

A Life Worth Living
Galatians 1:11-24
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Bizarre college courses. We've no doubt gotten wind of some weird classes being offered on university campuses. But then, the university is all about academic freedom and expanding one's intellectual curiosity, right?

Without passing judgment on the merits of the courses, I offer just five such classes that TIME magazine dubbed "bizarre" in an issue published less than a year ago:

- "Politicizing Beyoncé," Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Department: Women & Gender Studies
- "The Sociology of Miley Cyrus," Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. Department: Sociology
- "The Art of Walking," Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. Department: Environmental Studies
- "The Physics of Star Trek," Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California. Department: Physics
- "Wordplay: A Wry Plod from Babel to Scrabble," Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey. Department: Freshman Seminar

And then there's the class offered by Yale, and another one offered by Yale Divinity School. They're called, respectively, "Life Worth Living" and "Christ and the Good Life." We don't have space here to describe the curriculums, but it's worth noting that the courses assume that the answers to questions of meaning, purpose and a fulfilling life are embedded in particular traditions, including, but not limited to, Christianity.

So, what makes life worth living? Do we think much about it? In fact, dealing with this question used to be the whole point of a liberal arts college education.

Today -- not so much. These days, some observers say college courses tend to be more neutral and descriptive. They might look at what a historical figure thought or did, but without taking the next step of helping students think about values and meaning for their own lives.

But now, Yale University has these two courses intended to address this gap directly.

Matthew Croasmun, one of the course teachers, explained in an interview for The Huffington Post that "The question for the course for each tradition is, 'What are the truth claims this tradition is making and, second, but more importantly, if those truth claims are true, *how would your life have to change?*'"

"The courses ... address you as a living being," Croasmun said, and, as an example, he explained: "There's a challenge to think of our money in terms of how it can literally save lives. Once you think of your money that way, every decision you make has an incredible weight to it. Whether or not I see a movie suddenly becomes a moral choice."

Paul disses some preachers

The text before us from Galatians, written by the apostle Paul, gives an opportunity to think about what makes life worth living. Galatia was not a city but a territory in Asia Minor, and there's some scholarly debate about how widely the territory should be defined when talking about the recipients of this letter from Paul. Whatever the boundaries were, Paul had preached the gospel there and many of the Christian converts were the fruit of Paul's work and that of his coworkers.

In this passage, Paul gives a short biography of himself -- short, but hitting the main points of his life. He tells his personal story as part of his argument that the Galatians should believe the gospel as he presented it, and not as others had presented it. Those other preachers, he says, "are confusing you," (v. 7). Twice he says that such preachers should be "accursed" (vv. 8-9). They're doing nothing but perverting the gospel (v. 7).

So Paul says, "Consider my life. I will not confuse you. I will not pervert the gospel." His actual words are, "I want you to know ..." (v. 11).

Have you got some ethos?

In Aristotelian terms, this is an "argument from ethos." Although "ethos" is usually used in a different way today, in Greek it's the word for "character." Basically, it means that you won't buy an old Ford Pinto from a guy you don't trust. People in sales need ethos, or they'll go hungry fast. If what we say is supported by the character and persona we reflect or exude, we have the edge for success. One source says that the argument from ethos means "convincing by the character of the author. ... We tend to believe people whom we respect."

Paul says, "I'm that guy. You can trust me, and you can trust the version of the gospel I gave to you. Those other fellows -- they confuse you and pervert the gospel."

In his bio, he is honest to a fault. Very impressive. You like someone who comes clean with his past. Paul tells of his former zealous and violent persecution of Christians ("I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it," v. 13), about his subsequent conversion and then some details of his post-conversion life up to the time of his public ministry. He concludes the story of his early Christian years using the same verbs. He reports that the Christian groups in Judea didn't know him by sight, but that they heard from Christians elsewhere that "the one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy" (v. 23).

This is what one commentator calls a "biography of reversal." He who was persecuting was now proclaiming!

It was "a life worth living"! Although the main idea of Paul's story was not to reveal his purpose in life, he pretty much did this anyway. It's obvious that meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus turned his life upside down and infused it with new meaning.

It was a fulfilling life because his ministry was meaningful and because he knew that when he died he would be in a better place. Life was worth living, and there was no dread of death! Doesn't get much better than that, does it? Here's how Paul puts it in his letter to the Philippians: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (1:21).

Should we think about our life's purpose?

Do you think much about what makes your life worth living? Frankly, not everyone does. Some of us are just not in tune with such philosophical questions. We are happy to just take life as it comes.

Others are so busy with family, work and other activities that those things supply more meaning than they know what to do with! In fact, the question of meaning seldom or never arises.

But there are also some people for whom the matter of what gives life meaning and makes it worth living is a reoccurring and nagging query. It's not something we can just Google, like we do with all the other questions we have. These people agree with Mark Twain when he said, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born, and the day you find out why."

For many of us there's a driving desire to understand why we've been put here on this earth. We don't know that Paul was ever seized by that desire, but it seems clear, not only from the passage before us, but also from things he said elsewhere in his letters, that after receiving Christ, Paul became so involved in spreading the gospel that knowing the meaning of his life became a moot point.

An example from the creator of the Polio vaccine

Consider Dr. Albert Sabin, the creator of the Sabin polio vaccine. That vaccine is estimated to have prevented at least five million people in the United States alone from contracting polio -- a terrible disease. Sabin's work is the main reason that, while polio is not eradicated, we seldom hear of it today. Sabin died in 1993, but a few years earlier, on his 80th birthday, he was honored by his colleagues for his work.

One of the remarkable things about Sabin is that he never patented his vaccine, so he got no income from its use. He could have done that, but he chose not to. The vaccine was needed by the world, and he wanted it to be freely available. He had no profit motive. Sabin said, "My greatest satisfaction is to relieve the misery which is part of human life. If each one can do his part, civilization should be better."

Now, what do you think Dr. Sabin would have said if asked if his life had any meaning?

A life worth living is not necessarily an easy life

Paul, in telling his story, is saying: "My life as it has developed after encountering Christ is a testimony to my character and the believability of the gospel as I have presented it." In a nutshell: "Christ gives my life purpose."

As we know, Paul's life after meeting Christ got a lot harder (if you have any doubt about that, see 2 Corinthians 11:24-33), but the meaning he found in serving Christ enabled him to face those troubles.

And we need to hear that, too. When we are in dark alleys or lonely valleys where we cannot see the meaning of our life, when the darkness around us is so thick that we cannot perceive a reason to keep struggling, we need to grab onto this: God has a meaning for our lives. We need to trust that. Whether we can see the way ahead or not, it is there. We just need to do our best.

And remember what Jesus said about the anxiety about life: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [what you need for life] will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

Instead of seeking meaning per se, we should seek our place in God's kingdom. We should go on loving God, following Jesus and loving our neighbor, and, in so doing, we are living a meaningful life even though we may not be feeling it.

Sometimes, we will find joy in our living and, sometimes, we will not, but there is meaning in every life, and it lies in God, our Creator, and in his Son, Jesus.

We can hold onto that even when we are in deep emotional pain. Every life -- every life -- has meaning, and it lies with God. We should trust God, and go on living each precious moment we are given.



In today's scripture Paul defends his calling to be an apostle. He emphasizes that his call is of divine, not human origin.

Galatians 1:1-24

New Revised Standard Version:

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me,^[b] so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and understanding of this holy Word.