

the
GOOD
LIFE
DISCUSSION GUIDE

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COLSON

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The Good Life Discussion Guide

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INTRODUCTION

I INVITE YOU TO JOIN a conversation about the good life, about how the world really works, and about what we need to live well. All that is required is that you bring your mind, heart, and life experiences with you.

The Good Life and this discussion guide are for anyone who wants to discover the greater truths about life. We'll be exploring the deep questions that weave in and out of our lives: What makes life worth living? Where did I come from? Why am I here? What gives my life meaning? How we answer these questions will directly affect how we will live and how we will die and whether our lives will count for something.

Pascal once said there are only two kinds of people: seekers and nonseekers. This study is for seekers of any kind—young, old, artistic, poor, religious, or those who claim no faith at all.

Anyone who knows about me knows that I'm a Christian. I have strong convictions and can hardly claim to be a neutral observer. But I am a seeker too. My search led me into Christianity, and since then it has driven me to uncover more fully the truth that we are meant to know and live.

As I said in the introduction to *The Good Life*, I'm trying to direct the search without relying on any biblical assumptions. This may unsettle those of you who are Christians, but I think it makes sense simply to follow where human reason and the human imagination lead until we can

follow them no longer. In the end we'll see whether reason and the imagination demand that their scope be enlarged through faith.

The Good Life is a memoir of my life as well as an apologetic. I share some of my successes, failures, and joys, hoping that my life experience may point you to the truth about life. But I also defend what I know to be true about the world and how it works. I believe a worldview must work practically to be legitimate, and I have found that a Christian worldview has the power to give hope and value to every member of the human race.

Recognizing that life stories are important, Harold Fickett and I decided to use stories as a major thread in *The Good Life*. There you will find stories from our own lives, from the lives of people we know, from movies and books, and from people who have shaped history. Thinking and living are bound together: We think in order to know how to live, and we learn what's true through living.

But your stories are just as important. As you meet with your discussion group, add your stories to the mix. Sometimes those stories will not be pretty; other times they will speak of growth and victory. In sharing and hearing each other's stories, we are challenged, inspired, and enriched.

As you share your stories, listen to each other. Respect each other's positions, and ask questions. Commit to being honest about your questions, perspectives, and beliefs. Remember to be humble. Above all, search for the truth.

To help you do that, we've designed this study guide with several elements:

- *This Is Your Life*—asks starter questions for discussion
- *Slice of Life*—shares excerpts of stories from *The Good Life*
- *Life in Paradox*—poses some of the paradoxes that govern the good life
- *Words of Life*—explores stories and passages from the Bible

- *Self-Portrait*—asks questions that help you move forward in your search for truth and articulate your own worldview

Study groups meet with all sorts of schedules: some weekly, others every other week or even monthly. We've tried to accommodate those needs by designing two six-week discussion guides. We hope that your group will be able to go through both discussion guides, all twelve lessons. If not, you can begin with the first six lessons and then decide if you want to continue.

My hope is that as you study *The Good Life*, examine your own life, and participate in your group, you will find some answers to the questions you are asking. I challenge you to test my assertions. Test your own as well. I believe that if you search for the truth, you will find the capital-*T* truth. And when you do, you will find the path that will lead you to the good life, to a life worth living.

Chuck Colson

LESSON ONE

FACING THE UNAVOIDABLE QUESTIONS

What makes life worth living? Why am I here? What's my purpose? Whether we are enjoying our daily routines or facing a crisis, we often think about these questions. *The Good Life* challenges us to engage our minds and explore our struggles so that we can find what really matters.

Are you happy with your life? Do you feel you have found meaning? Do you know what the good life is?

READ AND REVIEW

Chapters 1–3 in *The Good Life*

THIS IS YOUR LIFE

As a group, view the cemetery scene from the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. If that's not possible, read the scene on pages 6–7 of *The Good Life*.

1. Share some initial thoughts about what it means to live the good life.
2. What do you think the purpose of life really is? Discuss your responses.
3. Are any of us worthy of the sacrifices others have made on our behalf? Why do you think we feel the need to be worthy?

SLICE OF LIFE

Read aloud this excerpt from Chuck Colson's reflections on his first day in prison after the Watergate indictment:

On July 8, 1974, my friend Graham Purcell drove me to a dingy Baltimore hotel, where four armed U.S. marshals picked me up and took me to prison. The meeting place had been arranged as a means of avoiding the press, but the media chased us from my home in McLean, Virginia, all the way to Baltimore. After giving my wife, Patty, a final kiss, I was put in the back of an unmarked car and taken to a prison on the army base in Fort Holabird. . . .

Fort Holabird reminded me of a ghost town. The windows of its redbrick buildings and soot-covered, green

wooden shacks were boarded up. Rampant weeds clung to every wall. In the midst of the otherwise deserted base, a nine-foot chain-link fence topped by razor wire surrounded one of the wooden buildings. One thing about the barbed wire surprised me, however. It was tilted outward—as if it was more important to keep people out than to keep the inmates in. . . .

The prison building was a far cry from the regal surroundings of the White House. Paint was peeling from the grimy walls, and steam pipes ran down the long corridor through the center of the building, which was illuminated only by dim lightbulbs dangling every thirty feet. . . .

After I completed the processing, I was turned over to Joe, a swarthy inmate who spoke halting English. He showed me to my room, a nine-by-twelve cubicle tucked under the eaves on the second floor. . . . The temperature in the room was over a hundred degrees. Baltimore was in the grip of the worst heat wave of the year.

As I lay on my bed that night, trying not so much to sleep as to catch my breath in the oppressive heat, I wasn't afraid—at least not physically. I had been in the marines and had lived in just about every kind of circumstance. I'd always been resilient. I wasn't worried about the future or about making a living after prison. I was confident that I could get a good job in business or get my law license back, at least in some jurisdictions. The thought of having to live in these circumstances for the next three years was difficult, of course, but most painful was the separation from my family and my sense of helplessness.

But for me, the most shattering thing about prison was the thought that I would never again do anything significant with my life. I was always a patriot, which is why I volunteered for the marines. I had gone into politics motivated by idealism, believing I could make a difference for my country.

When the president asked me to serve him, I readily gave up a six-figure income (a lot of money in the 1960s) because I thought it was my duty to serve, to make this a better world. Now my own government had thrown me in prison. That cloud would follow me for the rest of my life. I would forever be an ex-convict. I had known the heights of power, helping to shape the policies of the most powerful nation on earth. In the future I wouldn't even be able to vote, let alone go back into politics, which I loved. I could never fulfill my dreams.

The story I had been living had come apart, and I couldn't find the ghost of a theme that might continue. My future seemed imprisoned—for life. True, I had thought of success in material terms—power, money, fame, security. But I had also seen success as doing things that affected how people lived. How could I ever achieve this now? I would always be a marked man, an ex-convict, a disgraced public official.¹

1. Have you ever felt as if your story “came apart,” as if you were “imprisoned” by circumstances? If you are comfortable, share that story with the group.
2. The most shattering thing about prison for Colson was the thought that he would never again do anything significant with his life. Have you ever been in a similar situation? Explain.
3. Colson mentions he gave up a large salary because of the call he felt to serve and make this world better. Why is it that we find

ourselves inherently drawn to such a call? What do you think this indicates about the soul of humanity?

LIFE IN PARADOX

Read aloud these paradoxes:

Out of suffering and defeat often comes victory.²

Prison turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me, which is why, on the *60 Minutes* program marking the twentieth anniversary of Watergate, I told a startled Mike Wallace, “I thank God for Watergate.” Not only did prison radically transform my view of life, but the experience also gave me the one thing I thought I would never have again—an opportunity to serve others in significant ways. In my case that service has been a ministry to prisoners around the world.³

1. Reflect on your own failures and successes. Which experiences do you think have taught you more about life?

2. Colson also points out that suffering doesn't automatically erase our weaknesses. No particular virtue comes from just going through trials. In what ways have you found this to be true?

3. Share a story (from your own life or from the life of someone else) that illustrates how enduring great opposition or suffering can result in strength of character and blessing.

WORDS OF LIFE

The king seemed to have it all. He was on the high road of trade and culture, rubbing elbows with important world leaders. He was touted not only as the wealthiest man of his day but also as the wisest man alive. One would think that he had found the good life, but his inner struggles suggest otherwise. Even though these honest confessions were written centuries ago, King Solomon's thoughts speak for many people in the twenty-first century. **Read aloud** this story:

I said to myself, "Come on, let's try pleasure. Let's look for the 'good things' in life." But I found that this, too, was meaningless. . . . After much thought, I decided to cheer myself with wine. And while still seeking wisdom, I clutched at foolishness. In this way, I tried to experience the only happiness most people find during their brief life in this world.

I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards. I made gardens and parks, filling them with all kinds of fruit trees. I built reservoirs to collect the water to irrigate my many flourishing groves. I bought slaves, both men and women, and others were born into my household. I also owned large herds and flocks, more than any of the kings who had lived in Jerusalem before me. I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces. I hired wonderful singers, both men and women, and had many beautiful concubines. I had everything a man could desire!

So I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me, and my wisdom never failed me. Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere. . . .

What do people really get for all their hard work? I have seen the burden God has placed on us all. Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end.⁴

1. With what part of the king's pursuit can you identify?

2. Have you ever shared his disappointment that when you achieved something you had pursued, it felt disappointing or meaningless? Explain.

3. King Solomon asserts that he even found hard work to be meaningless and unsatisfying. How do you view your work? Does it feel like a drudgery or like a divine duty that has purpose?

4. What aspects of life do you find fulfilling and worthwhile?

SELF-PORTRAIT

1. Blaise Pascal said that everyone is either a seeker or a nonseeker. Which one are you? If you are a seeker, what are you seeking?

2. Do you feel as if you are living the good life? Why or why not?
If you are comfortable, share your responses with the group.

3. After reading chapters 1–3 of *The Good Life*, what questions about your life goals have been raised in your mind?

ADDITIONAL NOTES/QUESTIONS

NOTES

LESSON 1: FACING THE UNAVOIDABLE QUESTIONS

1. Charles Colson with Harold Fickett, *The Good Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2005), 20–22.
2. *The Good Life*, 23.
3. Ibid.
4. Ecclesiastes 2:1-11; 3:9-11.

LESSON 2: IN SEARCH OF THE GOOD LIFE THROUGH MATERIALISM

1. *The Good Life*, 35–36.
2. Ibid., 23.
3. Luke 12:13-21.
4. Matthew 6:19-21.

LESSON 3: AM I MORE THAN WHAT I POSSESS?

1. *The Good Life*, 64.
2. Ibid., 76.
3. Ibid., 74.
4. Genesis 45:1-15; 50:19-20. To read the entire story of Joseph, read Genesis 37–50.

LESSON 4: IN SEARCH OF TRUE HAPPINESS

1. *The Good Life*, 98–100.
2. Ibid., 112.
3. Matthew 19:16-21, NIV.
4. *The Good Life*, 120.

LESSON 5: LIVING BEYOND SELF

1. *The Good Life*, 147–153.
2. Ibid., 138.
3. Luke 10:25-37, NIV.

LESSON 6: SEARCHING FOR THE TRUTH ABOUT LIFE

1. *The Good Life*, 180–182.
2. Ibid., 187.
3. Daniel 3:14-20, 25-28.