

meanings:
searching ordinary life

By Ralph Ennis

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why search ordinary life for meanings?

Every day, whether we are conscious of it or not, we are asking “What’s the meaning of life? or more specifically, “What’s the Meaning of MY Life?” On numerous levels and in a variety of places we are looking for ways to access, process, and address heart and soul issues. But where do we start? How do we talk about this in a safe environment, without argument or people feeling they are being judged? With this resource we are proposing one place to start is with more neutral, common, and bite-sized questions regarding everyday, ordinary things.

biblical basis?

Psalm 19:1-5 introduces us to a SILENT LANGUAGE God has embedded in common place things all around us so we can see who He is. We are surrounded with thousands of lessons from life and nature, so how do we guide others to experience the Creator God who is everywhere?

King David writings include many words of ordinary things (food—26 times, mountains—32 times, sheep, sleep, etc.) Often, he used these words metaphorically to visualize and express the beauty of Kingdom realities. As we begin to build a framework of meanings around these things we unpack the special revelation and nature of the Creator.

For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. -Romans 1:20

...since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. -Romans 1:19

We have so much at our fingertips from this silent language of creation which may help others unpack their heart and soul issues if we only knew where to start.



a silent scream of meanings

We wake to the screams of our firstborns
piercing the night
with their complaints of life.

Our souls are alert to such interruptions for
our hearts are twisted to
surround them with acts of
love-meanings.

Yet daily we drive by beauty variations
the sounds of leaves and mosquitoes,
the smell of garlic and flowers,
light outlining the shape of a distant moon,
the grace and violence of humankind.

Without a thought to
such meanings
we pound our hearts to
the irregular rhythm of the economy.

Twisting is inevitably a way of searching
as young twigs bend for light,
so our souls
yearn for the non-tranquil peace of answered whys
silently screaming all around us
through the frequency of meanings
of the God who is everywhere.

searching ordinary life for meanings

...is a way to find a neutral and common ground to begin a dialogue around the meaning of life based on a relationship with the God of all Creation in a variety of ways and situations.

All around us images are used to elicit responses and connections. More often than we know life decisions and conclusions are made from the fragments and mosaic of visual symbols that pervade our lives. This tool seeks to tap into this process first by exploring some of these everyday symbols, experiences, and items. We then ask questions which begin to identify the feelings and values connected to them and how they are affecting our view of life and God.

The “everyday” we consider in this tool are:

...FOOD

...FAMILY

...CHILDHOOD

...EMOTIONS

...SLEEP

...WORK

...PLAY

...LOVE

...CLOTHES

...JUSTICE

...MERCY

...MUSIC

...MALE AND FEMALE

...GUILT

...SHAME

...SALVATION

...TIME

...NATURE AND THE UNIVERSE

...LIFE

...DEATH

...TRUTH

...MEANINGS

...AUTHORITY

...BODY

...BEAUTY AND UGLINESS

...PEACE

...FRIENDSHIP

...SMILING

...POVERTY AND WEALTH

...MYSTERY

...ENDINGS

suggestions and applications

Practically, this process seeks to ask two key questions:

WHAT DOES THE ORDINARY SAY ABOUT WHO I AM?

WHAT DOES THE ORDINARY SAY ABOUT WHO GOD IS?

However, we seldom discuss the question with our friends, family, co-workers, and especially people who come from very different life situations. And yet, ultimately these questions lead toward grappling with the meaning of life itself, our relationship to God, and enhancing the journey of **experiencing the richness of life**.

The images/topics found in this resource can be the bridge between the awkward silence between the search of meanings, the enormity of the question, and finding a place to start. So instead of discussing the meaning of life head-on, these images/topics encourage us to look at the ordinary parts of life first. Searching for meaning amidst the ordinary may help our approach to the big question.

Have patience! One person may be able to immediately give a response to the image/topic, another may need some time to process...that's okay! And if you are looking for some different ideas, here are a few suggestions to get the discussion going ...

- Invite some friends over for a meal (and or start a weekly dining club). Place an image on the table. After a while, out of curiosity somebody may ask what it's about. To get the discussion going examples of some questions you might ask are:
 - ✧ What's your opinion of (the topic)?
 - ✧ Why do you like it? ...or not like it?
 - ✧ What importance does it have for you?

- ✧ Does this affect how you think or feel about yourself? ...about others?
- ✧ What do you think it says about who God is? ...how He relates to you?

And, remember, this is not a quiz. All answers are okay.

- Try one image/topic a week with your family.
- Post an image above your desk at work. Someone's curiosity will start a conversation that can be continued over lunch or dinner.
- To expand on any of these suggestions, after utilizing this tool for a while, visit a museum. Discuss the meaning of some of what you saw and observed afterwards.

After the conversation has started, **let it flow**. Any comment is valid for discussion.

Listen and learn. And don't be afraid to be vulnerable yourself.

This is a **mutual search for meanings** in a very complex global society.

In addition to the above suggestions, following each image in this tool you will find more information, ideas and questions to enhance your discussions.

We invite you to enjoy the journey into the mystery of God and His beautiful creation!



**WHAT DOES FOOD
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

Why do you think some foods are nourishing, while other types of food can make you sick?

How do you think God feels about hunger and starvation?

Is there such a thing as “food for the soul”?

Where could you find this different type of food?

If you pray over a meal, do you pause to consider your dependency? . . . or God as your Personal Provider?

consider:

“It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” – *Jesus*, Matthew 4:4

“Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river . . . their fruit will serve as food and their leaves for healing.”

– *the Prophet Ezekiel*, Ezekiel 37:12

Genesis 1:29-31, Isaiah 55:1-2

a meaning of . . . food

Daily we eat. Some barely enough to survive—others with little restraint. But we all are bound to this food addiction for life.

Much effort goes into the habit. Some grow their own food. Others toil at the mass production, marketing, and distribution of food. The rest of us work to make enough money to exchange for food from a store, a restaurant, or for many around the world, their only option is to scavenge for some little scrap to eat.

All this effort for a simple habit . . . an undeniable necessity. Is this one of life’s most meaningless acts? Or does it reveal the simple reality of dependence?

On a daily basis we ingest material provision for our material bodies. Silently its scream of meaning seeks to touch our souls: “You are a dependent being. You need provision. You need a provider.” Is there a Universal Provider? Food doesn’t say conclusively. It simply alludes to our dependence . . . and its own existence as provision.

Food means we are dependent beings, and food reminds us of this daily.

Food implies there is a Personal Provider Who has delicately designed this nourishment process for us.



WHAT DOES FAMILY
MEAN TO YOU?

ponder and discuss:

What type of family did you grow up in?

Was that primarily a positive or negative experience for you?

What family attachments do you seek in order to maintain your sense of well-being, and why?

Describe your idea of a healthy family environment for raising the next generation of humanity?

consider:

“God sets the lonely in families...” – *from a song of David, King of Israel (~1000 BC), Psalm 68:6*

Ephesians 3:14-15; 1 Timothy 5:4,8; 2 Corinthians 6:18; Hebrews 2:11

a meaning of . . .family

Nuclear families, extended families, blended families, patriarchal families, matriarchal families, adoptive families, foster families, gay families, polygamous families, single-parent families—the landscape of families is diverse in today’s world. But we all have at least one.

Families can heal and build individuals. But, like a whirlwind, families can also devastate. Families are powerful. Children enter the world needing attachments. Coming to peace with these initial relationships can either nurture a lifetime of productive living or take a lifetime of energy and therapy.

Families are a given. Establishing peace and harmony within a developmental and healing family environment is not a given. Parents labor with intentions to provide and love, instill values and build character. The task is formidable. The ideal family seems forever beyond our reach. Yet the destruction of the family concept is not a biological option—as long as babies bond during their early days. Loneliness is implanted within the human soul, and a family of peace and harmony is an ideal solution.

Families mean people are relationally dependent creatures needing nourishment and boundaries.

*Families imply God is a relational God Who desires eternal attachment with people,
and longs to meet their needs and grant their desires.*



**WHAT DOES CHILDHOOD
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What was precious in your childhood?

How was it protected and honored?

Where is the place for innocence in adulthood?

consider:

“Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’” – *Jesus, interacting with children*, Matthew 19:13-14

Romans 8:15-17; Colossians 3:20-21; Ephesians 6:1-4; Matthew 10:16; Isaiah 49:15

a meaning of . . .childhood

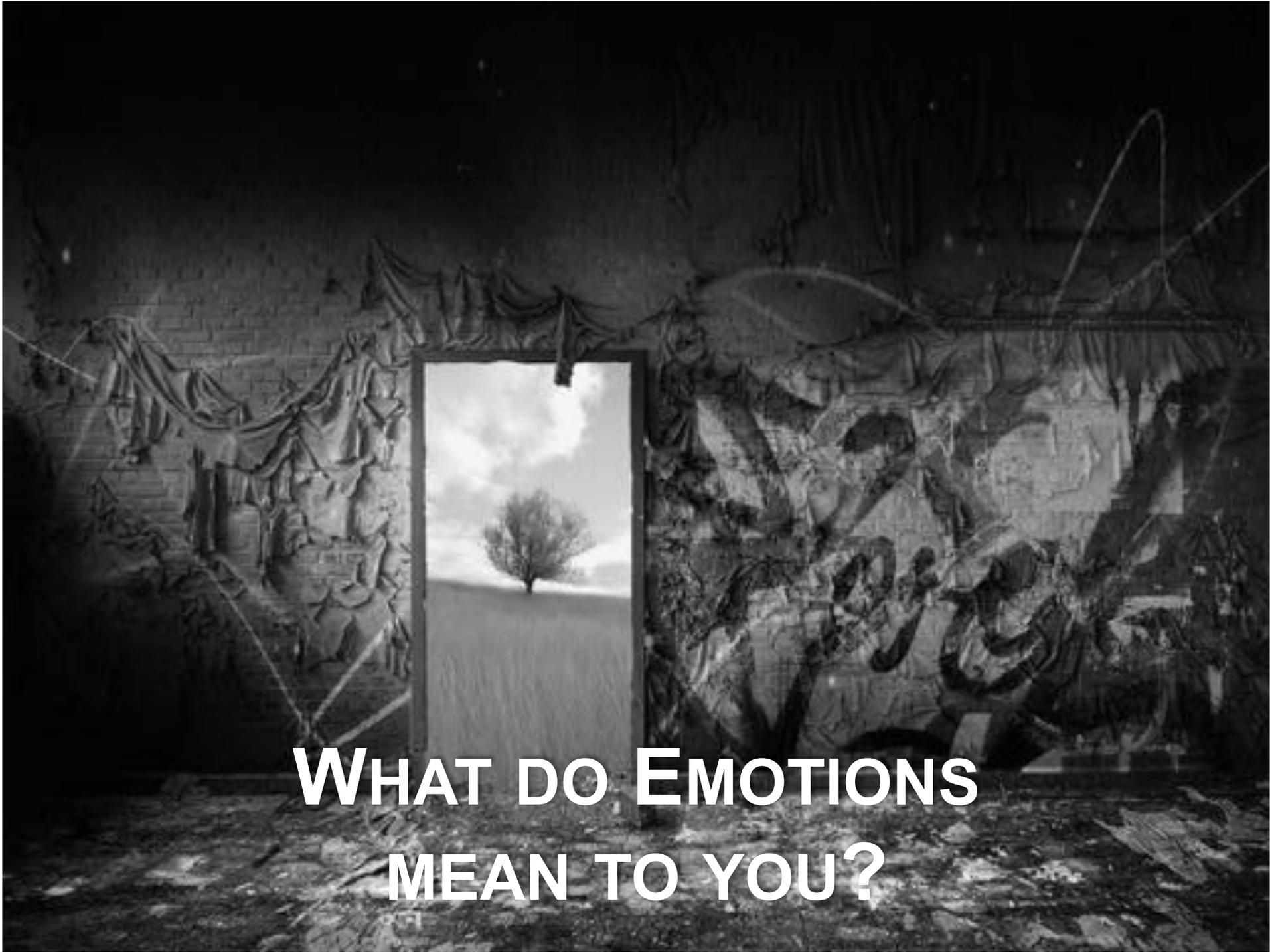
Each of us had a childhood. Some pretty, some pretty grim. The losses and gains of childhood form the playing field for a lifetime of discovery. Discovering ourselves. Discovering our parents. Discovering the Originator of this cycle of life. These precious days are fragile. They lead us from the purity of innocence into the pragmatics of human existence. Childhood is to be valued, cherished, and protected. It can never be replaced or repeated.

We owe children honor and protection. Without these, what could have been might be lost forever. Childhood happiness can shape a lifetime of healthy relationships and productivity. Childhood pain can shape a lifetime of regret and self-destructive habits. Both provide opportunities to look deeply into human nature. A lost childhood is something to grieve.

Childhood is not our end—it is a necessity of life that must be relinquished for its secrets to be unlocked. Sometimes we want to prolong childhood. Other times we abort childhood in a premature hunger for maturity. But what a legacy we give to our children if we bequeath them a host of tender memories from their childhood.

Childhood means innocence is precious and fragile.

Childhood implies God cherishes innocence and provides hope for the future.



**WHAT DO EMOTIONS
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What is the current emotional state of the heart of the world?

How do your emotions affect you on a daily basis? How does this reveal the deeper you?

What is the current emotional state of your heart?

Does God have emotions? If so, what emotions does He have?

What emotions did Jesus display?

consider:

“Keep you heart with all diligence for out of it are the issues of life.” – *a proverb of Solomon, King of Israel, Proverbs 4:23 (KJV)*

“Guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life.” – Proverbs 4:23 (NIV)

Exodus 20:5; Luke 13:34; John 11:35

a meaning of . . .emotions

We process life intellectually, but we experience life in our emotional responses. Without the emotional world which God designed meanings would look very different. Emotions are part of the feedback loop of life. Without this responsive emotional loop, life would become colorless and meaning would become anesthetized.

But dealing with our emotional worlds can be problematic. Abuse can traumatize our emotions. Denial or unhealthy links can be established. Pain can become pleasurable. What should be trusted can produce fear. Addictions can become shabby substitutes for engaging from the heart. Bitterness can cannibalize the soul and the body.

Experiencing emotional honesty and healthy behavioral choices is a major lifetime task. Beware denying the task. Beware ignoring the difficulty of the task. Enjoy the richness of the emotional world as color blossoms with structure.

Emotions are responses.

Emotions mean healthy people are responsive.

Emotions imply God is an emotional God.



**WHAT DOES SLEEP
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

How did your day go the last time you lost a substantial amount of sleep?

What connects sleep and trust?

What connects insomnia and anxiety?

consider:

“A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Don’t you care if we drown?” He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, ‘Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?’” – *Mark, an early follower of Jesus, Mark 4:37-41*

Psalm 127:1-2; Psalm 4:8

a meaning of . . .sleep

Did you know we will sleep through a third of our lives? We cannot live without sleep. An effortless issue for most—an unavoidable undertaking for all. Sleep is a necessity. Without it, sanity ceases in a matter of days. Sleep deprivation plagues new parents, the anxious, and the menopausal. Chemical imbalances can disturb sleep and diminish the quality of life. How we long to sleep like a baby—a sleep that is deep and without the dread of thoughts from other times.

Sleep requires trust. The mind releases consciousness with assurance that the external world is stable without us controlling it. Sleep requires us to relinquish control. Sleep pries control from even the most control-oriented people.

Sleep implies balance, and to be balanced requires trust. We will experience trust for a third of our lives—if only while asleep.

Sleep means that trusting and relinquishing control are healthy for mankind.

Sleep implies God can be trusted completely.



**WHAT DOES WORK
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

Why do you work?

What work has been most satisfying to you?

What emotions emerge as you consider the phrase, "It's time to go to work"?

What does your current work have to do with your destiny?

consider:

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." – *The Genesis Account*, Genesis 2:15

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward." – *Paul, a follower of Jesus*, Colossians 3:23-24

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; Ephesians 2:10; Acts 17:26

a meaning of . . .work

The Great Wall of China required work ... hard work for over 1000 years. It is the longest continuous building project on the planet. It symbolically represents the labor of many generations of Chinese making a contribution to their civilization.

Work and civilization run parallel. From an individual perspective work can seem like one is constantly trying to scratch out a living. Yet the urge to work springs from a longing in the human heart to survive, to build something, to nurture someone, to make a difference in his/her current generation. Work has a purpose ... a direction ... an ending from which to begin resting or playing. From a generational point of view, though, work can be viewed as the brush strokes on a mural of civilization building.

Work means that building civilizations has consequences over the generations.

Work implies that God works with a purpose in mind.



**WHAT DOES PLAY
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What is your favorite form of play?

How would life look without that form of play?

How does the idea that God has a sense of humor impact your view of relating to Him?

consider:

“A merry heart doeth good like a medicine; but a broken spirit drieth the bones.” – *Solomon, King of Israel, Proverbs 17:22*

Ecclesiastes 3:4

a meaning of . . .play

Play, playfulness, comedy, games, laughter, non-survival engagements, lightheartedness—the human heart wants to go there part of the time.

Every culture plays—and every culture has its forms of play. We are drawn to the joy of watching children play. We enjoy playing as a child and playing with children. Something is unhealthy when one can't play. A childhood deprived of play is a lost childhood.

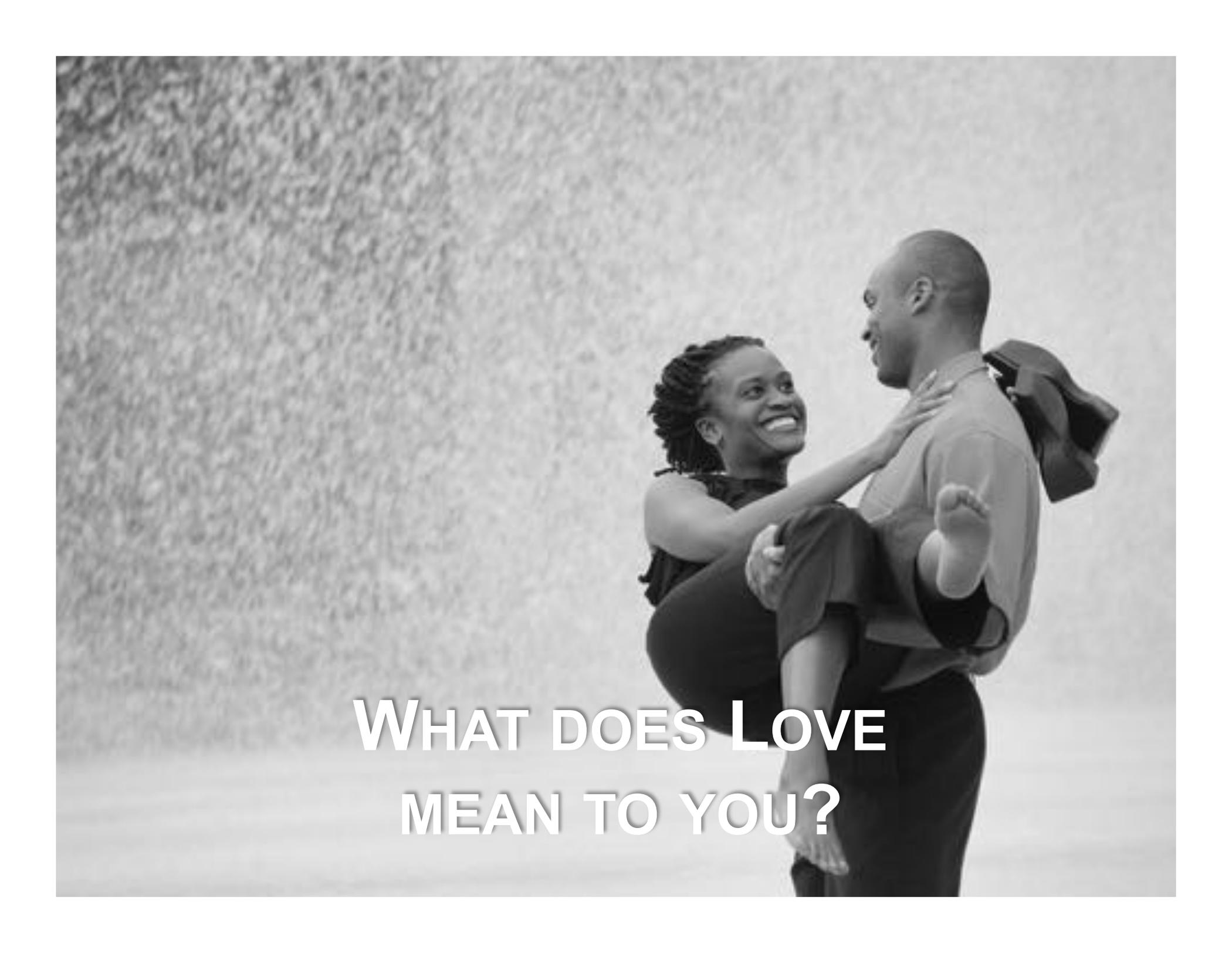
But what does play mean? If childhood/childishness is the abundance of play, then is maturity the absence of play? Without it, part of human nature is lost. Imagine a world with more play—or a world without play. The course of human history would be different.

Where does play come from? Is it part of a survival instinct to play? Sometimes play is practice for the real thing—playing house, playing school, playing army. Even lions cubs play hunting games. Sometimes play offers escape from the real things.

Something in our souls requires some play.

Play means that the human heart requires the oiling of fun and fantasy.

Play implies that God has a sense of humor and wants us to relax at times.



**WHAT DOES LOVE
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

In what manner do you most enjoy being loved?

How are loving and liking linked?

How is love jealous? (i.e. good, bad or both?)

In what manner do you love loving?

If God is love, is love God?

consider:

“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

– *Jesus, Luke 7:47*

“Keep on loving each other . . .” – *the writer of Hebrews, Hebrews 13:1*

1 Corinthians 13:1-13; I John 4:8; Song of Solomon 8:6-7

a meaning of . . .love

That curious English word “love”! The Greeks had three words to separate the concept into more manageable portions— sexual passion, brotherly love, and a love prepared for extreme sacrifice.

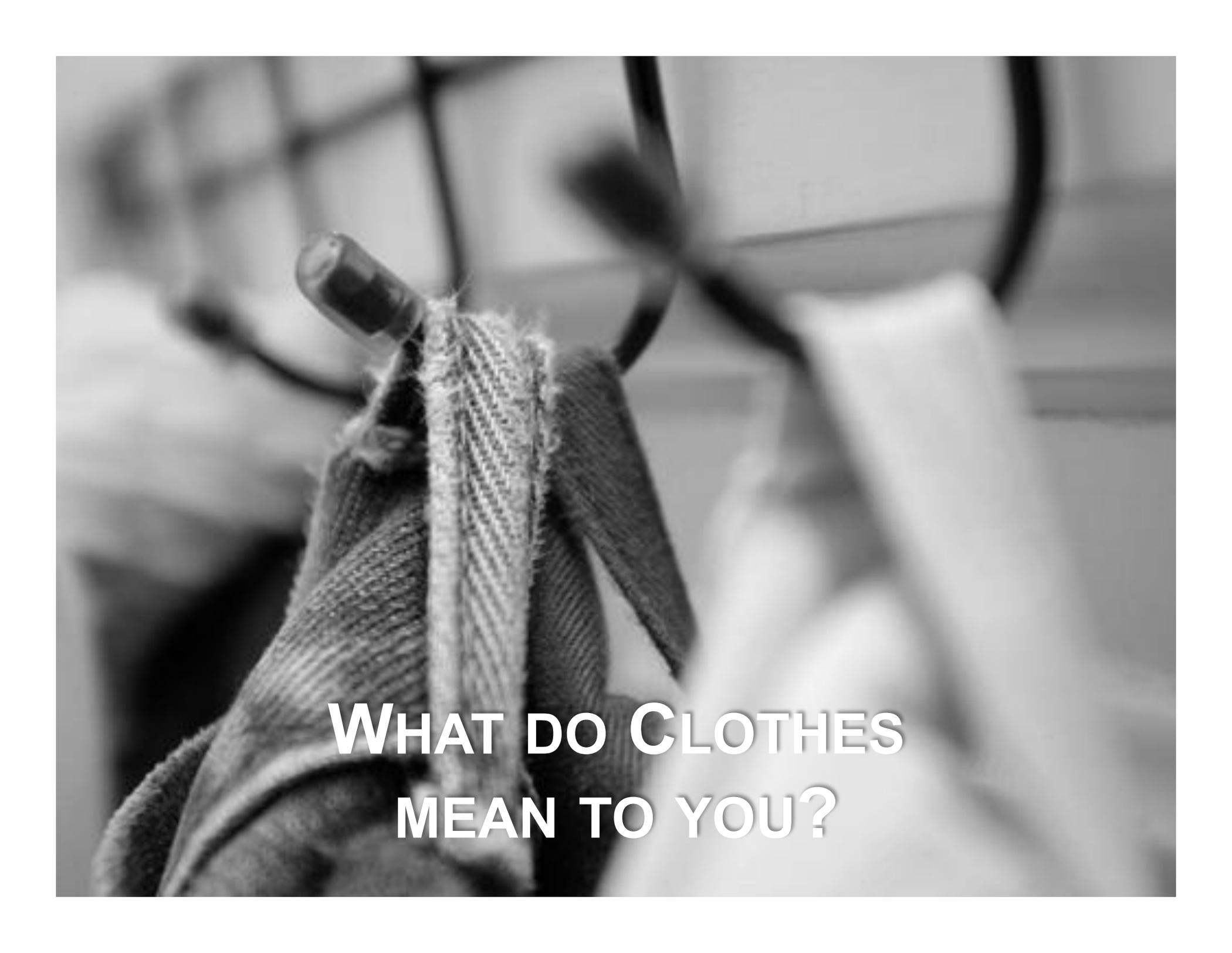
Love transcends material sufficiency. We have intangible needs—and that is okay. Love meets needs that nothing else can. Unless our deepest longings are touched with love, a huge void exists that can invite in an array of addictions and compulsions. We may indulge our deepest lust without satisfying our soul’s need for love.

Love can be received and given. Without it, we shrivel; with it we can thrive. Love received can drive people to great heights. Lack of love or love rejected can plummet one to the depths of despair.

And try as we may, self-love does not fill the void. Others must be involved in this process—a deep connecting of souls that allows for growth, change and loss.

Love means that people are not self-contained and that material provision is insufficient to meet soul needs.

Love implies that God created us with soul needs to connect us with Himself and others.



**WHAT DO CLOTHES
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What do you feel when someone arrives at an event inappropriately dressed for the occasion?

Do you wear clothes to match how you feel—or how you want to feel—about yourself?

Why is nakedness so powerful? Do you ever desire for your soul to be naked before someone?

What emotions surface as you imagine yourself soul-naked?

consider:

“Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were both naked, so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man. ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and was afraid because I was naked.’ And he said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?’” – Genesis 3:7-11

Genesis 3:21; Galatians 3:26-27; Revelations 1:12-18

a meaning of . . .clothes

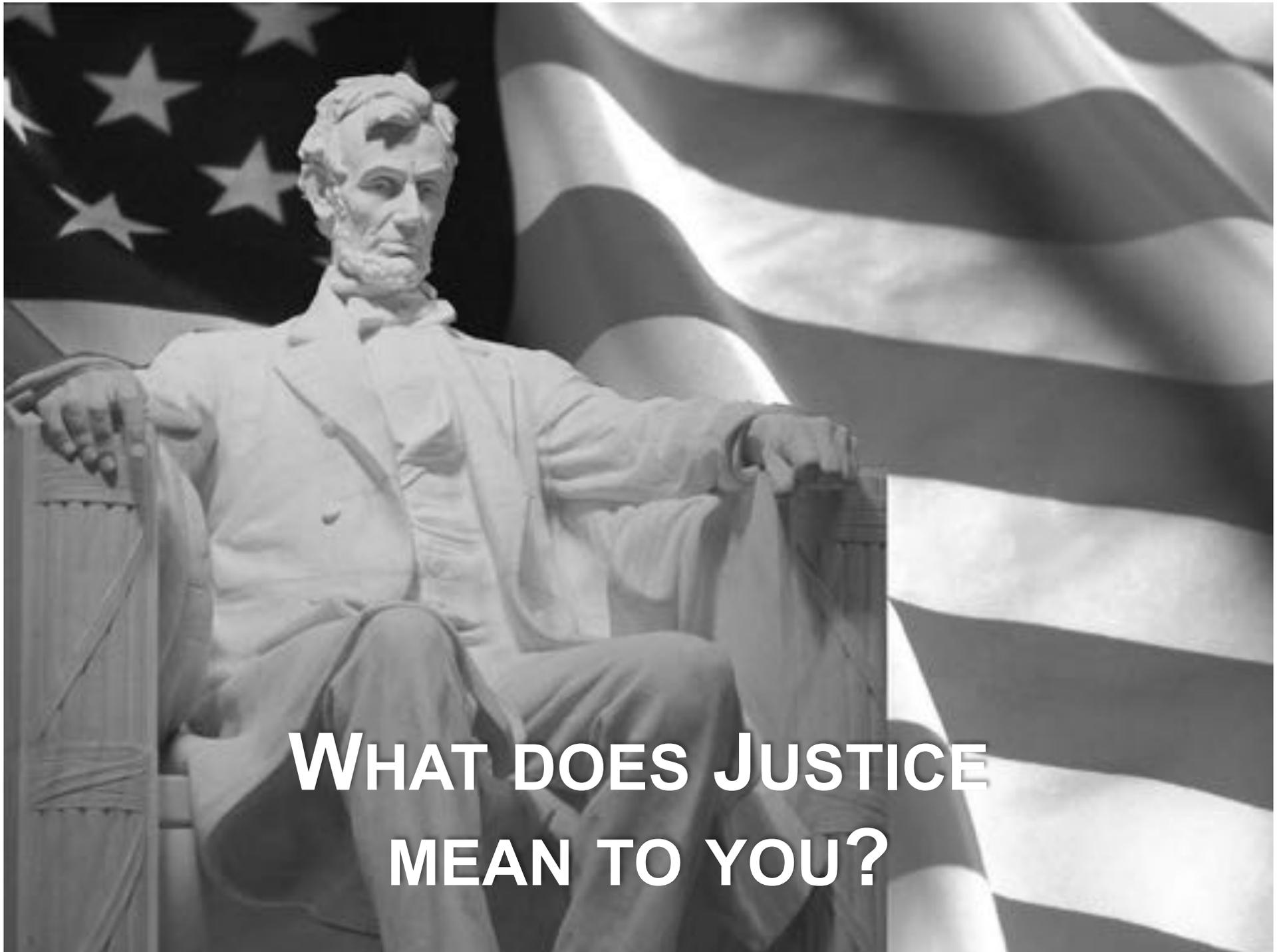
Enter clothes and the elaborate industry of fashion! The covering of human flesh preoccupies some while others give it little thought. All still faithfully cover themselves, for public nakedness comes at an emotional price—the exposure of shame. Babies don’t have it yet. But adolescence arouses this turbulent emotion associated with total exposure. Publicly strip any teenager and shame will emerge. The covering of shame is an emotion not learned but inherited—in most cultures of the world.

We can curse at our inheritance of shame. We can cover our inheritance of shame with clothes and ignore its reality. We can dull this emotion with shameless behavior. Or with clothes and conscience we can celebrate this powerful emotion that foretells of greater realities that the human soul longs for—realities such as total perfection and unqualified acceptance.

The economics of clothing and the fickleness of fads in fashion often overshadow the deeper realities behind the covering of naked humanity. Yet the possibility of restoring shamelessness lingers as a longing in the human soul—and drives much of both art and pornography.

Clothes mean that human beings, unlike other animals, have shame.

Clothes imply God requires and provides a covering for shame.



**WHAT DOES JUSTICE
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

Why does violation of personal space invoke such strong feelings of unfairness that leads to calls for justice?

When social authorities enforce justice, this is usually acceptable; but when an individual seeks revenge, it isn't. What's the difference?

consider:

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” – *Jesus, Matthew 7:1-2*

“I deal with them according to their conduct, and by their own standards I will judge them. Then they will know that I am the Lord.”
– *the Prophet Ezekiel about 600 BC, Ezekiel 7:27*

Proverbs 21:15; James 2:8-11

a meaning of . . .justice

Justice is a moral word. Right and wrong must be perceived and separated. We all operate under a set of laws—either laws in sync with society or socially defiant laws of our own making. Justice demands action. Judgments and consequences are an inherent part of justice. Justice means that some choices we could make are wrong. But who sets the standard for right and wrong, for justice and unfairness?

Can't we simply do away with the concept of justice and its moral underpinnings? Wouldn't life on the planet be better without people judging each other? Such a scenario is improbable because each of us wants to be treated fairly. We all know the biting sting of being treated unfairly. It is this inner desire for fairness that drives human justice. Without the fairness emotion and concept, all action could be embraced as moral-free and be judgment-immune. But who among us is so blind to self as to be utterly just?

Justice means each person has an internal conscience dictating what he/she thinks it means to be treated fairly.

Justice implies God is the only One Who knows how to be utterly fair in all He does.



**WHAT DOES MERCY
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What is mercy in the face of justice?

Why is it difficult to offer mercy?

Why is it difficult to receive mercy?

consider:

‘Mercy triumphs over judgment!’ – *James, a follower of Jesus*, James 2:23

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him. ‘Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God?’ he said, ‘since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.’” –*Jesus while dying*, Luke 23:39-43

James 2:12-13; Ephesians 2:4-5; 1 Timothy 1:15-17

a meaning of . . . mercy

Mercy usually means that a higher authority intervenes so that you do not receive the negative consequence you deserve for doing something wrong. Mercy is the fruit of justice tempered with compassion. So, in order to receive mercy, we must first be judged and condemned. Only condemned people can truly receive, appreciate, and grow from knowing mercy.

At the very heart of God is a heart of mercy. His compassion longs to spare us from the painful consequences of our poor choices—or at least for us to benefit from them. He longs to lift us from the grim reality of our fallen nature.

Mercy means judgment can be satisfied and overcome.

Mercy implies that God’s compassion can temper His enforcement of justice.



**WHAT DOES MUSIC
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

When does the “music” stop for you?

Why do babies seem to fall asleep more easily when music is present?

What kind of music brings tears to your eyes? Why?

consider:

“I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart. I will tell of all your wonders. I will be glad and rejoice in you. I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.” *—For the director of music. To the tune of “The Death of the Son.” A Psalm of David, Psalm 9:1-2*

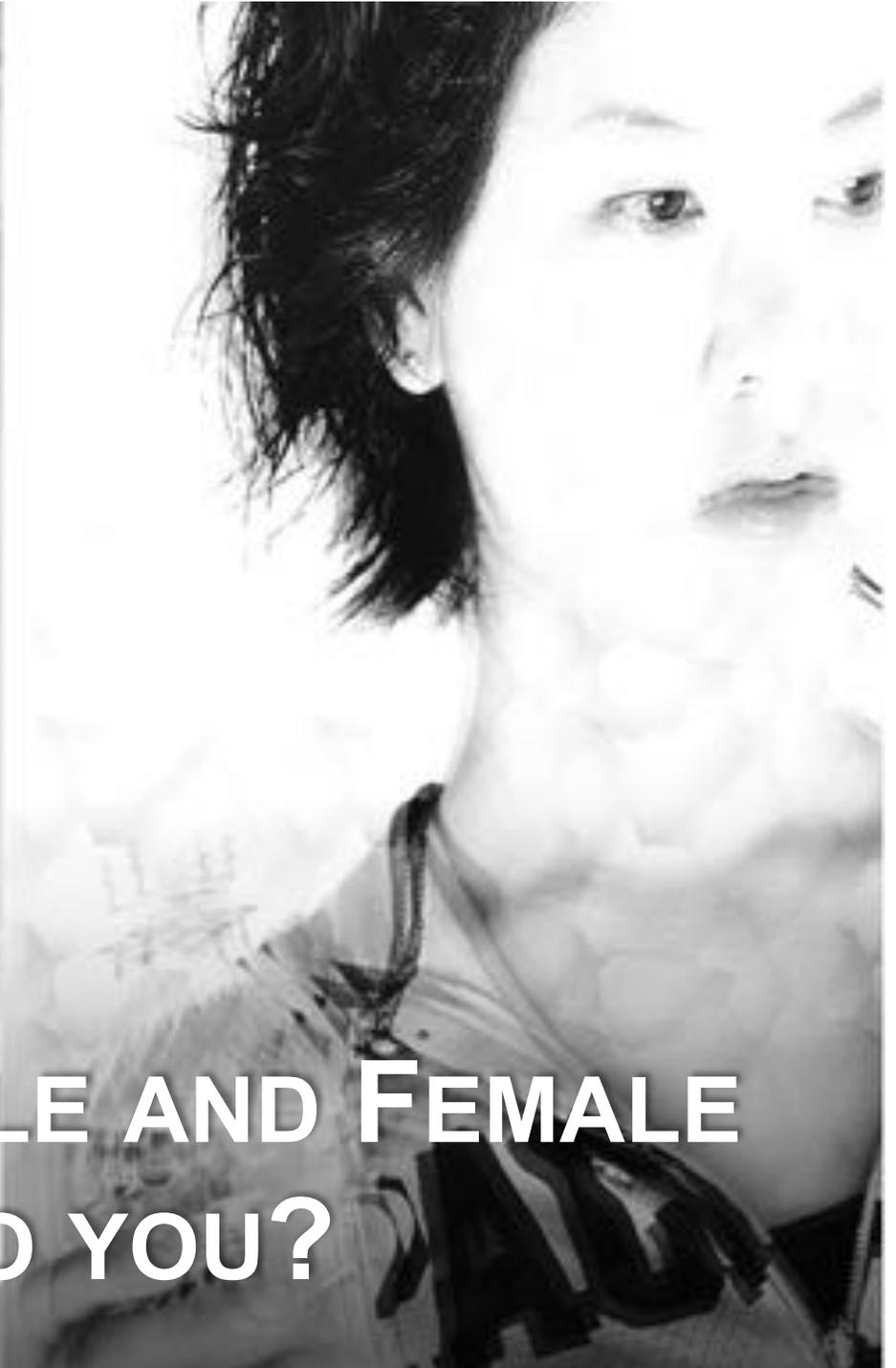
Psalm 33:1-3; Ephesians 5:19-20; Revelation 5:9-14

a meaning of . . .music

Sound waves can be manipulated to create music. Music can be created to inspire a wide range of emotions—from delight to despair, from patriotism to pathos, from fantasy to frolic. Music is a direct touch of the soul because it reaches a place in our emotions deeper than mere thought. It can invite worship, as well as excite hormones. Music can lead us to heavenly aspirations. It can also incite the hell in us.

Music mirrors the interplay between harmony and dissonance that we experience in life. It can take the chaos of arbitrary sound and screeches and mold it into a beauty that our soul longs for and responds to.

Music means chaos can be transformed into beauty. Music implies a God of trans- formative beauty.



**WHAT DOES MALE AND FEMALE
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

Is jealousy a positive or negative concept to you?

What parts of our soul would we seldom venture to if humanity were only one-sexed?

Can a two-sexed humanity thrive in a healthy way without a proper play of jealousy?

consider:

“In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” – *Paul of Tarsus, a follower of Jesus*, 1 Corinthians 11: 11-12

Song of Solomon 8:1-7

a meaning of. . .male and female

The sexes are intrinsically linked. They may not live together well, but they most certainly can't live without each other—at least for more than a generation.

Mystery surrounds sexuality. The attraction, the touch of the soul, the jealousies that arise between male and female—all seem to communicate something far beyond our human formulas and reasoning.

God also is a Lover, but He is not just a Lover. He is a jealous Lover who resists anyone and anything that threatens to come between Him and His Beloved. Perhaps God's touch of desire and jealousy for humanity is written deeply within our sexuality.

Perhaps the true nature of maleness and femaleness is not merely physical, but, taken together, is also deeply spiritual and represents facets of God's image. If we were not sexual and gender-specific beings, perhaps there are aspects of God's being that we would not be able to perceive

Male and female mean the cycle of “Jealousy-Love-Romance-Birth-Life-Death” is dependent on two sexes and reflects a spiritual dimension.

Male and female implies God symbolically revealed His jealousy for humanity.



**WHAT DOES GUILT
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

Why do some people feel guilt more than others?

If humanity felt no guilt, would the world be a better place to live?

How do you manage your guilt feelings?

consider:

“If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her’ . . . At this those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first . . . “ –*Jesus speaking to a mob*, John 8:76-79

John 8:1-11

a meaning of. . .guilt

The function of guilty feelings is to increase awareness of genuine guilt (i.e., actual breaches in our good-evil continuum.) Guilt is a great blessing for those around us, because without it we would roam free without a conscience to steer us between our good impulses and our evil ones. Guilt feelings push us to consider right and wrong...to consider others’ sense of fairness.

But it is also possible to have too much guilt, or to have false guilt, due to rules imposed by society or religion or ourselves that rob us of legitimate freedom.

Integral to human design is the universal existence of a moral compass called a conscience. The goal is to set boundaries of guilt intended to redirect us to goodness without constructing jails of hopeless guilt that surrender our souls to evil.

Guilt means people do wrong and foolish things and require emotional feedback for redirection.

Guilt implies that God designed people with a moral compass.



**WHAT DOES SHAME
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What have you been ashamed of? Why?

How are shame and guilt linked to draw us to God?

When you feel ashamed, how do you respond?

Do the shameful acts of your culture provide entertainment, instill numbness, provoke anger, or engender grief within you?

consider:

“Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth....”

—*Isaiah, a Prophet of Israel who lived about 700 BC, Isaiah 54:4*

“They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush.”

—*the Prophet Jeremiah about 700 BC, Jeremiah 6:14-15*

Hebrews 12:2; 2 Samuel 9:1-8; Isaiah 54:4

a meaning of . . .shame

“If I don’t become a country western singer, I’ll die of shame”—so says a 12-year-old girl who understands some of the dynamics of shame, but doesn’t know what shame is teaching her or what to do about it. Shame is an emotion deeply rooted in our being flawed, unworthy or worthless.

Guilt beats up on us because of something we’ve done. Shame is not so concerned with what we do, but with who we are—our very identity. Shame is more than embarrassment. It whispers, “You are flawed, you are bad, and nothing will ever change that.”

The core of shame is human imperfection and soul deformity. We feel ashamed because we know we are not as good as our souls were designed to be nor as good as we imagine ourselves being.

Shame means that human design has been devastated.

Shame implies that God extends His healing hand into corrupted human nature to powerfully draw people to Himself.



**WHAT DOES SALVATION
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What savings have you experienced in this life?

Do you long for an eternal salvation from decay and condemnation?

Can one save oneself?

Do you feel worthy of being saved? Do you feel saved from anything?

consider:

“But now He has appeared once for all at the end of ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people, and He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.” –Hebrews 9: 26-28

John 3:1-21; Psalm 18:19; Psalm 27:1; Psalm 62:1

a meaning of . . .salvation

To need salvation implies being rescued from a state of helpless danger. Salvation whispers, “Decay—or even death—is inevitable, unless . . .” Firefighters save property and forests. Doctors save lives and limbs. A jury’s acquittal can save you from condemnation and a jail term. Salvation implies that you are facing an uncertain calamity or a certain condemnation. If you fall under self-condemnation, or society’s condemnation, or God’s condemnation, then you are in need of salvation.

Our awareness of imperfection and shame often insidiously convince us that we deserve condemnation, not salvation. Sometimes the anticipation, if not dread, of condemnation fascinates and captures us. Will denying our need for salvation actually save us in the end?

Even if we do accept our need to be rescued from our dangerous or condemned state, who is capable of rescuing us? For whom will we surrender the fruitless effort of self-rescue and embrace the helplessness that leads to salvation?

Salvation means that the helplessness of decay and the sentence of death need not be final.

Salvation implies that God relentlessly rescues people who are helplessly and justifiably condemned.



**WHAT DOES TIME
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What time under heaven is it really?

How do you express your value of time?

Do you want more or less time?

How do you think the reality of time can be changed?

consider:

“Time is a dressmaker specializing in alterations.” —Faith Baldwin, *Face Toward the Spring*

Psalm 62:8; Psalm 39:4-5; Acts 1:7-8; Acts 17:26, 2 Peter 3:8

a meaning of . . .time

Have you ever wanted to take back something hurtful that you said? Or wished you could go back in time to undo something stupid that you did? Time is a reality from which humanity thankfully cannot escape. There are no time machines or reset buttons on life once we have messed up or done well. We are limited by the reality of a time-space sequence to our actions and their consequences. Fortunately, no one can undo our lives—for then all we do would be meaningless!

Yet for God time is fluid and flexible, because His eternal nature is unbounded by time. Made in His image, our imaginations and desires are also not bounded by time. We dream of what was before and what could be if only ... Even the hope of, and the fear of, eternity beguiles us.

*Time means that our actions are non-repeatable, continuous, and sequential,
and are intrinsically linked and locked in time and space.*

Timed-space implies that God always was, always is, and always is to come.



**WHAT DOES NATURE AND
UNIVERSE MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What places in nature most draw your soul to beauty?

Have you ever reasoned there is a “beyond the universe”? Why?

Does the “beyond” draw your soul?

If you could write down the essence of what the heavens are declaring, what would it say?

consider:

“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” —*Paul, a follower of Jesus, Romans 1: 20*

Psalm 19:1-6; Psalm 24:1-2; Job 38:1-15, Proverbs 25:2

a meaning of . . .nature and universe

The universe screams at us. Nature screams of beauty, peace, and violence. Screams of order and chaos, of diversity, complexity, and simplicity. If the God who conceived and birthed the universe did so purposely, then it follows that He embedded purpose and meaning and truth throughout what He made. Even “spiritual” truths are not confined to religious books or talk, but are proclaimed by the heavens.

The screams of the universe are cloaked in mystery, embedded in hidden places. Created in His image, humanity strives to unlock these embedded truths. The scientist’s scrutiny, the poet’s poems, the philosopher’s ponderings—all are premised on the hope of solving the mysteries of life.

The mysterious scream of nature will touch our hearts—if we choose to listen to just one blooming rose bud or drop of rain.

The Universe means that external and internal realities may appear as hidden mysteries.

The Universe implies that God embedded meaning in everything He made.



**WHAT DOES LIFE
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

When you look into the eyes of a child, does the meaning of life refocus for you?

What enriches the meaning of life for you?

How would you answer a child who asked you about the meaning of life?

consider:

“But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” –*Jesus*, Luke 20:37-38

John 14:6; Luke 20:27-40; John 4:13-14

a meaning of . . .life

Isn't it a peculiar thing that the human soul desires life to have meaning? It is not enough to simply exist or survive or even flourish. We want a bigger picture. We want meaning. We want a destiny with freedom of choice.

Life without meaning is a degraded life. To give up the search for the meaning of life is to succumb to the habit of dulling one's soul.

Life's meaning answers the question each dawn asks, “Why bother?” It is like a light beam illuminating the scenery along the path of our life's journey. But what is the source of meaning in life? Is it limited to whatever we make of it? Or is it bequeathed to us? Are we the authors of our own stories, or the story of another Author? The meaning of life mystifies the mind.

Life means that we want our story to have meaning, with an option other than death.

Life implies that God is the God of the living.



**WHAT DOES DEATH
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

Do you view death as a portal to a life not bound by time and decay?

Can death be embraced with both peace and fear simultaneously?

When you look into the eyes of the elderly, what do you sense inside of you?

consider:

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” –*a Songwriter of Israel*, Psalm 116:15

1 Corinthians 15:54-58; 2 Samuel 12:18-23; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

a meaning of . . .death

Little in life is certain—except its conclusion. Such is the power of death: it is the last word to the body. Death seems so final—so brutal, so ugly, immoral and meaningless. We rage against death when it seems premature or unjust. But we also struggle to embrace a noble death that crowns a life well-lived. Death feels like both an enemy and only rarely as a friend of the soul.

The core question is whether this final word will imprison the soul that can imagine so much more beyond death’s door.

Death means life must and will transition.

Death implies God has further plans and purposes.



**WHAT DOES TRUTH
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

Have you ever been deceived? How did you feel?

Have you ever been told a truth you couldn't receive until later?

How did you feel when you first heard it?

How did you feel after you finally embraced it as true?

Who is your most trustworthy source of truth? Why do we need to be freed by truth? Has truth ever not freed you? Why?

consider:

“You will know the truth and the truth will set you free...” –*Jesus*, John 8:32

Psalm 31:5; Psalm 26:1-2; Isaiah 59:12-15; John 8:32; John 14:6

a meaning of . . .truth

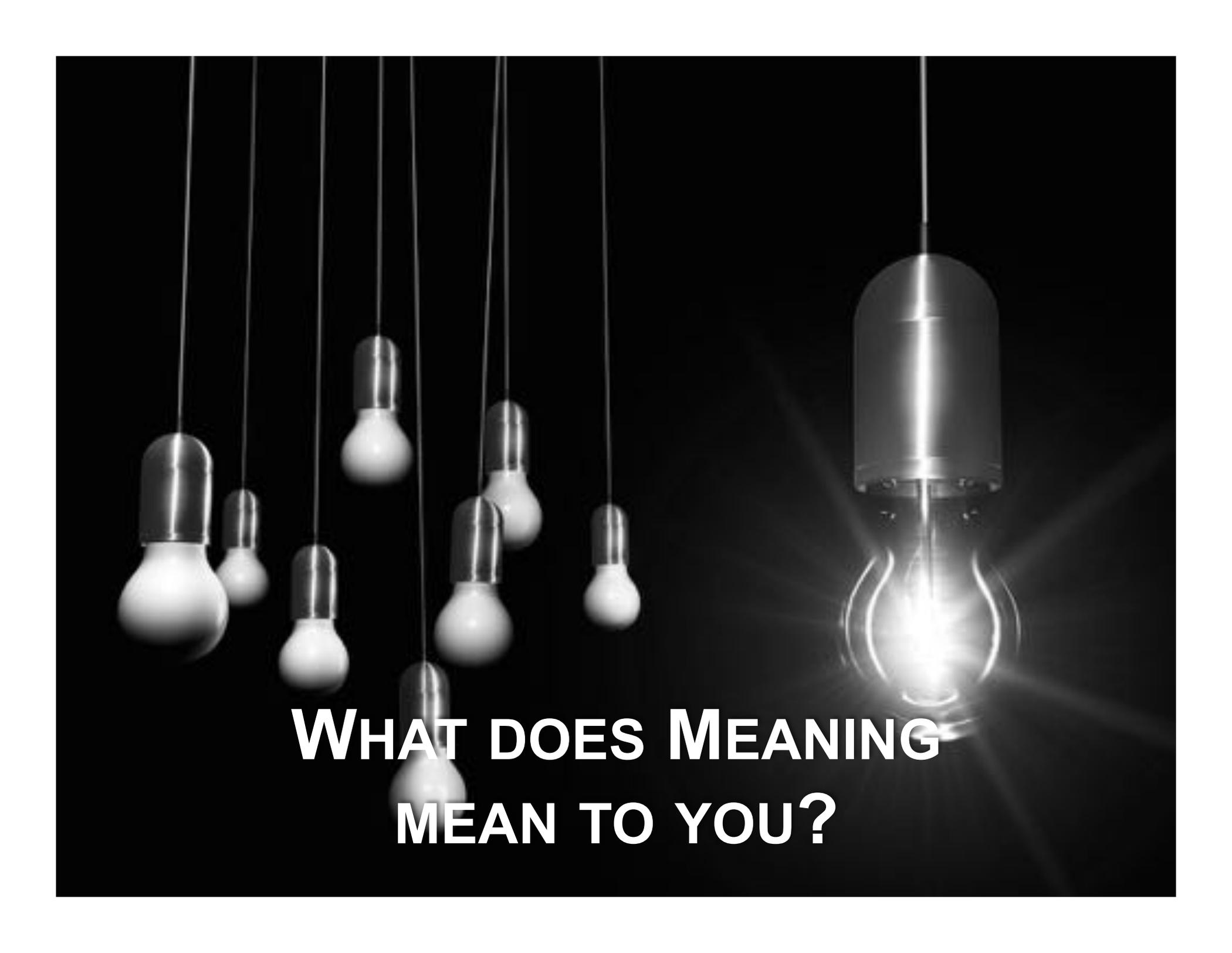
What is the difference between truth and facts? Consider this: Truth is found in those clear and accurate words depicting multifaceted reality in such a way that your heart and mind in unison say “Aha” and continue to say so as you uncover, discover, and examine evidence.

Truth is freeing. This kind of truth is rare, while facts depicting one-sided reality are commonplace. Consider this: Facts can even be dangerous. The soul longs for truth, but we often settle for facts. In an information age, facts are less expensive. Truth may be embedded in facts, or seem to be contradicted by “facts.” But it always transcends facts.

Trustworthy truth emanates from someone who is trustworthy. An untrustworthy person may tell trustworthy facts to support an untrustworthy truth. And so the battle within the soul is to discern truth from deception and still be able to trust, commit and act after the inner fight is decided.

Truth means that reality has patterns.

*Truth implies that God transcends facts and that freedom is possible
because God always remains true to Himself.*



**WHAT DOES MEANING
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

When all seems meaningless, where do you go?

What overarching story of life do you embrace that integrates life and death with meanings?

What is the difference between something's function and its meaning?

consider:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!”, says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

–*King Solomon beginning his treatise on meanings, Ecclesiastes 1:2*

“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

–*King Solomon at the end of his treatise on meanings, Ecclesiastes 12:13-14*

Ecclesiastes 2:17-26

a meaning of. . .meanings

“No more why's!” said a young girl to a four-year-old boy. We can't avoid trying to make sense of the world around us. We seem to be designed to ask the meta-questions of life.

About 3000 years ago King Solomon of Israel concluded that all of life is meaningless—at first and second glance, but not at last look. Today many songwriters, painters and philosophers conclude the same. Time and space limit our view of the future. Death and decay block our view of eternity.

Yet we keep looking. Either we are strangely addicted to something that doesn't exist, or else we are designed to explore a realm of reality that fulfills this deep longing of the soul. If only we could see clearly, past decay and death. It is this wall of darkness that allows time and space to render meaningless all acts of the present for some of us. It is this same wall that invites all of us to acknowledge our frailty before it and accept eternal consequences for today's realities.

Meanings exist because the probable consequences of our actions permeate reality.

Meanings imply that God transcends chaos and change to bathe existence with embedded links to His Being.



**WHAT DOES AUTHORITY
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

Do you like authority? Do you like submitting to authority?

Do you like being in authority? Do you respect authority?

What happens to you emotionally when you know you have disrespected authority?

consider:

“This (punishment) is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings; yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not bring slanderous accusations against such beings in the presence of the Lord.” —*Peter, a follower of Jesus*, 2 Peter 2:10-11

Luke 20:1-8; Romans 13:1-7

a meaning of . . .authority

Who has the last word? The power of information challenges the right of authority in today’s world. The power of wealth and sexuality has always challenged authority. But simple authority, despite all its abuses, is a phenomenon to be cherished as well as respectfully engaged.

Authority implies that power needs direction and that the powerful ones may not be suited to find healthy direction without help. Just ask any parent of a toddler!

As long as humanity begins with the innocence of babies and lingers with decisions that bring harm and health to others, authority systems are potentially health-bringing systems. The alternative—the chaos of anarchy—is far worse than the potential harm authority can breed.

Authority means that power needs to be directed.

Authority implies that God reigns.



**WHAT DOES BODY
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

Which body pleasures seem most connected to your soul pleasures? Which seem least connected?

Which body pains seem most connected to your soul pains? Which seem least connected?

consider:

“When He had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.”

—*Jesus at his death*, John 19:30

Luke 11:33-36; Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 15:42-49; 2 Corinthians 7:1

a meaning of . . .body

We wash our bodies. We nourish them with air and food. We exercise them. We caress them. We celebrate them. We also abuse them with substances of known harm. We risk them in behaviors that can mutilate them—such as driving recklessly in rush hour traffic. We use them to live out our imaginations.

Through all these functions we affirm there is a precious soul within the wrappings of flesh and bone—or else why bother—or even ask why?

Body means the spirit is wrapped precariously in flesh and bone.

Body implies God enjoys identity-containments.



**WHAT DOES BEAUTY AND
UGLINESS MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What is the most precious beauty you have experienced?

What is the most repulsive ugliness you have experienced?

Without beauty, what would your soul long for?

What do you find beautiful about God?

consider:

“How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves.” –*Solomon to Shulammite, his bride*, Song of Solomon 1:15

Psalm 27:4; Psalm 29:1-2; Isaiah 61:1-3; 1 Peter 3:3

a meaning of. . . beauty and ugliness

Beauty is a pleasure value. It excites our hearts; we dream of its effect upon our souls.

The beauty of simple architectural lines leads us to explore the space by containing it. The beauty of music penetrates our being and moves us through the range of human emotions. The beauty of sexuality—its physical curves, its sensuous embrace, its soulful reach and longing—foretells a deeper beauty.

We contrast beauty with ugliness, if only to accentuate the power of beauty . . . and the power of ugliness. Without this continuum, our imaginations and perceptions would be reduced.

Beauty and ugliness mean our souls are elevated far above mechanisms of the material world.

Beauty and ugliness imply God understands the logic of preciousness and repulsion.



**WHAT DOES PEACE
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

As you read, are you at peace in this presence?

As you reflect, are you at peace with your past?

As you imagine, are you at peace with your future?

What disciplines of the soul help you remain at peace?

How do you experience God as Peacemaker?

consider:

“Peace I leave you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

—*Jesus, a few hours before his death and subsequent resurrection three days later, John 14:27*

Romans 5:1-2; Psalm 119:165; Proverbs 14:30; Philipians 4:7; James 3:18

a meaning of . . .peace

Peace is not cessation of action. It is not necessarily happiness in the present.

Peace is a matter of living in the present while recognizing that beauty, power and mercy have historically (and will continue to) overcome the violence of judgment—undeserved and deserved.

Each of us experiences judgments—some seem just but many seem unjust, if only from our perspective. Judgments come from others as well as from ourselves. It is self-condemnation that can violently strip peace from our souls.

Only embracing the larger picture of beauty, power and mercy can our souls be restored to a state of peace.

Peace means the violence of judgments can be overcome with beauty, power and mercy.

Peace implies God is a peacemaker and wants us to be at peace in Him.



**WHAT DOES FRIENDSHIP
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

Who are your life-long friends? What would your life be like without them?

As you perceive God, does He offer real friendship? What does that look like?

Are you a good friend? Why?

consider:

“I [God] led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love.” *–Hosea, the prophet, Hosea 11:4*

John 15:15; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Proverbs 27:6; James 4:4-5

a meaning of . . .friendship

Do you ever miss a friendship? Do you reminisce over childhood friendships centered around play without the confusion of sexuality? Do you ever puzzle about adult friendships positioned around power, sexuality and authority? Do you ever long for elder friendships seeking to learn from the mistakes and pleasures of childhood and adult life and to enjoy time with others?

Friendships are essential to human health. They connect us to a broader reality that nourishes our souls. The human experience devoid of friendship often reveals a heart brutalized by loneliness. The kindnesses of friendship and even the hurts of friendships keep us sane and alive with hope.

Friendship means human connections are an antidote to loneliness.

Friendship implies that God offers real friendship to humanity.

A black and white photograph of two women laughing together. The woman on the right is in the foreground, smiling broadly and looking towards the left. The woman on the left is slightly behind her, also laughing heartily. The background is a bright, overexposed outdoor setting, possibly a beach or a park. The overall mood is joyful and positive.

**WHAT DOES SMILING
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What makes you smile?

Who makes you smile?

Does God smile?

And does He make you smile?

consider:

“A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit.” *—A proverb of Solomon, King of Israel, Proverbs 15:13*

Proverbs 15:30; Proverbs 17:22

a meaning of. . .smiling

It is the smile from the heart of a child that assures the rest of the world that life has a purpose, a meaning, a value. Smiling communicates hope and pleasure. The simplicity of the act is surpassed only by the enrichment of the heart.

Little we do in life so expresses the vulnerability of the human soul. We are beings created for smiling—for giving and receiving joy inexpressible in words.

We can deceive others with a fake smile. But nothing less than a genuine smile can signal the true healing of human relations. Not a smirk or a word or a deed, but a smile.

Smiling means we humans can signal—and obscure—the state of our souls with our faces.

Smiling implies that God smiles when we seek His face.



WHAT DOES POVERTY AND WEALTH MEAN TO YOU?

ponder and discuss:

How impoverished are you?

What wealth do you seek?

What poverty do you seek?

When you attain both the poverty and the wealth you seek, how will your life be different?

consider:

“The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”

—*James, a follower of Jesus*, James 1:9-12

Proverbs 30:7-9; Philippians 4:11-13

a meaning of . . .poverty and wealth

To desire riches seems natural to the human heart. These riches are often perceived as a reflection of our worth as a person. The more material riches we own, the more worth we have as people and the more pleasure we deserve—or so the logic of our emotions tells us.

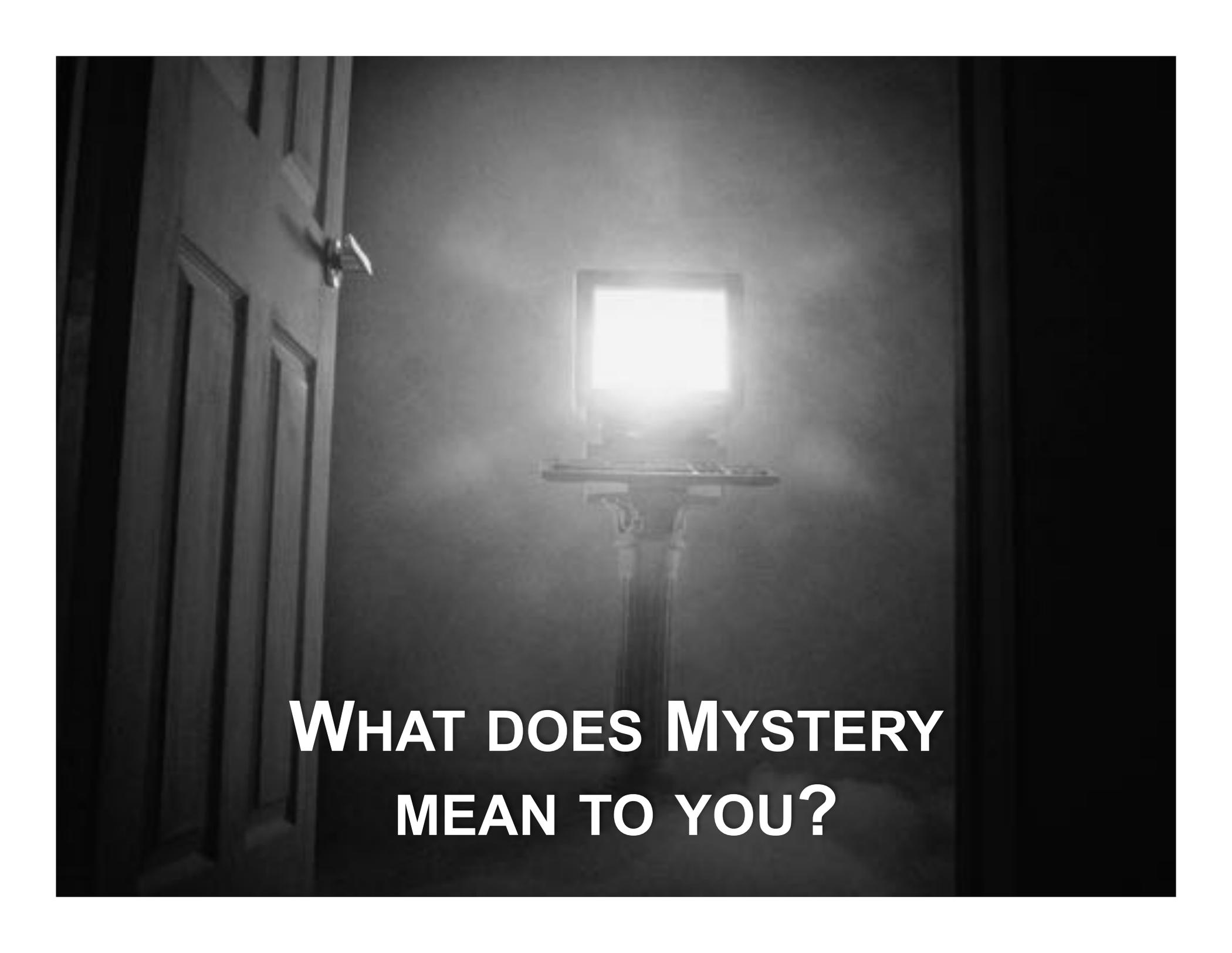
“A rich person deserves the pleasures of riches. A poor person deserves what he has.” Such simple economics of the soul leaves us all impoverished.

Riches buy neither worth nor security, but they do afford opportunities. Such opportunities can embellish our lust or can release our love.

Poverty, on the other hand, can afford struggle, defeat, compassion, or bitterness—we get to choose. Either way, the doorway of choice is shame. Only as we embrace our common shame does any man or woman—rich or poor or middle class—act with love, rather than with greed or self protection or violence or denial.

Poverty and wealth mean we, though unified by shame, are differentiated by the trinkets we surround and identify ourselves with.

Poverty and wealth imply that God knows the difference between true wealth and poverty.

A black and white photograph of a computer monitor on a pedestal in a dark room. The monitor is the central focus, glowing brightly against the dark background. To the left, a door is partially visible, slightly ajar. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and enigmatic.

**WHAT DOES MYSTERY
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What mysteries captivated your imagination as a child? How did you respond?

What mysteries captivate your soul now? How do you respond?

How do you feel about God being mysterious? Is that comforting or fear producing or exciting?

consider:

“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.”

—*A proverb of King Solomon, a King of Israel, Proverbs 25:2*

Colossians 1:27; Ephesians 5:31-33; 1 Timothy 3:16; Deuteronomy 29:29

a meaning of . . .mystery

Mysteries surround us—from within and without. No matter how hard we try, many mysteries defy our attempts to dispel them through the power of our intellect or the foresight of our imaginations. The mystery of beauty is enough to embolden the soul with a sense of dignity. The mystery of silence is enough to confuse the soul, and cause a sense of awe. The mystery of paradoxes perplexes our souls because they lie just beyond the border of our intellectual and spiritual capacities. The mysteries of gender interactions create whole industries that have a global appeal.

Our curiosities keep us occupied with mysteries. Somehow we reason that mysteries are important links in this life to the world beyond. But we can't grasp it all. We simply have not been created with the capacity to know it all. And God does not obligate Himself to reveal it all.

As the information age propels us into a world saturated with facts, mysteries remain a constant that sometimes change locations. The power of mysteries to excite and captivate our imaginations can be either deadened or nourished—we must choose.

Mystery means life does not imply chaos, and human hearts lean toward adoration.

Mystery implies God is worthy of adoration.



**WHAT DO ENDINGS
MEAN TO YOU?**

ponder and discuss:

What endings have you faced in life?

As you transitioned to another beginning, what emotions did you experience?

How have you experienced God in endings?

consider:

“Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” –*John, the Apostle, writing about Jesus and future times, Revelation 22:12-13*

Malachi 4:5-6 (last verses of the Old Testament), Revelation 22:12-13 (last chapter of New Testament); Matthew 24:3-8

a meaning of . . .endings

Childhood comes to an end. Vacations come to an end. Schooling comes to an end. All books come to an end. Some relationships come to an end. Our jobs often end. Sooner or later all individual people come to an end. Endings are natural and necessary for new beginnings.

We transition from ending to new beginnings. Sometimes we can't begin anew because we refuse to end. Other times we can't end because we're afraid to begin. Sometimes our endings are glorious. Sometimes we end in indignity. How we live the middle period often foreshadows our ends. We can often make up for a lousy beginning. We can even overcome a poor middle. But the end is usually our legacy to the next generation, especially to those closest to us. Good endings usually require special attention.

From each ending arises the hope of a new beginning. We cannot control all our endings, but each end can reshape us with hope as we embrace it.

Endings mean we have new beginnings ahead.

Endings imply God is beyond the end of the present and beyond the beginning of the end.

about the author...

Ralph Ennis, and his wife Jennifer, currently reside in Raleigh, North Carolina. Their life journey has taken them through New Jersey, Virginia, Colorado and Moscow, Russia. They have four married children and thirteen grandchildren. Ralph has a Masters in Intercultural Relations and focus on decision making and the use of images

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special thanks. . .

To Jennifer Ennis for all her insight and support over 40 years of marriage!

For the editorial work of Christine Weddle, Amy Leapley, Dennis Stokes and Judy Gomoll.

To Diana Green for her helpful input on the first draft of this work.

To Bob and Maggie Wynne for all their help and support in this project.

I dedicate this work to our children who have taught us so much about meanings in the ordinary.

