

## **The Good Life**

### **Book Discussion Guide**

#### **Chapter 1: The Unavoidable Question**

In the past, how have you defined the “good life”? What influences in your life led you to define it this way? Has your definition changed over the years?

In the opening story of Private James Ryan’s visit to the military cemetery at Normandy, what was the question that “dogged his whole life”?

What circumstances do you think cause people to ask the question, “Have I lived a good life?” Have you ever asked yourself a similar question? If so, describe the circumstances and how you answered it.

#### **Chapter 2: A Shattered Life**

If you’re old enough to remember the Daniel Ellsberg case and the Watergate scandal, what memories do you have? If you don’t remember them personally, what have you heard about them?

Did Charles Colson’s account in this chapter give you any new insights into those incidents?

Colson says that “the most shattering thing about prison was the thought that I would never again do anything significant with my life” (page 22). Have you ever felt that way?

#### **Chapter 3: The Great Paradoxes**

Colson says, “Prison turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me” (page 23). Do you understand how he could feel this way?

Have you ever seen any of the following paradoxes at work in your own life? If so, explain.

- Out of suffering and defeat often comes victory.
- We have to lose our lives to save them.
- Freedom lies not in conforming to the world’s expectations or even realizing what we take to be our deepest wishes; it lies in following the call on our lives.
- We have to understand the evil in ourselves before we can truly embrace the good in life.

Why does Charles Colson think these paradoxes are necessary to finding and living the good life?

#### **Chapter 4: A Nice Party with a Lot of Nice People**

How does the story of Dennis Kozlowski illustrate a misguided search for the good life?

Is it wrong to desire money and fame? Where would you draw the line between “enough” and “too much”?

Do you agree that Dennis Kozlowski yearned to become godlike? Can you identify with him at all?

### **Chapter 5: Shopping for the Holy Grail**

What are some of the ways in which American society has changed from a producing economy to a consuming economy? Have you seen evidence of these changes in your own lifetime, or between your parents’ generation and your own?

Do you honestly believe that money and possessions bring happiness? Why or why not? How can striving for these things prove self-defeating, once the need for basic comforts, such as food, clothing, and shelter is satisfied?

Explain how sudden wealth can cause a downward spiral (for example, in the lives of many lottery winners).

### **Chapter 6: Laughing at Death**

What stood out to you most about the story of Nien Cheng?

What was the source of Nien Cheng’s strength?

Compare and contrast the lives and character of Nien Cheng and Dennis Kozlowski. Who do you think was the happier person?

Would you say that Nien Cheng lived a good life? Explain.

### **Chapter 7: More Important than Life Itself?**

Discuss Dorothy Sayers’ statement that Christianity “affirms . . . that perfection is attained through the active and positive effort to wrench a real good out of a real evil” (page 75). Do you agree with Charles Colson that this is the essence of Christian redemption?

Explain Colson’s statement that “the good life is realized in our ability to hold fast to the truth and our human dignity that rests upon it” (page 76). Can you think of some examples, in addition to the life of Nien Cheng, where you’ve seen this principle put into practice?

How did Colson's trip to Peru with his children show them examples of the good life? If you have children, have you ever wanted to give them a similar experience?

What is the nature of human dignity? Is it earned, or is it inborn?

### **Chapter 8: A Life of Significance**

What does it mean to live a life of significance?

How do we sometimes confuse power, fame, or other qualities with significance?

Why do you think so many people view the ideal life as one of leisure? How can this idea be a trap?

What's good about work? How does work contribute to the good life?

### **Chapter 9: A Silent Good-Bye**

How did John Ehrlichman's denial of the reality of evil contribute to his downfall in the Watergate scandal?

How did Ehrlichman's experiences compare to Colson's in the years following Watergate? What do you think accounts for the difference?

Discuss this statement: "When we try to create our own lives and our own realities, we put ourselves at disadvantaged odds with reality itself" (page 101). What are some ways in which our culture encourages us to create our own realities?

### **Chapter 10: My Happiness, Right or Wrong**

What makes the idea of personal autonomy, or limitless freedom, attractive to so many people? What are the problems with this way of thinking?

Do you think the value of "choice" is overrated in our society? Why or why not?

Explain how placing personal happiness as the highest goal leads to empty lives, such as those portrayed in *The Hours*.

Explain how philosophies such as existentialism and New Age thinking led to the current crisis of meaning in many people's lives. How can we start to recover meaning in our lives?

### **Chapter 11: Whose Life Is It?**

Why is it sometimes hard for us to have to depend on others? or to have others depend on us?

Have you seen evidence in your own life that we are “biologically primed” to find meaning through attachment to others?

Are you now, or have you ever been, part of a strong community? If so, what was it like?

What is the difference between genuine patriotism and mindless nationalism?

### **Chapter 12: A Very Rich Man**

Do you recognize any aspects of yourself, or someone you know, in the fictional story of Warren Schmidt?

Rich, retired, free . . . was Warren leading the good life? Explain your answer.

What have you done to improve the world?

What could you do, today or tomorrow, that could make a difference in the life of someone else?

### **Chapter 13: Living Legacies**

How does pure and sacrificial giving play into the good life?

Has anyone ever gone out of their way to give sacrificially to you? If so, how did it make you feel?

Discuss the following statement by Charles Colson: “When we give to others, we discover this enduring truth: In giving we often receive more than we give” (page 138).

Which meant more to Colson, the Templeton Prize or the letter from the Russian prisoners? Why?

### **Chapter 14: Greater Love Hath No Man Than This**

How was the Chungkai prison camp transformed from a barbaric place into a real community?

How did acts of self-sacrifice on the part of the prisoners succeed where the “survival of the fittest” mentality failed?

What does it mean to say that a person must lose his or her life in order to save it?

### **Chapter 15: My Life for Yours—But to What End?**

Why is giving one’s life for another, while admirable, *not* the ultimate goal?

Why is it important to seek truth? Is there even such a thing as subjective truth?

Discuss the danger of dividing our lives into separate compartments.

### **Chapter 16: Journey into Illusion**

What were some of the influences that shaped the man Albert Speer came to be?

How did Speer justify his support of Adolf Hitler?

For all his spiritual searching during the last years of his life, what did Speer lack? Why couldn't he discern Hitler's evil?

### **Chapter 17: Living Within the Truth**

What were some of the early warning signs that all was not well in the Nixon White House?

Discuss Colson's statement, "When you have to make continual efforts to avoid knowing what's going on, you are in big trouble" (page 176). What's wrong with saying, "Don't tell me; I don't want to know"?

What elements did Colson's story have in common with Albert Speer's?

Colson describes how the big lie of Communism was perpetuated by the little lies of everyday people. What do you think of his statement, "We are all greengrocers who have placed in our shop windows placards declaring, 'There is no such thing as truth!' 'Tolerance is god!' 'Diversity must rule at all costs!'"? (page 185)

### **Chapter 18: Can We Know the Truth?**

What factors led to the denial of absolute truth in postmodern cultures?

Why is New Age the fastest growing religion? How does it differ from Christianity?

How does today's definition of the word *tolerance* differ from the historic use of the word? How is this change in definition affecting our right of free speech?

### **Chapter 19: What is Life Worth?**

Describe the philosophy of Peter Singer. What does Singer think should be done about severely disabled people like Charles Colson's grandson Max?

How is utilitarianism affecting our society's view of unborn children? of stem cell research? Where do we draw the line?

Why did Harriet McBryde Johnson lose the debate with Peter Singer? Why is “quality of life” a poor standard for why someone should be kept alive or not?

### **Chapter 20: God’s ID**

How did a simple spider give hope to Nien Cheng in prison? How did Nien’s experience contrast with Peter Singer’s philosophy?

What is intelligent design, and why are most public schools so reluctant to teach about it?

Name and discuss the scientific challenges to Darwinism.

Why is the question of where life came from so important? How does it affect the way we live our lives?

### **Chapter 21: Morality and the Natural Order**

Discuss what Stephen Covey calls the “Law of the Farm” and how it affects human behavior. What sorts of problems arise when we don’t follow the natural order?

What thoughts did Randy Thomas’s story bring to your mind? Did this chapter give you any new insights into the homosexual lifestyle?

What steps can we take to support God’s natural order in our society?

### **Chapter 22: The Gift of Knowing Right from Wrong**

What does the moral law have in common with the laws of science and nature? What sets it apart?

Do you agree with C. S. Lewis that all societies are governed by the same moral principles? Why or why not?

What makes our culture so reluctant to accept the idea of absolute moral truth?

What is the role of guilt in human life? Is guilt a good thing or a damaging thing (as many psychologists assert)?

### **Chapter 23: Beauty: The Sign of God’s Care**

Discuss the differences between Olivier Messiaen’s composition and that of John Cage. If you had been at either of these concerts, what do you think would have been your reaction?

Describe the foundational difference in worldview between Zen Buddhism and Christianity. How does a world without order translate into a world without beauty?

Do you agree with Colson that beauty is an extension of creation, and that there is a strong connection between beauty and truth? Explain.

What are some simple things we can do to restore beauty to the arts and to the world?

### **Chapter 24: Written on the Heart**

How do beauty and gratitude draw us closer to God?

Have you ever experienced a sudden rush of gratitude the way Charles Colson did on the sailing trip with his son Chris? If so, what did it feel like?

Do you agree that our society negates and trivializes beauty and gratitude? If so, give some examples.

### **Chapter 25: Postmodernists in Recovery**

List some of the ways that postmodernism contradicts itself.

Why does Colson say that we are *all* postmodernists in recovery?

What did you think of the story of Wallace Stevens? How did his postmodernist thinking affect the quality of his life? How did he finally find peace?

### **Chapter 26: Hope, Freedom, and Happiness**

What did the differences between a Hindu worldview and a Christian worldview mean for the inmates of the Trivandrum prison?

What does Christianity offer believers that other religions fail to offer?

Compare the lives of Hugh Hefner and Jack Eckerd. How do you think Hefner defined freedom and happiness? How did Eckerd define them? Whose definitions most closely match yours?

### **Chapter 27: The Bad News**

Discuss your reactions to the story of Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Do you agree that she gave her life over to a lie?

Do you think the world might be different today if O'Hair had accepted the truth of Jesus Christ? If so, in what ways?

Have you ever denied what you knew deep down to be the truth? If so, why did you do it, and what was the outcome?

### **Chapter 28: Providence**

Do you agree that we humans “have an innate sense that our lives are governed by something beyond us” (page 319)? Why or why not?

How does believing in a greater governing force contradict the belief in a random universe?

Looking back over your own life so far, can you see any evidence of the hand of Providence at work?

### **Chapter 29: A Good Death**

Review the story of Bill Bright’s life and death. What accounted for Bright’s positive mind-set?

Do you think you could face death with the attitude that Bill Bright displayed in his final years?

How can thinking about our own death help us to have a good life?

### **Chapter 30: Infinite Truth and Love**

In light of what you’ve read in this book, what is the good life?

What did you think of Charles Colson’s account of his conversion to Christianity?

Have you given your life over to Jesus Christ? If not, what do you think is holding you back?