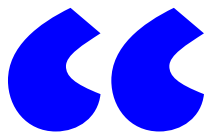


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**A PARENT'S GUIDE TO**

**PURPOSE**



The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for.

— Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

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A Parent's Guide to  
**PURPOSE**

**This guide will help you discuss these questions...**

- What does purpose mean?
- How do we seek our purpose?
- What is God's purpose for our lives?
- What does it mean to pursue God's purpose?
- Where in Scripture do we find our identity?
- How do we search Scripture for God's will?
- What is God's will?
- What is God's design?

## Introduction

A wise man once said, “you can use a toaster as a hammer, and it might work pretty well, but you’re not going to end up with any toast.” People are slightly more complicated than toasters and hammers, but it can be easy to relate to the example.

It’s hard to understand what our purpose as humans is. We can look for it everywhere—work, family, relationships, hobbies, religion. We can look to teachers, government leaders, or other authority figures for a sense of purpose. Those aren’t bad places to seek purpose, but they can ultimately prove fruitless if they aren’t paired with meaning that comes from a relationship with God. Only that is going to be able to lead us and our teens in the pursuit of the purpose for which we were designed—not a toaster hammering in nails, but making delicious toast as you were meant to.

## What is purpose?

Before we explore how to find purpose and help guide your teen towards finding it as well, we must answer that elusive question: what is purpose in the first place? There are many words people have used to describe that core longing to be who and what we were made to be: vocation, passion, desire, identity. While purpose may overlap with any of these things, it is differentiated by the fact that purpose cannot be decided upon by an individual—it is designed, pre-ordained, not optional but seekable.

According to the Westminster Catechism, a collection of theological questions and answers used by the church since 1647 to help Christians understand the heart and meaning of the Scriptures, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” What does this mean? Glorify God may be more understandable (although we’ll break that down in a minute), but enjoy him? How could we possibly do that when life is so difficult, and sometimes it’s all we can do to like God in the first place? We spend a lot of our lives being angry at God, doubting him, or ceasing to believe in him altogether. Some of the saints may find it easy to revel in God’s love, but for most of us, it’s a long process with many ups and downs. So how do we enjoy God?

### Enjoy God

It may be helpful to break down the word “enjoy”. Enjoy means, according to Merriam-Webster, “to take pleasure or satisfaction in”. However, there is a secondary meaning to the word revealed by its etymology. Enjoy comes from the Middle English word *enjoien*, which means “to rejoice”. This is

close to the meaning we understand today, but it goes a little deeper. Not only does it mean to enjoy ourselves, but to take joy from a situation. This indicates that not only are we to take pleasure in the presence of God, but we are to celebrate the existence of that presence in the first place. If we go back just a little further, *enjoien* was stolen, so to say, from the Anglo-French word *enjoier*, which means “to gladden, to bring joy to”. That’s the heart of the word. We may take satisfaction from God’s presence, we may rejoice in the nature of God’s presence, but above all to enjoy means to cause pleasure. Man’s chief aim, then, is not only to enjoy God, but to bring him joy by our actions and existence.

## **Glorify God**

This may seem like an easy one. We glorify God through worship and prayer, through the proper use of our bodies and our time. Glory is something we bring to God, an offering.

In the 18th century, a twenty-two year old named Robert Robertson wrote the beloved hymn *Come Thou Fount*. The song talks about grace and our constant need to return to God. The first line in the second verse says this: “Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by thy help I’ve come.” Though we may sing the words with conviction, it’s not likely that the definition of “Ebenezer” comes easily to our minds, except as the first name of a particular Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. Merriam-Webster defines Ebenezer as “a commemoration of divine assistance.” In other words, it is a marker of a time when God helped us. To raise our Ebenezer means to lift to God our memories of his faithfulness as an act of worship. What better form of offering could we bring?

The glory of God is set in stone. We don’t make him more glorious with our actions towards him. However, as we consistently remember his faithfulness, it becomes easier to do what he desires, and therefore celebrate his glory as it is.

## **Man’s Chief End**

So then, if we are to glorify and enjoy God, how does that relate to our purpose? Is our purpose what we do or what we feel? Is it how we think, what job we choose, when or if we get married, how we spend our money? The short answer is yes. Purpose is, to use an analogy, a road. We can get down the road any way we like--walking, running, cartwheeling--we can even stand still for days upon weeks. In any case, we are on the road. If we leave the road, we haven’t necessarily done anything that will totally destroy us, but it can no longer be said that we are on the road. We can do a million things off the road, good things, but they won’t have anything to do with the road.

The road, then, is our purpose. We can live outside our purpose our entire lives and be happy, but we won’t be doing what we were meant to do. And

for all of us, that's what we want. It's a core longing of every human being to find the road and know where it leads. Our means of getting down the road as quickly and well as we can has to be to drive. To drive, to move towards our end by way of our design, is to bring God glory and joy, all our lives and into eternity.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- How do you see purpose?
- Do you think it's something you can decide, or not? Why or why not?
- What do you believe God's purpose for humanity is? What is your "Ebenezer"?
- Who is someone who enjoys you? How do they do this?

## **How do I help my teen find their purpose?**

It's easy to shrink teens' purpose down to what they plan to "do with their lives" (how many times have teens heard that phrase?). Are they destined to be a doctor? A cosmetologist? A singer? An architect? More than likely they feel the pressure to make that decision now, and spend as much of their time worrying about it as possible. But purpose isn't just what you do, it's the pursuit of who you were made to be. In the following section we'll examine broadly what it means to pursue your purpose, which will hopefully provide you with clarity not only on how to disciple your teen as they seek their purpose, but help you as you strive to live into yours as well.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- How can you shift the way you talk to your teen away from "what do you want to do" to "who do you want to be"?
- How can you walk with your teen as they seek their purpose?

## **How do we pursue our purpose?**

If we know what our purpose is, we are then compelled to live within that purpose. Practically, we can discover how to do that very easily: we go right to Scripture. To go back to the road analogy, Scripture is our map. It tells us where we are going, and the best way to get there. Those who live without the map are bound to wander, to leave the road, and to find themselves in very strange places indeed.

There are two ideas found in Scripture which guide us towards our purpose. The first is God's design, and the second is God's will. They are phrases which we've likely heard before, but few of us understand what they mean in literal and practical relation to our daily lives, and so are prone to ignore their significance or fight against them as concepts we don't fully understand. However, they are essential to our search for purpose, and so it is needful for us to examine them both as aspects of God's creation and instruction for our every day.

## **God's Design**

In the Message version of Genesis 1, God declares his design for humanity: "God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature..." God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God's nature." Humans are designed to be like God in his goodness. We have the same characteristics as he does--his creativity, his dominion, his justice and mercy, his capacity to love and forgive. However, our design is cracked--broken by sin. By instinct we are lazy, irresponsible, unjust and merciless, hateful and unforgiving. This means it is difficult to live into God's design, but not impossible. We are redeemed by the death and resurrection of Christ, whose purpose as a human was to reacquaint us with our design by way of his teaching and sacrifice.

What this looks like in our daily life can be described as identity. Who we are is pre-decided, declared over our creation at the beginning of time. Seeking to live out our identity can be frustrating and confusing, especially in a postmodern world in which our identity is supposedly self-imposed. Everywhere we look there is some group or another inviting us to absorb our identity from them. There is also the temptation to find our identity in what we do or have--our partners, our jobs, our families and friends--but you'll be about as successful as someone looking for Arkansas on a map of Russia: you might see familiar shapes, but you'll never find what you're looking for.

So how do we find our identity within God's design? We have to understand that we are who God says we are, and we have to know and live out of that understanding. All throughout Scripture, God tells us who he has designed us to be.

- I am a child of God. "But to all who have received him--those who believe in his name--he has given the right to become God's children." (John 1:12)
- I am a friend of Jesus. "I no longer call you slaves, because the slave does not understand what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, because I have revealed to you everything I heard from my Father." (John 15:15)
- I am joined to the Lord and am one spirit with Him. "But the one united



with the Lord is one spirit with him." (1 Corinthians 6:17)

- I am a new creature in Christ. "So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away--look, what is new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- I am no longer a slave, but a child and an heir. "So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if you are a son, then you are also an heir through God." (Galatians 4:7)
- I am chosen, holy, and blameless before God. "For he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we may be holy and unblemished in his sight in love." (Ephesians 1:4)
- I am redeemed and forgiven by the grace of Christ. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace." (Ephesians 1:7)

It can be easy to dismiss these and other "I am" statements as trite, but they impact the choices we make and the way we walk through our lives if we allow ourselves to believe them. If you are no longer a slave, do you have to take another drink, or are you free to stop? If you are a new creature in Christ, does your past sin have to influence who you are today, or can you live as though your past is gone? If you are a child of God, do you have to do things on your own, or can you call for help with the knowledge that you will receive it?

Our identity springs from our design, and our design is clearly displayed all throughout Scripture. We are to reflect God's nature, and live as though we believe we are who he says we are. In this way, we glorify and enjoy God, bringing him pleasure and praise through our choices and what we believe.

## **God's Will**

This is the hard one. How are we to know and live out God's will? Sure, there may be some directives in the Bible like don't lie, treat others how you want to be treated, and honor your parents, but how do we know God's specific will? How do we know if it's his will for us to get that job, or to move across the country, or date that one person? If it's not spelled out in the Bible, how can we possibly know whether it's right or wrong?

Dallas Willard, a theologian of the 20th century, said this in his book *Hearing God*:

Obviously God must guide us in a way that will develop spontaneity in us. The development of character, rather than direction in this, that, and the other matter, must be the primary purpose of the Father. He will guide us, but he won't override us. That fact should make us use with caution the method of sitting down with a pencil and a blank sheet of paper to write down the instructions

dictated by God for the day. Suppose a parent would dictate to the child minutely everything he is to do during the day. The child would be stunted under that regime. The parent must guide in such a manner, and to the degree, that autonomous character, capable of making right decisions for itself, is produced. God does the same.

Here is a principle that may help: the story of Scripture is never at odds with itself. During the Reformation, Martin Luther and his contemporaries posited five tenets of absolute truth to guide the Christian in his or her walk through life. *Sola scriptura* (Scripture is the only authority on God and his plan for salvation), *sola Christus* (Christ is the only basis for salvation), *sola fide* (we receive Christ's redemptive power only through faith), *sola gratia* (salvation is given to us by grace and grace alone), and finally *sola Deo gloria* (our end and aim as creatures is the glory of God...sound familiar?). The one we're interested in here is *sola Scriptura*, the idea that the Bible is all we need to understand God's character and his will. In other words, we can go to any number of sources to try and get specific understanding of what we should do when difficult choices cross our paths, but the Bible is whole, complete, and in unity with itself to tell us everything about God's general will. We don't need anything else.

This all sounds good, but when it comes down to the nitty gritty, we don't always understand how to find God's specific will within Scripture. Well, sometimes the issue is not that we're looking in the wrong place, but we're looking in the right place in the wrong way.

Think about it like this: if you want to take a picture of a mountain range, you want a wide-angle lens so you can capture the whole thing. But, if you're insistent that you need to use a pinhole camera to take the picture, you're going to get a blurry result every time. You can't get angry at the mountain for not fitting better into your picture, or being clearer and sharper than your camera will allow. You have to use the right lens.

Sometimes we get tripped up trying to discern God's will because our thinking is too narrow. We want to crack open the Bible right in the middle and see Psalm 151:4 saying, "Jessica, thou shalt spend this week's income on that green dress that looked so cute on you. Thus sayeth the Lord." Maybe not exactly, but sometimes that kind of guidance would be nice, right?

Instead, we often need to pull back and examine the whole story of Scripture as it reveals the whole will of God. At the end of the day, the will of God is that Christ would die and rise again to redeem his creation, and that we would be set free to love and serve him for all eternity. He then gives us dozens of ways we can stay within his will in that sense. If we accept Christ's sacrifice, we are within God's will. If we love God with our whole hearts, souls, minds, and strengths, we are within God's will. If we have

faith for an eternity that is not seen, we are within God's will. Whether or not we go to one college over another cannot disrupt or confuse that will. It is permanent, fixed, and righteous. As Augustine once put it, "Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved."

We can, however, zoom in a little bit closer. We can gather God's more specific will for our actions by looking at the people in the Bible who did literally hear from God, and lining up what he said to them with his greater will for salvation.

In Genesis 22, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on an altar to make a covenant with him. Obviously Abraham is confused; didn't God just give him this son to be the father of many generations? But he trusts God, and as the knife is about to fall, God audibly tells Abraham to stop, and sends a ram to sacrifice in Isaac's place.

What do we learn about God's will through this story? That he wants us all to give child sacrifice a go and see what happens? Absolutely not! God's will in this situation was for Abraham to trust God so much that he would do anything for him, even something he didn't understand. Then, once he made up his mind and began to do the impossible task set before him, God provided a way out.

Or take Jairus, the religious leader from Mark 5. He went to Jesus trusting that his daughter would be healed, but Jesus stopped to heal someone else and in the meantime Jairus's daughter died. But Jairus did not lose faith, and knew that if Jesus came to his house anyway, a miracle would happen. Jesus followed Jairus home, and there he raised the little girl from the dead, telling everyone that she was just sleeping, and that she should get up and walk. Jairus' faith was rewarded, even when it seemed like Jesus just wasn't listening.

So where is God's will in this story? Through the actions of Jairus, we see faith exemplified by his insistence that Jesus could do what he said he would do and that he was powerful enough to do it. When Jesus stopped and Jairus got word that his daughter died, it's easy enough to think that he probably lost faith a little. But he still believed that if Jesus had done miracles before, he would do them again. He trusted the character of Jesus, and it fueled his faith. God's will in this scenario was not only that Jairus' daughter would live, but that Jairus would develop an unshakeable faith through tragedy. It was not God's will simply to let Jairus suffer, but to allow him to experience pain and disappointment so that his joy would be greater in the long run.

Let's go back to the idea of the Ebenezer. When we "raise our Ebenezer", we call out to God, saying, "this was your will before, I know it will be your will again." Though our circumstances may change, God's will never does. His will is that all situations work together for our ultimate good (Romans 8:28), that he would receive all the glory for everything that happens (Hebrews

1:3), and that we will be with him forever in paradise (John 10:28-30). If we believe the story of the Bible and what it says about God and then live like it, we will always be walking in the will of the Lord.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- How can you live into God's design?
- How can you pursue God's will?
- What is a Bible story that shows you a part of God's will?
- How can you apply that to your life?
- What is a verse that tells you who you are?
- How can you choose to believe that it is true?

## **Conclusion**

It's easy to feel purposeless. We wander through our lives, hoping something will pop into our path to give us direction, to tell us what we are meant to do. Instead, our purpose waits for us as patiently as our savior, knowing that if we are willing, we can return and be who we were made to be. Our purpose is to know God in his fullness through his Scriptures, living in his will as we were designed, to bring him joy and glory all the days of our lives and into eternity.

# A Parent's Guide to **PURPOSE**

## Summary

- Purpose is predetermined; we can look for it but we don't decide what it is
- The Westminster Catechism says man's purpose is to "glorify God and enjoy him forever"
- To enjoy God means to take pleasure in him, to celebrate him, and to bring him joy
- To glorify God means to bring him an offering of our trust and faithfulness, our memories of his goodness
- We find our purpose by living into God's design and seeking his will
- God's design for us is to find our identity in him
- God's will for us is to be saved by Christ and to live into eternity with him

## Additional Resources

- Axis Conversation Kit on Purpose
- A Parent's Guide to [Teen Identity](#)
- Axis Conversation Kit on [Identity](#)
- 10-Day Teen Talk on [Identity](#)