

The Meaning Crisis

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[0:00] You want to open your Bibles to Romans 11, just the last little section of Romans 11, verses 33 to 36.

And he breaks out in the moment of praise and he says these words, verse 33 of chapter 11 of the book of Romans. Through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray as we study this together. Amen. Gracious God, your word is truth and we ask that you would feed us with this truth this morning. Lord, show us what is in scripture. Open our eyes to see it clearly. Open our hearts to embrace it and change our lives through it, Lord. With the supernatural power of your Holy Spirit who is at work through your word.

We ask for the special blessing, the special mercy this morning and we ask this for Christ's sake and his glory. Amen. Amen. So just as we are doing the outreach in two, three weeks time in the evening, what we're doing over the fourth quarter is we're actually sort of redoing all the outreaches that we did in the evening.

[1:55] That some of you got to hear and be part of. Well, in this quarter, so every Sunday morning basically is an opportunity for you to bring somebody to come and hear about the good news of our Lord Jesus. And we're doing two of the series we've done in the past.

The first is life in crisis. Thinking about the meaning crisis and all sorts of other crises that are going on in our worlds and in our minds and in our hearts. And that's us today. And then we're going to do three on a series that was entitled Go to Church.

It was like, okay, say I take this Jesus thing seriously and I'm going to make church a priority. What should I be looking for from church and what should I be looking to do in terms of engaging with church?

So that's the next six weeks basically. And we start this morning with this one, the meaning crisis as part of our Life in Crisis series. So basically what I'm wanting to talk to you about this morning is what gets you out of bed in the morning.

And basically I want to talk about this in a sort of like a slightly deeper level than coffee or needing to go to the bathroom, which those of you over 40 know all about that.

[3:03] But I'm asking you, what is the meaning of life? And how do you possibly think you might go about discovering it? The French Algerian writer and philosopher Albert Camus, probably somebody you had to read in social science classes at university or somewhere along the line.

He once said, you will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life. So Camus actually believed that the very notion of finding meaning in life is absurd.

Like just don't do it, it's dumb. As an alternative to sort of sinking in despair and saying, well there's no meaning, what am I going to do with my life? In the face of that absurdity, Camus said, what you've got to do is you've got to revolt.

You've got to revolt against the apparent absurdity of life. Revolt against what he called sort of false hopes like religion. Instead, just try and carve out as much personal happiness and fulfillment as you possibly can.

So that's one way to think about the meaning of life. Another approach comes from the very outspoken, famous atheist Richard Dawkins. He once said this, he said, in a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky.

[4:24] And you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil,

no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

So he looks at science and the material world and he kind of concludes, look, there's really no evidence that there is any sort of objective meaning to this life. Now, interestingly, as he does that, that doesn't stop him from trying to give his life some sort of meaning.

So on one occasion, he said this, which is also fascinating if you think about it. He said, people say to me, how can you bear to be alive if everything is so cold and empty and pointless? Well, at an academic level, I think it is.

But that doesn't mean you can live your life like that. One answer is that I feel privileged to be allowed to understand why the world exists and why I exist. And I want to share it with other people. I think science is one of the supreme things that makes life worth living. We are fantastically privileged to exist at all. But then we also have the privilege of understanding this beautiful world in which we find ourselves.

[5:36] That should make us all the more eager to soak up as much as we possibly can of understanding our world and our place in it before we die. So Dawkins, he sort of admits there's no objective meaning to life.

And so what he does is he seeks to invent some sort of subjective meaning for his life in wonder at the natural world. Now, I give you these two different examples, these different but somehow related examples of Camus and Dawkins to sort of give you a snapshot of what's out there in terms of approaches to the question of meaning in our world today, particularly in our modern era that we live in.

Because what these two guys demonstrate is, I think, number one, the erosion of belief in some sort of overarching narrative for our lives, some transcendent, true overarching narrative.

And then number two, the need, though, that we still have as human beings to find meaning and purpose in order to have a meaningful life, to thrive and to survive.

You really can't live without meaning in your life. You can't thrive without some semblance of an answer to the big questions that we have out there, like questions like, well, why am I here?

[6:48] What is right? What is wrong? What am I for? Where am I going? Is there life after death? All those sorts of questions. You need to have a foundational story to govern your life, to give you a reason to get up in the morning.

When that shared story erodes in a particular society, that society tends to come apart. Because now all of a sudden you've got a whole bunch of people who are looking in different directions to try and plug this meaning gap, to fill this void.

Since the time of the Roman Empire, the shared story that has dominated the Western world, at least, and countries heavily influenced by the Western world, of which South Africa is one, that shared story has been Christianity.

Now that doesn't mean that every Westerner or Western-influenced person has been a devout Christian, but it does mean that at the very least, at a sort of like a nominal level, that has been the overarching worldview for those people.

And so you ask the question, well, what happens when that worldview then starts to retreat, when it starts to pull back? Think about it. For so long, Christianity has been, the Christian story has been the dominant story.

[8:03] It's provided a moral framework. It's provided meaning. It's provided purpose. Since the Enlightenment, though, that story has been slowly eroded. God has sort of been pushed to the margins of society and then out of the picture altogether.

A movement like the New Atheist Movement that you had at the beginning of the 2000s, the noughties and the 2010s, where you had people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris, who were these famous atheist speakers who were filling auditoriums for their talks and writing books.

That was seen as kind of a triumph of this whole trajectory, the de-godding of society. We've taken God out of society successfully now. But in the last few years, what's happened post that is many writers and social commentators have started to suggest, hey, you know what?

This de-godding of society has had some rather unforeseen yet really devastating drawbacks. That is a meaning crisis has been created.

Because, I mean, if you tell people repeatedly and triumphantly that there is no God, science has done away with our need for God, there's no true transcendent story into which this whole life fits,

you're just a random collection of atoms, here by chance, there is no object of morality, there is no heaven, there is no hell.

[9 : 28] Whether you selflessly work as a nurse in an under-resourced children's hospital or you are a child molester is of no consequence in a billion years' time when the sun burns up this planet.

All of these realities follow if atheism or some sort of hard materialism is true. If there is no God.

And so the natural consequence is that's going to create a massive, massive meaning crisis.

Why wake up in the morning then if all of that's true? Why? Why get out of bed? Why go to work?

Why build friendships? Why have children and get married? Why pursue causes of justice and charity?

Why do any of that? And I think people are feeling this. All over the place I think people are feeling this. And there's a lot of damage. Several high-profile psychologists, some people like you might have come across the name Jonathan Haidt, the NYU psychologist, they've tapped into this meaning crisis and they've actually suggested that it might play a key role in the growing mental health crisis we're currently witnessing.

These sort of massively high, elevated levels of anxiety. Also in things like the harsh polarization that we see in our culture between ideological and political groups, the left and right politics, the left and right ideological impasse that happens, the wars going on between those two groups.

[10 : 57] The general unhappiness and discontentment even in really advanced, wealthy, sophisticated societies. Justin Briley is a Christian writer and podcaster who spent a lot of time over the last few years interviewing psychologists and philosophers and cultural analysts and religious leaders, particularly around this question.

And here's his assessment. He says this. He says, this is the great irony of our age. We live at a more materially prosperous time than any other.

Life expectancy is at an all-time high and we have a constant and ubiquitous access to the kind of technology that our ancestors would have considered nothing short of magical. Yet statistics tell us we are more unhappy than we've ever been and that this is especially true for young people.

We have a meaning crisis and we're miserable as a result of it. We desperately want to fill that void. Now I've quoted Albert Camus and Richard Dawkins but here's one more quote.

This one comes from the 4th century North African bishop, St. Augustine. In his famous work, The Confessions, he writes this in the very beginning. He says, you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

[12 : 27] And so what Augustine does is he looks beyond this life to the creator God of all life and he says, I really, really can't understand life unless I understand my creator.

And so what I really want to try and do with you this morning, and it was kind of a lengthy introduction but during the rest of our time together is make a case that the only way that you're going to solve this meaning crisis is by finding your ultimate meaning in the God of the Bible. So two things I want you to see. You need a meaning that is bigger than you and you need a meaning that melts your heart.

A meaning that's bigger than you and a meaning that melts your heart. Here's the first one. You need a meaning that's bigger than you. So go to our passage, Romans 11 in verse 33. Paul writes the letter of Romans to a pretty divided church in the ancient city of Rome.

Probably more than any other one of his books and this is his longest book. This letter by Paul tells us about how a person gets into a right relationship with God.

[13 : 32] And his basic thesis through this book is that the way that you come into a relationship with God is not by good works, not by earning a right standing before God, but simply through faith. Simple trust in the work of his son Jesus Christ, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Put your faith in Jesus, Paul says. And it's there that you're going to find forgiveness of sin. It's there that you're going to find intimate relationship with your creator and a totally, totally new way of life. That's really what he spends the majority of the first 11 chapters on. How to get right with God. How to have the saving faith. But at the very end of chapter 11, after these sort of 11 packed full chapters of the beauty, the glory, the wonder and the power of the gospel, what Paul does is he breaks into praise.

You can almost imagine a guy sitting writing these chapters and then he stops and he thinks about what he's just written and he goes, I need to praise God. And then he writes that little bit of praise down. He breaks into doxology.

That's what we call it. And here's what he writes. Let me read it again for you. Verse 33. Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out.

[14 : 53] Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay them? For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever.

Amen. A doxology is literally a word of glory. Paul is so taken aback by the glory of God and the gospel that he breaks into these words of praise.

Look at all the worship that comes out of his mouth here. So verse 33, he says God's wisdom is infinitely greater than yours. He says God's knowledge is infinitely greater than yours. He says God's judgments are infinitely greater than yours.

Verse 34 then, he says God's mind is infinitely greater than yours. God's counsel is infinitely greater than yours. And verse 35, God's self-sufficiency is infinitely greater than yours.

Do you know what he's actually pointing out in all of that? Distinction. It's all distinction. That's what it is. Distinction between God and humanity.

[15 : 54] What he's basically trying to say is human beings, you guys, you're all the way over here and God, he's all the way over here.

Do you see that? Do you understand that? Do you comprehend it? That's what he's trying to say. Now this realization, this distinction, doesn't always actually drive people to worship when you see that and you figure it out.

One of the reasons is that we don't do very well with being told that we're inferior. We don't like being told that we're all the way over there. We don't like having our inadequacies exposed and if the God that Paul describes here is the true God over this universe, then just his very existence, by being there, he exposes us.

Morally. Intellectually. He exposes our inferiority. Martin Luther, one of the great reformers, Protestant reformer, he was once queried, he was once asked a question about his love for God and this is what he said.

He said, love him. Sometimes I hate him. Sometimes Christ seems to me nothing more than an angry judge who comes to me with a sword in his hand. Now that's not the sort of thing that you expect one of the heroes of the faith to sort of be saying.

[17 : 10] There's no bumper sticker for that. But God shows him up like he shows you up and he shows me up when we look closely.

And so often our first instinct is often not to worship but to pridefully resent God as a judge. But what if that pride, friends, is obscuring something, obscuring something from our vision that we desperately need?

Because the one thing you need, the one thing anyone struggling with a meaning crisis needs is a God that is much, much, much, much, much, and I could add many, many more muches there.

Much, much bigger than you. Even if that horribly exposes you and shows you up. So let me show you what I mean. Thinking about the way Paul describes God in this doxology, you need the God who takes counsel from no one.

Why? Well, because there are going to be times in your life when circumstances conspire to put you in a position where you are unable to counsel yourself out of that predicament.

[18 : 29] Where your friends are unable to counsel you out of that predicament. Where your therapist is unable to counsel you out of that predicament. And it's in that moment that the idea of a God who needs counsel from no one is actually deeply comforting.

When that God comes along and He holds you in His hand, is that all-knowing God holds the circumstances of your life in His hand.

When all counsel around you has failed you, the only thing you have left to turn to is the God who takes counsel from no one.

And so you need that God more than you know. And when you see that, you will worship Him and find your deepest meaning in Him. Secondly, you need the God who owes nothing to anyone.

The God you can't give anything to in order to enrich Him. Why? Well, because there are going to be moments in your life when you can't earn your way out of a situation.

[19 : 40] You can't perform well enough to make things better. You can't strive hard enough to right a wrong. There will be moments like that when you are just inadequate and you have nothing

in yourself or that you've accumulated to give.

And it's in that moment that the idea of a God who is completely self-sufficient in Himself is immensely, immensely comforting as He holds you in His hand. The omnipotent, omniscient God holds the circumstances of your life in His hand.

When you have nothing left to give, the only thing you have left then is to turn to the God who has nothing more to receive. You need that God more than you possibly know and when you see that you will worship Him and you will find your deepest meaning in Him.

Friends, think about subjective meaning. We spoke about that at the beginning. Creating your own meaning if there's no objective meaning out there in this world. What's one of the biggest problems with subjective?

Meaning. Creating subjective meaning for yourself in this meaning crisis. Why not just embrace Camus' concept of revolt or Richard Dawkins' finding wonder in the created world, natural world?

[21:00] The biggest problem, I think, with subjective meaning that isn't grounded in a transcendent, true reality is that it's often not very robust when it comes to sustaining you in the face of trial and hardship in the face of pain.

It just sort of melts away. It breaks down. Corrie ten Boom, the Christian writer, is credited with the saying, you'll never know that God is all you need until God is all you have.

You've maybe heard that before. She was a Dutch Christian who along with her family hid Jews during the Nazi occupation of Holland during the World War II.

Eventually her family was caught up. They were sort of rattled out and found out that she and her sister Betsy were imprisoned in Ravensbrook concentration camp. In her famous book, *The Hiding Place*, which if you've never read, you should go out after the service, buy a copy, and read it.

But in her famous book, *The Hiding Place*, she covers some of the horrific conditions in the concentration camp. Betsy, her sister, was basically terminally ill, not looking like she was going to make it through the wall, on her deathbed, having endured the horror of horrors in this concentration camp.

[22:21] She whispers these words to her sister, Corrie. She says, we must tell people what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that he is not deeper still.

Now those last words of Betsy, her dying words, probably became the most famous words in the book. There is no pit so deep that he is not deeper still.

It's just through that incredibly awful experience that I think many of us can't even get our heads around, through that incredibly awful experience that Corrie ten Boom realized that you will never know that God is all you need until God is literally all you have.

And she realized in that moment as her sister was dying and she said those words, she realized her sister, her sister didn't worship a God that you can give counsel to. Her sister didn't worship a God that needed her praise to feel affirmed.

She didn't worship a God who was like just a little bit above her, like a personal spiritual genie or something. She worshipped the God of Paul's doxology.

[23:37] The God who from him and through him and for him are all things to him be glory forever. Amen. You need that God. You need that God.

The God who is so, so, so, so much bigger than you. That is the only kind of meaning that's going to sustain you in this life. I'm not sure that a more robust source of meaning can be found anywhere else on this planet.

I don't think with all due respect to Richard Dawkins that marveling at the cosmos is going to get you through the death of a child. I don't think that a life built on subjective pleasure seeking and hedonism is going to comfort you through chronic and debilitating illness.

You need something so, so much bigger than that. So much bigger than subjective meaning. You need the God of the Bible. So, that's the first thing.

Second thing is you need a meaning that melts your heart. So, I take you back to verse 36 of Paul's doxology, the last two lines that we read.

[24:53] Paul says, for from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. Now, if you have read a fair bit of the New Testament and of Paul's writings in particular, you might read that and think, hey, that sounds very familiar.

In fact, if you're sitting in this worship service this morning, you might say, hey, that sounds very familiar. It sounds like something the Bible says elsewhere. In fact, it sounds like something that

Paul says elsewhere.

There are echoes of another part of the Bible in this verse. And those echoes come from Colossians chapter 1, verse 15 to 17. We recite it as our profession this morning.

A place in the Bible where Paul again is consumed with the glory of God, but this time he's consumed with the glory and the greatness of Jesus Christ. So listen again to what he says.

You should be very familiar with these words because we say them so often together, but listen to them. But now listen for the echoes of Romans chapter 11 verse 36. Paul in Colossians says, The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

[26 : 02] For in him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities. All things have been created through him and for him.

He is before all things and in him all things hold. Together. You hear those echoes? Romans 11? In him, through him, for him.

You see, in Paul's thinking, the greatness of our God, the extent of his glory and his majesty, the thing in him that is most deserving of praise and worship is actually revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ.

The praiseworthy feature of God, the most praiseworthy feature of God is his coming into this world in the person of Jesus Christ, to live a life that we cannot live, die a death we deserve to die, in our place for us, out of deep love and compassion.

It's in the gospel, the central message of the Christian faith, that we see the glory of the infinitely great God who is simultaneously infinitely compassionate towards us.

[27 : 14] You see that? Think about how do you define greatness? How do you define greatness? Here's one way to think about it.

Think about a figure like Nelson Mandela. Globally, there is something of a mystical aura that surrounds his image. Okay?

He's held in such high regard, not just because he was a great leader, well there are plenty of great leaders in history, and not just because he's a great politician, there are plenty of great politicians in history, not just because he was a great thinker with powerful ideas that could shape and change nations, he's held in such high regard in so many places because he had all of those attributes, and with them he seemed to at the same time have a genuine compassion and forgiveness, a willingness to associate with those who didn't have his stature, who didn't merit his attention, didn't deserve his attention, he had his compassion, condescension, even towards his enemies, where perhaps a lesser person might have dispensed of it there.

People who can hold together true greatness and true compassion for those who are not great, they're pretty rare and treasured people in society.

Now when you look at Jesus, what do you see? What do you see about the nature of God as he reveals himself in Jesus? Well by looking at God in Jesus, you see one who is great beyond all others, and yet at the same time is compassionate beyond all others.

[29 : 05] Because we see one who needs to be repaid by no one, and yet what does he do? He gives his life as a ransom. For many. We see one who takes counsel from no one, and yet in his own wise counsel he chooses to lay his life down for us.

We see the one who from him and through him and for him are all things, and yet we see him choosing to set aside all things to come and to save undeserving humanity.

one of the most enduring images of Jesus Christ is the crown of thorns. The crown because he's king, he's king over all, but the thorns because in his compassion he gives his all.

Incredible compassion. Our hearts are normally moved by those sorts of stories, stories of great compassion. And if that's the case, then at one level they should be totally undone by the scale of the compassion that we see from God in Jesus.

You see, friends, I often think about this, and this is a chastisement to my own heart as much as it might be to you, but I look at this whole thing, I look at the glorious God of this universe giving his son to save humanity.

[30 : 28] The mechanism by which this happens, the cruel, bloody Roman cross, an instrument of torture, I look at that greatness and I look at that compassion and then I ask myself and I ask you, what more does God actually have to do to get our hearts to take notice of him?

What more does he have to do for us to anchor our souls and find our deepest meaning in him? I mean, seriously, could he actually do any more than that? Is there anything he could do that is more profound than that?

Could he convince us anymore that he is wonderful beyond wonderful? Could he persuade us anymore that he's majestic beyond majestic? Could he reason with us anymore that he is loving beyond love itself?

What more does he need to do to make our hearts melt in his hands? When you look at the crown of thorns, is there really anything more that he has to say to your heart to prove that there really, really is no greater meaning in this life, then that's sacrificial love.

Everything else doesn't even come close. Let me close with this. A while back, there was a well-known religion journalist from the U.S.

[31:48] who quoted the first verse on social media of Isaac Watts' famous hymn, Alas, did my savior bleed. So the first verse goes like this, Alas, and did my savior bleed, and did my sovereign die, would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?

And this journalist got on social media and he took issue with him describing us human beings as worms. So on Twitter or X, he wrote this, he said, only a fool dies for worms.

Jesus died for wonderful creations cast in the divine image whom he loved with his whole heart. He believed you were worth dying for. That's what he wrote. Now I get the half-truth there.

I kind of get what he's trying to say, that human beings are fearfully and wonderfully made according to the Bible. Genesis chapter 1, it's there, it's in your Bible, tells us that all human beings are created in the image of God.

But Genesis 1 has to be held in tension with Genesis 3, that we are fallen and depraved and that we have inherited a sin nature and that nature manifests itself in all sorts of destructive thoughts and behavior.

[33:03] The Bible holds this tension. It holds Genesis 1 and Genesis 3 to be simultaneously true. We have immense God-given value, but we are desperately lost in sin.

And there's actually biblical precedent for us sinners in our sin nature to speak of ourselves as worms. So in Psalm 22, David, the psalmist, describes himself as a worm.

So it's in the Bible. But then come back to the hymn with me. If it is appropriate to sometimes frame our sinful status in terms of being worms, worms, then what about the question, is Jesus a fool to die for worms, as the journalist says?

Think of that hymn line, would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I? Is he a fool to die for me, a worm?

worm? And I want to say, friends, no, he's not a fool. He is not a fool. He's not a fool because think, it is not a fool who dies for worms, but rather one who possesses a loving, compassionate, condescension beyond anything that we can think of or imagine.

[34:31] when a little child picks up an earthworm and holds it in his hands and he shields it from any sort of harm, do we mock that child for showing compassion to the worm?

I mean, the child, he's so much more of a sophisticated creature than that little earthworm. Do we mock him for his compassion? No. Instead, our hearts are strangely warmed by the compassion that's evident in his young heart.

How much more then? How much more then when the all-powerful creator God of this universe condescends and he bends down to little you and me, how much more should we be dumbstruck by his great compassion?

to melt our hearts? Isn't that the God you want to anchor the meaning of your life in?

I'm really, really not sure you can get that kind of meaning anywhere else. A God who is that much beyond us and yet a God who in his great compassion would condescend down to us.

[35:56] God, that's where we find meaning. That's where the Bible offers us a meaning that can hold us and carry us through anything. Let's pray.

Let's ask for God to give us that meaning deep in our hearts. Father, we are in a meaning crisis. It's all over the internet.

We're told about it all the time. We see the effects of it in people as well around us, in ourselves, in our friends. as our confidence in an overarching true narrative for our lives fades and is weakened by all sorts of things.

And yet, Lord, when we look around and we look at what the options are, the alternatives for meaning, they're all so weak. They all fail us at key critical points in our lives. When we go back to the Bible, when we go back to God, your nature, who you are, and your Son, and what He's done for us, the greatness and the compassion, we see something that can give us a meaning, a rock-solid meaning that nothing else can.

[37:08] Father, impress the truth of the gospel upon us. This is not a story we just tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better about this world. This is not a subjective meaning. This is an objective meaning because Christ walked on this planet.

He lived, He died, He rose again, and He offered that forgiveness and that compassion to us. Help us to root our lives in this meaning, Lord, and I pray for any person who's sitting here this morning who's just really struggling in this area, battling, saying, where do I find this deeper meaning that I need?

Lord, show them that this is where they find it. For those who are going through trial and difficulty, when their confidence is being shaken, Lord, remind them of the objective truth of the gospel. Comfort their hearts with that. Give us this meaning that we might be a beacon of hope in a sea, in a world around us, of people who are really struggling to find meaning, Lord. We ask this all for Christ's sake and His glory. Amen.