

## **Whose We Are: Part 12: Identity and Purpose**

Acts 17.7, I Thessalonians 2.12, and selected verses

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**David Henderson**

**What is your purpose in life?**

**What is a purpose worthy of you?**

**What is a purpose worthy of God?**

This is the question Paul has us wrestling with this morning as we work our way through the book of I Thessalonians.

Over the past several weeks we've been exploring a number of different connected themes that get at who we are and why.

Identity: Who or what makes me me?

Authority: Who or what gets the last word?

Purity: Who or what do I pattern my life after?

Purpose: Why am I here? That's the question we're wrestling with this morning.

Let me give you a moment to reflect on those questions. If you're really honest with yourself, how do you answer those questions?

\* \* \*

**Some of you know the story of my own wrestling with those questions.**

I grew up in a church-going home, but early on, I rejected the Christian faith, and from that point on I was my own reference point, living my life for me.

I still remember when my freshman English prof at Miami asked me to write a biography of the most important person in my life and I wrote an autobiography.

Then, during finals of my sophomore year, both of my parents died in a plane crash. I had just turned twenty. We were really close, and, as you can imagine, their death shook me to the foundation.

Up until that point, I had just seen life as a game. Now, for the first time, I realized I was mortal and I started thinking about life at a more serious level.

Why *am* I here? What's a purpose for my life that is big enough to give myself to?

Friendship? Not reliable enough

Career? Not big enough

Fun and adventure? Not satisfying enough

None seemed adequate to explain a life.

It was at about this point that a guy named John Whitehouse, the head of a campus ministry at Miami, asked me: What is your purpose in life?

I said: "To make the world a better place for other people."

But on the inside of me I said, "You liar! Your purpose in life is to use other people to meet your own needs." Wow. That's a pretty small purpose.

My efforts to come up with a purpose for my own life were coming up empty.

So if purpose isn't something you create, then maybe it's something you *discover*.

As soon as you start asking that question, that leads to the question of whether there is a God. And if so, how we would know what his purpose for our life is?

Well, wouldn't he send word?

Then I remembered my Sunday school classes about all the messengers God sent, also that people said the Bible was God's word to us. Maybe there's something in there.

Then I thought, well, wouldn't he come himself and tell us?

Then I went to a Bible study that an atheist-turned-Christian friend of mine led. We looked at John 1.1-14, that said things like:

<sup>9</sup> The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup> Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

<sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

When you come down to it, there are really just two ways to think about life purpose.

Either it's something I chase after . . .

**Identity and Purpose without God**

## IDENTITY and *Purpose*



. . . in which case I'm running, always running, in endless pursuit of some compelling purpose to give myself to, but ultimately, no matter what I land on, it always ends up bending back and being about me – living for myself in some way.

That's the moment of awareness the main character comes to in Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog*, in which Moses Herzog, a confused man who is the product of our confused modern world, tries to make sense of his life.

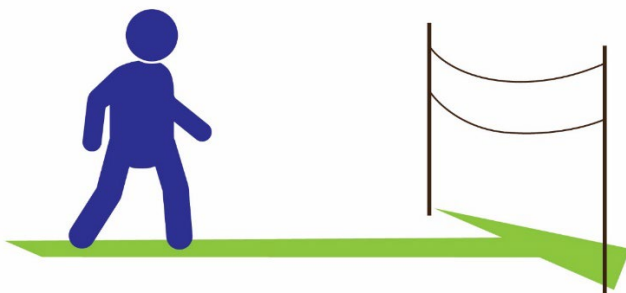
Looking in the mirror, getting to shave, he says to himself:

I owe the powers that created me a human life. Where is it? ... What have I to show for myself? (239)

Or . . . if God is at the center of it all . . .

### Identity and Purpose with God

## IDENTITY and *Purpose*



. . . then my life is about walking (using the biblical metaphor for how we live our lives) on a path that God has laid out toward ends that God has in mind, and He calls me to walk the path and to finish the race with joy and purpose and perseverance.

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul gets at the heart of those two choices. Am I living for me, or for him? How would you answer that question?

## **II Corinthians 5.15**

He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

\* \* \*

The theme of life purpose runs through all of Paul's letters to the early church, and nowhere is that more true than in I Thessalonians, the letter we're looking at today.

As we've already pointed out, Paul starts right off by establishing the identity of the Thessalonian believers.

## **We Are God's People**

- 1.2: You belong to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- 1.4: God loves you and has chosen you to be his own people.

They are *God's* people. God chose them, he created them, he ransomed them with his son's life. Three times over, they belong to him.

Think of what it means for something to belong to you. If a car belongs to me, I don't ask it if it would like to spend the day in the garage, or prefer to be outside. I don't ask it whether it would like to go for a drive or not, and if so, where it would like to go. It belongs to *me*. So I decide. I use it when I need it.

As God's people, as people who belong to him, God has loving intentions for us. There are ways he intends to make use of me as one who belongs to him. Those loving intentions get communicated in the book of I Thessalonians as . . .

## **God's Will for His People**

- 4.3: It is God's will that you should be sanctified.
- 5.18: Give thanks in all circumstances;  
for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

## **God's Purpose for His People**

- 1.9 to serve the living and true God
- 2.12 to live lives worthy of God
- 4.1 to live in order to please God

## **God's Call on His People**

- 2.12 God calls you into his kingdom and glory
- 4.7 God called you to live a holy life

In *The Avengers*, Loki says,

I am Loki of Asgard, and I am burdened with glorious purpose.

According to Paul, if we are followers of Christ, then we can say,

I am chosen by God and dearly loved, and I am blessed with glorious purpose.

I'm pretty sure we got the better deal.

Before we unwrap that glorious purpose, let me take a moment to stop and clarify terminology here. You might be distracted trying to figure out how what we're talking about fits with the whole idea of discerning God's will.

We tend to think of God's will and God's call in terms of what God wants us to do in a particular situation, faced with a specific decision. We think of God's will as the answer to the question: **What do you want me to do?**

Asking that question certainly is consistent with what the Bible teaches us about God – that God is a personal God who is involved in our individual lives and who has preferences related to the decisions we make, and that it is our privilege and responsibility as his people to discern those preferences as He makes them known to us by His Spirit.

All that is true. And that's what's behind passages like:

Psalm 25.5-6 Show me your ways, O Lord. Teach me your paths.

Psalm 32.8-9 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go.

Proverbs 3.5-6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Do not rely on your own insights.

But when Paul talks about God's will, God's purpose, God's call in this letter he has in mind something much wider and more sweeping and comprehensive. God's will doesn't just answer the question "What should I do?" in this particular situation. It answers the question "**Why am I here?**" What should I do with this *life* of mine? What is his all-the-time call on my life?

\* \* \*

For the answer to that question, let's turn to

**I Thessalonians 2.12**

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Let me just walk through this passage with you. There's so much here.

To give you context, Paul is talking here about his ministry to the people of Thessalonica when he first came to their city and began to talk with them about Jesus in a loving and comforting way, encouraging them, he says, just like a father who wants the best for his children. And that best?

encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God

The word *worthy* literally means of equal weight. Paul was urging them to make sure the one thing – the way they live their lives – corresponds to the other thing – the way that God loves them.

I recently got a battery powered leaf blower. Imagine if I tried to power this leaf blower with this AAA battery. That would be way too insubstantial for this kind of tool. For a tool this powerful you need a battery that corresponds to it. A battery that is suitable to it. A battery that is *worthy* of it.

What sort of a life purpose is worthy of God? And worthy of you?

Urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you . . .

This word “call” is a wonderfully personal word, as one person speaks the name of another and speaks a word just for them.

This is that very personal dimension of the nature of God that the scriptures teach us. We don't recognize the god of the Deists – the impersonal creator god who wound up the clockwork of creation and then took his hands off of it. We believe God is a person, not a power. His regard of each one of us is personal and intimate. He is involved in the details of our lives in personal ways. He knows us and calls us by name.

. . . God who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Our being called into his kingdom and glory has two layers of meaning.

First, it means he invites us into it, to take part in it ourselves.  
But second, it means he invites us to give ourselves to it, to help others take part in it.

As an example, I thought of Daniel Pierce and how he came into Purdue.

First he came in as an undergrad student, and he got to take part in it, to be served by the school.

Then, even while he was still a student, he started working for the IT Infrastructure Department, serving the school and his fellow students. And now, long after graduation, he works fulltime as the Manager of Infrastructure Design for the same department. He's still at Purdue, but now he's giving himself completely to carrying out the mission and vision of the school for the sake of others.

It's in that same sort of way that God calls us "into" his kingdom and his glory: to take part in it fully ourselves, but also to help others take part in it fully too.

Let's explore those two elements that are at the heart of a life worthy of God.

### ***Kingdom: his rule and not mine***

First, he calls us into the kingdom.

This takes us back to a passage we've already pulled up several times in the past few weeks, this verse from the book of Acts in which hear the heart of Paul's message:

#### **Acts 17.6-7**

These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also. . . .  
They profess allegiance to another king, named Jesus.

This is the essence of the Christian message from Paul's perspective: giving our allegiance to King Jesus. That's what faith mean.

If you've been around here for any length of time you've heard me say that a kingdom is made up of just two things:

1. a king who rules
2. and faithful subjects, men and women and children who recognize the king's rightful rule and give him their allegiance

So the kingdom is wherever the king rules in the hearts of his subjects.

Let me just pause here and anticipate a question that may be forming in your mind.

Wait a minute. Doesn't the Bible claim that God is already the king over the whole universe? So what does it mean that the kingdom of God is just in our hearts?

I think it's helpful to realize that when the Bible talks about God's rule, it talks about two stages.

1. We're in the first stage now. God is ruling over the universe. Psalm 47.6-7 says

Sing praises to our King, sing praises!  
For God is the King of all the earth!

God is the king. He rules over creation and He orders everything to fulfill his royal purposes, but not everyone recognizes or submits to his rule.

But some do. There are some who profess allegiance to king Jesus, as it says in Acts 17.7. So while God rules over all, his kingdom – the realm where his rule is recognized and submitted to – only exists in the heart of his faithful subjects.

2. But when Jesus returns and brings human history to a close – a moment in time that Paul references several times in this letter – that's when the universe and the kingdom will be joined into one.

God will eliminate from creation all that rejects his rule. He will usher in the new heavens and the new earth, and the new redeemed people of God, and all of existence will recognize and delight in his rule. That's the crowning redemptive moment described in Revelation 11.15 that says:

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his [King], and he will reign for ever and ever."

So the realm that exists in our hearts now will eventually exist in every corner of creation. And that's what we've been blessed to become part of.

Here are three implications:

**1. First, we are called to surrender to the King.**

God calling us into the kingdom means our relinquishing the small kingdoms of our own making, and allowing God to bring them – and us – under his loving rule.

Gene Green, who wrote a commentary on I Thessalonians, says that living a life pleasing to God and worthy of him means to: "serve him in a way in that makes his interests a person's primary ambition."

It's interesting to notice that in this verse, where Paul says God calls us into his kingdom and glory, Paul puts the emphasis on the word *his*. It says God calls us into the "*of himself* kingdom and glory."

Some of you are familiar with Paul Tripp's wonderful book *A Quest for More: Living for Something Bigger Than You*. He says



We were never meant to be self-focused little kings ruling miniscule little kingdoms with a population of one. (17)

At the center of the Kingdom is the King; and therefore the center of kingdom living is a deep, abiding, life-shaping affection for the King. This one central love fuels everything else we were meant to pursue as we exit the narrow confines of our self-defined kingdoms and begin to enjoy life in the big sky country of the kingdom of God. (167)

Giving our allegiance to Jesus as King means laying down our allegiance to any rival king – including ourselves.

***2. Second, we are called to put the kingdom on display wherever God takes us in this world in which we live as exiles and pilgrims.***

To live lives of love. Seek justice. Love mercy. Be generous. Put others first. Overlook wrong. Forgive hurts and failures. Live with joy and peace. Advocate for the weak and marginalized. Cross lines of difference. Give second chances. Look like Jesus.

All things that will make us stand out in this down side up world of ours.

3. And third, we are called not only to put the kingdom on display but to advance the kingdom. And if the realm of the kingdom is wherever men and women and children recognize and submit to the rule of God as king, that means living the sort of loving and compelling lives that help encourage others to give their allegiance to Jesus as King.

God calls us into his kingdom – both to enjoy it and to serve it. God also calls us into his glory.

***Glory: his reputation and not mine***

We often only have a vague idea of what people mean when they talk about the glory of God. But the idea is actually pretty clear.

God's glory has two dimensions. First, it is all that makes God God. It is his nature and character, his greatness and goodness.

But here's the crucial second element. The glory of God is the greatness and goodness of God *revealed*. God's nature and character brought into the light. Held up. Put on display.

So when Paul says God calls us into his glory that certainly points to the fact that God created us for relationship with himself, to know and enjoy the fullness of who God is. Because God created us for relationship with himself, our entering into his glory means

we fully experience God as he truly is, face to face, which will transform us into the people he intended us to be.

But remember our being called into the kingdom and glory means not just us entering into and experiencing it. It also means us helping others enter into it and experience it.

By implication, part of what it means for us to fulfill the purpose for which God created us is to live in such a way that we put the greatness and goodness of God on display. In other words, that we live in such a way that we increase his *reputation*.

According to Augustine, the shape of our life boils down to the way we answer a single question: who gets the glory? (Bryan Chapell, *The Glory of God*, p190)

In his book *The City of God*, Augustine writes:

There can only be two basic loves. There is a love of God that leads to a forgetfulness of self, and a love of self that leads to a forgetfulness of God.

The former glories in itself, and the latter glories in the Lord. The former seeks its glory from men, but the latter finds its highest glory in God. . . . The former lifts up its head in its own glory; the latter says to its God, My glory, and the lifter of my head (Ps 3:3). (Saint Augustine, *City of God*, Book 14, Chapter 28, trans. William Babcock and Rachel Coleman, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021, 89.)

Whose reputation is your first concern?

Robert Melick, in his book, *The Glory of God*, gets at the heart of what it means in practical terms to live for God's glory:

When Christians live like Christ they enhance God's reputation among those who observe them, thereby spreading and encouraging his glory. . . . Our ultimate destiny as Christians is to contribute to God's glory. . . . The primary concern of Christian people is furthering God's reputation. (100)

Here's how Evelyn Underhill describes it in her book, *Concerning the Inner Life*

The work done by Christ in [the] souls [of humanity] has ... as its main object the promotion of God's glory, the shining out of His Reality more and more fully through our acts, the deepening of our creaturely awe, the expanding of our consecration in service. (10)

In the 1600s a group of pastors and theologians gathered to capture the primary doctrinal beliefs taught by the Bible. They assembled those into a 1965 questions and answers to be memorized. Here's the very first and most important of them all:

**Westminster Catechism: Question One**

Q: What is the chief end of humanity?

A: Humanity's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

As Paul Tripp puts it:

We were made to experience, to be part of, to be consumed by, and to live in the pursuit of the one glory that is truly glorious – the glory of God. A ravenous and not easily satisfied pursuit of this glory is meant to be the compass of our living.  
(19)

I Corinthians 10.31

Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

When we started into this letter by Paul to the Thessalonians, I told you that it felt like it could have been his letter to the church in West Lafayette called Covenant, because there are so many places where he speaks to us right where we are.

Think of how we've framed in our mission and purpose as a church.

### **Our starting point, our core affirmation of faith**

Jesus is King.

Paralleling what he says in Acts 17.7

### **Our statement of identity and purpose**

We are his people, and we exist for his kingdom and his glory.

Almost word for word from I Thessalonians 1.4 and 2.12

### **Our statement of calling:**

God calls us to live a life of love

Love Jesus, love His people, and pour out His love on the world.

Paraphrases of I Thessalonians 1.6 and 1.3-4 and 3.12

Through Paul and his letter to the Thessalonians, God speaks to us, the Covenant family,

### **I Thessalonians 2.12**

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

urging us to live lives worthy of God, and reminding us that he calls us into his kingdom and glory.

As you walk down the hall at school, or pull up Amazon on your computer, or head out on a business trip for a few days, or drive down the highway, as you spend a free evening in front of the TV or decide how to give your money,

How do you live in a way that reflects the kingdom and glory of God?

**What is your purpose in life?**

**What is a purpose worthy of you?**

**What is a purpose worthy of God?**

I'm going to close by praying a prayer from the collection of Puritan prayers called *The Valley of Vision*:

Lord of all being,  
there is one thing that deserves my greatest care,  
that calls forth my ardent desires,  
that is, that I may fulfill the great end for which I am made –  
to glorify You who have given me being.

“Man’s Great End,” *The Valley of Vision*, 22

## **Benediction**

### **I Thessalonians 1.4 and 3.12**

Brothers and sisters, you are chosen by God and dearly loved.  
May your love for Him, for one another, and for all others grow and overflow.

### **II Thessalonians 1.11-12**

May our God count you worthy of his calling, and by his power may He fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.