

Meaning Before Happiness

By Bobby Schuller

Well today we're in the middle of a series called Serenity in the Storm, and we're talking about the tools, methods and things that the scriptures give us in order that we can be like Jesus in the manner that He took a nap in a storm; in the way that He was relaxed. He was able to endure difficult times with a peaceful mind. Maybe you're going through a storm right now. Anybody in the house going through a difficult time? Maybe going through a valley? Don't feel like you have to raise your hand.

When we're going through those valleys of the shadow of death, we want to panic sometimes; we want to be afraid, we want to run, we want to withdraw. But one of the best things we can do when we're going through difficult situation, is to have a relaxed mind because it's from that place, a place of peace, that we're going to make our best decisions, we're going to think the most clearly about where we are, and we're going to be the smartest when we're thinking like that.

And so we're talking about these different methods, and today I'm actually going to talk about something it might be a little more esoteric, something that philosophers and theologians and the scripture have dealt with a lot, but that is that we have to have a meaningful life in order to have a peaceful life. That if we want to have a peaceful, relaxed

mind, especially in our difficult times, we need to pursue a life first that's meaningful before a happy life. Yes, we should as our American orthodoxy says, we should pursue happiness, and I think pursuing happiness is a good thing. But remember that if all you pursue is happiness, you'll never find it. That we have to pursue a meaningful life, a responsible life in order to have the happy life that so many of us want to achieve. And I am concerned, when I look at our country and I look at our society, that that ancient wisdom, the value of a meaningful life as a foundation for a happy life, that that wisdom is being diluted and actually may be lost.

As I look around, I see, and I don't say this to be judgmental, it would be ironic if I did, because I feel like our country, people are becoming less responsible every day, and at the same time, becoming more judgmental. People are becoming judgmental about being judgmental. Maybe I'm even doing it now. I hope not. But you find that people are not taking responsibility for their own life; that they are casting judgment and critique on anything and everyone around them. Whatever political your affiliation is, you're thinking of the opposite party of you. But I guarantee you that both conservatives and liberals do this. That religious people do this. That everyone does this. And I think that undergirding it is this angst about not having a meaningful life.

I see it everywhere. I see that people become less responsible and more judgmental. Maybe you have a friend in your group of friends, or

maybe you know somebody who's sort of the grand inquisitor? They're always the one telling everybody what they can say or can't say, telling people what they can do and can't do. You have lots of these people in religion, you have lots of these people in politics. Maybe it's an aunt, maybe it's a grandparent, or a kid even, you're like don't want them to come to Thanksgiving or Christmas or 4th of July because everybody's going to be walking on eggshells around this person being like oh make sure you don't say that around this person, or this around her. And although of course we never want to be rude or mean or offensive to other people, we also don't want to walk on eggshells.

And the only reason I bring this up is I think that the sign of a slogan society, the sign of a society that's more judgmental and less responsible, that I think undergirding all of that is a need for something meaningful in your life. And that's good. We all have this need to live a meaningful life. And this is where the rubber meets the road: the place of greatest meaning in your life are usually located in your responsibilities and its responsibility that brings the most meaning in our life. Care for another person. Care for something important. Care to accomplish something that matters. Responsibility. And responsibility always, always involves sacrifice. That I have to give up something: my time, my energy, sometimes even my life in order that something else may live or succeed or thrive. And this is at the heart of human existence – that we

pursue a meaningful life, and this is the life that Jesus calls us to. This is the life that Jesus draws us out into.

Dallas Willard was a professor at USC, and he wrote a lot about this idea. He was not a judgmental person at all. He was always on everybody's side, but he wrote a lot about this slogan driven society. He said we are smothered in slogans. And you know, the other slogans, he particularly love to pick on bumper stickers. He really hated the phrase "random act of kindness and senseless act of beauty." As a philosopher, he says no act of kindness is random. It's always intentional and thoughtful. And no act of beauty is senseless. How about pursuing intelligent acts of beauty. He didn't like the "everything I learned in life I learned in kindergarten." And things like this. They bugged him. And one of the ones that he really hated was the "get up, stand up for your rights." He said we need to change that bumper to "get up, stand up for your responsibilities." Somebody make this bumper sticker for me.

And he said the reason is Americans are very fixed on their rights – their rights to do this, to have this, to own this, to be this, and that's fine and all. We have rights, and we ought to uphold those rights, but your rights are worthless if people in your society are not responsible. How are you going to uphold your rights if you live in a society that only believes in their own self and not in the rights of other people?

And so this was at the heart of it is that we need to create.. and this is at the heart of discipleship. We need to create people who are

moral, responsible, who want to be and do good with their life, even when it comes at personal cost. And so this is a very long winded way of saying that this is what Dallas Willard calls the cost of non discipleship. That in so many churches today, you can be a Christian without being a disciple. You can be a Christian without walking the narrow road, without paying the price, without sacrificing for your neighbor, without serving people, as long as there's this idea that as long as you pray a prayer, everything is fine, and although the prayer of salvation is so important, and the belief in it, that there's also a calling to be a responsible and moral person.

So all of this to say, if you hear anything I say today, this is my theory and that is that you can't be happy without meaningful responsibilities. Maybe you can for two or three weeks, especially if you're exhausted, but eventually your soul will just begin to eat itself and you'll need something to do with your life. And I grow concerned, especially for my own generation that the purpose of life is entertainment, the purpose of life is fun, experience, but very often those experiences don't really lack meaning because they don't require sacrifice. They don't require laying down some aspect of my life for someone else. And if they do, there's some show boating going on: 'look at how I laid my life down for someone else.'

And so we want to become the types of people that understand that when we trust our lives to Jesus, we're also trusting our ways to

Him, our decisions to Him, our behavior to Him, not in a judgmental, legalistic, religious way, but simply saying that loving my enemy, being an honest person, growing, learning, and becoming, from the inside out, a loving person is the best thing I can do. And the proof is in the pudding. It's with my kids, my grandkids, my neighbor, my enemies, the guy that cut me off in traffic. It's a good test. Thanksgiving when the grand inquisitor comes around. How am I going to treat that person?

And so today I want to look at the squarely, this idea of responsibility and the sacrificing of a comfortable life, for a meaningful life. I see it very clearly in the origin story of Moses. So we talked last week about Moses and Mt. Sinai, and how Moses really had a David heart. He just wanted to be with the Lord. He wanted to be before the Lord at all times, he wanted to be close to Him and didn't want to live a life without Him. But Moses wasn't always this way, and in fact sort of discovered God. And this is sort of his story.

So Moses' life is captured in the book of Exodus. Exodus is kind of the heart of the Torah. There's a lot of Jewish people who will say, and Jewish rabbis who will say the Torah, the first five books of the Bible is the most important part of the Bible, right? As Christians, we don't affirm that, but Jewish people would say the most important part is the first five books of the Bible, and that the most important book is probably Exodus. That almost, in a way, Genesis is sort of like teaming up to get people to come to Exodus. Genesis tells the story about the

garden and the flood and all of these things, and the evil of mankind, and God calling out Abraham from these people, building through Abraham a covenant, through Isaac and Jacob, and choosing a family, a tribe that would change the world and save the world through this covenant.

And so there's this story about, at the very end of Genesis, this guy Joseph. Joseph the Technicolor dream coat? Anybody? And this is how Joseph ends up in Egypt, a very powerful man, wealthy man, and he brings his whole family, his whole tribe to Egypt to live in harmony with the Egyptian people. Here's a very interesting work of art that was found at the tomb at Beni Hasan, which is an ancient tomb during the patriarchal period. What you see there is on the far right are two Egyptian officials, so they kind of look like slaves in this picture. It's the opposite. They're the wealthy, important officials, and they are leading a group of Hebrews. So symmetric's, you can tell by the change of the skin color and the accoutrement on their clothing that the two men on the right are Egyptian, and the ones behind them are symmetric. They're probably Hebrews. And even more interestingly is this work of art, which is carbon dated to be 1900 B.C.E. is led by a Hebrew man in a coat of many colors. Thomas Cahill, I don't know if he says it outright, but he is alluding to the idea that maybe this is an actual work of art made about this character Joseph. Maybe not, who knows.

But anyway, it's an important part of the Jewish people's minds, and actually a part of the Egyptian story that Joseph's family begins in Egypt, and they grow, and as you can even see in this work of art, they look very different, right? So there's probably some racism involved, some things going on, but as they're growing into a people, Egypt, which is the wealthiest most powerful, one of the most powerful empires that's ever been, but at the time it's like at the height of its empire, becomes feeling nervous about these Hebrew people that are living among them.

And as generations go by and Joseph dies and the pharaoh that knew Joseph dies, there's a new pharaoh and there are new leaders of this Hebrew group, and tension begins to smolder between them. And pharaoh sees this people is growing and the scripture says that if they continue to grow, they're going to overthrow us and essentially take Egypt from us. And so fear begins to grow, and finally pharaoh begins to pass unjust laws and decrees to begin to press down the Hebrew people, and as he does it, they continue to thrive and grow more.

And so eventually he has these people in chains and 400 years goes by from Jacob to the story we get to in Exodus, and now the people have been enslaved for generations. It's during this time that pharaoh continues to press upon these Hebrew people, even though they're being, he decides that the men or the boys, rather that are born to Hebrew families should all be killed. So every baby boy should be thrown into the Nile.

And in this story, there's two Levites who get married. It's important later because Levites become the priest in line, but they have this baby boy. And they take this baby boy and they do throw him, the mother does throw him into the Nile. And so she obeys the law, but with one caveat: she puts him in a basket.

So they take this baby and they put him in a basket and put him down the river, and his sister, this baby's sister follows the basket kind of as it goes down the river to see what will happen to her brother. And this basket arrives somehow, to the princess of Egypt. Amazing story. The daughter of pharaoh finds this basket with this baby, falls in love with this baby, and decides she's going to adopt this baby. She takes this baby out of the basket and says this is my baby. I'm going to raise this baby. And she looks around and sees a little Hebrew girl, has no idea who she is, and she says little girl, do you know any midwives who can help me raise this baby? And the sister says yes, I know a perfect one. And unbeknownst to the princess, it's this baby's mother!

So this is Moses. The name Moses, incidentally, means to be drawn out because Moses was drawn out of death into life. He was drawn out of the Nile. And how great is it that Moses is raised both by his adoptive mother, this princess, and by his actual biological Hebrew mother, who I don't even think was a midwife, but pretends to be, obviously, to raise her boy.

This is important when you want to understand the story of Moses because Moses grows up basically as two people. On the one hand, he is pharaoh's rich, popular, good looking grandson. He is a super star. I mean growing up as a teenager, I guarantee Moses was like awesome, right? I mean here's Moses, he grows up, and pharaohs his grandpa, and yet on the other side, his mother, the biological mother is Hebrew, she looks like him, they're the same race, and you know that he knew growing up that he's truly ethnically a Hebrew. And so he's got on the one hand this ethnic thing that I'm a Hebrew and their religion, but on this other hand I'm Egyptian and their religion and their politics, and this becomes a source of turmoil for Moses.

Later on in life, I think, as he begins to sort of wrestle with what all of this means, he looks upon his own people, the Hebrew, and he sees them in chains, and his heart begins to swell for them, and he sees one of his own people, an Egyptian official, that is a guy working for his grandpa, beating up one of his own people, a Hebrew, and this is like a moment of decision for Moses. This is a defining moment in his life, and watching it, he has a choice to make. And it's interesting because in the movies, you always see Moses sort of jump in-between the two, kind of like heroic – stop! You know?

But when you read the text, it's not that way. It looks like Moses, he says he looks to the right, and looks to the left, and looks around, and seeing nobody, murders the Egyptian. In other words, he probably either

waited until after it was over to kill him in secret, or snuck behind him and slit his throat, or something like that. So it's a very cowardly act of murder against, in a way, and this is the way kings think, against his grandfather, against his own family.

Of course, everybody finds out, and Moses runs for his life and he leaves this whole life behind him, not only his mother, who's a Hebrew and his brother Aaron and this whole Hebrew side of his family, but all of his wealth and his money and his comfort and his popularity, and his Ferrari, everything. He has to leave it all. And he goes out into.. it says he runs to the land of Midian, which is a nearby land which is not Hebrew or Egyptian. And he meets this guy Jethro, who takes him in who is himself a priest, and he marries Jethro's daughter Zipporah, and he just begins to live kind of a secret, hidden life as a fugitive. He's Moses the shepherd. He's taking care of his flock, he's doing his thing.

And one day, I picture after years of this, he wanders onto Mt. Horeb. Anybody else know the other name for Mt. Horeb? It's Mt. Sinai. So he wanders onto Mt. Sinai and Mt. Horeb. It's the first time. And he sees in the distance a bush that's on fire. And that's not very weird in the desert to see a bush that's on fire, but he thinks huh, a bush on fire. But for whatever reason, he keeps looking and he wonders, why is this bush on fire? And he keeps watching.

By the way, how long does it take for a bush to burn and to be totally consumed? If I had a bush here on stage and I were to light it on

fire, how long would it take? Ten minutes? Fifteen minutes? If only I had a dried Christmas tree we could try it right now. But the short answer is it takes awhile. It burns, it smolders. And the Hebrew rabbis go crazy over this idea that this, you know, bushes burn in the wilderness all the time, but something about Moses took a long time to keep watching this bush to eventually notice hey hold on now, this bush is on fire, but it's not being consumed. And it's only after he notices ten/fifteen minutes of watching a bush burn, and not being consumed, it's only after that that God finally speaks to him. So it's quite a while that passes.

And many of the old rabbis say that God was looking for someone who pays attention. Maybe I would say God was looking for someone not in a hurry. And there he is, and God says Moses, Moses, and calls, He says I've heard the cry of my people and I want you to lead them out of the land of Egypt out of bondage, right? And what's Moses response? Just a list of excuses.

The first thing he says is there's no way they're going to believe me. Right? There's no way they're going to believe that you, who's been gone for 400 years, now showed up to me and chose me, pharaohs grandson to lead them out of Egypt. And God does all these miracles. He turns His leprosy hand into a normal hand, He turns His staff into a snake, etc.

And so He gets all these amazing miracles, and then still, his mind would be blown, but it says still.. now he goes excuse number two: God I am not eloquent, I am slow of speech. Tradition says maybe he stuttered.

He's like I can't speak to these people, so I can't do it. And then God says I will help you. I'll help you. I'm going to teach you how to speak, I'm going to teach you how to get through it.

And then finally the third time, Moses just says please, just send someone else. Send someone else. Now this is interesting because it says that the Lord's anger was kindled at this, finally, because it's clear Moses is pretty much saying I can't do this, I won't do this. Why? Why doesn't Moses want to do this? Well one, he's been hiding like a coward from Egypt for a long time. He's a fugitive, a murderer, he has to go back and face his family, he has to face his adoptive Egyptian mother, he has to face his grandpa, all this scary stuff, right? And his life is fine! He's married. He's taking care of his sheep. He's in Midian and things are good. It's almost like God why are you doing this now? My life just got normal, please leave me alone.

And this is a question I want to ask. It's a literary question. What if the story ended there? What would have happened if God was like okay, fine Moses, you don't have to do it. What if he would have said I'm letting you off the hook, no problem, go back to Midian, raise your family, do your thing. What would have happened to Moses? I can tell you what I would have done. I would have spent the rest of my life wondering what I missed out on. I would have spent the rest of my life telling people about this burning bush, everybody calling me crazy, I'd probably wander up there to see if I could find another burning bush, talk to God about it

some more. It was actually God's mercy that He didn't let Moses off the hook.

I think in our life, we have these moments in our life where we're asked to sacrifice, we're asked to do something scary, we're asked to do what's uncomfortable, but what is meaningful and responsible. And I fear that we are getting to an age where people are picking what's safe and what's selfish versus what actually helps my neighbor, versus what God is actually called me to do. And it makes me sad, not for just our society but for that person. To understand that when God calls us, He calls us to a narrow road, not an easy road. That when He calls us, He calls us to do difficult things. He calls us to serve others. He calls us to be responsible and to care for people in need.

When you have a moment in your life like this, do the next right thing. Do what's right because you don't want to spend the rest of your life wondering what would have happened if I had done what was difficult.

See this is what Jesus promises us. Jesus promises us a happy life. Don't let any preacher tell you otherwise. It's squarely there in the scripture. If you read it in Greek, the Sermon on the Mount begins with a promise and an invitation to a happy life. That's what that word blessed actually means: macarius. It means happy. But it's with a caveat – that happy life comes through living a life the way Jesus calls us to live: for others, for our neighbor, a responsible life. And that without that caveat,

you'll never be happy. You'll never be happy without meaningful responsibilities.

And so this is not a judgmental thing but an invitation that maybe if you've been feeling sad or depressed or frustrated with life, maybe God will lay before you very soon the opportunity to do something very scary, but very responsible and very meaningful. I want you to really consider asking the Lord if that is for you, and really consider doing it because it may be that's the thing you need to find the peace of heart and the peace of mind that you've been looking for.

As a pastor, I've seen this played out so many times. I had a very good friend years ago who was an alcoholic and an atheist, and we were very good friends and we would talk all the time, and I would be like dude, you need to know the Lord. He will help you with your alcoholism. And he would always say all the stuff that atheists say about why there's no God and all this stuff. And I remember once we had this homeless shelter that we made pancakes for for kids and I gave him the responsibility. I was like I want you to lead this. So he had to get up at.. he did it. He had to get up at 5:30 in the morning, and organize a team to make breakfast for homeless families. And I watched as how giving him that meaningful responsibility that came at a great cost. An alcoholic waking up at 5:30 on a Saturday is a hard thing, Irene. It's a hard thing to do. It's really hard.

And he did it. He did it week after week. He got up, hung over maybe, I don't know. He would show up and he would do it, and he would help these kids. He started living a life for someone else! And I watched as it transformed his life. It not only freed him ultimately from his alcoholism, but I ended up baptizing him a year and half later. Because God called him through that.

I also remember before I had kids, I used to see how miserable parents were and I would think.. parents were talking about how happy kids make them. I'm like are they really happy? They don't look happy. They look tired. They look tired and they look poor, and they look like they don't have any time to hang out with me anymore. And yet at the same time, I watched as every single friends that were couples of ours had children, as long as they both stuck it out, I watched as how every single one of them grew in character. Every one of them. They were more patient, more kind, more loving. We had this friend who also was a pastor. He didn't have kids, and he was the meanest, most judgmental guy ever. And we used to always say watch, after he has kids, he'll chill out. And he did! All of a sudden became a nice pastor. Why? Because having children is suffering. And we need it, man. We need it.

And by the way, yes, having children is.. there are these moments that are very difficult, but it is really fun and great. And it's not like you need to be a parent to grow, but it's these things, these responsibilities. I also remember I had a friend, we used to email back and forth. He

struggled terribly with depression and suicidal thoughts. And I'll never forget this one time, he said you know when I'm really at the lowest point ever, I don't kill myself, it's because of my cat. I love my cat. And who would care for my cat if I was gone? And it seems, on one hand silly, but on the other hand it's utterly profound, isn't it? That his reason to live is for someone else. It's a cat. But it matters to him and that cat matters to God. And so he's doing something that matters.

So I want to say to all of us, and to everyone, that God wants us to live a happy life. God wants us to be full of joy and full of life. But the foundation of all of the fun you want to have, all the entertainment, all the parties, whatever it is that you want to do that's fun, if under that you don't have foundation of responsibility, of doing the right thing, of living a life for something bigger than yourself or someone else, of being a disciple of Jesus, you won't really enjoy the happiness.

So I want you to begin to look at your responsibilities through a fresh lens. That these, very often are the things that give us meaning. Yes, we should have boundaries, yes, we should have times of rest, but we should also remember that these are the things that make life interesting and joyful, and the Lord uses it to grow us, so we thank you, Lord.

So Father, I pray for this. For anybody who's here who's having to make a tough decision, we pray that you'd help us to understand the

power of meaningful responsibilities in our life. Lord, we love you so much, and it's in Jesus' name we pray, amen.