

What Is Life's Purpose?

- Glenn Kenadjian

What is the point of life? Why are we here? In other words, what is life's purpose? For untold centuries, people all over the world from all walks of life have pondered this question. I imagine you have also.

Life's Purpose Comes from God

If we want an answer, we first need to recognize that life has no purpose apart from God and his purpose for us. This is not a religious belief—a teaching we accept by faith. This is the simple consequence of what it means for life to have a purpose. We can see this by considering what it means for even an ordinary object to have a purpose.

Consider a plain, old telephone. What is its purpose? You may say something like, "It enables people to talk to others even across great distances." Determining its purpose is simple.

Now picture a man taking out two dice, rolling them, and getting a three and a six. What is the purpose of his getting those specific numbers? Here you may scratch your head. You may likely say something like, "There is no purpose, it just happened."

What's the difference? A telephone is a created thing and created things are usually made for a purpose (although we may not always know the purpose). On the other hand, if something comes into existence apart from any design or designer, it has no purpose. It just happened.

Without a God who made our world, that is our situation. Life just happened and it has no purpose. Some may try to find a purpose for life without reference to God and his purpose for us. However, it cannot be done. Most philosophical atheists agree with this point. They just conclude life has no purpose.¹

Life's Purpose Matters

In recent decades, increasing numbers of people say they are fine with life having no purpose. One serious comedian expressed himself this way. "What is the meaning of life?" is a stupid question. Life just exists. You say to yourself, 'I can't accept that I mean nothing so I have to find the meaning of life so that I shouldn't mean as little as I know I do.' . . . I see life as a dance. Does a dance have to have a meaning? You're dancing because you enjoy it."²

Furthermore, some people don't even like the idea of life having a purpose. The reason is simple. If we were made by God for a purpose, God may want things for us that I don't want. And things I strongly want, he may not want me to have them. Why want or care about a purpose for life that can run contrary to my desires?

You don't even need an overall purpose for life from God to give your life meaning. People can and do seek meaning for their lives through work, sports, family, friends, sex, service, school, hobbies

and other such ways. For reasons like these, many don't believe in or are unconcerned with life having an ultimate purpose.

So what's the big deal with having a purpose for life that comes from God?

First, if we were made for a purpose, we can expect our maker to evaluate us according to his intentions in making people, not according to what we decided gave our lives meaning. Scripture teaches "we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." (Romans 14:10) Did you and I fulfill the purpose for which people were made? Or did we miss that entirely as we pursued something else? If God's judgment determines our eternal futures, that's weighty.

Second, even for life here, when we choose our own life's meaning and live for that, satisfaction often escapes us—not just when we fail, but even when we succeed. In an interview a football star said, "Life has been good to me. I've had great success, many friends, prestige, a great wife and a beautiful family. And yet sometimes I sit at home in my mansion and get so lonely. I used to wonder why so many rich people commit suicide—now I know."³ Ongoing dissatisfaction, even after success in achieving our goals, can be a sign we have been living for the wrong things. By not living for what we were made, enduring satisfaction evades us.

Lastly, we can seek meaning for our lives through things around us. However, we can never find lasting meaning this way. We die, and the people and things we care about also die and end. It's morbid, but true. If you find your life's meaning through things like work or sports or sex, a day can come when you cannot do these any longer and you have to find something else that will hopefully give your life meaning. Furthermore, even if you live for your family, or your community, or the world population, or future generations; all these people eventually die. Unless people can live forever and what you do can benefit them forever, it's ultimately futile. Apart from (1) God, who can enable people to live forever, and (2) a purpose from God you can fulfill that yields eternal benefits, you cannot accomplish anything with lasting meaning. I think people without God know this, but they don't like it and frequently try not to think about it.

At Brown University, the Christian group I worked with in 1980 put on a program that dealt with facing the reality of death. To advertise this program among a largely secular-minded student body, a student in our group dressed like the grim reaper and passed out flyers in a dormitory cafeteria. He wore black clothing, including a black stocking over his face, and he held an aluminum foil scythe in his hand. I thought students in the cafeteria would find his appearance comical in a black humor sort of way. I knew many of these intellectual Ivy League students watched movies with gross violence and graphic sex without batting an eye, so I never expected the reaction we got to our fake-looking grim reaper. As he passed through the cafeteria, the color visibly went out of some students' faces. Some got up and left the room. A couple of days later an editorial came out in the student newspaper deploring our "scare tactics". It never occurred to me that calling attention in an unrealistic manner to something we all know is true, that we will die some day, would incur such a strong reaction. We often don't like to think that we will die, but it is especially depressing when we think that's it for us, and nothing we lived for will ultimately last.

¹ E.g., Stephen Jay Gould states this in, "The Meaning of Life", Life Magazine, Dec., 1988, p. 84.

² Jackie Mason, quoted in, "The Meaning of Life", Life Magazine, Dec., 1988, p. 83. By talking about the meaning of life, he's really talking about life's purpose and not what gives meaning to an individual. (Incidentally, if you adopt his philosophy and you happen to enjoy hurting others, and you can get away with it, logically, why shouldn't you? As he says, in this view we all mean nothing.)

³ O.J. Simpson, long before his wife's death and his murder charge, said this in People Magazine.

Whether we believe in God or not, if what we live for does not advance a larger eternal purpose for life, what we do has no lasting meaning. Our individually defined meanings will die with us. If we want lasting meaning, we need to focus on fulfilling a purpose that comes from our maker, not ourselves.

This motivation is particularly meaningful to me because that is why I gave my life to Christ in the first place. I was 17 years old and driving back from a vacation at the beach with my parents. I started thinking about my life. I felt things were finally going the way I wanted them to go. I was doing well in school, I had friends, I was playing guitar in a rock band, and I had just met a girl. For a 17 year old, that was perfect! I decided what I thought would give my life meaning, I went after those things with gusto, and I was succeeding.

However, it seemed empty. I thought, “Best case scenario? I go through life and get what I want. But then I die. I leave a tombstone with my name on it. So what?”

I believed back then that God was real, but I had been keeping an arm’s distance from him. I did not want him interfering with my life. Yet I remember thinking that day, “But I want my life to have a lasting meaning.” I concluded that if I gave my life to the God who made me and do what he wanted, then my life would have lasting meaning. So in the back seat of my parent’s sedan I silently prayed, “God, I have lived for myself for the last 17 years and it has seemed okay. However, now I am willing to give my life to you to do as you want with it.”

How can we know God’s purpose for our lives and world? By ourselves, we can only speculate. People’s opinions on this matter are a jumble of diverse and often contradictory notions. We have no way to know unless one big thing happens—God tells us. Now the Bible claims to come from God and speak for him. Many respond, “Of course that is not true. The Bible is an unreliable human book. It has been modified over the centuries and it is riddled with contradictions and obvious errors.” I used to agree. However after deciding to follow God, I spent a couple of years of reading and arguing with people on opposites sides of the fence and I ended up changing my position. Going into this here is outside the scope of this article, but good reasons exist to believe the Bible comes from God and reliably teaches us truth.⁴

So what does the Bible say is the purpose of our lives? Why did God make us?

Life’s Purpose Centers on Glorifying God

The scriptures clearly state God made the universe, he made people, and he made people in his own image. However, if you look for an explicit statement like, “The reason God made the universe and people is this. . . .”, you will be disappointed. I have not found one yet.⁵ However, that does not mean the scriptures do not reveal God’s

⁴ E.g., www.carm.org, www.windmillministries.org. For some books on this topic, see The New Testament Documents—Are They Reliable?, F. F. Bruce (Eerdmans, 1943, 2003), Evidence That Demands a Verdict, Josh McDowell (Authentic Lifestyle, 1972, 2004), The Historical Reliability of the Gospels, Craig Blomberg (IVP Academic, 1987, 2008), When Critics Ask, Geisler and Howe, (Victor Books, 1992)

⁵ Some say God’s comments to himself and his instructions to the first people in Gen. 1:26 & 28 supply God’s reason for making people—to rule over the natural world on his behalf. However, this does not explain why God made the world. When we look at nature and humans together as a whole, why did God make us? Ruling over nature responsibly seems to be a specific assignment God gave people, not the ultimate reason why we were made. However, later in this article I propose that this assignment connects with our ultimate purpose.

reason for making the world and us. The answer seems to emerge from numerous statements in the scriptures.

Psalms 19:1 makes an outstanding statement, “The heavens declare the glory of God.” This says the heavens, the physical universe as seen in the sky, manifest God’s glory. The universe’s intricacies, power, and beauty show the glory of its creator.

Another notable quote is Isaiah 43:7.

... everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.

This is the only place in Scripture where God says why he made someone. As he talks about the people of Israel, He says He made them for his glory. Does this apply to more than Israel too?

The majority of the books of the Bible plainly state a desire that people glorify God. To see the scope of this yourself, you can look up the almost 500 occurrences of “glory”, “glorious”, “glorify” and “glorified” in Scripture using a printed or online concordance⁶.

In addition, God explicitly states in Scripture that he is working to see his glory manifested on earth through people.

For as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man,
so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the Lord, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory, but they would not listen.
- Jeremiah 13:11

And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.
- Jeremiah 33:9

Then the Lord said, "I have pardoned, according to your word. But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord,
- Numbers 14:20-21

These and other verses say God has actively worked to make sure his glory will be displayed throughout the earth. He is not passive about it. He is dedicated to this purpose and he is intervening to accomplish it. The last verse says he will see that his glory eventually fills the earth. He puts the certainty of this taking place on the same level as the certainty that he lives.

Also, the scriptures instruct people to live to glorify God. For instance:

whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. - 1 Peter 4:11

You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.
- 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20

⁶ E.g., www.biblestudytools.com

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

This last directive is especially all-encompassing. Nothing is left out. Brushing your teeth? Do it to the glory of God. Making love with your spouse? Do it to God's glory. What do you want to do with your life? You know the guideline. It applies just the same as to how you relax with friends Friday night or spend your day at work.

In light of statements like these, numerous Biblical students have concluded that ultimately, God made the universe and people for his glory.⁷ The Westminster Shorter Catechism famously puts it this way, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

What This Means

What does it mean to be made to glorify God? To some, this just sounds strange. Even for those who accept this teaching, there is more to this idea than many people realize.

Let's start with the word glory itself. Like many words, "glory" has a range of meanings. However, the common factor seems to be the idea of greatness⁸, particularly greatness that is recognized and honored. We say our team got the glory last night when they won the big championship. We describe a beautiful sunset over a mountain canyon as glorious. We speak of the glory of a large and powerful nation or empire.

In the passages we read about God's glory, you may have noticed Jeremiah 33:9 and 11 speak of God wanting people who will be a glory for him. Even from common life we can understand a desire to make and shape something that will be an individual's glory.

An artist dreams of creating a great painting that moves many people. An author seeks to write a bestselling book that inspires and teaches truth skillfully. An architect aspires to design a grand building both practical and beautiful. On a different level, a parent may desire to have children on which she can shower her love and attention and help guide to become wonderful people. In all these cases, a person wants to make something wonderful that will express himself or herself; something about which they can say, "This will be my glory!"

Similarly, God wanted to express himself. He wanted to express not just his power, but also his goodness, his beauty, his wisdom, his love and other myriad aspects of who he is. So he made the universe and people to fill the earth. As people lived in harmony with him and followed him, our relationships of love and trust would continually manifest and display God's greatness and splendor—we would be living expressions of his glory. From Scripture, this seems to be the primary reason God made us.

Some conclude we mainly glorify God by praising and worshipping him rather than by being expressions of his glory. Now it's true many places in the Bible call us to praise and worship God⁹, and we can glorify God with our words as well as our lives. However, Jesus

put an emphasis on glorifying God with our lives. "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." (John 15:8) Words of praise alone are not the ultimate way we glorify God. Still, we need to genuinely praise and worship God in order to express God's glory through our lives. Genuine praise shows we have seen and are greatly pleased with God's glory. At the end of a concert, jumping up and yelling, "Bravo!" (or perhaps, "That was awesome!") demonstrates you have been greatly affected by what you have seen and heard. Sure, in concerts and in church we can (and do) fake appreciative words. However, when we utter genuine praise of God, we show we have been affected by his greatness. If we don't express such words, we likely don't see and appreciate his glory. Our genuinely praising God pleases God because it reveals we delight in him, and we need this to be living expressions of his greatness, displaying and spreading his glory throughout the world.

What This Does Not Mean

All this does not mean people are meant to be God's only expression of his glory. God is most glorious in himself. (Many verses speak of God revealing his glory directly to people and not just through them.¹⁰) Also nature and the cosmos are God's glories. But compared with nature, we have a greater capacity to reflect more of who God is because God made people in his own image. He gave us abilities to reason, value, create, communicate ideas, and more. Our abilities nowhere approach God's level, and they have been degraded by our turning away from God. Still, because of these abilities, we have the potential to have fellowship with our maker and become miniature reproductions of his glory in ways other parts of creation cannot.

This also does not mean God does not have any individual purposes for each of us as well. From Scripture, we see God has specific purposes for particular individuals, groups and even nations over different time periods.¹¹ By inference, he likely has a plan for each of us. However, his overall purpose is most important. When you embrace God's overall purpose, God's individual plan for you is to work to bring you in line with his overall purpose. When you reject his overall purpose, his individual plan for you is either to turn you around or, knowing you won't do that, use you to advance his overall purpose in others.¹²

Lastly, this does not mean God has no other purposes or intentions for humanity and for all Christians. Our expressing God's glory with our lives, however, is our overarching purpose and his other purposes are subordinate to this. In his popular book, The Purpose Driven Life, Rick Warren says we were made for five purposes: 1) Planned for God's Pleasure, 2) Formed for God's Family, 3) Created to Become Like Christ, 4) Shaped for Serving God, and 5) Made for a Mission.¹³ In light of Genesis 1:26-28, some say people were made to rule and manage the earth on God's behalf. I think these probably are purposes and intentions God has for humanity, and I believe he

¹⁰ E.g., Leviticus 9:6, Psalm 63:2, Isaiah 40:5, Matthew 24:30, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Revelation 21:23

¹¹ Three examples: "But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." (Exodus 9:16) "who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'" (Isaiah 44:28a) "The Lord loves him; he shall perform his purpose on Babylon, and his arm shall be against the Chaldeans." (Isaiah 48:14b)

¹² "I (God) will accomplish all my purpose" – Isaiah 46:10. Even when people sinfully act in rejection of God's purpose, his purpose is not defeated. Such actions are terrible for the people who commit them and often hurt those around them. Still God often uses these corrupt actions in his plan to refine and make more glorious those who embrace him (e.g., see Psalm 119:71 and Acts 2:22-23).

¹³ The Purpose Driven Life, Rick Warren (Zondervan, 2002)

⁷ For instance, see Jonathan Edward's, "The End for Which God Created the World" contained in full in John Piper's, God's Passion for His Glory.

⁸ In the Old Testament, the main Hebrew word for glory, "chabod", comes from a Hebrew root word meaning "heavy" or "weighty". This signifies something of great substance and significance versus something light or of little value.

⁹ E.g., Psalm 96:1-8, 106:1, 148, Isaiah 42:10-12, Romans 15:8-11, 1 Timothy 1:17, Revelation 19:5-7

likely has others too. But here are three reasons I think all these purposes are subordinate to an ultimate purpose of expressing God's glory. 1) The glory motivation resonates throughout much of the Bible, from beginning to end. 2) We can fulfill all the other purposes in ways that express God's glory, but none of the other purposes sensibly fit as an ultimate purpose supported by all the others.¹⁴ 3) We need to fulfill the other purposes in ways that express God's glory or we will seriously get off track in our practices.¹⁵ Many Bible students, Rick Warren included,¹⁶ agree that expressing God's glory is our ultimate purpose and the measure for how to carry out any other purpose.

To Fulfill Life's Purpose, Trust and Follow Christ

We have an ultimate purpose; and we have all failed at it. Often we haven't even bothered to care what purpose or purposes God has for us, let alone seek to fulfill them.

For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God. - Romans 3:23

I quoted this verse for years without fully understanding what it meant. Comprehending "all have sinned" is not hard, especially when we understand sin also applies to internal matters like envy, lust and hate. It's also easy to see we have fallen short of God's standards. But in what sense do we all fall short of God's glory?

We were made to express God's glory with our lives. As we live with him and for him, we can show how great his love, goodness, wisdom, power and other attributes are, and gain great satisfaction and joy through doing this. But we have all turned to our own purposes, not caring what God wants. We may instead seek to have our own glory through individual achievements, or through connections to an outstanding family, school, nation or other group. Or very often we are more modest and we just want to be left alone and comfortable on our own terms. "Being an expression of God's glory? Submitting to God in all things? That is too much for me. I will just take a less demanding course, thank you very much." But whether we think of it in these terms or not, all these other approaches to life involve rebellion against our maker. We are turning our backs on what he wants so as to live our lives on our own terms. And turning away from God has corrupted us and darkened our hearts.¹⁷ As a result, we all fall short of being and expressing God's glory.

Scripture says we were all made in the image of God. However, our sins distort our minds and hearts and no one in the Bible is described as being the image of God - with one exception. ". . . Christ, who is the image of God." (2 Corinthians 4:4)

Christ came to save us.¹⁸ His salvation involves not only forgiving our sins, but also repairing us so we can fulfill our purpose in life. And we can see where he wants to take us. He gave us his life on

earth as a model of the type of life he wants us to have—a life lived for God's glory.

While on earth, Christ made it his aim to glorify God, and he succeeded. In a prayer to his heavenly father right before his arrest, Jesus said, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do." (John 17:4) On earth, he visibly manifested God's glory through who he was and what he did. If we do not see this glory as we read the Gospels, that's due to our fallen condition rather than to any lack in Jesus. He gave the perfect example of living a life that expresses God's glory.

Hebrews 1:3 says of Jesus, "He is the radiance of the glory of God". When we turn to Christ as our Savior and Lord, and then cooperate with his efforts to make us more like himself, the more we too can fulfill life's chief purpose—radiating God's glory through our lives. We will also be better equipped to carry out any other purposes God has for us in ways that bring God glory. We lack the ability to do this by ourselves. However, through God's enabling we can be changed to be more like Christ and display more and more of God's greatness, and so fulfill our purpose.

¹⁴ It's hard to see, for instance, how we can carry out all the other purposes in ways that advance being "Formed for God's Family". One exception is "Planned for God's Pleasure". However, as an ultimate purpose, this really refers to the same thing as "Made to Express God's Glory", but from a different angle. As we rely on God and do what he wants and become more like him, this expresses God's glory and gives him pleasure.

¹⁵ For instance, seeking to rule over nature without caring to do it for God's glory can easily lead to selfish exploitation and despoiling. Similarly, focusing on living in God's family without doing it for God's glory can lead to cliquish behavior.

¹⁶ *The Purpose-Driven Life*, pp. 53-57

¹⁷ Romans 1:18, 21-32

¹⁸ 1 Timothy 1:15, Luke 19:10