

THE PLEASURE OF A PURPOSE ...FOR THOSE PERSONS NOW DISPLACED

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We lie in bed and think about the day ahead. What is there to do? What is there to accomplish?

For some, the idea of a day or a week with no demands on their time may sound very attractive. But what if this is their situation day after day and month after month?

In the normal course of life, the need to eat, the need to work, and the need to get on with others keeps us extended. But what if all of this changes? Employers may say we are redundant; medicos may say that we are an invalid; the next generation may call us out of date.

A sense of futility can also arise from a bereavement, a family breakdown, a moral failure or a vocational flop or just a feeling of inferiority. Something may have suggested to our mind that the things we have been doing are of little value—or, even if we think they are of great value, no-one else does.

However, it is clear that everyone needs to be significant in the lives of some other people. Even the annoyances of daily pressure or the sniping of enemies are preferable to redundancy and isolation. It is when the demands of a community disappear or fritter away that we realise how much our social setting provided a sense of vocation.

With early retirements and redundancies becoming quite frequent, the matter is all the more important to consider. Is the sudden cessation (for whatever reason) of the usual demands upon our time and attention going to reveal that there is no longer a purpose for our lives?

Some people may find sufficient stimulus in a variety hobbies and sports, socialising and touring. These may be good things to do, but if they are the basic shape of a person's life from then on, it seems to indicate that they regard themselves as unable to do anything important. Everyone is built for serving and honouring and giving to others. In a strange way, we all need the struggle that is involved in living with and for other people.

Vocation is a wonderful thing. Almost everyone, even the laid-back-living-for-the-moment kind of person loves to be able to say: 'I just had to do that.' We crave a demand upon our lives and crumble if we do not have one. This may be the reason

why wars and other disasters and local emergencies draw us together and we feel the pleasure of being pulled along in the flow of an important exercise.

This small article cannot discuss the reasons why these things occur, but most of us will realise that life from here on is going to be abysmal if we do not find a way of being useful. The question is, do we have to live in dread of another meaningless day?

Writing for Christians, or even for those who are interested in how Christians look at things, is completely different from writing for those who have no hope. A person who believes in the goodness of God has a certainty and courage and joy which do not arise primarily because of favourable conditions. Their life does not arise from what is seen.

A sudden stop of activity—or the overwhelming feeling that it may as well stop—can resolve into a prayer. We can pray that the love of God will be poured into our hearts and that we will do greater things than we have ever done before.

When I was young, I was taught the song:

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
Of our life's wild restless sea
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth
Saying: 'Christian. Follow me!'

The 'voices' we listen to in life make a great difference to the way we go about things. If we spend our life responding only to physical necessities, family pressures or institutional programming, or perhaps mere fleshly cravings, we may well become cynical when things grind to a halt. We may see no reason to do anything other than look after ourselves.

Selfishness is, unfortunately, a part of every person's life. However, if we believe that God has given up his Son for us, if we believe that our sins are forgiven, if we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, our life will be greatly shaped by these things.

One of the great producers of inactivity is this—the sense, real or imagined, that we have been rejected by others. We may say that we cannot serve those who reject us—but this need not be the case. The basic belief of all Christians is that God has not rejected us but received us. It is his calling that draws us on—even if our social context is unfavourable to us.

When the usual civic and familial props of our day to day life are knocked away, our minds, and perhaps our bodies, and perhaps our egos as well, tend to complain. But then, we have an opportunity to rediscover the things which are basic. Is our usefulness conditioned by the word of man or by the word of God? Are the saving actions of God in his Son frustrated by the limits of our environment? Are there purposes of God which are bigger than the purposes of man?

No-one should suppose that major changes can happen in life without struggle. No-one should suppose that the truth by which God wants us to live is swallowed like a pill. (It is more like becoming accustomed to a different diet!) For example, if we have been displaced from our usual employments or activities or associations, it is not

easy to discover a new sense of belonging. If we have been strongly affirmed in our worthiness by peers, we may not have realised how much our sense of being justified was dependent on their appreciation. Sometimes, understanding friends or happy circumstances shelter us from some of the rigours of these times—and these benefits are rightly seen as God's providential caring for our needs. Frequently however, we seem to be forgotten or misunderstood. It seems that we belong nowhere. Why does God leave us so isolated?

That question is for God to answer of course—and if he pleases to enlighten us. In the meantime, it is for us to walk by faith. If God is our Father, then he is to be trusted. If Christ is our justifier, we are to abide in him. If the Holy Spirit is given to us, we must expect him to work in us a new faith and hope, and especially, a new love. (See Romans 5:1–5).

Page after page of the Bible makes it clear that there is always a future and a hope for the people who trust in God.

It tells us that we have all been made in God's image. Is it possible for something made in the image of the Creator to be redundant in the creation? Christ has come to restore this image which we have marred so that we may truly reflect the likeness of our Maker. Is this all for nothing?

The blessing of God is on his people—even in a cursed earth. We certainly experience the futility of many things—considered in themselves, but the blessing of God far outweighs the difficulties of the curse. (Read Ephesians 1 for an example of what these blessings are.)

Christ has justified his people. In other words, we have no reason to lift a finger to justify ourselves. God regards us highly—as those who trust his Son. We can do what is given to us to do and wait for God to vindicate us. This leaves us free to do things for which there may be very little recognition; we can simply enter into life wherever we find ourselves.

God calls his people to be about his business, making the most of the time, being a producer and not just a consumer. 'Work,' said Jesus, 'for the night comes when no man can work.' Some may need a new understanding of work. It certainly includes being responsible for something necessary to the needs of others. It may have to be a very different kind of work. It may have to be very much more other-person-centred—that is, a helping of others to accomplish something rather accomplishing something oneself.

Because of the resurrection, we are told that our labour is not in vain in the Lord. Nothing done in love will be lost but be utilised and made a part of the eternal city.

Abilities of many kinds have been given by Christ because he has taken our captivity as a captive. All Christ's people are endowed with such things as are necessary for useful ministry to other people—in the church, but also among all the people they meet.

Christians have the mind of Christ. In practical terms, that means that we can think as Christ does. What wisdom—to be free of self-justification and hypocrisy and small-mindedness! The things that Christians know and the things they learn as they live under the word of God are immensely useful. Wisdom does not need to vaunt itself—but it will be freely available for those who recognise it.

This is particularly so if the reason for our 'displacement' has involved suffering of some kind. To have accepted this from God's hand gives a person poise and carefulness that are wonderful gifts to have. The most important thing of all is love. Those who love will never be without work to do. They may have more suffering, but more joy too.

One reason why the gloom of uselessness settles on us is that the world teaches (overtly and covertly) that we must have the right opportunity to 'make good.' This is a heresy and has caused the debilitation of many otherwise able people.

No-one will deny that opportunity opens doors. And no-one will deny that circumstances and people can prevent us from doing what we thought we were best at. It certainly appears that unthinking or evil authorities and leaders limit our usefulness. To take some extreme examples, they can gaol us or they can malign our reputation. But can any human being terminate our usefulness? Can these persons, or some nameless fate be the final arbiter of our fruitfulness? Surely not! Even if we were killed, our testimony would still speak—as does that of Abel (Heb. 11:4).

It is possible to confine what 'opportunity' means to the things which pander to our idolatries. If this is what we have done, then of course, God is wanting to redefine 'opportunity' for us!

Christ said to a church that they had little strength—probably meaning that they were without the usual means of making a large impression in their locality. But God said that he set before them an open door (Rev. 3).

Probably much of the early church's witness was effected by 'constricted people.' But the book of Proverbs says that 'a man's gift makes room for him and brings him before great men (Prov. 18:16). If Christ has taken captivity captive and given gifts to men (Eph. 4:8), then nothing he needs us to do need be frustrated by the lack of means. This is the confidence that Paul had in regard to providing famine relief for Jerusalem: 'God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work (II Cor. 9:8).

Social limitation is not just the work of man but the opportunity of God. The cross of Jesus is sufficient example of this truth.

'Where there is a will there is a way' says the old adage. Are there new ways to do the things we have been good at? Are there new things to do which utilise the wisdom we have gained? How can we accept some responsibility for the things necessary to the good of others?

Perhaps we need to talk to people we know and trust who can help us find out 'who we are for others' and 'where we fit'. Service can be given to churches and Christian agencies. Community service agencies need all kinds of helpers. Family and personal contacts may be the area of our engagement with others. Perhaps we should persist in seeking an employer. Finally, what matters is whether we actually love. If we truly love, it will become clear enough what we should be about.

Many people need a structure or environment created by others in which to be useful. Others can make their own opportunities. Whatever, we can still be co-labourers with God while there is breath in us. Besides, it is never too late to start something new, because our works follow us, and there is plenty of time ahead of us.

What a pleasure to know, not only that there is a purpose for our lives, but that the present moment has been purposed to aid our fuller discovery of it.