

Questions You Can't Answer By Yourself, Pt. 4
What is My Purpose?

2 Corinthians 5: 15; I Corinthians 6: 19-20; Colossians 3: 17, 23

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“Stellsie, you’ve been saved for a purpose.” That’s what my grandmother heard the Lord say to her in the night. She had never been the same after her husband of 52 years died. She lost her zeal for life, but her body kept on. She’d live 21 more years without him. But she struggled with *why*. Why am I here? I’m old. I’m lonely. My body hurts. I’m nearly blind. All my friends have died. Why, Lord, do you keep me on this earth? “Stellsie, you’ve been saved for a purpose.” She clung to those words. Such tenderness. Her name was Estelle. Stellsie was an affectionate nickname her husband had called her. So the voice she heard had known her heart, and spoken to her intimately. You’ve been saved for a purpose. She believed it. But she didn’t understand it. OK, there’s a reason for my life. But what is that purpose that keeps me here?

It’s not just 19 year olds trying to pick a major that ask about purpose. 90 year olds also wonder. So do young parents up to their ears with diapers. So do people who wonder where they fit as single in a coupled world. So do people who are startled that their kids have left the nest, 20 years have blown by and they wonder if this is really what it’s all about.

Purpose is a deeply human question. We want to know what the point is of living every day. What am I supposed to be doing with my life? Everyday has its demands. People have expectations. Jobs have requirements. Schools have assignments. Bills have to get paid. Houses have to be maintained. Children have to be cared for. Just this carcass of mine requires constant fueling and cleaning and resting and exercising, and then there are all the beasts to tend. Am I fulfilling my purpose when I’m doing all these things I have to do?

Scripture has robust answers about the question of our purpose. But I’ll warn you, the Bible contradicts the narrative we all live and breathe every day. If you watch the Disney channel, you’ll get a good dose of contemporary purpose: I am to discover what I really want to do and then do it while others admire me. I need to let my voice out and sing. I need to become the kind of prince I want to be even if the kingdom has to change. My purpose is to find out what my dream is

and live it. To live with no regrets for not trying something. To take advantage of every amazing opportunity I can grasp. My purpose is fulfilling *me*.

Now finding out our interests and skills is a good thing. Doing work that satisfies us and does some good for others is wonderful. Being true to your values and aspirations is fine. But if those things really are the deepest purpose of human life, very, very, very few people will ever fulfill their purpose. Most people in most times in most places don't have wide choices in what they will do with their lives. They do the work at hand to survive. Life is hard and opportunities limited. And even those who do get to do what they want will only fulfill their purpose for a brief time. Every Broadway show closes (except maybe *Cats!*). Every voice ages and cracks. Every athlete's skills diminish. Geniuses get dementia. Painters lose mobility in their fingers. Leaders lose their nerve. And in the very midst of having it all, our heroes have asked, "Is this all? Is this what I was meant for?"

Human purpose has to be deeper than dreams. Our purpose has to be available when we are at the height of power or the most diminished. What makes life matter has to work for the poor and the rich, the ones with a million choices or none.

Let's look again at our first Scripture: "*Christ died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*" That those who live might no longer live for themselves. How often I have secretly thought that Christ died for me so that I can live the life I want with heaven assured and my sins forgiven. As if he saved me so I could live for me. That's just not true. And it won't work anyway. Christ saved me so I can live for him. He calls me to die to myself so I can experience true, robust, fulfilled life in living for his purpose. Christ died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him, who for their sake died and was raised. I wish I could tattoo that on my brain.

Our second Scripture gets even more counter-cultural. These words could start a fight. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, who were struggling with sexual purity: "*You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*" You are not your own. Wait a minute. That's not what I think. Deep down, I know what my heart says. I *am* my own. I do what I want to do. Nobody can tell me what to do. I belong to myself. I am sovereign over me. That's why I always have an escape plan. I always assure myself how I have the resources to get out if I have to, out of someone's demands, out from a meeting, out of town and be free.

“No, son,” the Spirit gently whispers. “You are not your own. You belong to Jesus. I joined you to him. That’s what baptism portrays. You died with Christ so you can live with him. You gave control to him. He bought your sins at the price of his blood. You belong to him. If you were you own, you’d be alone, cut off from God, stranded in yourself, weighed down by your guilt, and unable to solve your death. You’d never be able to answer those deep questions of life. It’s the most wonderful news that you are not your own. For when you belong to Christ, you find your purpose. You live for him in whatever you are doing. Wherever you are, whatever strength you have, whatever age you are, your purpose is to serve Jesus by serving the world for which he gave his life. So stop fighting me. Glorify God with your life that belongs to him.”

The human purpose is to love God and love others. You can fulfill your purpose whether you are tediously folding clothes at the Gap or thrillingly closing a multi-million dollar acquisition. You live your purpose whether you are robust or frail, young or old. You find your life by losing it. You discover who you are as you worship the Triune God of grace and love the ones he puts in your path. Like all of the gospel, *purpose* is just that simple and just that deep. Purpose is completely egalitarian. God’s purpose works for the poor just as much as for the prosperous. But purpose is also completely unique. There’s only one you, and a sovereign God has placed you into this body, this family, this life for his reasons. Nobody else can take your place. He has work for you to do, through the work you do or even in spite of the work you do. *Anyone* can find their purpose in God’s mission. At the same time, *nobody* can take the place of your specific purpose.

Let’s round this out by looking at 3 results of finding our purpose in the way Scripture defines us. I am not my own. If Christ died for me, then I no longer live for myself, but for him, who for my sake died and was raised. My story is taken in to his story. What occurs when I die to self and live to Christ?

1) Energy. There are a great many more good things to do than bad. Anything, anything, that we do which is morally acceptable, which is honorable, productive and contributes to the common good glorifies God. It makes no difference whether I am preparing a sermon or scraping food off the evening dishes. If this is God’s will for me in the moment, then I can do it with all my might and glorify him. Toil can become praise. I cannot escape the toil of life. But I can offer that toil as participating in God’s will. So daily maintenance shines with significance. In our third Scripture lesson, Paul wrote, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” That’s how we work for bad bosses. That’s how we find freedom amidst demanding deadlines and requirements. I am not my own, I am the

Lord's. I glorify God by giving myself to him in any task. Belonging to Christ releases energy and zest for living, even when it's hard.

2) Empathy. My vision changes when I consent to the fact that I am not my own but Christ's. I begin to see with his priorities. I begin to regard others not as people to use for my fulfillment but as beloved of Jesus. The truth of his teaching becomes encouraging rather than daunting: whatever you do for the least of these my brothers, you do to me. Here again is the great egalitarian quality of Christian faith. I am about royal business when I feed baby food to an infant or wipe the chin of an elder. I am the King's right hand man whether I conduct a funeral or speak kindly to the beleaguered sandwich maker at Subway. From the perspective of eternal purpose, my time is every bit as efficiently used when I sit with a student at Gardere as when I write an article for *Desiring God*. In fact, the more I see people as members of the royal household of King Jesus, the more my heart connects to them. Belonging to Christ creates empathy in us because we look with the compassionate eyes of Jesus.

3) Generosity. My purpose is not to live for myself but for the one who gave his life for me. When I consider how generous is the God who died to gather me back to himself, I desire to make a return. I want to open my hand to others. As we consider a capital campaign for mission, I've been doing some research on cultivating generosity. One book suggested describing characteristics of generous people. That sounded intriguing, so one day at lunch I Rhonda and I went back and forth describing generous people. The list of qualities was energizing. Here are just five. Generous people are:

- **Other focused.** They look beyond themselves to consider the lives and needs of others.
- **Open handed.** They hold what they have lightly so that they may freely share it.
- **Cheerful.** Giving, whether it's through time, money, or service makes givers joyful. People who give themselves to others are not numb to the sorrows or joys of life. They are alive. They care deeply.
- **Invested.** Generous people want to be part of good things. Their generosity moves them to the center of what's going on.
- **Inventive.** Giving people get creative. They think of ways to care for others that will be fun, surprising, specific.

Living for myself gets very boring. Stubbornly clinging to the illusion that I am my own doesn't expand my life. It shrinks me. But living for Christ enlarges me. It

fills me with purpose. In one sense, it doesn't even matter what I do, whether I ring up clothes at the Purple Cow, stitch closed a wound, drive an Uber or run a business. God is sovereign. All work that is honorable and productive glorifies him. What gives purpose to what I do is the *way* that I work heartily unto the Lord. What matters is how I love and care for others through whatever I am doing. What matters is that I offer all of it as service to my king. I ask him to open my eyes to ways to care for whomever he puts in my path. I ask him to use whatever I do to be done with excellence. I ask him to connect my heart to those I meet along the way. And if I get to use my unique gifting along the way, all the better. But purpose, deep, fulfilling purpose comes primarily from worshipping, serving and loving the King through offering myself to him anew every day. To do whatever I do for him.

“Stellsie, you were saved for a purpose.” I can't say for sure what that purpose was. But I wonder what difference it would have made if she had died the same time my grandfather died when I was four. Instead we lived in the same home until I was 26. What purpose did God have for her to understand my faith more than my own parents did? How different would my life have been if we hadn't read Scripture together, prayed together, and sought God's will together. I know that as a minister's wife, she taught me about the dignity and responsibility of shepherding a church. Maybe part of her living longer than she wanted was the gift to me of finding my specific calling. Who can say. But I do know this: often beyond our sight, God is up to something big in those who live for him.