

The Meaning of Life

To the Citizens of Heaven, Part 2

Philippians 1:1a

A few years ago, a research team analyzed the writings of 195 people – famous people who lived within the past few hundred years.

And their analysis was intentionally directed to determine what that famous person considered to be the meaning of life.

They summarized their findings into several categories – or world views – what exactly did these particular people life was all about.

The largest category of famous people effectively believed that life was primarily a short journey during which you needed to enjoy and experience everything you could.

These people included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sinclair Lewis and singer Janis Joplin who summarized their basic perspective on life in her most famous lyric – “You got to get it while you can.”

Another category of people said that life really doesn’t have any lasting meaning at all no matter how much stuff you get.

From Sigmund Freud and Bertrand Russell to Clarence Darrow; Darrow summarized this perspective when he wrote, “Life is a ship that is tossed by every wave and by every wind; a ship headed to no port and no harbor, with no rudder, no compass, no pilot, simply floating for a time, then lost in the waves.”

Another group of famous people were found to simply believe that life is best understood as a brief struggle.

Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, and Jonathan Swift communicated this perspective; Jonathan Swift wrote, “Life is a tragedy wherein we sit as spectators who awhile and then act our part in it.” And then it’s over.

Another group lectured and wrote with the view that each of us creates our own meaning in life – it’s really up to us to figure it all out.

Carl Jung and Carl Sagan are among these – Sagan most famously wrote, “We live in a vast and awesome universe; where humanity clings to an obscure clod of rock. The significance of our lives and our fragile realm derives from our own wisdom – *we* are the custodians of life’s meaning.

One final category of people simply believes you’ll never really figure out the meaning of life anyway; it’s simply a mystery; from Albert Camus and Bob Dylan to Stephen Hawking; Hawking wrote, “If we found an answer to why we exist, it would be the ultimate triumph . . . for then we would know the mind of God.”ⁱ

Let me introduce then, in Hawking’s own words, the ultimate triumph; the answer to the mystery.

It’s revealed in the very opening words of Paul’s letter to the Philippian believers.

In Philippian’s chapter 1, we have nothing less than the discovery of the mind of God on the meaning of life.

You see, the famous people that were left out of that analysis I mentioned earlier – were people that had truly discovered what matters most in life.

Let me introduce you to two of them . . .

Philippians 1:1 Paul (stop there)

Not so fast.

Let me introduce the author of this letter.

His Hebrew name is Saul – not King Saul – that’s a different man from the Old Testament.

Saul was his Hebrew name, having been born to Jewish Roman citizens; Paul (Paulos) is his Greek name; and he used both names, according to ***Acts 13:9***.

However, later on in his ministry he dropped any reference to his Hebrew name – no doubt because his ministry focus shifted as God’s messenger of the gospel to the Gentile people – or non-Jewish people.

Paul is writing this letter from Rome where’s he under house arrest. It was a rather wild and winding journey that eventually brought Paul to Rome.

It started out with being arrested in Jerusalem, accused of causing a riot. He goes from one improper court proceeding to another; finally appealing to Caesar (***Acts 25:11***).

Every Roman citizen, which Paul was, had the right to present his court to Caesar – that didn’t mean that Nero would actually hear his case, but it did guarantee that Rome’s highest court would.ⁱⁱ

What Paul really wanted was the opportunity to preach the Gospel in Rome – and he finally arrives – having survived attempts on his life, a series of

trials, shipwreck, and now in chains . . . he arrives, not as a traveling preacher, but as a prisoner (*Acts 27-28*).

Given the benefit of being under house arrest, while he awaits his trial in Rome, he has the ability to receive visitors, as well as write and receive letters.

One of the problems he faced was that he had to pay for his rented apartment, along with payment for the military guards which rotated in and out of his apartment (*Acts 28:30*).

It was this body of believers in Philippi that sent money to him to help him pay his expenses. And this letter, among other motives, is Paul's personal thank-you missionary letter back to the church.

But there's something missing in Paul's opening introduction here. It's easy to miss . . . but it's highly significant.

I wonder if I could take a survey of hands . . . how many of you at one time or another wrote your sweetheart a letter. You know – on paper with something called a pen – you folded it and put it in an envelope and used something called a stamp. How many of you did that?

I suppose you could do the same thing with an email . . . but you can't perfume an email, now can you. If you've never received a letter from your girlfriend or fiancé where she's put on the envelope some of her perfume . . . you really don't know the meaning of life.

I was taught by Professor Hendricks and now teach it to my students at Shepherds Seminary that one of the ways we really ought to read the Bible is as if it were a love letter.

Why?

Because you have read those letters entirely differently than any other letter.

I traveled for a year, recruiting for my Bible College in Christian schools and churches. My girlfriend whom I would later marry would send a letter ahead to the church where I would be arriving. Sometimes the letter would be lost . . . sometimes it would arrive after I'd already left . . . sometimes it would arrive too early and the church office would overlook it; most of the time her letters ended up in my hands.

I'd find some quiet place alone and open that letter and read, "Dear Stephen" . . . and I'd stop cold.

Because I'm wondering why she wrote, "Dear Stephen".

Is there something wrong? I mean, the last letter a week earlier ago was "*Dearest Stephen*" . . . but

the letter a month ago was "*My Dearest Stephen*". We're obviously going in the wrong direction.

My Dearest Stephen . . . Dearest Stephen . . . Dear Stephen

How do I know the next letter isn't gonna be, "To whomever it may concern." . . . "Dear what's his name"?

Look, I haven't even gotten past the opening word and I'm asking questions.

Let's read the Bible a little more like that.

There's something missing here . . . in all but three of his letters, Paul always added the fact that he was an Apostle . . . *Paul, an Apostle of God . . . Paul, called to be an Apostle of God . . .* in other words, "Listen up!" (Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians).

But not here . . . just *Paul*.

Why? He's not writing from the perspective of an authoritative Apostle to the church – although this is inspired scripture – Paul is writing as a friend to his faithful friends.ⁱⁱⁱ

So in a highly unusual manner, Paul drops any reference to his position in the church.

And he does something else that's unusual. He simply moves on and introduces another man as his equal – a younger man – notice – *Paul and Timothy*.

As if to say, "We wrote this letter together."

They didn't . . . all you have to do is read the letter and it's clearly a personal letter from Paul.

However, Paul and Timothy *together* had started this local church in Philippi – and Paul here, with wonderful humility, gives this young man, Timothy, equal time so to speak.

In fact, Paul actually provides an update on Timothy's growing reputation as a leader and a pastor. Evidently, the church would have wanted to know how young Timothy was getting along – and Paul graciously filled in some blanks.

In fact, turn over to *chapter 2* and notice in *verse 22* where Paul writes, *But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served me in the gospel.*

In other words, Timothy has proved himself a faithful participant in the gospel.

And just what has Timothy proven to become? Look up a few verses to *verse 19. I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. 20. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare* – to paraphrase the next line, "everybody seems to care about themselves, but Timothy genuinely cares about the church.

Paul doesn't just flatter people. So when Paul says that Timothy is one of a kind, he means it.

This is all the more remarkable when you consider how unlikely it would be for Timothy to ever amount to anything for Christ.

But Timothy had discovered, like Paul – the meaning of life.

What really mattered in life . . . even though the only model Timothy had in a man, while growing up, was an unbeliever.

Listen, you've just been introduced to the name of a young pastor, raised in a mixed marriage . . . many believe it was a broken home with a single Mom, who will become one of the early church's greatest leaders.

And if Paul gives Timothy equal time here in this opening statement, perhaps we should take a closer look.

The first time Timothy appears in the Bible is in the ***Book of Acts. Turn to chapter 16.***

That's the chapter that introduced us to the charter members of the church in Philippi . . . now we're introduced to the co-founder of the church, along with the Apostle Paul.

Notice verse 1. Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek.

When Paul arrives in Timothy's home town of Lystra, most New Testament scholars believe Timothy was in his early 20's.

And he's already a believer.

We're never told exactly when Timothy became a believer, but if you put the clues together, Timothy's mother had become believers during Paul's first visit to their home town.

In ***Acts chapter 14***, Paul and Barnabas are preaching at Lystra and performing miracles. One thing led to another and Paul will be stoned nearly to death by an angry mob.

The disciples gathered around Paul, lying there broken and bleeding – and to their utter disbelief, he gets up, miraculously healed, and goes back into the city and continues preaching.

Listen, after being nearly stoned to death by an angry mob, should God miraculously restore your life and health, most of us would imagine it was time to move on.

But Paul stayed on, teaching the new believers and establishing churches in that region.

Two of those converts would have been two Jewish women – a mother and daughter – named Lois and Eunice.

Before we go any further, let me make an observation here . . . in fact, I want to make several of them as we take a closer look at this co-laborer to the church at Philippi.

1. Disobeying God in the past doesn't eliminate the potential of honoring God in the future.

The Enemy always wants to bring up your failure . . . and make it final . . . fatal.

There's an unwritten volume of strife and pain in Timothy's family heritage.

Truth be told, Eunice had possibly broken her parent's hearts by marrying a Gentile unbeliever. The strict Jew would refuse to accept their marriage; in fact, if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, her parents would regard that girl as dead. So much so, that sometimes a funeral was actually carried out, symbolizing their grief and the loss of that daughter to the world.^{iv}

We don't have any of the details, but twice, Luke writes in this account that ***Timothy's father was a Greek (Acts 16:1)*** – a clear indication that he was not only a Gentile, but a Gentile pagan – and unbeliever of the God of Abraham. In fact, Luke puts it in bold letters in verse 3 – ***Everyone knew that Timothy's father was a Greek.***

We're not told when and why, but even before Eunice heard the gospel, brought by Paul, her heart had returned to the Old Testament scriptures and had begun to follow them.

Paul will confirm her commitment to God in ***2 Timothy 3:14*** where he reminds Timothy that he had been taught the scriptures from his earliest childhood days.

Eunice had disobeyed the law of God in marrying an unbeliever – a Gentile . . . but evidently returned to the scriptures – and later, when Paul arrived in Lystra, she hears the gospel and comes to faith in the Messiah.

It's highly telling, by the way, that she had named her son, Timothy . . . which means, "One who honors God".

It's as if Eunice implies in that kind of home – in that kind of marriage – with that kind of past – "Listen, I didn't honor God when I became a bride . . . but I want to honor God now that I am a mother."

Eunice herself has discovered the meaning of life. It isn't just to get married . . . it isn't just to have a child . . . to have a home . . . she reveals it in the naming of her son, "This is what life is all about . . . and it's my heart's desire to see that this little boy grows up to honor and obey and love God."

There's another observation worth making in regards to this future leader in Philippi . . .

2. The absence of a godly father does not forfeit the potential of godly children.

Paul wrote to the wives of unbelieving husbands in Corinth, not to abandon their families but to remain a holy and sanctifying presence in their midst. (*I Corinthians 7:14*)

By the time Timothy grows up, here in *Acts 16*, perhaps 21 or 22 years of age, he's distinguished himself as a godly believer, dedicated to the truth of scripture – Paul calls him here in *verse 1 a disciple* . . . that is, a devoted follower of Jesus Christ.

His father was a Grecian unbeliever. In other words, he would have stayed home on the Sabbath and read the newspaper – or spent the day golfing while Eunice and Timothy went to the synagogue.

Mark this; while growing up, Timothy's father would have never advised him or encouraged him about his spiritual walk. Whenever they got together they would only be able to talk about the weather or the upcoming Olympic Games or the newest Roman senator.

But the absence of a godly father did not forfeit the potential of a godly son.

Which leads me to another observation – and it is that

3. The dedication of a godly mother can overcome the disadvantage of a broken home.

Don't get me wrong . . . there's an indispensable blessing to have spiritual leadership from a father and husband who is following after God.

It is the model God intended for us who seek to build our families and our homes according to his word.

But I speak today to mothers – many who are single – some who are divorced – many who today don't have a believing spouse or a spouse that doesn't act like a believer.

Perhaps you're wondering, is there some disadvantage in all of this that will handicap my children's potential for the Lord?

Will they never fully seize the meaning of life that finds its core value in finding and following Jesus Christ?

Is that even a possibility?

Take it from the opening line of a letter from Paul to the Philippians . . . let me introduce to you one of the leading men of the New Testament church . . . a young man from a spiritually divided home with an unbelieving father . . . a young man who lived up to his name – to honor God.

Eight years ago, I received a letter from a woman whose life had been totally turned upside down.

In her letter, she wrote, "I am so grateful to have found Colonial . . . I want you to know that I am praying for you to stay true to Christ."

She was the mother to two young children when she began to suspect that her husband wasn't being faithful to her. When she challenged him, he admitted that it was true – but, it wasn't another woman, it was another man. When she confronted him, he admitted to her his homosexual lifestyle that he'd kept secret for years. In that same conversation he told her even more devastating news . . . the other man was her own father.

In one conversation, her life as she knew it fell apart. To make matters worse, both her husband and her father were in full time ministry . . . secretly living sinful lives . . . which meant she would effectively lose her relationship with both of them.

Eight years ago, she slipped into a seat, perhaps next to where you sat. She began to readjust everything she'd ever known; she began to rediscover the meaning of life . . . to find supernatural strength for the next few steps in her life.

She put her two sons in your children's classroom . . . they were perhaps in your Bible study as they grew into young teenagers; maybe you were their Bible study leader; she sang in this auditorium standing next to many of you . . . she walked past you in the hallway and attended Bible studies with you.

She began life . . . in many ways . . . all over again.

I'll never forget that letter written in anguish – and especially that one line – My husband was a pastor and my father was a pastor and they broke my trust . . . and I've been coming here now for a while – I think you can be trusted.

It's a wonder she even cared to try again.

I received a second letter from her just a couple of weeks ago . . . with 8 years in between . . . I couldn't believe it had been 8 years. She had grown in her faith, though she admitted it was often filled with days of difficulty and testing. She wrote how grateful she was to have found a home here in this family of believers where she had found refuge and hope again.

She went on to include a photograph . . . and explain how just a few years ago God had brought into her life a genuinely godly man . . . they had now been married over a year . . . her sons, now young men, were committed to Christ; as a family they were involved in serving Christ with a local church in their new hometown.

She just wanted to write and tell me that she'd moved away . . . to let me know all that had happened in the last decade of her life . . . to say farewell . . . and to say to all of us – thank you.

Like Eunice, by the grace of God, the disadvantages were not insurmountable . . . she had raised sons who were walking after her example . . . her commitment to Jesus Christ.

When Paul mentions Timothy as a faithful believer, who has shown himself worthy to the Philippian church . . . a letter that would be read by all the churches, I can imagine that a mother was quietly thanking God for the Gospel and God's unfailing grace.

Another observation from this opening line is this:

4. The blessing of older, influential believers cannot be underestimated.

Paul's treatment of Timothy here in this letter as a co-equal is deeply gracious . . . and no doubt deeply appreciated by Timothy.

In one of Paul's letters to Timothy – we happen to call it *2 Timothy* – Paul writes, "*to Timothy, my beloved son.*"

Imagine what that choice of terminology meant to Timothy. Paul could have as easily called him my beloved brother; my beloved fellow Christian . . . my beloved comrade in the faith.

No – my beloved *son*!

Don't miss that choice of words. Imagine if Paul came to Colonial today and referred to your child as his own dear child . . . imagine what that would mean if your son or daughter didn't have a Daddy . . . or a Christian Daddy.

We can't imagine the joy in the heart of Eunice and her mother Lois – both women had been deeply involved in teaching young Timothy the truth of God's word – to see the baton taken up by the Apostle Paul.

Like Charles Spurgeon the great British pastor of the 19th century who was sent to live with his grandparents when he was 2 years of age. When he returned to his parent's home at the age of 6 to begin schooling he was already able to read, having been taught to read the Bible by his godly grandparents. And Spurgeon at age 3 was able to surprise his father on a visit home by reading an entire chapter of the Bible.

Like a spiritual relay team, God often brings people into our lives and the lives of our children as they continue influencing us on for Jesus Christ.

Listen, you put Timothy's testimony together and you'll discover that Timothy was a godly young man because of the grace of God through his mother and his grandmother and a man twice his age name Paul and many others in the assembly who helped define and declare and deliver the meaning of life to Timothy.

And by the way, Paul isn't just writing to the Philippians here as this letter opens . . . he's sending Timothy a message too . . . a reminder of what matters most in life.

Notice the end of the first phrase in *Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.*

The translation "servant" is an unfortunate softening of this Greek noun – *doulos*.

The truth of the matter is the Greek language has several words that can refer to servants – but *doulos* isn't one of them.

In the caste system of Paul's world, to be labelled a slave meant you had no personal rights; you were nothing more than property.^v

One author referred to the evidence from excavated documents of Paul's day that revealed how slaves were considered chattel or property . . . or equipment; we have documents that reveal how a farmer from Paul's day would list his slaves as speaking tools, to be distinguished from animals that were non-speaking tools.^{vi}

Although the duties of servants and slaves often overlapped in the first century, there is a key distinction between the two; servants were hired; slaves were owned.^{vii}

Paul isn't interested in softening his relationship to Jesus Christ.

To soften it is to miss the real meaning in life.

One author wrote, “It is only as a person becomes the slave of the Creator that he can begin to experience true freedom.”^{viii}

Another author from the 1800’s wrote it this way, “Slavery [to God] is the only [true liberty]. Freedom does not mean doing what you like, it means liking what you ought – [let me read that again: freedom does not mean doing what you like, it means liking what you ought . . . and doing that.”^{ix}

Charles Spurgeon, the British pastor in the 1800’s boldly exposed this inconsistent translation issue when he preached, “Where our Authorized Version softly puts it “servant” it really means “slave”. The early saints delighted to count themselves as Christ’s absolute property, bought by him, owned by him, and wholly at his disposal. Paul even went so far as to rejoice that he had the marks of his Master’s brand on him and he cries, “Let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” That was the end of all debate; he was the Lord’s and the marks of the whips, the rods and the stones were viewed as the branding of Paul’s body as the property of Jesus the Lord; now if the saints of old time gloried in obeying Christ, I pray that you and I will [do the same].^x

Paul is redefining our freedom. He’s turning it all upside down.

Paul the great Apostle . . . Paul the renowned church planter . . . Paul the courageous missionary . . . Timothy the faithful partner in ministry with Paul . . . Timothy the young man now groomed to take the place of the great Apostle.

No . . . Paul and Timothy . . . slaves of Christ Jesus.

On one occasion, and with this I close, Hudson Taylor, to this day one of the most revered missionary pioneers in church history – in fact, for the sake of my own soul, I reread through his biography this summer in my devotions; he was once being introduced as an older man to a large church in Australia. The moderator of the meeting introduced him in eloquent and grand terms. He regaled the audience with some of Hudson Taylor’s accomplishments – and they were many, by the way – starting dozens of schools and hundreds of churches; visiting and evangelizing in every Chinese province; now employing at least 600 hundred Chinese believers who were now serving as missionaries in his China Inland Mission; this moderator came to a flourish at the end of his long introduction by welcoming their illustrious guest. Hudson Taylor stood quietly at the podium for a moment and then said, “Dear Friends, I am merely serve an illustrious Master.”^{xi}

Listen, God did not save us to become sensations . . . he saved us to become slaves.^{xii}

. . . who find the meaning of their lives in the grace of the gospel . . . and in submission to their Lord and Savior . . . their illustrious Master, Jesus Christ.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/14/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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i Kinnier, Kernes, Tribbensee, Puymbroeck; *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (Winter 2003); citation: www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/july/2070411.html

ii *Life Application Bible Commentary*, General Ed. Grand Osborne (Tyndale House, 1995), p. 14

iii William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 9

iv Adapted from William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Westminster Press, 1976), p. 120

v Sam Gordon, *An Odyssey of Joy* (Ambassador, 2004), p. 17

vi Ibid, p. 18

vii Adapted from John MacArthur, *Slave* (Thomas Nelson, 2010), p. 12

viii Gene A. Getz, *The Measure of a Christian: Studies in Titus* (Regal Books, 1983), p. 17

ix Quoted in MacArthur, p. 222

x MacArthur, *Slave*, p. 20

xi R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Great Stories and Quotes* (Tyndale House, 1998), p. 213

xii Adapted from Gordon, p. 19