

Man's Search for Meaning: Viktor Frankl's Psychotherapy



by KRIS HEMPHILL

Shortly before his death Mark Twain wrote in his autobiography:

Men are born; they labor and sweat and struggle for bread;...
age creeps upon them; infirmities follow; those they love are
taken from them, and the joy of life is turned to aching grief...
Death comes at last—the only unpoisoned gift earth ever had
for them—and they vanish from a world which will lament
them a day and forget them forever.¹

The Preacher's opening verses in Ecclesiastes are similar to Twain's sentiment: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes... There is no remembrance of former things" (Eccl 1:2–4, 11). Both Twain and the Preacher voice questions our souls long to have answered: Where does one find enduring meaning, life purpose, and sustainable joy, and why do so few seem to find it?

Psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Viktor Frankl also wrestled with such questions. He searched for answers after watching fellow prisoners "run the wire"—a common form of suicide whereby a prisoner would intentionally run into the electrically charged barbed-wire fence surrounding the camp. With no hope of the war ending before they slowly starved to death, many prisoners gave up the will to live. For Frankl, clinging to images of his wife is what kept him

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¹ Mark Twain, *My Autobiography: "Chapters" from the North American Review* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999), 29.

from doing the same. Many mornings while marching to the day's worksite in bone-chilling temperatures, he'd engage in imaginary conversations with his wife. He'd ask her questions, and she'd answer. "In my mind I took bus rides, unlocked the front door of my apartment, answered the telephone, switched on the lights."² Imagining such everyday scenes took on new meaning for Frankl. They offered a reason to live, a refuge from the cruelty and spiritual poverty of the death camp.

Frankl believes that finding meaning is man's greatest motivation.

Frankl's experiences at Auschwitz impacted him significantly, and after the war he developed an existential psychotherapeutic model called *logotherapy*. Its central focus is man's desire to find meaning.³ Although less utilized in the United States, logotherapy is still widely practiced in many parts of the world, particularly Europe and South America. Clearly it resonates with people. In fact, Jimmy Fallon, the popular TV host of NBC's *Tonight Show*, recently shared on his show that he read Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, while recovering from surgery. Holding up the book to the camera, he described how it greatly encouraged him by showing him the meaning of *his* life: "I belong on TV... talking to others...and if anyone is suffering at all, I'm here to make you laugh."

Why is it that Frankl's system continues to impact so many lives today? And what can biblical counselors learn from it? How should we critique it? Before delving into these questions, I will summarize Frankl's conceptualization of logotherapy.

What Is Logotherapy?

The term *logotherapy* derives from the translation of the Greek term *logos*, which denotes "meaning."⁴ As a meaning-based therapy, its methodology is future-focused. The goal is to find meaning for the patient to fulfill going forward, because "finding meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man."⁵ Frankl believes that finding meaning is man's greatest motivation, and he stresses

² Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴ It is important to note that Frankl's use of *logos* differs from the one used in Scripture to describe Jesus Christ, as in John 1:1.

⁵ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 99.

man's responsibility to actualize it. This goal makes logotherapy less retrospective and less introspective than psychoanalysis.⁶ It is also much less concerned with techniques for symptom alteration than the psychotherapies popular in the U.S.

In logotherapy, meaning is unique for each person and can change over time. Even so, Frankl identifies three sources where people commonly find meaning:

1. work and achievement;
2. love and relationships; and
3. the attitude one takes toward unavoidable suffering.

The logotherapist's job is to help people discover a meaning for their lives in one or more of these three areas.

Finding meaning enables a person to say "yes to life," even in the face of great difficulties. Frankl identifies these difficulties also as a triad: the "tragic triad" of pain, guilt, and death. People who are searching for meaning may come for counseling because their struggle with one aspect of the tragic triad has unsettled them. Frankl would use people's present difficulty to help them find future meaning in either work, relationships or their attitude toward suffering.

The goal then is to develop what Frankl called "tragic optimism" in the face of pain, guilt, and death. This positive view is rooted in the belief that there is potential meaning to be found even in the most miserable of circumstances. "What matters," noted Frankl, "is to make the best of any given situation."⁷ To make the best of pain is to "transform a personal tragedy into a triumph" by facing it with dignity and honor. "In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning."⁸ To make the best of guilt is to welcome it as an opportunity to change for the better by making different choices in the future. To make the best of death is to embrace the challenge it poses and to make the most out of every moment of our lives.

To gain a better understanding of how logotherapy works, let's look at three of Frankl's case studies.

Logotherapy Case Studies

Consider the different ways Frankl helped his patients. Though each person was facing an aspect of the tragic triad, he guided them to discover one or more potential sources of meaning by applying logotherapy.

Facing pain. A mother was suicidal after one of her sons died at age eleven, leaving her with one remaining son who was paralyzed since birth. Grief stricken,

⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁷ Ibid., 137.

⁸ Ibid., 113.

the mother tried to convince the disabled son to commit suicide with her. He refused. "For him, life had remained meaningful."⁹ To help the mother find meaning, Frankl oriented her attention toward the future. He showed her how caring for her disabled son spared him a life of institutionalized care. The woman burst into tears. "I have made a fuller life possible for him... I can look back peacefully on my life for my life was full of meaning, and I have tried hard to fulfill it."¹⁰

There are ways we can be stimulated by Frankl's model, even though we would not replicate its core elements due to our scriptural convictions.

Facing guilt. Speaking to a group of prisoners at San Quentin Prison in California, Frankl said, "You are human beings like me, and as such you were free to commit a crime, to become guilty. Now, however, you are responsible for overcoming guilt by rising above it, by growing beyond yourselves, by changing for the better." Years later, Frankl received a letter from one of the prisoners showing how he had risen above his guilt. He shared that following his release from prison, he started a logotherapy group for ex-felons. "We are twenty-seven strong and newer ones are staying out of prison."¹¹ By helping each group member identify what gave his life meaning, this man believed logotherapy was the reason all but one were able to stay out of prison.

Facing death. A rabbi who had lost his wife and children in the concentration camps despaired further when he realized his second wife was sterile. The rabbi believed that because his children died as innocent martyrs, they were given the highest place in heaven. He, a sinful man, could never expect to join them because he believed that he needed a son of his own to say Kaddish¹² for him upon his death. Frankl offered potential meaning by appealing to the man's belief system. "Is it not conceivable, Rabbi, that precisely this was the meaning of you surviving your children: that you may be purified through these years of suffering, so that you, too, though not innocent like your children, may *become* worthy of joining them in

⁹ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰ Ibid., 117.

¹¹ Ibid., 149.

¹² Kaddish is a Jewish prayer of praise for God commonly recited at funerals. Sons are required to say Kaddish for eleven months after the death of a parent, in part to increase the merit of the deceased parent in the eyes of God.

Heaven?"¹³ The perspective that Frankl offered not only made meaning out of this man's suffering, but also gave him the future hope of reuniting with his children.

According to Frankl, these people found relief through the new point of view he opened up to them. All were able to move forward as they found meaning in achievement, or love, or a positive attitude toward suffering—or some combination of these. But this raises several questions. Is the hope Frankl offered his patients of lasting value? Is any source of meaning fair game as long as it instills feelings of hope for the patient in the here and now? How should Christians think about logotherapy as a model of care?

Evaluating Logotherapy: What's Useful and What's Not

Frankl was an excellent observer of human behavior. Though he was not a Christian, his resultant theory comports with certain aspects of biblical truth. There are ways we can be stimulated by his model, even though we would not replicate its core elements due to our scriptural convictions. Let's explore what we can take away from Frankl's model and what we must leave behind.

How logotherapy is useful. Consider some of the ways logotherapy maps onto biblical realities.

- It acknowledges a question that is on all people's hearts: What is the meaning of my life?
- It observes a longing of the human heart: I want to find meaning, identity and purpose.
- It validates our desire to find meaning in our pain and suffering.
- It recognizes that meaning can be an issue of life or death by passionately acknowledging that the pain of hopelessness is deep and visceral.
- It affirms the dignity of man. Every person is unique and has value. The totality of our being is not merely physical, but also spiritual, and we possess the capacity and freedom to respond to our environment rather than simply being subject to it.
- It seeks to offer practical help to those who struggle with meaninglessness.

We can also affirm other aspects of Frankl's work, including the thoughtful summary he devised for helping us think through areas of human suffering (i.e., the tragic triad of pain, guilt and death). In addition, he correctly recognized that there is meaning to be found in honest work, loving relationships, and learning how to suffer well. Despite these strengths, the scope and depth of Frankl's help is limited and cannot have everlasting value in the lives of those he seeks to help.

¹³ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 120.

How logotherapy is limited. As with any secular model, the underlying presuppositions of Frankl's model are inherently flawed, and his solutions to human suffering do not go deep enough. Consider these limitations:

- *Frankl's willingness to work with any patient's faith commitment.* Though Frankl leaves the door open to the possibility that some higher power may exist to explain "ultimate meaning" in human suffering, he considers anyone's definition of higher power as equally valid for therapeutic purposes. But if there is, in fact, one true and living God, then attempts to garner power from a source or reason other than the true God is ultimately *hebel*, the Hebrew word for "vanity." Finding meaning apart from God is altogether futile.
- *Frankl's view that man is self-determining.* Frankl believes each person has "the option for what, to what, or to whom he understands himself to be responsible."¹⁴ Failing to understand human responsibility before God, truth is relative and individualized based on one's experience.
- *Frankl's belief in man's decency.* "There are two races of men in this world, but only these two—the 'race' of the decent man and the 'race' of the indecent man."¹⁵ Frankl's belief that man is either "saint or swine" denies the biblical reality of the human condition. The nature of man is to rebel against God. The decent may rebel and the indecent may repent and believe, as in Jesus' parable of the decent Pharisee and the indecent tax collector (Luke 18:9–14).
- *Frankl's certainty that people can effectively deal with their own guilt.* In his speech to the San Quentin prisoners, Frankl said that man can "rise above his guilt" by choosing to become a better version of himself and by acting on his freedom to behave better in the future. While Frankl is able to partially recognize man's guilt, he offers an idea that surely sounds good to its hearers but that is wholly ineffectual in reality. Only God offers a true solution to our guilt.

I am struck by Frankl's passionate desire to share with others what he learned from his own unimaginable suffering at the hands of wicked men. However, any system that erases God and elevates us by denying our sinful nature ignores the necessity of the cross. It cannot offer lasting meaning. True hope is found in the biblical Logos, Jesus, who meets man's most fundamental need and not his perceived need for meaning. Jesus meets man's deeper need to be ransomed and rescued.

¹⁴ Ibid., 109–110.

¹⁵ Ibid., 86.

As Christians, we can offer sufferers something far better. We offer them a person, the One who is well acquainted with grief, guilt and death. Christ corrects and informs our distorted understanding of where true meaning is found. He teaches us that meaning cannot be found in anything under the sun. Though people long to find meaning in their work, relationships and suffering, it is only when we are in Christ that we will be able to answer the question: Why am I here? We find meaning in the context of work, relationships and suffering as we live vitally connected to our God and Savior.

Christ corrects and informs our distorted understanding of where true meaning is found.

Consider how Scripture addresses logotherapy's three sources for meaning:

- *Work.* God calls us to subdue and have dominion over his creation (Gen 1:28). Moreover, we are created to do good works (Eph 2:10) in worship of him.
- *Relationships.* Because we are created in the image of God, we are designed to be in relationship with him and to reflect that intimate union in our relationships with others. We are called to imitate God's selfless love toward us by serving one another (Matt 20:28).
- *Suffering.* God uses suffering to expose our hearts (Ps 119:67–71), to see our need for him, and to conform us into his image (Isa 48:10; Rom 8:28–29).

Only when we understand meaning in *light of the Son* will we experience lasting joy in *life under the sun*.

Can Logotherapy Be Useful to Biblical Counselors?

In a sense, yes—logotherapy can be useful. In a deep way, no. God often gives certain insights to secular people that can sharpen our counseling. The call to pay attention to where people look to find meaning is one of those insights. Let's revisit each of Frankl's three case studies. We will look at both what Frankl did that was helpful, and how biblical counselors are able to go deeper by pointing each person to a fuller and more lasting meaning.

Facing pain: the case of the suicidal mother. Frankl helped this woman view her future in a new way. He effectively located a reason for her to live and not commit suicide. He began to move her through the grieving process by directing her focus from the pain of the present to the future meaning found in the care

of her disabled son. He creatively helped her visualize what her son's life would be like in two scenarios: one with her in it and one without her in it. Frankl made her feel understood, needed, and loved. By meeting her immediate need for meaning, Frankl helped her choose life. But what happens if a day should come when she can no longer care for her son? Or what if she outlives him, or becomes too ill to offer care, or he rejects her because of some unforeseen conflict that erupts between them? Would her life again collapse into meaninglessness?

As Christians, we agree that motherhood is a high calling by God—one that offers legitimate meaning in service to her son. However, we would not serve her well if we did not connect her with the source of *all* meaning—the author of life who blessed her with the gift of motherhood. We help her see that motherhood is meant to point her to her heavenly Father—*her eternal caretaker*—who tenderly and lovingly meets her every need. His care of her will never end, even if her care for her son does end. Motherhood is a practical way for her to enjoy and adore Christ, not to satisfy her desire to feel needed. God warns that such desires can serve as a snare if elevated as an object of worship.

We would help her see that her identity—the essence of who she is—cannot be found in anything tied to this world, no matter how noble. Regardless of which meaning source she chooses, it is subject to change. Meaning is transitory, based on one's circumstances. Ecclesiastes describes this as a chasing after wind (Eccl 1:14, 17; 2:11). Lasting identity must be firmly planted in the Lord who is her rock (Ps 18:2) rather than the shifting sands of earthly treasures.

Facing guilt: the case of the San Quentin prisoners. Frankl's system achieved a measure of success for some of the prisoners at San Quentin. All but one of the twenty-seven ex-prisoners attending the logotherapy group stayed out of prison. Elements of Frankl's system appear to have helped the prisoners. But which ones and why?

First of all, Frankl treated them with dignity and respect. He related to them: "You are human beings like me." They likely felt accepted and not shamed. He wisely counseled them to take full responsibility for their actions—and not blame their wrongdoing on society, their upbringing, or any biological, psychological, and/or sociological factor. To do otherwise, he said, would be tantamount to explaining away their guilt, as if each person is "a machine to be repaired"¹⁶ rather than an individual who is free to choose his or her actions.

Frankl sees the dignity, freedom and responsibility of man, but his inaccurate view of guilt and hope has consequences. Guilt equates to feelings of remorse, despair and hopelessness that stem from knowing one has done wrong in the

¹⁶ Ibid., 149.

past. But the new hopefulness these prisoners reported gaining from logotherapy was rooted in the idea that future good works can make up for, or assuage, the guilt of past actions. When Frankl tells the prisoners, "You are responsible for overcoming your guilt by rising above it," he is promoting a classic humanistic belief. As fallen people, we crave self-empowerment. We want to solve our own problems without the help of God. The self-help genre and the "I can do anything" mindset are *hebel*—vanity. Only God can offer a deep solution for man's guilt because our guilt is before God. Although Frankl rightly asserts that the prisoner's guilt cannot be explained by seeing him as a machine broken by outside influences, the prisoner is nonetheless broken—*spiritually broken*. He needs restoration, to be made whole, by the saving work of Christ.

Facing death: the case of the grief-stricken rabbi. Frankl sought to offer compassion and understanding as he listened well to the rabbi's deep pain of loss. Frankl asked good questions. He worked hard to know the rabbi well. He saw the importance of taking into account this rabbi's belief system as an orthodox Jew, knowing that it would have important implications for how he responded to his present struggle. Yet this very premise is troubling. Frankl states unequivocally that logotherapy is open to working with anyone's belief system, thereby becoming a means to an end—a false one.

While Frankl seeks to help this man grieve his losses, his understanding of what it means to suffer well is in direct opposition to ours who know the risen Christ. "When a patient stands on the firm ground of religious belief, there can be no objection to making use of the therapeutic effect of his religious convictions and thereby drawing on his religious resources."¹⁷ As an orthodox Jew, Frankl knew this man's despair stemmed from his belief that, in effect, he had no son to pray him into heaven. Frankl then set out to convince the rabbi that his tears from grieving could earn him merit with God, thereby improving his chances to join his children in heaven. To support this, Frankl quoted Psalm 56:8: "Thou has kept count of my tossings; put thou my tears in thy bottle! Are they not in thy book?" Frankl took this Scripture out of context, but this would be of no consequence to him. It achieved the goals of his counseling—to offer this man relief from despair and a way to suffer well. Frankl's "anything goes" methodology is troublesome at best.

We would show this rabbi how the Messiah offers the true answer to his fears about eternity. Through Christ, he can have assurance of salvation and not rely on the wishful (and false) hope Frankl offers. For no man can have enough sons, who can say enough Kaddish, that will earn him enough merit in the eyes of a

¹⁷ Ibid., 119.

just and holy God. Only the merit of Christ's sacrifice, God's Son, will suffice.

This same Savior also offers meaning to the rabbi's suffering. God can actually use it for his good here on earth. For Christians, suffering is a way to identify with Christ as our Suffering Servant, the Man of Sorrows. He uses it to increase our awareness and need of him (Ps 68:19), to refine, strengthen and perfect us to keep us from falling (Ps 66:8–9; Heb 2:10), and to draw us into a deeper relationship with him (2 Cor 4:16–18).

God offers a better solution to each of Frankl's three case studies. He offers them a relationship, not a self-generated system. His divine grace sets their affections on a new trajectory through repentance and faith. He offers them an eternal perspective, one in which the cross mercifully sheds new light on existing struggles. And as they seek first to covenant with God, meaning and purpose will be added to them (Matt 6:33).

The End of the Matter

Mark Twain, Viktor Frankl and the Preacher in Ecclesiastes have much in common. They lived in very different times and had very different life experiences, but all three described many of the same realities of living in a world corrupted by evil. All three acknowledged the brevity and futility of life. Each shared a yearning to find meaning, a way to make sense of the pain and suffering of this world. Yet, as each one neared the end of his life, each arrived at a different conclusion to the question of meaning. Mark Twain deemed that the world was devoid of all hope and meaning. Frankl said there is meaning to be realized, but it is self-generated. Only the Preacher offers a complete answer that goes deep enough and lasts long enough. "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl 12:13). This will withstand any tragedy that besets us because the true Logos never wavers, never sleeps, never leaves and never forsakes.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue
Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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