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### **Leaving Meaning Behind: God What is Your Reply?**

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INTRO: Who here remembers the music they listened to when you were a teenager? You remember it? Some was crazy, but some was idealistic and fun. Trying to find a description for each decade I remembered Dr. Joyce Brothers describing the cultural climate of the decades. She said “the ‘60s were the love decade, the ‘70s were the “me” generation, the ‘80s were the “we” generation, and the ‘90s were going to be the “we-we” generation.” (Did I tell you it was on Saturday Night Live, done with a straight face?)

But today’s popular music is different. Much of it is so depressing. If it’s not about pain and misery, it’s angry, even furious. As for rap music, it’s filled with violence, sex, and hatred, especially for women. It reflects a common worldview today. Remember, worldviews are ways we see the world that are so underlying and deep that we aren’t even aware of them, but they affect every part of our lives: how we live, how we work, how we relate. And today we are looking at a worldview that says the world is devoid of meaning and purpose.

I see these artists and wonder “What are these kids so mad about?” Then I move into old-fogie mode. “These performers are multi-millionaires who have everything they want. They’ve got no reason to be so negative all the time.” You have to ask “What’s the attraction? Why are so many kids buying this stuff?”

But instead of wondering what it *does* to young people, let’s look at what it *tells us* about them. Today’s rock is the music of abandonment, complaining about broken homes and families, absent fathers, and purposeless living. It’s *the* underlying theme.

Papa Roach sings “Broken Home” “I know my mother loves me/But does my father even care.” Everclear sings “Father of Mine” about a father walking out on the family, with the plea “Take me back to the day/when I was still your golden boy.” And “Wonderful” yearns for the way things were before his parents split: “I want the things I had before/Like a Star Wars poster on my bedroom door.” Blink-182 had a hit with “Stay Together for the Kids” which recognizes there is no easy solution: “What stupid poem could fix this home,” but then adds “I’d read it every day.” In Pink’s “Family Portrait”, the singer pleads with her father, making a child’s promises: “I won’t spill the milk at dinner.”

Good Charlotte, Pearl Jam, Linkin Park, Disturbed, and Korn... These songwriters and performers are drawing on their own experience, and all the fame and fortune that is theirs cannot make up for the pain they still feel. And they have a huge audience. These artists are putting into words what 50% of American kids feel - meaningless. Abandoned, and purposeless, just searching...

It’s not just rap or thrash music, either. Listen to the lyrics of the #1 selling album last week, “Absolution” by Rose: “It’s time we saw a miracle./Come on, it’s time for something biblical/to pull us through.../This is the end of the world.” Or the #2 album “Give Up” by The Postal Service “I want so badly to believe that ‘there is truth, that love is real,’ and I want life in every word to the extent that it’s absurd.” Or the #3 album ‘o’ by Damien Rice “Why do you fill my sorrow / with the words you’ve borrowed / from the only place you’ve known? / Why do you sing Hallelujah / if it means nothin’ to ya?” Or the #4 album “Funeral” by Arcade Fire “It’s not a lover I want no more, and it’s not heaven I’m pining for, / but there’s some spirit I used to know that’s been drowned out by the radio”

Those are THE most popular albums this week... Now, I admit that today's lyrics are a lot deeper than my era of 1984 thought-provoking classics like Down Under, Africa, Stray Cat Strut, Maniac, and Electric Avenue. But can you hear the sense of hopelessness? The sense of lost-ness? The sense of meaninglessness?

Today we live in a world that is leaving meaning behind. You and I deal with emptiness. Do we even realize how we are responding? I think all these lyrics represent one expression of leaving meaning behind. I think another way we respond to the meaninglessness and purposelessness is to keep it to ourselves, by medicating ourselves with busyness, work, anger, and all the addictions, like alcohol, drugs, and sex.

I think people are living beyond meaning and purpose, and even with God in our lives, you and I are dealing with it. We fill our lives, like our planners, to be busy, busy, busy, full of things to do and places to go and people to see. We think the opposite of an *empty* life is a *busy* life. A full life is a full schedule. Life's like a joke without a punch line. And when we take the time to look, which we don't often do, we begin to see that, while our lives are full of activities, they are often empty of purpose. It's like the script for our lives was lost. T-shirts and commercials feed on this: Just do it. Life's short. Play hard.

Life's not too short, it's just that death's so long. The one who has the most toys – dies anyway. It's not the pace of life that bothers me – it's the sudden stop at the end. Where did this come from?

Our final history lesson in this series: Our worldview shifted in the Renaissance from being God-centered, to the Enlightenment in which humanity began trading spaces with God, followed by a second shift in the 1800s we call Romanticism, which is the idea that the world hums with the supernatural but is absent of God. It is filled with opportunities that lack any inherent meaning. Out of which the philosopher Nietzsche dismantled Christianity and its God-centered view. What was left was nihilism, the view that nothing of meaning exists. There are no facts, only interpretations... We're left with the worldview that there *are* no absolutes. It's not a new worldview as much as a death of any coherent worldview. A Christian staff member at Stanford sums it up: "It's fine to pursue truth as long as you don't find it."

Stuff happens. Whatever. There is no God. God is dead. There is no meaning purpose. Life is absurd. There is no predictability. The world is chaotic. And - there is no truth. Perspective is everything.

**God, what is your reply?** In other words, what do you say to a society that says God is dead and Elvis is alive?

Now here's something interesting. In many ways, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is very much like the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, into which the church was birthed. The 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman culture lived beyond meaning and purpose, beyond right and wrong, beyond God. They were consumers, spectators, and self-absorbed individuals. It was multicultural and multilingual, They were attracted to the wild side: sex, other addictions, and violence. There were barbarians. And today we have the new barbarians. They were into multiple worship of multiple gods, multiculturalism, and hostility toward those who espoused only one view of faith or religion. And today...? Listen to this account in Acts 17:16-32...

*"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.*

1. Paul was greatly distressed, for lost people. He had a heart for these people. The last time you were distressed, was it for other people in their lostness?
2. Paul talked with them, reasoning in the marketplace, their turf.
3. Paul focused in on Jesus and the resurrection. Remember it's good news, not a hammer!

*Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)*

1. Paul got their attention. Are you saying anything or living in a way as to get anyone's attention?
2. He went to them. (He didn't wait for them to visit him!) Church are we going out?
3. He set himself apart from their basic beliefs.

*Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.*

1. Paul became a student of the culture. He didn't bash it.
2. Paul knew that every human being worships something.
3. Paul used their culture and their terms to describe God to them. Here's how he made the jump:

*"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all people life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that we would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'*

1. Paul told them about God.
2. Paul reminded them of their own culture (with the many temples...)
3. Paul realized God was already at work in their lives.

*"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone-- an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all people by raising him from the dead."*

1. Paul tells them about a personal relationship with God.
2. Paul calls them to another way of living.

*When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others."*

1. Paul took the initiative and left the results up to God.
2. In your life, have you stepped out in faith? Maybe it's a relationship with a family member. Maybe it's sticking up for somebody. Maybe it's NOT participating in the same old office stuff everyone else is. Be strong! Be bold! Here's what you and I become to a world that has left meaning and purpose behind:

### **We become meaning-makers.**

1. The most important thing we can communicate is a coherent and compelling Christian worldview. There are amazing biblical ways of answering basic questions of life and meaning.
2. Even though God is a distant mystery at best and a sick joke at worst to many people, deep within each of us lie both the belief that life ought to be meaningful and the desire to experience a life that reflects that.
3. The greatest gift we can give to this world adrift is a sense of meaning: Meaning makers: people who make sense of life, people who make sense of God, people whose lives ring with clarity in the midst of contemporary ambiguity, people who have integrity, people who reside in today's world revealing with their living and their lips that Jesus' death is the source of vital life.
4. The world ripples with meaning simply because God *is*. We just point them to meaning. Simply ask good questions and then listen.
5. There is meaning even in death. Woody Allen said "It's not so much that I'm afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens." It fractures every family, breaks every friendship, quiets every hand, cuts every life short. The Eastern view sees history as a circle, and we return as someone or something else, with no memory or

meaning. The Western view sees history as random splashes of chance. No wonder our only response is despair. To this, God adds a third view of life and death. It's not endless repetition or painful randomness. The Christian views death totally uniquely: not with despair but hope. Because Jesus died and rose again, we have hope, not as the world has, like wishful thinking, but hope that we live out today, even in a fallen world.

### **We become Truth Tellers.**

1. We communicate the option of truth. If someone insists it's not possible to know anything for sure about religious things, it can be helpful to probe a bit. "The only thing we can know about religious things is that we can't know anything for certain?" Why is truth not even an option?
2. We speak the truth about Pluralism: The fact of diversity, (that there are many faith options sincerely held by 1000s of people) does not mean pluralism (that everybody's faith is equally valid and true). Sincerity does not determine truth. Reality does.
3. We speak God's Word into our reality. Either there's life on Mars or there's not. Either there is a personal God or there's not. Either Jesus is God with us or he's not. Either I will live past death or I will not. Either the tomb was empty or it was not. When it comes to reality, the answer can never be "All of the above." Learn what God says about it!
4. We winsomely engage in pointing people to look outside themselves. Most of us decide truth by consulting with one source: ourselves – our feelings, our reason, our experience. Do you see the problem? There may or may not be a God, but my opinion doesn't tell me much.
5. Our only option is to look outside ourselves.

### **We become Faithful Friends.**

- Because it's not about us, we can be honest about struggles. Our streets, homes, and churches are filled with the walking wounded. Let's not be a hotel for saints, let's be a hospital for sinners! We will be includers: name your sin, and let Jesus start to heal you!
- Establish common ground. Start from scratch. People have no frame of reference. They don't know all the churchy language. But they do know love. And that takes time.
- Establish common ground through pop culture. Like we saw at the beginning of the worship service, you don't have to search very hard for the search for God.
- Keep Jesus at the center. Christianity is about one thing: Who is Jesus, and what does that mean for me?

**So our identity is found in God.** We just have to discover it, not create it. Who we are is ultimately defined by our having been made right with God through Jesus Christ. It's all about who He is. We are restored to wholeness, becoming men and women that we were created to be. The way out of this worldview of meaningless, purposeless living is God's reply: Come on a journey with me: A journey beyond meaningless and purposeless living.

God, What is your Reply? To the American kids and many of the rest of us who feel beyond meaning, abandoned, and purposeless, just searching, Jesus says "I have a map. I AM the Way. Enter into a **JOURNEY** with me – through mountains, valleys, swamps, and vistas. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it. You'll get tired. I'll be with you. You'll miss the trail. I'll be with you. You'll sit down, lie down, and forget where you're headed. I'll gently guide you. And when the journey leads to difficult places, I'll be with you. I AM who I AM. My Holy Spirit will be with you, and I will never leave your nor forsake you, and your meaning and purpose will be in Me. It's a journey of significance. A journey of sacrifice, a journey of hope and a future.