

The Meaning of Life Leader's Guide

Young adulthood can be a time where we ask many big questions and make important decisions about our lives. We wonder why we are here, what we are supposed to do with our lives, and what do we want to do before our lives end.

In this four-part study, we will look at how the meaning of life is found in our creation, redemption, vocation, and resurrection. Notes for the leader will be provided in blue italics. The topics addressed in each session may lead to greater discussion beyond the provided questions. Do not be afraid to note other topics and ideas that this study may draw out and explore them further. Be sure to reach out to your pastor, other commissioned workers, or written resources to further explore topics in this study.

Session 1: Living as God's Creatures

The Meaning of Life

...is found in our Creation, Redemption, Vocation, and Resurrection.

Creation: God is God, and we are not. God created us and continues to provide for all our needs. He has designed us to live in a certain way, and we trust his promises to us.

Consider these difficult questions that might be heavy in your mind.

- What is the meaning of life?
- From whence does life come? What is our relationship to the One who gives life?
- What is our relationship to the rest of creation, and in particular other humans?
- Why does death exist, and why will we ourselves die? Is it supposed to be that way? Will death always conquer us? How do you know?

Where do you go to find answers to these questions as Christians. We are going to explore those questions by looking at how the meaning of life is found in our creation, redemption, vocation, and resurrection.

To understand who we are as God's creation, start by looking that the following verses from Scripture and the Small Catechism. It is helpful for everyone to have access to a Bible and for longer passages to have multiple people read.

Genesis 1:24-31; 2:15-25 – God Creates Us

- What did God create on the sixth day?
- In what ways are we like the other living creatures?
- Being made "in the image of God" sets us apart from other creatures. How is this term explained in Genesis 1:26, 28?

The First Article: Creation – God Provides for Us as Creatures

"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean? I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true."

-Luther's Small Catechism

- Where does our life come from? How did we get our very existence, our body, our mind, our historical context as 21st century Americans, our parents and siblings, etc?
- We receive all good things from the Lord. But what about when the Lord gives us bad things...?

Job – God Is God. You Are Not.

Read Job 1:20-22; 2:9-10.

- Who does Job believe killed his kids? Is he right?

As the leader share: Most of the book records how Job's three friends try to convince Job, "Buddy, you must have done something wrong. After all, God loves the righteous and punishes the wicked. So, since God is harming you, you must have done something really bad to earn his wrath. Figure out what it was, repent, and God will give you good things again."

But Job maintains that he did not commit some particular sin for which the Lord is punishing him. Job knows that God is good, and he's waiting patiently for God to rescue him from his misery, but God is silent. After a while, Job begins to demand that God give him a reason for making him suffer. He starts to claim that, not only did he not commit some particular sin—he didn't sin (chapter 31).

- Starting in chapter 38, the Lord himself shows up to answer Job. What reason does God give why he made Job suffer?
God is God. You are not. See also Romans 9:19-24. God reminds Job who it is that is the creator and who is the creation.
- When the Lord's hand seems to be against you, and you don't know why, how should you respond?
We know that God's mind and ways are beyond us. We may not see what God is doing but that does not mean that he does not have mercy on us and love us. See Romans 11:30-36.
- What are promises we can hold on to when things around us seem difficult?
See Romans 8:28-39. God is working good according to His will and ways. God has sent Jesus to die so that we can never be separated from God's love.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16, 32-40 – To Live as a Creature Is to Live by Faith

- What does it mean to have faith or to live by faith?

- Did the people in Hebrews 11 receive the things that God promised them? That is, did their faith become sight?
- Why should we trust the Lord?
- What would life without any kind of faith look like?
- What good is faith? Why is it good, proper, and vital that creatures live by faith, not by sight?

Exodus 20:1-21 – To Live as a Creature Is to Live under God’s Design

- Upon what basis does God give the Ten Commandments? That is, why should he get to tell people how to live?
- What do the Ten Commandments tell us about our relationship to God and to each other?
- Do the people want to approach God? Why or why not?

Next time: We do not, in fact, live according to God’s design. How does God respond?

Session 2: Redeemed by Christ

The Meaning of Life

...is found in our creation, redemption, vocation, and resurrection.

Creation: God is God, and we are not. God created us and continues to provide for all our needs. He has designed us to live in a certain way, and we trust his promises to us.

But our life as creatures begs the question: what about the fact that we are sinful? We do not, in fact live according to his design specifications. How does the Lord God Almighty respond?

To understand redemption in Christ, start by looking that the following verses from Scripture and the Small Catechism. It is helpful for everyone to have access to a Bible and for longer passages to have multiple people read.

The “Problem” of God’s Law

As the leader share: When we consider the Ten Commandments, we cannot help but be accused by them. They show us our sin.

God’s Law hurts us. Does this mean that God’s Law is bad? Aren’t suffering and pain bad things that we should avoid by any means necessary? Consider when a person is dying. Some may say that a “good death” includes using drugs to numb any pain until the person is no longer awake or alert. We can question if it’s right to take away every possible pain a person may have, regardless of the repercussions.

God’s Law accuses us, not because the Law is bad, but because we are. The “problem” of God’s Law is really the problem of our sin.

Likewise, when I’m dying, I don’t want to be pumped so full of morphine that I cannot be awake or alert. I desperately want to be able to talk with my family and my pastor to reconcile, confessing my sins and receiving forgiveness. I want to be able to share my faith and hope to my family to help ease their distress when I die. I must die as the wage for my sin. But this will not be the end of me because there is One who has taken away my sins, died in my place, and risen from the death in my place.

The One Who Lives Exactly As God Intends

- We were once perfect humans, living as God intended. When was this? What happened to our humanness?

Read Galatians 4:4-5; Hebrews 4:14-18 and Matthew 26: 36-39.

- What does it mean that Jesus is fully human? In what ways is he like us? In what ways does he not experience humanity in the same way that we do?
- Look at Hebrews 2:14-18 as well. In these passages, why is it beneficial for us that Jesus is fully human?

Romans 5:6-10; 8:3-4; Colossians 1:19-20 - In My Shoes

- How can Jesus dying do anything good for *me*?

The Second Article: Redemption

"And [I believe] in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.

What does this mean? I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true."

-Luther's Small Catechism

- How does knowing we are redeemed by Jesus give our lives meaning?
- How is the meaning we have in our redemption different than the false meaning given in the world?

Ephesians 2:1-10 - To Live Is to be Saved by Grace through Faith in Christ

- What is the "before" and "after" picture here? What happened in between? How does this reveal the meaning of life?
- What is the difference between how Christians and unbelievers understand "life"?

Next time: If my sin isn't counted against me, then why should I bother living a good life? What should I do with my life?

Session 3: Serving Our Neighbor

The Meaning of Life

...is found in our creation, redemption, vocation, and resurrection.

Creation: God is God, and we are not. God created us and continues to provide for all our needs. He has designed us to live in a certain way, and we trust his promises to us.

Redemption: The head of humanity is no longer Adam, but Jesus. Jesus is the perfect human, and he is exactly what man is supposed to be. To truly live is to be saved by grace through faith in Christ.

Upon redeeming us, God puts us back in the world.

To understand our vocation and the meaning it gives, look that the following verses from Scripture and the Small Catechism. It is helpful for everyone to have access to a Bible and for longer passages to have multiple people read.

Ephesians 5:22—6:9 – Who Is Your Neighbor, and What Do You Owe Him/Her?

- What are a **wife's** God-given role(s) and responsibilities toward her **husband**? (That is, "**She is to be _____, and God calls her to _____**"?)
- What are a **husband's** God-given roles and responsibilities toward his **wife**?
- What are a **child's** God-given roles and responsibilities toward his/her **parents**?
- What are a **father's** God-given roles and responsibilities toward his **child**?
- What are a **servant's** God-given roles and responsibilities toward his/her **master**?
- What are a **master's** God-given roles and responsibilities toward his/her **servant**?

It may be helpful to look at the Table of Duties in Luther's Small Catechism to answer some of these questions as well.

What are my vocations?

As a leader share: When explaining what sins we should confess to our pastor, Luther portrays sin as a brokenness of relationships. He then examines some of the things which could be broken about those relationships. These relationships are vocations.

"Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?"

-Luther's Small Catechism

From this we learn that we have particular relationships with particular people. God has designed these relationships such that we owe certain people certain things (or people need certain things from us). Sin

against my neighbor describes a variety of ways in which I fail to give him what I owe him as his father, son, worker, etc.

In addition to designing what we owe each other and what we need from each other, God directly gives us overarching roles and responsibilities in a number of our vocations (e.g. child, father, mother, worker, citizen). At the same time, God gave you to your parents as their son or daughter. Vocation is Latin word from voco, "to call." So, your vocations are the offices or "relationship places" to which God has called you. These vocations are gifts directly from God.

Consider these questions when identifying your vocations. Where has God definitively and clearly called you? Consider the three estates: Church, Family, and State. How/when has God called you into the Church? How/when has God called you into Family? How/when has God called you into the civil State? Everyone has these vocations.

Titles and duties within each vocation will be different depending on the person. You may choose who you will marry or befriend. You can choose your occupation, for whom and in what capacity we will work. What you don't get to do is choose whether or not you'll be a Christian (Church), or whether or not you'll honor your parents (Family), or whether or not you'll serve your neighbor in some way (State). You are always called to those vocations.

What should you do with your life?

As a leader share: This is one of the tremendously important questions you wrestle with regularly as a college student and as a maturing man or woman. Are you in the "right" major? Will a degree in your major enable you to get a job in a field you'd like to work in? Should you get married or wait until you meet certain markers? Should you try to hold off on having kids, or is this rejecting the understanding that children are always a gift from God and a direct outcome of sex?

*There is a temptation to let our considerations about these questions be purely about self-fulfillment: "What do I want for myself?" A better question might be: "**How can I best love and serve my neighbor?**"—and who is (or can be) my neighbor?*

Your vocations—the offices, relationships to which God has called you—are primary, everyday ways in which you serve your neighbor and through which the Lord serves your neighbor. Your occupation is one of these, but it is not the most important. Vocations are ordered. Note that in Ephesians 5-6 Paul begins with wives and husbands, then moves to children, then to work. Some vocation are prioritized before others – Church comes before Family, Family comes before State. And also within these vocations, certain neighbors rank before others (e.g. spouse comes before children, next-door-neighbor comes before neighbor-in-a-foreign-country)."

Other than what is revealed in the Bible (e.g. the Ten Commandments), God typically doesn't explicitly tell you what to do with your life—what career to take, whom to marry, etc. Answering these decisions, then,

largely comes down to wisdom, experience, and the guidance of your family and friends. Consider the following questions.

Leaders, read through the questions below with participants and consider how understanding vocation, understanding God's Word and listening to faithful Christians around them helps them to answer these. Have a discussion around where participants might struggle with answering these questions. As a leader, be prepared to share how you used God's Word and your understanding of vocation to answer one or more of these questions.

Questions of vocation

- What place does my Christian faith play in my life? Is going to church a priority for me?
- How much of my time and attention do my family, friends, and those whom I serve need from me, or how much time and attention do I owe them? Among my options, which jobs/careers will be least likely to intrude upon my family time?
- What other people in my life rely on me heavily for things? (For example, if you have aging parents with health problems, you might try to live near them or have them move in with you. This used to be called "retirement.")
- Should I get married? Is lust an issue for me? (See 1 Corinthians 7:8-9)
- How can I love and serve my neighbor through a given job/career? How does each benefit people?
- Would a given job require me to break God's Law regularly and deliberately?
- Which jobs/careers will allow me to be an active member of a solid church (when considering location, shift work, travelling, etc.)?

Questions of personality

- What problem(s) in the world do I particularly notice and want to spend my life addressing?
- What do my friends/family say that I'm good at? What do I believe I'm good at?
- What work would most play into the strengths, knowledge, and skills that God has given me?
- What work would further develop these skills so I can become even more effective?
- For what extrinsic (outside of myself) reasons would I do a given job? Why does each job need to be done? Whose life would get worse if this job weren't done?

In conclusion

- What is the focus of your daily life? Are you here to make your own life better, or someone else's?
- What difference does this distinction make?
- Who is currently in your life? What do you currently owe them?
- What are the most important factors in how you decide what to do with your life?

Session 4: Born to Live Eternally

The Meaning of Life

...is found in our creation, redemption, vocation, and resurrection.

Creation: One important thing about us is that God created us and continues to provide for all our needs. He has designed us to live in a certain way, and we trust his promises to us.

Redemption: The head of humanity is no longer Adam, but Jesus. Jesus is the perfect human, and he is exactly what man is supposed to be. To truly live is to be saved by grace through faith in Christ.

Vocation: Upon redeeming us, Christ does not take us out of the world but rather gives us a higher purpose within it. You exist for the benefit of other people, not yourself. What should you do with your life? Love and serve your neighbor.

But what good is life if it ends in death?

In this session, it may be helpful to print out the lesson for everyone. This way they can read along and take notes on the article from Rev. Dr. Gibbs. There are several questions provided at the end. Depending on your group, you may want to read the whole article at once or take it in sections. If there are questions about the theology discussed in the article, it may be valuable to invite your pastor to join you for the discussion, if they are not already present.

Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs, "Five Things You Should Not Say at Funerals"¹

As a young pastor in the early 1980s, I learned pretty quickly that you hear things said at funerals that (strictly speaking) were not true. The deceased was often described as the kind of person who "*never* turned away anyone in need" or who "would give *anyone* the shirt off his back" or who was "*always* a loving and patient husband." Recognizing quickly the need to "translate" comments made during times of intense emotional strain, I also learned that it was probably a grim thing when the best that was said about the dead person was "Oh, he was a real character all right!"

As a not-as-young pastor now in the early years of the twenty-first century, I still hear at funerals things said about the dead Christian that are not true. The problem is that I hear them said by the pastor, as part of his sermon. These are things which, strictly speaking, are not true. More importantly, these are things which, *theologically speaking*, are not true. And so we ought not to say them. Because ultimately, statements such as the ones highlighted below downplay the real meaning of death, and they diminish the great hope of resurrection that is God's answer in Christ to the reality of death. **The following are things that should *not* be said at funerals.**

First: "Bob has received the crown of righteousness, and he has heard the Lord say, Well done, good and faithful servant'." No, actually, he hasn't—not yet. The phrase "crown of righteousness" comes from 2 Timothy 4:8 where Paul confidently asserts as he looks forward to his own death, "Finally, the crown of righteousness is being stored up for me, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing." **The crown of righteousness is awarded on the Last Day, at the Final Judgment.** Until that day, it is stored up and waiting to be awarded (see also 1 Peter 5:4). The Lord's commendation, "Well done," comes from the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30), a parable that also refers to the Judgment Day. **The final verdict on each Christian's service is not given until the final accounting takes place—when the Master returns after a long journey** (Matt. 25:14, 19; see also 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

Second: "Margaret has now entered into eternal life." There is no Biblical support for a statement like this—this is not, in fact, a Christian thing to say. Standing on its own, such an utterance can also have the double effect of both diminishing the significance of Holy Baptism and effectively eliminating the creedal hope of "the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come." As John 5:24ff. tells us, **eternal life has already begun for all who hear Jesus' words and believe the Father who sent Him.** Whatever else might be said about the condition of the believer's soul when death tears it away from the believer's body, this event cannot and must not be called "entrance into eternal life." To say such a thing is to imply that the body is not destined to participate in eternal life!

Third: "John has gone to his eternal home." This utterance contains an echo of a Biblical way of speaking, but it is terribly misleading. In 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, Paul is dealing with the prospect of death, the hope of the resurrection body, and how these matters interrelate. His primary hope concerns the resurrection body that will be given to him and to all believers "so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" (2 Cor. 5:4; cf. 1 Cor. 15:53f.). Until he puts on that dwelling, Paul and all believers groan, along with the whole creation (2 Cor. 5:4; cf. Rom. 8:22-23). The gift of the Holy Spirit, however, is the "bridge"

¹ Published in *Concordia Journal*, October 2003, pp. 363-366. **Emphasis mine.**

between this mortal existence and that immortal, resurrection life—the Spirit is the "guarantee" of final inheritance and life (2 Cor. 5:5).

So, life is lived in this tension. Until the gift of the resurrection body, one must be "home" *somewhere* and "away" *from something*. Currently, Paul is "home in the body" and "away from the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:6). If he had to choose, he would rather be "away from the body" and "home with the Lord," something that he elsewhere describes as an existence that is "far better" (Phil. 1:23). But this does not mean that the bodiless existence of the soul is "our eternal home." If one were going to specify the location of our "eternal home," the closest approximation would be where we are now—in God's creation! **As creatures, this creation is rightly our home.** Spoiled by sin, however, the creation awaits renewal—our eternal home is in need of renovation, purging, restoration. A Christian who dies most certainly is, in some important sense, "at home with the Lord." But at death, the believer does not go to his or her eternal home—not yet.

Fourth: "Julia is with the Lord now forever." This, too, implies that the resurrection of the body is an afterthought, an add-on, something that isn't very important. The blessed condition of the dead believers is rest, paradise, a being "with the Lord"—but it will not always be that way. Our dogmatic theologians have rightly called the condition of the soul apart from the body the "*interim state*." **It is a "between" kind of existence.** It is not the existence that will characterize eternal life. Things will change on the Last Day also for the dead—they will be raised and in that condition, "we will always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17).

Fifth: "This is not a funeral—it's Craig's victory celebration!" This is perhaps the most objectionable of all—and it is patently false, as even many unbelievers instinctively know. It is true, of course, that when a Christian dies, he is now "out of danger"—he can no longer be tempted. In addition, when tragic and prolonged physical or mental suffering precede the death of a Christian, there can be great relief and release for both the deceased and for those who loved him and have cared for him.

But who could even imagine saying that a funeral is a "victory" when it's the funeral of a child, or of a young mother, or of a colleague and friend struck down in the midst of a vigorous and productive life? As a matter of fact, **the death even of a Christian is always and only a sign that sin has not yet fully been abolished by the Lord Jesus Christ;** the last enemy has not yet gone under His feet. As a matter of fact, death (which does *not* separate the deceased from the love of God in Christ) *does* separate the deceased from those who love him. Funerals are not victory celebrations. They are funerals. The grief is, in light of the Gospel, never grief without hope (1 Thess. 4:13). But it is still, ever and rightly—grief. For only on the Last Day will death be swallowed up in... victory (1 Cor. 15:54).

Why do we say things at funerals that we should not say? Perhaps it's the desire to bring "complete" **comfort** to those who mourn. I suspect that there is also at work a skewed anthropology that views a person as **essentially a "soul."** So, when we think of a person's *future*, we think only of the future of his soul, but not of the blessed future of his body.

But my real guess would be that such mis-speaking at funerals occurs because we have lost a real appreciation for the true and great Biblical hope of the *parousia* [literally, "presence"] of Jesus at the consummation of the age (see my essay "Regaining Biblical Hope: Restoring the Prominence of the Parousia," *Concordia Journal* 27 [October 2001]: 310-322). When the second coming plays no *functional* role in one's working theology, it will not show up in funeral sermons. **When the theological understanding of death as *the enemy* is hidden behind clichés that are not true, then there is less opportunity for speaking the Good News.** When the pastor, even though he believes that it will happen,

is not himself actually looking for and longing for the return of Christ—then he will say at funerals things that he should not say. And he will not deliver the fullness of the Gospel.

For that is what a pastor should say at a funeral—the Good News. The Law is there, staring everyone in the face—death. And the sermon should speak explicitly of sin and its effects and its manifestations—including the death of *this* Christian brother or sister. And one can also proclaim the Biblical message about the soul of the dead Christian—the soul is "with Christ," or "at rest," or "in Paradise." These are all Biblical ways of speaking, and they can offer true Christian comfort.

But in the face of death the pastor must proclaim the Good News of God's solution to sin and all its effects. **And God's solution for bodily death is bodily resurrection!** The resurrection of Jesus is the first fruits of the final resurrection on the Last Day—and this is very good news indeed for all who are in Christ Jesus. The redeeming act of Jesus of Nazareth encompasses and overcomes all guilt now, and His deeds for us will overturn the death of our bodies and restore us and all who trust Him to our rightful home in the new heavens and the new earth. This hope is realistic, in that it allows death in Christ to be death—no more, but certainly no less. And this hope is true, because it is centered in Christ Jesus and looks only to Him who is the same yesterday in our life, today in our death... and forever in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. This is what we should say at funerals.

Discussion of "Five Things..."

- Have you ever heard these five things or variations of them?
- When a Christian dies, what happens to him/her?
- Upon what basis can Christians have hope in the midst of death—upon what foundational truth does our hope exist? What is our hope for Christians who die?
- What hope do *unbelievers* have beyond death?
- How does understanding the theology around them change how you talk about death?

1 Thessalonians 4:14-18 - When Christ Returns

- What will happen to those who have *died* before Christ returns?
- What will happen to those who are *living* when Christ returns?

1 Corinthians 15:12-58 - Resurrection

- In what sense has Christ been raised from the dead? Did he simply die and go to heaven like Christians do today?
- What significance does Christ's resurrection have for Christians?
- What does "resurrection" mean regarding Christ's physical body? What does it mean regarding our own physical bodies?

Romans 8:18-30 – How It is Supposed to Be

- Is the world right now—and, indeed, all of creation—how it's supposed to be? Will it always be this way?
- How does this relate to the statement: "Christians are to be in the world, but not of the world" (cf. Romans 12:2)?

Resurrection and re-creation as encouragement

Speak these works aloud or sing them to each other as an encouragement as you complete this series.

"Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:18).

"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

"And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies... we wait for it with patience" (Rom. 8:23, 25b).

"Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart" (LSB 708:3)

Lord, let at last Thine angels come,
To Abram's bosom bear me home,
 That I may die unfearing;
And in its narrow chamber keep
My body safe in peaceful sleep
 Until Thy reappearing.
And then from death awaken me
That these mine eyes with joy may see,
 O Son of God, Thy glorious face,
 My Savior and my fount of grace,
Lord Jesus Christ, my prayer attend, my prayer attend,
And I will praise Thee without end.

In conclusion

As a way to close the series, re-consider your answers to these questions asked in the first session.

- What is the meaning of life?
- From whence does life come? What is our relationship to the One who gives life?
- What is our relationship to the rest of creation, and in particular other humans?
- Why does death exist, and why will we ourselves die? Is it supposed to be that way? Will death always conquer us? How do you know?