

Dear God, what's the point?

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Date: 01 December 2019

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[0 : 00] when we ask, how can I stay healthy? In a New Straight Times column from a couple of years ago, the columnist Rajan Devadesan, after reflecting on the life of his late mother, wrote this, it's on the screen.

Like fictional Vulcans, he's a Star Trek fan, we real humans crave to live long and prosper. Living long involves our longevity goals.

Prospering, the way I see it, is to live meaningfully and deeply. Like you, my hope is to live long and deep. And therefore, he goes on to say, allocating some of our money to raise our odds of not dying prematurely is good sense.

We should spend some money on health insurance, regular medical checks, appropriate vitamins, minerals and supplements, healthy food, a car with great brakes and safe airbags, and exercise equipment and facilities that must be used to be of use.

All that should, statistically speaking, extend our lives. And my guess is that most, if not all of us, would agree with his words. After all, if you were to investigate how much time we spend talking about which food is the most healthy, and which exercise regime is the best, and what sort of unhealthy activities we should avoid, it would soon become obvious that this is actually one of the major preoccupations of our lives.

[1 : 29] How can I prolong my life? But I wonder, how many of us spend time asking and reflecting on another question?

What's the point? What's the point of life? What's the point of my life? Let's say that I've got a good diet, I'm taking the right supplements, I've got a great personal trainer, and I've just added a good 10 years to my life.

But what's the point of that? What's the point of existing, say, 80 instead of 70 years on this earth? Have we thought deeply about this?

It's quite interesting, isn't it, that we likely devote more energy to thinking about extending our lives rather than thinking about the point of our lives.

And our culture doesn't encourage us to think about this too much. I still remember years ago when one of my friends was asking precisely these questions.

[2 : 37] What's the meaning of life? What's the point? Why do we exist? And then another one of my friends shot him down. Ayah, why you waste your time so much working your brain so hard and think so deep, deep about these kind of questions?

Afterwards, you might go crazy, you know. Don't be so kanjong lah, just enjoy your life. Malaysian society, I think, doesn't encourage us to reflect deeply on the point.

But the first thing I want to make clear this morning is what an important question that is. Now think about it this way. Just imagine you move to Australia.

They love the game of cricket there. But you have absolutely no idea what cricket is. And you're thrown into a game of cricket, but you have no idea what the objective of the game is.

You have no idea what's the point you're aiming for. And you have no idea about any of the rules. You don't know how it begins, how it ends, what is the bet for, where and when you're supposed to run.

[3 : 47] And there is no way for you to participate in that game in any meaningful way. And in fact, if you were thrown into the game without knowing the point, what would you feel?

You'll feel confused. You don't know what you should be doing and how to achieve your goal. You'll feel dissatisfied. You know that there's something for you to do, something you should be working towards, but you have no idea what it is.

And so you'll feel frustrated. You might even feel alienated. You don't feel like you belong to the world of cricket and maybe Australia at all. But isn't it strange that when it comes to the game of life, many of us think that we can engage it in a meaningful way without having answers to the big questions?

Somehow, so many people believe that we can somehow sort our lives out even if we haven't really thought about what's the point of it all. And we choose to postpone thinking about it or bury it altogether.

But it's such a crucial question. After all, what we think the point of life is will fundamentally change how we live life.

[5 : 09] Now, we know this on a small scale. If the point of finding a boyfriend or girlfriend is to find a good life partner, then you will go looking for someone whom you can spend the rest of your life with.

But if you think the point of dating is simply to find a cute companion to go with you to the movies, then you will do it very differently. What you think the point is will fundamentally change how you approach life.

And if you've never figured out the point, then it's no surprise that you'll sometimes feel confused or dissatisfied or even alienated. So that's the first thing I want to establish.

I hope we see why it's important to try to answer this question rather than sweep it under the carpet. But okay, you say, okay, okay, I know.

I can see why we need to ask this. But let's get to the actual question itself. What is the point? And how should I go looking for it? Well, let me draw on the Christian philosopher Ravi Zacharias to help us.

[6 : 19] Meaning, he suggests, is made up of four related components. There must be a sense of wonder, a knowledge of the truth, an experience of love, and finally, security.

When we have all four, he suggests we have arrived at meaning. We have arrived at the point.

Now, that sounds reasonable. But how should we go looking for these things?

Well, how do enlightened 21st century people normally go looking for answers? They turn to science. And what is the scientific method all about?

It's all about observation. Why don't we look at the world and record the data? Why don't we see what we can find? And then, after analyzing our findings, reach a conclusion.

Again, sounds reasonable, doesn't it? Well, that's interesting. Because about 2,500 years ago, there lived another wise man, a teacher with a capital T.

[7 : 31] And that's exactly what he decided to do. Observe, analyze, conclude. Just like scientifically-minded 21st century people.

And he's written a book that we find in the Bible called Ecclesiastes. And like any good scientist, he has a hypothesis. He has a thesis statement.

What is it? Well, if you don't have a Bible open in front of you now and you want a Bible, you can put up your hand, the ushers will come to you if you don't want to have a Bible. But if you do, let me encourage you to open it to the book of Ecclesiastes.

You can find it in the table of contents after the Psalms and Proverbs. And then you read chapter 1, verse 2 with me. And here's his thesis. It's meaningless.

Meaningless. Meaningless, says the teacher. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. Now, does that surprise you?

[8 : 36] Perhaps you are expecting to open the Bible to find a philosophy of life along the lines of be true to who you are or maybe live life with the greatest passion or learn to forgive and embrace unconditional love.

And isn't the point of this talk to discover the point? But the teacher, he takes our expectations, he crumples them, and then he throws them into the nearest rubbish bin.

And then he declares to you and me, let me give it to you straight. The point is, there is no point. That's reality.

Now, why might the teacher reach such a conclusion? Well, this is what the teacher has observed. Life is short. Now, Ecclesiastes is written in a language called Ancient Hebrew.

And that word meaningless that you see on that page or on the screen, is actually quite hard to translate into English. It's the word hebel. And actually, it literally means something like breath, vapour, mist, a path of wind.

[9 : 53] And so when the teacher is saying everything is hebel, he means everything is like a mere breath.

Here for a few seconds and then gone. if you've ever been to a cold country and you exhale when you're outside, you can see your breath, can't you?

You can see the water vapour forming. But you'll only see it for a few seconds and then it's gone.

And that's what the teacher says our lives are like breath, vapour, hebel.

and he's right, is he not. Life is short. In my mind, September 11 didn't feel so long ago, but actually everyone who has started college this year has no first-hand memory of it.

For the members of our congregation who remember me from Sunday school, did you know that I'm turning 35 this month? Did that feel quick to you? Football fans, did you know that it's 20 years since Manchester United beat Bayern Munich in the Champions League final?

[11 : 03] Where did all those years in between go? Well, as another part of the Bible says, everyone is but a breath and it's that same word hebel again, even those who seem secure.

Life is short. And that's what the teacher observes. But he takes it one step further. As a result, he says, it doesn't really have any real meaning.

That's why the English Bibles we have translated as meaningless. And he says, I can prove it. Just observe the world. Here's the scientific method in action.

Life is really one big merry-go-round. It's an endless cycle of repetition without any progress whatsoever. Now, of course, there is progress in the sense that we make technological and medical advances.

But what the teacher means is that there is no progress in terms of the basic pattern of life. We come into this world, we work, and then we die.

[12 : 14] The faces change, the names change, the circumstances and the methods and the politics change. change. But the basic pattern doesn't.

Don't believe me, he says. Well, let's examine nature, verses 5 to 7. The sun rises and the sun sets and hurries back to where it rises.

The wind blows to the south and turns to the north. Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full to the place the streams come from.

There, they return again. So the sun goes up and then down and then it goes up and then down.

And so the sun seems to be constantly moving. But actually, the pattern is the same.

Same with the wind. The wind seems like it's free as it blows here and there. But in reality, it's just going round and round.

[13 : 18] Plenty of activity but just going in circles. Streams flow into the sea. The water evaporates. It rains and then it goes back into the stream again.

Round and round it goes, an endless and weary repetition. And the teacher declares, this is what life is like.

Verse 4, generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. In other words, you're here and then you're gone.

And you leave no imprint behind. The earth's going to forget you. Look at verses 10 to 11. Is there anything of which one can say, look, this is something new?

It was here already long ago. It was here before our time. No one remembers the former generations and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.

[14 : 28] Think you can make a difference? You're overestimating yourself, the teacher says.

You're thinking that you're greater than you really are. No one is going to remember you.

Let's consider who invented the internet. Do any of you know? Do any of you know anything about the life of the inventor? And if you cannot remember this guy, who's going to remember you 100 years from now?

And even if you leave children behind to continue your legacy, the truth is they are simply part of the great cycle of generations who come and go.

You labor, you toil, and you die. While the earth just stays there. That's a fact. And so what's the point?

The answer the teacher suggests is nothing. That's the answer to his own question in verse 3. What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?

[15 : 36] The answer is nothing. That is life under the sun. A phrase that he uses frequently in this book. What is life under the sun?

It's this life in this present world. It's life that ultimately constructed on its own has no point. God. Oh dear, how depressing.

This wasn't what I signed up for when I got out of bed on a Sunday morning to come to church. But what I want to show you is that the Bible is a profoundly realistic book.

What the teacher does is to tell us, let me strip reality to the bare bones for you. This is how it's like. You get up early. You eat breakfast.

You go to work. Or maybe you drop the kids at school. You have lunch. You scroll through Facebook. You did summer work or you pick up the kids from school.

[16:42] You came back, had dinner, maybe watch some TV, do some cleaning, and then go to bed. Then repeat and recycle.

for what? So that you would die, eventually. And so it's no wonder that when very smart people have sat down and tried to work out what's the point of life, well, they have reached very similar conclusions.

Here's one of the greatest Western philosophers of history, Jean-Paul Sartre. Man is a useless passion. It is meaningless that we live and meaningless that we done.

Francis Crick, the Nobel Prize-winning scientist who discovered the structure of DNA, he goes one step further. He tells us, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, in fact, no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.

That's all we're reduced to. we human beings aren't just generations that come and go, but even worse, we're just a bunch of chemicals that come and go.

[18:00] And it's not just Westerners. Eastern Taoist philosophy suggests that it is futile, useless, to ask what's the point. Rather, just embrace it, they say.

Don't ask, just be. And the shock of finding Ecclesiastes in the Bible is that it appears the Bible agrees.

Life is meaningless under the sun. There is no sense of wonder, no access to any truth, no love, and no security in such a world.

But hang on, hang on, hang on, you say, no way, no way, no way, pastor, cannot, cannot, cannot. How can it be? Pastor, we cannot accept what you're saying. How can you say our lives are pointless?

The Bible is missing the point. After all, at the very least, we can choose to make our lives happy and meaningful, can't we? It's what we ultimately make of it.

[19:07] Isn't that what we're always told? Choose to make your life happy and meaningful? You know what? The teacher agrees with you. In chapter 1, verse 13, he laments, oh, what a heavy burden this is.

And so he says, all right, I'm not going to give up. I'm going to keep looking for the point of it all. And so Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verse 12, to the end of chapter 2, which we didn't have time to read this morning, he tries, in those verses, he tries to make his life meaningful.

So he tries various options. First, he goes for wisdom. Verse 13 again, he says, I'll apply my mind to go study. What happens if I get my bachelor's from Oxford, my master's from Cambridge, and my PhD from Harvard?

What happens if I consume every single TED talk out there for my own personal development?

What if I apprentice myself to the people who are at the top of their fields?

And this is what he discovers in chapter 2, verse 13. He says, yes, it's definitely better to be wise than foolish.

[20:19] Wisdom is better than folly. But then, uh-oh, that still doesn't solve the problem. What's the point? For in the end, whether I am wise or I am foolish, the same fate awaits me.

Like the fool, the wise also die. Hmm. Okay, then, what about finding my meaning in pleasure?

And that's what the first half of Ecclesiastes chapter 2 is all about. Okay, let's build grand mansions with beautiful gardens and parks. Let's get lots of money so that I can buy for myself all kinds of pleasure, including sexual pleasure.

I happen to have an acquaintance who lives an extravagant lifestyle. She literally travels every few days to exotic places. Just last week, I kid you not, she was hanging out on the private island of the billionaire owner of Virgin, Sir Richard Branson.

But the teacher says, sure, it's enjoyable for a time, absolutely. I agree with that. But does it convey meaning?

[21 : 35] No. And I think my friend knows that for all her riches, she is a very restless soul. Okay, next option.

What about work? Let's give our awe to the projects that will make a difference. Let's work hard to make the world a better place.

Now, isn't that really meaningful? But he soon realizes that that is no use as well. For in 2 verse 21, he says, how easy it is for us to labor hard, to make a difference, only for someone else to come and undo all the good work that we've done after we die.

Just like that. You know, take the Lehman Brothers, for example. Originally, they were cotton traders before they eventually founded a bank that became the fourth largest investment bank in the United States.

And I used to see their big headquarters in London. But in 2008, the bank is no more. It's gone bankrupt.

[22 : 46] It's no longer there. All because of some corrupt executives. You come and do some good work, and someone comes and undo all of it after you die.

You see, none of us are happy to say that life is pointless. And so like the teacher, we strive to make life meaningful.

We try to assign some sort of purpose to our lives. Now, perhaps you've decided that your purpose in life is to be a good parent, and so you strive to do what's best for your kids.

Or perhaps you've decided that your purpose in life is to champion a worthy cause, like ending sex trafficking, or building a better future for our rural youth, or championing environmental sustainability, and so on.

And you could absolutely decide on your own purpose, and gain motivation and significance from that.

[23 : 54] plenty of people do. And I'm not saying that you cannot. Yes, you can. But I want to suggest that if you leave it at that level, you're building your life on fragile foundations because you still haven't really answered the question, what's the point?

if I ask you, why be a good parent? You might very well answer, so that my kids will grow up to be upstanding citizens. Or if I ask you, why end sex trafficking?

You might very well answer, because I want the world to be a more just place. But the problem is that I could be like a little kid, and then I could then ask again, well, what's the point of that?

What's the point of making your kids upstanding citizens? What's the point of making the world a more just place?

For if this world is all there is, if there is no God, if there is no life beyond this world, if death is really the end point, then it really doesn't matter whether you are a sex trafficker or the one trying to end sex trafficking.

[25 : 16] What you will do will make the world a better place, or a worse place for some people, for a brief period of time, but in the big picture, it has no significance.

Yes, you've given your life some meaning for the time that you're here on earth, but it's meaning that you have created for yourself. It doesn't actually have any objective significance outside of your own head.

And if it's up to me to decide the point of my life, then it's actually impossible to build a good society together. After all, if you decided that the point of your life is to help the poor, but I decided that the point of my life is to chase after money, then who's to say that your meaning is better than my meaning?

After all, it's up to each individual to decide on his own purpose, isn't it? Now, you could argue that one purpose is more noble than the other, but on what basis can you say that?

So what I'm really suggesting to you is that if God is out of the picture, this is the logical conclusion. our lives are pointless. That doesn't mean that we can't try to create our own purpose and meaning, but when we do that, we're actually living our lives in an irrational way.

[26 : 51] We're ignoring reality as we observe and experience it. And if we try to create our own purpose and meaning, it's impossible to have a common basis to make life better together.

So, is the teacher right? Is this the Bible's conclusion, that there is no point?

Well, not quite. You see, that's not the whole story. As we read through Ecclesiastes, we begin to notice two constant themes that keep popping up again and again.

One is human longing. You see, there's a paradox within the teacher. Even as he makes these observations that life is meaningless, he is still longing for more.

Take chapter 6 verse 7, for instance. Everyone's toil is for their mouth, and yet their appetite is never satisfied. And that's exactly how we felt earlier, wasn't it?

[28 : 01] We said, no, no, no, this cannot be. Life cannot be pointless. Life must have meaning. We were made for more than this. We long for more. And the second theme is that of moral accountability.

The teacher constantly finds himself making moral judgments. So in chapter 7, verse 7 and 8, for instance, he can say that bribery corrupts the heart, and that patience is better than pride.

In other words, he senses that the world that he lives in is moral in nature, that there is such a thing as right and wrong, that patience is a good thing and pride isn't.

And again, that's true, isn't it? Think about how you feel when you read in the newspapers about an act of kindness that's shown to a stranger, or when you read about the amount stolen from 1MDB. You know that there is something right and something wrong about one action and the other action. And so, together, this constant sense, this constant longing for something more, this innate sense of moral responsibility, well, they act as pointers.

[29 : 28] They point to the fact that there is intrinsic meaning in this universe. They point to something bigger than ourselves. They point to the point of it all.

You see, the teacher actually does believe in God. A quick skim through this book will tell you that he's no atheist. But he's trying to make sense of the paradox of life that we all feel.

on the one hand, so much of life appears repetitive and meaningless. And yet, on the other hand, it seems as if embedded within us is a longing for something bigger than ourselves.

Embedded within us is a recognition that there is a moral order in our universe. And so, how can we make sense of all three things? That life appears meaningless, and yet somehow we still possess human longing and moral accountability.

Well, my friends, I believe the Bible as a whole provides the most satisfying answer. You see, this is what the Bible says.

[30 : 43] God does exist. And in the beginning, God created the world. And he said it was very good. It was filled with deep meaning. He gave it a particular shape and order.

He showed what is good and evil. Indeed, someone once said that the universe is the theater of God's glory. And within this world, he created human beings for relationship with him.

In another part of the Bible, it says that we are crowned with glory and honor. We've been given significance to act on God's behalf.

In relationship with God, we act as God's representatives here on earth. But what happened, the Bible goes on to say, is that we didn't like the idea of God being in charge.

We didn't like the idea that there was someone to whom we are responsible and accountable. And so we decided to break the relationship. We committed treason against heaven's king.

[31 : 47] And so what did God do? As punishment, the Bible says, he places on earth the curse of sin. He says to us, you will now toil on this earth.

You will work the earth, and yes, you will get food from it, but you're not going to get anything more than that. It will give you no satisfaction. And then at the end, the Bible says, by the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it, you were taken.

In other words, you're born into this world, you work, and then you die. Sounds like the world of Ecclesiastes, doesn't it? Sounds like our world, doesn't it?

And so the Bible says, yes, you are right. The world as you observe it is meaningless. Life is short, and then you die. But here's where the Bible's perspective differs from many others.

It says, the world wasn't always this way. The meaninglessness we feel is the curse of sin, not the original design of the universe.

[33 : 11] And that's why we still long for something more. That's why we long for meaning. That's why we long for moral accountability. we long for the world to be back like what it was, back at the beginning.

We feel the curse of sin now, but we long for the original blessing. And that's why we think stopping sex trafficking and helping the rural poor is a worthy cause.

We know it's right because we're designed for relationship with God, the one who ordered this world. And that's why we want more than just work, eat, sleep.

We were made for more. And so what the Bible does is that it goes beyond observation. Yes, it shows us that life is short and repetitive, but then it gives us the reason why this is so.

It's because we've turned away from God and invited his curse. But then wonderfully, the Bible doesn't stop there. It makes the observation, it gives us the reason, but then it also gives us the solution, a solution that the teacher longed for, but he couldn't quite see in his time.

[34 : 32] And that answer is Christmas, the day Jesus was born. And when Jesus came, he made the most outlandish claims.

He said that he was God himself, come as a human being. In other words, he's saying that God has placed himself in the same position as humans, having to endure the toil and meaninglessness of this world.

Can you imagine that? That's what Christians believe. But not only did he endure the toil and meaninglessness of this world, he also endured death itself, like the rest of human beings under the sun.

Jesus' life was short, just 33 years. I've already lived longer than Jesus. But his life wasn't pointless. For the point of his life and death was to reverse the curse of sin.

It's to restore meaning and purpose. Now how do we know that has happened? Because Jesus rose again. If that is true, and Christians absolutely believe that is 100% true, that means the curse of sin is broken.

[35 : 45] It's no longer you live, you die, the end. And if God was willing to go to this extent to bring us back into relationship with himself, then that says something about the point of our lives.

For in the end, the Bible says the point is not to discover some philosophy of life that we abide by, the point is to know a person, God himself.

And when we know God, we find our true meaning and purpose, not one which we created for ourselves. Remember earlier what Ravi Zacharias said that were the four components of meaning? He says there must be wonder, truth, love, and security. And when we know Jesus, we know all four. We experience this wonder that God himself not only created this incredible world, but step into it.

We access truth, for Christianity says that if we know Jesus, we can know who God truly is. We find love, for when we not only know, but trust in Jesus, we experience God's grace and affection.

[36 : 57] And finally, we have security. We know that death is not the end, but we will spend eternity enjoying God. And that will free us from the burden of having to discover and create the point of our lives.

We simply listen to God. He says love others. And so we work out how we do that as the person God created us to be with the gifts that he's given us, whether that is working to end rural poverty or caring for our kids.

Both tasks now have dignity. He says love God. love God. And so that means doing what we do as an offering of worship. Not to earn his favour, but to say thank you.

And you now know where you come from, where you're going, and what you're meant to be on this earth for. You can engage meaningfully with this game called life.

Now this morning, you might not be a Christian, or you might be someone who considered yourself a Christian, but you're beginning to realise that you actually have no idea what being Christian is really all about.

[38 : 10] And everything I'm saying today is quite overwhelming. I understand that. There's more questions that you have. And that's okay. In many ways, I simply want to make you today reflect on the most important questions of life.

I hope to quit your appetite for next week. But if you're asking, what's the point? I want you to keep pursuing that question.

Now don't be afraid to have a deep conversation at refreshments afterwards, rather than just talk about the weather and football. In fact, on your outline, I've suggested that all of us ask each other, what do you think of the talk this morning?

Come speak to me, speak to friends, and come back next Sunday. But as I call up the musicians now, they can start coming up, to sing our closing song.

The one thing that I plead with you is not to ignore this question. God could be changing your life.
So I leave you to reflect as we sing our final song this morning.
[39 : 19] and I invite ushers as well to come and come in the second afternoon.
this turned to be happy. It's to go to secure Lars upon theanch■■■ M