

# GOD'S DEFINITION OF MEANING

## A Critique of *Man's Search for Meaning*, by Victor Frankl

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# CRITIQUE OF VICTOR FRANKL'S "LOGOTHERAPY" GOD'S DEFINITION OF MEANING

## Critique of *Man's Search for Meaning*, by Dr. Victor Frankl

Drawing on his horrendous experiences in a concentration camp under the Hitler regime, psychiatrist Victor Frankl has developed a form of treatment he calls "logotherapy," in response to man's search for meaning in life, particularly under conditions of intense suffering. Unlike many of his colleagues, he does not display an open hostility toward Christianity. His writing reveals at least some belief in the existence of God, although he has not embraced the Christian faith and evidently prefers to separate his religious beliefs from his psychotherapy.

Interestingly, Frankl faintly recognizes that his profession has usurped the role of the pastor: "Some of the people who nowadays call on a psychiatrist would have seen a **pastor, priest or rabbi** in former days" (p. 138, emphasis added). The best way to evaluate his approach to man's problems is to look at some categories--categories which are **also addressed by Scripture**: What is the nature of man? What is man's basic need? What is man's fundamental problem? How can that problem be solved? Who is the major agent for change? What is the goal of that change?

### NATURE OF MAN

In general Victor Frankl sees man as a **free, self-determined** agent who uniquely determines the meaning of his own individual life, having the potential for either great good or great evil. He stresses man's responsibility for his own life: "things determine each other but *man* is ultimately self-determining" (p. 157). He asks, "How can we dare to predict the behavior of man?" (p. 155). Yet he cautions that "freedom...is not the last word" (p. 155) but rather "is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility" (p. 156).

In contrast with many victim-oriented psychologists of today, Frankl describes the danger of seeing man as "nothing but the result of biological, psychological, and sociological conditions, or the product of heredity and environment" (p. 153). He warns that "this neurotic fatalism is fostered and strengthened by a psychotherapy which denies that man is free" (p. 153).

Departing from the behaviorists, Frankl laments that for too many years, "psychiatry tried to interpret the human mind merely as a mechanism" (p. 156). Instead, he claims that "the innermost core of the patient's personality is not even touched by a

psychosis"...the incurable psychotic individual may lose his usefulness but yet retain the dignity of a human being" (p. 156).

Frankl sees the **primary motivation** of man as "the striving to find meaning in one's life" (p. 121). This is not merely "a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives" (p. 121), but the major driving force for man's actions. Later we will see how this presupposition forms the framework for his definition of man's basic need/problem, as well as his therapeutic methods.

Frankl believes that man has the potential to become either "swine or saint," depending not on external conditions but rather on the decisions of his own free will. Drawing on his concentration camp experiences, he notes that:

"Life in a concentration camp tore open the human soul and exposed its depths. Is it surprising that in those depths we again found only human qualities which in their very nature were a mixture of good and evil?" (p. 108)

Biblical Response. We can agree with Frankl that man has serious responsibilities and is not *determined* by his environment, experiences, or genetic factors. In that sense, he brings welcome relief from what many Freudian-oriented *Christian* psychologists today are teaching. Scripture clearly warns that man is "without excuse" (Romans 1:20). Frankl's system, however, does not see man as responsible *before God*, but only as responsible *to himself*. There is no place in his system for absolute standards of value, as determined by God, to distinguish between good and evil.

Frankl carries man's free will far beyond the responsibilities outlined in Scripture. Even though man is responsible before God, the Bible repeatedly affirms God's sovereign control over the affairs of man (Ephesians 1:11; Daniel 4:34, 35; Proverbs 19:21, 16:1, 16:4, 16:9, 20:24, 21:1, 21:30, 21:31; Romans 8:28, 29; Romans 9).

Man does not have the ability, on his own, to become either "swine or saint." Scripture teaches that man's nature is *sinful*, and that left to his own devices he lives in rebellion against God (Isaiah 53:6, Romans 3:10-18). He is spiritually dead in his sins, apart from God's divine intervention to give him spiritual life (Ephesians 2:1, 8, 9).

Our conclusion must be that Frankl's view of man, though containing elements of truth, is biblically inadequate.

## MAN'S NEED

Frankl claims that "man's search for meaning may arouse inner tension rather than inner equilibrium," but "precisely such tension is an indispensable prerequisite of mental health" (p. 126). "What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task" (p. 127). Such sentiments are echoed by many other psychologists, using such phrases as "hunger for significance."

Biblical Response. Man was created to live in close fellowship with God, to reflect His image and thus glorify Him. Because man has exchanged the glory and worship of God to seek after his own glory, and to worship idols (Romans 1:18-32), his primary need is for reconciliation with God. He is unable to achieve this through his own efforts, and thus his most fundamental need is for the redemption that Christ accomplished on the cross.

## MAN'S PROBLEM

Having begun with man's need for meaning, Frankl states that "man's will to meaning can also be frustrated" (p. 123). "A man's concern, even his despair, over the worthwhileness of life is an *existential distress* but by no means a *mental disease*" (p. 125). Elsewhere Frankl proposes that an "existential vacuum" exists because "at the beginning of human history, man lost some of the basic animal instincts in which an animal's behavior is imbedded and by which it is secured" (p. 128). A second loss to man is that "the traditions which buttressed him are now rapidly diminishing" (p. 128). This problem of *boredom* results in "more problems to solve than distress" (p. 129). A frustration of man's will to meaning may be "vicariously compensated for" either by a "will to power" or a "will to pleasure" or some other substitute (p. 129).

Biblical Response. We can agree that the term "mental disease" is inappropriate to describe man's basic problem. However, *the life of man has no meaning apart from his Creator.* Attempting to create one's own "meaning" apart from God is a futile and dangerous venture. Man's problem must be identified biblically as **sin**--his rebellion against God and the resultant separation.

## CHANGE: GOALS, METHODS, AGENT

Predictably, Frankl's "logotherapy" is focused on discovering meaning in life, and thus it departs from some other therapeutic methods:

"Logotherapy deviates from psychoanalysis insofar as it considers man a being whose main concern consists in fulfilling a meaning, rather than in the mere gratification and satisfaction of drives and instincts"...or in mere adaption and adjustment to society and environment" (p. 125).

Agent for change. The role of the therapist in this matter is described as "assisting the patient to find meaning in his life," as he "tries to make the patient aware of what he actually longs for in the depth of his being" (p. 125). (This sounds remarkably similar to the New Age movement's invitation to look within oneself to find "god" or the "true self.") In this system, *man is his own savior*: "Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment" (p. 154). The therapist is not the agent for change, but rather the patient himself recognizes--regarding the meaning of his life--"that it is *he* who is asked" and that "he can only answer to life by *answering for his own life*" (p. 131). Therefore, "logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence" (p. 131). Perhaps the following quotation best describes this highly man-centered "salvation" system:

"Questions about the meaning of life can never be answered by sweeping statements. 'Life' does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as life's tasks are also very real and concrete. They form man's destiny, which is different and unique for each individual. No man and no destiny can be compared with any other man or any other destiny."  
(p. 98)

Nevertheless, Frankl does indicate that meaning extends beyond self, that "the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche" (p. 133). He claims that "the more one forgets himself"...the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself" (p. 133).

Goals of Change. Compared to psychoanalysis, logotherapy is "less retrospective and introspective," focusing "rather on the future, that is to say, on the meanings to be fulfilled by the patient in his future" (p. 120). In this way, "the typical self-centeredness of the neurotic is broken up instead of being continually fostered and reinforced" (p. 120). Thus, Frankl's goal appears to be one of finding meaning, yet not limiting that meaning to oneself alone.

Standards of Change. A strong relativism is found in Frankl's philosophy. The therapist "must leave to him (the patient) the option for what, to what, or to whom he understands himself to be responsible," whether "to society or to his own

conscience" (p. 132). Therefore, the "logotherapist is the least tempted of all psychotherapists to impose value judgments on his patients," leaving such judgments up to them to decide. "Logotherapy is neither teaching nor preaching. It is as far removed from logical reasoning as it is from moral exhortation" (p. 132). Thus, there is really no absolute standard for change; anything goes!

Methods of Change. Frankl discusses three ways to discover meaning in life: (1) "creating a work or doing a deed," (2) "experiencing something or encountering someone," and (3) "by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering" (p. 133). (This third item, suffering, occupies such a significant place in Frankl's philosophy that the whole next section is devoted to it.)

Biblical Response. The goal of biblical change, for the person who already knows Christ, is to progressively change from sin to righteousness in his behavior and attitudes. This is called sanctification. The first change needed for the *unbeliever* is to receive Christ. Merely discovering one's own "meaning," apart from Christ, is unacceptable. The goal of the believer's change is to live to please *God* first, then others, instead of living to please self. While Frankl's counsel to seek meaning outside self is admirable, it is inadequate because God is left out.

Man cannot be his own savior, and he is not the primary agent for change. He is not left to determine his own life's meaning. Even prior to the fall, God gave clear instructions to Adam and Eve, not expecting them to determine meaning for themselves. Both salvation and sanctification require the power of God's Holy Spirit. The believer increasingly obeys God, being empowered to do so by the Spirit (Romans 8).

Man does not set his own standards for change. God sets those standards in His Word. The biblical counselor, unlike the logotherapist, must impose value judgments on the Christian counselee. These values are not his own personal preferences, but God's commands.

We can appreciate Frankl's emphasis on the future, rather than dwelling unnecessarily on the past. The believer must also be future-oriented. However, Frankl's "future" includes only earthly life and is thus incomplete. The believer has the glorious hope of an *eternal* future with the Lord. His life is therefore highly meaningful, being God's child with an everlasting future, plus the opportunity to serve God and lead others to Christ while he remains on earth: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

## MAN'S RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

Suffering is a critical aspect to Frankl's philosophy and his search for meaning: "What matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph" (p. 135). Frankl believes that suffering "ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice" (p. 135). He quickly adds that suffering is not *necessary* in the search for meaning: "To suffer unnecessarily is masochistic rather than heroic" (p. 136).

The ultimate meaning of suffering, however, is something Frankl believes man cannot grasp: "Ultimate meaning necessarily exceeds and surpasses the finite intellectual capacities of man" (p. 141). He does issue this challenge: "Are you sure that the human world is a terminal point in the evolution of the cosmos?" (p. 141). In other words, he speculates on the possibility of another level of life wherein this life's suffering would be explained. Meanwhile, he says that "what is demanded of man is not...to endure the meaninglessness of life, but rather to bear his incapacity to grasp its unconditional meaningfulness in rational terms" (p. 141). Perhaps a sophisticated version of "grin and bear it!"

Frankl, advising a "tragic optimism," lists three points in his counsel on how to respond to unavoidable suffering:

1. "Turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment." (p. 163)
2. "Deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better." (p. 162)
3. "Deriving from life's transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action." (p. 162)

In discussing guilt, Frankl states that "a crime in the final analysis remains inexplicable inasmuch as it cannot be fully traced back to biological, psychological, and/or sociological factors" (p. 173). In fact:

..."totally explaining one's crime would be tantamount to explaining away his or her guilt and to seeing in him or her not a free and responsible human being but a machine to be repaired." (p. 173)

The third point concerns Frankl's response to the reality of death. He suggests that near the end of your life you should look not to transitoriness, but rather at "the deeds done, the loves

loved, and last but not least, the sufferings (you) have gone through with courage and dignity" (p. 175). In the meantime, "as soon as we have used an opportunity and have actualized a potential meaning, we have done so once and for all" (p. 175).

Finally, this perhaps best summarizes Frankl's response to suffering:

"When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden." (p. 99)

Biblical Response. Frankl's system reveals itself to be empty in comparison with the hope of the believer in Christ. Suffering does not witness to "human potential," but to the gospel, to Christ's death on the cross and resurrection, His victory over sin and death. The "ultimate meaning" of suffering is not left to idle speculation about some higher level of life; this bring little comfort (or none). God has revealed much of His plan and purposes for man. He has given us the history of man, the account of creation, man's fall into sin, and God's glorious plan of redemption that has been fulfilled in the life of Christ. He has given the believer an assurance of the future hope of glory, eternal life with Him. He has revealed to man that history will one day be consummated, with the return of Christ and the final overthrow of all evil. Frankl's system contains no hint of this glorious hope, but rather leaves man to his own hopelessly inadequate imaginations.

The believer is not called to bear a unique burden of suffering that no one else can bear for him! The *unbeliever* must bear such a burden for eternity, but the Christian has the wonderful assurance that Christ has taken on Himself the burden of sin and paid for it, once and for all. The sufferings of this life, for the cause of Christ, are not the burden that Frankl describes. Instead, the believer counts it a high privilege to suffer for the gospel:

"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:6, 7)

Surely we can best conclude this analysis with some of the most comforting words ever penned, words given by inspiration of the



Holy Spirit:

"We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck, down, but not destroyed."  
(2 Corinthians 4:8)

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." (2 Corinthians 4:16, 17)

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." (Romans 8:18)

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: 'For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35-39)

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