

“WHAT ON EARTH AM I HERE FOR? (PDL 1)”

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Why are we here? We may know why we're here this morning (although it would be interesting to ask around and see what your answers would be!), but why are we here on this planet at this time? What's the point of it all? Where are we going? Where's the purpose to our lives? It's not a new question. The Preacher who wrote those words we've just read was voicing the concerns of those around him getting on for three millennia ago. And the same questions have been asked in one form or another from then until now. People want to know what the point of life is.

I was browsing round a bookshop in Sutton Coldfield earlier this week and there was a whole section of the ground floor devoted to “Self Help” books – books which attempt to give people some kind of purpose, some goal, some aim in life. They were written by all kinds of different people with all kinds of expertise that they wanted to share – so desperate were they to share the secrets of life that they were charging a mere £10.99 to the gullible punters. But that is only the tip of the iceberg, as it were. Look around you – on television, in the shops, in the newspapers – and you will see people trying to work out what on earth we're here for using ancient philosophies, new philosophies (more or less the same thing, just a different vocabulary), pop psychology, analysis, different forms of religion, retreats and so on.

Most people who want to find an answer to the problem are encouraged to look within themselves. Discover your goals. Work out who you are. As one pithy aphorism puts it: “*You don't learn who you are – you create who you are.*” And not too far from here there is a public building with this supposedly inspirational saying displayed on a banner: “*Life has no point except the point which you give it.*” Now, I think I know what that's trying to say, but ultimately it is a highly depressing slogan by which to try and live your life. It is very much in the tradition of the existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and his merry band of followers. (Actually they were anything but merry!)

You see, many, many people spend all their lives trying to look for the point to their existence, trying to find the answer within, when actually the point to life isn't dependent on them at all. There is a purpose to our lives and that purpose is not something within ourselves, but external. We are here for a reason. There is a point to it all. And over the next six weeks we are going to try and discover what that is with the help of the Bible, some reflection here on a Sunday morning, and, for those of you who are really interested, some small discussion groups during the week and Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

But to start with, we have to make an assumption. We could spend some time trying to prove it, but I'm actually going to take it as read. The great philosopher and mathematician, Bertrand Russell, once said, “*Unless you assume a God, the question of life's purpose is meaningless.*” Russell himself was unable to make that assumption and remained an atheist throughout his life. His writings show that he was struggling to find any purpose to life and photographs of him show a man who always looked pretty fed up with things. (There may be a link there!) There is a God. There is something beyond us and beyond this immediate moment. That **something** is a **someone** and we will call him God.

Because, you see, this is not about you. And it's not about now. It's all about God and eternity. It's about the God David addresses in *Psalms 139* – the God who is everywhere; the God who is eternal; the God who made you; the God who has had a purpose for you from before the beginning of time (*Psalms 139:16b*). Bound up in all our assumptions about God is the idea that he is the Creator, the one who put this universe together and who put us in it, who created us – you and me. Now, if you make something – whether it is a simple Meccano machine or a Duplo truck, or a highly complex electronic computer or space probe – you know how it works. You know the best way for it to be used. You know what its purpose is (even if it is just a decorative bauble, it has a purpose – to be looked at and admired).

Well, God made us. So he knows best how we work and he knows what we're made for. There are common purposes to our lives – all human beings share some purposes – and there are individual purposes to our lives – I don't necessarily have the same specific purpose in life that you do. And God has given us the intelligence to seek that purpose in him, and he's given us a book of instructions about finding that purpose and getting on with living it out: the Bible. Over the next few weeks, then, we are going to use that book and we're going to use our God-given intelligence to try and find out our common purposes and maybe our individual purposes too – not by looking within, by all kinds of flaky navel-gazing, but by looking at God and what he has to say. Because he made us and he knows best. If you haven't got a copy of Rick Warren's book, (which is, at best, a guide to help you use the Bible properly, so don't assume he has the answers: he just tells you where to look for some of the answers and gives you a framework for thinking within) – if you haven't got a copy, then you can take a set of notes which have some of his points to ponder on the back (and that will be on the website following on from the sermon each week).

We all have different motivations for our lives, don't we? We behave as we do for certain reasons. For some of us there is a sense of guilt that drives us. For others it may be fear – fear of failure, fear of ridicule, fear of letting people down. It may be materialism that is our driving force – we want to **own** more and better things than other people because we feel it means **we** are therefore somehow better.. Some of you may be driven by a need to gain approval from others, to be the centre of attention, to be liked. Once again, they are essentially self-centred, self-generated purposes. In *Matthew 16:25*, Jesus says this (this is Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in *The Message*):

“Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?”

And St Paul writes this to the Christians in Rome (*Romans 8:5-8 – The Message*):

“Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own spiritual muscle but never get round to exercising it in real life. Those who trust God's action in them find that God's Spirit is in them – living and breathing God! Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. Focusing on the self is the opposite of focusing on God. Anyone completely absorbed in self ignores God, ends up thinking more about self than God. That person ignores who God is and what he is doing. And God isn't pleased at being ignored.”

God does have a plan for us, though. He tells his people through the prophet Jeremiah in *Jeremiah 29:11*, and they are words which I believe are still applicable today. God made you. And because he made you, you matter to him. And because you matter to him, he gives you a purpose, a reason for living. He knows that people who have no reason for living, who have no purpose in life, get fed up, depressed. That's not the life he wants for you. He wants you to get the very best out of life. That's what Jesus said was the main reason for his coming – in *John 10:10* he says, *“I came so people can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.”*

Realising that there is a purpose to life can give meaning to our lives. It **simplifies** things for us. We don't need to go rushing about trying everything to see if it works for us. We don't have to live our lives according to an agenda that other people have set for us, trying always to win their approval for what we do. It **focuses** our lives, too. We are freed from the need or the desire to spread our energies and our resources over all kinds of areas – we can concentrate on the things that we believe God wants us to do. That helps to relieve the stress that we can often feel and releases us from some of the pressures that we might otherwise find ourselves under. And it **motivates** us in our daily living. We know that we are moving towards a goal, that there is something worth doing – and it's worth doing because it's for God.

Now don't get me wrong: this doesn't mean that all your problems will be solved in one fell swoop. It doesn't mean that from now on life will be a bowl of cherries. There will still be obstacles to overcome, problems to solve, difficulties to confront. But it will be worth facing up to them, because you know that God has a reason for it all, that there is some kind of purpose in it all. It will be worth facing up to them

because it's for God – the one who created you and who loves you more than you could ever imagine. He'll help you. He'll strengthen you. He'll be there with you as you try to move forward. And there will be others who can support you, pray with you, pray for you. (That's partly the reason for the small groups.) In the end, though, it's all for God. It's all about him. It's all for his glory.

Over the next few weeks, between now and Easter, we will see just how we can get involved in that, in living lives that give glory to God. It happens through worship – which we'll look at next time. It happens through loving others, through becoming more like Jesus Christ, through serving other people with the gifts and abilities that God has specially given to us as individuals, through telling others about him and sharing what, I hope, we find with those who are still looking for meaning and purpose in their lives.

In the final analysis, though, if you want to get anything out of all this you have to answer a simple question – a simple question with profound consequences: **Who are you going to live for – yourself or God?** Are you going to continue trying to find your own meaning to life, trying to give life your own point – something which will change from day to day depending on your moods and on your circumstances? Or are you going to throw your lot in with God and try to discover where he might be leading you? Let's try and work together on this, supporting one another, discussing with one another, praying for one another

"THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE"

1. What on earth am I here for?

Read – Psalm 139 and Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Why are we here? A question that is asked by many people – and has been asked down through the centuries. The temptation is to look within oneself which is ultimately a fruitless exercise because we are such fickle beings. There is a need to look beyond oneself to try and discover meaning.

Bertrand Russell said: "Unless you assume a God, the question of life's purpose is meaningless."

This is all about God and about eternity. God made us, so he knows how best we should function and what the purpose of our existence is. Our purpose, our motivations, can be very mixed – guilt, fear, materialism, craving for approval, etc. They are self-generated purposes.

Look at *Matthew 16:25, Romans 8:5-8*. (If possible, read them from *The Message*.)

God does have a plan for us (*Jeremiah 29:11*). Realising that there is a purpose for us can give meaning to our lives. It can:

- **simplify**
- **focus**
- **motivate**

This doesn't mean, though, that our lives will become problem-free, but it does mean that we can know God's help and strength as we move towards our goal (and we can offer one another support and prayer).

In the final analysis, we are created by God to give him glory, which we do through:

- **worship**
- **loving others**
- **becoming more like Jesus Christ**
- **serving other with our gifts**
- **telling others about Jesus**

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS IN YOUR HOUSEGROUP

1. What do you think are the implications of the first sentence in the book – "It's not about you"?
2. What do you feel most people's lives are driven by? What has been the driving force in your life? Why do you think that is?
3. Up to this point, what image or metaphor has best described your life? A race, a circus, or something else?
4. If everyone understood that life on earth is really preparation for eternity, how do you think we might act differently?
5. What do people get attached to that keeps them from living for God's purposes?
6. What have **you** been attached to that could keep you from living for God's purposes?

SOME THINGS TO DO THIS WEEK

Day One

It's Not About Me

Remember: *"Everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him."*

(Colossians 1:16b)

In spite of all the advertising around me, how can I remind myself that life is really about living for God, not myself?

Day Two

I am not an accident

Remember: *"I am your Creator. You were in my care even before you were born."*

(Isaiah 44:2)

I know that God created me. What areas of my personality, background and physical appearance am I struggling to accept?

Day Three

Living on purpose is the path to peace

Remember: *"You, Lord, give perfect peace to those who keep their purpose firm and put their trust in you."*

(Isaiah 26:3)

What would my family and friends say is the driving force of my life? What do I want it to be?

Day Four

There is more to life than just here and now

Remember: *"This world is fading away, along with everything it craves. But if you do the will of God, you will live forever."*

(1 John 2:17)

Since I was made to last forever, what is the one thing I should stop doing and the one thing I should start doing today?

Day Five

Life is a test and a trust

Remember: *"Unless you are faithful in small matters, you won't be faithful in large ones"*

(Luke 16:10a)

What has happened to me recently that I now realise was a test from God?
What are the greatest matters God has entrusted to me?

Day Six

This world is not my home

Remember: *"So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."*

(2 Corinthians 4:18)

How should the fact that life on earth is just a temporary assignment change the way I am living right now?

Day Seven

It's all for him

Remember: *"For everything comes from God alone. Everything lives by his power and everything is for his glory."*

(Romans 11:36)

Where in my daily routine can I become more aware of God's glory?