



what's life all about?

Scott Petty

• Little Black Books •
books that get to the point

what's life all about?

Somehow, we can spend much of our lives ignoring the biggest questions there are. What's the point of life? Why are we here? And what should we do with our time?

The answers to these questions are big, but they don't need to be scary. Scott Petty goes to the heart of the matter while also answering some of the common questions young people have about life:

- What does God think about me?
- Can you be a Christian and not go to church?
- What is the most important thing in life?

Like all the Little Black Books, this is a fun read and gets straight to the point.



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Little Black Books: What's Life All About?

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Introduction

There are a lot of books (including the other books in the Little Black Books series) that talk through the nitty gritty of the tricky questions about God, faith and the Christian life. But sometimes we need to take a step back and ask the broadest and biggest questions there are. It's good to have a detailed knowledge of predestination and a theology of suffering and sexuality (for example), but have you ever wondered what life is really all about? Have you wondered what you are supposed to be doing here? Are you just a product of thousands of years of chance? Is life supposed to be as random as it often appears?

These are some of the deepest questions you can ask, and even some of the smartest people who have ever lived cannot answer them. Take Stephen Hawking, for example. Although he is confined to a wheelchair and has gradually lost the use of his voice, arms and legs to the point of paralysis, Professor Stephen Hawking remains one of the most intelligent human beings on the planet. Despite his disabilities, he operates a computer system

attached to his wheelchair via an infra-red ‘blink switch’ clipped onto his glasses. By scrunching his right cheek up, he is able to talk, compose speeches, research papers, browse the internet and write emails. And he is perhaps the greatest scientist of our time. He is responsible for pushing along research into cosmology, quantum gravity, black holes and the big bang theory. He wrote a book called *A Brief History of Time*, which stayed on the London *Sunday Times* bestseller list for a record-breaking 237 weeks. He is an extraordinary man by every standard. But this great brain says:

Even if there is only one possible unified theory, it is just a set of rules and equations. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?¹

He doesn’t know. He does not believe in a personal God, and although he has devoted his mind and life to thinking about the universe, he still can’t explain its existence in the first place. He has since come out saying that the universe was fired into existence by gravity, but this is a bit of a chicken and egg thing, because he doesn’t adequately explain who or what created gravity.² And he still doesn’t explain *why* the universe was created—why there is something rather than nothing.

Nor can Professor Hawking explain our existence. He cannot say what we are supposed to do and be in the time we have on the earth—this earth that he understands better than any human alive today.

Without being arrogant, I think we can do better than Stephen Hawking. With a knowledge of God we can not only know, at least in part, what “breathes fire” into the universe, but we can also discover what life is all about and what we are supposed to do in the few short years we are alive.

Our starting point will be to follow the journey of discovery that the Old Testament’s wisest man took in thinking about these questions. Then we will see that the question of our identity—who we are—will unlock the riddle of our purpose—what we are supposed to do in life.

CHAPTER I

The search for meaning

I saw a guy the other day who looked like he was into heavy metal music, and he was wearing this black t-shirt that had in big white letters these four words: BIRTH SCHOOL METALLICA DEATH. I'm not especially into metal but I did kind of envy this guy's simple take on life. He was basically a walking advert for a way of life that's all about Metallica. You're born, and then you go to school to learn about life, and when you're done at school, you're in the Metallica stage of life, and then you die. Life is all about Metallica. I reckon that the guy with the shirt is probably pretty happy with his Metallica life.

But it's really too simple a way of understanding life. His t-shirt didn't mention work or relationships or happiness or sadness or family. Fair enough—you can't fit all those words on a t-shirt. Actually, most people can't fit all those really important things about life in their *heads* without getting confused.

The more you think about things, the more confusing life can seem. I mean, I'm confused about things like how a ship, as heavy as it is, manages to float when a tiny stone that I throw into the ocean sinks straight away. I also cannot understand how I can speak into a plastic phone receiver in Sydney and have a completely normal, real-time conversation with my brother in London as though he had just stepped into the next room to grab a banana. I am confused about how my voice can get there so quickly when it takes my body one whole day in a plane to get from Sydney to London.

But there are more important things to be confused about—like how rich people are never really happy, and how justice doesn't seem to come to those who need it the most. And why people get to a point where they just carry on with life without really thinking about it. Perhaps the answer is that when they stop to think about it, life seems all too meaningless. It's easier to just get on with living.

I would like to know how to live meaningfully when life seems meaningless. I would like to know what I am supposed to do with my life so that it's not meaningless—so that on the one hand I'm not confused by it, and on the other, it's not as one-dimensional as Metallica man thinks it is.

We are not the first people ever to think about these things. There is a part of the Old Testament called Ecclesiastes where the wisest guy in the Old Testament, Solomon, tries to work life out. Sometimes he gets depressed, and sometimes he just settles for being content with the good times and the good things he is given. And although he eventually arrives at a suitable conclusion, you need to go the distance with him. Otherwise his conclusion doesn't make any sense.

Everything is meaningless

When I say that Solomon gets depressed, I mean that he gets depressed because he observes so many meaningless things in life. That's his motto throughout the book of Ecclesiastes: meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.

Life is boring and predictable

Solomon watches everything that life on this planet involves and decides it is all meaningless, like “chasing after the wind” (Eccl 1:14). In other words, it's pretty pointless. For a start, he discovers that there is a boring repetitiveness to life. People come and people go; only the earth stays the same. The sun rises and sets, then

rises and sets again. The wind blows to the south, then to the north; round and round it goes. What has happened in the past will happen again in the future. If you think that something is new, you're wrong. It has already happened, already been thought of, already been done. Nothing is truly new. He detects a boring predictability in the way the world works. Now, if you're thinking that he's not a very upbeat kind of guy, you have to remember that this was in the days before Metallica.

Young people sometimes don't pick up on this boring predictability because they are doing so many things for the first time. But at the risk of sounding like the old man sitting on his front porch chewing tobacco and cussing at the children passing by, it won't be too long before you start getting sick of the ordinary course of things. You do the washing on Monday, hang it out to dry on Tuesday, and by Friday all your clothes are dirty and you have to start all over again.

Let me confess something: many years ago I used to be an accountant. It was part of my job to do company tax returns. And because I worked for the same accounting firm for six years, I did the same companies' tax returns year after year. I'd pull out the file and there'd be a divider for every year. Behind each

divider everything was the same; it just had a different date on it. And sometimes when I'd drunk too much coffee or accidentally inhaled too much photocopying fluid, I used to think the file was whispering to me that there is a boring predictability to life. It's been a long time since I left that job, but I bet you there is a divider for every year since then, and there'll be a divider for every year that follows.

The world was going before we were born, and will be going long after we die. The really depressing thing about this repetitiveness in life is that no-one will care that you or I lived. Solomon says, "There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow" (Eccl 1:11). I thought about that for a while and realized that I don't know anything about my great-grandparents—not even their names. You probably don't know anything either—about your great-grandparents, I mean, not mine. If I live to see my great-grandchildren then I will be a lucky guy, but they will not remember me. The world and life will go on and on as they always have, but no-one will remember you or me once we've gone.