

# Session 3

## MEANING



*This guide—for individuals or groups—is designed to provide space to reflect on the experience of the pandemic and what comes next.*

*The exercises below invite personal reflection and discussion with others. The linked videos available on [conversatio.org](https://www.conversatio.org) provide instances of other Christians wrestling with the nature of this time. They can be used to stimulate thought during a small group session or in advance.*

The 1991 movie *City Slickers* explains the meaning of life, kind of. A tough old cowboy named Curly begins the conversation,

Curly: "Do you know what the secret of life is?" [points index finger skyward] "This."

Mitch: "Your finger?"

Curly: "One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that, and the rest don't mean [anything]."

Mitch: "But, what is the 'one thing?'"

Unfortunately, Curly died before he gave Mitch, or us, the answer.

This paragraph will explain the meaning of life in 200 words. Are you laughing? Me too. But, we all *need* the answer. We all lean forward in our seats, just in case Curly knows the one thing.

At least one book in the Bible takes a more scientific approach. The writer of Ecclesiastes, explored a wide variety of potential answers to the question "What gives life meaning?" He set out with a list of possibilities that sounds just like the list we would come up with if we tried. He tried each one and discarded it. The book begins with a preview of his conclusion, "*Everything is meaningless,*" says the Teacher, "*completely meaningless!*" (Ecclesiastes 1:2 NLT)

Yet, instinctively, we know there *is* such a thing as a meaningful life. Deep within we know there *is* a greater purpose. The disruptions of 2020 and 2021 stripped away many of the things that once provided illusions of meaning, and their loss showed us that they could not carry the weight of being our "one thing." Now we have an opportunity. We can refocus ourselves on the one thing.

**Watch Alexis Abernethy and Kelly Kopic discuss “Meaning”**

**<https://conversatio.org/classroom/session-3-meaning/>**

*This video is an optional resource, a minimally edited recording of a conversation between Alexis Abernethy and Kelly Kopic, moderated by Steve Porter. If you are using this guide with a group, you might choose to view it as a group or watch it individually, in preparation for your time together.*

### **Visio Divina**

*The painting in this guide is another optional resource. Visual art can provide a window through which we can see things differently. Take some time to look curiously at the painting. What do you notice? What might God be saying to you about re-emerging through this masterpiece?*



## Finding My Breath

The onset of the pandemic meant that the ground on which I had stood was shaking and shifting.

I experienced this shift and disorientation both personally and professionally. The pandemic challenged my sense of coherence about the world. What would it mean for me to not visit my 91-year old mother in assisted living? Would I see her again? What would it mean for me, a relationally oriented professor, to teach group therapy on Zoom? My sense of mattering, my value to others, was challenged.

I had to ***sit*** in the meaninglessness, the pain, the angst in a way that I have never felt before. I ***shared*** my disorientation with my students, my friends, my family, and my community. We are finding a ***new way forward***. I joined the protests for honoring black lives. I felt a deeper call to serve in my community to help address the racial inequities. I have become more resolute about ***reflecting God's love, justice, and mercy*** in my life.

Alexis Abernethy

## Exercise 1: Reflect Individually

*Take about 10 minutes to reflect. If you are participating in a group using this study, this exercise can be completed in preparation for a group meeting or, if you prefer, as a brief part of your meeting.*

**Read Psalm 23 slowly.**

The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need.

He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams.

He renews my strength.

He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley,

I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.

Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.

You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies.

You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings.

Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life,  
and I will live in the house of the Lord forever. (NLT)

**Do you sense that God is near?** Can you easily embrace the words, “I have all that I need,” “he guides me,” and “you are close beside me?” If so, enjoy slowing down to be with God. Express your gratitude by singing a song or writing a letter to God.

**Do you feel God’s absence?** Do you feel out of touch with this Psalm except perhaps dark valleys or enemies? Consider reading Psalm 22. Honestly let your emotions spill out. Vigorous exercise or writing an unedited letter to God helps some people.

## Meaning (How do we regain a coherent sense of the world?)

I would love to see Christians lead the way in demonstrating how God gives our lives meaning: *that meaning, however, is not experienced by leaving this world, but by more fully living within it.*

By learning to be ***more fully present to God and to others***. Such living must be happily done within our creaturely limits, not pretending we should always be doing more. Our problem has not been that we found some meaning in our work, or in our kids, or in our friendships, or Churches. These are all good things.

The problem is that for too many of us, ***we unconsciously tried to invest these good gifts with ultimate meaning, and when that happened, the good gifts turned into cruel masters.***

Gifts meant to point us to the Giver were treated as the ends in themselves. And we were left empty and spent. Rather than slowing down and seeing how all these imperfect things (work, family, our bodies, relationships, etc.) could point to God's faithful presence, we instead tried to find ultimate meaning in the things themselves. Like the kid who loves a chocolate bar but then decides to eat two hundred of them instead of one, what was originally sweet and good became sickening. Work is good. Family is good. Relationships are good. Our bodies are good.

But these are all gifts from God, and only when we are moving at a pace that we see them in this way can we live more fully in the present, knowing ***God is with us and he is investing these good gifts with meaning***, even during the hardest of times.

Kelly M. Kapic



## Exercise 2: Reflect with Others

*If you are using this study individually, read the questions, think about them and journal about the ones that capture your attention. Consider bringing that question up in conversation with a trusted friend or family member.*

### Look Back

Life as we have known it was disrupted in 2020–2021. Many of us lost the stuff that gave our lives meaning, or at least it was mixed up and scrambled, like a jigsaw puzzle thrown into the air.

1. What was disruptive for you?

### Right Now

In the book of Ecclesiastes, “the teacher” explored the same sources of meaning to which people in our time turn, and concluded, “*Everything is meaningless.*” (Ecclesiastes 1:2 NLT) Yet, deep in our souls we know that despair cannot be right, it cannot be the whole story.

2. Where do you turn when life seems to lead to the conclusion that “everything is meaningless”?
3. Do you see a connection between living a meaning-full life and beauty? Some people find focusing on beauty, through nature, music, beautiful words, art, or beauty in other image bearers brings meaning to life.

### Move Forward

Psalm 23 vividly gives us a glimpse of David’s interior life. His was a life with the shepherd, peace and meaning came from loving and following God. God was with him through the darkness, set goodness and mercy about the task of chasing him, and gave him confidence that in the future they would live together forever.

4. How easy or difficult is it for you to find your meaning, as King David did, resting in the provision of our Good Shepherd?
5. How does actively loving others play in making life meaningful for you?
6. Which habits help you hold onto the reality that the Lord is with you even in the valley of the shadow of death?



### Exercise 3: Practice

*“Grand problems require small moves.” -Rob Loane*

*Throughout this study we suggest ways to take small consistent steps in the right direction. Read them. Discern if God is inviting you to take a step.*

#### Listening / Dependence

God is always active. He is always up to something. Wake up 5 minutes early. Begin the day slowly. Thank God for another day. Ask him to go with you through it, and allow you to cooperate with him in his work in your soul and in your part of the world. Read or recite Psalm 23.

#### Gratitude / Beauty

Look for God’s “fingerprints” on your day. Do you see him in an unexpected glimpse of beauty? In the face (masked or unmasked!) of someone you meet? Whisper a thank you to God when you see a “fingerprint.”

*Enjoy God’s kindness as you receive the hug of friend or see their smile. Move your body, not simply to avoid gaining unwanted pounds, but as an opportunity to reconnect with the fact that you are a creature dependent upon the Creator. Even amid the mundane learn to look for beauty, listen to and for God, and lay before him your anxieties and hopes. Avoid multitasking, not simply because researchers tell us that we will be less productive when we live in such a divided fashion, but because living in such a frenetic manner makes it all the more difficult to recognize and respond to God throughout the moments in your day.*

*Meaning is discovered, not by doing more, but by more fully living in the present with and for God.*

Kelly M. Kapic

## **Slowing / Awareness**

Choose one time you tend to multitask and instead do only one thing at a time. Intentionally do it more slowly than you normally would. If you feel restless, let the impulse prompt you to turn your thoughts to God instead, to do whatever you are doing with him.

## **Share the Journey – Spiritual Direction / Soul Friend**

Think of a mature Christian friend who listens well. Set a time to discuss the source of meaning in your life and what you long for. Many people find it helpful to also meet regularly with a spiritual director who has practiced listening to God, listening to others, and discerning what God might be doing.

## **References**

Alexis Abernethy. *Worship that Changes Lives*

Kelly M. Kopic. *You're Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God's Design and Why That's Good News* (Available January 2022)

*Inspired by The Bible Experience*, MP3 CD, 2008

Dallas Willard. *Life without Lack: Living in the Fullness of Psalm 23*

Wendy Wood. *Good Habits, Bad Habits: The Science of Making Positive Changes That Stick*

**Dr Alexis Abernethy** is a Clinical Psychologist and Professor in the School of Psychology & Marriage and Family Therapy at Fuller Theological Seminary. She most recently served as the Chief of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and is currently the Chief Academic Officer at Fuller. She graduated from Howard University with a BS in psychology. She received her MA and PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. She is a Certified Group Psychotherapist and Fellow of the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA). Her primary research interest is the intersection between spirituality and health. She has published articles related to cultural competency, spirituality and health, and group therapy.

**Dr Kelly M. Kopic** is Professor of Theological Studies at Covenant College where he has taught since 2001. With a PhD in Systematic and Historical Theology from King's College University of London, Kopic has written or edited fifteen books, with his new book *You're Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God's Design and Why that's Good News* comes out in January, 2022. His earlier work includes the recent volume *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering*, which won the Christianity Today book of the year award in the area of Theology and Ethics and World Magazine's Short List award for Accessible Theology Book of the year. He also recently completed two volumes with the economist Brian Fikkert called *Becoming Whole: Why the Opposite of Poverty isn't the American Dream* and *A Field Guide to Becoming Whole: Principles for Poverty Alleviation Ministries*. In 2014 Kopic received a Templeton Grant to be part of The Center for Christian Thought studying the topic of Psychology and Spiritual Formation. Currently he serves as part of the Core Research Teams for the Templeton funded studies called "Project Amazing Grace" and "Christian Meaning-Making, Suffering and the Flourishing Life."

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