

A Matter of Life or Death

Discovering what it is to be fully alive

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his guests were gun-wielding guards. His wife decided she and the children didn't desire that kind of "fun," and they were not the only ones absent from Todd: God also was ignored. Though he professed to be a Christian, he worshiped a god-on-the-shelf—one to take out and use whenever convenient. All through the saga of Todd's exploits his mom defended him, even when he nearly destroyed another family member financially and even in the face of his skirmishes with the law. And, from Todd's perspective, it was never his fault.

Broken relationships, broken lives, excuses, shifting responsibility, heartache, the worship of self and anything else other than the true God: though you may not be able to relate to everything in Todd's story, some of it is probably your story or maybe that of your family. Somehow we sense this is not the way it is supposed to be. Certainly we wish it were not the way things are.

Yet, what is life supposed to be like? We experience its broken version, but what was it like "just out of the factory"? To answer that, we will go back to the beginning and see how God created mankind. What did he intend life to be?

Gracious Animation From God: The Essence Of Life

In Genesis 2:7 we read, "Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." There are two main implications from this brief statement of man's beginning. First, it is very clear that life comes from God. This has already been stated in Genesis: "Let us make man So God created man ... " (Genesis 1:26–27). Elsewhere, we learn that God is intimately involved in the formation of a baby in the womb (Psalm 139:13–16), and it is not just some babies, nor is it the case that God gave life only to the first human and it came merely by natural process to

the rest. God gives life to every person who has ever come into the world (Acts 17:25).

At this point, at best we might think, “Oh, that is a good biblical truth,” or at worst we might conclude, “So what?” But, this truth comes with greater punch when we understand that God is not stingy in his giving of life. If anything at all stands out in Genesis 1–2 it is that the life from the Creator was not like some mere trickle of water running down our windshield after the first drops of rain. Instead, it was like the mighty torrents of the Mississippi river at flood stage! God filled the waters, lands, and skies with ever-multiplying life, he covered the land with lush fruit-bearing vegetation, he stuffed the place full of rich minerals and resources, he provided multiple sources of life-giving water, he actually commanded Adam that he wanted him to eat freely, richly, and abundantly from all the fruit trees of the garden (except one), he placed the first man and woman in a paradise that was also like a natural temple wherein God fellowshiped with them, he created mankind with the capacity to know and serve and enjoy him, he gave them wonderful companionship with each other, he made it clear everything he gave to them was good, and he provided that this life could be a forever life! The Bible’s first pages do not mess around. They set the ground rules right away by clarifying that if we want life and want it abundantly, it comes only from God. Could it be clearer that God’s design for us is that very kind of rich life? As Jesus would later affirm, “My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life” (John 10:10, NLT). God does not want to take away true joy and satisfaction; he wants to give this to us in life!

Before we go on, we need to take a break and let this truth soak into the depth of our heart. Do you really believe that if you want to be truly alive and not just existing, this comes only from God? One of the great plot lines of the larger story of the Bible has to do with whether or not we will believe this. I’ll explain more about what I mean throughout the book. For now, simply plant this flag

in the ground: Life, rich life, true pleasurable life, comes only from God.

As we think about life coming from God, we also must not miss that this life is gracious in its nature. In other words, apart from anything Adam or Eve did, God bestowed upon them and continued to bestow upon them unearned favor and empowerment for all God designed man to do. From day one, people have had to trust in God and look to him for life and all that is needed in that life. Apart from the Creator breathing into man the breath of life and apart from God's blessing, man has no life and cannot really live. This is the "light bulb" that must come on above the head of every Todd on the earth. We do not find life in self or merely in our own strategies. We do not discover true wealth and satisfaction apart from the one who formed us out of dust.

Now, if you have been tracking, you might be thinking, "Tom, you said there were two main implications in Genesis 2:7. We get that life richly and graciously comes from God. Yet, what is the second implication?" Thank you for tracking and for asking. Let me answer. We see here that life in its very essence is animation. To animate is to cause to move, to empower. An animated cartoon is one in which hundreds or thousands of still shots are put together (each with different positioning) to make it look like the characters are moving (like they are alive). Here in Genesis 2:7 we are told the "man became a living creature." The result of this is that the man is given capacities and is able to function and to carry out the purposes for which God created him. When we put both truths together, we understand that life, the very essence of which is animation, comes from God.

Now that man's functioning to carry out the purposes of God has cracked open the door and walked into our discussion, we

need to move on to look more closely at man's purpose, for this also is a very important part of life.

Purpose: The Target Of Life

For a good part of my pastoral ministry I have served two churches in small towns very much connected into farming and ranching. One of the discoveries I have made is that when farmers and ranchers retire and move into town with little or no purpose in life, they do not usually live long. I have perceived the same struggle in nursing homes among the elderly. God created us to live for purpose. Without it we dry up and die.

This truth bubbles up from the pages of Genesis. In the Genesis 1:26–28 general treatment of man's beginning, God gives man "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing." To have dominion simply means to rule or have oversight. It is what a king, a prince, or some other leader does, and it is also what God does in relation to man. God made mankind his vice-kings and queens. Specifically, God is commissioning people to lead, direct, care for, and to use the creation for God-honoring ends. Additionally, God blessed and commanded people to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (28). Simply-put, this would include having children who would grow up to carry out the purposes God has given mankind—that is, to be God-worshippers and glorifiers.

When we come to the account of our creation in Genesis 2, we find an even more detailed explanation of purpose. Here man was animated by God to work the garden in which he was placed (9, 15), to enjoy the rich gifts of God (16), to refrain from that which God forbade (17), to name the other living creatures and so carry out his dominion (19–20), and to be in a community wherein the next generations of God-imagers and lovers would be brought into the world and raised (18, 21–24).

Like a perceptive crime scene investigator, we need to bring together all the evidence from Genesis 1–2 to uncover what our ultimate purpose is. We were given life to resemble God and to reflect his glory through serving him and each other in this world and by bringing God-honoring order among creation. We do this more specifically by loving, trusting, and thus obeying him.

Before we move on from looking at the target we must be shooting at to have true life, there are two more matters we dare not miss. To begin, not to have this purpose takes us from the path of life to that of death. We know this since God gave the following command to the first man, Adam: “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it *you shall surely die*” (Genesis 2:17, emphasis added). At least part of what this implies is that when sin is present, man who was created for purpose will stumble around in the dark to find the purpose for which he has been animated.

We glean this from Ecclesiastes where “the Preacher” seeks to figure out life (1:12–18), yet realizes this cannot be fully done (1:14–15). As such, there is a sense in which life in this fallen world seems empty (1:2), a mere “striving after wind” (4:4). Yet, God does give enjoyment to man in life and labor as a gift (2:24–25; 3:9–13). Bottom-line, the way one finds true life and enjoyment is to “fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (12:13). The reason is this, “For God will bring every deed into judgment, and every secret thing, whether good or evil” (12:14). Light is shed on this book’s finale in 2:26: “For to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.” The book seems to make the point that even though life can seem very empty at times (though yes, God does give enjoyment), nevertheless the ultimate vanity is in not

trusting in, fearing, and following God. In this case, man faces God's judgment and so emptiness is his eternal lot.

The other matter we need to consider before moving on is the fact that God designed humans to function in harmony between body and soul. Behind what we have discovered so far is the need for our desires and our decisions to be submitted to and set upon God. That involves the soul. But we dare not miss that God placed us in a physical world, with physical bodies, to carry out physical tasks in union with those desires and decisions. In fact, as Paul comments upon God's governing of the world and of each person's wealth much later in the Bible, he offers a strong implication for understanding creation as well, "God ... richly provides us with everything for enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17, my own translation). In context Paul's point is that our material wealth, what God gives in this physical world, is for the purpose we might find enjoyment in God.

To understand that the body and soul are to function together in harmony and that therefore we are animated to carry out our purpose in a physical world, reveals why we have such a pull to live in this physical world and to be connected to it. It also explains why physical death is such a twisted intruder into the plot of this world.

At this point we are gaining more and more insight into Todd. God designed him and animated him to live for purpose in a physical world. Yet, soul and body are not only no longer in harmony, but both are horribly twisted and broken because of sin. As a result, Todd wants life in this physical world and he wants his years to count in some way. Yet, separated from the true source of life, he finds himself seeking to set up his own targets, shooting at them, and hitting them or not, finds both the goals and the process of achieving them are not for his good or that of anyone around him. When we stop and consider that the planet

is populated with people just like Todd (you and me), and we are daily taking up the same space and bumping into each other—fully incapable apart from God of realizing harmony between soul and body and with the world (not to mention with each other), it is not hard for us to see why the daily grind seems like something far less than true life!

“Ah!” some of you might say. “Things seem to be going pretty well for me. I have purpose and I am fulfilled in this purpose.” That may be true, but sooner or later, you will discover on your way up the ladder of success, you have been on the wrong set of rungs. For most people that mistake will be faced both in this life and the life-to-come. For that rare person who seems to have a pretty nice time of it while on this planet and is satisfied (or at least has become numb to the reality they are not), there will still come the day-of-reckoning when for all of eternity they will realize they have missed life.

Trust: The Way Of Life

When God created man he not only gave him abundance to enjoy, he also put one limit on him: “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Genesis 2:17). There was nothing magical in this tree. It served as a test for man—would he trust God that following him led to life and disobeying him led to death? We see this in the doubt-producing question from the Satan-possessed snake to Eve, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” and in his all-out contradiction of God’s command, “You will not surely die” (Genesis 3:1, 4). We also see this in the description of the desire that was conceived and eventually gave birth to the sin: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6). Rather than trusting God to bring satisfaction and wisdom, it was decided that their own way was