

14 February 2010

The Purpose Driven Life – Part 1 – What on earth am I here for?

Readings: Ephesians 1: 3-14 and John 3: 13-17

Occasionally the newspapers feature some (usually) amazing feat. A round-the-world solo sailing record. A climb to a particular peak. And almost before the celebration flags stop waving, the question arises: now what? What will fill the vacuum left over, now that that target has been achieved? A number of years ago, when I was in my mid-30s, I was Assistant Company Secretary of BP Minerals. The Board met that day, and my boss came into my office. He was retiring. The Board had agreed to appoint me as his successor. I was absolutely elated. I'd 'arrived'. And my boss said to me 'what are you going to do in 10 years time?' I didn't at first understand the question. Yes, in one sense I'd 'arrived' – but there had to be something more, something beyond.

For all of us, whether we achieve great and famous success, or just struggle to get through life, there are times when we ask ourselves – there must be more to life, something more, something beyond. What on earth am I here for?

Today, we start our 40 Days of Purpose by looking at three of life's greatest questions:-

1. The question of existence – why am I alive?
2. The question of significance – does my life matter?
3. The question of intention – what is my purpose?

1. The question of existence – why am I alive?

I can recall discussing a question like this with a group of friends when in my early 20s. One of us posed the question: do I really exist? Or am I a figment of my own imagination?

Indeed, am I just a figment of God's imagination? We may ask how we know that we exist or is it all in the mind, maybe life is just a dream from which we will suddenly awake.

The philosopher Descartes said, 'I think, therefore I am'. Which is often used to prove our existence. Another philosopher, Kant, said 'if I have 100 dollars in my mind, it does not mean it exists in my wallet!' Life is much more than what is in the mind.

For thousands of years people have questioned 'Why am I alive'. The prophet asked it in Jeremiah 20:18: "*Why was I born? Was it only to have trouble and sorrow, to end my life in disgrace?*"

There have probably been times in your life when you felt that way, too. Life can seem to be surrounded by problems. It can seem more like a treadmill. As the Seven Dwarfs sang (not quite!): I owe, I owe, so off to work I go.....

We can feel trapped in our own existence, and life can seem to be drudgery. And at such times we ask ourselves, 'What's the purpose of my life? The truth is, that a life without a purpose isn't a life worth living. It's no coincidence that the suicide rate in our society has gone up, especially amongst the young – a generation that has grown up in schools which no longer teach of God, of Christianity – in a society where Sunday School attendance has fallen (I think in less than my lifetime) from 50% to just 3% of children.

Without God, what are we? A freak chance of nature? A complex lump of molecules? Without God, life has no real reason or meaning or purpose. If you take God out of the equation, you don't have many alternatives. Probably the greatest philosopher of the last century was Bertrand Russell. He was an atheist, and he said "Unless you assume the existence of God, the question of life's meaning and purpose is irrelevant."

Some suggest you can take the mystical approach which says 'Look within and find your purpose.'

Others find their purpose in things. Money brings power and success. But are those with money any happier? The famous Beatles song – Money can't buy you love. In fact it often destroys lives – look at the lives of those who have won the lottery.

There was an article in the Sunday Mirror, 31st January 1999 about a hospital orderly, John McGuinness, who in January 1996 won £10 million on the lottery. Till then, he had been earning £150 a week; now he could afford to buy anything he wanted. So he spent a million pounds on a house, over a million pounds on cars, three quarters of a million on jewellery for his girl friend, half a million on holidays, and has given £1.3 million to his local football club. But because of the interest the money is earning, his still got £10 million in the bank. (Maybe we should ask him for a donation to our re-ordering!)

Yet the remarkable thing is that John says that the money has not made him any happier at all. 'When I buy something new it does give me a fifteen second buzz. But it's a buzz that doesn't last. A house is just a house and a car is just a heap of metal. When I was working at least I felt I was achieving something.'

And in one area of John's life the lottery win has actually made things worse. Although he's given a lot of money to his family, it has only caused problems. 'The money has caused so much hassle within the family,' he says. 'No matter how much you give them it is still not enough. We were a

very close family before the lottery, but the money has caused a lot of heartache, and in the backs of our minds we know something has gone wrong.’

Wealth can bring comfort and so-called security, but it doesn’t necessarily bring happiness or fulfilment.

In search for that fulfilment of life many people turn to self-help books. There are many of these books around and basically they all say the same thing ‘You’ve got to invent your purpose in life’. They focus on success.

They all give the same basic approach – discover your dreams, go after your goals, have some ambitions, aim high, have faith in yourself, figure out what you’re good at and never give up on yourself. There’s a trend in schools to do this – I was at a Junior School assembly recently, and the children were singing as they came in. At first the song seemed innocuous, but its words emphasized the so-called ability within ourselves to be whatever we want to be. By navel gazing we exaggerate our own importance and feel surprised when others don’t share in our greatness.

These books may be full of good advice and may help you to become successful. But being successful and knowing your purpose in life are not the same thing. You can be considered as being very successful in life and still never know “What on earth am I here for?”

So what did God put me on this earth for? The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment. It’s far greater than your own happiness. Even your own peace of mind. You were made by God and you were made for God and you were put here for His purposes. And until you understand that, life isn’t going to make sense.

Why does God want us here? Why are we alive? Why are we on this planet? Is there a reason? The Bible says this in Proverbs 16.4, *“The Lord has made everything for His own purpose.”*

It’s for His purpose. God has never made anything without a purpose. Every rock, every plant and every animal has a purpose. There was a short news bulletin this week – I caught the end of it. Evidently spring is happening 11 days earlier – and there is concern because the balance isn’t being maintained. Bees aren’t around those 11 days earlier to cross-pollinate, and so on – so the gentle balance of nature is being disturbed. Everything has its purpose in God’s great design. And even more so, you have a purpose.

God has five purposes for your life. In the next 40 days we’re going to look in detail at those five purposes. The five reasons God put you on this planet. Today, I just want us to see God’s motive.

Look at this next verse, Ephesians 1:4, *“Long before He laid down the earth’s foundation, He had us in His mind and settled on us as the focus of His love to be made whole and holy by His love.”*

Note the phrase *“the focus of His love”*. Because, if you don’t get anything else as we start this 40 days, I want you to understand that God says He made you, to love you. Why am I, are you, alive? God made you to love you. You were created to be loved by God.

2. The second key question of life is the “Question of Significance: Does my life matter?”

Isaiah asked this question in Isaiah 49:4 He said, *“My work all seems so useless. I’ve spent my strength for nothing and for no purpose at all.”* The writer of Ecclesiastes raises similar questions when he says *“Meaningless! Meaningless!”* Everything is meaningless.” What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun?” *“I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”* And at the end of the book he says *“Remember your Creator”* and *“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty, the purpose, of man.”*

If you don’t have a meaning and purpose in your life and you don’t know why God put you on this planet, life doesn’t make sense.

During World War II, there were prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp in Hungary, that were processing human sewage in a factory. The factory was destroyed in an Allied bombing raid. So the prisoners had nothing to do. The Nazi soldiers made the prisoners take all the rubble of that factory and move it to another field. The next day, they had them take that same rubble and move it back in reverse. The next day, they had to take that stuff and move it back and day after day they had no meaning, no purpose. It was just work doing the same thing over and over with no meaning and no purpose.

Then something strange began to happen. The prisoners began to go crazy. They began to lose their will to live because there was no meaning, no purpose in their work. They were just moving bricks back and forth, back and forth. Many of them began to throw themselves in front of the guards trying to get shot. In essence, trying to commit suicide. Why? Because they, like you and I, were made for a purpose to have a meaningful life, not just an existence.

I think it’s true that humankind goes through life living at one of three levels:

The Survival level is really where most live today. They are barely getting by. They're just existing. They're not living. They are controlled by their circumstances. They're just in survival mode.

A step up from that is where some of us are. By the world's standards, we've made it. We live comfortably. Compared to the rest of the world, we're extremely wealthy. We have freedom, we enjoy good health and you may have been successful in your career. But this doesn't necessarily bring fulfillment. The reason is, it takes more than success and status to satisfy our deepest needs.

Then there is the **third level of living**, which does bring fulfillment and purpose. It's when you know the meaning of your life that gives it significance.

It is found when you come to know how much you matter to God and that you have discovered God's purposes for your life and you're living them out.

If you want to know how much you matter to God, look at Isaiah 44:2.

God says, *"I am your Creator. You were in My care, even before you were born."* (Isaiah 44:2)
Psalm 139 says similarly.

God was caring for you even in His mind, as He thought of you.

The next verse in Isaiah says, *"You scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe. Every day was recorded in your book."*

Do you matter? – Yes. He made you. He made you to love you and the Bible says you do matter. He sees everything in your life, the good, the bad and everything in-between. You do matter to Him.

Look at the next verse, *"His plans endure forever; His purposes last eternally."*

The purposes I'm going to talk about during Lent are not just for the rest of your life on earth, they're for the rest of your life forever and ever. Because God's purposes are eternal. When we talk about the five things God put you on earth for, He just wants you to practise here, what you're going to do forever and ever in eternity.

This life on earth is the warm-up act, this is the kindergarten, this is the preschool, this is where you do the dress rehearsal. God says, "I have plans and purposes for your life, but they don't end at death." Because when you die, your heart is going to stop and that will be the end of your body, but that's not the end of you. You're far more than a body. You were made to last forever.

The Bible says this, Psalm 33:11 says, "*His purposes last eternally. God says, "I was made to last forever."*"

I was made to be loved by God, and I was made to last forever. This life is not all there is. One of the biggest ways you can waste your life is thinking all there is, is here and now. We're going to spend far more time beyond death, than we do on this side. On this side, we may get to live 60,70,80 or 90 years or so. But that's just a drop in the bucket compared to eternity. The time you spend on earth really isn't that very long. It's like if you stretched out a line from London to Australia. The first millimetre of that line would not even equal how tiny your life is compared to all the time you're going to spend in eternity. You were made for eternity and life is preparation for eternity. You're not going to find that in a self-help book, but it's the truth. Life is preparation for eternity and in the next 40 days we'll be looking at how you prepare, because this is not all there is. God's purposes for you are eternal. They are forever. This is the key to the meaning of life - realizing that life is preparation for eternity.

The Bible says this in 2 Corinthians 5:1, "*When this tent we live in – our body here on earth – is torn down. God will have a house in Heaven for us to live in. A home He himself has made, which will last forever.*"

How much do you matter to God? You matter so much to God that He wants to keep you with Him for the rest of eternity. That's how much you matter to God. He wants to keep you with Him forever.

[Look at this verse, "Leave your impoverished confusion and live and walk up the street to a life with meaning." (Proverbs 9:6)]

We now have some answers to the three questions we started with.

First, the question of existence – why am I alive?

God answers it by saying, "*I made you to love you, that's why you're alive.*"

Secondly, in the question of Significance – does my life matter?

God says, oh yes you do matter. You matter so much that I have made you for eternity. You're going to be around for a long, long time.

Thirdly, the “Question of Intention: What is my purpose?” What on earth am I here for?

And that's what I'm going to be exploring with you during Lent.

In Psalm 89:47 David asked the question, *“Why did you create us? For nothing?”*

If you believe that there is a God and that God made you for a reason, then the only way you're going to know your purpose is first looking to Him.

Have you ever bought something that requires home assembly? And the instructions are not at all clear – if the instructions exist at all? Or had something put into your hand and you wonder what on earth it is, how is it used, what is it for? Here's an office 'gadget' most you will know. It's really useful at removing staples. If you didn't know what it was it could be quite dangerous with its sharp teeth. If you don't know something's purpose, it is likely to be abused.

When you don't know the purpose of something, it is likely to be misused, or abused. The only way you're going to know what some things is by either talking to the creator, or the inventor of it, or reading the maker's instructions.

The only way you will ever know your purpose in life is to talk to the Creator and look at the maker's instructions, found in the Bible. Genesis 1:1, the first verse in the Bible...starts by saying *“In beginning, God created.”*

Everything starts with God, it continues with God, it ends with God. *“In the beginning, God created.”*

And Proverbs 9:10 *“Knowing God results in every other kind of understanding.”*

If you want to understand the meaning of your life; if you want to understand your purpose of life? You find your purpose by getting to know God. It all starts with God.

This is underlined in Colossians 1:16, *“For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible...everything got started in Him and finds its purpose in Him.”* Then the next verse, *“It is in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for...part of the overall purpose He (that's God) is working out in everything and everyone.”*

If you're going to get to know God's purpose for your life, you have to get to know God. It's just that simple. 'In the beginning ... God...' This may take a while to work through because understanding God's purposes for your life does take time. It's not something we can grasp quickly because of its impact on our life. That's why we're going to take 40 days to look at God's purposes for you.

You may be asking, why 40 Days? Well, the Bible is very clear that God considers 40 days to be a spiritually significant time period. In fact, in the Bible, any time God wanted to prepare people for His purposes, He took 40 days. For instance:

- *Noah's life was transformed by 40 days of rain*
- *Moses' life was transformed by 40 days on Mount Sinai*
- *The spies were transformed by 40 days in the Promise Land*
- *David was transformed by Goliath's 40-day challenge*
- *The city of Nineveh was transformed in 40 days*
- *Jesus was empowered for ministry by spending 40 days in the desert*
- *and the disciples were transformed by 40 days with Jesus after the resurrection.*

The next 40 days are going to transform your life. I'm absolutely confident of that. This Lent gives us this opportunity to explore these purposes together. Do try to set time aside everyday to read a chapter from 'The Purpose Driven Life', starting today, it will only take about 15 minutes. Again, try to come every Sunday during Lent to hear about the five different purposes God has for your life. And finally, may I really encourage you to join one of the many Home Groups. These will give you the opportunity to share further the week's theme found in the book. These are not high powered in any way. Each group just watches a DVD on the week's theme and discusses it afterwards over a cup of coffee or tea.

Although there are 40 Days of Purpose, if you add up the times you spend in church, reading the daily reading and attending the groups, it's probably a lot less than 48 hours. Not much time when you're thinking about eternity!

Regardless of where you are in your spiritual journey, look at this last verse. *"It makes no difference who you are or where you're from – if you want God and are ready to do as He says, the door is open."* (Acts 10:35)

George Herbert once said, "It's never too late to be who you might have been."

Let us pray together ...

You know God had a purpose in bringing you here today. He wants you to know Him and He wants you to know His purposes for you. So talk to Him. You don't have to use any fancy words. If you don't know what to say, just follow me in this prayer...

"Dear God, I realize that if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be alive. But because you made me, you must have a purpose for me. I admit that I focused on my plans for my life, not yours. But I want to know your purposes for me, so I commit the next 40 days of my life to learning about it. Thank you that you made me so you could love me. Thank you that you cared for me even when I didn't know you. Thank you that I was made to last forever. I want a life filled with meaning. I want to start by getting to know you better. So as best as I understand, I ask you, Jesus Christ, to come into my life and help me to understand your purposes for me. I want to take the first step today. In your name I pray, Amen."

Brian Pritchard

14 February 2010

www.stmarysbillingshurst.org