

Growing in Christ

Part 3: 'Our Purpose in Life'

If we truly want to grow and mature in Christ, then we must allow the Spirit of God access to the bedrock of our life, our faith, our character and our personality so that He can strengthen us, remove any flaws and if necessary, totally rebuild everything. In order for us to find growth and maturity and strength above the surface, we need to make sure everything below the surface is in order.

I liken our journey in this teaching series to the restoration of the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney many years ago. Some of you may have even seen what they did to that magnificent building. I recall the day when I walked past in George Street as a truck was coming through a large gate in a security fence and so I got to see right into the construction site. I was astounded to see that they had excavated beneath this grand old building far enough to put in a multi-storey underground car park. They had actually gone beneath the old foundations to strengthen them and restore them. Then they went down three more floors.

I remember walking through the building several years later admiring the finished product above the ground but then I quickly realised that for every hour they spent on the visible renovation above ground, they spent at least ten hours underneath the ground, making sure that this magnificently 'revived' building everyone could see had a firm enough foundation to allow it to stand for another 100 years.

Friends, that's the kind of process which can unfold in us through this teaching series, if we let God have His way. The safety fence has been erected, the plans have been prepared, some rather confronting warnings have been issued about the task before us and now the excavation and exposure of the foundations of our life can begin. We will go slowly so as to ensure that the whole building doesn't collapse. The task is monumental to us, but a normal day on the job for God.

I want us to begin at the basic level of reading the plans and understanding our very purpose in life. This comes even before the foundation is replaced or strengthened. This is the philosophy beneath the foundation if you like. So what is our purpose in life? The Apostle Peter tells us very clearly in his first letter. Let's read this from the amplified Bible.

1 Peter 2:9 *"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, God's own purchased, special people, that you may set forth the wonderful deeds, and display the virtues and perfections of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvellous light."*

Living a life without any real meaning to it - without any goal or purpose - is not only dull and boring, it is miserable! For the Christian, such a life should never be. If we really understand who we are, what our purpose is for us being here - and where we are going - life will become exciting and abundant and full. If the foundation is strong, the building will be strong. If our basic purpose is clear, our life will work.

So who are we? We are: "... a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, God's own purchased, special people; we are the sons and daughters of God." (1 John 3:2). We are, "children of God and joint heirs with Christ." (Romans 8:16, 17). We are "his bride . . ." (Revelation 19:7).

And what is our purpose? Our purpose in life can be summed up with two words: *becoming* and *doing*. Those same two words form the basis of evaluation for us along the way too. At any point in our lives we should be able to ask "*Who am I becoming?*" and "*What am I doing?*" The answers to those questions will determine if we are on track with what God has prepared for us. Let's see what the Bible says about this.

1. Becoming

Romans 8:28-29 *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."*

Who we are becoming as a person is a 100 times more important than what we are accomplishing. If we have the proper character, we will accomplish God's will for our lives. Heaven is not our goal, it is our destiny. Our goal is to become more like Jesus! The Apostle Paul is a great example of someone who was becoming. He was a man who was not in a spiritual rut. He pressed on towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. His one supreme goal was to know Jesus in a more intimate way and to be identified with Him by his life.

1 Corinthians 9:26-27 *"Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."*

Paul knew that if he would ever be the person Jesus wanted him to be, he must exercise discipline. He had desire, but discipline was also necessary. The body, with its own desires and cravings, must be brought under control and become subject to the Spirit of God. The word *disciple* comes from the same root word that *discipline* comes from. If we are going to be true disciples of Jesus Christ, we must learn to discipline ourselves. This simply means we must learn to bring our lives under subjection. We need to exercise control over our desires, thoughts, emotions and behaviour. In almost every other vocation - for example: sports, music, or a military career - discipline is the key for success. Our primary vocation or calling is to be a Christian (Christ-like), and this is only possible when we cooperate with the Holy Spirit and discipline ourselves.

2 Corinthians 7:1 *"Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."*

Revelation 19:7 *"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready."*

The emphasis in the above Scriptures is that the Holy Spirit does not do it all. We must discipline ourselves and make ourselves ready for our Bridegroom. It may not always be convenient to fast and pray, but it is important. There are many things we could do besides reading the Bible, but man cannot live by bread alone. We need to partake of the bread of life (the Word of God). Discipline in our lives does not make God smile on us more or love us more. Our salvation and our relationship with God is not affected by anything we do or don't do. Discipline is not a legalistic duty. Nothing we do or don't do will change God's love for us or our relationship with Him.

However, our personal experience of the fullness of that relationship and the power of our salvation, that is, the practical outworking of what God has worked in us, will only be our experience as we participate with the Holy Spirit and allow the life that is in us to rise to the surface and permeate who we are and what we do in the process.

There are so many Christians who right now are crying out for the power and reality and gifts of the Holy Spirit as they seek a deeper walk with God and yet their undisciplined lives, sinful habits and character flaws stand in the way of who they are becoming and so they cry out in vain. The fact is, you can be whatever you want to be in this life! It really is true. What kind of Christian do you want to be? What do you really wish to do with the rest of your life? It is up to you to choose whether you will be just an ordinary Christian, or whether you will be a person that God can use in a very special way. Again, discipline is the key.

Elijah was used by God to bring revival to a whole nation. Was he some super human being? No, not at all. James tell us in his letter that Elijah was a man subject to human passions as we are, and yet he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it didn't rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit. (James 5:17,18). His key to success was not that he was a special kind of person - with special talents or powers. The key to his success, I believe, was a disciplined prayer life.

In Acts 6 we read about the seven men who were appointed as the first Deacons of the apostolic Church. Five of them were Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. How many of them could you have named? Probably none. They were just good, ordinary men who did their job in a good, ordinary way. But what about the other two deacons, Stephen and Philip? They had the same opportunities. The same doors opened to them that opened to the other five. But both went down in Church history as great men of God. Stephen became the first Christian martyr and Philip became a great evangelist who set the city of Samaria on fire with the flames of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was also responsible for the gospel being carried into the country of Ethiopia. (see Acts, Chapters 7 and 8). These men, like all the great men and women of the Bible and throughout Church History, were becoming; they were in a constant state of flux; they never stopped growing in Christ; they were disciplining themselves so as to allow the Spirit of God the opportunity to mould them more and more into the image of Jesus.

If you have not read Billy Graham's Autobiography, *Just a I am*, then I strongly recommend you find a copy and read it soon. One of the most obvious characteristics of this incredible man of God is that from the day He embraced Jesus as Saviour right through to the end of his long life, Billy Graham was a work in progress; he was always becoming; he was always learning, growing and maturing. After leading hundreds of thousands of people to the Lord in over 160 countries around the world this great statesman of the Kingdom of God still disciplined himself every day to study the Word and pray and deal with personal sin and weaknesses in his character. He said that one of his struggles in writing an autobiography was that he was still learning and growing and he knew that as soon as he committed anything to writing about his life there would be another lesson and another chapter where he would become even more like Jesus.

What a testimony! What a powerful example of this foundational truth. If ever there was a man in our lifetime who could hang up his hat and feel like he had arrived and done well - it would be Billy Graham. A man of incredible integrity and maturity; a man of transparent honesty and humility; a man who did more in one life-time to make this world a better place and populate heaven than any other single person for centuries. And yet that man was still becoming, still learning and still growing in Christ until the day he died. So you see friends, becoming is not just an initial phase; it's not an early training program; it's not something we grow out of. This is a day-by-day lifetime process and the reason we are not living in full-on revival across this nation at present, I believe, is because millions of Christians stopped becoming . . . years ago. They supposedly 'grew up' and 'settled down' and the learning and growing, the daily disciplined journey stopped dead in its tracks. Becoming is critically important . . . but so is doing.

2. Doing:

Matthew 28:19 *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ..."*

Mark 16:15 *"He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."*

Acts 1:8 *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

The responsibility for reaching this world with the gospel of Jesus Christ does not belong only to preachers and paid staff in Churches. Every child of God is to be a witness for Jesus Christ and to use their gifts to reach the same end - to seek and to save the lost. The spiritual-minded Christian is not content with just existing. Such a person has learned that the only truly happy life is when we get involved with the work of God and are always busy for Jesus. They have learned that true joy comes when we have the right priorities: Jesus first, others second, ourselves last.

Luke 17:33 *"Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it."*

There is a lot of meaning in those words of Jesus. When we truly lose sight of ourselves and begin to live for others, we will be partakers of the abundant life.

Luke 6:38 *"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."*

What is this Scripture referring to? Give what? Where does it say that this is referring to material things only? When you read the eleven verses before verse 38, you will realise that Jesus was talking about giving love. What we have is what the world needs most. We have Jesus and we have truth. We also possess the love of God, because God is love! We are vessels of His truth and we need to be channels of His love. As the old saying goes: *"God's love was not put in your heart to stay; Love isn't love, until it's given away!"*

Everything we have been given is to be given away. We are not meant to keep it. We are called to be channels, not reservoirs! We are meant to bless others with all that we have. Our time, our gifts, our money, our prayers, our life! If we live our selfish 'walled-in' lives, we will go backwards in our walk with Jesus Christ, the same Jesus Who said in Matthew 20 that He was sent by the Father, *"... not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many;"* the same Jesus Who said in John 20, *"As I have been sent . . . so now I am sending you."* Jesus Christ loved others, lived for others, and finally died for others! And He has called us to do the same.

So is there a purpose for us being in this world? Did God save us for a reason? Yes! God loves us and He wants to share eternity with us, but He also wants us to be busy becoming more like Him, and doing His will - *becoming, and doing!*

Who are you becoming and what are you doing? Are you on a journey or have you arrived somewhere and parked (or stalled) years ago? Are you making choices every day which allow the Holy Spirit to refine you and mould you more and more into the image of Jesus? Or to put it another way, are you dying to your own selfish, fleshly desires every day so that the life of Christ that is in you becomes more and more obvious to those around you? That's what growing in Christ looks like!

Is your personal, intimate relationship with God growing or deteriorating? Those are the only two choices - no relationship is static. You are either making daily choices to grow closer to God and become more united with Him, in Christ, or you are not. If you are not then the enemy will make sure you are drifting further and further away in your experience of that relationship. God will never leave you, but your fallen humanity, your selfish desires and focus can become so dominant that He may as well be a million miles away.

Who are you becoming? What are you doing? The only two answers that are consistent with the New Testament revelation of what a Christian is are this: **I am becoming more like Jesus and I am doing the works of Jesus.** Which means I am becoming more loving, patient, kind, long suffering, compassionate, selfless, caring, serving, humble, focussed on the needs of others and it means that my life's focus is to preach the good news, give sight to the blind and set the captives free. That is the answer God is waiting to hear from each and every one of us. Is that the answer you can give Him today? Who are you becoming right now? What are you doing with your life right now? Answering those questions will help you determine if you are truly growing in Christ or not.