

Why am I here? Why do I exist? What is the purpose of my life?

Maybe this is a little too early in the morning (or too late in the evening) to be pondering such existential questions, but ponder them we will.

Religious and secular philosophers have been trying to answer those questions for a long time. But the discussion of the meaning of life is not restricted to lofty philosophical debates by people much smarter than I. These are questions I think every person has to deal with and confront at one point or another, and often at multiple points in life.

These are questions that float through the mind of the single mom just trying to keep her kids alive, fed, clothed, and housed, the blue-collar truck driver who spends half his life on the road, the white-collar engineer who spends 50 hours a week staring at a computer screen.

They are questions that rattle around in the heads of teenagers trying to figure out how they fit in this crazy world, young adults trying to find a career that gives them drive, parents who spend half their lives feeding, clothing, shuttling, and cleaning up after children, and retirees who struggle with the growing limitations of the twilight years of life.

Why am I here? Why do I exist? What is my purpose?

Generally, all the ways that people have and do answer these questions fit on a broad spectrum between two extremes.

On the one hand, there is the theory of evolution which says there is no purpose. Your existence is accidental. Which means, do whatever you want. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die. Figure out what you want to do, what makes you feel good, what you think is beautiful and just indulge in that because your life means nothing, so just pursue happiness. The religious version of this answer says that god is a god of love who wants you to be happy, who created you with certain desires and wants you to have fun, so just do whatever god is whispering in your heart that you should do.

On the other hand there are other people, who in reaction to the inherent selfishness that the theory of evolution logically leads to, who've realized that pure selfishness doesn't actually feel good, that the pursuit of happiness is an endless pursuit, say that your purpose in life is to leave this world a better place than when you came into it. You exist for the enhancement of the species. You exist to help people in need. You exist to equip your kids to have a better life than you did. The religious version of this answer says that god is a god whose love you have to earn, even if it just a little bit – your purpose in life is to follow the rules.

Generally, all the philosophies (both religious and secular) on why we exist fall into this spectrum – pure selfishness (make yourself happy), or philanthropy (you exist to leave the world a better place). Most people end up somewhere in the middle with their own personal philosophies. They really want to do whatever it is that makes them feel good, but their natural knowledge of God, their conscience keeps them from being purely selfish and they try and help some people out along the way.

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Today, in his letter to some believers in the Macedonian city of Philippi, Paul tackles these questions head-on. And his answer, the Christian answer, is completely off the charts. It is altogether different from that spectrum that the rest of the secular and religious world land on.

Paul, towards the end of his life, was sitting in a Roman prison. He was rotting in that prison, with the very real possibility hanging over his head that he could be killed because he had done a little bit too much and persistent Jesus sharing. And while he sat in that prison with lots of time on his hands to ponder his life, and why he was there, and what his purpose was, he wrote a letter to the Philippians with God's answer to those questions.

God's and therefore, Paul's answer to those questions is summed up in one little verse in the middle of this section from Philippians, verse 22: **For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.**

And he unpacks what that philosophy of life means in the rest of this section.

For Paul, life wasn't going to be about selfishness, about doing what made him happy and comfortable – no instead he stated his purpose in life this way: **I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.**

God had revealed to Paul that he existed to exalt Christ. That was his purpose in life. That is why he was there. The purpose of everything Paul was, everything he thought, said, and did was to bring glory to Christ, to advance Christ's agenda, to point to Christ – not bringing glory to himself, not selfish, not even a little bit.

Neither, though, was Paul's life about making this world a better place. Yes, the selflessness that God had called him to would make him want to serve other people, but the purpose was never to make this world a better place, for him or for them. No, there was a greater purpose: **It is necessary for you that I remain in the body... and will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.**

Do you see the subtle but important difference? Paul doesn't exist to make the world a better place for the Philippians, he exists to guide the Philippians to a place better than this world – heaven.

God had revealed to Paul that this world was a broken world, completely corrupted by sin, and so the purpose of this life cannot be making this world a better place because it's simply not possible – it's not going to happen until God does away with this sinful world on Judgment Day. His life wasn't about following the rules to make this world a better place, but about pointing people to Christ who would save them from this world and take them to a better place.

God had revealed to Paul that he existed to strengthen the faith of the people around him – faith in a better life that cannot and will not be found this side of eternity. Paul existed to remind them that Jesus and joining him in heaven are the only things that really matter in this world.

That's what it means to live by the philosophy that **to live is Christ, to die is gain**. It's a completely new and different answer to the questions of life's meaning, one that drove Paul to not know which was better, to live or to die. Because if he lived, he would get to continue to remind and teach the Philippians about Jesus and how Jesus sets them free from this world, but to die would mean getting to see Jesus face to face.

**To live is Christ. To die is gain** – God's purpose for life – Paul's and yours.

But you know... you and I have this propensity to flip the saying. As Christians we have this nasty habit of living as if "to die is Christ, to live is gain."

Here's what I mean.

As Christians we understand that one thing that Christ does is that he sets us free from the fear of death, and so, to die is Christ. When I die, I get to go to heaven and be with Christ and spend all eternity glorifying him, and I look forward to that.

But I also think as a sinner that this earth can't be just a wash, right? After all, we are here, so what's so wrong with trying to make the most of our time here? What is so wrong with making at least part of my life about *gaining* a certain level of comfort and happiness here on earth?

And so the Christian 5<sup>th</sup> grader who looks forward to heaven with Christ, lives at least part of his life now for his own personal gain. Life is all about getting the next toy, the right group of friends, having fun.

The Christian teenager who looks forward to heaven with Christ, lives at least part of her life now for her own personal gain. Life is all about having the right clothes, the right level of popularity, making the right teams, having fun.

The young Christian adult who looks forward to heaven with Christ lives at least part of his life now for his own personal gain. Life is all about going to the right school, getting the right job, making the right amount of money, hanging out at the right places with the right people to have the maximum amount of fun.

The Christian parent who looks forward to heaven with Christ, lives at least part of her life now for her own personal gain (disguised often in the pursuit of personal gain for her children). So life is all about keeping your kids safe, getting them into the right school, getting them every advantage in life, signing them up for every sports team and program available so that they can have the maximum amount of fun, comfort, and success.

To die is Christ. To live is gain.

We, as Christians, look forward to heaven with Jesus, but all along the way we forget that our purpose in life is not gain, but exalting Christ.

The fifth grader exists to glorify Christ – which means when he is hanging out with his friends, playing with his new toys it's an opportunity to selflessly love them, to act like a Christian, to remind them about Jesus.

The teenager exists to glorify Christ – which means she dresses in a way that glorifies Christ not her own body, she talks to her friends in a way that glorifies Christ, not props herself up by putting others down.

The young adult exists to glorify Christ – which means his job isn't a way to make money and gain success, it is a way for him to faithfully use the gifts Christ has given him to Christ's glory, and use the money he gets from that for the betterment of Christ's church on earth.

The parent exists to glorify Christ – which means the #1 goal of parenting *isn't* raising well-rounded, self-confident kids, but making sure that when those kids die they have had every opportunity available to them to get to know Christ better.

Paul says in Philippians that he would be ashamed of himself if he did not have sufficient courage to live the way God had called him. If you are anything like me, when you look at your life and the reason behind the choices you make on a daily basis (your purpose in life) you and I have a lot to be ashamed about, because so often our motivation falls right onto that spectrum that the rest of the world hopelessly follows.

Which leads me to wonder and ask, how could Paul be so bold? How could he be so confident that "**now as always Christ would be exalted in his body**"? Was he made of something different than us?

No, he wasn't.

It would take a miracle. It would take a miracle to take a dead sinner like Paul (who, lest we forget, once upon a time had arrested and killed Christians – meaning he lined up thoroughly in that "life is about following the rules, making the world a better place category) and make him alive with hope and expectation and courage to live his life for Christ and find his real home and gain in heaven.

It takes a miracle for us too – it takes someone outside of ourselves doing to us and for us what we are incapable of doing for ourselves... kind of like those dead people in the other two Bible lessons for today. Those dead people who were incapable of helping themselves. Those dead people who remained dead until they came into contact with Christ.

The answer is Christ. Christ, who came into this world and lived perfectly by God's purpose for this life. Think about that. Jesus approached every single life choice thinking, not "how can this benefit me." It was *always*, "How can this a) glorify my Father, and b) help others get to heaven?"

Everything he did, he did with you in mind, so that he could get you to heaven, right up to that cross on that hill shaped like a skull outside Jerusalem. His obsession in his life and in his death was to take you and do to you and for you what you are incapable of doing for yourself – to teach you what it means that **to live is Christ, to die is gain**.

And in Christ we find the reason and motivation to leave behind that spectrum of purpose that the rest of the world lives on. Because this earth has no pleasures, it offers nothing that can come even close to the love that Christ has shown me, and the pleasures he has in store for me. And because his life and death have freed me from the burden of having to fix myself or this world by the sweat of my brow, by following the rules.

We are now, like Paul, off the charts. The purpose for our lives is simple, it's pure, it's liberating – **to live is Christ. To die is gain.** Amen.