

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ***Which Is More Important, the Pursuit of Meaning or of Happiness?***

Perhaps you have heard of Jodie Foster's seven-minute speech at the Golden Globes Award ceremony on 13 January 2013, when received the Cecil B. DeMille Lifetime Achievement Award. The speech was random, disorganized and at times evidenced confusion. She publically admitted what most people already knew—that she is a practicing lesbian. Few were shocked by such transparency; some in the audience even applauded. But it was the end of her speech that was rather haunting. She exclaimed: “Jodie Foster was here, I still am, and I want to be seen, to be understood deeply, and to be not so lonely.” Michelle Van Loon of *Christianity Today* writes: “That frank and fragile confession is the most daring thing I've heard a public figure say in a long, long time. Bottom line, isn't what Foster wants exactly what each one of us wants? To be known, to be cherished . . . and not to be so very lonely? . . . Jodie Foster, an actress who has spent 47 years behind a performer's façade, fumbled a bit as she tugged at the strings of her mask during her Golden Globe speech. But the mask came off in the final moments of her speech as she moved beyond confessing her choices to voicing her loneliness.” I doubt very much if Foster was even thinking this way, but she was crying out for God that evening. She was crying out desperately for the One who created her, redeemed her, loves her, cherishes her and made a profound promise: “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Jodie Foster's speech reminded me of an article recently published in *The Atlantic* by Emily Esfahani Smith, entitled, “There's More to Life Than Being Happy.” This article demonstrates with social science data what the Bible has been declaring for millennia: Only in a relationship with God, where selfishness and self-centeredness are replaced with an other-centered life of love for God and love for others, do we find meaning in life. Permit me a summary of Smith's argument:

1. She cites the importance of Viktor Frankl's powerful 1946 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. The book's ethos—its emphasis on meaning, the value of suffering, and responsibility to something greater than the self—seems to be at odds with our culture, which is more interested in the pursuit of individual happiness than in the search for meaning. This observation then begs the question: which is more important—a life that is happy or a life filled with meaning and purpose?
2. According to the Center for Disease Control, about 4 out of 10 Americans have not discovered a satisfying life purpose. “Forty percent either do not think their lives have a clear purpose or are neutral about whether their lives have purpose. Nearly a quarter of Americans feel neutral or do not have a strong sense of what makes their lives meaningful. Research has shown that having purpose and meaning in life increases overall well-being and life satisfaction, improves mental and physical health, enhances resiliency, enhances self-esteem, and decreases the chances of depression.”

3. In the forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, a new study argues that nearly 400 Americans aged 18 to 78, when asked whether they thought their lives were meaningful or happy, responded (as summarized by Smith) that “leading a happy life. . . is associated with being a ‘taker’ while leading a meaningful life corresponds with being a ‘giver.’” Happiness is about feeling good about oneself; the pursuit of happiness is associated with selfish behavior—being a “taker” rather than a “giver.”
4. The pursuit of life’s meaning is unique to humans, while pursuing happiness is not. A meaningful life is associated with doing activities such as buying presents for others and taking care of children. Having children requires self-sacrifice, which is a key element of meaning in life.
5. Perhaps most importantly, Smith found that meaning is not only about transcending the self, but also about transcending the present moment: “While happiness is an emotion felt in the here and now, it ultimately fades away, just as all emotions do; positive effect and feeling of pleasure are fleeting. The amount of time people report feeling good or bad correlates with happiness but not at all with meaning. Meaning, on the other hand, is enduring. It connects the past to the present to the future.” Research also confirms that people who have a clearly defined purpose in life rate their satisfaction with life higher than anything else.
6. The pursuit of meaning is what makes human beings uniquely human. By putting aside our selfish interests to serve someone or something larger than ourselves—by devoting our lives to “giving” rather than “taking”—we are “not only expressing our fundamental humanity, but are also acknowledging that there is more to the good life than the pursuit of simple happiness.”

This remarkable article by Emily Esfahani Smith, which I just summarized, confirms what Scripture teaches us. God created us as relational beings—to love Him and love others—and in that life of other-centeredness is meaning and fulfillment. But sin destroys that, for sin at its core is selfishness, self-centeredness and self-indulgence. Life is about me, about my needs, my desires—and I will do anything and use anyone to satisfy me! 5,500 years of recorded history show us that the selfish pursuit of happiness is self-destructive, leads to dysfunction in relationships and ultimately destroys culture. Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection paid the price for our sin and made it possible to live a life of eternal meaning and significance. His sacrifice is the solution to the senseless quest for happiness alone. Further, He gives us His Spirit to enable us, guide us, teach us and empower us to live the life of meaning to which we are called. May Jodie Foster find the life of meaning that comes with faith in Jesus Christ. He is the answer to her cry of loneliness.

In conclusion, I am reminded of the incredible tragedy of one of the world’s more famous atheists, Christopher Hitchens, who died last year of esophageal cancer. He boldly declared that just because one suffers and one faces death, is not a cause for surrendering “first principles,” presumably meaning his atheism. He also declared, “I don’t *have* a body; I *am* a body” and nothing else. He admitted to trashing his body with strong drink and smoking. The writer of the

foreword to his last book wrote that Hitchens was a “man of insatiable appetite,” as if that were an endearing and significant character trait. But, as Preston Jones of John Brown University states, yet “Hitchens himself felt regret, a ‘gnawing sense of waste. . . I feel my personality and identity dissolving,’” he wrote. Jones reveals that Hitchens was touched by the witness of a Christian, the famous geneticist, Francis Collins, a man Hitchens once called “one of the greatest living Americans.” Hitchens writes that “Collins never suggested prayer in the course of their conversations,” but, writes Jones, “it seems that the doctor’s witness suggested something Hitchens might have preferred not to confront so late in a short life given to the sharp rejection of the idea that the body may not be everything.” God’s Spirit used Collins to touch his soul, not just his body. I hope that Christopher Hitchens made a decision of faith before he died. His life was filled with the pursuit of happiness, not the pursuit of meaning. He pursued a life with “an insatiable appetite,” yet feeling at the end of his life “a gnawing sense of waste.” The tragedies of Jodie Foster and of Christopher Hitchens drive us to Jesus, for He is the only source of a life filled with meaning and purpose. There is simply no other way to attain meaning!

See Preston Jones in [www.booksandculture.com](http://www.booksandculture.com) (13 November 2012); Michelle Van Loon in [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) (17 January 2013); and Emily Esfahani Smith in *The Atlantic* (January 2013).