

## What Does The Bible Say About Meaning and Purpose?

By Barry Cooper

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As he reached his mid-fifties, the poet Philip Larkin described a typical twenty-four-hour period in his life:

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.  
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
Till then I see what's really always there:  
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
Making all thought impossible but how  
And where and when I shall myself die.<sup>1</sup>

For Larkin, life's [meaning](#) and purpose was effectively annihilated by death. For scientist and author Richard Dawkins, death proves there is no purpose in the universe except genetic replication:

During the minute it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive; others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear; others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites; thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease. . . . In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.<sup>2</sup>

How can life ever have meaning, when the full stop always comes too early? One of Shakespeare's tragic heroes puts it like this:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
Signifying nothing.<sup>3</sup>

If in the end life signifies nothing, why bother doing anything?

Thom Yorke, frontman of the band Radiohead, gives a blunt but resounding answer: "It's filling the hole . . . that's all anyone does." Asked by his interviewer what then happens to the hole, Yorke replied, "It's still there."<sup>4</sup>

It's a sobering thought. Everything we do—all the holidays, the conversations, the achievements, falling in love, choosing where to live and who to marry and what to wear and what to eat and how to bring up the children—is an unloved magazine in a doctor's waiting room. It's nothing more than a vacuous distraction until the moment our name is called and we receive the news we've been dreading all along.

Prince or pavement-sleeper, it doesn't matter. We all spend our days trying to fill up the ravenous hole inside us, and then—in a cosmic irony we'd probably enjoy if we weren't so inconveniently dead—we ourselves end up as landfill.

The [Bible](#) surveys this pageant and agrees. If death is the ultimate fact of the universe, this must be our conclusion: "Meaningless! Meaningless... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless... What do people gain from all their labors?"

<sup>1</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 208.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Dawkins, *River Out Of Eden: A Darwinian View Of Life* (London: Phoenix, 1996), 131-32.

<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1337. (It's Macbeth, by the way).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with *New Musical Express* magazine, May 15, 2001.

...No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.”<sup>5</sup>

[Death](#) certainly cures us of the delusion that we are the centre of the universe or have ultimate control over our lives.

But it's still a legitimate question to ask: What should we do with the short time we have? If a spade is for digging and scissors are for cutting, what are human beings for?

## Born To... What?

On the face of it, that isn't an easy question to answer. We seem to be omni-competent. We write sonnets, build skyscrapers, sing songs, run marathons, play musical instruments, tell jokes, make babies—not always in the same weekend, but still. The human race is wildly, prodigiously, embarrassingly gifted.

But is there something that all of us, even as individual human beings, are peculiarly fitted for? Some particular [purpose](#) that all of us were built to fulfill? To put it another way: What were we born to do?

Our answer to this question is very important. Getting it wrong could be catastrophic. If you saw someone using a priceless Stradivarius violin to whack tent pegs into the ground, you'd rightly think it was a tragic waste of a good violin—and one expensive way to put up a tent.

By not recognising the violin's purpose or suggesting that it has no purpose, we stand to lose a very great deal. Valuable things will be decimated. And the world will be denied the joyous sound of something doing what it was made to do.

So then: What are we human beings for? [What is our purpose?](#)

## Image Is Everything

The Bible's answer to that question begins to unfold in its very first chapter, where we read that you and I were created “in God's image”: “God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”<sup>6</sup>

The implications of that statement—you and I are made in God's image—are enormous, and to tease them all out would require much more room than this paper allows.

For one thing, it means that every human being—the tiny human confined to the womb, the elderly human confined to hospice, the disabled human confined to the wheelchair—bears the image of God and therefore has infinite [value](#). The way we treat others matters very much indeed.

But it also means this: You and I were made to “image” God. Our purpose in life is to be a reflection, a mirroring, an image of God himself.

No analogy is perfect, but let me try to illustrate what I mean. In London, where I live, there is a seventeenth-century building called the Banqueting House. Inside, on the ceiling, there is a stunning painting by the Belgian painter Peter Paul Rubens. So beautiful is this painting that it's impossible not to stare up at the artistry, detail, and majesty of it.

But unfortunately, after a few minutes of staring upward, your neck starts to hurt.

So the staff at the Banqueting House came up with a solution. To help people see the painting better, they created special trolleys with mirrors placed on top of them. Now you can move the trolley around, gaze into the mirror, and admire the painting in a way that would otherwise be impossible.<sup>7</sup>

There is something of that in Genesis 1. It tells us that our Creator made us, mirror-like, to image him, to draw attention to him, to display and represent him. We were made to reflect God's staggering beauty and goodness so that the world can enjoy its Creator even more. That is our purpose in life. And when we discover that purpose—like the Stradivarius being played rather than smashed—our hearts truly sing.

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Ecclesiastes 1:2-3, 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, Genesis 1:27. See also Genesis 1:26; 5:1-2, and 9:6.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks are due to my friend Nate Morgan Locke for this illustration.

This is what God means when he says: “Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory.”<sup>8</sup>

Why are we here? To display God’s glory by imaging him.<sup>9</sup>

The constellations in the night sky are stunning. They, too, “declare the glory of God,” as does the rest of creation.<sup>10</sup> But for all their dizzying, distracting beauty, the stars weren’t made in God’s image. Remarkably, God has gifted that privilege to us and us alone.

## An Egocentric God?

At this point, I should address a possible objection. If the ultimate purpose of God’s creation—and especially the ultimate purpose of human beings—is to bring glory to God, doesn’t that imply that God is rather selfish and egocentric?

It may seem that way at first glance. But let me suggest two reasons why this isn’t the case.

First, the God of the Bible reveals something extremely unexpected about himself. He is a [Trinity](#). This is a word that scares and confuses people. But it simply means that he is a “tri-unity”: three distinct persons united in one divine nature.<sup>11</sup>

Each of these persons—Father, Son, and Spirit—is endlessly self-giving to the others. The Father glorifies the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, and the Spirit brings glory to the Son, who in turn glorifies the Father.<sup>12</sup>

There is an endless and joyful giving and receiving of love within the Trinity. And far from being selfish or egocentric, God actually invites those he has created to participate in this matchless joy.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, as the eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards pointed out, seeking one’s own glory is only a problem if the person doing it is not absolutely worthy of glory.<sup>14</sup> It’s light of this, it’s very good news for us that God glorifies himself. In doing so, he is graciously pointing us to the source of all joy.

## The God of All Happiness

We don’t have to sacrifice our pleasure in life in order to image God. On the contrary, we image him best when we enjoy him most. The purpose of your life, then, is to enjoy [God](#).

It’s in our best interests that we do, because all of us want to be as happy as we can be, after all. And it’s in God’s best interests that we do, because nothing glorifies God more than our happiness in him.

The man who says, “My wife makes me happy,” while looking as if he’s being held at gunpoint doesn’t glorify his wife. But the truly happy man does. He joyfully tells others about her beauty, her character, her love. She is evidently the object of his thoughts, his daydreams, his embarrassing (if heartfelt) poetry. He never wants to leave her side, and if he does, he laments her absence. He never looks at other women because he is so satisfied in her. Even those who’ve never met her think, *She must be amazing. Look how happy he is because he’s with her.*

He glorifies her by demonstrating that nothing and no one makes him happier. That is what it means for us to glorify God.

## Turning the Mirror Away

But in reality, as we know, that isn’t how we live. We live as if real happiness is found apart from God, and therefore we don’t glorify him.

We spend our time glorifying something or someone other than God. We can’t help ourselves. Because human beings were made in the image of God, we were made to glorify. So we seek out “lesser glories.”

Think about what we give our thoughts and daydreams to. Think about what our hopes and aspirations are. Career, sex, money, leisure, family. If we’re honest, we glorify lots of things, and we glorify lots of people—including ourselves. But we

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, Isaiah 43:6-7, my italics.

<sup>9</sup> When the Bible speaks of “God’s glory”, it means his unparalleled beauty; his supreme value; the complete “goodness” of his character.

<sup>10</sup> *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Psalm 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 13:14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, John 17:1; John 16:14.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, John 17:20-21.

<sup>14</sup> See Jonathan Edwards, “Dissertation I. Concerning the End for which God Created the World”, in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

don't glorify our Maker, the very one who gave us all the things we love to glorify. As Dr. Tim Keller puts it, when you live like this, you have broken the image of God in yourself.<sup>15</sup>

It's not that these "lesser glories" are bad in themselves. They can be very good in their place. But when we look to them to give us our ultimate sense of purpose, they cannot possibly bear the weight. They never provide the deep satisfaction for which we ache. They let us down, or death intervenes and steals them from us.

That is why we so often experience the terrible absence of meaning and purpose expressed by Philip Larkin, Richard Dawkins, and Thom Yorke. Because we aren't "imaging God" as we were born to do, we look to these lesser glories and start to image them instead. Our souls shrink to the size of the things we've set our hearts on.

The book of Romans puts it like this: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless."<sup>16</sup>

When a mirror is "turned away" from someone, it no longer reflects them. And that is where we find ourselves: turned away from our Maker, estranged from him, deserving his condemnation, unable to enjoy the purpose for which we were made.

So what hope is there?

## The Perfect "Image of God"

As you read the New Testament, you may start to notice something breathtaking. [Jesus Christ](#) is described as being and doing exactly what you and I were intended to be and do. He's described as "the image of God" and "the image of the invisible God."<sup>17</sup> In other words, he perfectly reflects God's character in every way.

In John 17:4, Jesus prays to his Father, "I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do." What was this work that God the Father gave his Son to do? It was to live a life that perfectly imaged God, a life that perfectly glorified him. In other words, Jesus came to do what you and I have failed to do. He perfectly mirrored the complete goodness, grace, justice, mercy, love, and overwhelming beauty of God.

If we were to try to summarize, we could say something like this: In the life of Jesus, we see God himself taking on human flesh and fulfilling the purpose for which all human beings were created. In the death of Jesus, we see him taking the condemnation we deserve for rejecting the purpose for which God made us. And in the resurrection of Jesus, we see that death—the enemy who threatens to destroy all purpose—has been destroyed.

If you want to see a glorious painting, by all means come to the Banqueting House in London. Gaze into one of the mirrors. But if you want to see God, gaze into the face of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup> As he says himself in John 14:9, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." He is the only perfect image of God.

## Turning the Mirror Back

But of course, it's not enough simply to recognise that Jesus imaged God perfectly. If we're to live out our true purpose, we actually need to be transformed so that we become more like Jesus ourselves. As mirrors, we need to be "turned back" so that we can once again reflect our Maker.

And that is exactly what God does for all those who come to him. How do we come to him? Jesus gives us the answer: he tells us to "repent and believe" in him.<sup>19</sup>

"To repent" literally means "to turn back." God's Spirit enables you to turn back toward Jesus so that you can mirror him. Suddenly, you start to "see" the beauty of God in Jesus Christ. You see it in the Bible, and you see it reflected in the words and actions of those who love him.<sup>20</sup> And as you do that, you start to reflect him yourself. God slowly but steadily begins to restore his image in you.<sup>21</sup>

We can't do this from our own strength, any more than a mirror can realign itself. So this isn't about us "turning over a new leaf" or "trying harder from now on."

<sup>15</sup> "Saturday Sermons: In the Image of God," The Biologos Forum, accessed July 16, 2013, <http://biologos.org/blog/saturday-sermons-in-the-image-of-god>.

<sup>16</sup> *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Romans 3:10-12, my italics.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 2 Corinthians 4:6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, Mark 1:15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, Ephesians 3:10-11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, Romans 8:29; see also 2 Corinthians 3:18.

It's about recognising our complete dependence on the one who gives us "life and breath and everything else."<sup>22</sup> It's about asking Jesus to do for us what only he can do. It's about asking for forgiveness and repenting. It's about asking him to send you his Spirit, so that you can live a life that begins to image the beauty of God's character.

And may your heart begin to sing sweetly as it remembers what it was [born to do](#).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, Acts 17:25.