What is the meaning of life? (part 1)

- Why are we here?
- What is the point of our existence?
- Is there a meaning to our lives?

This is not just one of life's BIG questions, but arguably the biggest of them all – why are we here? Is life a random experience determined by chance, or is there a creator with a plan and purpose that can involve us?

There are many who hold the view that looking for meaning in life is an illusion, that ultimately our lives signify nothing. The view of Macbeth in Shakespeare’s play is typical of that school of thought:

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.

Or, as Byron put it in his poem on his 36th birthday:

My days are in the yellow leaf;
The flowers and fruits of love are gone;
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone!

Less than a month later he was dead.

In the quotes from Shakespeare and Byron we sense a real disappointment with the conclusions they have reached about life, a sadness that, when all has been said and done, their lives amount to very little.
Philosophers’ opinions

So what do the world’s finest minds believe to be the meaning in life?
We want to look at ten views from the greatest philosophers who have ever lived. Some of them, like Buddha, Freud and Aristotle, will be known to us, and we may even understand a little of their writings. Others we may well not have come across, unless we have an interest in philosophy. Clearly, boiling down their philosophical approach to a few words is a little unfair, but it helps us understand the range of views that exists.

- **Maslow**  Using our creative powers
- **Fromm**  Living productively
- **May**  Being able to love
- **Buddha**  Achieving inner peace
- **Kant**  Acting in line with universal laws
- **Freud**  Loving and working
- **Heschel**  Living in wonder
- **Frankyl**  Hoping in an ultimate meaning
- **Tillich**  Being yourself
- **Aristotle**  Living virtuously

Clearly there is a wide range of views.

General opinions

There are probably five common themes which provide meaning to most people’s lives:
- Education
- Wealth
- Partners
- Career
- Recreation

For some it is all about education.

Achieving the very best education for themselves, or perhaps even more so for their children, becomes the most important aspect of life.

For others it is all about wealth accumulation.

Achieving the very biggest house, the fastest car, the widest selection of exotic holidays. If we are being honest, we all like a bit of that.

And then there are partners.

Probably for many this really means sex. Fulfilling their natural desires is the top of some people’s list.

The other themes mentioned are career and recreation.

For some their job is everything, it defines them to such an extent that losing it becomes a barrier they never get over. Others find life’s meaning in their hobbies and recreation.

So what are we to conclude?
How do we decide?

Is the meaning of life to be found in loving and working, achieving inner peace or being yourself?

If the ten finest human minds have reached ten different conclusions, how are we supposed to find the answer?

Even if there was some common theme running through man’s philosophical thinking, it would be man’s conclusion – and is man capable of figuring out the answer?

The answer from our Creator

The best of men are indeed only men at best…..unless they are directed by God.

God transforms the debate. If there is a creator who has a plan and purpose, and if He has revealed the meaning of life, then there is the possibility that we may get to know it.

Solomon was not listed amongst our ten human philosophers we considered earlier because his wisdom and insight was different. It was unique, because Solomon’s wisdom was given to him by God.

This is what the Bible says about how Solomon got his wisdom:

... the Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” Solomon answered..... “Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong”

The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself..... **I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be**”

1 Kings 3 v 5 to 13

At the end of his life Solomon reflected on all his experiences. As an old man he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes.

He had sought the meaning of life in all the routes which most people try:

This is what he said about education:

*I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven.... I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me. I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.*

**Ecclesiastes 1:13 and 16**

This sounds as though he was well educated!

This is what he said about wealth:

*I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces.*

**Ecclesiastes 2 v 7 to 8**

We learn from elsewhere in the Bible that Solomon was fabulously rich.
This is what he said about relationships:

“I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man”.

_Ecclesiastes 2 v 8_

Elsewhere in the Bible we find that Solomon had 700 wives! So he certainly had plenty of experience in fulfilling and satisfying human desire.

Regarding his career, Solomon was king over a very rich and prosperous nation:

“I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem”.

_Ecclesiastes 1:12_

Is there a more important career than a king?

And this is what Solomon said about recreation:

“I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired, I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work.”

_Ecclesiastes 2 v 4 to 6 and 10_

So there is no doubt Solomon spent time busying himself and finding enjoyable things to do.

What were Solomon’s conclusions?

With his God-given wisdom, and having experienced all that life has to offer, Solomon drew four conclusions:

“I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven... have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind... I said in my heart, ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I applied my heart to know wisdom’... I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.”

_Ecclesiastes 1 v 12 to 17_

The first of Solomon’s conclusions is that the accumulation of wisdom and knowledge is also just a striving after the wind. It is ultimately futile.
Here is the second of Solomon’s conclusions:

“Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.”

Ecclesiastes 4 v 1 to 3

His conclusion was that life is oppressive. If you live in a prosperous country in the 21st century, life may not feel oppressive to you. But for two thirds of the world’s population, each day is a struggle for survival.

What was Solomon’s third conclusion?

“For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.”

Ecclesiastes 3 v 19 and 20

It was Benjamin Franklin who wrote that life's two certainties were death and taxes!

We don’t know what fiscal policies Solomon applied, but with his God-given wisdom he was certain that at the end of our life we will return to the ground and our bodies decompose, just like the animals. So conclusion number three is that only death is certain.

At the very end of his writings Solomon pulled together all his wisdom and distilled it into fourteen words:

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Ecclesiastes 12 v 13

When the Bible speaks of fearing God it is not just in the sense of being frightened by Him, it means to have a sense of reverence and awe when considering God, because of His greatness and goodness.

Fearing God, and keeping His commandments, is the whole duty of man, says Solomon. This is his fourth conclusion. The good news is just how simple it is – only two things to focus on, fearing God and keeping His commandments. The bad news is just how difficult we find it to put it into practice!

Solomon takes us a fair way on our path to understanding the meaning of life. And if we share his conclusions we will be in a good position. But the Bible makes it clear that, although Solomon was uniquely wise, there is one greater than Solomon…Jesus.
The answer from the son of God

Jesus uses analogy of the shepherd (himself) and his sheep (his followers) to explain the meaning of life:

“I am the gate (of the sheepfold); whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture…. I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”

John 10 v 9 to 11

Let’s just think about the main points of what Jesus was talking about:

- Jesus is talking to his followers about salvation
- Without Jesus there is no meaning to life
  - “through me (he) will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture”
- Jesus came that we might have life
  - but, more than just having life,
  - we can have it “to the full”
- Ultimately we can have eternal life
- Because the shepherd gave his life for the sheep

Just before his death by crucifixion, Jesus explained a little more to his followers about having life “to the full” - eternal life:

“Father, the time has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son may glorify You. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those You have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent.”

John 17 v 1 to 3

These are the main points from these verses:

- Eternal life is a gift from God
  - It will be given to all true followers of Jesus
- The meaning of life is
  - To have a relationship with God (to know Him)
  - And to know His Son Jesus
- If we have no relationship with God and Jesus
  - There is a vacuum in our lives, something is missing.
When Jesus spoke to his followers about making eternal life possible, he was reflecting the overall plan and purpose of his Father. There is a marvellously simple symmetry about the Bible. It begins in Genesis with God’s creation, when man and God are at one. We saw in the “Why does God allow Suffering part 2” section (page 104), how our tendency to disobey God resulted in problems in our relationship with God. The Bible ends in Revelation, with God’s re-creation and ultimate reconciliation with man. Enabling men and women to live forever in a perfected earth is the hope of the Bible.

Ultimately, the Bible claims that whether life has meaning for you and me depends upon the choice we make now in our lives. Jesus described that choice as being between two roads:

*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*

Matthew 7 v 13 and 14

One is a broad and comfortable motorway, which speeds to death, a road favoured by the majority. The other is a small, narrow, and difficult road, favoured by comparatively few, which leads to life.

**Summary**

In answer to part 1 of the question “What is the meaning of life?” We can summarize what we have seen:

- Philosophers claim to know life’s meaning
- People seek to find meaning in
  - education, wealth, partners, career or recreation
- The only way to find ultimate meaning is if the creator has revealed it to us
  - This is the Bible’s claim
- Solomon, uniquely given wisdom by God, concluded that only a life with God has meaning
- Eternal life is only possible through the sinless life and sacrificial death of Jesus
- Eternal life is to know God and Jesus, and to have a relationship with them
- Ultimately we must choose between
  - The broad way that leads to destruction
  - The narrow way that leads to eternal life in God’s kingdom
What is the meaning of life? (part 1)