to a conflict with someone (Step 2), we often need to seek His help in processing several powerful feelings “attached” to that conflict (often from past relational conflicts). It is frequently difficult for us to understand (discern) what God is directing us to do until we have adequately dealt with these past issues. It is only at this point that we are able to receive God’s direction calmly and humbly. Additionally, sometimes, we must ask a trusted friend for assistance or wait for God to “walk us” through additional life experiences before we can fully discern and accept His guidance. Obeying (Step 3) is also a step that can be very difficult – and we frequently fail – which brings us back to God (Step 1) to process the feelings generated by our failure to follow His previous directions fully!

However, as we become more spiritually mature, we begin to understand that the back-and-forth processing of our thoughts and feelings with God is an integral part of how God brings about transformation in our lives. And all of the time we spend seeking God’s guidance and support and trying to follow His leadership in our lives, we are deepening our relationship with Him. One surprising outcome of these interactions with God (Level 3 thinking) is that we find greater meaning and purpose in our lives. We also find ourselves spending more and more time interacting with God and experiencing ever-deepening levels of joy as He changes how we think and, therefore, how we live. We also begin to find fulfillment as God guides our lives. But we can experience even greater levels of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment as we direct our thinking to **Level 4**.

As Christians increase their capacity to understand God’s ways and seek to follow them, they acquire an ever-growing mountain of knowledge. However, large amounts of information can often create confusion and frustration if we cannot organize and synthesize the information we accumulate into a structured knowledge base. The Bible uses the term **wisdom** to denote the process of synthesizing knowledge into a usable framework for guiding decision-making. Scripture challenges us to connect with God to grow in understanding and wisdom.

1 Kings 3: ⁹ So give Your servant an understanding heart ... to discern between good and evil.

Proverbs 2: ⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.

James 1: ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

But the “full life” – the life Jesus came to enable us to experience – involves much more than merely “controlling” our responses to daily life experiences. In addition

to finding meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in our daily activities and experiences, God desires that we experience those same blessings in a “global” way – that the entirety of our lives would be richly and “fully” rewarding!

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.

Proverbs 10: ²² It is the blessing of the LORD that makes rich, and He adds no sorrow to it.

Isaiah 35: ² They will see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ...
⁷ The scorched land will become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water ... ⁸ A highway will be there, a roadway, and it will be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean will not travel on it, but it will be for him who walks that way, and fools will not wander on it. ⁹ No lion will be there, nor will any vicious beast go up on it; These will not be found there. But the redeemed will walk there, ¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD will return and come with joyful shouting to Zion, with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

This last passage from the Book of Isaiah speaks to God’s vision for the lives of “His people” – those who choose to know and follow Him. The “full life” Jesus spoke of in John 10:10 is lived on a “highway” – actually, a “**high way**” of living – a life with meaning, purpose, and fulfillment that increasingly unfolds as we seek to understand and live by God’s ways. And God’s “ways” include – and are built on – knowing, loving, and following Him on a deeply personal level. That approach to life results in maximum joy, peace, and gladness of heart.

I have spent the past 40+ years doing my best to know and follow God. As my knowledge about God and His ways increased (often through my failures), I frequently felt frustrated by my inability to find a way to synthesize all the information into an organized, understandable whole. However, despite my frustrations, I persevered, even though I was unable to accomplish that task. Over time, my life became increasingly God-centered and grew in meaning, purpose, and personal fulfillment. (In all honesty, I can still be a jerk sometimes; it just seems to happen less frequently!)

In the several months preceding my retirement from teaching and ministry, I wondered what my life might look like in this next chapter. As I attempted to “prepare” for retirement, I began reflecting on all God had helped me understand and how He supernaturally changed me over time. I started to see that all the knowledge He revealed and helped me process “fit” nicely into four categories. I also began to realize that as the amount of knowledge and understanding increased within and among these four categories, and I aligned my life accordingly, the overall levels of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment I experienced also increased! All the information about God and

His ways fit nicely as “answers” to four specific questions. Reflecting on these four questions is what I label **Level 4 Thinking**. These are the four most important questions in life!

- 1) Who is God?
- 2) How Has God Designed Life to Be Lived?
- 3) Who Am I? (And Who Does God Want Me to Become?)
- 4) What is God Calling Me to Do?

As you invest time reflecting on these **Essential Questions**, find the “right” answers, and allow God to use those insights to guide your life, you will **supernaturally experience ever-increasing levels of meaning, purpose, and personal fulfillment**.

The rest of Part 2 (Chapters 6-10) will be focused on developing a deeper understanding of these (**Level 4**) **Essential Questions**. However, before moving on, let me give an example of how I have seen my mind “navigate” between the four levels of rationality.

Near the end of my teaching career, the educational bureaucracy in America began pushing for the implementation of “Common Core Math.” (Before going any further, I sincerely apologize if the reference to mathematics causes you to experience any anxiety! I also want to apologize for any embarrassment or other forms of mistreatment you suffered at the hands of math teachers in your past! Try to suppress all those feelings generated from your problems with mathematics throughout your life – or schooling in general – and turn your focus, instead, to the explanation of how my thinking moved between the four levels of rationality!)

As a trained professional with over 40 years of experience teaching mathematics at various levels, I recognized that many things about the Common Core “movement” were problematic to the teaching and learning of mathematics. However, my building principal and district administrators (who had almost no knowledge about teaching and learning mathematics) thought it was a great thing to do and pushed for full implementation of everything the “experts” suggested. In the minds of my “superiors” (perhaps because they never really experienced much success in mathematics), the Common Core initiative would help students better understand and learn mathematics. Because I knew better, my immediate reaction was to resist, and I did so – first in dialogue with my principal and later at the district level. Not surprisingly, this created great conflict – within me and with my superiors.

The conflicts that arose from the district’s movement to implement Common Core Math generated many strong feelings and caused me to spend a great deal of time deciding how to respond to the many challenges I faced. First, I needed to pay attention to the strong negative emotions I discovered rising in my heart. My anger, resentment, and disgust generated many thoughts about how stupid my superiors were and how I

might be able to attain more significant influence regarding the proposed changes. I wondered how I might be able to show them how ignorant it would be to unthinkingly implement strategies and curricula being pushed by people they don't even know. I automatically started to think: "How can I show them their lack of understanding and the errors in their reasoning?" "How can I find ways to help them understand how the changes that are being suggested violate basic principles of how students learn mathematics?" Since these questions arose from strong negative emotions, I knew I was looking for ways to embarrass my superiors and "help" them understand how stupid they were! This was Level 1 thinking, and I instinctively knew that any decisions growing out of these strong negative emotions would likely be unproductive and probably only cause further damage to relationships with my superiors. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I sometimes allowed Level 1 thinking to drive my behavior.

This awareness caused me to shift to Level 2 thinking. What are the "rules" that govern relationships? What kinds of behaviors and attitudes (on my part) would please God and be more likely to result in positive outcomes? I recall pondering many questions like these for a significant amount of time before I realized I was still processing these issues in a less-than-mature manner. I was focusing on the "small picture" and ignored the reality that many problems were of greater importance in life than how students were taught mathematics. I was focusing almost exclusively on my concerns rather than paying attention to God's concerns. I was guilty of "seeing the trees but not the forest" – and both were important! This new awareness moved my thinking to Levels 3 and 4.

From the perspective of my **actions**, I would ask God Level 3 questions like, "What's the best way for me to point out potential problems (with a given proposal) in a way that demonstrates both personal as well as professional respect for my superiors?" "What are my responsibilities as both a math teacher and a department chairperson, and how can I fulfill those responsibilities in a way that honors You?" Those are just two examples of the Level 3 questions that I began to process with God – and each time, navigating through all four Level 3 processing steps.

Simultaneously, as I pondered all the issues I faced, many Level 4 questions surfaced. "What do these strong negative emotions tell me about who I am?" "How does my teaching mathematics fit into my life calling as a Christian and my personal calling to help people discover how God is at work in their lives?" "What can these experiences teach me about how God designed the superior-subordinate relationship to best function?" "Are subordinates supposed to submit to their superiors blindly, or is there a responsibility for the subordinate to be more involved in the decision-making process?" "How might a subordinate effectively appeal to an authority figure by providing information that the superior is not seeing?" "When I see all You allow to happen – to me, my students, the American educational establishment, etc. – what does that teach me about Your character? Your plans?" "What does all I am experiencing in this situation tell me about Your plan for me?" These are all examples of Level 4 questions I

regularly pondered and continue to reflect on today. I would often see myself fluctuating among the four levels of thinking moment-by-moment and day-by-day, depending on “where my head was” at any given time.

I hope this example helps you better understand the four levels of thinking and how one might “navigate” between them. In my experience, I have found that processing Level 3 and Level 4 questions is most effective when I am in extended periods of solitude and silence. For the last ten years of my teaching career, I would spend between 30 and 60 minutes every school-day morning parked in my car in a large, empty parking lot about a quarter mile from the school where I taught. Those times in solitude each day contributed profoundly to my transformation and spiritual growth. Times of solitude and silence continue to be the “best” part of every day for me, resulting in the most significant levels of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment!

Before moving on, I should point out a 5th level of rationality (consciousness might be a better term) that transcends the other four levels of thinking. This 5th level of consciousness – experiencing God’s Presence – occurs when your spirit is awakened to the realization that God is present with you and desires to “connect” with you on a deeply personal level. This 5th level of “consciousness” only occurs if you pause and allow God to “draw near to you” (**James 4:8** – “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”). As you “suspend” thinking (put your mind in “neutral”) and just wait for God, He will often “break through” in a powerful way. Sometimes you’ll be overwhelmed by His Presence and weep as He releases mercy, compassion, and grace, ministering to you on a deeply personal level. At other times, God will “implant” a deeper, more wholistic understanding of an important issue you are attempting to resolve, or a deeper understanding of who He is or who you are. In whatever way He “reveals” Himself, you’ll walk away from the experience with greater confidence, peace, and hope. These kinds of experiences happen to me, mostly during times of solitude or deep worship. But God has sometimes broken through like this while driving my car or doing my laundry! The goal – always, always, always – is to seek Him to the best of your ability. Everything that occurs after that depends entirely on Him.

As you continue to do your best to know and follow God (which is all anyone can do), you will find yourself more quickly (and with greater frequency) directing your thoughts toward God rather than relying on your own capabilities – functioning more frequently at Levels 3 and 4 in your thinking. As you see that occurring in your life, recognize that as a mark of a growing spirituality!

The following five chapters will help you better understand each of the Level 4 Essential Questions and how the “right” answers to these questions will grow your life in meaning, purpose, and fulfillment.

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.