

A philosophy professor was discussing the purpose of life with his students. He asked, "If all your loved ones were gathered at your funeral, viewing your casket, what would you like them to say about you?" One fellow said, "I hope they would say he was a good husband, father and friend." A gal replied, "I would want them to say I was very successful in my career, but very kind and generous as well." A third student said, "I'd want them to say, 'Hey look, he's moving.'"

Well, folks, what do you think is the purpose of life? Researcher George Barna asked this question in his survey of American Religious Beliefs for Arizona Christian University: What is the universal, common purpose or ultimate reason for living? He gave a variety of possible answers and these were the results. Number one answer, given by 23% of the respondents, was "Experiencing happiness and fulfillment." I guess that is not a real surprise, because we all want to be happy. The second most common answer, 18% was "Evolving into our full potential, physical, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually." I guess that is a good goal. Third with also about 18% was "Knowing, loving and serving God." More about that one in a bit. After that 10% said, "Furthering the development of humanity," whatever that means and another chose a little more tangible, "Living a long and healthy life." 7% opted for "Advancing world peace" as their ultimate reason for living, and 10% said they do not have a clue what the purpose of life is.

Perhaps we gain a little clearer understanding of those answers when we see how people responded to a second question Barna asked: How do you define success? The number answer, 25%, was living a healthy, productive and safe life. "Being a good person" came in second, 22%, and third, 21% was "Consistent obedience to god." 18% defined success as being liked and respected by other people. 4% said success was having or achieving things society values, 3% defined it as whatever society deems success to be, and 2% want to "Return as a more evolved life form"...What I think means reincarnation. That is what George Barna discovered. Again, one might quibble over specific numbers or specific wording, but I suspect Barna's study does reflect what really exists in our culture. How do we as Christians respond? Well, let's pause

and pray that through His word and by His spirit the Lord would encourage and challenge us today.

There are three things that strike me from Barna's research:

#1 There is no consensus among Americans about what the purpose of life is. During my 63 years on this planet, television has supposedly been the great "Homogenizer" of American culture. The advancement of television meant people in Manhattan

and Makinen were watching the same programs and seeing the same ads. Yes, in many ways, for better or for worse, people in Manhattan and Makinen have much more in common than they did 70 years ago. However, it is evident that in many ways, and for many different reasons, there is an increasing fragmentation where your view of life maybe quite similar to someone living in Manhattan, but completely different from your neighbor down the road in Makinen. So when Barna asks, "What is our common purpose for living," people have many different answers.

I would put the answers people gave to Barna in three categories. First, are folks whose focus is pretty much on one person, me...not me, but themselves. When someone thinks the purpose in life is to "Experience happiness and fulfillment," and that success is "Living a healthy, productive and safe life," it reflects a fairly narrow focus. If things are going well for me, in my life, that's what matters. It could be called Narcissism. Now some extend their concern to their immediate family, but they still lead very self-centered lives.

The second type of people are those who at least try to be what we call "Socially Conscious," concerned not just about themselves, but about others. "Furthering the development of humanity, advancing world peace, being a good person, being liked and respected by others." Those are all phrases that would describe someones desire to be concerned about more than personal happiness and to try to make the world a better place.

The third group of people have a different focus. They say their purpose for living, is to know, love and serve God. These folks define success as doing that, or in Barna's survey "Consistent obedience to

God.” These people certainly want to experience happiness. They want to make the world a better place, but they understand that the primary purpose of life is to honor God. That brings us to my second point.

#2 The Bible makes it clear that the purpose of life is indeed to know, love and serve God. Or we might say to Glorify God. Though only about 20% of Americans indicate that it is what they understand life's purpose to be, the Bible sees as a universal responsibility. It is what you and I and every human being on the planet are to do. The Westminster Catechism says, “The chief end of man (meaning, the primary purpose of every human being) is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. The Apostle Paul puts it this way **1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.** Every part of life is to be lived for His glory. Other Scriptures that point to glorify God as our true purpose in life include **Psalm 86:9 -- All the nations you have made will come and bow down before you, Lord, and will bring glory to your name.** Or **Romans 11:36 – For everything comes from him (from the Triune God) and exists by his power and is intended for his glory.** All glory to him forever! Amen. **1 Corinthians 6:20 Says For you were bought at a price. So glorify God with your body.** And **Revelation 4:11 – Our Lord and God, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power, you have created all things, and by your will they exist and were created.**

How do we glorify God? Barna's “know, love and serve God” is pretty close. I might say to know, love, worship and serve God. Loving the Lord is really the key. That is why Jesus says, **Matthew 22:37,38 – Jesus replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.”**³⁸ **This is the first and greatest commandment.** To love God with our entire being is our most important responsibility. If we are doing that, we will indeed glorify God, and we will enjoy Him forever, finding our joy in God, both now and through eternity. Now, the reality is none of us do this perfectly. We should all want our love for God to grow. We should want to glorify God in a greater way today than we did yesterday.

Now many of you here are tracking with what I have just said. You are thinking, yes that's what being a Christian is about. I trust in Jesus as my savior and then I focus on growing in love for the Lord, and trying to glorify Him each day. That is great. My point is that most people do not think this way. 80% of Americans see the purpose of life as *something other* than knowing, loving and serving God. They do not think living life in a way that pleases the Lord is what they want to do. That baffles me why?

#3 Because, I am convinced, people will find what they are looking for in life if they turn to the Lord. Remember, the most popular response to the question “What is the ultimate reason for living?” was “Experiencing happiness and fulfillment.” That is close to universal human desire. Yet, even though most people do not realize it, trusting and following Jesus is the only path that leads to true and lasting happiness. John Piper, coined the phrase “Christian Hedonism” to sum up the Bible's teaching on this topic. I remember when I first heard the phrase I thought it was strange. Hedonism means to pursue pleasure. It is often associated with drugs, sex and rock and roll, or if you are a bit older, wine, women and songs. That seems to be the opposite of what a Christian should try to do. Yet, over the years I have come to realize that not only is Piper correct in his understanding of what the Bible teaches, but he has identified a very practical and helpful truth for those trusting and following Jesus.

The Bible teaches that God is the source of solid and lasting joy. If you want to experience a joy that transcends your circumstances, that will enable you to be happy even when your happenings do not happen the way you want them to happen, a joy that will last into eternity, then friend, trust and follow Jesus. It is described in **Psalm 16:11 As David speaks to the Lord, You reveal the path of life to me; in your presence is abundant joy; at your right hand are eternal pleasures.** Or **psalm 84:10-12 – Better is a day in your courts than a thousand anywhere else. I would rather stand at the doorway of the house of my God than live in the tents of wicked people. The Lord grants favor and honor; he does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity. Happy is the person who trusts in you.** Like C.S. Lewis, Piper understands that the problem with us as human

beings is usually not that we want too much out of life, but they we are content with far too little. Lewis put it this way: *"It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. We are like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."*

Friends, we should be satisfied with nothing less than the joy that comes from knowing, loving and serving the Triune God. As most of you know, following that path is not always fun and not always easy. You will shed plenty of tears along the path. But it is the only road that leads to solid and lasting joy. And as John Piper likes to point out, finding our joy in God, rather than in other things, is a big way to glorify God. If you can truly say, I find more joy in my relationship with the Lord than I do in sports or other hobbies, more joy in the Lord than I do in my job or career, more joy in the Lord than I do my house, car or other things I own, more joy in the Lord than I ever find in my relationships with family members and friends, that does indeed glorify God. It reflects the fact that you have found Him to be more worthy, more cherished, than anything else in your life.

So, why do people, people I know and love, intelligent people, choose not to take the path that leads to joy? Why do they refuse to trust and follow Jesus when they say happiness is what they are looking for? Two main reasons. First, is spiritual blindness. The Christian message just doesn't make sense to many folks. That has been true for a long time. Even in the first century, the Apostle Paul wrote **1 Corinthians 1:23 – So when we preach that Christ was crucified, (The heart of Christian message) the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.** Paul explains why this is the case in **2 Corinthians 4:4 – Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.** Apart from the help of God's spirit, the Gospel does not make sense to people.

Second reason people are not interested in trusting and following Jesus, is because they are

"Post-Christians." They do not believe Jesus is the path that leads to happiness, because they think they have been on that path and think they know it is not where it leads. A couple of weeks ago I had this conversation, with a friend, a real person, so I won't give you a name. The individual told me that she had gone to a Lutheran church when she was a child, but had never been confirmed. She, now however, has a spiritual hunger. She feels that religion will help bring significance and fulfillment to her life. So during COVID, she has been watching three different "Spiritual Teachers" every week. One is Sikh Priest—India, the big turbans, kid of an off shoot of Hinduism. The second is a Unitarian Universal Pastor. That churches name proclaims they do not believe Jesus is God and they believe everyone will be saved. The third is Jewish women, who is not a Rabbi. This is where she is turning to fill her spiritual hunger. Notice there is no Lutheran or Baptist pastor on the list, or even a Roman Catholic priest. Why? I suspect she thinks she has already been down that path. Her experience in church when she was a kid, likely left her empty. She wants to explore religions with when she is not familiar, because maybe one of them will be that path leading to fulfillment and happiness.

How do we respond to someone like my friend? Gently. I commend her quest for spiritual truth, but urge her to not exclude Bible Christianity as she seeks to find what will bring fulfillment and happiness to her life. And then I very gently suggest that perhaps her childhood experience at a Lutheran church didn't really expose her to all that Christianity is and offers. Whether they were raised in Lutheran, Baptist, Charism or Roman Catholic churches, there are many people who were fed a lot of Legalism and Moralism...follow the rules and be a good person, and very little Gospel...Salvation by grace, through faith, in Jesus alone. Do people find the Gospel of Jesus Christ unsatisfying and unfulfilling? Not usually. They often experience some distorted or incomplete form of Christianity, confuse it with the Gospel, and then declare it does not provide the life and joy it promises.

Second thing people are looking for in life, according to Barna, is good health, safety, and a long life. Now, I do not believe Bible Christianity promises these things in the here and now, though empirical evidence reveals that people who are

regular attenders have less health problems and a longer life expectancy than people who do not attend church. Yet, the reality is that all of us are vulnerable to health problems, accidents and invariably death. Now, there are times when God intervenes and heals a sickness, prevents a car accident from occurring, or keeps us from dying prematurely. There are two things we must never forget.

#1 As God's children we will never experience a tooth ache or broken bone, an illness or accident, unless the Lord has chosen to use that adversity for His glory and for our ultimate good. Also, none of us will breathe our last breath on this earth one second earlier or one second later than God ordained. I find that comforting.

#2 Is an even better promise. One day we will have perfect health complete, safety and eternal life. This happens for all believers in Jesus when we arrive in our eternal home in heaven. The Apostle John describes it in **Revelation 21:3b, 4** – **“Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”**

Folks, that promise freedom from death, sorrow, crying and pain points to something for when human beings long. The mistake is thinking it is something that can be found here and now. It will be experienced only by those who travel to a new land, to the Promised Land, where Jesus is King. Again the way to reach that land is by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

This year marks 10 years since the death of my friend Howie Janesich. Many of you knew Howie. Some of you knew him as Mr. Janesich when he taught and coached at Buhl and Mountain Iron. The first time I met Howie, he was filling his motorcycle with gas at what was then the EZ Stop Station here in Chisholm. I remember Howie saying, “It is great day, Pastor Dan and when you have your health, you have everything.” I remember what he said because, even though I didn't respond, I thought, “No. That is a futile hope. No one always has their health.” Well, the years went by, Howie and I became good friends. We enjoyed working together with Bob McDonald and the Chisholm Basketball Program. And then Howie and his wife Judy started coming here to

church on Sunday mornings. After a while they both confessed their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. In the summer of 2010 Howie and Judy were baptized at Dewey Lake. And then that fall Howie was diagnosed with cancer and passed away in November. In my last conversation with him, Howie said something like this. “Pastor Dan I am very sick. I have lost my health, but I still have Jesus and that is all that really matters, isn't it?” I responded, “Yes, Howie. Having Jesus, or more precisely Jesus having you, is all that really matters.”

Friends, remember this: Right now you may not be experiencing the happiness or health, the safety or security, fun or fulfillment for when you long. But if you have Jesus, if He has you, if you are trusting and following Him, that is all that really matters.