

How to Live a Good and Meaningful Life

Rich Nathan

Never Give Up

Hebrews 12

August 17 & 18, 2019

If a reporter came up to you on the street and shoved a microphone in your face and said, “Tell me, what’s the meaning of life?” What would you say?

It’s always interesting to hear what famous people say is the meaning of life. Here’s Arnold Schwarzenegger’s.

Slide (There are pictures to go with all these quotes)

For me, life is continuously being hungry. The meaning of life is not simply to exist, to survive, but to move ahead, to go up, to achieve, to conquer. – Arnold Schwarzenegger

Here’s Selena Gomez’s take:

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“One of the most important things for me in life is my hair. I’ve always been about my hair, and I love that my mom and my nana taught me how to take care of it myself. It goes through a lot every day, but I try to keep it healthy. I have to admit, it can get a little dead on the ends.” – Selena Gomez

Here’s wisdom from Frank Sinatra:

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“The big lesson in life, baby, is never be scared of anyone or anything.” – Frank Sinatra

Of course, we have the old bumper sticker that says:

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The one who dies with the most toys wins.

In other words, the meaning of life is found in acquiring as much stuff as you possibly can. Today, we might say the one who has the most experiences, not necessarily things, but experiences – travel experiences, sexual experiences, foodie experiences wins. Or maybe the one who has the most likes on Facebook or Instagram wins.

And of course, there’s wisdom from Kanye West:

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“My greatest pain in life is that I will never be able to see myself perform live.” – Kanye West

One person says the meaning of life is found in having nice hair. Another person says the meaning of life is getting a bunch of stuff. Another person says that the meaning of life is found in comfortable retirement and playing golf every weekend. Someone else says, “For me, the meaning of life is found in injecting heroin into my veins.”

It’s no wonder we have so much chaos and conflict in our society. There are so many different opinions about how it is that we’re going to live a good and meaningful life. And we have no one deciding which opinion is right. Let me give you an illustration:

Imagine if we have four people trying to play a game of pool. One person says, “The object of this game is to avoid getting any of the balls into one of the holes on the table.” Another person says, “That’s not the way you win. The way you win is by getting all the balls lined up in the corner.” Another person says, “No, the way that you win the game is by getting the white ball in a hole without touching any of the other balls.” Another person says, “Wait a minute. Why don’t we read the rules of the game. Otherwise, we’re all just guessing and we definitely can’t play together because we’re all playing by different rules.”

Brothers and sisters, if everyone has their own opinion about how to win at the game of life, how do we decide which one is the right opinion? What do we say to our kids about how to live a good and meaningful life if it’s all a matter of my opinion versus our kids’ opinion? The only way to decide between all the different competing visions of life is if there’s a God above us who has communicated to us, “This is the way to live a good life. Here are the rules of the game. Here’s what life is all about.” That’s what God did in sending us Jesus and giving us the Bible. He communicates this is the way to live a good and meaningful life. You don’t have to guess at the rules of the game.

Today, we’re going to continue in the book of Hebrews, a book that we’ve been studying all summer. In Hebrews 12, the author goes beyond Kanye or Sinatra. Even beyond Arnold and Selena. In Hebrews 12, he gives us one of the best, sustained explanations of how it is that you and I can live a good and meaningful life. I’ve called today’s message, “How to Live a Good and Meaningful Life”. Let’s pray.

Slide Hebrews 12:1-3, 12-13

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame,

and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

¹² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³ “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

What I get from these verses is that one of the keys to living a good and meaningful life is to

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Interpret life correctly

In Hebrews 12:1-2, the author tells us that life is a race, perhaps thinking of the marathons that used to be run in the ancient Olympic games. Parenthetically, it's not exactly clear how we should interpret this statement in verse 1:

Slide Hebrews 12:1

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,

And then in verse 12, he describes that life is a boxing match.

Slide Hebrews 12:12

¹² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

In other words, keep your hands up. Don't let your arms droop. Otherwise, you will be knocked down by your opponent. So, if we were to take these two statements, we might combine them and say to the writer of Hebrews that the best way to understand life is to say that life is a strenuous journey.

So, with apologies to Selena Gomez, life is not really about your hair. With apologies to Kanye, life is not really about seeing yourself in the mirror. Life is not about getting the most stuff or having the most likes on Facebook. Life, properly interpreted, is a strenuous journey. You know, most of the great thinkers in history have interpreted life this way.

Back in the late 17th century, there was an English Puritan named John Bunyan who wrote a book while he was in prison for preaching without a license from the government. The book was called *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

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Book cover

The Pilgrim's Progress has been called the first novel written in English. And other than the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress* was the most read and most owned book by English speaking Protestants in the 1700's and the 1800's. Millions and millions of people used to read *Pilgrim's Progress* to their children.

The language is really dated and almost no one today reads *Pilgrim's Progress* to their kids, though there are updated versions of it which are kid-friendly. I didn't read it as a child, but I read it as an adult and I absolutely loved it. The entire book is an allegory. A man named Christian journeys from his home town called the "City of Destruction", which stands for the world, to the "Celestial City" which is heaven. Along the way, he encounters a variety of people and challenges as he undertakes this strenuous journey from this world to the kingdom of God.

Pilgrim's Progress is hardly the only book which has interpreted life as being a strenuous journey. In ancient Greece, of course, we have *The Odyssey* by Homer.

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Book cover

Maybe you read that in high school. Life as a strenuous journey is the metaphor that Mark Twain uses in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

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Book cover

And of course, if you're looking for stories that interpret life as a strenuous journey, look no further than *The Wizard of Oz*.

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Movie poster

Follow the yellow brick road.

Let me ask you a question. Is this the way that you see life? Do you say to yourself often, my life is a journey from this world to the kingdom of God? Life is not meant to be a continual vacation on the beach or a spa day where I am pampered all day long. If life is hard, nothing's wrong. Life is a strenuous journey. And life is not meaningless; it's not a random series of events. I'm not just a bunch of atoms thrown together through unguided chance. God has given life meaning. God has designed life with purpose. I'm headed somewhere. I have a destination in view. I'm aiming to see God and to live with him forever.

Let's read on in this chapter:

Slide Hebrews 12:4-8, 11

⁴ In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
⁶ because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

What I get from these verses is that part of living a good and meaningful life is not only interpreting life correctly as a strenuous journey, but also learning to

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Interpret suffering correctly

The author here is not making a comprehensive statement about suffering. He’s not saying that all loss or all pain is noble. The author is not saying that people who suffer more obviously need more discipline from the Lord than people who suffer less. Nor is he saying that it’s obvious that all suffering in our lives serves a higher good or some higher purpose. We should never read one text in the Bible as summarizing everything that the Bible has to say about a difficult subject. What the author is saying, however, is that interpreted correctly some suffering can be used by God to produce good in our lives.

I’ve often said to people that the worst thing in our lives is not pain. The worst thing in our lives is wasted pain. Pain that doesn’t make us wiser. Pain that doesn’t make us more sensitive to other people’s pain. Pain that doesn’t make us more grateful for the gifts in our lives that we’ve taken for granted. The worst thing in life, brothers and sisters, is not pain. It’s wasted pain. It’s pain that doesn’t result in any good for us or for others.

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Suffering produces growth

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, when I ask people what the most transformative moment in their lives, what is the thing that produced the most change in you? Almost always, people talk about times of suffering.

Suffering upsets the normal patterns of our lives. It makes us realize the limits of our self-sufficiency. Much of the time, we feel like we don't need a lot from other people. I don't need a lot from God. I'm doing just fine on my own. And then something knocks us off our feet. It could be a scary medical diagnosis. It could be a betrayal from someone you trust. A public humiliation. The suffering of a loved one. The loss of someone close to you. A child's addiction. A major disappointment. Something knocks us off your feet. Suffering shatters our illusion of self-sufficiency. It says to us, "You know what, you're not nearly as strong or mature or full of faith as you thought you were."

The journalist David Brooks puts it this way:

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[Suffering] smashes through the floor of what you thought was the basement of your soul and reveals a cavity below, and then it smashes through that floor and reveals a cavity below that.

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Suffering produces love and gratitude

Suffering not only holds a mirror up to us concerning where we are, but it very much can lead to a greater appreciation and love for God and for others. As I said, we so often take God's gifts, whether they're friendship or health or love from our families, just feeling good or doing enjoyable work, we often take God's gifts for granted. It's when something is removed from us that we realize nothing has to be. All that I have is good has come from the hand of God.

Sometimes suffering is a wakeup call that we've gotten off the path. Sometimes we're experiencing pain because God wants us to turn around.

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Suffering produces a wake-up call

How often has it been pain that's gotten you to change your life? We can live at a low level in your marriage for years and get used to bad communication and frustration and disappointment. But at some point, our marriage causes greater pain than our inertia and we finally make a choice to get counseling to deal with the issues that have been there for decades. Or you've had an addiction for years. It's getting sick and tired of being sick and tired that makes us change. As C.S. Lewis said,

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God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

God uses pain to wake us up. God uses pain to get us to turn around. To make different choices in our lives. Choices that will relieve the pain. But if God uses pain to grow us, to wake us, to move us to love and gratitude – it's always because he loves us. All that our Father in heaven does, he does because he loves us.

How do we live a good and meaningful life? We need to interpret life correctly. Life is a strenuous journey from this world to the kingdom of God. We need to interpret suffering correctly. Suffering is often used by God our Father to produce something good in us – kindness to others, awareness of our own limits, a wakeup call to reverse field and get back on track. And because life is a journey, we need to

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Interpret the traps correctly

Slide Hebrews 12:14-17

¹⁴ Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. ¹⁷ Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.

In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, as Christian made his way from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City there were traps along the way. There were places where he got off the path. It's not easy to live the Christian life. It's never been easy.

The author mentions some traps. In verses 14 and 15, he mentions the roots of bitterness.

Slide Hebrews 12:14-17

¹⁴ Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

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The trap of bitterness

What is the author talking about by watching out for the root of bitterness? The context of the “root of bitterness” is in verse 14 where we are urged to “make every effort to live in peace with everyone”. The author is warning us of the impact of unresolved conflict. When you have a conflict with someone and you don’t resolve it, when you’re not at peace and you let that conflict fester, it forms roots of bitterness in the soil of your soul.

Not only will unresolved conflict with someone separate you from God and from the church, but in the words of the author, “it defiles many”. It spreads like a poisonous vine. The tendency is to take your bitterness and unresolved anger and sow it in someone else’s life and then someone else’s and someone else’s. Have you ever seen that? You are really hurt by someone. You feel betrayed or dismissed by them or treated unfairly. And you haven’t resolved it with God and with the person who hurt you. What do you do with that hurt? You know what you do. It’s what I do – we spread the hurt around. We want others to share in our view that this is a really awful person or an awful church and they should hate them as well. The only way to dig up the bitter root of unresolved conflict and anger towards a person is forgiveness.

Friends, are there any of you who have fallen into the trap of bitterness? You’re angry and hurt by something that a family member or friend or a Christian leader or the church has done to you. Can any of you see in your own soul the root of bitterness that is not only affecting you but spreading to others? Do you see that the only way to get free is to forgive the person who has hurt you and to turn your anger over to the Lord?

The author mentions another trap.

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The trap of sexual immorality

Slide Hebrews 12:16

¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.

The Greek word for sexual immorality is the word *porneia*. It’s the word from which pornography comes. By *porneia* the author is talking about any deviant sexual behavior. How many people do you think have stepped off the road in this world to the kingdom of God because they have gotten themselves trapped in sexual immorality? In fact, I’ve seen few things derail a person’s pursuit of Jesus more often than sexual immorality.

Bitterness is a trap. Sexual immorality is a trap. So is godlessness.

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The trap of godlessness

Slide Hebrews 12:16

¹⁶ See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.

What's he talking about when he speaks about the trap of being "godless like Esau"? The author is going back to Genesis where Esau traded in his birthright, his inheritance of God's promises that came through his grandfather, Abraham, and his father, Isaac. Promises of being the chosen people. Promises of the land. Promises of blessing. He traded in God's promises for the immediate gratification of a meal.

How can you and I fall into the trap of godlessness like Esau? Certainly, we are imitating Esau's godlessness every time we opt for immediate gratification over long-term intimacy with God. Every time we give into a particular sin which hurts our conscience or robs us of peace or is a substitute for the satisfaction we could find in God we're being like Esau. Immediate gratification over our deeper connection with God.

So, if you want to live a good and meaningful life, you've got to interpret life correctly. Life is a strenuous journey. There's nothing wrong when life is hard. It's not meant to be a day at the beach. The fact that you experience stress – what did you expect in a marathon? The fact that you are getting push back because you want to follow Jesus – what do you expect?

We need to interpret suffering correctly. Life is not about everything going right all the time. That's not a Christian perspective. We need to interpret the traps correctly and we need to interpret the destination correctly. Finally, like any journey, the Christian life has a destination.

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Interpret the destination correctly

It's become very common today to speak about life as a journey, but many post-Christian thinkers suggest that the meaning of life is just found in the journey itself. It's a journey unto nowhere. It's just all process. Meaning is found in trying, in doing your best, in making your own meaning. But the author of Hebrews says, "Oh no. The meaning of life is not just found in running a marathon. It's running a marathon towards a destination, towards a goal."

The author speaks about two mountains. The first mountain is Mt. Sinai.

Slide Hebrews 12:18

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm;

Mt. Sinai, which the place of the giving of the old covenant, is described in the next few verses by seven characteristics.

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1. A mountain that can be touched
2. A burning fire
3. Darkness
4. Gloom
5. Storm
6. A trumpet blast
7. A voice speaking words

Everything about the old covenant at Mt. Sinai was designed to communicate distance. It was designed to communicate “Stay away!” It was designed to communicate “Back off! God is holy! You can’t just walk into his presence!”

The author is saying to his audience, “Why would you want to go back to distance from God and to a situation where you were afraid of God? You were cut off from God? Don’t go back to that old system. There has been a total system upgrade. You have something so much better because Jesus came.” And he describes the second mountain. Not Mt. Sinai but Mt. Zion.

Slide Hebrews 12:22a

²² But you have come to Mount Zion,

Just like Mt. Sinai, Mt. Zion has seven things we encounter there:

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1. The heavenly Jerusalem
2. Thousands and thousands of angels.
3. The church of the firstborn
4. God
5. The spirits of righteous men
6. Jesus
7. The sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel

The author says, “You didn’t come to Mt. Sinai, but through Jesus you have come to Mt. Zion.” Everything about Mt. Zion is designed to draw us close, to draw us near, to draw us into intimacy with God. The curtain has been torn. Everything the author of Hebrews has been saying about the upgrade of the new covenant is that we now can draw near to God. Because of Jesus and his death for our sins, we do have confidence to come into God’s presence. The Lord welcomes us. He wants fellowship with us. He’s

not saying “Back off” anymore. He’s saying “Come near”. He’s not saying “Get away”. He’s saying “Get close.”

I love the culmination of this text where he speaks about the characteristic of Mt. Zion this way.

Slide Hebrews 12:24

[You’ve come] to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Why does Jesus’ blood speak a better word than the blood of Abel? Abel’s blood cried out from the ground for vengeance. After Cain murdered his brother Abel, Abel’s blood cried out from the ground. Here’s what we read:

Slide Genesis 4:10

¹⁰The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.

Abel’s blood cried out for justice. “God, look at what my brother did to me! Avenge my death, O God! Don’t let Cain get away with this awful crime.”

Around the world, the blood of Abel cries out to God for justice. The blood of the people who died at the mass slaughter in El Paso, the blood of the people who died at the mass slaughter in Dayton, the blood of the people who die in shootings all over America every day, those who die at the hands of dictators around the world, their blood is crying out to God for justice. Their blood is crying out for vengeance.

We read this:

Slide Hebrews 12:24

[You’ve come] to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Why does Christ’s blood speak a better word than the blood of Abel? The blood of Christ speaks to us of pardon. Christ’s blood cries out to God – not for vengeance, but forgiveness!

Christ’s blood cries out to God, “Father, forgive them. Father, have mercy on them. Father, receive them into your arms. Forgive every one of them who turns in faith to me. Forgive every one of them for everything they have ever done and everything they have failed to do. Forgive them, Father, for every breach of your holy Law, for all of their wanderings away from you. For all the traps they have fallen into. Father, forgive them.”

The better word is a word of forgiveness. Brothers and sisters, those of us who place our faith in Jesus will not just hear that better word on a day of judgment. Father, forgive them. Pardon them. Absolve them of all of their guilt. What the author is saying is that you can hear the blood of Jesus speaking to you right now. You can come to Mt. Zion right now in prayer. Every time you worship, you're coming to Mt. Zion. Every time you pray to God, you're coming to Mt. Zion and you're coming to the blood that speaks a better word.

Do you hear the blood of Jesus speaking to you? Do you hear it? Be clean, my child. Lay your sins on me. Do you hear the blood of Jesus speaking, not only to God, but to your own conscience? Be clean. Be set free. Be forgiven.

Do you want to live and good and meaningful life? One of the secrets is to hear the blood of Jesus speaking to you. Let's pray.

How to Live a Good and Meaningful Life

Rich Nathan
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- I. Interpret life correctly
- II. Interpret suffering correctly
 - a. Suffering produces growth
 - b. Suffering produces love and gratitude
 - c. Suffering produces a wake-up call
- III. Interpret the traps correctly
 - a. The trap of bitterness
 - b. The trap of sexual immorality
 - c. The trap of godlessness
- IV. Interpret the destination correctly