

The Purpose from Eternity

It's not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you are placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose.

Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*⁵

READ EPHESIANS 3:1-13

The Mysterious Plan

I suspect Paul had a lot of time for reflection while sitting in his dark prison cell. Why was he here? What was life all about? Had he wasted his time and talents? Had he traded a rising career for a dead-end adventure? It's the sort of mood that makes you want to read Ecclesiastes. "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" (Ecclesiastes 2:15)

We are grateful that Paul found another conclusion in his dark introspection. He found comfort in know that even in his prison cell he was caught up in something much larger than himself. He was part of a work of divine genius, not human chaos.

He was a participant in the grace-filled plan of God

Of all the people that had ever lived, Paul had been chosen to serve as an apostle of Christ (v. 1-2). He was made

a steward of God's grace and entrusted one of history's greatest tasks. Paul considered it a unique privilege to be the person selected by God to reveal the "mystery" to the world (v. 3).

The ancient world was full of mystery cults. There are even still a few around, but I don't advise looking for them. Simply put, mystery cults were religious groups or secret societies prevalent in ancient culture that coexisted with more mainstream national religions. A person joined the cult through a rite of initiation of some kind and then, if you preserved in loyalty to the cult, you learned of the great mystery, the secret that only the cult could reveal to you about life and its meaning. Most of those secrets are now lost to us because they were in fact kept secret from nonmembers.

Paul here declares Christianity to be a sort of mystery cult, but not a very good one. It was a mystery cult that shared its secret openly with the world. Yes, in times past it had been hidden from "the sons of men in other generations" (v. 4). But Paul had been given the task of sharing the secret with the whole world. Both Jew and Gentile were joint participants in the mystery and all the promises it entailed.

The Christian mystery also differed from ancient cults because of how it was received. In the ancient religions, you might arrive at the mysterious knowledge by deep thinking or through meditation. In Christianity, this mystery was not discovered by anything humans did, but it was "revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (v. 5). We know the mystery because God wanted us to know it.

Consider the honor that Paul feels! For 1500 years, Paul's forefathers had been searching the Old Law, trying to

understand God's ultimate purpose. They had wondered how God was going to fix the world that looked so broken and sad. They wondered how it could be that "the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name" (Amos 9:11-12). Now, not just during Paul's life time, but as preached by Paul's own lips, the great purpose of God is finally made known in Christ Jesus.

The mystery being revealed is this: Jesus Christ is Lord, and God's purpose for all people is coming true in him. Jesus is the centerpiece of God's purpose. He is the Christ (Messiah) for whom Israel had waited for so long. However, an unexpected piece of the puzzle for the Jewish believers was that the Gentiles were included in Christ's people as "fellow heirs" (v. 6). Jesus was truly lord of all, not just of some.

Paul considers it a great honor to play a part in the unfolding of this part of God's plan as the apostle to the Gentiles (c. 7-9). When Paul calls himself "the least of all saints," we see Paul's humility. Likewise, we should learn the joy of serving God without trying to bring glory to ourselves.

The ultimate goal of God's plan is that all people — Jew and Gentile — would take part in this great revealed mystery (v. 9). From the highest to the lowest, God wants all people to see His "manifold" wisdom (v. 10). "Manifold" is translated from a Greek term which means having a great variety of colors, like patterned fabric or a brightly colored painting. Truly God's purpose in Jesus is beautiful to behold. Paul seems to think of the mystery as a precious jewel. He describes it as "unsearchable riches" (v. 8). It is the most precious gift that God could ever give this world. It is the gift of his only son, Jesus.

If the gospel mystery is a gem, then the church is like a

golden ring that displays God's precious jewel. The church's work, above all others, is to make known God's beautiful plan for the world. We lift it up so that all the world may see it (v. 10). As Jesus said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). The job of the church is to be all about Jesus. Jesus does all the hard work. We just lift him up.

It is important to note that this is all God's "eternal purpose" (v. 11). The sum of all that happened — the coming of Jesus, his suffering, his death, his resurrection, and his church — is what God had desired all along. Human purposes and plans may come and go, but God's will in Jesus is here to stay.

What could make us bolder in our work or more confident in our faith than knowing that we are part of God's purpose (v. 12)? We have been allowed to participate in God's work of saving his people. What an honor! Even if we suffer, we can have hope and confidence in doing what God wills (v. 13).

The Church As God's Purpose

For me, it is helpful to distinguish between a plan and purpose. It is a hairsplitting distinction, but I've found it useful.

Jesus Christ is God's plan, and the events of the gospel story are no accident. Jesus was tried in court "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). He stood before Herod and Pontius Pilate, but they were merely there as God intended "to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place" (4:28).

The Church is God's purpose, meaning that it exists to fulfill God's intent in all things. "This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord." Jesus is the culmination of the plan and therefore the realization of the purpose. The Church exists to carry out that purpose and reveal it in the world. We are a city set on a hill and a light to every nation (Matthew 5:14). "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (5:16).

Why does this matter?

It is important for me to realize that God's work in human history has been about Jesus, not me. Rick Warren, in his massively popular book *The Purpose Driven Life*, summarizes this concept perfectly in his first paragraph: "It's not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you are placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose."

It isn't about me.

Surprisingly, this is relieving news. If all of creation has been engineered to give me some opportunity, what if I miss? If I am the focal point of all meaning in the universe, what if it crushes me beneath that burden of responsibility?

Instead, the purpose and plan of God is already finished. He planned to bring Christ to the world. He created a people with the purpose of making that plan known to the world. I am part of something great – a fact that gives me great meaning and satisfaction – but it does not depend on me!

In the story of Esther, Mordecai approaches Esther with

a dangerous opportunity to save the Jewish people from violence and persecution. He goes so far as to suggest to Esther, “Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14b) Perhaps this moment and this opportunity was the work of God, and perhaps this was a turning point in history for Esther and all her people.

But that isn’t all Mordecai says. “If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place” (Esther 4:14a). Esther indeed had a great opportunity, but salvation did not belong to Esther. Salvation from peril was a work of God. If it was God’s purpose and plan to save his people at that time, no failure of Esther could undermine it.

In the book of Acts, a Jewish leader named Gamaliel makes the same observation about the fledgling Christian movement. Gamaliel recited a long list of contemporary Jewish movements that had risen and fallen in their time. None had amounted to much, and Gamaliel deduced from this a simple observation. “If this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God” (Acts 5:38-39).

The plan and purpose of God are made perfect in Jesus Christ. My part, my purpose, is to participate in what God had done in Jesus. It isn’t all up to me, and it isn’t all about me. “This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Who Am I?

I am the result of a divine plan, but I alone am not its purpose. I am not the center of the universe or the leading actor in the human history. The outcome of your life and my life does not hang on my achievements or my failures. I am not unimportant, but neither am I most important. I am one of the many children of God and am blessed to be so.

I am a church member, and therefore I am a participant in the greatest story ever told. I am not the hero of the tale, and if I'm being honest, sometimes I am even more like a villain. But have a role to play. God's purpose, first accomplished in Jesus, lives on in my life.

I am here because of him, and I am here for him. My life and identity will not be defined by what I accomplish, but rather by what he has already accomplished. My life's work is to trust in what he has done and share it with the world.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we apply the message of Ephesians 3:1-13 to our own lives? In what ways might we shift our focus from personal accomplishments to align more with God's purpose being fulfilled in Christ?
2. What are some practical steps or attitudes we can adopt to prioritize God's purpose in Christ over our personal achievements and ambitions?
3. How does understanding God's purpose in Christ impact our perspective on success and failure in life? How can it provide a sense of meaning that transcends human accomplishments?