

A free resource by Pip Witheridge,
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IS THERE MORE TO LIFE?



Hi there. My name is Pip (short for Phillip). I'm a pastor at St Paul's Anglican Church in Carlingford. I have a wonderful wife and a daughter who keeps us busy and entertained. I love running, reading, and helping people explore life's big questions. I hope what I've written here helps you to explore life's biggest question for yourself.



The question that never goes away

In every age of human history, people have asked the question: is there more to life?

You don't have to be a professional philosopher to realise this is an important question. Children ask this question to their parents when they get old enough to ponder life's mysteries—sometimes this is not long after they learn how to talk!

Parents ask this question to themselves when their children let them down, or when their spouse doesn't live up to their expectations, or when their work is out of control. Sometimes people ask this question when they can't have kids of their own, or when their attempts at romantic relationships come to nothing. Others ask this question even when everything they want in life comes their way.

I remember asking the question to my mum when I was only about ten years old. I didn't ask her "is there more to life?"; instead I asked her "is life over when you die?" and to me it meant basically the same thing. She seemed caught off guard by it, but still managed to give some sort of answer. I don't quite remember what she said, but I remember that it didn't solve my problem. I still wrestle with the question today, now as a thirty-year-old with a daughter of my own, not even a year old. I'm sure one day she'll ask me the same thing.

We ask this question because we are human. Humans have always asked this question. We ask it because this life, though pretty good for a lot of people a lot of the time, is never as good as we wish it was. And even if life deals us a nice hand, soon enough we remember that life, no matter how good, is short.

I don't say all this to depress you—though it might seem that way! I say this because part of what it means to be human is to ask big questions. Today, as life seems more isolated than ever, when we spend more time online than we care to admit, when the world seems full of uncertainty, we desperately need to make time and space for life's big questions. As a pastor, my experience has been that peoples' lives are far better when they take time to stand back and look at the big picture of why they are here.

There aren't many times and places nowadays where we get to explore deep things like this. My hope is that you would join me in doing so.



Why success doesn't satisfy us

Success comes in all shapes and sizes. For one person, success might mean buying a house and paying it off. For someone else, it means climbing to the top of the corporate ladder in their industry. For someone else, it means climbing to the top of a mountain, or running a marathon, or completing a triathlon. For the next person, success is about relationships—having and

holding onto them. For the next person, success is giving your kids the best education possible, and seeing them earn top grades. For others, success is a combination of all of the above.

But here's the thing: none of this success ultimately satisfies.

Let's think about money and status—something none of us seem to have enough of. How much money or status do you need to be happy? An interviewer once asked this question to John D. Rockefeller, the world's first billionaire. Do you know what he said? "Just a little bit more."

Even those with the most know that it's never enough. The world-famous actor Jim Carrey was once interviewed about his career and the riches that came with it. He stunned the interviewer when he said, "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer."

Earning wealth and fame is like eating a big, delicious breakfast. It takes a long time to make, it is wonderful to enjoy while it lasts, but not long after it's gone you will want something else. Success, and the wonderful feeling it brings, feels like the wind—here, then gone, all in a few short moments.

Even when we enjoy sustained success in our careers or family life, it can only last so long, because we only last so long. We only have a short time to enjoy life. It might not always feel short—some days seem to drag on forever. But there's an old saying about parenting that says, "the days are long, but the years are short." I think this is what most people feel toward the end of life. In the final assessment, it all feels like a blur.

One of the songs in the Bible speaks to this truth; it describes a person's life like grass: "in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers." (Psalm 90:6). I wonder if you've ever looked at a patch of grass and resonated with it—here today, gone tomorrow.

In another place in the Bible, a man named James challenges his readers to consider the brevity of life. He says, "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." (James 4:14). I wonder if you have ever woken up someplace cold, where a mist sits over the horizon in the early hours and disappears by mid-morning. Life, says James, is like that.

Our search for meaning



Even if we do feel full and happy at the end of our lives, and even if we manage to leave some sort of positive impression on the world after we leave it, we can never know with certainty where the fruits of our labour ultimately end up. There is a story of a successful ruler who builds up wealth for his family, but at the end of his life he cannot help but feel a sense of dismay. He says, "I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?" (Ecclesiastes 2:18–19).

People sometimes say that all they want in life is to make the world a better place. But each of us knows deep down that the reality is not that simple, because even if we manage to nudge the world in the right direction, there is no telling what course it will take even after a few generations.

When people feel empty in life, what do they do? I think there are three major approaches people take. They either embrace the emptiness, chase an emotional high, or search for something that actually satisfies.

The first approach is not so helpful. It is the approach of the disillusioned person who realises that life seems empty and says, "it is what it is". It is the approach of the woman who wakes up, goes to work each day, comes home, watches her show, goes to bed, wakes up and does it all again and again, not because she wants to, but because in her view that is all that life is about. She is not excited about it, but she thinks it better to follow the pack than to question if there is something more. In fact, she has already made up her mind that there probably isn't more to life than work, and so she simply presses on. She embraces the emptiness, because what else is there to do?

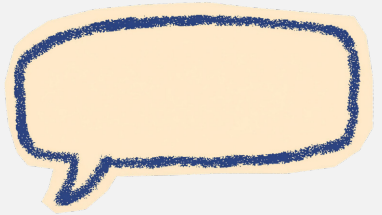
The second approach is not so helpful either. It is the approach of the short-

sighted person who thinks that the key to a happy life is to chase the next emotional high: the next holiday, the next romance, the next promotion, the next shiny thing. It is the approach of the man who knows there is more to life than a robotic existence, but tries to satisfy himself with short bursts of gratification—emotional sugar. He buys something new, travels somewhere exotic, tries a new hobby. It gives him a fleeting feeling of significance, but it doesn't satisfy.

The third approach is different. It is the approach of the person who realises that giving up is not the path to happiness, and yet does not give in to the allure of emotional sugar. It is the approach of the person who lives for something far greater than themselves. It is the person who lives for something beyond their own life. Granted, this approach requires faith, and we don't all have faith. But faith is something we can cultivate through exploration. If you are reading this, chances are that you are open to exploring whether there is something more to life, and whether faith might play a part in your life. To keep exploring is to embrace this third approach.

The famous author C.S. Lewis wrote about this third approach. He wrote, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same." (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Touchstone: New York, 1996, pp. 120-121).

What is this other country? What is this thing beyond life itself? To answer that question, I want to introduce you to perhaps the most important person who ever lived.



What Jesus said about life's purpose

Jesus lived about two thousand years ago. He grew up in a small town and worked as a carpenter before beginning a short public ministry in his early thirties. During that time he travelled through villages and towns teaching about God and gathering a group of followers.

Now, I don't know if you believe in God. Perhaps you don't know if you believe in God! Whatever the case, I invite you simply to read on with an open mind. The point of me writing this is to help you explore the question of whether there is more to life, and no figure has been more influential in helping people answer this question than Jesus.

Jesus' message revolved around what he called "the kingdom of God"—the idea that there is a God who acts in history to bring people into relationship with him. Because Jesus taught as if he had divine authority, he quickly became a controversial figure. Many ordinary people were drawn to him, but some religious and political leaders saw him as a threat. After only a few years of public teaching, he was arrested and executed by crucifixion—a common death for criminals in the ancient Roman Empire.

What happened next is the reason people are still talking about Jesus today. His followers became convinced that he had risen from the dead. Within a few decades, communities of people across the Roman world were gathering around his teaching and calling him Lord. Today, more than two billion people identify themselves as his followers.

Whether or not you believe that Jesus rose from the dead, it is worth considering the impact he has had on human history and mankind's search for meaning.

Jesus spoke with crystal clarity about the foolishness of building your life around the pursuit of things that don't ultimately last—especially true if God exists. On one occasion, Jesus told a story about a farmer who had a terrific crop yield. The farmer wondered what to do with all his surplus grain; he tore down his barns and built bigger ones. He said to himself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" Jesus finished the story by saying that this is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.

In other words, if there is a God at the centre of things, it is a mistake to live as though this life and our wealth is all that matters.

On another occasion, Jesus told his followers not to worry about what they eat and what they wear, but instead to focus on seeking the kingdom of God. The logic is pretty simple: if there is a God who created us and designed life with a particular purpose, we should seek to know God and the way in which God wants us to live. This should be our top priority—nothing else.

So, what does God want from us? That's a huge question. I'm happy to share what I think if you'd like to get in touch with me. For now, I think raising the question is more important than providing an answer. Because simply exploring these questions is key to what it means to be human.

| Keep exploring

If this e-book has stirred up questions for you, that's a good thing. Questions about life, meaning, and God are worth exploring.

If you'd like to keep going, here are a few ways you can.

Get in touch. Feel free to reply to the email you received this from, or write to me directly at pipw@stpaulsanglican.org.au. I'm a pastor, and conversations about life's big questions are a normal part of my week. If you have thoughts, questions, or even disagreements, I'd genuinely love to hear from you.

Keep reading. If you signed up to receive this e-book, you'll also receive occasional emails with short articles about faith, life, and meaning. Our aim is simply to help people — whether they believe in God or not — think more deeply about life's big questions.

Come and explore Christianity in person. I regularly run a short course called Explore Christianity, where people can ask questions and look at the life and teaching of Jesus in a relaxed, open environment. You don't need to be a Christian to come — in fact, it's designed especially for people who aren't sure what they believe. Visit stpaulsanglican.org.au/explore to learn more and sign up.

You're also welcome at church.

You're always welcome to join us at St Paul's Anglican Church, 32 Moseley Street, Carlingford. Our main Sunday services are 9:15am (families and adults) and 6:00pm (young adults). We also run youth groups, kids' programs, and other gatherings throughout the week. You can find more information at stpaulsanglican.org.au.

Wherever you are in your journey, I hope this has encouraged you to keep asking the big questions.