

Introduction: The Good Life in God's Story

Everyone wants to live a good life, because no one wants to reach the end of life only to realise that they have wasted it.

In that sense, we're all like a central character in Stephen Spielberg's blockbuster movie *Saving Private Ryan*. Loosely based on true events, it tells the story of a team of soldiers sent on a mission to rescue the young private James Ryan – the one brother, out of five, to survive the Normandy D-Day landings.

The film opens and closes with the scene of elderly James Ryan hobbling into a Normandy cemetery, accompanied by his family. Stretched out before them, as far as the eye could see, were thousands of white crosses planted in a sea of green grass. Each cross marked the grave of a fallen soldier who had sacrificed their life to save others. Standing before one gravestone,

he fell down on his knees and broke out in tears. His family rushed to his side, but there was only one thing that could bring him any comfort. He sought the reassurance: "Tell me I've lived a good life. Tell me I'm a good man."

Like James Ryan, we all want to live a good life. But that raises some important questions.

WHO DEFINES THE GOOD LIFE?

There are many competing stories of the good life in the world.

If we listen to the ancients, Plato says, "Get wisdom"; Aristotle says, "Get virtue"; Epicurus says, "Get happiness"; or Zeno says, "Get stoical."

If we listen to the moderns, the celebrities say, "Get rich and famous"; the playboys say, "Get laid"; the eco-friendly say, "Go vegan"; or the weightlifters say, "Get fit."

The bookshops are filled with shelves of books on different lifestyle packages; the podcast charts are dominated by the likes of Joe Rogan with his rotating cast of guests discussing alternative lifestyles; the social media platforms are bursting with life hacks and advice from influencers.

Faced with this smorgasbord of options, how can we know which version of the good life to choose?

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre famously quipped that we cannot answer the question “What am I to do?” without first understanding “What story do I find myself a part of?”¹ The decision to kiss or kill the monster depends on whether you’re starring in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* or Ridley Scott’s *Alien*.

If you’re a Christian, then you’re not the author of your own story. God is creator of this world, the giver of life and the author of our stories. Therefore, the good life involves finding our place in God’s story. The Bible tells us that the good life involves God’s life being shared with us (John 17:3) and God’s love being shared through us (John 13:34-35) – in union with God’s Son, Jesus Christ.²

In this book we’ll be looking at God’s blueprint for the good life contained in the Ten Commandments. In fact, across the generations and traditions, young Christians have been educated in the Apostles’ Creed for doctrine,

1 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Bloomsbury, 2007), 250.

2 For an introduction to the significance of union with Christ in the Christian life, see: Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (David C. Cook, 2016).

the Lord's Prayer for spirituality, and the Ten Commandments for ethical living.

If the Ten Commandments are the blueprints for the good life, then Jesus is the finished product. In Jesus we see God's perfectly obedient Son, living life as God intended it to be.

In a world where Christians are increasingly misconstrued as "the bad guys,"³ it's all the more essential that we live the good life described in the Ten Commandments and exemplified in the person of Jesus Christ.

WHAT MOTIVATES THE GOOD LIFE?

Going back to *Saving Private Ryan*, the movie climaxes with the heroic rescue of private James Ryan. Though, tragically, it came at the great cost of Captain Miller's life. Lying and dying in the street, Miller whispered in Ryan's ear, "Earn this." For the rest of his life Ryan was haunted by those dying words. That's why, at the end of his days, Ryan returned to his saviour's final resting place, seeking to prove that he had lived a good enough life to have deserved such a sacrifice.

3 Stephen McAlpine, *Being the Bad Guys: How to Live for Jesus in a World that Says You Shouldn't* (Good Book Company, 2021).

Like Ryan, many people live their lives trying to prove to themselves and others that they're worthy. Such a lifestyle is not a blessing but a curse. Yet that is not the way the good life works with Jesus. The gospel offers to liberate us from the performance trap, labouring under the misunderstanding that God's love depends on what kind of day we're having – whether we've read the Bible, said our prayers, or done a good deed for someone else.

The Christian life is not about working towards a wage ("earn this"); it is about receiving a gift ("enjoy this"). It is not motivated by what we can do for God, but what God in Christ has already done for us. If a child on Christmas morning opened their presents, itemised the cost of the gifts, and wrote an "I.O.U." note to their parents, that would show that they have misunderstood the purpose of a gift and the generosity of the giver. Likewise, the good life is the Christian's way of saying "Thank You" to God for His generous and gracious love.

Nevertheless, that does not mean there is nothing left for us to do in this life in this world until we get to heaven. That's why Dallas Willard once said that "grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is

an attitude. Effort is an action.”⁴ It is God’s intention for the seed of the gospel to flower and bear fruit in a good life of action:

“Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matt. 5:16 NIV)

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Eph. 2:10)

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” (Titus 2:11-13)

“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Pet. 2:12 NIV)

HOW DO WE PRODUCE THE GOOD LIFE?

The good life is not self-propelled, it is Spirit-empowered.

4 Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (Monarch, 2006), 61.