

## **Why Am I Here? A Different Approach to Understanding Your Life's Purpose**

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*Why am I here? Who am I? What's my life's purpose? What's God's will for my life?*

These are the type of questions I often hear in my work as a college and career counselor. Much of my day is spent helping young adults (ages 17 to 25) sort through their confusion and find a meaningful direction for their lives. These young people want to understand who they are and what they have to offer. They are searching for answers that will help them understand their place in this world and define their purpose.

Many of these young people describe feeling overwhelmed and frustrated because they can't figure out what they are supposed to do with their life. They have no method or strategy in place that allows them to sort through all their options and pick a path that best matches who they are. They say they want to do God's will for their life, but are confused about how to uncover it. They tell me that if God would just let them know exactly what He wants them to do, then they would do it. Others describe feeling guilty because they have been told that they are supposed to do something "big" with their life, but they don't know what that is. They recall comments from well-meaning adults who have told them that God has a special calling on their life, but they can't even decide on a college major much less identify the something "big" or "great" they are supposed to do.

*Why am I here* and *what's my life's purpose* are common questions in our society. This is evidenced by the popularity of Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, and books by other authors addressing topics like God's will for my life, how to make a difference with my life, understanding my life's journey, etc. There are many excellent books and articles available addressing the *why am I here* and *what's my life's purpose* kind of questions. So why would I want to add to this discussion that has already been addressed so excellently? First, because I have spent over 20 years of my life helping people sort through these type of questions in my college and career counseling practice, and for quite some time I have wanted to consolidate the insights I have gained from this experience. Second, I want to approach the questions of *why am I here*, *what's my life's purpose* and *how do I discover God's will for my life* from a different angle. Instead of asking *why am I here*, I want to ask a different question: *Where am I?* I believe it is possible to gain new insights into our life's purpose by asking ourselves this question.

*Where am I* should be the first question you ask before deciding on a direction or purpose. For example, if you want to get from San Antonio to Dallas you will need to head north. If you want to get from Amarillo to Dallas, you will need to head south. In both cases your purpose is to arrive in Dallas, but where you are before you begin that journey greatly impacts your direction. You don't just get in your car and randomly pick a direction without first considering - *where am I?*

## Where Are You?

Have you ever really thought about *where* you are? I'm not referring to what town you live in, or what stage of life you are in; I'm asking if you have considered how your life's purpose might be affected by the fact that you live on earth. What kind of place is earth? What kind of place was earth before God placed man here, and what condition was the earth in when God began to create heaven and earth? When I ask people what kind of condition the earth was in when God began His creating process, they usually say that the earth was in a state of "nothingness." However, according to Genesis we learn that the earth was formless and empty, and darkness existed when God began to create heaven and earth.

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*

Genesis 1:1-2 (New International Version)

In considering the question *where am I* from a biblical perspective, we realize we are on a planet that was once empty, dark and formless. The first thing we see God doing in the creating process involves Him taking a formless, empty and dark place and bringing order, shape and purpose to it. Throughout the days of creation, we see God bringing order, separating things from one another and setting clear boundaries. He was reclaiming from chaos. The creating process involves restoration and redemption; a theme we see throughout all of God's Word and clearly one of God's purposes for the world and for mankind.

When looking at the Hebrew/ancient Eastern roots of the creation story, we see a somewhat different interpretation than what many Christians today would view as the beginning. To most Christians, the opposite of the created order is "nothing." But to the ancients, the opposite of the created order was something much worse than "nothing." It was an active, malevolent force we can best term "chaos." In Genesis 1:2, chaos is depicted as a dark, undifferentiated mass of water.

*...the earth was a shapeless, chaotic mass, with the Spirit of God brooding over the dark vapors.*

Genesis 1:2 (The Living Bible Paraphrased)

Later in Genesis, we read how God creates the dry land and the seas, which can exist only when the water is gathered together or bound by dry land.

*Then God said, "Let the water beneath the sky be gathered into oceans so that the dry land will emerge."*

Genesis 1:9 (The Living Bible Paraphrased)

If we begin our search for understanding *who am I* by first asking *where am I*, we can gain new insight into understanding our purpose. If we are in fact located in a place that has been redeemed and ordered by God, we can say that we are in a place that was once in chaos, but was restored. We can also say we live in a place that was declared as good by God after He finished His creating process.

*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*

Genesis 1:31 (New International Version)

Unfortunately, we know that after mankind's Fall, the original creating efforts were distorted and wait for the day when all will be finally and completely restored and redeemed. However, since we also know that we are created in God's image, and since we live in a world that currently needs lots of restoration and repairing, what if part of our life's purpose is to help bring order out of chaos? What if we are to join in the redeeming and restoring of our world?

### **Repair the World**

A favorite Hebrew phrase of mine is ***tikkun olam*** meaning "repair the world." What if one of our life's purposes is to fix those things that are broken in our world? If so, then one of the answers to *why am I here* might be - *to help bring order out of chaos*. This purpose is one that we can plug into every day of our lives. We no longer have to look for some extravagant or lofty goal to bring meaning and purpose to our lives. You don't have to find the cure for cancer or banish world hunger; you simply need to do your part in repairing and restoring the things that are broken in the world; things that you see within your sphere of influence that need fixing. Following are a few examples of how simple it can be to see your life's purpose in action; if you understand part of your life's purpose to be about bringing order out of chaos in even the small things everyday.

### **Everyday Examples of Tikkun Olam**

One of your friends comes over confused about what to do about a certain problem. You help her sort through her thoughts, examine her options and decide on a course of action. You have helped her bring order out of the chaos of her thoughts and you have helped her restore peace and order to her world.

Your son falls off his bike and cuts his knee. You help bring order out of the chaos by applying antibiotic ointment and a bandage to his knee. This may seem like a simple thing, but a cut knee left unattended could lead to a serious infection and much chaos.

Your grandmother's electricity was cut off because she forgot to pay her electric bill. You take a look at her checkbook and realize that she has not been balancing her checkbook or paying her bills on time. You offer to take care of her bookkeeping and bill paying. You help bring order out of the chaos and provide a more peaceful and stable environment for your grandmother. This simple act of restoring and repairing makes a huge difference in her life.

Each of these examples are simple ways to help repair and restore things or situations that can become broken in our world. When I pray, I ask God to show me the places and situations where He wants to use me to help bring order out of chaos. I ask Him to make me attentive to ways that I can help restore order and bring wholeness and peace to a situation. He gives me the opportunity to do this almost every day in my college and career counseling practice and in dealings with my family, friends, community and church.

### **What's God's Will for My Life?**

It concerns me when I hear people discussing how exasperated they are because they say they can't discern God's will for their life. I hear many confused and frustrated young people say they feel that God has abandoned them because He hasn't made His will clear to them. They are searching for some elusive and mysterious answer to their life's purpose instead of seeing that God provides opportunities everyday to be involved in the repairing and restoring of our world.

I'm afraid we have made the search for God's will in our life far too complicated. Jesus simplified God's will for our lives when he was asked by the religious leaders of his day to identify God's most important commandment. Let's look at two Scriptures from the book of Matthew to see how Jesus summed up God's will for our lives.

*Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

Matthew 22:34-40 (New International Version)

*In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the prophets.*

Matthew 7:12 (New International Version)

When people tell me they don't know what God wants them to do with their life, I try to encourage them by saying that I believe Jesus simplified it for us. He said we are to love God and love others. If you are doing those two things, you are doing God's will for your life.

### **Short Answer to Why Am I Here?**

So in summary, when trying to answer questions about *life's purpose*, *God's will* and *why am I here*; consider the following 2 things:

1. Recognize where you are. You live in a world that needs to be restored and repaired. You can have a part in helping to bring order out of chaos. Do good deeds. Look for simple, everyday opportunities to serve others and make the world a better place. Actively participate in “tikkun olam” (repairing and restoring the world).
2. Don't waste time and get frustrated waiting for God to reveal some specific will for your life. Get busy where you are. If you see something that needs to be fixed, changed or done differently, jump into it and help fix or change it. If someone needs your counsel and comfort, offer it. If you see something that needs to be organized, bring order to it. Look for ways to do good deeds, repair, restore and make someone else's life better. By participating in this type of activity you are representing God, loving Him and loving your neighbor; which is exactly what Jesus said was the most important thing you could do.

As people who Jesus has redeemed and restored, we are equipped to serve others and fix those things that are broken in our world. I think a big part of our life's purpose is summed up nicely in Ephesians.

*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

*Ephesians 2:10 (New International Version)*