

## Essential Life Questions

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:** <sup>9</sup> So give Your servant an understanding heart ... to discern between good and evil.

**Proverbs 2:** <sup>6</sup> For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.

**James 1:** <sup>5</sup> 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:** <sup>11</sup> 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:** <sup>22</sup> It is the blessing of the LORD that makes rich, and He adds no sorrow to it.

**Isaiah 35:** <sup>2</sup> They will see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ... <sup>7</sup> The scorched land will become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water ... <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> 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.**

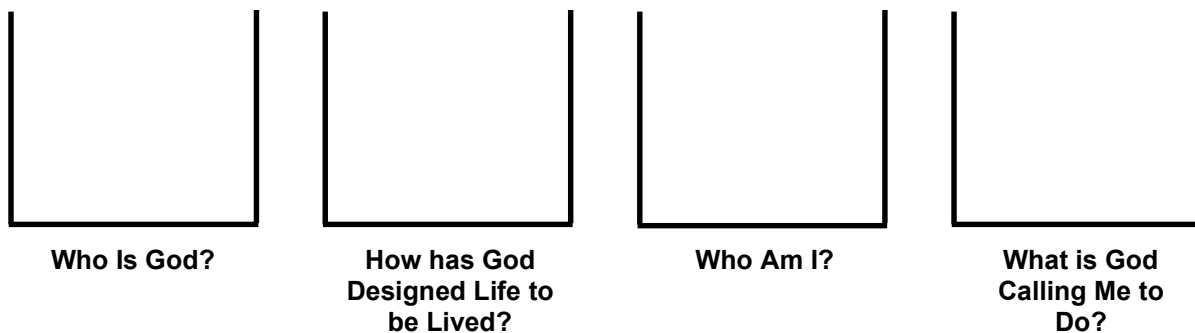
*[A full discussion (including examples) of Levels 1-4 reasoning is presented in the handout titled "Levels of Rationality" and available on my website.]*

The deepest levels of learning and transformation occur as we reflect on our life experiences using **Level 4 Thinking**. You've probably heard the saying that "hindsight is always 20-20". That is, we see and understand life experiences more clearly as we "look back" on issues that have occurred in our past. That's probably because we can "look back" more objectively – when strong emotions are tempered or removed from our experiences. Developing the habit of reflecting on the critical issues and happenings in your life is a wise practice. It has been my experience that times of reflection have

produced the most profound learnings, especially in finding the “right” answers to the Essential Questions (Level 4 Thinking). I recommend the following process.

As you reflect on a given experience, use the Essential Questions as a “filter” for learning. Ask God, “What do You want this experience to teach me about You?” “What life principles can I discover?” “What do my reactions to this experience – past and present – teach me about myself?” “How do You want me to respond to this?” Each life experience is “pregnant,” with the possibility of gaining essential knowledge and understanding. And when you reflect on emotionally charged experiences from your past, you open the door to healing and closure, guided by God’s Grace.

I’d like you to consider these four Essential Questions as separate *containers* of knowledge (see Figure 6-1 below). As you reflect on past or present life experiences and engage in the four-step Level 4 thinking process previously outlined, God will reveal important insights that will become “answers” to one or more of these questions. In your mind, “sort” the insights God provides into one or more of these four containers. Over time, the amount of information in these areas will significantly increase. As the amount of information expands, allow the Holy Spirit to direct your mind to search for synthesis among the various pieces of information within each container. This practice will enable you to discover valuable **life principles** within each container. Additionally, as the Holy Spirit guides you, allow your mind to search for synthesis amongst the four containers. You will experience an increased sense of direction, meaning, and purpose as you allow the Holy Spirit to accomplish these synthesizing tasks. And as your thoughts, plans, and actions are guided by these insights and understandings, you will also experience an ever-increasing sense of fulfillment.



**Figure 6-1: The 4 Essential Questions**

Even though the growth of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment unfolds supernaturally, the process is not something “magical.” The development of these powerful life experiences has a rational foundation. The more we engage in Level 3 and Level 4 thinking, the more each life experience becomes pregnant with the possibility of having significant meaning and purpose. If the insights I gain enable me to better

understand and surrender to God's leadership, then all my life experiences can contribute to my future, bringing me ever closer to fulfilling God's purposes for my life. This is how meaning, purpose, and fulfillment grow as we find answers to these Essential Life Questions and allow them to guide our lives. ***And this is how the singular life focus to "know and follow God" causes everything of value in life to unfold.***

Given this brief outline of these four questions' role in helping us to know and follow God, I also want to communicate why these Essential Questions are vitally important. When I came to faith at age 29, the commitment I was making at that time was to seek to know and follow the truth – wherever it might lead me. My faith then was that God was real and that He had created everything that I had come to accept as real. Influenced by my upbringing in Catholicism, I began with the idea that God was all-knowing (omniscient) and all-powerful (omnipotent).

In Appendix A: "The God Thing," I explain my early journey to that believe God was real. My confession of faith (that is, accepting Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for the forgiveness of my sins – my failure to follow what I really believed to be *right* – and seeking to surrender to God's leadership in my life) was just the next step in my spiritual journey. At that time, I believed if God was powerful enough to have created all of life, He certainly was worth knowing and following. If God is powerful enough to create the "heavens and the earth," it would be stupid to ignore *anything* He might have to say! My previous 29 years of life experience taught me that ignoring people with great power and knowledge can only lead to disappointing outcomes. If for no other reason than self-preservation, I should at least listen to what God might have to say about life!

I pressed on in my journey to understand and follow what was right and true to the best of my ability, but this time, I sought God's assistance and guidance. My journey quickly brought me to explore the Bible and the Church. I began reading the New Testament (Phillips Translation), starting with the Gospel of Matthew and reading my way through to the end of the Book of Revelations. While many issues were confusing – some even seemed to be contradictory – my overwhelming response was that God's Word was **true!** I came to realize this Book contains words of wisdom and truth! The more I learned, the more I became convinced the Bible (in its original languages) is the *inspired* Word of God and must serve as the foundation upon which all truths are to be examined and understood.

**2 Timothy 3:** <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

As I acknowledged earlier, the accumulation of knowledge and understanding often became confusing as I tried to organize and synthesize all I was coming to believe was true. Only in the past year or so (after 40+ years of trying to know and follow God) have I realized the significance of the four Essential Questions. In the remaining



chapters of Part 2 that follow, I aim for you to understand the *essence* and *importance* of these four questions – and not to provide all of the answers. ***Finding answers to these Essential Life Questions is the journey God asks YOU to take with Him.*** As you follow God’s leadership – and attempt to do what God asks you to do to the best of your ability (Level 3 thinking) – He will teach you an incalculable number of truths. As you organize and synthesize these truths among the four Essential Questions (Level 4 thinking) – and allow them to influence how you live – you will experience an ever-growing sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment! Now, let’s explore those questions!

A fuller discussion of the Essential Questions and many related ideas is captured in my book, “Finding Meaning, Purpose, and Fulfillment: Making Sense of God, Life, and Success.” This manuscript answers the question “What is life all about?” from a biblical perspective, presenting a comprehensive, rational framework for biblical Christianity.