

Meaning, significance, and purpose

What Does This Mean?

Life has been described as “one thing after another” with little meaning—just a collection of events and facts. Human beings have seldom been satisfied with this. Every generation has asked, “What is the purpose of life? What does it all mean?” Human beings are people in search of meaning. In the Western world people are more affluent than earlier generations, but life still seems empty for many. The Bible recognizes the struggle to find meaning in life. The book of Ecclesiastes is about a man trying to find purpose in it all; he has tried money, sex, and power, but all are meaningless (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Only after a long struggle does he find some purpose in life.

Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for. Viktor E. Frankl

There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning. Thomas Aquinas

St. Augustine described the search for meaning as being restless until we find our rest in God. Faith in God gives purpose to life, and meaning is there to be discovered; we do not have to create it. Purpose and meaning come through a relationship with God and others: people were made for love (Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 3:8-9). Humanity's purpose has been summarized as glorifying God and enjoying him forever.

Belief in a good Creator assures Christians that he has not created a meaningless universe. The pattern and complexity in the world point to a designer who created with a purpose and who gives life significance. That purpose is expressed as history moves toward a goal when wrong will cease and there will be a new heaven and earth, with no sorrow or sin and where nothing comes between God and his people. Christians have a personal sense of purpose that is expressed as a belief in God's “calling.” This calling is to serve God and others using our gifts. It may be expressed within a person's family, friends, or work. It may be volunteering or a calling to a specific ministry.

The questions of what our vision is and should be are in fact the most crucial and most basic questions that we face. . . .Fundamentally, the language of this vision belongs to the moral and religious family of

language, for it is the function of moral and religious language to provide the essential dimension of education—a language of meaning. David Purpel

What Does This Mean in School?

It can be tempting in any subject to concentrate only on the skills, on how something works, on gathering data, and on doing research and to not take the time to discuss what it all means and its significance. Or we could teach differently.

- Asking *Why*-questions is appropriate in all subjects. Meaning is not just for subjects such as English and religion or Bible class; it applies in science, design, math, and computing technology. Ask these questions in a way that signals they are weighty and worth grappling with.
- Learning, say, to create and read graphs can be presented as a skill that could be used for a range of good purposes.
- Drawing attention to pattern and complexity can be done in most subjects; there are patterns in music, art, language, and science. This does not mean that we only look at what is good and ordered in life. Christians explore God's world and face the depths of sin and the heights of love, all within the awareness that God has created a world with meaning.
- Use examples of people who felt a sense of God's calling, from famous figures such as Florence Nightingale to ordinary Christians living out their calling in work and family life.

Think of an instance when a good discussion about purpose or meaning arose in a lesson. How did it come about? Identify a lesson where you could emphasize meaning, significance, and purpose. Very few lessons are limited to "raw" facts; there usually is scope for developing meaning. For example, history is not just events—those events have significance for the larger questions we ask about life.



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