



C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

DISCOVERING GOD'S PURPOSE FOR YOUR LIFE

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One of the biggest questions is not, What is *my* purpose for my life? but, What is *God's* purpose for my life?

Are you confident that you know and are fulfilling God's purpose for your life? I trust you are, but not everyone is. In our chaotic and unsettling world, it is sometimes hard to understand how God's purposes are being worked out

in our lives. Whatever your case, in the midst of the confusion, fears, anxieties, and distractions of this present world, all of us can benefit from a firmer confidence that God is indeed working out His plans in our lives.

How can we gain this confidence? To be sure, we can't work it up on our own through human optimism and positive thinking. Rather, it is produced by the Holy Spirit, who works primarily (though not exclusively) through Holy Scripture, which He uses to enlighten our minds and kindle faith in our hearts (Rom. 10:17).

God's purpose for our life has two major aspects: (1) His purpose in the world to come and (2) His purpose in the present world. These are intricately intertwined, and it is important to approach our need for guidance in the present world, which seem so urgent, in the context of God's larger purposes. Once we situate ourselves in this framework, we can more readily discern and embrace God's purposes in the unique circumstances of our lives.

Let's begin by reminding ourselves that the God of the Bible is a God of purpose. And not just general purposes but specific ones. He is the supreme, long-term strategic planner of the universe. He

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does nothing in a random or haphazard manner. And His purposes extend from eternity past to eternity future, encompassing not only the ultimate destiny of His creation, but our personal lives, as well.

God's Purpose in the World to Come

The first chapter of the Bible sets the stage: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).¹ God employs His immense power and wisdom to create the world in which He intends to work out His purposes. Hints of this purpose emerge in the verses that follow. From this opening scene, we can rightly conclude that such a God is well able to fulfill His purposes. God Himself assures us of this elsewhere: "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose'" (Isa. 46:9b–10). A number of other Scriptures say the same thing and are meant to assure and comfort us.

But God is more than simply a purposeful, all-powerful Creator; God is good! After demonstrating more of His sovereign purposes and power by calling Abraham, establishing his descendants as the people of Israel, and later delivering them from Egypt, God revealed Himself in a deeper way to Moses on Mount Sinai: "The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness'" (Exod. 34:6). The psalmists and others would later affirm this, saying, "The Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations" (Ps. 100:5). God demonstrates His goodness and love most clearly in the gift of His Son to be Savior of the world.

What is the big plan that this good, loving, and all-powerful God is working out? Those who are reasonably familiar with the Bible will



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God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen. 1:27–28)

The biblical story ends with the *consummation*, “according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:9), and once “all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). The picture is glorious:

KNOWING & DOING

This is God's ultimate purpose — to recreate this fallen world and to bring about a new heaven and new earth.





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In this new world, as Jonathan Edwards describes it —

*divine love shall ... be brought to its most glorious perfection in every individual member of the ransomed church above. Then, in every heart, that love which now seems but a spark, shall be kindled to a bright and glowing flame, and every ransomed soul shall be as it were in a blaze of divine and holy love, and shall remain and grow in this glorious perfection and blessedness throughout all eternity!*²

This is God's ultimate purpose — to recreate this fallen world and to bring about a new heaven and new earth. He is redeeming a people for Himself, with whom He will dwell and with whom He will share His own glory.

God's Purpose in the Present World

Between these two beautiful pictures of God's original good creation and God's new and glorious creation lies a world that has been devastated by sin, suffering, and death. Thinking about this shifts our attention from the heavenly to the earthly, from the grand masterplan to its fulfillment through redemption. When our first parents fell into sin, they plunged the world into a catastrophe that has plagued us ever since. But in spite of this, God's purposes continued to move toward fulfillment, initially through Abraham and the people of Israel, then finally and supremely through Jesus, God's own Son. Jesus proclaimed the in-breaking of God's kingdom and gave Himself up as a propitiating sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. His death appeared to have halted the kingdom dead in its tracks. But after His glorious resurrection, He commissioned His followers to go into all the world and make disciples of all people everywhere. Supercharged by the Holy Spirit, God's kingdom spread across the Roman world in one generation. The kingdom continued to advance, as disciples of



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Jesus went out into the world and brought people of all nations to faith in the Messiah. Today more and more people are being brought into His family each day, people who will one day inhabit the new heavens and new earth and live in the very presence of God Himself and of Jesus Christ.

Though we are ensnared and defaced by sin when we enter His family, God puts each of His children into a lifelong process of transformation designed to conform them to the likeness of Jesus and make them fit to live in His presence. As Augustine noted, “None can become fit for the future life, who hath not practiced himself for it now.”³ As they are transformed daily “from one degree of glory to another,” their lives increasingly display His grace and glory in this present world and will do so perfectly in the world to come. Paul gives a brief but comprehensive description of the process:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience — among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:1–10)





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Paul emphasizes here that people are brought into God's kingdom not by any good works they have done, but by God's grace alone — His completely unwarranted, undeserved mercy and love toward them. Even more shocking, God intends that in the world to come, they shall be examples of His amazing grace, living trophies, as it were, of His great love.

Paul describes God's people as His "workmanship," or works of art, created in Christ to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for them to do. In the previous verse, Paul strongly emphasized that they were not saved by good works; here he emphasized that they were saved for good works. Elsewhere Paul urged believers to be "zealous for good works" and to "devote themselves to good works," (Titus 2:14; 3:8). But for Paul, good works are never the cause of salvation, only the fruit and evidence of it! This is a crucial distinction we need to keep in mind throughout our lives, for we are prone to drift imperceptibly into thinking that our works earn points with God.

What are these good works to which we are called? Their primary manifestation is the change of heart and character that comes from the new birth — the process of becoming holy in daily life through grateful, Spirit-empowered obedience. Paul spoke of this a few verses earlier:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Eph. 1:3–6)

Being "holy" has two aspects: the position of being set apart



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as God's child, which is conferred upon us through new birth, justification and adoption into God's family, and the process of change (sanctification) that makes that position a progressively experienced reality. The goal of this process is to "be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29), and it happens as you "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" and seek to "be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:1–2). This metamorphosis unfolds as we seek to follow the teaching and example of Jesus, drawn forward by a grateful love. It is guided by Holy Scripture, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and manifested in the fruit of the Spirit, as we fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

God's grand purpose for the world to come, then, is in the process of coming into being in the present through the redeeming and restoring work of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Christ, and by the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, God is at work preparing a people to populate His new world. His purpose is to conform them to the image of Christ. This means that God's purpose for each one of us is to be transformed in our character, such that we more fully reflect the character of our God and increasingly live a life of love and good works.

God's Purpose Unfolds in Our Daily Life

The transformation process that shapes and prepares us for the world to come takes place in the midst of our daily lives and is multifaceted. As we saw earlier, this involves every area of personal and moral life. It also includes family, work. And ministry. Yes, God has a place of service in His kingdom for each of His children, whether they are at the top of society or the bottom or somewhere between; whether educated or illiterate. Every life is a plan of God. The Bible shows us many and varied examples of this.



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Consider God's purpose for the prophet Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). Or His plan for the apostle Paul, "when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles ..." (Gal. 1:15–16). It was said of King David, "After he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, he fell asleep" (Acts 13:36). God has plans not just for notable figures like these, but for each of us in our own generation, plans which He has "prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Our great concern and frequent prayer should be for God to fulfill his plans for our life. What a tragedy it would be to discover at the judgment seat of Christ that we had not fulfilled His purposes for our lives but *our own*.

How do we discover and fulfill God's plans for us? Let's review where Scripture has brought us. First, we saw that God calls us to live with Him in the new heavens and new earth and to glorify and enjoy Him forever as trophies of His grace and love. This requires that we embrace His grace and love through faith in Jesus His Son Christ. Next, God calls us to respond to His grace with wholehearted surrender and the pursuit of Christlikeness. These purposes of God are general and apply to us all. Once we have embraced them, we are in the position for God to lead us into how He wants to work them out in our daily lives.

God can lead us in any way He wishes. By a direct word, as with Jeremiah (see above). Or in rare cases, a word through others, as with Paul (Ac. 21:10-11) or through unusual circumstances (Ac. 16:6-11). But normally, He works through a process using His written word, by which any other guidance must be judged. This process, which we usually find too slow, serves to draw us closer to Him in prayer, to keep us dependent on His word and Spirit, to



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help us surrender to His will, and to teach us about Himself and His ways. It should also move us to seek the prayer and wisdom of others in the church, teaching us to depend more on our brothers and sisters in Christ. In a word, it is a maturing process.

God's plans unfold in the ordinary affairs of daily life, and He wants to guide us, especially in the important issues, such as which church to join, in what ways we should serve God, where we should attend school, what career we should pursue, where we should live, where we should work, who our close friends should be, whom we should marry, and when we should retire. Our choices in these matters may seem mundane, but they are not. Not only do they forge the context in which God's plans are worked out; more important, they shape our lives and contribute to our transformation. It is an inescapable law of life that we make our choices, then our choices make us. Choices are transformative — for good or ill. Lewis noted: "Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before."⁴ Because of this, it is important to seek God's Fatherly wisdom and guidance in making these and other significant decisions as our lives unfold.

There are no Bible verses that will give us specific answers to questions like these. However, we can often gain insight and wisdom from relevant biblical precepts and promises. For example, "Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way" (Ps. 25:8–9). This means humility of heart is essential if we want God to guide us, so is reverence for God; "Who is the man who fears the Lord? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose" (Ps. 25:12). Another key promise is "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you" (Ps. 32:8). God instructs and teaches us in a variety of ways through His word and Spirit. He also counsels us with His eye on us, indicating a more personal level of guidance.

A photograph of a forest with a wooden boardwalk. The boardwalk is made of wooden planks and winds through a dense forest of tall, thin trees. The ground is covered in brown leaves and pine needles. The trees are mostly bare, suggesting a late autumn or winter setting. The lighting is soft and warm, with sunlight filtering through the trees. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Rather, God will personally guide and direct us through the Holy Spirit opening our understanding to the meaning and application of His word to the circumstances of our lives and the situations we face.

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So this is not a mechanical process of studying the Bible as a book of rules, regulations, policies, and procedures, then coming up with the right answer. Rather, God will personally guide and direct us through the Holy Spirit opening our understanding to the meaning and application of His word to the circumstances of our lives and the situations we face. In the verse that follows (Ps. 32:9), He warns us against being senseless and stubborn, like a horse or mule. In other words, we are not to be spiritually dull and rebellious to His guidance but rather docile and surrendered.

Seeking God's guidance requires the wholehearted surrender and active faith described above. In practical terms, this means we commit ourselves in advance to trust God and do His will, whether we like it or not. We must resist the tendency to rely on our own understanding and instead seek God's wisdom. This is reinforced in Proverbs, which reminds us that "whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered" (Prov. 28:26). We find His wisdom as we "trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths" (Prov. 3:5–6). This wholehearted trust does not mean that we shouldn't use our understanding but that we should subordinate it to God and His wisdom. This is where some of us go astray; we simply default to what appears logical to us. Others default to what "feels" right. As God's wisdom becomes clearer, we must embrace it, for to "acknowledge" Him in all our ways means to acknowledge His lordship and submit in the obedience of faith. When it doesn't become clearer as quickly as we hope, we must wait on God in a posture of active trust. This can be hard. But God often uses delays to work deeply in our lives, testing our motives, deepening our faith, developing our patience, and aligning the circumstances required for His answer. Only then will we be in a position for Him to direct our paths. In seeking God's guidance, there is also a place to "listen to advice and accept instruction" (Prov. 19:20) from older



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believers who are known to be wise, godly, and well grounded in Scripture. And of course all of this must be done with serious prayer (and sometimes fasting) and the confident assurance that God “rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb. 11:6 NIV).

Let’s briefly consider three common examples. Scripture tells us that anyone who wants to marry is free to do so. However, it limits our specific choice to another believer (1 Cor. 7:39). Based on that verse, we might close our Bibles and consider the matter settled. Whomever I feel deeply attracted to is an option, right? Yes, but is it a wise option? Many will be shocked to discover that romantic attraction, while exciting and desirable, is not the only or even the most decisive consideration in choosing a mate. The fact is that not all potential candidates are equally desirable as a spouse or parent. Thus, we should go further and seek *biblically derived* answers to significant questions: What are the basic characteristics of a good husband or wife? What is this person’s level of spiritual maturity and commitment to Christ? Would this person join, support, and encourage me as I seek faithfully to follow Christ? Do we have compatible higher-level priorities and life goals and enough in common to sustain a healthy relationship? How compatible would we be in other ways as a couple? Is this person sufficiently emotionally healthy? What is the place for discernment and advice from parents and godly spiritual leaders? These are a few of the important questions for which you should seek biblical wisdom when choosing a spouse with whom you can glorify God and fulfill His purposes. Next to accepting Christ as Lord and Savior, this is arguably the most important decision of life.

Or consider work. We are free to choose any type of work that is not illegal, immoral, or ungodly. But here as well not all options are equally wise or God-glorifying. What does the Bible teach about our work? A very basic assumption is that God has endowed each



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of His children with the gifts and abilities necessary to fulfill His plans for their lives. If you did poorly in math and science while in school, you are not likely destined to become an engineer or astronaut! So an important starting point is to take account of our God-given gifts, abilities, and motivations. These are suggestive. Once they become clear, we are able to ask: Is a given job a good fit for my gifts and abilities, strengths and weaknesses? Is it a position in which my gifts will enable me to glorify God if I perform it well? Is there a realistic possibility of being salt and light to those among whom I labor? Prayer for the Spirit's guidance (sometimes with fasting), accurate self-understanding, godly counsel, and self-surrender are very important in making such decisions. For most Americans, this process will need to be repeated a number of times over their careers and is crucial to fulfilling God's plans for them.

Finally, a word about God's plans for us in the church. Every person who has been born again has been given a least one special enablement by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7). The Spirit's gifts equip us to glorify the Father and the Son through serving our brothers and sisters in the church and, in some cases, serving people outside the church in mission. Our gifts normally become evident in the course of active involvement in church life. As we exercise them, the church is built up and strengthened and God's kingdom advances. The gifts of others also minister to us in various ways, including wisdom and counsel to discern God's direction on issues, questions, and challenges. Serving God in His church is a major part of His plan for our lives and also a great source of satisfaction and fulfillment in our life on earth.

In conclusion, if we truly want to do God's will and fulfill His plans in our lives, and if we ask Him, He will lead and empower us to do so, for He knows our hearts. Indeed, "the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those



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whose heart is blameless toward him” (2 Chron. 16:9a). And when we appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of our lives (Rom. 14:10–12; 2 Cor. 5:10), we will not have to draw back in failure but can hear Him say, “Well done!” We will have glorified and enjoyed God here on earth and shall joyfully enter the world to come, where we will glorify Him yet more and enjoy Him forever and ever! ■

NOTES

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

² Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, [more info?]

³ Augustine of Hippo, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 6 (Oxford: Parker, 1857), see Ps. 148l.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; reprt., San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 92.



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God ... has purposes and performs particular actions, ... does one thing and not another, [is] a concrete, choosing, commanding, prohibiting God with a determinate character.

— *C.S. Lewis*



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1

Have your views about fasting changed as a result of reading this article and, if so, how?

2

Assuming it is medically appropriate for you, would you like to participate in a one day, sunup to sundown fast (refraining from all food but drinking plenty of water)? If so, when do you plan to do this?



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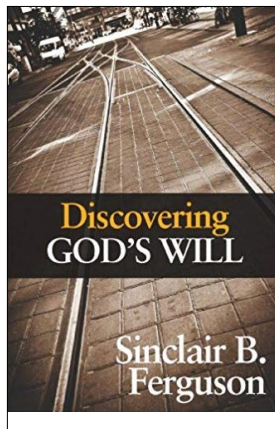


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RECOMMENDED READING



Sinclair Ferguson, *Knowing God's Will* (Banner of Truth, 2013)

There are few more important things in the Christian's life than discovering God's will. The assurance that we are in the center of God's purposes brings lasting stability to our experience. But how do we discover the will of God for our lives? Sinclair Ferguson answers this question by showing how God's will is shaped by His ultimate purposes for us. It is made known to us through his Word. At times discovering God's will demands careful thought: it may require patience; it always demands a right attitude to God Himself. Discovering God's Will draws out fundamental principles by which God guides us, applies them to practical situations like vocation and marriage, and underlines many important biblical counsels. It shows that the guidance God gives comes primarily through knowing, loving and obeying Him.

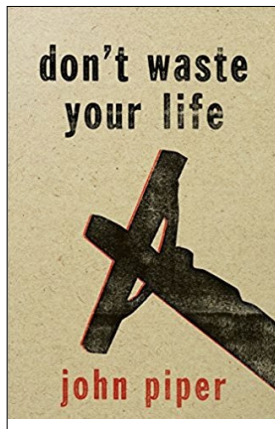


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John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life* (Crossway, 2003)

John Piper writes, "I will tell you what a tragedy is. I will show you how to waste your life. Consider this story from the February 1998 Reader's Digest: A couple 'took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30-foot trawler, play soft-ball and collect shells. ...' Picture them before Christ at the great day of judgment: 'Look, Lord. See my shells.' That is a tragedy.

"God created us to live with a single passion to joyfully display his supreme excellence in all the spheres of life. The wasted life is the life without this passion. God calls us to pray and think and dream and plan and work not to be made much of, but to make much of him in every part of our lives."

Most people slip by in life without a passion for God, spending their lives on trivial diversions, living for comfort and pleasure, and perhaps trying to avoid sin. This book will warn you not to get caught up in a life that counts for nothing. It will challenge you to live and die boasting in the cross of Christ and making the glory of God your singular passion. If you believe that to live is Christ and to die is gain, read this book, learn to live for Christ, and don't waste your life!