

For What Do You Live?

[Matthew 6:19-21, 6:25-33](#)

From the story of Daniel and the Sermon on the Mount, we will search for God's answer.

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Worship at 9:00 and 10:45 a.m.

As I exited a department store, I held the inner door for a young couple. As we stepped through the vestibule, he said to her, "What are you going to live for if you get all your china and silver when first married?"

I wanted to run after them and tap him on the shoulder and thank him for the sermon introduction.

I imagine the scene. She has been talking about her china and silver patterns for months. He has just sat in those departments for three hours waiting while she changed her mind ten times. He probably wondering what all the fuss was about---plastic works fine, and you don't have to wash it. I wonder if they are married still. And, still looking for different meanings in life.

[I want to take a moment of personal privilege to thank the woman who has tolerated my indifference to china and silver and other masculine idiosyncrasies for the past 46 years. Tomorrow is our anniversary. Charlotte, I thank you for your love, loyalty and support.]

Back to the sermon. "What are you going to live for if you get all your china and silver when first married?" What are you going to live for---after---after graduation, after the job change, after retirement, after marriage, after the children move out, after you feel better, after ??????

Let's shorten the question, "What are you living for?" Today? Tomorrow?

A person over eighty years of age wrote me: "As the years have passed, there are more and more persons who are younger than I who have died. [I ask] 'Why---why am I standing here beside a casket, when he, who is younger than I, is lying in that casket? What am I living for?'"

One of my grandfathers---whom I dearly loved, whose enthusiasm and exuberance lifted my spirit every time that I saw him---had a stroke. It knocked him off his feet, literally. For the next eleven years, he never did more than grunt, play solitaire and hobble with a crutch. That experience when I was 14 transformed me. His crisis caused me to ask a profound question when most of my friends were just hanging out: What is meaningful in life? The question is hammered home again when I visit our people whose bodies no longer are self-sustaining, and Avon cannot make beautiful. What to live for?

Many of us cope with meaninglessness by a simple technique: we throw ourselves into a project. It may be remodeling the living room. We spend hours looking at catalogues, window shopping, day- dreaming about the project. We lock on it. Then, when we have it, when we can see the result, when it is over, we feel empty and seek another project. Maybe we take up golf. After one fascination is finished or has become boring, then again returns the question: What am I going to live for?

Daniel must have asked that question many times. (Some of you know the story of Daniel from the Old Testament, and others of you do not. I'll speak so that those of you who have not read it can follow me.)

Daniel probably was a teenager at the time when his written story began. He was handsome, intelligent, well-built and of noble birth. (We are talking class president, king of the prom and quarterback of the football team.) He had a very bright future---except that the Babylonians were conquering the world! Babylonian soldiers captured this home city of Jerusalem; then herded the residents off like a cattle drive to Babylonia.

To feel the predicament of Daniel, imagine that Al Qaida exploded nuclear missiles in five of our cities, poisoned our water reservoirs, and sabotaged power plants. Hopeless, overwhelmed with loss and grief, we surrender. Then, they round up the brightest of our people and yank them off to Iraq to employ their brains to further control the world. That was Daniel's plight. His family gone; his home gone; his city gone; his country gone; his future gone! Trudging over the dusty road, tears dropping, heart broken, I expect that Daniel asked, "What is there to live for?"

King Belshazzar had a dream. It vexed him so much that he couldn't sleep. He sent for fortunetellers, magicians, sorcerers and wizards to come and explain the dream to him.

They said to the King, "Tell us your dream and we will explain it to you." But the King was nasty, saying, "No, I have made up my mind that you must tell me what I dreamed and then tell me what it means." How is that for a set-up? Of course, they could not.

King Belshazzar flew into a rage, and executed them all!

Daniel sent word that he would reveal the dream and interpret it. Prior to appearing before the King, he asked Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to pray with him for divine help. That night, God gave Daniel the King's dream and its interpretation. Daniel praised God, saying: God is wise and powerful! Praise him forever and ever. He reveals things that are deep and secret; He knows what is hidden in darkness, And he himself is surrounded by light. I praise you and thank you....

Is it not interesting---and of great significance---that heroic saints often praised and thanked God, while lesser saints fixated on doubting questions, resentment, defensiveness and give-me prayers?) An appropriate question for reflection: Why do the heroic saints praise and thank God so much? Have they learned a secret about living meaningfully?

Daniel recounted the dream to the King, and interpreted it. The King was impressed with Daniel and his God. He bowed to the ground in homage to Daniel, rewarded Daniel with a high position in the government and gave him splendid gifts. Life must have been idyllic for Daniel with a top job and lots of money.

However, in time King Belshazzar was succeeded by Darius the Mede. Darius appointed Daniel to a second level supervisory position and considered promoting him to be second in command in the empire. Number two! Daniel was exceptionally competent in managing the King's affairs. Guess what happened? Others were jealous and wanted the position themselves. They schemed to ruin him, but could not find anything wrong with the way that he served the King. Finally they said to each other, "We are not going to find anything of which to accuse Daniel unless it is something in connection with his religion."

So they went to King Darius and said, "May your Majesty live forever! All of us who administer your empire---the supervisors, the governors, the lieutenant governors, and the other officials---have agreed that your Majesty should issue an order. Give orders that for thirty days no one be permitted to request anything from any god or from any man except from Your Majesty. Anyone who violates this order is to be thrown into a pit filled with lions. Let it be the law of the Medes and Persians which cannot be changed under any circumstances."

King Darius signed the order.

When Daniel learned of the order, he went home. In an upstairs room there were windows that faced toward Jerusalem. There, as he had always done, he knelt down at the open window and prayed and gave thanks to God. (Did you catch that? What did he do? Prayed! Thanked God!) When Daniel's enemies observed him praying, all of them went together to the king to accuse Daniel. They said, "Your Majesty, Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, does not respect Your Majesty or obey the order you issued. He prays regularly three times a day."

When the King heard this, he was upset---he liked Daniel---and did his best to find some way to rescue Daniel. But, because it was in irrevocable law, he could not.

So, the king gave orders to throw Daniel into the pit filled with lions. He said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve so loyally, rescue you." A stone was put over the mouth of the pit, and the king placed his own seal on the stone. Then the king returned to the palace and spent a sleepless night, without food or entertainment. At dawn, the king hurried to the pit. He called out anxiously, "Daniel, servant of the living God! Was the God you serve so loyally able to save you from the lions?"

Daniel called back, "May Your Majesty live forever! God sent his angel to shut the mouths of the lions so that they would not hurt me. He did this because he knew that I was innocent and because I have not wronged you, Your Majesty."

The King was overjoyed and ordered that Daniel be pulled up out of the pit.

What did Daniel do in the pit? Rant and rave at the injustice that was done to him? I doubt it. Doesn't ring true. Curse the evil king? Probably not. Whine at how unjust life is? I doubt it. He must have been tempted. Would you be? However, those emotions and prayers would have been a waste of energy. I think that he prayed, asking God to shut the lions' mouths. And, I think that he thanked God. I think that he had learned the power in thanking and praising God. I think that he had learned that the chief meaning of life is not survival, nor is it rank, nor is it power, nor is it privilege. It is God!

Daniel learned that the chief meaning of life comes from God, not from self or things or people. He knew the value of thanking and praising God. He knew that he could lose everything, except for one. What could not be taken away? God! The silver and china, the bank accounts, the beautiful bodies, the houses, the careers---all those people, things and ideas to which we give so much--- are in the words of Jesus, like "treasurers [laid up] for yourselves here on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and robbers break in and steal." They are not wrong per se. They are sinful only if we invest so much in them that we neglect God. They are tools to be used in living out of our relationship with God. Investing in God, living for God, is as Jesus put it, like "stor[ing] up riches for yourselves in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and robbers cannot break in and steal."

Later in the same chapter Matthew quotes Jesus again. This time saying, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness...." Jesus teaches, "Strive first...." Jesus, as the Son of God, informs us that we will be blessed if we make a high-quality relationship with God the number one goal. He speaks of the kingdom of God as the most profoundly meaningful and significant goal--- greater than all others. Kingdom of God and God's righteousness are expressions of his culture that may not communicate well to you. Let me translate briefly.

Kingdom implies that there is a king. Who is the king? God! Jesus has been talking about the use of money. So, assuming that he had money in mind when he made this statement, Jesus is saying that striving for God's righteousness requires that God and God's values be taken into consideration when we make money decisions. As subjects of the King, we take the King's teachings into consideration when we make decisions about our money, about our careers, about our use of time, about our values, even about the laws and policies of government. (This is not a new truth. What is the first of the Ten Commandments?) If you have a thousand dollars, the first claimant for a portion of the thousand is God, and God's purposes of spreading the Gospel, the alleviation of pain and the advancement of justice.

Our presbyterian ancestors included spiritual giants who wrote the Shorter Catechism. Those of you who are older may have learned it by heart. What is the first question of the Catechism? "What is the chief end of man?" We might say, "What is the purpose of life?" or "Why are we here?" What was their answer? "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." In our words, we are to honor, respect and obey God and to receive pleasure and meaning out of our relationship with God. The authors of the Catechism understood that our greatest meaning is God.

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What do you live for if you have the silver and the china?

What do you live for after your Jerusalem falls?

What do you live for in the lions' pit?

What do you live for when you prosper?

What do you live for if you hold high office?

For what are you living now? What happens when you lose it? You will, you know, someday! Unless it is God!

Therefore, let's reword the question: For whom do you live?

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