

# Purpose ... and Peace

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"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.<sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.<sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

In university, my friend Rob was a party animal. He was more interested in having fun than in doing well in school. He didn't even know what he wanted his major to be. So he went to lots of parties, socialized with lots of friends, went to lots of concerts ... he also went to few classes, attended few study sessions, and studied for very few hours! As you can imagine, Rob's grades suffered. In fact, he was barely passing.

About his third or fourth year of university, Rob decided what he wanted to do. He wanted to go into Business. It certainly wasn't an easy degree, and it would require several more years of school. Yet an amazing thing happened. He set aside specific days in which he would only study, no matter what party invitation popped up. He studied hard to understand the material. His grades went from a C average to a straight A student. My friend had found purpose.

Those of you who do not attend Christ Church may not know that we have started a program where we are reading the book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, by Rick Warren. This book is written like a devotional, which discusses over 40 days what the Bible says is our purpose in life. Even if you don't attend Christ Church, you might want to consider picking up a copy of this book and reading it.

Everyone wants purpose in life. We all want some meaning and purpose in all that we do. Purpose gives direction. Purpose gives fulfillment. Purpose gives meaning. Purpose gives motivation. It is only natural that as Christians we would desire to find God's purpose for our lives.

But if purpose is so important, why does it seem so elusive? Often our jobs seem less than ideal, and we think another position would be more ... well, purposeful! Or we wonder if the things we do inside and outside of work are really making a difference in the world.

This sense of lack of purpose can strike particularly close to home for the single person. We see a family with wife, and husband, and kids, and we think, "Now, they have purpose: caring for husband, for wife, for family." Are we on the right track? Our purpose seems like a train track, only we can't find the right track!

My friend Beatrice took her son to New York City for some vacation time. When it came time to come home, she went to Penn Station to catch the train home. But she didn't know

where to find her train. Beatrice wandered around from one section to the next, but couldn't make any sense about where she was, or where she was supposed to go. Everyone was walking quickly from one place to another, anxious to catch their proper train. They all seemed to know where they were going, and she seemed terribly out of place, like the only foreigner who did not know where she was going.

Is this what God's purpose is like? Do you feel like God's purpose is like a railroad track, with you like my friend Beatrice, desperate to find the right track for our lives? Do you feel like you haven't even left the station?!

Is God's purpose like a train track?

Others of us feel like we started life on track, but that our plans got hopelessly and irreparably derailed. You had a husband to share your dreams with - but then he walked out on you. You had kids to support, and nurture - but then your wife got custody. You had God's plan figured out, but then things went terribly wrong. Is God's purpose like a train track? Is it like a train track, and my life is permanently derailed, and I don't see any way to get back on track? Is that how you feel sometimes?

Is God's purpose like a train track?

We say of someone with a single focus that they have a "one-track mind." This can be a compliment, if someone is devoted to some noble cause. But often we use it in a negative sense. "He has a one-track mind," which means he is neglecting other important aspects in life. Some of us relate to being on that train track. We feel like we have left the station and headed down the track - only it's the wrong track! We've headed down a career path, but now we think it isn't fulfilling, or doesn't match our skills or personality. Or our decisions about marriage, or divorce, or relationships, or sexual indiscretions have taken us down a track that we realize now was not the best. Or our thoughts, or time, our priorities have not been what they should, and now we are being drawn in directions we know aren't right. But trains are not like cars; they can't just pick up and turn around at a moment's notice, because they are on tracks and headed in a specific direction. Once you are on that train, you can't just turn around. And so, in a similar matter, we feel like our lives are outside our control, that it has a destination all its own, that we are heading a direction we do not prefer, but feel powerless to do anything about it. Is God's purpose like a train track, and I've gotten on the wrong train, heading down the wrong track, with no way to turn around?

Is God's purpose like a train track?

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not need anything. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."

The psalmist draws a mental picture, a beautiful image of us as the shepherds and God as the Shepherd. I notice several things in this small passage.

## 1. A Pasture

The first thing I notice is that God gives us a pasture.

Some of you were at a retreat a few years ago in Vermont, when I compared God's will to a pasture. Rather than a train track, where you can get off track, or on the wrong track, picture God's will as a pasture. Where can a sheep graze in a pasture? Anywhere it wants to! In the same way, God gives us lots of opportunities and possibilities in this life for where to live, what to do. This should help decrease our anxiety in life, because we don't have to worry if we have somehow gotten off track with God's will or purpose in our life. We can find purpose and contentment where we are.

Sometimes God can guide us in different ways. He can close a door. He can give us direct guidance through revelation. But more often than not, he lets us decide. When a child is young, a parent needs to tell him *what* to do: "put on your coat." They don't need to know why, and they probably don't care. They need to trust the parent. As they get older, they need to know both *what* to do and *why* to do it. "Put your coat on; it's cold out and you might catch a cold." The older child demands to know why the parent requires things, and wants to know that there is reason behind the commands. Eventually a child is old enough that you only need to tell them *why*: "Did you notice the weather report today? It sure is cold." As a child becomes a mature adult, you no longer need to tell them exactly what to do. The mature person can figure this out for himself. A parent longs that his children grow up to become adults who can make wise decisions for themselves. God treats us as adults, not children, not telling us everything we should do like kindergarteners, but longing that we grow to maturity to make wise decisions.

It is not wrong to make goals, and even to work to achieve those goals. But we waste so much of life if we fail to live the life God gives us here and now. You don't need a different job to serve God. You don't need a husband or wife to have a full and joyful life. It is not wrong to desire marriage, kids, and a fulfilling job. But none of these things can take the place of God. Thank God for the numerous opportunities of decision.

I must admit with humility that I am still trying to learn these lessons. I learned recently that I had to move to a new apartment. I must admit to having a fair amount of anxiety over this whole ordeal. But then I found the perfect place. In a quiet family neighborhood. Bigger than my existing place. God was good.

The couple was accepting references, and was going to make a decision after seeing several applicants. I was confident they would call back. But they never called. I finally found out that they had given the place to someone else.

God had closed the door. I was very discouraged. But then God lifted my spirits. Within 24 hours I got calls from two other places. They both wanted me as a tenant.

God could have made things clearer to me if he had given me only one choice. Do you think I complained? No! I thanked God for loving me so much that he gave me two opportunities, and gave me the wisdom and freedom to decide for myself which one I wanted.

Do you feel like you can't find the right track in *your* life? Realize that God has given you a vast *field* of opportunities. His concern is less which one you choose, and more how much you are faithful to Him.

## 2. A Green Pasture.

God gives us not just a pasture of opportunities, but also a *green* pasture. It is a pasture lush with rich food for the eating. We just need to look around to find it.

Sometimes life doesn't seem like it is rich with blessing. We tend to look at the pasture God has given us, and think that "the grass is greener on the other side of the fence!" But seeing our situation as a rich green field has less to do with where we are at, and more to do with how we look at our situation. Do you view the glass as half full, or half empty? God wants us to see and appreciate what we have, rather than always wanting to be somewhere else.

I heard a story once about a woman who, once she got on one track, she always felt like she should be on another.

"First I was dying to finish high school and start college.  
Then I was dying to finish college and start working.  
Then I was dying to marry and have children.  
Then I was dying for my children to grow old enough for school  
so I could return to work.  
Then I was dying to retire.  
And now, I am dying...  
And suddenly I realize I forgot to live."

This person kept looking for the next track desiring where she was going next, but forgot to appreciate where she was.

The business community has stumbled upon this concept. There is a small book called "Fish" that you can find in most bookstores. It talks about a fish market in Seattle. Now, there is nothing exciting about working in a fish market. It is stinky, smelly, fishy, dirty, ... and did I mention stinky? There was a tremendous morale problem. People just didn't like working there.

Well the managers, workers, and everyone there got together and decided, "Look, we are all here for several hours each week. We each have our own things going on at home, things beyond our control. We may not think this is the greatest job. But while we may not be able to change what we are doing, but there is one thing we can control: our attitude." And with that, they made a conscious decision to set aside any frustrations at the door, and do everything to make this the most fun place to work anywhere.

So they joked. They laughed. They made games of things they had to get done, rather than thinking of them as drudgery. Customers noticed the difference. Need to get a fish across the room? Why carry it when you can toss it across the room - and get a lot more laughs in the process! They would get customers involved too, standing on tables and trying to toss - or catch - their purchase. They were having fun - but it was the same work! Soon people would come just to watch these crazy people and their fish antics. Sales went up, people took notice, and companies began asking this small fish company to give motivational talks on how to boost company morale and productivity. The workers now said they wouldn't work anywhere else - but it was the same work! They had learned the secret of enjoying what they did, making the most of where they were at.

Of course, these two business writers have merely reworded what God has taught us all along: (Phil 4:12) "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."

Can you really be content in dire circumstances? Is it possible to be fulfilled when life turns out not like you planned? Once I was in Mexico City serving as a short-term missionary, a bit of an irony because I was having my own spiritual doubts. Was God really out there, when He didn't seem to be answering my prayers like I wanted? We went to visit a leper colony, and I spoke to this one leper who turned out to be a Christian. We had come to witness to the lepers, but in God's sense of humor he turned the tables and this leper witnessed to me. I asked him tough questions about how whether his severe illness ever caused him to doubt his faith. He told me that his illness caused him to trust in Christ and love him even more. This man looked at life through God's eyes, and was able to find joy where he was. I still do not understand how this happens, but I understand that God can help people through situations they would rather not have endured.

Do you feel like someone - or something - has gotten your life off track? Recognize that, through God's eyes, you can find peace - and contentment - and joy - where you are, regardless of your circumstances. He's given you not just pasture, but also a green pasture, full of blessings when you look for them.

### **3. A green pasture with a fence**

How does farmer keep animals from wandering off a green pasture? He builds a fence. God gives us lots of freedom, but he also wants to protect us from life's dangers. So he builds a fence of his guidelines, his law, to keep us in the boundaries of his will.

What is God's will, his purpose for our lives? It is usually not job "x" or city "y", although sometimes he gives specific calls. Rather, he gives us general boundaries, the "fences" of our lives, because He loves us and wants to protect us. Guidelines like, "Do not steal" and "do not lie". It deals not just with actions, but also with attitudes, such as "Do not

envy”. Jesus summarized the law in two commandments: “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” and “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now we may think that laws are very “old testament,” and that Jesus freed us from such legalistic thinking. But Jesus said, “I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.” And he states, “If you love me, you will obey my commands.” Jesus wants us to follow Him, not as a way to salvation, but *because* of his free gift of salvation.

Close your eyes for a minute. Picture yourself in a cage. How do you feel? Trapped? Confined? Want to get out? Now what if I told you that you were a diver, and that that cage was a shark cage, and sharks were circling the cage, drooling for some fresh meat. Now do you want to get out of the cage? You see, fence can be used to keep things in, and they can be used to keep things out. God’s moral rules to live by are for our benefit.

An elementary school looked at the chain link fence around the playground and they thought, “These kids are going to be emotionally scarred. They must feel like they are in a zoo with this fence around.” So they took the fence down. And what do you think happened? The kids were afraid! They huddled in the center of the playground and their eyes darted furtively about, scared that any moment now someone was going to walk by and snatch one of them and run away. God’s commands are a security that protects us from the dangers of sin.

Do you feel like you are on the wrong track in your life? Work to stay within the fences of God’s moral law. This doesn’t have to be a big project. You can take little steps. God says, in Deuteronomy 6:

<sup>5</sup> Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. <sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

You don’t need to become a missionary or become a CEO or become a wife or become a father to fulfill God’s purpose in life. You can start this week, tomorrow morning, with devotions. You can start tonight when you lie down, praying to God and reading from his Word. If you don’t know where to start, you could use this book as a starting point. God will be ready and eager to meet with you. Because of His love for us, he has given us the fence of his moral guidelines.

#### **4. A green pasture with a fence and a shepherd**

God has given us a vast pasture of opportunities, green with blessings, with a fence of protection through his guidelines or moral law. But there is a problem. We still have a tendency to wander past the fence. The point is, we can’t every get to God’s green pasture on our own. The Bible says, “We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has gone to his own way.” Sin deceives us and entices us, and all too often we willingly give in. And when we stray away, we cry out like lost sheep, unable to find our way back to the pasture.

Which is why the fourth and last item God gives us is so important. God gives us a vast pasture, with green grazing, a fence of protection – and a Shepherd to carry us back to the pasture when we go astray. In Matthew 18 Jesus describes a man who loses one sheep out of a

hundred. The owner goes to search for that single lost sheep to bring it back to the fold. We are that lost sheep. We need help to get back to the green pastures. God the Father sent Jesus to bring us back.

God the Father sent God the Son to die on a cross, to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus rose from the dead, giving us hope and assurance that we, too, can one day rise from the dead and join our Lord. We cannot do it on our own. The Good News of the Bible is – we don't need to.

Do you not feel satisfied with the life you have? Do you wish you were on a different track? You don't have to *do* something different or *be* something different or *wait* for some future event to have peace. This week. Tonight! Jesus said, "Peace I leave you. My peace I give you." He said elsewhere:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Don't stop looking for your purpose in life, but don't be burdened by it. Goals are not sinful; worrying about life's goals is. We don't have to worry, because we can trust God. We can trust God. God's given us many things so that this life would not become a burden: a field of opportunities, green pastures of blessings in the midst of life's struggles, a fence of guidelines to give us boundaries, and most importantly a Shepherd to guide us and comfort us and be with us all the way. He wants to be with you every step of the way.

We have a slogan at RICSF: "Single, not solo." We are a very diverse group here: different ages, some men, and some women. But we have one thing in common: We are all single for one reason or another. But we need not go through life solo. Don't go through life solo.

Have you been trying to make it in life on your own? Have you felt like you could somehow earn God's favor? Or perhaps you have felt just the opposite, like there was absolutely no hope for you. If you can't please God, why bother trying? But we can please God, through Jesus Christ. We must lean on him. Don't go through life solo.

If you want to trust and lean on him, will you pray with me? "Heavenly Father, I am so often like a sheep without a shepherd. I need Jesus Christ to guide me, to shepherd me, to bring me home. I need you to be with me always, through thick and thin, good times and bad times, for support, comfort, direction, deliverance from my own sinful tendencies. Lord, dwell in my life. I surrender my life to you. Amen."

If you prayed this prayer for the first time, I want you to do two things.

1. Tell someone. Tell a Christian friend. Tell me! The Bible says to "confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord."
2. Take a small step toward meeting with this Shepherd. You might start praying regularly, and reading a bit of your Bible each day. You could start by reading this book. You could even join one of the many Bible studies that are beginning next week to discuss this book. Christians are meant to be in fellowship with one another. And the same God who saved you is eager to meet with you.