

OpenTheo

A Life Worth Living—Even In Sorrow | Miroslav Volf

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The Veritas Forum

PART OF A SPECIAL 6-WEEK SERIES | Does “the good life” mean that everything in your life is good? For the final episode of our first season, we talk with Yale theologian Dr. Miroslav Volf about the “why” of living — when we’re faced with sorrow and suffering, what keeps us going? Miroslav helps us explore the tensions between joy and sorrow, justice and mercy, and invites us to consider how having a “why” to life could change us. Like what you heard? Rate and review us on Apple Podcasts to help more people discover our episodes. And, join the conversation on our Instagram, @veritasforum. You can see our full slate of speakers, learn more about our production team and co-sponsors, and read full show notes at beyondtheforum.org

Transcript

[Music] The first episode of this podcast series on the good life was about the art of dying. And our final episode is our bookend, where we end on a hopeful note. It's about the why of living.

So many of us treat life like a syllabus. We do the assignments and we get an A. But eventually we realize that's not how it works. It may feel like the script of your first 22 years of life was laid out for you.

You started off in kindergarten, then you moved on to first grade. Followed by second, third, fourth, and fifth grades. Next came middle school and then high school, followed by college and possibly grad school.

Throughout those years, you were trained to believe that success is coming. It's just around the corner. So you get a job and you hit your quotas and get promotions and get bonuses.

You're advancing in the world. Success is coming. Then you wake up at 40 and think, "It's here.

It must be." Right? But you look around and realize that every day you're in the world,

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We read the original texts from these philosophers and religions. We read the original texts from these philosophers and religions. We spend time discussing them, trying to understand through a great of asking, question, what is the vision of the good light? When we enter an interfaith dialogue, we often end up in one of two scenarios.

Either we overemphasize the differences between the faiths and focus on critiquing everything we can about traditions we don't agree with. Or we under emphasize their differences and minimize their truth claims by thinking aren't they all the same anyway? But Mirosloff doesn't take either one of those approaches. First, through the comparative study course, students explore the traditions, not just intellectually or academically, but experientially too.

We explore a tradition. We would have a signature practice for, say, slum that might be a prayer, daily prayer. For Judaism, it may be Sabbath observance.

For Christianity, it may be practice of forgiveness or something like that. I invited students when we were talking about Judaism to practice Sabbath for one day. Here's what you do on Sabbath.

Now, let's go and do it. We'll commit ourselves and we're going to get together. After that, and we're going to talk about our experiences.

And then he asked them to consider, even try on the claims of each tradition. So, over the end of a class, I want you, as all, to imaginatively enter into that world and imagine yourself that you're embracing that position and ask yourself, "How would I need to change? What would that philosophy demand of me?" And the goal of this course and all these conversations is for people to ask the big question for themselves. What is the good life? Or why is a life worth living? Amir Isloff's concept of a life worth living focuses on three components.

First, our actions, what we do. What does it mean for life to be lived well? That is to say, "I'm now an agent. I lead once in my life." So, there's this agency dimension.

What does it mean for me to live it, to lead it really well? Second, our circumstances. What happens to us? What does it mean for life to go well? Now, suddenly, I'm no longer an agent. I am affected by things.

What kinds of things need to be the case to affect me in what ways so that I can say that my life is a good life flourishing life? And third, our emotions. How we feel about our actions and our circumstances. And finally, there's something in between acting and being affected, being active and passive.

And those are our emotions. Our emotions combine both what happens to us and what we respond to and what we actually do, our agency. And that's the affective side of life.

This idea that the good life includes both our actions and our circumstances makes sense. But you and I both know that as much as they contribute to the good life, they also threaten it. Our actions and our circumstances aren't always good.

Sometimes we suffer, whether it's because of something we've done or because of something done to us. And I wanted to understand Mearns's why. Why should we keep going in light of suffering? Most great traditions, but certainly Christian faith, which formulates a vision of good life in face of suffering.

Suffering is such a ubiquitous experience for human beings. And at least when it comes to the Christian faith, there are three main responses to suffering. One is an attempt to kind of make sense of it, to explain why it happens, and to see how the suffering may play some role in the life that we lead and lead some kind of a good.

The other response, and I think the second one is much more prevalent in the Bible, is

suffering is here, our task is to eliminate it, eliminate suffering. What did God do when God saw the children of Israel suffering in Egypt? God's heard, God saw, and God came. So it's a very simple line, and that line goes throughout the Bible.

But there is also a third one, which I think is very important and often forgotten. And that is Christian faith provides also resources, how to live with suffering that I can't fully explain, and I cannot eliminate. It's this domain of suffering that is almost inescapable and not able to be domesticated.

And in that, the question becomes then, how do I live in such a way that suffering, which I'm undergoing, does not crush me, so that I can have what I've come to call abundant liveliness, notwithstanding circumstances in which we find ourselves. Now, that's an extraordinary thing, and that's really what saved my father, right? Suddenly, in this hell, he finds the possibility of love. A certain new life has been infused in him, and he's a new man from inside.

Mira's love talks about a joy that can be found even while suffering, a joy in spite of, not just a joy because of. Joy in spite of, he says, is a kind of oppositional joy, a form of resistance that says, even if your circumstances are not going well, even if you're suffering, you can still find joy. It's joy, partly notwithstanding, the suffering that which gives sorrow, but it's also joy because there's something also in life more than just sorrow, and something that's larger than the cause of sorrow.

There's a phrase in the Bible. It's a phrase I've said for years would be on my tombstone. Remember that I said in our first episode how I think about death a lot.

And that phrase is sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. This isn't a Pollyanna sort of joy, a joy that ignores the bad and only focuses on the good. It's joy that looks honestly at pain and suffering, and nonetheless smiles through the tears.

How can this be? I'll give you an example. I wrote an article a couple years ago called "Turning 40 While Single and Childless" and you can find it online if you want to read it. It's about how just because I am single and childless, that doesn't mean that I want to be.

I've even been engaged before. But one thing I didn't talk about in that article is how even through years of longing for marriage, I've been a bridesmaid 15 times and been to countless bridal and baby showers. And I've had to wrestle with how can I acknowledge my feelings of disappointment, while also at the same time genuinely celebrate these wonderful milestones for my friends.

In other words, can I live in both sorrow and joy at the same time? And I can. For the same reason that Miraslop's dad's perspective changed even when his life circumstances didn't. Because I experience God's love and I trust him.

I trust that he will give me everything that I need, even if it's not everything that I want and the ways that I want it. And the amazing thing is that the more I let go of my expectations, the more my eyes are open to see my friends' celebrations as my own celebrations too. When they get married and have kids, my family expands.

I talked a little bit about this in the first episode of the podcast. I said how I didn't want to be alone in New York during quarantine last year, so I went to Seattle to be with my friends and their daughter, my God-daughter. Their joy in getting married and having Lucy became my joy too, even through tears, because I gained her in my life.

Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. But sorrow is only one type of suffering. There's a particular form of suffering that, to me, presents its own challenges to the good life.

And that is what happens when someone else has intentionally caused your suffering. And the reason this is a particular challenge to the good life is because we've seen throughout the series that other people are vital to our living well. One of these sources of suffering is wrongdoing that others have done against us.

It can be something relatively simple. The shadows are image of ourselves. It can be something absolutely egregious that destroys lives.

And forgiveness tries to somehow wrestle with that reality. And the way it wrestles with that reality is to take it seriously and yet at the same time to try to overcome the wrongdoing. That's a very difficult concept.

The way forgiveness does that is to peel off the wrongdoing from the wrongdoer. I've committed the wrongdoing. But when I'm forgiven, that wrongdoing is almost detached from me.

And I'm let free from the wrongdoing that I have committed. Mirasloff is saying there are two parts of forgiveness. First, there is noting the action that caused harm.

This part, he says, isn't particularly hard to do. Not for the one who was wronged anyway. The only person who might find it hard is the person who's done the wrong.

They may want to diminish the extent of their wrong or make excuses. But the second part of forgiveness, detaching the wrongdoing from the person who caused the harm, is hard. That's where our sense of justice rebels against the act of forgiveness.

A person doesn't deserve. And it's absolutely true. A wrongdoer does not deserve to be forgiven.

The wrongdoer deserves to be, in some sense, curtailed and in some sense, punished also. In mere Christianity, Oxford theologian C.S. Lewis writes about his own journey to understanding forgiveness. And it's similar to Mirasloff's concept of it.

Lewis says that before he was a Christian, this idea of separating the wrongdoer from the wrong was ridiculous. He called it a silly, straw-splitting distinction. "How could you hate what the person did and not hate the person?" he asked.

But years later, he realized that there was one person he had been doing this to his whole life, himself. However much he disliked parts of himself, his own cowardice or conceit or greed, he went on loving himself without much difficulty. And that realization made him wonder, "If I can do that for myself, why can't I do that for others when they wrong me?" And Mirasloff says that it's this type of forgiveness that is an essential part of the good life, not only for the one who is wronged, but also for the wrongdoers too.

People these days speak often how forgiveness heals to forgive would then be not to let our lives be stunted and arrested because of the wrongdoings we have suffered, freeing ourselves from the dead hand of wrongdoing upon our lives. But the other idea of forgiveness is to rectify the situation by helping the person who has caused the harm be freed from what they have done. Mirasloff talks about forgiveness as a gift, a gift from the one who has been wronged to the wrongdoer.

But the challenge with any gift of course is that for it to be effective, it must be received. I think the only way we receive forgiveness is by repentance and by reparation on the part of the wrongdoer, it requires recognition of wrongdoing as wrongdoing. And wrongdoing is something bad done toward the one who was wronged, as well as attempt to restore the situation to the person what measure of what they have lost.

And even though forgiveness is an essential part of the good life, and for the Christian it's even a command given by Jesus, it's not the wrongdoers job or prerogative to tell the one who was wronged how or when to forgive. And so, in the Christian tradition, forgiveness is not an optional extra. Forgiveness is actually at one of Christ's commands, that one should do notwithstanding how the other person acts.

On the other hand, to forgive is not the only command. And there's something really insidious and self-serving. Somebody who is done wrongdoing gives lessons to those who have been wrong how they ought to forgive.

Everybody knows this just stinks, right? Morally, this cannot be possible, right? And yet we see that happening. Maybe not by people who have actually wronged, but people who might have to change their behavior if they were to recognize that actual wrong has been done. So in this sense, forgiveness asks not only the one who is wrong to do something, but it also asks the wrongdoer, now the forgiven, to do something to.

Forgiveness always needs to affirm justice. It affirms it already in the first instance. You've done it wrong.

That's also naming it in a just kind of way. But we need also the other side, that is to say

perpetrators, to incorporate it in their own behavior, turning away from what they have done through apology, receiving forgiveness also through apology, and then showing in their behavior that they have done wrong. Merelof told me a story about his dad to illustrate this point about repentance and reparation, about the wrongdoer.

In this case his dad, changing his behavior after being forgiven. He said when his dad was 10 years old, he left the village where he was raised. But prior to that, he was like any other 10 year old, you know, in the summer, you walk by an orchard of somebody and you see a ripe peaches or plums or whatever it is.

You go and eat some of the right peaches and plums, you know, it's there. So his dad would steal it. And when he was 18 or 19 years old, after the death march, he returned to the village.

And he went to the people who he stole from. He goes to them and says, you know, when I was a little kid, this is what I did. I've now come to faith.

And I realized that this was wrong and I want you to forgive me. And if I can do anything to restore that to you, I will work. I will do whatever it takes, but I want to make good the wrong that I have done.

And I thought, well, now, this is proper way to deal with the wrongdoing, right? You can't continue to benefit from the wrong that you have committed and expect the other person to just forgive that. That's faith. And that's transformative power, by the way, of forgiveness.

Hi, all. I'm Carly Aschleman, the assistant producer of Beyond the Forum. If you're loving the podcast so far, we want to invite you to continue these important conversations on our Instagram account at Baritas Forum.

Follow us right our podcast season to access behind-the-scenes content, exciting giveaways, and conversations with other podcast listeners, like you. Thanks for tuning in and enjoy the rest of the show. In the trailer to this series, I told you that I was committed to taking you on a journey to explore the good life for modern times.

And in six episodes, we've talked about the art of dying, about community and mental health, about having difficult cross-cultural conversations, about quantifying human flourishing, and about the importance of all and wonder. And now we've also talked about the why of living, especially at a live with joy in spite of suffering and sorrow and why it's important to forgive. But what I didn't promise you was one definitive, authoritative answer to the question, "What is the good life?" And that's because life isn't a syllabus.

It's not a simple problem to be solved with a formula. Remember what Sethian said in episode five. It's a hard, complex question that involves your beliefs and how you answer

the big questions of life.

When you planned your day today, you likely spent a lot of time thinking about the what and the how of all that you need to get done. But how much time did you think about the why? Why you're doing any of it in the first place? And yet it's this why question that gives our lives meaning and gives us perseverance to live. Nietzsche isn't someone who I share a worldview with, but he said something very profound that I agree with.

He said that if you have a why to live, then you can bear almost any how. And Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, quoted Nietzsche when he wrote about his own experience in the concentration camp. He said that life wasn't primarily a quest for pleasure or power, but a quest for meaning, a quest for the why.

Don't wait until you're 40 or 50, or even as Lydia cautioned us in the first episode, don't wait until you're on your deathbed, to ask the why question. You can start by trying to answer the big questions. Why is there something rather than nothing? What does it mean to be human? Why are you here? What happens to a person at death? How do you know what is right and wrong? What is wrong with the world and what can make it right? And of course, what is the good life? And if you want to explore the big religious and philosophical traditions, you can do what Merezloaf students do.

You can try them on. After all, the good life has to work, not just intellectually, but experientially too. And it has to work even if nothing in your outside world changes.

It works because it changes you. Hi again, this is Assistant Producer Carly Eschleman. To close off this final episode of our first season, we yet beyond the forum want to take time to say thanks to all the folks who helped us get the show together.

Our first thanks goes to our guest, Dr. Merezloaf-Wolf. Dr. Wolf, your story is so profound and we're incredibly thankful that you joined us to close off our first season on the note of forgiveness. We also want to thank our astounding production team at PRX.

That's Jocelyn Gonzalez, Genevieve Sponseler, Morgan Flannery, and Jason Saldana. And thanks to our great colleagues at the Veritas Forum for being our biggest fans and a fantastic team to work with. It's so great having your encouragement each drop day without fail.

And of course, we want to thank the John Templeton Foundation and all of our donors for their generous support of our conversations. And a final thanks goes out to our launch team and co-sponsors. I'd like to specifically thank our podcast advisory board.

That's Christina Perota, Jack Kubeneck, Annie Lee, Ben Ciao, and the other folks at the University of California. Ben Ciao, Isaiah Drummond, Joseph Delamour said, Lauren Lad, and Sunk Wingo. Alright, that's all for this episode and all for this season.

Thanks for listening to Beyond the Forum.

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