

A PORTRAIT OF CHRIST-HONORING PURPOSE

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“You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.” John the Baptist (John 8:28-30)

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31)

It was May 21, 1527. This time period marks the “continental divide” of Christian history. The church was fighting to redefine what it meant to be a Christian. Major figures in church history were doing the things for which we now remember them: Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Huldreich Zwingli. In the midst of these major figures was a small group known as the Anabaptists. They sided with neither the Reformers nor the Catholic Church. On this day, one of these men was facing execution for his faith. The indictment read:

Michael Sattler shall be committed to the executioner. The latter shall take him to the square and there first cut out his tongue, and then forge him fast to a wagon and there with glowing tongs twice tear pieces from his body, and then on the way to the site of execution give times more as above and then burn his body to powder as an arch-heretic (McDow & Reid, 1997, p. 160).

As this gruesome plan unfolded, one sympathetic observer recorded:

When the ropes on his hands had burned through, he raised the forefingers of both hands, thereby giving the signal he had agreed on before with his fellow believers to indicate that such a dying was bearable and that he remained in the faith (McDow & Reid, 1997, p. 161).

What enables a man, in the midst of such unimaginable suffering, to maintain his focus on God’s glory and the edification of God’s people? In a word, purpose. Michael Sattler had one resounding goal—to spend his life for Christ. Whether his life was spent over 50 years or a few hours, he wanted it to be used for God’s purpose.

The intent of this article is not to promote martyrdom as the ultimate expression of Christian affection. The goal is to communicate how God’s presence in the life of an individual provides a stable and satisfying sense of purpose that brings meaning to intense suffering, our treasured pleasures, and the monotony of everyday life.

Defining “Biblical Purpose”

Biblical Purpose is an over-arching goal or agenda for life that brings consistency and direction to the apparent disconnectedness of life. Purpose is what allows an individual to measure progress and have a sense of accomplishment. Purpose relates to *why* you do things, more than *what* you do.

The same action can stem from multiple purposes. For example, how many different potential purposes are there for a young boy to help an old lady across the street? A short list includes: sincere compassion; to earn a Boy Scout badge; she is his grandmother and he will get a guilt trip if he does not; he works on commission at the business across the street and hopes to make a sale; or she is the grandmother of the girl he wants to date and he hopes she will put in a good word for him.

The purpose of this article is not to judge motive—only God knows our hearts—but to instruct on how to sustain the only motivation that will satisfy the human soul. Because the same *what* can emerge from many *whys*. If we focus only upon what we should be doing we can easily truncate the Christian faith to a set of duties. Only when the duties of faith are practiced in a love for God (worship) and in keeping with our created design (purpose) will they fill the nagging void in our heart.

In America, life carries many relatively predictable elements: many years of education, working even more years to support oneself and possibly a family, the challenges of starting a career, an intense time of reassessment at mid-life, and adjusting to a slower pace as one ages. Without some grander purpose, life can become so routine or harsh as to promote depression or disillusionment (Ecclesiastes 1:2-11).

It is important to note that this definition of purpose overlaps with the concepts of identity and wisdom also found in this series on a Christ-honoring alternative to self-esteem.

Identity: Knowing what something is provides a foundation for understanding how to use it. Knowing that people were created in the image of God to reflect His glory as God's children provides a framework for purpose to which individuals must fill in the details.

Wisdom: Wisdom is the implementation of purpose. The most eloquently stated purpose, centered upon the Godliest cause without wisdom is like the finest luxury car with a fourteen year old behind the wheel on a rainy day and a winding road.

Creating vs. Sustaining

There are many excellent books, seminars, and sermons on purpose. Chances are you have either read or heard more than one. This article does not seek to add something new to the breadth of excellent materials available; rather, it strives to instruct you on how to skillfully implement your purpose—to know God and enjoy Him forever—in the parts of life that often distract us from our purpose.

Before moving to application, however, it is necessary to pause and consider how God has designed (e.g., talents, gifts, attributes, gender, nationality, residence, etc...) and equipped (e.g., experiences, relationships, work/school setting, etc...) you to specifically *know Him and enjoy Him forever*. If this is not clear to you at this point, skip to the final page of reflection questions. These are designed to assist you in formulating a personal purpose statement.

When the Going Gets Tough...

Five parts of life often cause people to digress from their God-given purpose. First, there is the repetitive, monotonous, enthusiasm-draining cycle of life that we will call *the mundane*. Second, there is the physically, mentally, and spiritually demanding parts of life that do not replenish what they drain from our souls which we will call *the difficult*.

Third, there is the pervasive anxiety of a self-perpetuating to do list, unending number of “should’s,” and ever-teasing “like-to’s” that we will call *business*. Fourth, there are those moments when the constellation of wrong people, wrong time, and wrong word/action line up in such a way as to make the aura of your face crimson red that we will call *the embarrassing*. Finally, there are the times when every morsel of my effort, intelligence, blood, sweat, and tears are utterly insufficient that is devastatingly known as *failure*.

These five struggles tempt us to quit, give up, run away, hide, or in some other way depart from the purpose for which we were created. The rest of this article seeks to demonstrate how dying to self, as opposed to focusing on self, equips us to navigate these difficult terrains without losing our bearing on the glory of God.

The Mundane: *David the Shepherd*

In many ways heroic actions are easier than repetitive actions even though they are more costly. It is easier for a secret service agent to get caught in the rush of the moment and risk his life to save the president, than it is for someone to care for an unresponsive loved one who needs to be fed, bathed, and changed. The latter task is hard, disheartening, repetitious, unnoticed, isolating, and depressing.

While a bit cumbersome, the following quote by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1996) from *Meditations on the Cross* ties this theme of mundane suffering with the cross of Christ:

It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to a human order than in the freedom of one’s own, personal, responsible deed. It is infinitely easier to suffer in company than alone. It is infinitely easier to suffer publicly and with honor than out of the public eye and in disgrace. It is infinitely easier to suffer through the engagement of one’s physical being than through the Spirit. Christ suffered in freedom, alone, out of the public eye and in disgrace, in body and soul, and likewise subsequently many Christians along with him (p. 27).

The number of tasks that fit this description are numerous: getting an education, maintaining a living, a job with a high degree of routine, or religious practice that has become ritualized. Consider David in this context; not the powerful, warrior-king David, but the anointed shepherd boy in waiting. Even before David was the anointed shepherd boy, he was just *shepherd boy*—day after day of tending stupid sheep.

David had a harp, a sling shot, and a heart for God. For years he had no grand mission beyond green grass, fresh water, cool shade, and stay awake. Yet these days were not wasted. David became excellent with his sling shot and used it to slay Goliath (I Samuel 17). David mastered the harp and played it to tame King Saul’s madness (I Samuel 16). David cultivated a heart for God that protected most of his rule from the corrupting influence of power.

The most impressive part of the David as shepherd boy is that he worked so hard not knowing he would be king. Had David known he was preparing to inaugurate the Messianic line, his preparation would be expected. As it was, his situation was eerily like ours. He was stuck doing life and it stunk (quite literally if you have ever been around sheep).

Often boredom can be misinterpreted as low self-esteem. I am not enjoying life; therefore I must not love myself enough. Boredom is not a problem of self-assessment, but one of purpose being mired in life. The mundane ought to cause us to evaluate whether we have grown accustomed to excitement and a constant desire for pleasure. If not, then the call is to decipher how to find meaning in the mundane.

Steps to Overcome: Purpose is difficult to sustain when life is mundane. Here are several truths and application steps to consider in order to assist you in maintaining a sense of purpose.

1. Remember God does not waste experiences. In your daily devotions, study the life of Moses (Exodus 2-20; Deuteronomy 31-34) and make notes of how God used the disruptive details in his life in the same way He did in David's life.
2. Examine your talents, passions, and opportunities. Pick one and set aside time each week to cultivate it. Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." The battle of the mundane is often caused by not taking time to relish the good gifts of God.
3. List your struggles, sufferings, and disappointments. Consider the segment(s) of people who share these experiences. Pray that God would give you a voice out of these difficulties to reach out to this people group.
4. Reflect on the virtues of perseverance and endurance. Keep track of how God is growing these in your life. Make it a daily practice to thank Him for one way He is shaping your character.

The Difficult: *Jeremiah*

Purpose does not equal success. Unfortunately, having a clearly defined, unifying agenda for the decision-making process does not guarantee that every, or even most, endeavors will reach their desired end. Jeremiah is an example of a God-fearing man, with a God-given purpose who by most definitions of success was a failure. Israel did not respond to his preaching. Jeremiah so frequently cried out to God in frustration over the ineffectiveness of his ministry that he is commonly known as the "weeping prophet."

In Jeremiah's case ineffectiveness was not a reason to change directions. The lack of responsiveness was not God "closing a door." It was God leaving His people without excuse. God was giving a living commentary on the hardness of humanity's heart (Jeremiah 17:9-10). God called Jeremiah to fail in order to advance His agenda for salvation history. Jeremiah's message (1:9-10) was one of difficulty:

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Difficulty, as Jeremiah demonstrates, is a time to reflect on one's life, "Correct me, O Lord, but in justice; not in your anger, lest you bring me to nothing (10:24)." Jeremiah faced difficulty with a humble heart acknowledging that he may have acted outside of God's will. But God did not respond to Jeremiah's prayer with conviction. All difficulty is not divine punishment. If this were true, Paul could not say:

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:3-5).

Christ-honoring purpose must be able to endure difficulty or else it is futile in a sin-scarred world. Suffering is real and Satan knows it is an effective tool to discourage God's people.

Difficulty should not be misinterpreted as low self-esteem. The despair of a long battle is a matter of fatigue and ebbing hope. In these times we are called to acknowledge our insufficiency in order to fully rely on God (II Corinthians 2:15-17). The arduous effort of difficult times ought not to cause us to look within to our own resources, but to God and His sufficiency.

Steps to Overcome: Difficulty has no universal cause. We cannot carte blanche attribute it to personal sin, the activity of Satan, God's refining process, or the general effects of the Fall (it may be any of these, but it is not always one of these in particular). In the effort to maintain purpose in the midst of difficulty consider the following.

1. Examine your actions and motives for sin in deed and motive. Self-examination is a good and right response to difficulty. Make sure that your purpose has not become tarnished by a self-serving agenda.
2. Enlist fellow believers to pray with you, encourage you, weep with you, and to exhort you to persevere. Suffering is not an individual sport. Let the church be the church to you at this time.
3. Take time for Sabbath rest. Difficulty can be exhausting physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Purpose is balanced, not consuming. If we are not taking time to restore our minds and bodies, it may be that purpose was mutated into obsession.
4. Read through the Psalms that reflect upon difficulties. Journal your experiences like the Psalmist so you will have a record of God's faithfulness.

Busyness: *The Tower of Babel*

People without purpose can be, and often are, busy. This is not as obvious as one might think. It is easy to accept the false notion that those who lack purpose are wandering aimlessly through life. This is sometimes true. But it is just as frequent that people without purpose are running through life gasping for air and on the brink of burn out.

A major obstacle to purpose is busyness. One might think, "I have too much to do to select what is most important, to analyze my task list, and weed out tertiary matters." A frequent example is the person who says, "I'm too busy to pray. I know it's important; that I should do it, but when?"

For an example of how busyness, or an intense focus, can be an obstacle to Christ-honoring purpose consider the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). These people had a clear objective—build a tower. Their objective was God-related—their tower was to reach into the heavens. Yet their busyness and focus was the very thing that brought them under God's judgment.

Purpose is that which separates the good from the best. There are nearly an infinite number of good tasks to which individuals could commit themselves. There is also a massive collection within the Body of Christ to whom those tasks are to be disseminated. Christ-honoring purpose is the interpreting of my life—and its assortment of "trivial" details—within the context of the advancement of God's kingdom.

At the tower of Babel there was a competing kingdom which perpetuated their busyness. It was the kingdom of reputation. They wanted to build the tower to "make a name for ourselves (v. 4)." A key element of developing a Christ-honoring purpose is to increasingly reduce the level of self-interest that

motivates our behavior. As John the Baptist said, “He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease (John 8:30).”

Self-interest may not be what motivates your over-flowing day planner. Perhaps it is people-pleasing or some other legitimately good, but secondary cause that drives you to squeeze thirty-six hours into a day. It is important to identify the motive that fuels our busyness or we will just become more efficient at being distracted and serving our idols.

Steps to Overcome: Busyness is a difficult trap to escape from. Every moment you spend planning your escape is a moment you spend further solidifying your ensnarement. Steps in overcoming busyness are by necessity very logistical in nature. The protocol below does not include the wise use of a time management device (e.g., day planner), although these can be helpful.

1. Think of your week in terms of a 168 hour pie, that is seven twenty-four hour days. Given your roles in life, how would God ideally divide those 168 hours? God has not called you to do more than will fit into those hours. Write out your ideal distribution of that time.
2. Make a list of the things that do consume your 168 hour week. To save time keep a piece of paper or small notebook with you and take brief notes as you do life.
3. Compare your two lists. Mark those things that can be eliminated immediately, in six weeks, in three months, and in six months. Develop an exit strategy for these things. Involve at least one trusted, Christian friend in this process. This type of priority decision is difficult to make clearly in the midst of a hectic schedule.
4. Pray through the matter until you can realize that you should not feel guilty for relinquishing responsibilities that do not fit your God-given purpose. Guilt-motivation is not what God made us to run on and is a fuel with many unpleasant emissions.

The Embarrassing: *Philemon*

Pride is often the dark side of purpose. Once purpose is found, it is easy to think “I’ve arrived.” Fulfilling our purpose can lead to an ease and productivity that tempts us to believe that we have become self-sufficient.

Onesimus—the escaped slave who was saved under the preaching of Paul—had finally arrived. He had become a personal assistant to the greatest missionary-evangelist of all time. For once in his life he was doing something significant that did not bring shame or guilt. He was contributing to a cause higher than forced labor or self-interest.

Now he had to return, repent, and accept the responsibility for his actions. I can only imagine the rationalization that must have run through Onesimus’ mind, “It is more productive for God’s kingdom for me to help Paul than to pay for my sin. After all, I wasn’t even a believer when I escaped. Philemon is a leader in his church. He should be happy I’m saved. He’d probably rather I help Paul. This is just a waste of time. Philemon should be honored that one of his former slaves is an assistant to the Apostle to the Gentiles.”

Productivity does not trump duty. Productivity outside of Christian integrity is counter-productive. Therefore, Paul sent Onesimus back to make things right with Philemon. This demotion and requirement of confession—Onesimus was not only a fugitive, but also a thief (v 18)—had to be embarrassing.

Humility and selflessness are essential components of a Christ-honoring purpose. Purpose navigates us not only through the dark night of our soul, but also the red tinge of our cheeks. Christ-honoring purpose takes us through embarrassment to character; instead of taking us around embarrassment to compromise.

A sentimental self-love often causes us to avoid, or offer ourselves an out, from what is embarrassing. A Christ-honoring sense of purpose leads us to evaluate whether our embarrassment is a necessary part of Godly sorrow (II Corinthians 7:10-11), a result of over-valuing the opinion of others, the fruit of over-estimating our own importance, or an unwillingness to acknowledge weakness.

Steps to Overcome: Reputation often tempts us to abandon purpose. We become self-protecting instead of staying the course of self-denial (Luke 9:23). Here are several truths and application steps to consider assisting you in maintaining a sense of purpose when facing embarrassment.

1. In the midst of successful times, never lose sight of your dependence on God. We have purpose only by the grace of God. How we respond to success and to what we attribute our success profoundly influences the way we respond to embarrassment.
2. Make it a spiritual discipline to do things outside of your comfort zone. Not just to broaden your horizons, but also to prepare you for times of admitting weakness.
3. Remember to examine your heart when you are embarrassed. Our emotions reveal aspects of our heart that often go unnoticed. Seize the opportunity of embarrassment to allow God to spotlight misplaced priorities of our heart.
4. Reflect on what it means to consider everything loss for the pleasure of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:8).

Failure: *Peter's Denial of Christ*

“At this point why not throw in the towel? Haven't I done enough damage already? I'm tired of being the Most Valuable Player for the *other team*. I'll make more progress when I quit walking in the wrong direction.” These are the types of thoughts that haunt the person who is staring failure in the face. This is the mindset that makes purpose and failure seem antithetical.

Yet, if we are ever going to live out our purpose, we must do so in the face of failure. Again, we are sinful, we battle a flesh nature, and full redemption does not occur until Christ's return. As sinful people, we will fail. We will have to admit our mistakes, over-sights, errors, and sin. These truths make it inevitable that any purpose which lasts must face failure.

On the subject of purpose in the face of failure, the apostle Peter provides a vivid example. Peter, the outspoken disciple, the one who said he would die before he allowed Christ to be crucified, is the one who denied even knowing Jesus three times to a mere servant girl.

Before judging Peter too harshly, however, it should be counted to his credit that only he and John risked following Jesus to His trials. The other disciples fled fearing for their lives after Gethsemane. Peter's loyalty to Christ—a purpose statement—led him to go farther than 87.5% of Jesus' most intimate disciples. Therefore, it should be noted that failure does not necessitate a lack of purpose, an insufficient purpose, or a lack of intimacy with Christ. Moral failure does mean a competing purpose has grown too strong in our hearts.

One of the temptations that accompanies failure is to immediately question our salvation or deeply ponder why we sinned. We sin because we are sinners. This means we innately—as a result of the fall—become distracted from our ultimate purpose—to know and enjoy God—by lesser purposes (e.g., work, comfort, knowledge, pleasure etc...).

Peter did fail. He momentarily chose the purpose of self-protection over the purpose of honoring Christ. He could not have saved Christ's life even if he were faithful. Theologically, God would not have allowed it. Logistically, he did not hold enough political clout with the Sanhedrin or the Roman officials. From this we see that purpose is not always about results. Peter failed not because he could have saved the day and did not, but because he surrendered his identity as a Christ-follower for self-preservation.

It is dangerous to attribute failure to a lack of self-love. It makes our sin primarily against ourselves, not God. We seek to love ourselves more than to overcome our failures, not to repent to God for our foolishness and misplaced priorities. Self-love then becomes the primary purpose for which we live and loving God becomes one of the reasons we use to feel good about ourselves.

Steps to Overcome: The pivotal question for this article is: how did Peter regain his purpose? How did Peter resist the temptation to give up and go back to being a fisherman? Here are several truths and application steps to consider assisting you in maintaining a sense of purpose in the face of failure.

1. Admit your failure to everyone affected by your sin. Peter's repentance and restoration were in front of the disciples. Purpose requires courage and selflessness. Peter did not raise the excuse that ten of the disciples scattered like scared field mice. He answered Jesus question "Do you love me more than these?" directly, honestly, with vulnerability, and publicly.
2. Accept responsibility for your failure and make appropriate restitution. When Peter wanted to know of the consequences other disciples would face (Luke 21:20-22), Jesus returned Peter's focus to his responsibilities and need for restoration.
3. Remember who God called you to be. Peter was still the one who uttered the confession upon which God would build his church (Matthew 16:18). He was to be the leader of the apostles and a key figure in organizing this awkward new entity known as the church. His restoration was difficult, but because he embraced it with repentance and humility, his purpose did not change. Failure is not fatal in light of God's grace.
4. Realize that while any particular failure is not inevitable, failure is. This truth has to do with expectation. Never should a believer expect to sin in a given situation (I Corinthians 10:13), but neither should a believer expect to live without sin (I John 1:8-10). Failure does not disrupt purpose as much when we have a right understanding of who we are.

Conclusion

The difficulty of Christ-honoring purpose is not defining what the term means. The other elements of the portraits series are more complex. Challenge arises from sustaining purpose. Many trees have given their lives for the paper on which a multitude of purpose statements were written but never fulfilled.

Often the assailants that destroy purpose are not catastrophic. Catastrophes call us to action. They awaken our senses and refocus our priorities. We would gear up for a direct attack from the enemy. The most effective assassins of purpose are boredom, repetition, a hectic schedule, shame, and regret.

As you have read this article, you have been given twenty points of application to overcome these stealthy perpetrators. The battle begins now. Will you identify several application points to enact? If not, chances are one of these enemies will sabotage the good intentions that are just now beginning to sprout in your imagination.

REFERENCES:

Blackaby, H. & King, C.. (1994) *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman.

Bonhoeffer, D. (1996) *Meditations on the Cross*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

McDow, M. & Reid, A. (1997) *Firefall: How God Shaped History Through Revivals*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman.

Checklist for A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Purpose

For each item place a check in the blank if you can provide evidence that you regularly exhibit this attitude, behavior, or character trait. If you struggle to be able to give a fair self-assessment of an item, ask people who know you well. In the parenthesis beside each heading, rank the five areas of this article according the level of disruption they create for your purpose (10 being most disruption; 1 being the least).

The Mundane ()

- _____ I am able to stay focused when life is repetitious.
- _____ I can identify how the seemingly insignificant details of my life contribute to my purpose.
- _____ My disposition is pleasant regardless of the time of year or season of my work.

Busyness ()

- _____ I can articulate my priorities and live them out.
- _____ Anxiety due to an over-whelming number of tasks rarely disrupts my life.
- _____ People can depend on me to fulfill my commitments.

The Difficult ()

- _____ I can face challenges without disruption to other areas of my life.
- _____ I am willing to ask for help from others.
- _____ I rarely quit a task or project before it is complete.

The Embarrassing ()

- _____ It is easy for me to admit I made a mistake.
- _____ I can be successful without focusing the attention on myself.
- _____ I am able to acknowledge my own short-comings with grace and appropriate humor.

Failure ()

- _____ I rarely beat myself up with guilt and shame after I fail.
- _____ I accept responsibility for my failure and avoid blame-shifting.
- _____ I understand and take comfort in the fact that failure is not final in light of God's grace.

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*** The items left unmarked should become your agenda items for developing Christ-honoring purpose.

Reflective Questions

On a separate sheet of paper answer the following questions. The questions are intended to assist you with the preliminary and foundational step of articulating how your specific purpose emerges from the chief end of man—to know God and enjoy Him forever.

1. Make a list of each of the following:
 - a. Things I enjoy doing
 - b. Talents and abilities God has blessed me with
 - c. Unique or difficult life experiences
 - d. People groups with whom I interact or have influence
 - e. Needs for ministering within my church or community

2. Rewrite the following segment of the Westminster Catechism in your own words.

QUESTION: What is the chief end of man?
ANSWER: The chief end of man is to know God and enjoy Him forever.

3. Do you expect God to try to hide His purpose for you or make it more complex than you can understand? What part of you wants to answer yes to this question?

“What is God’s will for my life?” is not the best question to ask. I think the right question is simply, “What is God’s will?” Once I know God’s will, then I can adjust my life to Him and His purposes.... The focus needs to be on God and His purposes, not my life!... God doesn’t usually give you a one-time assignment and leave you there forever. Yes, you may be placed in one job at one place for a long time; but God’s assignments come to you on a daily basis.... God is far more interested in a love relationship with you than He is in what you can do for Him. His desire is for you to love Him (p. 18).

-- Excerpts from *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby & Claude King (1994)

4. Write a purpose statement using the material above.

5. What interferes with you consistently fulfilling this purpose? Keep this in mind as you read, review, and reflect on the article.