

*The Significance
of Life*

By

Rev. Geo. A. Fuller, M. D.

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LIFE.

Rev. George A. Fuller, M. D.

Text: What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that Thou visitest him? —Psalms 8, vs. iv.

The critical thinker who looks over the great field of human thought and action is compelled again and again to pause and ask, "What is the purpose of life?" Is it anything more than a wild and fruitless chase after the unattainable? He who gives the most time to the study of physical science, and the great unsolved problems of sociology, is prone to hesitate before answering or attempting to answer these questions. A glance at our penal and reformatory institutions,—yea, even at our great hospitals for the treatment of diseases both of the mind and body,—and at our ever-increasing charitable institutions, compel us to pause and question the real purpose and significance of life. In the great struggle for the mere pittance of a livelihood how many become as wrecks strewn on the seashore of time! How many fond and cherished hopes are blighted seemingly forever! How many continue to drag out a miserable existence where no light illuminates their path, with only want and despair as companions?

Is this world, after all, as beautiful as poets have dreamed and as fair as rhapsodists would make us believe? If we read the so called philosophy that materialism has given to the world we should be forced to believe that "all is vanity and vexation of spirit." And that life was simply a bubble, the bursting of which would certainly end all our dreams. But, I ask, are we to take seriously these conclusions of materialism? Are we to look upon nature and life through the smoked glass of disappointments and prejudices? Are the mentally and spiritually blind to be forever our guides? Are not the positive assertions of the soul worth more than all the negations and denials of physical science? Which is the greater authority—science the created or soul the creator?

If we are to accept a philosophy of negation, one that denies all the affirmations of the soul, then life, truly, becomes meaningless, and there can be no valid reason for our existence. A cruel and relentless destiny then compels us to be,—and we become the mere sport and plaything of titanic forces. How narrow, unsatisfactory and irrational this view of things!

Without stopping to argue, or to present the reasons for my conclusions, I must at present content myself by simply affirming the spiritual side of the Universe, and consequently the spiritual side of man's nature. As Thoreau says, "Certainly there is a life of the mind above the wants of the body, and independent of it." May I not add that it is this life "above the

wants of the body" that we must never lose sight of, if we would ever discover the true purpose of life. If man's thoughts, emotions and aspirations are simply the results of chemical action, then the Universe itself is without meaning and all life purposeless.

Well did Kant exclaim, "Two things fill me with awe,—the starry heavens, and the sense of the moral responsibility in man." No matter how frequently one looks at the starry heavens the soul is always filled with awe and reverence at the unspeakable majesty of the scene, and one is forced to ask, "Who made all those globes of fire speeding on and on forever through infinite depths?"

Tyndall in his "Materialism and Its Opponents" thus speaks of the power within the Universe: "When I attempt to give the power which I see manifested in the Universe an objective form, personal or otherwise, it slips away from me, declining all intellectual manipulation. I dare not, save poetically, use the pronoun 'He' regarding it. I dare not call it 'Mind.' I refuse even to call it a 'Cause.' Its mystery overshadows me; but it remains a mystery, while the objective frames which my neighbors try to make it fit simply destroy and desecrate it." Is not that moral responsibility of which Kant speaks as revealed in man a silent, yet potent revelator of that power that works in and through all things in the Universe? Emerson most truly says: "The Universe is the externalization of the soul. Wherever life is *that* bursts into appearance around it. Our science

is sensual, and therefore superficial. The earth, and the heavenly bodies, physics, and chemistry, we sensually treat, as if they were self-existent; but these are the retinue of that Being we have." Soul, then, is the important thing to study in the Universe. After all, is not soul the only thing of real importance in man, because alone it is permanent?

Material prosperity cannot give us true peace and happiness. Intellectual supremacy will forever fail to satisfy the cravings of the soul. Ethics, justice, freedom, these reveal unlimited horizons, and develop in society a broader field of love, and are among the permanent gifts of the spirit.

The real purpose of life stands revealed to us only when we have time and liberty to think. Professor Sheldon Ames in his treatise on "Science of Law," says: "Liberty, in itself, is a negative term denoting absence of restraints: on its positive side it denotes the fullness of individual existence." When we have not only the time to think, but also the liberty to express our thought in life and action, then it is we begin to understand that there may be a purpose in life uplifting and divine.

Professor Huxley has told us that the "beauty of holiness and the ugliness of sin are no mere metaphors, but real and intense feelings." These "intense feelings" serve to reveal to us in part the higher purposes in life, the struggle of the soul to free itself of all that impedes its upward flight. The reachings after a still greater freedom and the unfoldings of

all the tenderer, sweeter, and nobler feelings in life, are, or should be to every man, evidences of a purpose in life that can never reach its divinest fulfillment in this our present expression of life.

It is not things themselves, the inventions of man, which have produced the great innovations in the world, but the engendering thought behind all things that shows forth as evidence of a purpose in life. In other words, the impulse which is born out of man's real spiritual life is the revelator of that purpose.

Ah! what a tremendous discovery was that when we learned that the operations of nature were not obeying a capricious will, but were working according to steadfast and unalterable laws. As Goethe said:

“According to laws mighty, fixed, eternal,
Must we complete our being's circle.”

Another poet, Revleux, says:

“Suns wander up and down,
Worlds go and come again,
And this no wish can alter.”

“In this grand poetical form is seized the same uplifting knowledge that not the material but the spiritual force holds within itself the presentment of God, that even the world's creation consists in part in immutability of its laws.” This presentment of God as foreshadowed in immutable laws, again reveals to us a purpose in all things, and life even in

the meanest of expressed forms, is not without purpose in the economy of nature.

Not all can walk the higher paths of life; not all can be brave mariners and sail out over the vast unknown deeps. Many are destined for the humbler walks and perhaps only venture along the shores of the great seas gathering up the treasures that are cast at their feet.

As the poet says:

"My life is like a stroll upon the beach,
As near the ocean's edge as I can go,
My tardy steps its waves sometimes o'erreach,
Sometimes I stay to let them overflow.

"My sole employment 'tis and scrupulous care
To place my gains beyond the reach of tides,
Each smoother pebble, and each shell more rare,
Which ocean kindly to my hand confides.

"I have but few companions on the shore,
They scorn the strand who sail upon the sea,
Yet oft I think the ocean they've sailed o'er
Is deeper known upon the strand to me.

"The middle sea contains no crimson dulse,
The deeper waves cast up no pearls to view,
Along the shore my hand is on its pulse,
And I converse with many a shipwrecked crew."
(*Thoreau.*)

Who can say that the purpose of life is not equally fulfilled in the lives of the shipwrecked as well as in the lives of those who sail with safety and apparent success out over the waters of the great turbulent seas? On the strand lessons may be learned and experiences come to the individual that could not come

elsewhere. Therefore in the life of seeming failure may be fulfilled the divine purpose of life.

R. D. Melville says: "The key to the enigma of the Universe is found in the doctrine of evolution."

We would also declare that evolution is also the key to many of the enigmas of life. In the doctrine of ascent from the lower to the higher may certainly be found a rational explanation of many, if not all, the experiences of life. How much more ennobling its teachings than are those of ancient dogmas which have been put forth sometimes in the name of religion. The ceaseless and unresting urge that is in man is no longer meaningless, but instead becomes the mighty lever that lifts to higher and higher attainments. These attainments should not be found merely in the external world, in the production of works of art in stone or on canvas, but should find their fullest expression in the real life of the man.

The purpose of life may be as readily fulfilled in the humblest walks of life as in the so-called highest. If the ideal is strong, pure and noble, the mission is being fulfilled in the highest. In everyday, commonplace labor, the ideal should be strong, pure and noble, and the labor must be useful and its results likewise fraught with beauty.

In speaking of life, Henry Wood says it "is a continuous divine communion. While it appears broken into a vast number of disjointed fragments, there is but One Life. . . . Without any loss of individual responsibility, each one belongs to the race, which as

a whole would be incomplete without him. . . . The ultimate acme of humanity is universal brotherhood. This will not be attained by means of any new departure in sociology, perfected legislation, or ideal political economy, but from a higher consciousness which will fuse and unify heart and character. The current of spiritual life flows from the centre outward, carrying on its bosom rich offerings of loving service and ministry. The cold tide of selfishness, which ebbs from without inward, ends in a deadly vortex because it has not compensating outflows."

Within all is aglow with celestial warmth. From without comes the cold blast of materialism. Our misunderstanding of life and its purpose comes when we take hold of the wrong end of things. In the realm of effects we shall ever seek in vain for the cause of things,—so in the realm of externalization we shall seek vainly for an understanding of life. If the outward form leads to the discovery of spirit, as the mighty force that compels all to be, all is well and good, for at last the trail has been found that sooner or later must lead to the comprehension of all things. For if the spiritual side of the Universe is not revealed, we know only worlds of darkest shadows where tremendous storms are forever wrecking all that is. But with spiritual illumination, even the clouds have a golden lining, and the storms are not purposeless and vain. What a transcendent meaning is thus given to all things! With uplifted eyes we read a new meaning in blazing sun and star! And

life, our life, is yet to know and guide all things. Spiritual knowledge is yet to be the source of our power.

Mallock, speaking of the higher spiritual conception of man and his destiny, asks: "Is this majestic conception a true one, or is it a dream only, with no abiding substance? Is it merely a misty vision rising up like an exhalation from the earth, or does a something more come down to it out of heaven, and strike into it substance and reality? This figure of human dreams has grown and grown in stature; does anything divine descend to it, and so much as touch its lips or its lifted hands? If so, it is but the work of a moment. The contact is complete. Life, and truth, and force, like an electric current passing into the whole frame. It lives, it moves, it breathes; it has a body and a being; the divine and the eternal is indeed dwelling among us. And thus, though mature knowledge may seem, as it still widens, to deepen the night around us; though the Universe yawn wide on all sides of us, in vaster depths, in more unfathomable, soulless gulf, though the loom of time grows more audible and more deafening in our ears—yet through the night and through the darkness the divine light of our lives will only burn the clearer. And this speck of a world as it moves through the blank immensity, will bear the light of all worlds upon its bosom."

And this light of all worlds that the old earth ever bears along with it on its celestial journey is the life

that is in man, and this life is ever revealing a diviner purpose in all things.

What we really want to know at this present time is not so much the history of crime and the stupendous follies committed by mankind, but to make sure that there is real goodness, self-sacrifice and unselfishness in the world. Crime and folly bear the same relation to goodness as chaff does to the wheat. We need a larger faith in humanity. There should be on our part no attempt to prejudge the acts of mankind. No branding of one as good and another as bad. We must seek for good in all—and wheresoever we find it we should cherish it as the most precious of all our findings. Then rare graces of the spirit shall confront us on every hand, many times these shall look out upon us from the most unexpected quarters. We must not be over-fastidious, but must cast aside nearly all our conventionalities, and learn to take people as we find them. We did not make them, neither is it expected that we shall make them over. Then shall we find a promise and a power in human nature that we never before dreamed of. We must not be offended by rudeness of manners, for oftentimes concealed within there is a nobility that almost appals us with its possibilities. Our aim should be to understand all kinds of men—then shall we more fully understand the purpose that is in all life.

We have failed many times to understand the significance of life, simply because we have tried to reduce all human life to our own forms so that we

might be able to give them our labels. But human life is not easily reduced to certain fixed forms. We should rise above being always disturbed either by our own or others' imperfections. Truly does the hermit of Walden speak when he says: "It is not worth while to let our imperfections disturb us alway. The conscience really does not, and ought not to monopolize the whole of our lives, any more than the heart or head. It is as liable to disease as any other part."

The most perfect life is the one in which conscience is seldom or ever manifested—the one that keeps along the even tenor of its way,—oblivious to the workings of conscience within and the imperfections without.

Perhaps the most important thought that comes from our study of the purpose of life, is that of incarnation,—in other words, God in man, in all humanity. In Newton wrestling with the problems of the Universe, in Raphael struggling with the ideals of the soul, with Beethoven voicing alike the discords and harmonies of the Universe,—in Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton ministering on fields of carnage to suffering humanity; Garrison, Phillips, Parker, and a host of others pleading for an oppressed and outraged race; in Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony and others patiently yet persistently demanding equal rights for all irrespective of sex; in Burnham Wardwell and John Murray Spear urging upon humanity its duty towards the unfortunate incarcer-

ated in prison cells, and all who have pleaded for a nobler manhood, a diviner brotherhood for the human race. The newer incarnation is that of love, that yet shall work stupendous changes in the world. The dying Bunson looking up into the tender, loving face of his wife, said: "In thy face have I seen the eternal." An old Jewish proverb says: "God could not be everywhere, so he made mothers."

One writer has said: "This new-old form of the doctrine calls incarnation continuous, progressive, ascendent, as well as universal." (Rev. M. C. Gannett.) It is the "Word" made visible and tangible in the flesh. The plan embodies within its scope the brute as well as the angel, and also whatever of life may be below the brute or above the angel.

Again, the purpose of life is partially revealed in individuality. Emerson says: "Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with accumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous, half possession." There is something that you can certainly do better than all other men. Find that something and do it with all your might and soul. When you discover the purpose in your own life, you will need no longer a teacher. Who could have been the teacher of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Wagner? Do as best you may whatever duty lies before you, for even the most menial duty may hold within itself a possibility divine. The simple region of thine everyday life thy soul may

fill with the warmth and glow of infinite love. George Eliot says: "Perhaps it is an implicit joy in the resources of our human nature which has stimulated admiration for acts of self-sacrifice which are vain as to their immediate end. . . . We have need to keep the sluices open for possible influxes of the rarer sort." If we keep the sluices wide open the "possible influxes" become everyday realities.

Our lives are certainly influenced from beyond,—and in part moulded and shaped by powers divine. It behooves us then to live in the consciousness of the inspiring spiritual world. Then in our own lives we should realize not only our self-reliance, but also how in a great measure we are dependent upon others. When spirits approach us from the higher spheres of life, we may become conscious of their presence, many a time, only by the influence they exert upon our lives and actions.

Yet, may this not be the most important influence exerted over us, and ultimately lead to a complete understanding of the purpose in life, when we fully realize, through these whisperings of the spirit, our own immortality.

"So, O Soul, there's no farewell
Where souls once together dwell;
Have no fear, O beating heart,
There's no such word as part.

"Hands that meet and closely clasp
Shall forever feel the grasp.
All that lives goes on forever,
Forever and forever."

(*Annette Kahn.*)



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