

The Meaning of Life, the Universe and Everything

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Sooner or later pretty much everyone gets around to it. It happens to most people in those quiet times, often after some kind of crisis or other significant life event. They ask themselves the big questions: “What’s it all about?” “Why are we here?” “What is my purpose for existing?” Or better yet, “Why does anything exist? Isn’t it just as reasonable that there would be nothing rather than something?”

The human race has long sought the answers to questions such as these, and not surprisingly, has come up with a wide array of answers. Most religions, for example, teach that life is about some kind of test. A deity or group of deities has placed us here and established the criteria for passing the test. Your job is to figure out what the criteria are, do your best to meet them, and hopefully pass. If you do in the end you’ll get a reward. If you fail the test, well, not so much. The exception is the Hindu religion that teaches you have to keep taking the test in successive lifetimes over and over again until you get it right.

Philosophers have given other answers. Aristotle taught the purpose of life was to seek good and reject evil. The Epicureans said life is all about the pursuit of pleasure. This is all there is, so eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you die. Then it’s over. Lots of people today live by this philosophy. The Stoics said that it’s all about the fate you’ve been assigned (by whom or what they weren’t clear on). Anyway, you can’t change your fate, so the best you can do is buck up and deal with it as bravely as possible. Keep a stiff upper lip and take life as it comes. The Cynics said it’s all about trying to attain self-sufficiency. The goal of life was to become the master of one’s mental attitudes and to become dependent upon no one. Sounds a lot like the American Pioneer spirit, doesn’t it? Classic Liberalism tells us that the pursuit of individual liberty is the highest good. Do what you want as long as your doing it doesn’t interfere with anyone else doing what they want. There are countless other philosophical answers many of which are variations of these themes.

Modern Science has given us yet another answer. It’s this: life has no meaning at all. That anything exists is the result of an accidental cosmic burp that used to be called the “Big Bang”, but that now is known by the more scientific sounding “The Primordial Singularity”. That’s what started it all. And now, some fifteen billion years later, we are merely the products of a series of random and undirected natural processes. There is no plan, purpose, or meaning to life. It just happened. All by itself. It is what it is. And in the grand scheme of things we are insignificant specks of dust that will have our brief stay and then pass away forever.

Fans of science fiction may recognize that I borrowed my sermon title from the third of Douglas Adams’ five book series that begins with *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Part of the storyline is that brilliant alien minds got together to build an amazing super computer. Its sole purpose was to solve the mystery of the meaning of life, the universe and everything. They put the question to it and it went to work, steadily humming away for I don’t remember how many millions of years. Then came the momentous day when it finally spit out an answer. The result: the number 42. When they asked the computer to explain its baffling response, it replied “That’s the correct answer. What you’ve got to figure out is what the right question is.”

And that’s absurd, of course. It’s supposed to be funny. But I don’t think the answer is any worse or more ridiculous than the others I’ve mentioned up to this point. The problem with

all of them is that they seek the answers in the wrong place: from the bottom looking up, as it were – the Creation considering itself. But the correct answers aren't found here within the Creation. They are found in the Creator. And they are revealed to us by him.

This is what the Apostle Paul is addressing in today's Epistle from his letter to the Christian church at Colossae. And most Bible scholars believe that for most of the passage we heard, Paul is quoting from a creedal hymn known to the Colossians that they use in their worship. It's likely a hymn that Paul himself or one of his missionary companions wrote and taught to the new Christian congregations that they planted throughout the Mediterranean world. This hymn is important because it reveals the answers to the big questions concerning the meaning of life, the universe and everything. And they can all be summed up in just one word: the name of Jesus; Jesus, by whom God delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image or icon of the invisible God, Paul declares. And that's interesting: Adam, the first man, *was made* in the image of God. In the fall, he lost that image. But Jesus, whom Scripture tells us is the second Adam and by whom all that fell is going to be restored, *is* the image of the invisible God. That is to say, everything we are able to see of God is seen in him – as the hymn later states, “in him all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell.” If you want to see God, you have only to look at Jesus. God wants you to look no other place to see him. He reveals everything he wants you to know about him in Christ. Besides, you won't see God looking at anything else because he is otherwise invisible.

By him, that is, Jesus, Paul continues, all things were created, in heaven and earth, visible and invisible. This too is interesting. We normally ascribe the work of creation to God the Father, as we do in the creed. And that's true: the Father is the Creator. But so is the Son. And so is the Holy Spirit. All three persons of the Godhead had a role in it. The emphasis here is on God the Son's role. He is the living and powerful Word who is both God and with God, by whom and through whom all things were made; both the things we see, that is, the physical order of creation, and the things we don't see: the spiritual realm of angels both holy and fallen.

And not only was everything created *by* him, Paul also asserts that everything was created *for* him. It's here that we come up against the mystery of the purpose and meaning of life and creation. It's *for* Jesus, God's Son. And it works like this: the Father loves the Son by eternally begetting him. That is, the Father sacrificially gives his divine substance, whatever that spiritual stuff is that makes God God, he gives all of it so that the Son exists – as a separate person sharing the one divine essence. Yeah, I know, it's complicated. But bear with me. The Son loves the Father in return by submitting his will. As Jesus prays, “Not my will, Father, but thy will be done.” But there's a sense in which his love is incomplete. Oh, his obedience to the Father is absolute, but his love does not fully reflect the sacrifice of the Father in giving himself completely. It's the creation that gives the Son something to give himself for in the same sacrificial way. Thus the creation serves as the object that perfects his love. It is, in this sense, the Father's gift to the Son that completes him.

Paul continues, “He is before all things”. This “before” is not a reference to time, though being eternal, the Son obviously exists before creation. But no, here “before” means in the sense of being in first place, having rule and authority over all. It's the King of kings and Lord of lords idea. And certainly Jesus is all of that. “And in him all things hold together.” It's another profound assertion. Not only is Jesus our Creator, but he is the living and powerful Word that sustains us in existence. We sometimes fall into thinking of God the way the Deists do. In their

view, God gets everything going sort of like a giant clock and then just sits back to see what happens. There's no ongoing divine "hands on" interaction or direction. That isn't the way Scripture describes it. No, we're to see the Son of God intimately involved in every happening, guiding and directing the course of each and every detail of human history all for the benefit of his Church – the assembly of those called out to be his own and given faith in him by the power of his Word.

This is what Paul tells us of Jesus next: "He is the head of the body, the Church." This marks the transition point in the hymn that Paul is quoting. We move from Jesus' role as Creator to his role as Redeemer and Restorer of creation. And nothing can be more "hands on" than that: the eternal Son of God entering his Creation, taking on a human body, living a life of perfect obedience, and then giving that life – his body and blood on the cross – as the sacrifice to pay the penalty of our sins. It is the focal point and main event in all of world history. And by giving his body on behalf of all of us, he makes all of our bodies together his body in the mystical union we call the holy Christian Church. And filling us with his love made complete by his sacrifice, he enables us to love him and the rest of the members of his church by giving our bodies in sacrificial service to each other. It's his gift to us, to make us and our love complete, just as the Father gives the Son the Creation to complete his love.

This, my friends, is the meaning of life, the universe and everything. It's all about the love of God for us in Christ Jesus. It's about the peace Jesus made between the Holy God and sinful mankind by the blood of his cross. It's about him opening the way to paradise for us that we may abide in his love and share it with each other forever. It's not an accident, as Science tells us. It's not a test, as most religions teach. It's a gift, a good and precious gift. May we be given the grace, the wisdom, and the faith to receive it now and always; and forever give our thanks, worship, honor and praise to our gracious God who loves us in his Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!