

3 Most Important Questions Of Life Pleasant Plains 12-8-2019AM NICK ANGEL

- ***READ Acts 17:16-21*** During his seemingly short stay in Berea, Paul was able to successfully reason with those within this city because the text tells us that these people were of a much more noble character than those who were in Thessalonica where Paul had just come from. What a nice change of pace this must have been for Paul since he was probably more accustomed to so many people being unwilling to calmly reason within the Scriptures. However, this time of peace quickly comes to an end when the Jews, who had bothered him in Thessalonica, hear of Paul's sharing of the Word in Berea. They decide to make the short trip to Berea to cause problems for Paul, and they are able to do so to the point that the brethren immediately send Paul to Athens where he waits for Silas and Timothy to come join him after they finish up in Berea.
- It is while Paul is in Athens that he does a little sightseeing. While our efforts at sightseeing are often done as a means of relaxing for a bit, Paul's time looking around Athens only left him depressed. Though this was a magnificently beautiful city with stunning architecture on display in their buildings and monuments, Paul was deeply depressed by the presence of so many idols. Athens, one of the most prominent cities in all of the Roman empire, was an intellectual, philosophical, and religious hotbed. It was a city that loved deep conversations and learning of new ideas.
- It didn't take Paul long to recognize this as he not only observed the idols all over the city but he was also busy carrying out his common practice of going to the synagogue and the marketplace to reason with those who would listen concerning God. Some of those people he sought to reason with were the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.
 - The Epicureans encouraged their followers to lead tranquil and contemplative life that should be free of passions and destructive emotions. They were open to the existence of gods, but they didn't believe that they were all that concerned with the goings on of mankind.
 - Stoics were pantheists meaning that they saw divine nature in everything. This divinity is seen in humans in their ability to reason in an effort to achieve a virtuous life.
- These two groups had accrued substantial followers within Athens that led them to continually discussing the big questions of life and current happenings. Upon learning of the Apostle Paul, they described him as an *"ignorant show-off"* who was a preacher of foreign deities because he was speaking concerning Jesus and the resurrection. They took him to the Areopagus which is probably what is now known as Mars Hill. On this hilltop, Paul was able to share with these and many other peoples that which they really enjoyed hearing...something new.
- The subject matter that Paul then discusses with those gathered wasn't actually anything new to them for he simply spoke of those things that Paul and many other people of his day and even many people of our day have questions concerning. Paul used this opportunity to answer what might be described as the 3 most important questions of life. Just as the Epicureans, Stoics, and many other philosophers and religious minded people had answers to these questions...so did Paul. However, his answers were founded in the wisdom that had been given to him by the one, true, and living God in heaven.
- Brethren, these questions continue to be asked today, and they continue to be answered by various people in this life. But sadly, many of those answers are given from the standpoint of the "wisdom" of men. This morning, we want to first recognize these important questions, some answers given by men, and then we will consider the actual answers given by Paul according to the wisdom from above which is of God. So what are these three big and most important questions of life?
 1. Where did we come from?
 2. What are we doing here?
 3. Where are we going and how are we getting there?

I noted just a moment ago that these questions have been asked for a long time, and they have been answered by a number of different people or philosophies. We're first going to look at how the questions are answered from the perspective of someone who approaches life from the standpoint of humanism. This philosophy can be best understood as a system of belief in which the concern is firmly upon human affairs in this world and not upon any sort of divine or supernatural being or set of beliefs. The Humanist will not answer any question concerning life with a god or supernatural being in mind. Everything is seen purely from the standpoint of human wisdom and knowledge. You would probably not find it surprising then to understand that humanism is closely aligned with the theory of evolution. So how would the humanist answer these three most important questions of life? Consider these answer that are given by the American Humanist Society as a part of their Humanist Manifesto III, a successor to the original Humanist Manifesto of 1933. (americanhumanist.org)

I. Humanist Answers:

A. "Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change"

1. Where did we as humans come from? According to humanists, we are simply a byproduct of natural processes that did not have us in mind. That has to be the only conclusion based upon the statement that we are *"the result of unguided evolutionary change."* As others have stated, we as humans are simply the beneficiaries of hitting the evolutionary jackpots.
2. Concerning the genesis of this material world... *"Humanists recognize nature as self-existing."* According to humanists, this world came into existence on its own by its own and without any influence of anything else...especially the influence of some sort of divine or supernatural being. Therefore, since nature came from nothing and we can from nature, then by conclusion we, as humans, came from nothing. We are a result of nothing other than pure chance.

B. "Life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals."

1. However, the humanist believes, that though we are the byproduct of natural processes that did not have us in mind, there is a main point to our existence and it centers around living in such a way that we are able to *"develop[ment] and animate our lives with a deep sense of purpose, find wonder and awe in the joys and beauties of human existence, its challenges and tragedies, and even in the inevitability and finality of death."*
2. According to humanist, much of this purpose, wonder, awe, and joy comes from our social nature. Through relationships we can *"strive toward a world of mutual care and concern, free of cruelty and its consequences, where differences are resolved cooperatively without resorting to violence."*
3. Further, humanists believe that this will all result in the ultimate goal of maximizing individual happiness. Happiness in life is the goal and whatever we can do to make ourselves happy is what we ought to be trying to achieve while we are here in this life.

C. "...being a Humanist means trying to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishment after you are dead."

1. This is a quote from Kurt Vonnegut who served for many years as the honorary president of the American Humanist Association. This quote is seen as a succinct representation of what it means to be a humanist.
2. According to this man and those who would subscribe to his way of thinking, there is nothing to expect beyond this life. There is no eternal reward or punishment. There is just nothing beyond our existence in this life, and therefore there should be no eternal influence on what happens in the present.
3. Therefore in other terms, we are not going anywhere after this life and nothing we do in this life is going to have any impact on what we experience in the next life because there is nothing in the next life. Once we die, we are gone. We simply cease to exist.

To sum up the answers given to the questions by the humanist:

1. We come from nothing.
2. Just be happy.
3. We are going nowhere.

I don't know about you...but those answers leave me pretty dissatisfied because they show us to have no true meaning in this life outside of ourselves. I sure don't like the idea that I exist simply by chance. I would hope that I have more value than that. Additionally, it is pretty sad to think that this life is all there is to our existence. We are born, we live, and we die and cease to exist. How sad!

Speaking of sad, what about this whole thing about happiness being the ultimate goal? It seems like this logic could turn really bad really quickly. I say this because what happens when what makes me happy doesn't make someone else happy? What happens if I'm the type of person who really enjoys pushing people in the face? I have a sneaky suspicion that no one here would be too happy if I came up and punched you in the face! So what do we do in those situations? Someone might say that we ought to broaden out the happiness to being something that helps society, but what happens when one society's happiness is bad news for another society? What took place in WWII comes to mind when thinking about the Nazi society and the Jewish society.

Therefore, I think it is pretty safe to say that there is a lack of logic, value, consistency, or hope in this type of worldview. The humanists are left with little to live for and nothing to look forward to. What an awful way to live?! So how would Paul differ in his responses to these questions? Does he have anything better to offer from the standpoint of the wisdom of God? Let's read **Acts 17:22-31** to find out what his answers would be to these three big questions of life.

II. Acts 17:22-31 Answers

A. We come from Adam, God's first creation. (vv.24-26)

1. Paul begins by acknowledging the religious-minded nature of the Athenians. *"I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed: 'To an Unknown God.'"* This is exactly the type of thing that Paul was hoping to be able to act upon, and he wastes no time in seeking to proclaim to these people that which they were ignorant of. *"What you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you."* Paul was ready to tell them of God.
2. The first thing he tells them about God is that He is the Maker of the entire world and everything in it, He is the Lord of heaven and earth, and He is not the same as what is found in this life. He transcends what exists in this life. Whereas everything we see in this life is material, God is different because He is spiritual and supernatural. He possesses supernatural powers that allowed Him to speak the world into existence. **(Genesis 1)** *"He Himself gives everyone life and breath and all things."* Paul directly contradicts the teachings of the humanists by stating that God is the being that brought everything and everyone into existence, and all of that can be detailed in **Genesis 1** and other places in the Bible.
3. So what about everyone? Where do we fit in with God? Paul goes on to say that *"From one man He has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live."* Let's begin with the fact that Paul states that we did not just happen by chance, but that we were created by God and all descendants from one man. Again, **Genesis** has answers to these questions, and in **Genesis 2:7-25** tells us about the first man and the first woman who came from the rib that God took from his side. From those two people, Adam and Eve, we have all descended. They were not the byproducts of natural processes that didn't have them in mind, but they were purposefully created by God in His own image. **(Genesis 1:26,27)**

B. We are to seek, reach out, and find God. (vv.27,28)

1. Paul goes on from this point to show that God created men and established their times and boundaries so that they might *“seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.”* What is it that causes men to seek after God? Is it not the creation itself? Paul himself would later write to the Romans and note that God’s creation is the first and most obvious evidence for His existence.

“since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse.” (Romans 1:19,20)

2. The natural response by men ought to be for us to search out and find the God that is not too far from each one of us. We ought to search Him out so that we can learn more of Him and what desires from us. However, we often instead deny Him and His existence in an attempt to do whatever it is that we please. We seek to suppress Him so that we don’t have to acknowledge someone or something that is higher than ourselves and that might make demands of us as the higher and supreme being.
3. Yet, that doesn’t cause for that hole that is within us to seek something greater to be filled. Instead, it continues to exist and we have to try to find some way to have it sufficed. Blaise Pascal, a 17th century French writer and theologian, has a fantastic quote that quite well sums up what men seek to do to find happiness and how it will never be enough.

“What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace?”

This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”

(Blaise Pascals Pensees...page 75)

4. What then does it mean to allow God to fill the void that He created within us so that we might seek Him? I would suggest that it means that we ought to seek God, find Him, discover His will, and then we willing to submit to it. In doing this we can find true happiness in something that is outside of ourselves and that is God and His will for us! After all, Paul makes it clear that *“in Him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’”* I will never cease to be fascinated by the fact that even the secular poets, this one specifically being the Greek poet Aratus (315-240BC), acknowledged the obvious that we are a product of something far greater than ourselves! Yes, He did create us and by that fact alone we are indebted to seek Him and discover His will so that we might follow it. Fulfilling His purpose for us in finding Him is what brings true happiness into our lives!

C. We are all moving towards judgment, & we can be judged positively through repentance. (vv.30,31)

1. However, this leads us to the last point of what is the purpose of us following His will? The purpose, according to Paul, is that we be willing to be exactly as God created us to be which is that we be His children. Children are naturally to be obedient to their parents, but almost as natural is the failure to be obedient at all times. This causes a problem because Paul answers the final question by stating that we are all marching towards judgment, and our failure to be obedient to God causes us to all have the issue of standing before God as disobedient children.
2. Yet, Paul tells these people that *“having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has set a day when He is going to judge the world in righteousness by the Man He has appointed.”* By this we come to know that there is a judgment that is coming in the future, and that judgment must mean that there

3. is going to be something to our existence beyond this life. Of course, a reading of the Bible shows us that what awaits beyond this life is either life with God or death apart from Him.
4. So what do we do if we have lived in such a way that we have not been faithful to Him and therefore deserving of death? **(Romans 6:23)** Paul states that God has been willing to overlook these times if we are willing to repent which means to acknowledge our wrongs and be determined to be better. If we are willing to do this then we have the opportunity to be judged in a favorable way by the Man He has appointed to judge which is Christ Jesus whom God raised from the dead to prove that He has power over death.
5. From God we learn that there is an existence after death and the way we live in this life is going to have all of the impact over our existence in the next. We can either suffer the consequences of our rebellion against God, or we can enjoy eternal bliss in the presence of our Father because we have trusted in Him and believed in His ability to save through the life that was lived and given by His Son Jesus.

I don't know about you, but this sounds so much better than what is offered by the humanists from so many different stand points. First of all, it gives us value and purpose. We were created for a purpose, and we have value in God's eyes. Second, it gives us something outside of ourselves to strive for. We are seeking to bring honor to God, and oh by the way...we bring honor to Him by loving our neighbor as ourselves. Lastly, we are told that there is a goal to shoot for, and that goal is to be able to stand before Jesus on the last day as faithful followers who are ready to receive the great reward that He has promised to His followers. The choice to me seeks abundantly clear.

However, things back in Paul's day were much like they are in our day. There were some, the Epicureans and Stoics who ridiculed Paul at his mention of the resurrection. There were others who said they would give him another chance to talk about this at a later time. Then there were those who *"joined him and believed."* **(Acts 17:34)** These people were willing to consider the evidence that Paul gave in what he said, and they were willing to trust in the God he shared with them. Those people were just like us in the sense that they had some big questions that had not been answered in a satisfying way from the standpoint of men's wisdom, but Paul was able to answer from the wisdom of above. They trust in that wisdom and it led them to faith. May each of us be content with the wisdom of God when it comes to the biggest questions of life, and be a people who are willing to act upon that wisdom in a way that leads us to repentance and being prepared for that day of judgment.