



# Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs

## (5) The Meaning of Life

Genesis 1:26-31

Revelation 21:1-4

2 Corinthians 5:6-10

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This is sermon #5 in a series of sermons called “Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs.” We are living in a time and place where the secular worldview is the dominant worldview. The secular worldview claims that either God does not exist or if he does, he is not relevant for human life. People who live their lives by the secular worldview live their lives without reference to God. We live in a pluralistic society which means that there are all kinds of way of thinking about life, but the one that is most influential is the secular worldview. Hardcore atheists believe that nothing exists beyond the physical world. But a larger number perhaps, have a vague belief in the existence of God and an afterlife, but those beliefs make almost no difference in their thinking and living and so we can consider them to be practical atheists. They live according to the reigning secular worldview so that their values and their way of life and their opinions about things are consistent with the belief that this life is all that there is to this life. What matters is the here and now, and if there is anything above and beyond this life, it makes little or no difference.

In this sermon I will address that way of thinking about life from a biblical perspective in one particular area, the question of the meaning of life or the significance of life. The logical implication of living in terms of this life only is that there is no meaning or significance that lasts forever. The secular way of thinking about the meaning of life and the biblical way of thinking about the meaning of life are very different. And

what I will do in this sermon is consider the secular way of thinking about the meaning of life and then address that from the Bible.

Those who live by the secular worldview have all their meaning-eggs in the basket of this life. That is the logical implication of the secular worldview that the only life that matters is this physical earthly life. If there is nothing beyond this material physical world, there is no meaning that is larger than life. When life ends so does meaning. According to the secular way of looking at the world, there will come a time in the future when our sun dies or explodes or whatever and life on earth will come to an end and then all that will be left is a lifeless universe. That will be the end of all meaning. Nothing anyone has ever done will matter anymore. All of human culture will be destroyed. If that is the end, then everything is ultimately meaningless. There is short-term meaning. But there is no forever-meaning. There is nothing that will matter forever and ever.

Here is how the atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell expressed this in an essay called "A Free Man's Worship."

"... Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; ... his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; ... no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; ... all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and ... the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins--all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built."

Now this quote from Bertrand Russell is interesting from a number of perspectives. It is interesting as a clear expression of one of the implications of the secular worldview. Human life is ultimately meaningless. There can be no overarching purpose to life if its cause is the "accidental collocations of atoms" and in the end everything

mankind has achieved and humanity itself “are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system.” Russell is honest about the logical implications of the secular worldview.

But there is something else that is interesting about this quote from an atheistic philosopher and that is the spirit of sadness that pervades it. The conclusion is that man must live with “unyielding despair.” That is not a happy term and it conveys the difficulty of accepting the idea that life is ultimately meaningless. To live a life without ultimate meaning is to live a life of unyielding despair. It is despairing of any ultimate significance to ones’ life. It is not despairing of any significance to life at all, as we will see in a moment, but it is despairing of any significance beyond this life. The secular worldview requires people to live with the conclusion that on the basis of that way of looking at life, ultimately it does not matter how you live and what you accomplish. Once you are dead, you go out of existence and at some point in the future, life on earth will end and so there is no eternal significance to anything that has happened during the existence of human beings.

For many secular people that is a hard thing to deal with. Russell’s quote conveys some of that difficulty by speaking of living with an unyielding despair. And there are many secular people who struggle with that. There is a long history people expressing the pain of living life believing that it only has temporary significance and that at the end, their lives are without any lasting purpose or value.

Rodney Stark is a sociologist who has written a lot to debunk some of the myths and inaccuracies about Christianity and religion in general perpetuated by scholars motivated by the secular worldview. One of his books is called *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World is More Religious Than Ever*. In that book he shows on the basis of actual surveys that vast numbers of people think regularly about the meaning and the purpose of life.

Here is some of what he writes, “The three tables presented at the end of this chapter help to reveal why religion endures. People want to know why the universe exists, not that it exists for no reason, and they don’t want their lives to be pointless. Only religion provides credible

and satisfactory answers to the great existential questions. The most ardent wishes of the secularization faithful will never change that.”

“Secularists have been predicting the imminent demise of religion for centuries. They have always been wrong – and their claims today are no different. It is their unshakable faith in secularization that may be the most “irrational” of all beliefs.” (p. 211)

What this shows us is that the belief that the world has no meaning or purpose is not a view that many people actually hold and for many of those who do hold to it, it is a painful view to hold. It is very clear that most human beings want their lives to have a meaning that is larger than this life only. Many people who are convinced that there is no meaning beyond the meaning that they create themselves, find that way of looking at life to be depressing and disheartening.

This is another example of a characteristic of human life that fits with the biblical worldview and does not fit well with the secular worldview. It is not a proof that Christianity is true, and the secular worldview is false, but it is another way that we see that what we believe on the basis of the Bible fits with life as we experience it while the belief that we are the random products of chance and time does not fit with life as we experience it.

This is the way that faith and reason work together in the biblical worldview. We accept the Truth of God and the Bible by faith and when we consider life and the world in the light of what we accept by faith, we find that that it explains the world as it is and as we experience it. On the other hand there are all kinds of areas where the actual experience of life does not fit with the secular worldview. And this is one of those areas. The secular worldview means that life has no ultimate meaning, but the majority of people in the world find that difficult to accept and to live with.

I want to bring in one more thought before we consider the biblical response to the secular claim that there is no ultimate meaning to life. While most people believe that there is a meaning to life that transcends this earthly existence, or find it difficult and unnatural to live with the conviction that life is ultimately meaningless, there are also

quite a few in our society who report that they are perfectly happy with the meaning that they find in life even if it is only a temporary meaning. There are many who find meaning in their lives in their work and in their relationships or in trying to contribute to the common good or any number of things that give them satisfaction and happiness. They believe that there is no overarching meaning to life in general and their lives in particular, but they are happy with just enjoying their lives the best they can without worrying about the fact that ultimately there is no significance to their lives that is above and beyond their temporary earthly existence.

While the majority of people think about the question of the overall meaning of life and the world, there are significant numbers of people who are happy to live with the philosophy: “Eat, drink for tomorrow you die. Get what you can out of this life because this life is all there is.” Clearly there are many people in our society who are happy to live this way.

Here is a quote from an article in the New Republic by Jerry A. Coyne that expresses this. “Yes, secularism does propose a physical and purposeless universe, and many of us accept the notion that our sense of self is a neuronal illusion. But although the universe is purposeless, our lives aren’t. This conflation of a purposeless universe with purposeless human lives is a trick that that faithful use to make atheism seem dark and nihilistic. But we make our own purposes, and they’re real.”

Randy Newman a Christian evangelist has written an article for the “Desiring God” website called “What If They’re Happy Without God?” In that article he writes, “I’m talking about people who, from all outward appearances, seem just fine without God. They don’t appear to feel guilt or shame about anything. They don’t seem to long for something transcendent to add meaning to their lives. They don’t mind sleeping in on Sunday morning and lingering leisurely over brunch. In fact, they look forward to it.”

So when we think about the secular worldview and the question about the meaning of life, we find that thinkers who reflect on the implications of the belief that nothing exists beyond this material

physical world admit that on the basis of that way of looking at the world there is no ultimate meaning to life. If there is no mind behind it all there can be no meaning of it all. Most people of the world do not think that way. Most people of the world think that there is meaning to life or if they don't, they find it a painful thing to think that there is no purpose to life. But there are also those who claim to be completely satisfied just to get what joy and pleasure they can out of life without any thought about the overall meaning of it all.

So that is a secular belief that is common in our society. Whatever meaning there is, it is restricted to the meaning you give to your life and there is nothing beyond that. There is no meaning that is just there as the meaning of all of life and the whole universe. Some people are happy to live that way. Many find it painful and depressing. Let's now address this idea from the Bible.

Now in dealing with this subject from a biblical perspective we must say while the whole Bible is about the meaning of life, the leading edge of the biblical message is not how humans can find meaning for their lives, but rather it is how we can escape the wrath of God because of our sins. The leading edge of the biblical message, if I can put it that way, is a declaration of the existence and glory of God and his claim upon our lives. In the very first chapter of the Bible we learn that God is the creator of all things including man. Towards the end of the first chapter of the Bible and in the second chapter we learn that God gave human beings a task to perform and that he requires obedience from us. And in the third chapter we learn about the first act of disobedience and the catastrophic consequences of that disobedience and the main theme of the rest of the Bible has to do with God's plan for the restoration of his creation through reconciling himself with man.

We find the same kind of emphasis in the teaching of Jesus. According to Matthew's gospel, the summary of Jesus' message was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" – that is, God is coming to establish his kingdom and the only way to be ready for his coming is to repent of your sins and be reconciled to God. And as the events of Jesus' life unfolded and were interpreted in the light of the Old Testament

promises and prophecies, it became clear that Jesus' work of salvation was the center piece of history and of the meaning of history.

It is important that when we deal with the question of how we can live a meaningful life and how can we know the meaning of life, that the Bible's main focus is on God and the whole question of how we can escape the judgment of God because of our sins. The Bible actually has a lot to say about the meaning of life, but the great priority of the Bible is to declare to us who God is and who we are in relationship to him. The great concern of the Bible is God and his purposes and what God has done in Jesus Christ to provide a way of forgiveness and reconciliation with God. So the great problem that the Bible addresses as far as mankind is concerned is not how we can find meaning for our lives, but how we can stand in the final judgment.

Consider how Paul addressed the philosophers at Athens in Acts 17:22ff. Here are some of the main points of his speech. "[T]his I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.... [H]e commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world by the man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

This is where we must begin our thinking when we consider how the Bible addresses the question of the meaning of life. The Bible does not address human beings asking them to think about the philosophical question of the meaning of life. In the Bible, is God speaking to us, addressing us as our maker and informing us that we are sinners under his wrath because of our sins. The first priority of the Bible is that God is God and we are subject to him and we are sinners who must repent or perish. But that is not a harsh message because it comes with the summons to believe in Jesus and submit to him as the way provided by God himself for us to be forgiven and made right with God. In order to understand the biblical teaching on the meaning of life, in biblical perspective we must realize that we are not addressed in some neutral fashion with a viewpoint to consider, but we are addressed as creatures

of God, accountable to him and under condemnation outside of salvation in Christ.

The next thing that we must understand about the biblical perspective on the meaning of life is that to find meaning apart from God is actually rebellion against God. The Bible makes it clear that not believing in God and not finding our purpose in life in serving him is actually rebellion against God and makes us worthy of death. The first of the Ten Commandment is that we are to have no other gods than the one true God and Jesus' summary of the first four of the Ten Commandments is that we are to love God with all our hearts. So as the Bible confronts us as the Word of God the first thing that it requires of us is to submit to the God who speaks and make pleasing him and loving him the first priority in our lives. Having a purpose in life that is restricted to this world only is disobedience and places us under the wrath of God. The whole biblical message begins with God and our submission to him.

However, the message of the Bible is a message of salvation. God does not tell us we are condemned and turn his back on us. He tells us that we are lost, but he also tells us of all that he has done so that we might escape the just penalty for our sins. The Bible insists on the authority of God and reveals him as the Lord of all, but it also speaks much of his compassion and grace and mercy and love and the great lengths he has gone to provide a way for us to be forgiven and warmly embraced. That is the good news about Jesus Christ – the Son of God – sent into the world to give his life as a sacrifice for sinners. It is a strange message to modern ears – a divine/human person as a sacrifice for human sin, but the way of salvation is the way of humbling ourselves to believe this very strange message and learning to celebrate it as the foundation of our hope and the greatest display of love that the world has ever seen.

But then – what about the meaning of life? Well the Bible deals with this from a number of interrelated perspectives. There is an overarching purpose to the whole of creation and to all of history. If we think of what God tells us in the account that he gives us in the first chapters of the Bible of the creation and of the mission that he gave to Adam and Eve, we see that God's purpose was to fill the earth with images of himself who would enjoy life as they lived to please him. God told Adam

and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and to develop the earth to meet their needs and enjoy the bounty of the earth and to do all that in obedience to God's will.

When it comes to the overarching purpose of everything, we must think in terms of the purpose of the Creator for the creation. And from the early chapters of the Bible we find that it had to do with mankind reflecting God's character, and as God's reflectors, filling the earth with human beings made in the image of God. From the early chapters of Genesis we learn that fellowship between God and man was a key part of this purpose and that it involved man living in obedience to God. It is also clear that God's purpose included mankind experiencing a rich and pleasurable existence within that purpose.

Now the fall of Adam and Eve into sin added a lot of complexity to God achieving his purpose, but the overarching purpose remains the same. For God and man to live together in harmony. For God to be honored by man and for man to experience joy and satisfaction in life with God. If we go to the book of Revelation we find God's description of what he is working toward in history. In Revelation 21 we read of a new heaven and a new earth and in verses 3 & 4 we read, "Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

So the purpose of everything is God and man living together in a relationship in which God is honored as God and in which God's people are blessed in that relationship. There are many different aspects to this as we consider all of what the Scripture's teach about God's purposes and the meaning of human life within that purpose.

Jesus Christ is at the center of that. Jesus is at the center of God's plan to deal with human sin and reconcile God and man. And a huge aspect of that is the glory of Jesus. We learn in Philippians 2:10-11 that it is God's plan "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

And the purpose of human life fits within God's plan for everything – submitting to Jesus for the glory of God. One of the ways that the Bible

speaks of this is with the language of pleasing God. Paul in Colossians 1:10 tells Christians to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God....”

These are just a few aspects of the biblical teaching about the meaning of life. It begins with being reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Apart from salvation, we only live for ourselves rather than living for God and the Bible teaches that that is the way of death. But it also teaches that those who believe in Jesus and follow him find their purpose in pleasing God and enjoying fellowship with him. And it insists that living this way is the most satisfying and joyful and fulfilling way to live. And it insists that living to please God has an eternal significance. It matters now, but it will also matter forever. In 2 Corinthians 5:9-10 Paul writes, “[W]e make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”

So the contrast between the secular worldview and the biblical worldview could not be greater when it comes to the meaning of life. In the secular worldview whatever meaning we give to our lives ends with death. There is no ultimate meaning. There is no ultimate purpose. In the biblical worldview there is an overarching purpose for the world and for history – the glory of God which includes the enjoyment and fulfillment of the people of God in God. There is an eternal significance to our lives. Seeking to please God is something that will matter forever. Hearing God say, “well done” is the greatest reward because ultimately the greatest joy and satisfaction is being cherished by God and loving him in return.

I said earlier that most people in the world believe that there is more to life than just this life. There is a reason for that. It is that we live in a creation that was created with a purpose, we were created for a purpose that transcends this earthly existence and so the biblical worldview fits with the way most people experience life. We believe that the Bible is true by faith. But that believe is confirmed again and again by the way that human beings experience life. And in connection with the subject of the meaning of life, the Bible holds out to us a life

that is worth living and which is profoundly satisfying by receiving reconciliation with God in Jesus and then by his grace learning more and more to live not for ourselves but for God, by learning more and more not to have our treasure on earth, but rather in heaven. How we live matters, not only in the here and now. It will matter forever.