



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Search for the Meaning of Life

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(Triggered by a study of the Bible book of Ecclesiastes)

I am the preacher. Preaching is my profession. I take my profession seriously. I try to proclaim my messages in a clear and understandable way, and to have reasonable, logical support for them. After all, in my work I am undertaking to deal with global truths – the very basics of life – as well as to be helpful to the people. I am attempting to proclaim the Word of God.

As I do so, I encounter many questions and uncertainties. Things just do not always fit into neat little packages, no matter how much I wish they would. I need to make sense out of my observations and my experiences of life, both for myself and for those to whom I preach. Otherwise, I can't expect my hearers to understand my messages, nor to find them helpful.

It seems that there is a body of belief that is generally regarded as truth. For instance, most everyone seems to hold the view that, if you do right things, you will be appropriately rewarded. And, of course, if you do wrong things, you will just as surely be punished. In the last analysis, God is the judge. Obey God – do what God commands that you do – and you certainly will get the goodies. And, since God is always fair, if you do not obey God's commandments, you will surely suffer the consequences. God metes out to us just what we deserve. Who could expect anything more? Isn't this what life is all about? Isn't this the meaning of life?

Maybe these beliefs are true. Certainly, a lot of people seem to believe them. If God really does reward and punish as the beliefs suggest, then the meaning of life would be found in simply obeying God and getting the rewards for doing so.

I confess, however, that, for me, it isn't quite that simple. These beliefs neither fit what I observe, nor what I experience – not with any consistency. And they do not provide me with adequate answers about the meaning of life.

I know lots of people who keep the commandments and live good lives, but, instead of being rewarded, they have had many misfortunes and have suffered a great deal. There seems to be no answer as to why they suffer. They certainly deserve better, if you judge by their obedience and the good that they do. They ought to be receiving rewards, not misfortunes and suffering. That is, they ought to if what life is all about is to do the right things and get the rewards for doing so.

And I know lots of people who do not keep the commandments and who do terrible and destructive things to those around them. Yet they seem to have an abundance of good fortune. Why should they be rewarded when their behavior is so bad? But they seem to prosper anyway and their prosperity looks like reward.

And I observe that storm and drought, famine and fire, strike people indiscriminately. The righteous are not protected any more than the sinners. Vast

numbers of people exist under the grinding burdens of life – again with no indication that being good or doing good brings any kind of reward. This can't be the meaning of life.

What, then, is the meaning of life? In what or where is it to be found? If I am to have any kind of message to bring to the people, I must have an answer. And I need to know for my own peace of mind. Where do I search? What do I do?

I am the preacher. It is my profession. It is what I do with my life. I will find the answer in my work. Surely, for everyone, the meaning of life is found in their labor and their toil.

I will look to my labor for meaning.

I submerge myself in the tasks of my profession. I prepared carefully and well before I preached. I worked to develop an effective style. I listened to my hearers to learn from them how I might do an even better job. I went about doing good. I was acclaimed for the excellence of my work. I reaped the rewards – the material rewards as well as status and reputation. I saw others benefit from what I said and did. It was worthwhile. There was meaning in what I did.

But I did not find the meaning of life there.

While I was busy about many things, I kept hearing the words of the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible. “I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.” (Ecc. 1:14) “All is vanity.” “All is vanity.” Over and over the refrain sounded. And I heard it as I sought the meaning of life in my work.

What difference does it make if I work hard – have many possessions – receive much acclaim – and help many people? What difference does it make in the long run? When my life ends, all that I have done and all that I have accomplished with my work doesn't add one moment to my life. “All is vanity.” “All is vanity.” The meaning of life is not here.

If my labor does not give me the answer, maybe acquiring and using power will.

So I devoted myself to acquiring and using power.

I was more successful than I could have imagined. I reached the point where I exercised a great deal of control over many things and many people. I influenced business, and manufacturing, and the course of government. I even achieved the position that gave me the power of decisions over whether a person lived or died – that is, physical death. Maybe I even had power over emotional and spiritual death without being fully aware of it. I knew that I could give and withhold possessions and status for any reason I chose.

But even though I acquired and used all that power and received the rewards that went with it, I didn't find the meaning of life. I could affect the length and quality of life for some, but I could not keep a person from dying. Sooner or later, all came to the end of life. Sooner or later, I came to the same place, and was confronted with the same conclusion. All is vanity and a striving after wind.

What difference does it make if I acquire and use all that power, even if I use it to help many people? What difference does it make in the long run? When my life ends, all the power that I have attained doesn't add one moment to my life, nor increase its meaning. The meaning of life is not here.

If my acquiring and using power does not give me the answer, maybe peace and pleasure will. I will look to pleasure for the meaning of life.

So I satiated myself in the pursuit of pleasure. I adopted the philosophy of "eat, drink and be merry". I went to the party wherever it was. I celebrated. I laughed. I played. I sought out all the ways of pleasure about which I knew until I was utterly spent. Nobody had more fun than I - or so I told myself.

In my pursuit of pleasure, I spent money like it was going out of style. I shared with old friends. I made new friends. We played practical jokes on each other. We reminisced. We compared experiences. We philosophized. We danced and played together. We ate and drank until sated. I was determined to experience every kind of pleasure there was. And I did, with all the rewards that went with it.

But all too soon, the party was over. And what did I have to show for it? It was fun. I had added many pleasant memories. I would certainly go to the party again. But not to find the meaning of life. This too is vanity and a striving after wind. I did not find the meaning of life in the pursuit of pleasure.

What difference does it make in the long run? When my life ends, all the pleasure I have had won't add one moment to my life, nor anything significant to its meaning.

If my labor, my acquisition and use of power, and my pursuit of pleasure do not give me the answer, surely, I tell myself, it is to be found in the acquiring of knowledge.

So I devoted myself to acquiring knowledge – all kinds of knowledge.

Why do birds sing? Or cats purr? Or the rain and the snow come as they do? Why are some people kind, and others cruel? I asked myriads of questions. The more I found answers, the more questions there were to which to seek answers. It was soon apparent that I could not know all things. Though there were rich rewards, I did not find the meaning of life in the knowledge I acquired. It too, was vanity and a striving after wind.

What difference does it make in the long run? When my life ends, all the knowledge I have acquired won't add one moment to my life, nor anything significant to its meaning.

Where do I turn now? If I can't find the meaning of life by acquiring knowledge, maybe I can by seeking and gaining wisdom. If I become able to understand and resolve the mysteries of life, and to give wise counsel to all who also yearn for the answers, I should be able to find the meaning of life.

So I set about to seek and gain wisdom.

I looked into the mysteries of life. I read. I studied. I meditated. I investigated every philosophy. I sat at the feet of the gurus. I raised all the questions I could think of. If I could just find the answers – the right combination of ideas and beliefs, I told myself – I would surely be able to gain wisdom, resolve the mysteries, and find the meaning of life, as well as to receive the rewards that go with such wisdom.

Though I gained much wisdom, and was much sought after as a counselor, I did not find the meaning of life. This, too, was vanity and a striving after wind.

In the long run, it all comes out the same way. This life ends, and so what difference does what one has done, or acquired, or come to know make? So what, if one has all wisdom and still does not know the meaning of life? So what, if one receives all kinds of rewards? Neither rewards, nor punishment point to meaning of life.

In all this searching, I began to see that people keep trying to find ways to circumvent and to postpone death – meaning the ending of physical life – as if keeping death from coming is the ultimate objective of life – the ultimate reward – the ultimate meaning.

It isn't.

And you have every right to ask, "Well, then, what is?"

What is the meaning of life?

At this point, I come to a shocking realization. This whole search in which I have been engaged has been based on my assumption that life does not have meaning until I find the meaning – that is, how to circumvent and to postpone death. Acting on that assumption, I have gained possessions, achieved great power, pursued pleasure, acquired knowledge, became wise (but, apparently, not wise enough), all in the belief that the result would be that I then would have found the meaning of life. Instead, I kept finding that all is vanity and a striving after wind.

I'm not going to find the meaning of life by believing that it is not available to me until I do something to find it. I realize now that my problem is in what I believe to start

with. What I believe forms the base from which I have been searching. I need to change what I believe.

I checked on the use of the words “vain” and “vanity”, and found that, in the Bible, they mean emptiness, fruitlessness, worthlessness, vapor, no substance – an empty and worthless substitute for God.

An empty and worthless substitute for God! When I tried to find the meaning of life in my work, was that what I was doing – looking for an empty and worthless substitute for God? I pondered the question a long time, and decided that I wasn’t really looking for a substitute for God, but I was searching in the wrong places and with the wrong beliefs if I wanted to find the meaning of life.

The meaning of life is not in seeking rewards and avoiding punishment. It is not in circumventing or postponing death, nor in preserving life. It is not in labor, nor in getting and using power, nor in pursuing pleasure, nor in acquiring knowledge, nor in seeking and gaining wisdom. In the last analysis, it all comes out the same way. This life ends for us all. What difference does it make what rewards or punishments one has gotten? What difference does it make what one has done, or acquired, or come to know? What is the meaning of life anyway? What message do I proclaim?

Other words of the author of Ecclesiastes come to mind.

“Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do.” (Ecc. 9:7)

God has already approved what you do. And, I might add, God has already approved who you are. Or, said another way, God has already infused your life with meaning.

The author of Ecclesiastes ended his writing with these words, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” (Ecc. 12:13-14)

I would paraphrase that message. God – the Creator – remains in charge of God’s creation – including us, made in the image of God. We have been given life and we are loved from the beginning. We have the gift of life and love to do with as we will. Love God, as we are already loved, and follow God’s instructions, for they are designed to make the living of this life meaningful and satisfying in every way.

If we are willing to accept it, God has set the parameters (judgment) and we have the resources to know what is evil and what is good.

The matter rests in our own hands. There isn't something for us to do to find the meaning of life. There isn't something for us to do to assure rewards and avoid punishment. There isn't something for us to do to keep this life from ending.

There is much for us to do to express the meaning of the life God has given us to live. Love as God loves. Serve as God serves. Suffer as God suffers. Enjoy as God enjoys. For God has already approved you and what you do.

This is the meaning of life.