

A man with a beard, wearing a tan baseball cap and a dark jacket, is shown in profile, looking out over a vast valley at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow that silhouettes the man and the distant hills. The sky is a mix of light blue and orange.

What Makes Life *Meaningful?*

AN INTERVIEW WITH
BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD  on FIRE.

What Makes Life *Meaningful?*

AN INTERVIEW WITH
BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD  on FIRE.

Transcript taken from an interview between
Brandon Vogt and Bishop Robert Barron.

Cover image: Kal Visuals, Unsplash.

© 2023. All rights reserved.

BRANDON VOGT:

What is the meaning of life? How do we find it? That's what we're going to be discussing today with Bishop Robert Barron. Maybe we could begin with the recent discussion you had with three other gentlemen on Jordan Peterson's podcast. The group included Jordan Peterson, yourself, Jonathan Pageau, and John Vervaeke. The title of this video, which you can find on YouTube, was "The Four Horsemen of Meaning." Would you first tell us how this conversation came about? What are the "Four Horsemen of Meaning"? What does that allude to, and what were your initial impressions of the discussion?

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON:

I think it came out of the conversation I had with Jordan Peterson now almost a year ago, when we hit on some of those same topics. Jonathan Pageau is the wonderful icon writer and very wise in regard to the symbolic tradition. John Vervaeke is a psychology professor at the University of Toronto who studies the question of consciousness and how that relates to meaning. So it was Peterson's camp that reached out to me and asked whether I would be willing to sit down with the three of them and talk about this whole question and how it's intriguing a lot of younger people today.

It went on for well over two hours. I worried about the short attention span of a lot of millennials and younger people, given social media, but now it seems like a lot of people are very interested in these long-form podcasts. Think of Joe Rogan, who goes on for three hours with people, and Peterson, too, typically goes two hours. And we were talking at a pretty high level too. It's not a user-friendly mode of discourse, but that's how it came about. And the "Four Horsemen" term, of course, goes right back to the book of Revelation, but that was picked up by the New Atheists, the "Four Horsemen of Atheism," Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett. So they're playing on that, and it seems we're the four horsemen riding in the other direction, the direction of meaning.

BRANDON VOGT:

At the very beginning of the discussion, Jordan began by asking each one of the other three guests how they would define meaning. And here was your definition: "Meaning is to be in a purposive relationship to a value." And then you added that to live a religiously meaningful life is to be in a purposive relationship to the *summum bonum*, or the supreme value. What do you mean by that definition of meaning?

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON:

I was trying to make it as simple as possible, and I was using Dietrich von Hildebrand, whom I rely on a lot in these matters. These basic values appear, and they shouldn't be analyzed to dust. What I mean is that they're there in the world. When you hear Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, you recognize its beauty. The act of Maximilian Kolbe at the end of his life, surrendering himself to save his other man, is immediately recognized as morally good. You read Plato's *Symposium* and you recognize the apparent truth within the text. A good education, as C.S. Lewis would agree, is teaching people how to recognize those values so that they are intrigued by the right things—so their wills and their passions are engaged by the right things.

So a meaningful life is in a purposive relationship to a value. You not only appreciate the value, but now you're ordering your life toward it. You're saying, my life is about appreciating that value and maybe even trying to imitate that value so that I can try to do something at least akin to what Plato did, something akin to what Maximilian Kolbe did, something akin to Beethoven. Even though I don't have the gifts of all these people, I'm in a purposive relationship to the value that I've discerned. I think that's what makes your life meaningful. And then the next step is finding the supreme values. I just named a handful of values

at different levels of importance. We say to a little kid, “Don’t take that glass of water away from your sister.” Well, you’re inculcating; you’re awakening them to a moral value. Then there’s Maximilian Kolbe, a moral value at the highest possible level.

It’s the same with aesthetic values. Teach a little kid, “You can draw a bird by doing this,” and tell them their little drawings are beautiful. And then there’s Michelangelo. So to be in a purposive relationship to the highest value, the *summum bonum*, is now to be in a religiously meaningful life. Much of the purpose of education and formation is to move people into this realm of objective value, but not just into it, into it in a hierarchically ordered way where you lead people to higher and higher expressions of value. And then, finally, what goes to the very highest truth and goodness and beauty? We name that God. And a religiously meaningful life is one that is purposively related to that good.

BRANDON VOGT:

There’s lots of talk today about how we’re suffering a crisis of meaning, and people point to all sorts of indicators, such as record-high suicide rates and opioid addictions and depression. Do you sense that as well? Do you think we’re suffering a unique crisis of meaning today?

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON:

Yeah, and I'd be in line here with Charles Taylor and other philosophers who would say that up until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most people in most civilizations in human history would say you can't really be happy outside of a relationship with some transcendent good. Without a relationship to God, I can't really be happy. I can't really be satisfied. It's only in relatively recent years in the West that people have begun to say they can be happy and satisfied without that relationship. The bottom line is you can't, and that's where a lot of the meaninglessness, depression, anxiety, and sense of drift are coming from. The other thing I'd say is if the realm of value is objective, it's outside of us. It impresses itself upon us. So the Beethoven Seventh Symphony is beautiful not because it pleases me but because it *changes* me. It controls me. It takes possession of me. Maximilian Kolbe's act doesn't please me. It frightens me if anything. But it's massively valuable. If you say, as many people do today, that all value comes from inside of you as a matter of your own choice, that's never going to make you happy. On the contrary, I'm happy when the good knocks me down and rearranges me and chooses me and calls me and summons me to become an evangelist for it.

When you see a great play or a great film, or you hear a marvelous symphony, or you meet a great saintly person, it grabs you, it rearranges you, and then sends you on mission. All the great heroes of the Bible are not self-inventors. The Bible is utterly uninterested in that. They're interested in those people who are knocked to the ground and rearranged and heard. They heard a voice, a higher voice. Now don't literalize that as hearing a physical voice coming out of the cloud. It's a symbol for this attunement to the supreme value that is now calling out to me. Now we're into the realm of real value, and that's going to make us happy.

BRANDON VOGT:

As a father of many kids, I watch a ton of kids' movies, and one of the things that really bugs me is how so many of these movies follow the same pattern of struggling with a meaning crisis, then looking within to discover true meaning. And it's not even self-invention the way you're describing. These characters recognize that meaning is something to discover, not something I create, but the place to discover it is within. Follow your feelings. Listen to your heart. Look in. Discover who you are. Find yourself. And I think it leads to a dead end. It's the exact opposite direction you should be going. Meaning is found outward, either among us or beyond us. There are some objective

values we need to latch onto and align our lives to find objective meaning.

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON:

Right. I mean, look, I'm such a sinner and I'm so mixed up about so many things and so lost. I'm going to look inside me and my mind and my little desires to find meaning? Give me a break. I'd be a wreck. St. Paul says *fides ex auditu*, faith comes from hearing. It doesn't well up inside of me. It comes from hearing. Abraham heard the voice of God and followed. The great Iris Murdoch, the Irish philosopher, was a Platonist and brought Plato up to date in some ways for the twentieth century. In one of her essays, she says that when someone's depressed and full of anxiety and worried, they should open the window, notice the kestrel—this gorgeous, beautiful bird—and just start looking at it. And she said that within a minute, all of your anxieties fall away and all of your preoccupation falls away, and your depression falls away. And before you know it, you're all kestrel. You're so absorbed in the objective goodness of this thing, it's begun to rearrange you and remake you. That's the way it is with the Good in the Platonic tradition. The recognition of these values is the same idea. These goods will lead you to God if you let them. But if we keep preoccupying ourselves with ourselves, we're not going to get anywhere. We're going to get stuck.

BRANDON VOGT:

Let's shift now to a couple of polls and surveys dealing with the question of meaning that have recently come out, very timely in light of your Jordan Peterson discussion. The first one came from the Lifeway Research group, and a lot of the stuff they discovered was stuff we would probably expect, that people seek meaning in God and relationships and family and things like that. But here's one interesting thing I found in the poll. Lifeway discovered that four out of every five Americans believe that there is an ultimate purpose and plan for every person's life. Now, to me, that was surprising in light of the statistics we've covered in the past about how much religion is dwindling in the culture. I find it interesting that so many people believe in an ultimate plan but not a planner or an arranger, an agent, of this plan. How do you read that?

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON:

You can't have it both ways, because if you say, I'm making up my own plan, well, that's one thing, but they're not talking about that. They're saying there's something out there that's the purpose of my life. It's like Lewis' concept of everyone finding the same letter in their mailbox, like the Tao, the sense of moral rectitude and moral responsibility no matter what the

culture is. And he said, isn't it odd that every single person in the world finds the same letter in their mailbox? Is it likely that the wind just happened to blow the same letter into every single mailbox in the world? Well, no. It's completely impossible. And so where does this moral law within us come from? That the world is legible so that scientists can do their work? Why is the world morally legible that we can adjust ourselves to it? We're not coming up with the plan. We discover it. If that's true, then there has to be something like a planner or someone that provides the purpose. Now, go back to Aquinas. So much of his anthropology is predicated upon this idea of final causality. How come I do what I do? This morning I woke up, and I got out of bed, and I brushed my teeth, and I said my prayers, and I put my suit on, and I went to work. So I was operating in a purposive way. I'm doing all kinds of things to attain certain goods and values, but why am I ultimately doing all of it?

There's got to be some finally supreme and unsurpassable good that I'm at least inchoately seeking. Now, I'm a bishop of the Church, so I'm aware that God is the supreme good, but I mean someone who's a total nonbeliever. Nevertheless, there is some first cause of the will. There has to be. There's some supreme good that you are at least implicitly seeking. That's the good that will give meaning to your life if you fully surrender to its purposes for you. Now, that's a biblical view of

life, and that people still kind of acknowledge it, at least implicitly, is encouraging. That means there's still something of the biblical imagination at work.

BRANDON VOGT:

A second recent poll came from the Pew Research Center. This one was completed earlier this year. They asked nineteen thousand adults about the question of meaning all across the world. And what was perhaps unsurprising is that in every single country without variation, the top source of meaning was family. Why do you think family is so closely tied to meaning?

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON:

Because it's a great good. Take the analogy of a Russian doll. So let's say for a typical person, I woke up, I brushed my teeth, I got dressed, I got in the car, I went to work. Well, how come? Well, because I want to make money. Well, why do you want money? Because I want to support my family. Well, why do you want to support your family? Because my family's a great good, and their flourishing is important to me. At that point I have eight Russian dolls. I have situated a very particular act of the will like getting out of bed in the morning, and I've come by eight steps to a really basic fundamental value, that my family and their flourishing are a great good. You've found one of the

most basic goods that there are. Now read the Bible. Is family the ultimate good? No.

The Bible says it in many ways, doesn't it? Like with Abraham. You know your son Isaac whom you love? I want you to sacrifice him to me. Some may say that's God being cruel, but that's the wrong way to read it. It's the Bible's way of signaling that there's a higher value than even the value of family. Or let's say someone else is motivated because they love their country. Terrific, you've found a great value. You're a patriot. Loving your country is a good thing because your country is a high value. But not the highest value, because if God is calling you to something that goes against the desire of your country, you have to follow God. So my point there is that those polls represent something very real. People find real values, objective goods in the world, but our job is now to lead them to the *summum bonum* that's beyond even these great values they discover.

BRANDON VOGT:

Let's close with this final question. I know we likely have readers that are struggling with finding meaning or purpose in their life, or maybe it's the son or a daughter of one of our readers or a friend, a loved one who's drifting into nihilism and lost without purpose. As a pastor, what do you say to someone in this situation, someone who comes to you and says,

“I don’t have any meaning and I don’t think my life is worth living.”

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON:

I get that question a lot. My usual response is to say, perform today the simplest act of love. Will the good of another. Because that’s one of the most important steps out of the self-preoccupation that’s making you so unhappy, and it orders you toward a value. You’ve identified someone as a great value, and now you want to serve that person by an act of love. That’s a marvelous way to break out of the prison of the self. Another one would be, along those Iris Murdoch lines, to find something beautiful, something good, like that. If it’s a bird you see out the window, look at it, and just spend some time studying it, analyzing it.

I think of that line by Jacques Maritain, where there’s more reality in a seed between my teeth than in all of Hegelian idealism. What he meant there was that a seed between my teeth is real. It’s the simplest, stupidest thing, but by God, it’s real. And it’s good to that degree because being and good are convertible terms. So perform an act of love or look out the window or on the ground or even between your teeth to find something that’s just real and lose yourself in that. That’s an important first step.

Subscribe to Bishop Barron's YouTube Channel at
<https://www.wordonfire.org/youtube>.

You'll love his weekly Sunday Sermon, the Word
on Fire Show, and insightful discussions and
commentaries!