

1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Isaiah 40:25-31

Sense of Purpose

“What’s the point?” Have you ever found yourself asking that or a similar question? Or heard others speaking along those lines? I’d be surprised if you hadn’t. No matter how secure we are in ourselves, no matter how comfortable we are about life in general or our circumstances in particular, sooner or later we will have cause to question. It may be that we’ve put in a huge effort into something and it hasn’t worked; we’ve gone out of our way for someone and they’ve thrown it back in our face or sustained pressure at home, work, church or socially (or a combination of them all) is just getting us down. I’m not for one minute decrying this response. It is a very human one and whatever else we are, we are human beings. Indeed, as Christians we need to remember that we are not supermen or women. We live with the same constraints and requirements of every other human being on the planet – a need to take food, rest and sleep; a need for reflection and relaxation, for exercise, for social interaction with friends. Yes, and spiritual refreshment and renewal too, for prayer and fellowship. We are not machines and like everyone else in this world we need to give ourselves a chance – body, mind and soul. An eminent Christian psychiatrist told a group of us, (divinity students), that a measure of stress was good for us, it provides drive and stimulation to rise to particular short-term challenges but stress be very damaging if it is overdone or prolonged. He used the illustration of a piece of elastic. To do its job it has to be under a measure of strain – that is a normal function of elastic. But if it is greatly over-extended even for a short time or kept under moderate tension for a very long time it will cease to function. We human beings, Christians included, need to be alert to a) enormous stress (even for relatively short periods) and b) significant stress over long periods. Ordinary occasional stress is just part of human life. However, these greater demands placed on some require care. We may need extra support and encouragement, the opportunity to relieve the pressure for a while (maybe even an hour or two) or it may mean some more sustained assistance and in some instances professional intervention. An example of this, becoming more common, is the strain placed upon committed family members as a result of caring for a loved one. There can be profound and sustained pressure, often unnoticed even by close friends - unending, 24 hours a day, and if as it so often does, the illness or condition changes the personality of their loved one, so that temperament, attitude and demeanour is wildly different, it can place an enormous burden on the carer. More and more is asked of them and they feel they don’t have anything more to give. They can feel guilty about the way they feel about the person they loved and are trying hard still to love. “What’s the point?” There is, of course, a point but it isn’t wrong to think like that and we should not berate ourselves if we find ourselves there. As a wider congregation we need to be more aware and supportive of those in these or other situations where life’s circumstances weigh heavily. One thing we would do well to remember is that Jesus meant what he said about being with us always. He really does mean that he will be with US always, not just other people. And, we need to take more seriously the fact that we belong to a Christian

fellowship. We are bound together with one another (as well as to Christ) and we are to bear one another's burdens, carry one another's loads. In practical terms we have to admit that there will be times when each of us without exception has to face the fact that we are NOT fine, and we CAN'T manage on our own – nor would I suggest are we meant to. And it will mean that when offering help we shouldn't necessarily take NO for a final answer. We mustn't interfere or be pests, but it may be right to offer help again. We can overplay the "I'm fine" card. If we are to be a caring and compassionate Christian fellowship then we need to be aware of the stresses and strains people are under these days – and there is a huge variety of them – with a wide range of suitable responses to address them or support BUT one thing - I do not believe it is in God's design is for anyone to have to drive themselves into the ground – whether it is in a work situation, a family situation or even church. Stress, in moderation, may be a useful stimulus to effective living but it is most certainly not part of God's plan for anyone to be under inordinate and prolonged pressure beyond their ability to cope and we need prayerfully and practically to see what we can do to alleviate such circumstances. I have wandered away a bit from the particular Bible passage, but I believe that there is a real pastoral issue to be addressed and I wanted to be clear that it is not God's purpose to drive us into the ground. I hope that in speaking as I have I haven't added any more pressure or sense of guilt to anyone – that certainly was not the intention.

Now, I'd like to address God's purpose in a positive way.

A commission to discharge

Paul speaks of the obligation he is under – an obligation to proclaim the gospel of Christ. He can do no other than fulfil the commission he received from God to tell out and live out the good news of Jesus, his Saviour and Lord. The familiar story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, the encounter with the living Lord and the complete turnaround of his life, changed virtually instantaneously from a persecutor of Christians to an ardent advocate of the faith is stunning. It might be easy to excuse ourselves from such an obligation, claiming in our defence that we had received no such commission. No, we are not called to be apostles. Not many of us are called to put ourselves in the "firing line" or to be vilified for our faith. But we all inherit a share in that Great Commission issued by Jesus and recorded for us at the end of Matthew's gospel. Go into all the world and make people my disciples, teach them everything I have commanded you and baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – and I will be with you always, even to the end of the age. We may not see ourselves as being called specifically to a public ministry of preaching or proclamation – though I'm sure in a congregation this size there will be one or two at least who have such a calling perhaps as yet unrecognised. That is something we should be more open to speak about – and there are new forms of ministry opening up – apart from full time ministry of word and sacrament including local worship leaders. But on top of these there is the overarching call to service which applies to each and every Christian. We all have as part of our purpose in living in this world, a commitment to share in proclaiming the good news of Jesus and of living for him – not all from a pulpit, but perhaps a quiet word here and there, sharing with a friend our sense

of forgiveness, acceptance and trust in the Lord Jesus; offering to pray for or help out a neighbour in need and not being afraid to let on that you love Jesus; speaking up for Jesus in a situation where folk are running him down. And we can do any or all of these things alongside the regular everyday things that occupy our time – indeed our witness for Jesus is likely to be even more effective as we are able to integrate our faith into everyday life. And God can give us the ability to do that with grace and compassion, not to be forced or pushy, not to proverbially “ram it down anyone’s throat” but to allow the Spirit of God to move in our lives and those we encounter to equip us to discharge the responsibilities that God has placed on us. And even, and perhaps especially, when we are under tremendous pressure, when we have good cause to ask “what’s the point of it all?” to be reminded that God really is with us and can give us all that we need to do his will (and sometimes that will be to share the load with others). I never met the Queen (got a wave from her car on Queensferry Road in Edinburgh) but I have a bit of paper at home in which she calls me her “trusty and beloved” and commissions me to serve as an officer in her Royal Naval Reserve. I have a bit of paper that records my licensing to preach the gospel by the Presbytery of Edinburgh, an extract minute of my ordination but you don’t need these because as sisters and brothers of the Lord Jesus Christ we have all a wonderful sense of purpose that can cut through any circumstance, that can overcome any bewilderment or inadequacy or inferiority – we are all children of God in Jesus Christ – we are called to live for him, in his strength and for his glory. Whatever else we are called to be or do we are called to proclaim him as Lord and Saviour and live our lives for him.

There will be times when we will ask ourselves “what’s the point?” We may well have to address the specifics of the pressures or circumstances that are getting us down (and we may not be able to do that on our own – we need to be more open to sharing – to getting help and offering it) BUT we also need to recognise the real purpose we all have in being here on God’s earth – to proclaim and live for Jesus, our Lord and Saviour.

Like Paul to recognise that we can do no other. What else can we do apart from serving Jesus? Nothing. The way we do that will vary enormously. Most of us will discharge our christian commission among our families, friends, workmates and neighbours without having any fancy title or position – nevertheless, we have a real purpose, a commission from the Lord of lords, the King of kings to be the unique person that he has designed and equipped us to be and to achieve for him and his kingdom all that he has purposed.

Do not lose heart. Do it all for the sake of the gospel so that you (and others) may share in its blessings.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.