



Does my life have a purpose?

John 10:1-10

I am exploring a number of questions gathered under a generic enquiry, 'Is there more to life than this?' I now turn to 'Does my life have a purpose?' After asking questions concerning human identity and community engagement, our attention becomes deeply personal as we ask about purpose for each of our lives.

I remind you from last week's address that there are many people who consider happiness in the narrow sense of being defined by home, family and friends and enough money to live comfortably. But there is more to life than this.

All of us come to learn that life has other sides to it:

- Tragedy can strike our life and those close to us
- Jobs, careers and interests in life can be lost
- Close relationships can fall apart
- Material advancement can be denied us.

If life's purpose is understood as only about being happy, then it may disappear as swiftly as early morning mist.

My starting point is that our purpose is bound up with God's purposes. I am sure we have to scratch deeper than the surface of our existence to discover life's purpose. The fact that we cannot see God physically does not deny him.

- We cannot see wind, but the spring weather can cause devastation
- We cannot see electricity, yet we switch on the light with confidence
- We cannot see air, but we will not live without it.

Life has an ultimate purpose and it is ours to discover. Words don't just fly on to the pages of a book and land in the right order. A book has an author; a painting an artist; a building an architect – and God has given purpose to life.

In John 10, we have a great central theme where Jesus illuminates the characteristics of his ministry in relation to sheep and shepherding, but draws a section to a close with this concluding thought:

'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. '(John 10:10)

As contemporary city folk, we need to work harder at understanding the illustration of shepherd, for even in Jesus' day people did not fully grasp what he was saying. Jesus shares the fact that he came – and comes to us – so that we can enjoy life to the full. The life and purpose that Jesus brought – and continues to bring – is an 'overflowing experience' when compared to the restrictive patterns of much religion.

On a Sunday when we specifically explore the importance of volunteering, it is good to remind ourselves that life is more than just our family, our income or career; it is closely linked to how we discover what it means to voluntarily give ourselves to help others. Such engagement can be as fulfilling for us as it is for those we assist. For us, such engagement has a solid Christian foundation.



J B Phillips was a highly-regarded twentieth century Bible translator and he wrote, 'Over the years I have hundreds of conversations with people, many of them of higher intellectual calibre than my own, who quite obviously had no idea what Christianity is really about. I was in no way trying to catch them out; I was simply and gently trying to find out what they knew about the New Testament.'

'My conclusion was that they knew virtually nothing ... It means that the most important event in human history is politely and quietly by-passed. For it is not as though the evidence had been examined and found unconvincing; it had simply never been examined.'

The purpose of life is life with a capital 'L'

Throughout history God's message has always been to do with quality rather than quantity. Life can be a miserable experience, if we don't discover something of its purpose.

In Woody Allen's film 'Annie Hall' we are confronted with the words, 'Life is divided into the horrible and the miserable.'

Sometimes you meet people who have a very negative outlook on the world. It is as if they have been placed on earth to spoil everyone else's fun. You have to be honest and say some of these people are Religious with a capital 'R'.

But Jesus came into this world to breathe his goodness and purpose into all our lives. He did not come to spoil life.

If we take a serious look at the New Testament, we see One who brings joy, peace and deep satisfaction to people who know they need it!

Those who feel self-satisfied and full of self-importance find it hardest to understand Jesus Christ.

- He is the pearl of greatest treasure
- He is the gift that puts everything else into perspective
- He offers more to life than the bank, the gym or the fashion expert can ever give to us.

It is too easy to miss the simplest truths. Two academics in a university town met each other in the street and one said, "Good morning" and the second enquired of him, "What on earth does he mean by that?" There is simplicity at the heart of things which does not require a specially selected set of skills to understand.

Far too often, we wrestle with the 'how' of life without having begun to explore the 'why'.

- We are like the hamster in the cage – ceaselessly running on treadmills with no destination in view
- A person once concluded, 'I dig the ditch to get the money, to buy bread, to get the strength to dig the ditch.'



Paul, writing to one of the early churches, spoke about having discovered an 'Abundant life'. It is there – Yes – in this real world of disaster and earthquakes; there is a quality of life that lifts us above a success-based view of life and it is all possible through God's grace.

Have we really discovered the quality of life that God offers to us? It becomes possible through those powerful truths of 'forgiveness, hope and God-given purpose!'

We have just lived through an election with our sisters and brothers in the USA. I am reminded of the Watergate scandal and Chuck Colson who found himself in prison, and became a Christian. He had been known as 'The hatchet man of the White House'. In his autobiography, he tells of a Christian fellowship gathering one evening in Washington DC at which four people were present:

- Chuck Colson – Republican tough guy of the White House
- Senator Harold Hughes – sworn enemy of Colson for so long
- Eldridge Cleaver – a former left-leaning radical political leader of the Black Panther party
- Tommy Tarrants – a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, fuelled by race hatred – on parole.

They had all discovered life had more to offer than they had ever known. We see it in volunteers who discover that in working with young people, they can give something back; in people running a weekly shop for residents; or in those answering the phone to folks in need – in all these ways, life has a capital 'L'.

The purpose of life is offered to us in Christ

People are very tired of empty religion. The kind of 'infighting' between religious leaders and thinkers doesn't appeal to people. In fact it puts people off.

However, because people are tired of unhelpful God stories, this must not lead us to the conclusion that there is not still a hunger or longing for the deepest things in life that God has to offer.

In some ways, there has never been a more religious society than the one we live in today, where God is spoken of in obscure and abstract ways. There is an indefinable maze of religious thought forms. But for many people, God often remains distant, vague and remote.

In a matter of weeks, we shall enter Advent and then Christmas, when we shall celebrate how Jesus Christ puts a face on God. We shall read, 'The Word became flesh, full of grace and truth, and lived among us.'

From France in the nineteenth century, we read, 'The man who has no inner life is the slave of his surroundings.'

Jesus Christ offers us alternative ways of living life by sharing his purpose and power. Life's purpose cannot be about gaining everything the world offers. There are no pockets in shrouds – and there are far too many examples of apparently successful people who are still unhappy.



When Jesus talked about it being harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, it was not to condemn wealth or to turn his back on ambition, but to say folks are surrounded by so much that ultimately will not give them the key to life.

In John 10, Jesus is saying many have claimed to lead people to life, but only he will give us the truth, purpose and love of God. We have read of God's provision, guidance and care and these are the things that matter most.

The purpose of life is offered to us in Christ and this is why we at Wesley Mission never struggle to make the link between Word and deed.

William Penn, an English Quaker, sailed to the New World in 1682, fleeing persecution, and ultimately founded the State of Pennsylvania. He was right to say, 'The way of God is a way of faith...'

The purpose God offers to us is challenging. So we read, 'If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. '(Luke 9:23) The journey of the Christian is not an aimless ramble, but a pilgrimage of purpose. We are permanent learners who follow with purpose.

Golda Meir, the amazing woman who led Israel through some very troubling times, reflected upon life in this way, 'I cannot think of anything more terrible than looking back at the end of your life and feeling you have not written well in the book of life.'

Life is the quality that Jesus demonstrates. The great Dane, Soren Kierkegaard, famously said, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."

The purpose of life interrupts cosy patterns of life

There are times when our lives need to be interrupted. Sometimes they are – and it can be disturbing.

What does a pair of slippers symbolise to you? In Europe at least, when people think of Christmas gifts, many children have chosen to buy their parents a pair of slippers.

- Warmth in the cold
- Relaxation after strenuous work
- Taking it easy!

But, however pleasant they might be, they are not the symbol of the Christian faith. There is an essential energy which never leaves us and is part of what it means to live purposeful lives.

Thomas La Mance, in the context of business life, famously said, "Life is what happens to us while we are making other plans." It can pass us by. We may find ourselves preoccupied with the peripheries and miss the centralities.

This question of life's purpose is to affirm something that is the antithesis of life lived as though it were a random collection of experiences with no abiding sense of direction.



The Christian faith is unique and makes unique claims upon people's lives. Jesus Christ is not one among many, but calls us to a purpose that demonstrates why we are part of this world.

Our lives are interrupted by his claims upon us, by his demanding call within us, and the transformation which takes place through the work of the Holy Spirit.

A Presbyterian minister was invited to address a class of university students. He began the meeting by asking a question, 'What are you living for?' One student was swift to respond, 'I am going to be a pharmacist.' The minister then pursued his point, 'I understand that's how you're going to earn your livelihood and it's your choice of career, but what are you living for is the question.' The young person bowed his head for a moment and said, "Sir, I'm sorry but I haven't thought that thing through yet." It is possible to journey through the whole of life and never really answer that fundamental question.

I wonder what picture comes to mind when we think of a cosy pattern of life. Eileen Guder once wrote, 'You can live on bland food, so as to avoid an ulcer, drink no tea or coffee or other stimulants in the name of health, go to bed early and stay away from nightlife, avoid all controversial subjects so as never to give offence, mind your own business and avoid involvement in other people's problems, spend money only on necessities and save all you can.' She goes on to say that it is still possible to break your neck in the bath.

Our text comes at the second half of a sentence which has spoken of how a thief behaves towards the sheep. In point of fact, what we see is only self-interest. Life's purpose is much more clearly expressed when we have a concern for others. The true Shepherd of John 10 doesn't take but gives, protects rather than steals, and lives life in a way that gives possibility to others.

Tom Wright concludes some comments on this verse by saying, 'The promise of full life, full to overflowing, is as relevant for us today as it was then.'

- Materialism has proved to be unsatisfying
- Popularity can be a passing experience.

The call of Jesus Christ is still worth our consideration and our commitment. If we respond to his call, we will discover that there is more to life and it does indeed have a purpose.

In one of Charles Schulz's famous Peanuts cartoons, Lucy is thinking deeply and Charlie is listening.

'Charlie Brown, she begins, 'life is a lot like a deck chair. Some place it to see where they have been. And some so they can see where they are at the present.'

Charlie sighs, 'I can't even get mine unfolded.'

It was Helen Keller, the wonderful Christian woman who faced so many challenges, who reflected that 'Life is either a daring experience or nothing at all.'