

**January 1, 2012**

# **What is the Meaning of Life?**

## **Genesis 2:4-24**

### *1. Is the glass half full or half empty?*

When you got up this morning was it great to get up and get going – or would you really have rather stayed in bed ...

When you look at the world around you, what is your attitude?

What do you think Adam's attitude was as the events of Genesis 2 unfold?

How do you like at life? Why?

### *2. Is your story mostly written, or just beginning?*

The story could end quite nicely right there, couldn't it? But it doesn't ... In fact, it is only just beginning ...

If you were to think of your life as a book, where would you be? Why do you think so?

I want to suggest that none of us are anywhere near the end – our story is just beginning ...

This may seem like an odd Scripture to read right after Christmas. But it reminds us of the great world God created in the beginning. Jesus came to begin the process of restoring Creation to what to what it was meant to be. Through His life, death and resurrection He taught us about the meaning of life, about how we should live. And His death drew upon Himself all the sin, evil, and darkness of the world, so that the process of restoring God's creation might begin ...

Scripture tells us we live in an age with two worlds side by side: one, this visible world, is so scarred and troubled it is slowly ticking down, like some great machine, exhausted and plagued by crippling aches and pains, the old cogs and pistons are wearing down and seizing up ... slowly, but relentlessly and inevitably, our world is wearing out. But here is the miracle, a whole new world, a perfect world, with no war, no pain, no death, has begun and, as the world we see winds down, this new world is just winding up ...

The last words of Edward the Confessor, an early King of England reportedly were: *"Don't cry for me. I shall not die. And as I leave the land of the dying I trust to see the blessings*

*of the Lord in the land of the living."* We call this world the "land of the living" but if you think about in eternal terms, you could call it "*the land of the dying.*" That's not to be discouraging or disparage of life here and now! But it is to be realistic about what is coming.

In the face of his wife's death, C.S. Lewis reflects, "*Why am I so afraid? I never knew love could hurt so much! I love you and all I want is to love you. Around every door I hear your voice say to me, 'This is only the land of shadows. Real life hasn't begun yet!'*"

The last words of Lewis' famous series about Narnia are these, spoken by Aslan, a lion (who represents Jesus): "*There was a real railway accident,'* said Aslan softly. *'Your father and mother and all of you are - as you used to call it in the Shadowlands - dead. The (school) term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.'* And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." In a very real way, "tomorrow never dies!" It's good to remember that as we begin a new year ...

### ***3. What is the meaning of life?***

"*What is the first commandment in the Bible?*" When I taught theology and geography at Taylor University College in Edmonton, I would ask my students that question. I would get answers like, "*Go into the world and make disciples ...*", "*You shall not kill,*" "*Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God,*" "*Do not lie*" ... all great commands, but not the first one. The first one was actually in Genesis 1:28: "*Be fruitful and multiply ...*" This was a risky point to make with first year college students!

However the second command, also in Genesis 1:28, was what I wanted them to notice: "*Fill the earth and govern it*": The word "govern" or "subdue" implies agriculture - plowing, harvesting, etc. - making the earth fruitful. "*Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.*" From the very beginning people - you and I - have a purpose: to care for God's creation. The word "reign" or "rule" recognizes that we are God's ambassadors, charged with oversight and care of creation on His behalf. God is the great King - but He gives us the task of being his stewards/regents/governors of His Kingdom. Wow!

In Genesis 2, God mentors Adam in this governance as He gives him authority to name each of His creatures (19-20). God is grooming Adam to be His governor. And Adam's - our - mandate is: "*to tend and watch over it (God's creation)*" (2:15).

From the very beginning, people - you and I - were created for a relationship with God, with

one another, and with God's creation in perfect harmony. Genesis 2 gives us a glimpse of how life was meant to be lived (and how it will be lived again, in heaven). This is part of our identity as those created in the image of God.

From the very beginning, people had a purpose: to enjoy and worship God, to live in relationship with one another, and to tend and care for/govern and reign over His world. This is part of our identity as those created in the image of God, too. We do this as God does - in love, with compassion, with self-sacrifice, in the best interests of others ... A perfect ruler - like God - is not interested in self-aggrandizement or become wealthy at the expense of his subjects. He is consumed with a passion to see the kingdom flourish, all citizens be blessed with safety and sufficiency, justice and peace be maintained, and mercy and compassion reign. Godly kings were especially charged with care of the weak and powerless, and to set things right so that all might flourish (Psalm 72; Proverbs 31:8-9). A perfect ruler will give himself completely to his kingdom (God, of course, will do that as Jesus gives His life for us!).

This command to humanity - us - to tend and watch over / to govern or rule as God's representatives - has never been rescinded. It still is in effect. It applies to you and me.

God's mission or purpose was to create a universe in perfect harmony with Himself. It was to be a place where people and creation worked together in perfect "*shalom*" - a Hebrew word commonly translated "*peace*," but whose basic meaning is "*completion*," "*wholeness*," "*harmony*," or "*fulfillment*." More than just an absence of conflict, *shalom* implies actively creating harmonious relationships and perfect wholeness. And the world is to be a place where people and God relate perfectly and without hindrance, too.

As God's deputies, our mission is to carry on this task of creating *shalom*. That's why we share our faith in Jesus (only He can give us peace with God and with others). That's why we care for those who suffer and need compassion. And that's why (yes!) we should be concerned about God's creation (our environment). This is what we're about as a church, too - "*As a Christ-centered community, our mission is to know Christ and make Him known.*" As we celebrate Jesus' birth, we also celebrate that we are re-called to be His people ...

#### *4. How can I get this point across?!?!?*

This is so important, but how do we get the message across?

Perhaps we can think of it in terms of Jesus words, "*I am the resurrection and the life*" (John 11:25). We grasp the "resurrection" part - sort of - but what about the "life" part? Note that Jesus does NOT say, "I *am* the resurrection; I *will be* the life" (future tense). He DOES say, I *am* the life (present tense)!

We usually see resurrection only in life-after-death terms. So we can feel life here on Earth becomes meaningless ... what's important is heaven. This statement ("*I am the*

*resurrection and the life* ^) belongs nicely at funerals, but otherwise doesn't impact our lives. But that misses Jesus' point!

Resurrection happens at two levels. One is a physical resurrection - it happens one-day, someday. The other resurrection is spiritual. It happens the instant we welcome Jesus as our Saviour. What Jesus is saying at the spiritual level is that *"Even if you feel dead in sin; even if you feel like you have lost all that makes life worth the living ... I can make you alive again."* This is true in life after life throughout history. When God comes into a life, something new is born! That's why John 3 uses the image of a second birth. A spiritual life is born where once there was nothing at all!

Each of us who has accepted Jesus as our Saviour has God's Holy Spirit within us. But we can choose to allow Him to work within us - giving us God's joy, peace, hope, and love - encouraging us in our relationships and seeking justice in the world - or not! God's will for us is that power of the resurrection be in us, giving us new life (Philippians 3:10, Ephesians 1:15-23). But it is very possible to be saved by Jesus, and still be very miserable! Will we allow that power to move in us ... ?

Tony Campolo argues that the number one problem among North Americans is not so much that we are evil, but that we're dead! He talks of getting on an express elevator in a New York skyscraper with a bunch of "dead" people (no one would talk!). He turned to face the other people and said, *"We'll be traveling together for quite a while, so why don't we sing?"* And the people were so intimidated, they sang! His point is, most of us are the "living dead"; we go through the motions of existence, but there's no passion, no purpose, no meaning. Instead, he argues, we need to be the "living" ...those who know that life is so much more, because we live it day-by-day with Jesus, and those who have a living hope for the future!

When Jesus says, *"I am the resurrection and the life,"* He is inviting you to be part of a Great Story that goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before!

Christmas and New Years gives us an opportunity to look again at Jesus. What's it all about? Tom Wright observes, *"The longer you look at Jesus, the more you will want to serve Him in His world. That is, of course, if it's the real Jesus you're looking at. Plenty of people in the church and outside have made up a 'Jesus' for themselves that makes few real demands on them. He makes them feel happy from time to time but doesn't challenge them, doesn't suggest they get up and do something about the plight of the world. Which is, of course, what the real Jesus had an uncomfortable habit of doing."* (Following Jesus, p. ix) Is the glass half full or half empty? Is your story winding down or winding up? Are you open to what the Spirit is calling you to in 2012?