

Title: Building a Life of Purpose
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Viktor Frankl was a famous 20th century psychiatrist. He was also an Austrian Jew. Because of his heritage, Frankl was forced into the Nazi concentration camp system, spending time in both Auschwitz and Dachau. Frankl endured the full horror of the camps, including losing his mother, father and wife to the Holocaust.

Soon after he was liberated he published his most famous book, the English translation of which is called *Man's Search for Meaning*. While in the camps, Frankl made it his mission to find meaning even in the most desperate and horror-filled of circumstances. His book reflects that journey. This last week the 75th edition of *Man's Search for Meaning* was released. It has sold more than 12 million copies.

Frankl concluded that living with a lack of meaning is humankind's paramount existential stress. He observed that many people, if not most, stumble through life with a vacuum of meaning – a complete absence of purpose to their lives. Frankl observed that:

There is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is meaning in one's life...He who has a "why" to live for can bear almost any "how".
(Viktor Frankl)

What is the 'why' of life? What is the meaning or purpose of our existence?

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* says this:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, filled with sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
(*Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5)

Just in case you were not thoroughly depressed, in his book, *River out of Eden*, militant atheist Richard Dawkins offers us this:

The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.
(Richard Dawkins)

What Dawkins is saying is consistent with what other famous atheists have said. A hundred years ago Bertrand Russell was almost as strident in his criticism of religion in general and Christianity in particular as Richard Dawkins is in our day. And yet he said this:

Unless you assume a God, the question about life's purpose is meaningless.
(Bertrand Russell)

It follows that if there is no God, and you and I are just a freak of nature, evolutionary slime that has the good fortune to progress, if there is nothing beyond this physical life except a dark void, then our life truly is devoid of meaning. Even more, if our life is devoid of meaning, then it logically follows that our life is devoid of any real dignity or worth.

How are we all feeling? Full of life and energy?!

Contrasting the nihilism of atheistic humanism is the biblical worldview that asserts that every human being, without exception, has dignity and worth as one of God's image bearers. That we are, each and every one of us, a living, breathing testimony to the creative and loving power of God. And with that dignity and worth, each and every one of us has meaning and purpose that we will only discover in and through the one who created us.

In 1517 the Catholic monk Martin Luther developed 95 theses protesting corruptions of faith he believed evident in the church of his day. His actions led to the Protestant Reformation. Luther and Calvin and others lead people back to the essentials of biblical faith. They would instruct their followers in these essentials through catechesis – the teaching of doctrine. Typically, a catechism consisted of a series of questions and answers that students would memorise. These teachings, these catechisms, are behind the bible, the foundational theological sources of our faith. And each of them addresses right up front and with confidence the question regarding the meaning and purpose of our life. For example, the Heidelberg confession, published in 1563 asks this question:

What is thy only comfort in life and death?

The answer is beautiful:

That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

In 1646, the Westminster Confession of Faith was developed in England and with it a catechism. The first and most famous question of 106 questions of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is this:

What is the chief end of man?

The answer give is this:

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Our purpose is to glorify God. Meaning for our existence is only discovered in enjoying God, not for a moment, but forever.

Scripture references are cited to support the answers to each of the 106 questions addressed by the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Where does the bible say that our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever? In John's vision of heaven, the 24 elders lay down their crowns before the throne of God and declare:

Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.
(Revelation 4:11)

Our life-defining purpose is to glorify God.

The Psalmist says:

Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.
(Psalm 16:11)

The fundamental meaning of our life is to enjoy God, and not for a moment, but forever.

A Pastor attended a prayer breakfast and struck up a conversation with the men at the table, most of whom he did not know. The man sitting next to him was in his early fifties shared about how much he was looking forward to retirement. H was really excited at the prospect of finishing his career. He told that Pastor and the rest of the table that just that morning his wife had asked him:

'What are you going to do when you retire?'

He replied quickly but perhaps thoughtlessly, 'I'm going to sit on the couch and watch TV all day every day.'"

The table was silent, but the Pastor, being a Pastor, could not keep quiet for long.

"If you do that," he said, "you'll be dead in a year."

The man looked at the Pastor and asked wide-eyed, why?

The Pastor continued, "If the lack of purpose in your life doesn't kill you first, your wife surely will."

The fact is that many of us drift aimlessly through life with a lack of purpose, with a nagging sense there must be more to this life than we can taste, touch, hear, smell or see.

While life is not without meaning or purpose, we can live as if it has no meaning, nor any purpose.

Our purpose is to glorify and enjoy God not for a moment, but forever.

The Scottish theologian Thomas Boston once said, our present existence is only "a short preface to a long eternity."

The writer of Ecclesiastes says that God has set eternity in the heart of men and women. We were created to live beyond the limitations of this mortal body – every one of us. The stark fact is this. We will either spend eternity with God or apart from God. And by his grace and out of his love, God gives us the choice whether our eternity will be spent in his company or not.

God has long range plans for your life. God has long term aspirations for you. The question is, do we have long term, eternal plans and aspirations, or are we caught up in the illusion that this mortal life, however brief or long, is all there is?

One seventh century mystic put it this way:

Prepare your heart for your departure. If you are wise, you will expect it every hour.
(Saint Isaac the Syrian)

It follows that if God has planted eternity in our hearts, that we are forever people, then we should live with forever in mind. How do we do that? How do we use this one and only precious gift of mortal life we have with eternity in mind? I would like to suggest three simple commitments we can make:

Use my TIME in view of Eternity

The language we use about time is very revealing. For example, we talk about how we 'spend' our time. Time is a precious commodity. The time we have in this body is a finite resource and a gift from God. Not that it stops us from 'wasting' it!

For example, on average we spend 90 minutes a day on the Internet facebooking, twittering and so on.

The average human being will change channels on the TV 325,000 times over their lifetime. For some of us, that is a yearly figure!

We can waste our time or we can invest our time for God and for eternity. We can glorify God with our time.

Many of us get caught up in the so-called rat race, in a never ending cycle of activity where we try to get win with our finances or our career or our even our relationships. We make these good things into ultimate things and forget the eternal things. Rick Warren has said that even if you win the rat race, you are still a rat.

James Dobson puts it this way. Many of spend our time on seeking the rewards that our culture honors – a successful career, a bigger house, a healthy investment portfolio. We climb and climb the ladder to achieve this success, only to discover, often too late, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.

In 1867, Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel invented a new high explosive, which he named "dynamite."

Apparently he was convinced that his invention would make war too horrible to ever happen again. Unfortunately he quickly discovered there was no shortage of buyers for his new explosive. He made a huge fortune from its sales, yet was horrified with the suffering and misery it caused in wars and conflicts. But his very success trapped him.

Towards the end of the 19th, century he awoke one morning to read his own obituary in the local paper:

"Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who died yesterday, devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before. He died a very rich man."

Actually, it was Alfred's older brother who had died. A newspaper reporter had confused the epitaph. But the account had a profound effect on Alfred. He decided he wanted to be known for something other than developing a means to kill people efficiently, and for amassing a fortune in the process.

As a result, he initiated the Nobel Prize—an award for scientists and writers who foster peace. Nobel said:

Every man ought to have the chance to correct his epitaph in midstream and write a new one.
(Alfred Nobel)

Some of you may be laboring with the burden of thinking you have wasted your life. Let me speak plainly. There is not one wasted life in this room. If God is still granting you oxygen to breathe, whether you have decades, years, or even just months left on this planet, you still have the ability to glorify God with your time.

Use my TALENTS in view of Eternity

Billy Graham is famous for his single-minded focus on sharing the love of Jesus with others by using his God-given gifts. He was so focused on bringing his message in every possible moment that he would somehow always find a way to do it.

One of Billy's assistants said that you could ask him how he gets his suits dry cleaned when he is always travelling and somehow he would turn his answer into an opportunity to share the gospel. Before every TV or radio interview Billy Graham participated in there would be a microphone check. The technician would ask Billy to say something — anything—so they can adjust the audio settings.

Most people would count to ten, or say their ABC's, or recite what he had for breakfast or something else equally inane. But Billy Graham would always quote John 3:16—'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.'

When Billy Graham was asked why he would recite this verse in every, single sound check, he replied:

Because that way, if I am not able to communicate the gospel clearly during the interview, at least the cameraman will have heard it.

Billy Graham's life, his talents, his time – everything – was aligned with his overriding purpose – to glorify God and lead others to do the same.

Jesus gave us, the church - his commission just before he ascended to heaven – that we are to go and make disciples, baptizing them, teaching them and helping form them. This commission is reflected in Newlife's mission statement, 'Changing Lives, Transforming the World.'

We do not exist to please ourselves, but to please God.

I am not called to preach a message that tickles your ears, but a gospel that transforms your life from the inside out.

We are God's people, set apart by him in order that we might declare his praises – the one who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

In the end the measure of Newlife's faithfulness – our success – will not be how many seats we have in our auditorium, or how many people we have sitting in those seats.

The measure of our effectiveness will not be our seating capacity, but our sending capacity.

It will be measured by the number of young people like Stu are we sending to the nations.

It will be measured by the number of men and women like Nick are we training to be Pastors.

It will be measured by the number of leaders like Jon are we forming, who in turn can form hundreds more.

It will be measured by the number of us – people like you and me – how many of us who move beyond shallow end Christianity and instead jump into the deep end of faith-sharing and justice-making and world-shaping service?

We glorify God when our purpose is aligned with his purpose – to see this world redeemed and restored through the power of Jesus Christ.

Last, we live with eternity in mind as we:

Use my TREASURE in view of Eternity

One of my favorite authors, Eugene Peterson tells of how he saw a family of birds teaching their young to fly. Three young swallows were perched on a dead branch that stretched out over a lake. He puts it so beautifully, let me read it to you:

One adult swallow got alongside the chicks and started shoving them out toward the end of the branch-- pushing, pushing, pushing. The end one fell off. Somewhere between the branch and the water four feet below, the wings started working, and the fledgling was off on his own.

Then the second one.

The third was not to be bullied. At the last possible moment his grip on the branch loosened just enough so that he swung downward, then tightened again, bulldog tenacious. The parent was without sentiment. He pecked at the desperately clinging talons until it was more painful for the poor chick to hang on than risk the insecurities of flying. The grip was released, and the inexperienced wings began pumping. The mature swallow knew what the chick did not--that it would fly--that there was no danger in making it do what it was perfectly designed to do.

Birds have feet and can walk. Birds have talons and can grasp a branch securely. They can walk; they can cling. But flying is their characteristic action, and not until they fly are they living at their best, gracefully and beautifully.

Giving is what we do best. It is the air into which we were born. It is the action that was designed into us before our birth. ... Some of us try desperately to hold on to ourselves, to live for ourselves. We look so bedraggled and pathetic doing it, hanging on to the dead branch of a bank account for dear life, afraid to risk ourselves on the untried wings of giving. We don't think we can live generously because we have never tried. But the sooner we start, the better, for we are going to have to give up our lives finally, and the longer we wait, the less time we have for the soaring and swooping life of grace.

There is a strange and troubling saying of Jesus about money that has always bothered me. Perhaps it bothers you too. Truth be told, most of what Jesus says about money bothers me. But this statement in particular challenges me:

I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.
(Luke 16:9)

It all sounds a bit crass and a bit desperate. Buy yourselves friends? Get some heavenly favors?

Let's break it down. One day all our money, all our investments will be gone. Or more particular, we will be gone from it. We will die and pass from this life to the next. Despite some fairly desperate attempts, no one as yet worked out how we carry the money and possessions we have in this life into the life to come. As someone has said, there is no need for a luggage compartment in a funeral hearse.

When we are gone, it will be gone. What will remain with us is not our money, but what we have done with it.

Let me explain.

Every time we give to help a missionary like Stu win a person to faith, we store up treasure in heaven.

Every time we give to a Christian ministry like Compassion or World Vision, we store up treasure in heaven.

Every time we give to a local church that is serious about obeying the Great Commission, we store up treasure in heaven.

Imagine what it would be like when you get to heaven to be greeted by friends you have never met, but who are there in some large or small way because of the sacrifice of money you have made, or the service you have given or time you have offered.

This empty chair represents those who are to come – those men and women, boys and girls who do not yet know Jesus. We don't know their name, but God does, just as he knows ours. They will be the friends that welcome us into our heavenly dwellings. They will be the people who say to us with faces radiating with joy, 'Thank you for playing your part in helping me discover life with God – eternal life!'

Always we have the opportunity to invest the financial resources God has blessed us with for eternal purposes. We always have the opportunity to invest in a bank where neither rust, nor moth destroy, or recession, or stock-market downturn or rising or falling interest rates destroy.

We fulfill our God-given purpose as we use our time, talents and treasure with eternity in mind.

And so I leave you with this question:

Question: What is the chief end of man?

Answer: The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.