

“What On Earth Am I Here For?”

*“I am your Creator. You were in my care even before you were born” (Isaiah 44:2a, CEV).
Ephesians 3:8-21 ¹*

You may be familiar with the huge radio telescope at Arecibo, Puerto Rico. A thousand feet in diameter and 167 feet deep, the telescope covers about twenty acres with three by six-foot aluminum panels, which together comprise the radio mirror. Suspended 450 feet above the reflector is a 900-ton platform that contains the radio receivers. The telescope looks like a huge satellite dish, and is in fact the largest telescope on Earth.

Among other things, the Arecibo telescope searches for faint radio signals that might give some clue to the existence of other intelligent life. So far as I know, there have been no “nibbles” yet.

People seem to take two basic positions about extraterrestrial beings. One the one hand, some folks believe it quite likely that extraterrestrial life exists, and that it’s only a matter of time until we find it—or are found by it. The other folks believe that what God is doing on planet Earth is entirely and absolutely unique. (And I suspect that quite a few of us don’t care one way or the other.)

Where would you be in such a discussion? While my own tendency is toward hoping for extraterrestrial life, God’s sacrifice on the Cross was so incredible that it really seems inconceivable to me that this would be repeated in world after world. Whatever God is doing in the universe as a whole, though, the Bible is quite clear about what God’s purpose is on the particular planet where we live.

*“You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, **the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth.** Everyone who is on the side of truth listens to me” (John 18:37). Earlier, comparing himself to Satan, Jesus said, “*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*” (John 10:10).*

Jesus was all about purpose, and He intends for us to be as well. Wouldn’t it be a fine thing to be able to say with confidence, as Jesus did, “This is the purpose of my life. This is what I was born to achieve”? Having such a confident and focused sense of life purpose seems rather rare, though. Even if we have such a sense of purpose in one season of our lives, it’s pretty common for that focus to get fuzzy in other seasons. And when our focus is fuzzy, when our purpose is perplexing, one frequent result is discouragement and depression.

It’s been said that depression is the “common cold” of the human spirit in our time. As often as not, though, what we call “depression” might be more accurately named “despair.” Despair is a crisis of meaning and purpose growing out of negative expectations about the future. Those philosophers known as existentialists have had some very interesting things to say about purpose, despair, and Hope.

Jean-Paul Sartre, a major twentieth-century existentialist, wrote that if there really were a God who had created humans, then our purpose in life would be to become what God intended us to be. But, said Sartre, there is no God, and thus no purpose, no hope exists. There is no

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on February 7, 2016.

objective meaning for human life, and we are adrift in the darkness of the universe with no star to guide us.²

Rick Warren put it memorably when he noted that “if there is no God, if you’re really just a freak chance of nature, then you’re really just complex pond scum – and guess what? – your life doesn’t matter. But you know what? There is a God! And God made you for a reason. God made you for a purpose. And the only way you’re going to know your purpose is by looking to Him.”

My friends, we humans cannot live as if our lives have no purpose. Irvin Yalom, another existentialist, wrote that we must either invent meaning, or else we must discover meaning that exists beyond ourselves.³

Some of us may remember the song, made popular by Peggy Lee in 1969, “Is that all there is?”⁴ The Bible says that if your life has no purpose, you’re “*like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind*” (James 1:6).

The Good News is that God has given us a great deal of help in the project of finding our life’s purpose. As Rick Warren puts it in the book that we’re reading for our 40-Day Journey, *What on Earth Am I Here For*, “It is only in God that we discover our origin, our identity, our meaning, our purpose, our significance, and our destiny. Every other path leads to a dead end.”
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Warren agrees with the existentialists about the choices before us: “You have only two options. Your first option is *speculation* [guessing, inventing]. The other option is *revelation* [from God].”⁶ So, if you want your life to have purpose, you have to begin by deciding whether or not God exists. Jean-Paul Sartre was more correct than he knew. If there is a God, your life’s mission is to discover and to accomplish God’s purposes for you. If there is no God, well, good luck.

My friends, the God we meet in the Bible is no “unmoved mover,” no ethereal “force.” God is personal and passionate, and God is passionately in love with you! “*Don’t be afraid, [God says,] for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine*” (Isaiah 43:1).

Is there intelligent, embodied life elsewhere in the universe? I don’t know. But I do know this: The fact that there is a God means that there is a purpose for your life. And because God has a purpose for your life, nothing matters more than knowing that purpose, and nothing can compensate for not knowing it.⁷

As Rick put it in a sermon, “Your life starts with God, it continues with God, it ends with God. . . . If you want to know your purpose in life, start getting to know God. The more you get to know God, the more you’re going to understand the ways and the wisdom of God and the more you’re going to understand the meaning and purpose of life.

²Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism,” in William V. Spanos, *A Casebook on Existentialism* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1966), pp. 278, 282.

³Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), pp. 22, 459-460.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Is_That_All_There_Is%3F

⁵ Rick Warren, *What On Earth Am I Here For? The Purpose Driven Life*, expanded edition (Zondervan, 2012), p. 22.

⁶ Warren, pp. 23-24

⁷ Warren, p. 34. See 2 Timothy 1:9.

“You’ll also begin to understand *everything else* because the Bible says that knowing God results in every other kind of understanding. You’re not going to learn this on some talk show. You’re not going to learn this in some séance. You’re not going to learn this reading tea leaves or doing drugs. You’re not going to learn this going to a seminar. The only way you’re going to learn the meaning of life and your purpose in life is to get to know God. **It’s all about God.**

In our book, Rick reminds us that “You discover your identity and purpose through a relationship with Jesus Christ. . . . The purpose of your life fits into a *much larger, cosmic purpose* that God has designed for eternity.”⁸ Knowing your purpose gives meaning to your life. Knowing your purpose simplifies your life. Knowing your purpose focuses your life. Knowing your purpose motivates your life. Knowing your purpose prepares you for eternity.”⁹

Even before God spoke the Word of Creation, God knew you, loved you, and intended to adopt you into his Eternal Family. The truth is that life on Earth is really a lot like life in your mother’s womb—it is preparation and development for the greater life that is to come.

My friend, the most important decision you will ever make is your decision to accept or to reject God’s offer of adoption, God’s offer of forgiveness through what Jesus did for you on the Cross. The Bible calls this adoption the experience of being “born again” (John 3:3). That decision is a unique and singular event, just as physical birth is a unique and non-repeatable event.

More than this, when the time is right, God is going to bring everything in heaven and on earth together under the magnificent authority of our Risen Lord, and in preparation for that coronation God intends to teach you, to train you, to shape you, so that you become more and more like Jesus, our risen and coming King.¹⁰

C. S. Lewis wrote that God’s purpose is to make you and me into “dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine.”¹¹ Lewis wrote that God’s command to “*be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect*” (Mathew 5:48), is neither idealistic foolishness nor a command to do the impossible. God intends to make us into creatures who can obey that command.¹²

Now being shaped into the character of Jesus is more difficult than deciding to be born again. This shaping lasts as long as we live on Earth, and it’s only as effective as our cooperation with it—continuing shaping requires our continuing cooperation. God’s purpose is to build deep into the DNA of your spirit the Jesus-qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). But this shaping depends on your intentional and continuous focusing of your life on worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry and mission—as we will see during our journey of the next forty days.

Paul had this shaping and this coronation in mind when he wrote, “*When I think of the wisdom and scope of God’s plan, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit. And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God’s marvelous love. And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is. May you experience the love of Christ,*

⁸ Warren, pp. 24-25.

⁹ Warren, pp. 34-38.

¹⁰ See Ephesians 1:4-10.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan), p. 85.

¹²Ibid, p. 89.

though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God” (Ephesians 3:14-18, NLT).

This, my friends, is where we’re heading during these forty days. Don’t miss it!