CHAPTER 2: JESUS GIVES YOUR LIFE MEANING AND PURPOSE

The search for the purpose of life has occupied people’s minds for thousands of years—whether rich or poor, scholars or the uneducated. And the question, “What on earth am I here for?” continues to trouble people today. That is why Rick Warren’s book on the purpose of life called “The Purpose Driven Life” reached #1 on the New York Times Best Seller list.1

As people search for purpose in life, they encounter the persistent problem of life’s apparent emptiness. Solomon described this thousands of years ago when he said, “Everything is meaningless … completely meaningless!” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). One Chinese student expressed this sentiment:

Like many young adults, I used to ask myself, what on earth am I here for? To fulfill my parents’ willing? To make a lot of money? To give birth to my child? To enjoy my life this bittersweet journey? I used to ask myself, what is the driving force of my life? The peer pressure? The respect of people? Envy and jealousy? To be honest, I didn’t have a clue.2

Even those whose lives are going well may feel this way. Yu-shan from Taiwan said: “Even though I was such a positive person who had a happy life, sometimes I did feel empty in my mind. And I knew that the emptiness could not be filled by human efforts.”3

Jesus offered an answer to this problem when he said, “I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever be hungry again. Those who believe in me will never thirst” (John 6:35). He says that he is the one who can satisfy your spiritual hunger and thirst, who can fill the emptiness in your life. To understand why and how this is true, let us consider first the problem of life’s emptiness and meaninglessness, and second, how knowing God through Jesus can make your life meaningful.

The Problem of Life’s Emptiness and Meaninglessness

Solomon’s statement on the meaninglessness of life is an introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes, which is a book of philosophy about life. It looks at life from the perspective of natural man without God, and shows us that without God everything is meaningless. What he discovered is that, while there may be some temporary or superficial meaning in life without God, at the deepest level of one’s being there is still an emptiness which cannot be filled without God.

Most people try to find satisfaction and meaning in life either by living for self or by trying to improve society. While the second approach is more noble than the first, both ways lead to emptiness and disappointment if God is not in your life.

The Emptiness of Living for Self

The way that most people try to find a meaningful and happy life is by living for self. People live for self in a variety of ways, but the result is the same—emptiness.

Through Money

Some live for self by seeking money, thinking that this will make their lives full and happy. Those from economically advanced countries tend to be very materialistic, and their lives focus around money and the things money can buy. But hose from developing economic countries are often no less focused on money, striving hard to catch up and overtake these other countries to enjoy the benefits of a higher living standard. For most graduates, the decision about where to go is largely an economically driven decision—where will they have the best opportunity to make money and enjoy a high living standard?

What we fail to realize when accumulating money becomes the purpose of our lives is that money does not guarantee happiness, nor does it provide a satisfying purpose for life. The Bible tells us in the book of Ecclesiastes four reasons why money is meaningless. First, it never satisfies: “Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness!” (Eccl. 5:10). If someone has a million dollars, he wants two million. If he has one expensive luxury car, he wants another. Those who love money are never satisfied by what they have—they always want more.

Second, money is meaningless because it provides no benefit to the soul: “As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them?” (Eccl. 5:11, NIV). The rich man can look at all the things he has and admire them, but it doesn’t satisfy the emptiness and longing in his heart. In fact, many of the richest people in the world are the most miserable.

Third, money is meaningless because it increases your worries: “People who work hard sleep well, whether they eat little or much. But the rich seldom get a good night’s sleep” (Eccl. 5:12). The more money and things you have, the more you have to worry about. If you have several expensive cars, you have to worry about how to maintain them, or that you will get into an accident and destroy them. If you have a big house and yard, you have to worry about how to maintain it to keep it clean and attractive. If you have lots of money in investments, you worry that you will lose it if the stock market does poorly. The more you have, the more you have to worry about. So instead of making you happy, your money and possessions may actually increase your worries and troubles.

Fourth, money is meaningless because you can quickly lose it and ultimately you must leave it behind when you die: “We all come to the end of our lives as naked and empty-handed as on the day we were born. We can’t take our riches with us” (Eccl. 5:15). During times of economic crisis, many rich people watch helplessly as their fortunes evaporate before their eyes. And when you die, you can’t take your money with you. Why focus your whole life on what is only temporary and must be left behind?

Money is not evil—it can contribute towards a comfortable and happy life, and it can enable you to help others. But money alone is not enough to make your life meaningful and happy. You could be the richest person in the world and still feel empty and miserable, because money doesn’t satisfy, it provides no benefit to the soul, it leads to greater worry, and it must be left behind.

Through Pleasure

Some seek for satisfaction in life by seeking pleasure, thinking this will make them happy and fulfilled. Most modern societies provide many opportunities to seek pleasure, such as getting drunk or high on drugs, viewing pornography, or becoming sexually involved in relationships before or outside of marriage. It is tempting to think that seeking pleasure in these ways will lead to an exciting and satisfying life. But this is not true, for several reasons.

First, pleasure is only temporary. The Bible says that there is pleasure in sin for a short time (Hebrews 11:25). But it is only for a *short time*. Pleasure does nothing to give permanent satisfaction to your life. When you are doing a particular thing, you feel pleasure, but when that activity is over, you feel bored and empty again.

Second, pleasure is only superficial. Solomon says in the book of Ecclesiastes:

I said to myself, “Come on, let’s try pleasure. Let’s look for the ‘good things’ in life.” But I found that this too was meaningless. So I said, “Laughter is silly. What good does it do to seek pleasure?” (Ecclesiastes 2:1-2).

There is nothing wrong with having fun or laughing (as long as it is clean and wholesome)—in fact, we need some fun and laughter on occasion to help us relax so that later we can continue with renewed energy the more serious responsibilities of life. But if all we live for is pleasure, then that is meaningless. It makes us feel good in a superficial way, but does nothing to solve the underlying, deep emptiness of the soul.

Third, excessive or sinful pleasure may lead to guilt. If you spend too much time just having fun, you may feel guilty because you are neglecting more serious responsibilities (like studying or working). If your way of having fun is sinful, such as getting drunk or having sex outside of marriage, then you will also likely feel guilty.

Fourth, sinful pleasure can lead to destructive consequences. Drinking too much can negatively impact your health and can also interfere with having a happy family life or being successful in your work. The Bible says:

Don’t gaze at the wine, seeing how red it is, how it sparkles in the cup, how smoothly it goes down. For in the end it bites like a poisonous snake; it stings like a viper. (Proverbs 23:31-32).

Sexual sin can lead to venereal disease or HIV / aids, and to broken homes and hearts. The Bible warns:

For the lips of an immoral woman are as sweet as honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil. But in the end she is as bitter as poison, as dangerous as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave (Proverbs 5:3-5).

The sinful pleasures that seem attractive can destroy your life.

Though many walk in the path of pleasure, it is not the way to a truly satisfying or meaningful life. Pleasure is only temporary and superficial, and if it is sinful pleasure it will also lead to guilt and to destructive consequences in your life.

Through Education

Education is important in all cultures and pre-eminently so in some. Many students seek self-advancement through education, thinking that this makes their lives meaningful. They pour all their efforts into education, seeking to succeed by getting the highest grades and earning the highest degrees from the best schools. To achieve this goal, they have sacrificed from an early age, forfeiting the pleasures of childhood by studying late every night and through the weekends. The cultural and family pressure to succeed can be enormous, and the sacrifice continues into adult life. Many leave spouse and child behind to pursue the best educational opportunities in another country.

The dedication and sacrifice are admirable, but we must stop to ask why. For what purpose? To get the best grades? But why? So you can graduate with a Masters or Ph.D. from a respected school? But why? So you can get a good job? But why? So you can earn the respect of others or make a lot of money? But still, why? Once you’ve reached your final goal, then what? If all you have to live for is self, there is still an emptiness, a meaninglessness in your life. Without some kind of life philosophy or religion, life has no meaning. And even a philosophy or religion may leave you empty if it takes you down a path which does not lead to truth, but only to confusion.

Many college students are focused on their studies with the goal of getting a good job when they finish. Such was the case for Junwei and his wife from China. But notice how he felt sometime after entering the working world:

When we were students, we did not notice the spiritual emptiness because our time was occupied by heavy course work and friendship. But after we stepped into society, we faced the high pressure of work and impassive relationships between colleagues. Although we both did well, we still felt tired of this kind life. Every day after work, we did not know what to do. Having dinner with friends would bring us a short time of happiness, but later we felt more bored. Without any faith, we were like strollers in the street at midnight. We experienced the endless spiritual emptiness. Even we began to doubt the purpose of living.4

Some may reply that the fulfillment in education comes, not in seeing education as a means to an end—like getting a good job or making money, but from the intrinsic value of gaining knowledge. But consider what King Solomon, considered by many to be the wisest man who ever lived, said:

I said to myself, “Look, I am wiser than any of the kings who ruled in Jerusalem before me. I have greater knowledge and wisdom than any of them.” So I set out to learn everything from wisdom to madness and folly. But I learned firsthand that pursuing all this is like chasing the wind. The greater my wisdom, the greater my grief. To increase knowledge only increases sorrow (Ecclesiastes 1:16-18).

With more knowledge comes greater understanding of life’s complexities, sufferings, and unresolved problems. A student might think that once he attains a Ph.D. he will know everything there is to know in his or her field. But the reality is that he will learn enough to realize how many unresolved questions are still to be answered.

Living for self does not lead to a meaningful and satisfying life, whether it is through money, pleasure, education, or anything else. There is an emptiness in the heart of man and woman that cannot be filled just by living for self. The soul of man has a spiritual vacuum that can only be filled by God.

The Futility of Trying to Improve Society

Some people, although they do not know God, realize that there is more to life than living for self. They want to improve society and help people live a better life. For them, education or wealth are not just a means to self advancement, but to improving society. This is a more noble goal than just living for self, and those who pursue it may find some degree of meaning and satisfaction in their lives. But often people who start out very idealistic, thinking they can do great things to change society, later become disappointed when they realize how little they can actually do. They come to realize that their efforts to improve society have had little impact.

Charles Colson was one man who found this to be true. Colson was one of President Richard Nixon’s cabinet members. He says:

I grew up believing that powerful people shaped history—ideological, determined, and driven, I set out to make my mark on history by influencing the most powerful institution I could, the presidency of the United States. Yet, four years after I reached the office next to the president, I was frustrated and disillusioned. I thought of the 14 hour days; the tense, all night meetings; the agonizing debates over public policy—and yet I couldn’t think of a single person whose life I had touched for the better.5

Of course, this is not always the case. Some people, although they do not follow God, may in fact improve life for their family or society in a significant way. By working hard they may provide for their family and make possible a good education for their children. Through a scientific discovery they may help to improve people’s lives, or by teaching they may help to prepare students for a successful career, or by holding a position in government they may help make improvements in society.

But from God’s perspective, the ultimate significance of these contributions may look quite different. You may provide your children a good life and education, but for what—so they can get a good job and make lots of money, which will leave them, like you, feeling empty and unfulfilled? You may make a scientific discovery to improve people’s lives, but for what—so that through medical advancement their empty lives can be extended, or through technological advancement they can have more leisure time to fill with meaningless pleasures? By teaching you may prepare your students for a successful career, but for what—so they can gain material wealth and status in society while remaining spiritually poor and without acceptable status before God? Perhaps a president or king can help make his country more powerful, but for what? For even the most powerful nation on earth is like a drop in a bucket to God (Isaiah 40:15).

One who tries to improve society without God will have a life of only limited significance because he is unable to help people with their greatest need of all—the need to know God, who can fill the emptiness in their lives. Certainly, it is more meaningful to improve the lives of others, even in only physical, material, or economic ways, than to live only for yourself. But from the perspective of God and eternity, living your life without God has only limited significance and meaning. It is impossible to really change society without changing people’s hearts, and only God can do that. In the final evaluation, trying to improve society without God is largely an exercise in futility, and is still “meaningless, meaningless, utterly meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 1:2, NIV).

In The Purpose Driven Life Rick Warren shares this story:

Andrei Bitov, a Russian novelist, grew up under an atheistic Communist regime. But God got his attention one dreary day. He recalls, “In my twenty-seventh year, while riding the metro in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) I was overcome with a despair so great that life seemed to stop at once, preempting the future entirely, let alone any meaning. Suddenly, all by itself, a phrase appeared: *Without God life makes no sense*. Repeating it in astonishment, I rode the phrase up like a moving staircase, got out of the metro and walked into God’s light.”6

Having considered the darkness of life’s meaninglessness and emptiness, let us now “move into God’s light,” considering how knowing God through Christ can make your life meaningful.

Finding Meaning in Life By Knowing God Through Christ

The Cause of Life’s Meaninglessness

The ultimate cause of life’s meaninglessness is separation from one’s Creator. The Bible says that God created man in his image (Genesis 1:26-27)—that is, God created man (and woman) similar enough to himself, with rational reasoning ability and with an eternal spirit, that man can know God and have a relationship with God. Human beings alone, of all God’s earthly creatures, have this ability to know God. It should follow, then, that their greatest fulfillment and satisfaction in life comes through experiencing and enjoying a relationship with God. So when man is separated from God his Creator, he feels a kind of spiritual emptiness in his life. Nothing else—money, education, power, pleasure, can fill that emptiness. Only God can.

If separation from God is the cause of life’s emptiness, then we should ask, “What is the cause of man’s separation from God?” The answer is sin. Man disobeys God, rebelling against him and choosing to go his own way, as the Bible says, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” (Isaiah 53:6, NIV). “It’s your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore” (Isaiah 59:2). Our sins separate us from God, and because we are separated from God, our life is meaningless, as described later in the same chapter: “We grope like the blind along a wall, feeling our way like people without eyes” (Isaiah 59:10).

The Solution to Life’s Meaninglessness

The solution to life’s meaninglessness, then, requires a solution to the problem of sin. God has provided a solution by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sin. The Bible says that “the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin” (1 John 1:7b). When Jesus died on the cross and shed his blood, he was being punished as a substitute for us. We should be punished by God for our sin, but “God showed his love for us in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, KJV). Our sin was placed on Jesus and he was punished for us, as the Bible says: “The Lord has laid on him the sins of us all” (Isaiah 53:6b).

Because Jesus takes away the guilt of our sin, he can restore us to a right relationship with God. The Bible says:

For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and people. He is the man Christ Jesus. He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone” (1 Timothy 2:5-6a).

Jesus is the mediator between God and sinners—the one who can bring God and people back together again, because he is the one who, by dying for us, paid the price to set us free from our sin.

Through believing in Jesus as your Savior, the guilt of your sins is washed away and you are restored to a right relationship with God. By coming to know God and through experiencing his love, the emptiness in your heart is then filled and you come to experience a meaningful life.

How Knowing God Makes Life Meaningful

It has been stated that coming to know God through Christ will make your life meaningful. But in what way will your life be meaningful?

Satisfaction

First, knowing God will bring meaning by giving your life satisfaction. That is, you will no longer feel that your life is empty, but you will feel satisfied, or spiritually full. You will have a deep feeling of true happiness and contentment. There are several aspects of this satisfaction which Jesus makes available to us.

One aspect of this satisfaction is *fulfillment*—that is, the feeling that your life is no longer empty but full and worthwhile. Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10, NIV). He also said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6, NIV). When you feel the emptiness in your heart and desire that it be replaced with something better, then you are experiencing spiritual hunger. If this spiritual hunger causes you to sincerely seek God, then you will be blessed, or truly happy, because you will find God, for God says, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13, NIV). By finding God your emptiness will be filled and your hunger will be satisfied. Jesus speaks again about how he can satisfy your spiritual hunger when he says:

I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever be hungry again. Those who believe in me will never thirst (John 6:35).

Jesus can satisfy your spiritual hunger and thirst. He can fill your spiritual emptiness so that you never need to feel spiritually empty again.

Jesus also gives us a satisfying life because he offers us *peace.* Jesus says:

I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn’t like the peace the world gives. So don’t be troubled or afraid (John 14:27).

Jesus’ peace gives us a deep feeling of contentment and quietness in our souls, regardless of the circumstances. Even when we would normally be troubled and afraid, we can experience peace in our hearts.

Increased peace is one of the most common experiences reported by those who have come to know Christ. One Chinese student said: “I feel peaceful and happy because I have God in my life.”7 Another Chinese student, quoted earlier about the emptiness he felt in his life, reported concerning the experience of he and his wife:

After this considerable decision [the decision to accept Christ], we felt we got a more peaceful life than before. In these years, we worried about everything, our parents’ health, my baby Daniel, my study and my future career. All these things drove us mad, we always felt unhappy, even worse than we were in China. But now we believe in Jesus, and hand all of them to Jesus, we do according to his instruction, we feel more release.8

Yu-shan, also quoted earlier about the emptiness in her life, wrote at some length about how her pursuit for peace was satisfied in Christ:

Once my Bible study leader talked about her personal experience of having Jesus in her life. She said, “The biggest difference after becoming a Christian is that I have peace of mind.” Her words just like stones knocked on me. “Peace of mind”—what does that mean in terms of becoming a Christian? I didn’t understand at that point, but I definitely was sure that was what I needed to have and was hungry for …. After I started my journey of seeking God’s word of peace, I have not only peace but also joy in my mind. In John 14:27 Jesus said, “I leave you peace. It is my own peace I give you, I give you peace in a different way than the world does. So don’t be troubled. Don’t be afraid.” What a privilege to have God’s blessings! The inner calm that God planted in me really helps me to find balance in life and have harmony in my mind.9

Another word to express the idea of peace is *rest*. Jesus says, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). When we feel weary and burdened with the troubles of life, Jesus can give us rest and peace in our souls.

Another aspect of the satisfying life Jesus offers us is *joy*. Jesus says, “I have told you this so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!” (John 15:11). The joy Jesus gives us is a deep and long-lasting joy that does not depend on the circumstances. Usually we feel happy when something goes well and unhappy when something goes badly. But the joy Jesus gives is a deep and true happiness that we can feel even when things do not go well. And this joy gives us strength to keep on going even when we would otherwise want to give up, as the Bible says, “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

A former Japanese student in Buffalo named Kota used to talk about how before he came to know Christ he had to drink almost every day to forget about the emptiness in his heart. But after he started following Jesus, he no longer needed to drink, because his heart was filled with joy. And you could see the joy in his face. How about you? Is your heart filled with joy?

If you will follow Jesus, he offers you a satisfying life—a life of fulfillment, peace, rest, and joy. Chen from China shares the difference it made in her life after she accepted Christ:

My appearance didn’t change but my heart changed. Now in my heart, God is number one. He loves me and saved me. I start to understand people around me more and care about them more. My heart is full of more love. And I feel peaceful and happy because I have God in my life.10

How about you? Do you feel satisfied with your life? Do you feel peace and joy within your heart? Or do you feel that your life is empty and meaningless? The Bible says: “Let the thirsty ones come—anyone who wants to. Let them come and drink the water of life without charge” (Revelation 22:17). Jesus says, “Come to me … and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Come to Jesus, accepting him as your Savior and inviting him to take control of your life, and he will replace your emptiness with satisfaction.

Significance

A second aspect of a meaningful life is significance. A meaningful life should be both satisfying and significant. Some people feel satisfied with their lives, but actually their lives are meaningless because they are not significant. That is, their lives do not accomplish anything important—they do not in any way contribute to a better world or to a better life for anybody.

Without God our lives do not have much significance, at least not from the perspective of God and eternity. But by following Jesus, our lives can be truly significant, making a great impact for good in the lives of others, not only for this life, but forever. Let us consider three aspects of living a truly significant life.

First, living a significant life means that you *invest your life.* Life should not be simply spent, but invested. When you spend time, it is gone and there is no benefit for the future. But when you invest your time there is a future return. If your life is to be truly significant, then your lifetime should not just be spent and wasted on momentary pleasures, but it should be invested for eternity. Jesus says, “Store your treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:20). By living his life for God, the follower of Christ stores up treasure in heaven that will last forever. We need to remember, as Rick Warren states in his book, that life is a temporary assignment. To make the most of life, he says, we must remember two things: first, compared with eternity, life is extremely brief. Second, earth is only a temporary residence.11 The wise person realizes this and sees his life as an investment into eternity. To invest his life in eternity, the follower of Christ should invest his life in the three things that are eternal—God, God’s Word (the Bible), and the souls of men. By getting to know God, by learning and obeying God’s Word, and by helping others to find God and gain eternal life, the believer is investing his life for eternity, and so makes his life significant.

Living a significant life not only involves investing your life, but investing it *in the service of God.* The follower of Jesus gives up selfish control of his or her life in order to be a servant of God. But the paradox is that as he gives up his life, or loses it for God, he in fact finds greater satisfaction and significance in life than was possible by keeping his life for himself. Jesus says, “If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will find true life” (Mark 8:35). That is, whoever tries to live only for himself will discover that his life is lost, or meaningless, but whoever gives his life to serve Christ and to advance his message will save his life, finding both satisfaction and significance in his present life and eternal life in heaven.

To live a significant life, the Jesus follower not only invests his life in the service of is or herH

God, but he does it *for the benefit of others.* Jesus instructs his followers to love their neighbors as themselves (Matthew 22:39), which means that they will be as concerned about helping others and meeting their needs as they are about having their own needs met. Your life becomes significant, not by living for yourself, but by living for the benefit of others. Living your life for others also makes your life more satisfying and happy. Most people seek happiness by putting themselves first. But the true secret of happiness is to put others before yourself (and God first of all). There is joy in serving others.

The follower of Christ tries to help others in a variety of ways—physically, by offering food, clothing, medical care, or a place to stay; financially, by giving or loaning money to help those in need; socially, by offering friendship and acceptance; emotionally, by offering love and a listening ear. He does all this because he is following Jesus’ teaching and example about loving others as he loves himself. But the greatest way he can help others is spiritually, by helping them to know God and find eternal life, for this impacts them not only for this life, but for eternity.

By following Jesus, you discover that you were made for a mission.12 This mission is a significant work that God has for you to do, and it always involves investing your life in the service of God for the benefit of others. Zhang Rumin (Ph.D. in microbiology) testifies that before he knew Jesus he was motivated by a selfish desire to rise to the top in his field of science. But he says concerning his purpose in life after becoming a follower of Christ:

Our purpose in life is not to achieve earthly fame or accumulate material fortune but to love God and spread the same Good News that has given us the true meaning of life. We are walking unswervingly on the path of righteousness and shall not exchange our deep-rooted joy and peace for anything else.13

Charles Colson, former aide to President Nixon who was quoted earlier, later became a follower of Christ when he was in prison because of his role in the Watergate scandal. Then he began to see what it really means to live a significant life. He says:

It was in prison that I learned that people’s lives are influenced most often not by grand pronouncements and programs of political leaders, but by ordinary people … I saw that the world’s darkness is illuminated not by grand spotlights, but by a thousand points of light flickering in the night; individual Christians living out Christ’s love among those in need.14

How about you? Is your life truly significant, or does God look down from heaven and shake his head because you are like a man who digs holes and fills them up again, thinking with a short-term perspective that he is doing something worthwhile, while in fact he is accomplishing nothing? Why not become a follower of Jesus and start living for him? He can give you a truly meaningful life, which is both satisfying and significant.