

## Living with a Purpose • Romans 8:28

Wouldn't it be great to know our purpose in life? If we could know exactly why we were born and what we are supposed to do wouldn't life be a whole lot clearer and better? I've heard people say, "I was born to be a mother. My life is all about giving birth and raising children." I've heard others say, "My purpose in life is to have a good time. 'Eat, drink, be happy and die' is my motto." And others have said, "The reason I live is to improve the world leaving it a better place than when I was born." I've even heard people say they decided in the first grade to be a surgeon, to marry a blue-eyed blond and to have five children. Now that person is a 50-year-old surgeon married to a blue-eyed blond who was also in Mrs. Major's first grade class and they are the parents of five children all spaced out five years apart. They've lived their first grade plan.

But that's not most of us. The vast majority of us have no idea what our purpose in life is or how life is supposed to turn out. When most of us reflect back on life we realize it has turned out completely different from anything we could have predicted. Many people say they have read books, attended seminars on life purpose and still don't know their reason for being alive.

As Christians we are impressed with the place of purpose in the Bible. Let's look at some familiar words from the Christmas story in Matthew 1:18-21:

*This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

*But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a*

*dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

Joseph's purpose in life was to wed Mary and be Jesus' father. Mary's purpose in life was to mother the Son of God. And Jesus' purpose is absolutely clear; it was to "save his people from their sins." So, as Christians, finding and fulfilling our purpose in life is a Jesus-like thing to do. It's just not always easy to do.

A good place to start to figure out our purpose in life is with four Ps: Purpose (why I'm alive); Preference (what I like); Person (who I am); and Plan (what I'm going to do). Let's take a look at each of the four Ps.

Purpose is the reason I'm alive. It answers the question of what I'm supposed to do during my time on earth. When we become Christians our options dramatically change and enormously narrow because our purpose becomes God-centered instead of self-centered.

The opening line in Rick Warren's best selling book *The Purpose Driven Life* says, "It's not about you." This is totally counter-cultural and opposite of what we are regularly taught. We are bombarded with messages that say it's all about us—what **we** want; **our** happiness; **our** needs; **our** fulfillment. Self-help books are a multi-billion dollar industry. But as Christians we are different. We have pledged our love and loyalty to Jesus Christ. Our purpose is not about us. We live to please God, to honor Jesus and to make him happy more than ourselves. It's a totally and radically different approach.

There are many ways we can write a purpose statement but as Christians our statement should be God-centered and not self-centered. The

***When we understand that each of us is unique and that we have a purpose before God then we don't have to compare ourselves to anybody else. All we need to do is trust God.***

Westminster Shorter Catechism says, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” That is a God-centered purpose.

Preference is what I like and the way I would like my life to be. It’s the dreams I would like to come true. The list of possible preferences is big enough to fill the Library of Congress. Some of the more usual choices include healthy, wealthy and happiness. Specifics could be a college education, a professional sports contract, publishing a book, cutting a hit record, winning an Academy Award or a Nobel Prize, finding a cure for cancer, being President of the United States, getting married, having children or getting even with someone who has hurt us.

It can be wonderful to dream. Dreams are our preferences imagined as if they were reality. Some preferences are reasonable and reachable. Some are totally far-fetched and extremely unlikely. One of the most frequent lies told to children in America is that “you can be anything you want to be.” The truth is that we cannot have everything we want.

The third P is Person. Person is who I am. This is the reality part of the four Ps.

Who I am is a male, born into a middle-class American family, with an immigrant mother and a father who grew up in a working-class poor home, with three older brothers and a minimal aptitude for music, sports or foreign languages. What I’m good at is school when I work hard at it, people skills, communication and leadership.

So, who are you? What are you good at? What are your strengths?

Some people have person and preference align, but that’s not true for all of us. Albert Einstein wanted to be a concert violinist but he was better at math and physics. St. John wanted to be a successful politician seated at the right hand of the king, but he was better at writing four New Testament books. Esther in the Old Testament wanted to win a national beauty contest (which she did) but what she was really good at was saving the Hebrew people from genocide.

The fourth P is Plan—what I’m actually going to do. This is a list of specific actions to take who we are and use what we have to satisfy our preferences or fulfill our purpose. This is what we are going to do with whatever we have left of life.

Everything else is theory. The plan is for actually doing something.

To live with a purpose let’s consider some practical suggestions of what we can do. Start by writing a purpose statement. That’s fairly common in our society. Just finish the statement, “The purpose of my life is to . . . .” Keep it short and simple. Keep it personal. Keep it God-centered. Write a purpose statement that fits your life this year but will equally fit the last year of your life.

Start today; then revise it tomorrow. Reword it next week. Pray for God’s help. It can be fun but it can also be a lot of hard work. That’s why a lot of people don’t do it. Do a good job and your purpose statement will shape and direct the rest of your life—job, marriage, money, vacations. All of life is then monitored by this purpose statement.

Here are some samples:

The purpose of my life is to glorify and enjoy God forever.

The purpose of my life is to make God look good.

The purpose of my life is to please Jesus Christ every day.

The purpose of my life is to point people to God.

The purpose of my life is to bless others in Jesus’ name.

The purpose of my life is to be a godly person.

Dream your preferences. If you could have whatever you want, what would it be? Would it be fame? Fortune? Living on a farm? Getting married? Being an astronaut? Dreaming is an important part of the purpose process.

Write a purpose statement, dream the preferences and then describe yourself. In your head or on a piece of paper make a list of who you are and what you have to work with. Include the best and the worst, gender, age, education, strengths, weaknesses, abilities, disabilities, family, friends, assets, liabilities and whatever else describes you. The list doesn’t have to be long but it should be honest.

Now let’s pray a prayer. Look at Psalm 37:4-7 as a basis for a prayer about living with purpose:

*Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

*Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this:*

*He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.*

*Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways.*

Here is the way to pray and think about living with purpose:

*“Delight yourself in the Lord”* means putting God absolutely first. Whatever God wants is what we choose even if that means none of our preferences. We choose to put God first even if we are not healthy, wealthy or happy. God first!

*“He will give you the desires of your heart”* doesn’t mean that God will give us whatever we please or whatever we want. It means that God will change our preferences so that we want what is best.

*“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him.”*

This means we have absolute confidence that God will accomplish his purposes in our lives.

*“Wait patiently.”*

This means that we trust God for his schedule.

*“Do not fret when others succeed.”* When we understand that each of us is unique and that we have a purpose before

God then we don’t have to compare ourselves to anybody else. All we need to do is trust God.

If you model it after Psalm 37, what would your prayer sound like? Maybe something like this:

God, I commit the purpose of my life to please you. You are number one all the time with everything. You made me and you know me. I trust you to fulfill your purpose in me even if that means giving up my preferences. And, I’ll leave the timing to you, God, even if it means that I die before I fully understand all that you are doing. I purpose my life for you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Go ahead and make your plan for life. It may include school, a career, family, money or anything else. Just make all the choices based on fulfilling your purpose.

If the purpose of my life is to please and honor God, how will I uniquely do this in the way I live? How do I please and honor God with my job, my marriage, in divorce, health, car, education, budget, friends, the parties I give or attend, the clothes I wear, illness, business, my expense account, my attitude and dealings with poor people, politics, other races, sports, church, children or what I read? What is my plan to fulfill my life’s purpose?

It is important that we check our progress on an ongoing basis. Regularly get a checkup. How am I doing in fulfilling my purpose? What is God doing to fulfill his purpose in me?

There is an amazing and supernatural teaching in Romans 8:28-29 where it says:

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.*

In other words, we are not the only ones with a purpose and a plan for our lives. God had a purpose and plan for each of us before we were born. God is working to make everything come together for good, even our mistakes. God’s plan is to make us like Jesus. Checking up

means that we are regularly reviewing how we are doing for God and what God is doing in us.

When necessary, change the plan. Life’s purpose stays the same throughout a lifetime but the reality is that our plans often need to be updated. If I decide to glorify God as a parent but never get married or have a child then my plan needs to be changed. I must decide how I can glorify God single and childless. If I plan to fulfill the purpose of God in my life through my job and then I loose my job, the plan needs to be changed to please God with a different plan. If I plan to make God look good in a way that is restricted by unexpected sickness, how can I now fulfill my purpose and make God look good even when I’m ill?

Bethany Hamilton was ranked as the best amateur teen surfer in Hawaii. In October 2003 she was attacked by a tiger shark and lost her arm. As a committed Christian Bethany planned to ful-

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fill her purpose as one of the very best surfers in the world. Her father asked, “Now what are you going to do?” She told her father that if having only one arm proved detrimental to reaching the top in competitive surfing then she’d see about playing soccer.

St. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:12-13:

*I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.*

When St. Paul said “*I can do everything*” he didn’t mean that he could buy a mansion in Rome when he was broke or magically make a sandwich when he was hungry. He meant that he could change his plan and fulfill his purpose for God even when circumstances changed. A few lines later he wrote, “To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Circumstances change. Bethany lost an arm. Paul went to prison. We get older. But purpose stays the same. God stays the same. We live to please and honor God. That is our purpose in every circumstance.

When I was eight years old and in the third grade I came home from school for lunch every day. It was about a mile each way. I quickly ate lunch one day and then headed out to the backyard to play with my dog. I took the dog’s leash and started spinning it around as fast as I could make it go. When it was time to walk back to school my mother called out to me and I stopped the leash. It snapped around and the metal clip squarely hit and split my front tooth. I intuitively caught the pieces and ran into the house. I was driven to the office of Dr. Stillwell, our family dentist. With tears streaming down my cheeks I told him, “I didn’t do it on purpose.” That was my favorite excuse every time I did something stupid. And it was true. To this day I’m still missing the back half of my front tooth, but “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

The practical question for Christians isn’t what we didn’t do on purpose. The practical question is what we did do on purpose. Let us think through every day how we can purposefully, thoughtfully, intentionally and deliberately live our lives to please and honor God. And, let’s do it on purpose.

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