

HUMAN VOCATION: Study 6 Glory into the Holy City

Introduction

All humanity is created in Christ and is blessed with **creational** vocation (Genesis 1:28). The church in faith-union with Jesus Christ also shares a **redemptional** vocation (Ephesians 3:8-9). The true, excellent way to participate in vocation is through *agape* love (1Corinthians 13; Rom. 5:5).

This is known as the Spirit floods our hearts, revealing the glory and joy of the self-giving, deeply-suffering **love** of Jesus for the world. As we take up our vocation, *we love because he first loved us*. On more than one occasion Geoffrey Bingham quipped, 'It is obligatory for a redeemed person to lay down their life voluntarily'.

In Hebrews 12 redeemed humanity are exhorted in this way: *Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame*. For Jesus has taken his seat *at the right hand of the throne of God* (Heb. 12:1-2). As those **called** to belong to Jesus, and to share in God's plan, we know that we have been created through him and **for him**. Christ is risen *for us*:

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that **in the Lord your labour is not in vain** (1Corinthians 15:58).

^{24b} ...and **the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it** (Revelation 21:24).

²⁶ **People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations** (Revelation 21:26).

In the Lord our labour is not in vain. It is not just marking time. Our labour is significant. It counts. In union with Jesus Christ the crucified Lord, sinful Adamic human life, all our *distorted self-serving* human vocation has been crucified. *'I have been crucified with Christ'* (Gal. 2:20). In union with Jesus Christ, the risen redeeming Lord, all *authentic* human vocation, all **self-giving**, genuine service, and suffering-in-love has been redeemed and sanctified. *The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God* (Gal. 2:21). Life lived by faith *in the faithfulness of Jesus*, and the glory he gives to, or shares with us is real. Our work is not in vain. This work is honoured. It has a glory. I understand this means that the glory of our vocation is carried forward into the Holy City. Understanding the significance of the battles of faith, and of suffering in Christ, gives encouragement to those **called** to endure persecution and difficulty, holding fast to the faith of Jesus. 'Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord'. "Yes", says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labours, for **their deeds follow them**" (Rev. 14:13).

The Surprising Glory of Vocation

Faith provides a grand vantage point from which to appreciate our vocation. It is my contention that to fully appreciate the whole matter of taking up a human occupation, or vocation, a person benefits greatly from seeing their vocation within the broadest context of *what it means to be human* within this world. To know and understand that broad context with faith's certainty is of vital importance. Yea, sure people can easily just keep busy, or simply drift along. Create some memories for others.

What I am contending is that to be purposive is 'a thing' of ontological significance. It is part of the way things truly are. In a way, it is essential. To limit all discussion of human life, to explanations of *causes and effects*, ('we work to get money', or 'work gives our days meaning', 'I enjoy milking cows' etc.) without recourse to the big goal—**teleology**, is an error in human thinking. Our secular unbelieving society lives by little goals, bucket lists and so on. If only they could *see* with the eyes of faith that this life is loaded with a significance way beyond itself.

To *think* and *reason* in Christ enables us to see vocation—even mundane, difficult service as having glory. The King of creation, the King of Glory, took a towel and a bowl of water and washed the feet of his disciples. He loved them to the end. John describes Jesus serving: ‘*It was just before the Passover Festival*’... *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him*’ (see John 13:1-5 NIV).

British theologian Lesslie Newbigin claims: ‘purpose remains an inescapable element in human life’. He argues that it is strange indeed that a scientific or a practical observant person, can look at a new unseen machine, and grasp what it is, by understanding its purpose. Humans without faith in God, in the Western world, generally study by observation and testing to grasp the purpose of almost everything—*except* the purpose of a human life. Interestingly, Newbigin points out that ‘The Eastern Religions do not understand the world in terms of purpose’.¹

Most in Australian society would agree that all occupations have an *immediate* purpose. A baker bakes bread for others to eat.² However, there is a bigger question. What is the primary, or ultimate purpose of a life or a community, or a nation on this planet? Is every human life purposive? Or do we all just *make it up as we go along* for no reason? Are all the inhabitants of this rotating planet existing, but for no ultimate reason in particular?

Purposeful Living

As Christians we all live this life in response to God’s grace in Christ, with faith, hope and love, in anticipation of the age to come, when God will be all in all, or everything to everyone (1Cor. 15:28). We now live **with our purpose redeemed**—with a view to the age to come.

At a Funeral Service, when I am leading in the opening prayer—after seeking God’s forgiveness for any times we may have failed the deceased, and after requesting God’s enabling power to forgive anything that may have been hurtful to us—I often then add: ‘... grant us healing and wholeness, and above all, help us to believe anew in the resurrection to eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord, that each of us might better understand **the purpose** for which you have made us. In Jesus name. Amen.’

The American Pastor and author Rick Warren certainly tapped into the need for human beings to live with purpose when he wrote a book entitled *The Purpose Driven Life*. It was a global best seller.³

Jesus prayed to the Father, concerning the completion of his own life, ministry, and unique vocation:

“I glorified you on earth by **finishing the work that you gave me to do**. So now, Father glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.”
(John 17:4)

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, Eerdmans, 1986, p. 35, 39, 73

² A society or a community exhibits a whole network of inter-related purposive activity. A mechanic gets a bus back on the road for a bus driver. A bus driver can successfully transport passengers to reach their destination. An optometrist, and an eye surgeon can help to restore the vision of a bus driver. The mechanic, optometrist and eye surgeon, can all go to work on the bus. A world of people serving one another is an everyday occurrence, yet when considered carefully it is an amazing matter to behold. But is vocation just with a view to this age?

³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Zondervan, 2002. It was a #1 bestseller on the New York Times list of books, and was published in more than 70 translations, and over 34 million copies were sold across the world. I am not so sure that our lives should be ‘driven’, even by purpose as such. Sometimes I think a preferable focus may be ‘A grace-inspired life’ or ‘A responsive, purposeful life’.

His prayer continues at some length, as he prays for his disciples, in their lives and ministries, which are to be a rich outcome, or fruit of his sufferings upon the cross, and of his resurrection as victorious over death. He prays, thus, as we pick up these words later in his prayer:

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you Father, are **in me** and **I am in you**, may **they also be in us**, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. **The glory** that you have given me I have given them, so that **they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one**, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, **to see my glory**, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:20-24).

‘To See My Glory’

The glory of Jesus Christ—the outshining of all that is within the very heart and deep soul of his life—is the self-giving love of God for humanity, and of Jesus for the Father himself, expressed and revealed in the sufferings of the cross of Christ, where sharing in the Father’s love for the world, he was willingly the sin bearing Lamb of God, and the victorious Victor over death, and over the powers of evil—and as such the redeemer of the world. *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil* (1John 3:8), and as such to establish the great work of God, and transform the works of humanity, into the ways of self-giving love in which they were ever intended (Eph. 2:10).

What then is the Glory Brought by Kings and People and Nations into the Holy City?

Of the New Jerusalem, the Holy City—human society in the age to come—we read that *The Kings of the Earth will bring their glory into it* (Rev. 21:24). *People* will bring into it the glory and the honour of *the nations* (Rev. 21:26). Systematic theologian Hendrikus Berkhof describes the things brought into the Holy City as ‘*the cultural treasures of history*’.⁴ So we might easily assume that the music of Mozart, for example, will be part of that glory. Matthew Henry says, ‘*Whatever is excellent and valuable in this world shall be there enjoyed in a more refined kind, and to a far greater degree*’.⁵ That might mean the **excellent** loving deeds of a nurse emptying a bed pan is part of that glory. The patient love of a friend supporting a mutual friend by listening with loving care to their problems must be a **valuable** part of that glory. In every case, it is of course the crowning glory *from* God shared with created humanity, and a returning glory, redeemed in Christ. The passage invites contemplation:

²² I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the LORD GOD the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and **the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.** ²⁵ Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶ People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life (Revelation 21:22-27).

Meredith G. Kline says of created humanity, crowned with glory and honour and given the role of vice-regency within creation (Psalm 8): ‘*Man’s creation was a coronation*’.⁶ God is King: human beings are regal, with a royal task. When humanity is commanded to be fruitful, it has to do not only with procreation (making babies), but also with the cultivation, preservation, enhancement, productivity

⁴ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, Eerdmans, 1979, p. 520

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible in One Volume*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1960, p. 783

⁶ Meredith G Kline, *Genesis: A New Commentary*, Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2016, p. 13

and care of every part of creation: over 'every living thing that moves' (Gen. 1: 28); this includes the birds of the air, the fish of the sea and even 'whatever passes along the paths of the seas' (Psalm 8:8b). When Jesus the true King of creation dies on a Roman cross, in true self-giving love to and for the world, it was prophesied that his ministry would 'startle many nations', and 'kings shall shut their mouths' as they 'contemplate' what true love, service and leadership entails (Isaiah 52:15; Philippians 2:5-11). Revelation 1:5-6 says that Jesus is 'the ruler of the kings of the earth, and that he has loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen'.

As members of the renewed 'new creation' we are freed to rediscover genuine vocation. The Redeeming Jesus Christ reverses the effects of the fall, and of the curse, and redeems work and service, with a view to the ultimate reconciliation and glorification of all things. Ray Ortlund once commented on **the glory brought into the Holy City** in an event blurb:

'God put culture-making deep into us. And he doesn't intend to delete the artifacts of human culture we have come up with; he intends to redeem them. I see in my theological imagination a parade. The kings of the earth – culture-shapers – parading into the Holy City, bringing to the King the treasures of their domains, for his glory – the literature, the music, the clothing, the foods, the humour, the languages and accents, the customs, and so forth. Modernity homogenizes and flattens us out. Eternity will preserve us and what we create and enjoy – but purified ("nothing unclean") and consecrated to Christ forever.'⁷

This type of insight greatly helped one South Australian man in his faith, when he saw that all of the models of Holden cars (EJ, EH, HD, HR and so on) that **he had helped design** at Elizabeth for families to enjoy, **carried an attendant glory** that was not simply to be forgotten, as nothing.

Work, Rest and Play:

'Work, Rest and Play' all warrant more attention than I give them here. These 3 are often linked in statements about the wholeness of life. Working, and living in God's way of vocation is designed to be punctuated with the rhythm of **The Sabbath Rest** (Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:9-10; Hebrews 4:3). This rest and recreation includes important free times of **play**.⁸ Art, music, literature and recreation, including playing sport,⁹ exploring galaxies, knitting, doodling, slumbering, surfing, fishing, enjoying the company of the birds, animals and wildlife, as well as the beauty of sunsets, mountain vistas, and dynamic oceans and rivers, are an important component of what it means to be truly human, and what it means to enjoy our calling as God's people, living all of life **to the glory of God** (1Cor. 10:31).

I occasionally expended my breath trying to convince my father-in-law that a Christian could be a jockey. I think his Baptist allegiances, and of course the bad associations of the horse racing industry with gambling and horse injury, prevented me from getting anything beyond laughter at my suggestion. I know it is not only Christians who say 'nup to the cup'. Even so, in 1996 jockey Darren Beadman, a recently converted Christian, stood before millions of people and publicly thanked—first of all—the LORD Jesus Christ for his win in the Melbourne Cup, aboard the Bart Cummings trained horse, the suitably named 'Saintly'. Alas, 'Jack, a Christian at the podium bearing witness to Christ, as winner of the race that stops the nation'. I still don't think he was convinced!¹⁰

May God bless you in your sufferings, and in your joys as you embrace the vocation God has given.

⁷ Ray Ortlund quote: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ray-ortlund/previews-of-coming-attractions-6/> (visited 26/1/2023)

⁸ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, Eerdmans, 2005.

⁹ Lincoln Harvey, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, Cascade Books, p. 88. Harvey says the church should celebrate sport rather than oppose it, and develop a theology of sport, consistent with freedom the gospel gives.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guU09ARXcqk> (accessed 8.3.2023).