

Purpose and Calling: Living Beyond Yourself

Main Point

If we are to flourish in the third third of life, we need to live with purpose. But it is often hard for older adults to have a clear sense of purpose. As Christians, our purpose reflects God's purpose and comes to us through God's calling lived in diverse callings.

Introduction

In 2002, I was in a small group of pastors and other leaders gathered at Saddleback Church in California. Pastor Rick Warren was hosting us. Before our group started, Rick took me into his office and showed me a hefty manuscript. "I just finished this manuscript today," he said. "I'm excited about it and hope it will help a lot of people. It's called *The Purpose-Driven Life*." I told Rick I'd love to read it, so he sent me the manuscript. When I was only a couple of pages in, I thought to myself, "This book's really good. It's gonna do just fine." Nineteen years later, *The Purpose-Driven Life* has sold over 50 million copies and is one of the bestselling Christian books of all time. Why was it so successful? There are many reasons, but the most obvious answer is this: *People are yearning for purpose*.

In 2009, Simon Sinek gave a TEDx talk in the Pacific Northwest. It was called, "How Great Leaders Inspire Action." As of today, it's the third most popular TED talk in history, with over 58,000,000 pageviews. Sinek's talk is all about *why* we do the things we do. As Sinek says, "By 'why' I mean: What's your purpose? What's your cause? What's your belief? . . . Why do you get out of bed in the morning? And why should anyone care?" Why has Sinek's talk been watched so many times? The most obvious answer is this: *People are yearning for purpose*.¹

I hear this yearning for purpose from so many people in or entering the third third of life. A man I'll call Jim retired a couple of years ago after a long, successful professional career. He's continued to do some part-time work and lots of volunteer work. He's had more time to spend with his grandchildren. But he feels restless. He says he needs something to help

him get out of bed in the morning, some greater purpose than he feels so far in this new season of life.

Some folks in the third third of life do have a strong, clear sense of purpose, something that gets them up in the morning and motivates them throughout the day.² But a clear purpose is not common to many in the third third of life. Some people used to think they had plenty of future-oriented purpose when they retired, but what they imagined would fulfill them just hasn't worked out as they expected.³ Others remember having clarity about their purpose when they were younger – they wanted to build a career, to nurture a family, and so on – but they feel purposeless as they get older. They're yearning for more: more significance, more passion, more purpose. These people are intuiting a bedrock truth of the third third of life: *Purpose is essential for flourishing. We need purpose if we're going live fully and fruitfully.*

What is Purpose?

Before I go any further in this talk, I should define the word “purpose.” The [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#) offers these options: “the reason why something is done or used; the aim or goal of a person.”⁴ Simon Sinek and many others would agree that purpose has everything to do with your why. It's not what you're doing, but why you're doing it.

These definitions point to the value of purpose, why it's so important if we're going to flourish. Purpose matters because it gives us direction. It defines our aim or goal. It's also important because it can supply the reason for our actions, even for our very existence. Purpose supplies the “why” of life that gives meaning and leads to our “what” and “how.” Purpose helps us discern what we should do in life and, perhaps even more importantly, who we are trying to become.

Having a strong sense of purpose also motivates us. It does help to get out of bed in the morning. Purpose can also discipline us, giving us focus and showing us what we should not do as well as what we should do. Therefore, purpose is essential to our fruitfulness in every season of life, including the third third.

Purpose and Flourishing

It turns out that the benefits of purpose go beyond helping us to be productive in meaningful ways. *There is a growing body of research that shows how important purpose is for flourishing in the third third of life.*

Let's examine a few examples of this research. In this lecture I'll give brief overviews. You can find references and more details in the workbook notes for this lecture.

Purpose Helps Older Adults in Physical Functioning – A [2017 study](#) from Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health examined evidence from 4500 older adults through the University of Michigan's [Health and Retirement Study](#).⁵ Here's what they found:⁶ “[Our] findings suggest that a sense of purpose in life . . . may play an important role in maintaining physical function among older adults.” In fact, those who had purpose in life also had an average walking speed of people 2.5 years younger than their chronological age.

Purpose Contributes to Health and Longevity - An [article](#) in the January 3, 2021 edition of the *Washington Post* had this headline: “Boosting our sense of meaning in life is an often overlooked longevity ingredient.” Writer Marta Zaraska explains: “Research has shown that people who have high levels of purpose in life spend fewer nights in hospitals, have lower odds of developing diabetes, and over two times lower risk of dying from heart conditions than do others.”⁷

Impressive list of health benefits related to purpose and aging – In 2017, an [article](#) in *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* reported on 31 studies of purpose and aging. This article, entitled “Aging With Purpose: Systematic Search and Review of Literature Pertaining to Older Adults and Purpose” provided a long and impressive list of health benefits related to purpose: “Physical benefits included better health and functional status maintenance, greater cognitive function, increased physical activity and positive health behaviors, enhanced stress recovery, and longevity. Purpose is also associated with a lower incidence of AD [Alzheimer's Disease] and mild cognitive impairment and reduced risk for cardiovascular chronic health conditions. Psychosocial correlates in the review include greater life satisfaction, lower death anxiety, and reduced depression severity or incidence.”

Purpose Tends to Decline for Older Adults

So, there is abundant scientific evidence linking purpose and flourishing in the third third of life. This would seem to be good news. But there's a problem: *As we get older, our sense of purpose in life usually declines*. An article in *Psychology Today* bears this unsettling title, "[The Pernicious Decline in Purpose in Life with Old Age](#)." Ouch! Not just decline, but "*Pernicious Decline in Purpose in Life with Old Age*."

A more academic treatment of this "pernicious decline" is found in a scholarly [article](#) in *Ageing International*. The writer, Martin Pinguart, a psychology professor in Germany, surveyed 70 academic articles on purpose and aging. He writes, "In the meta-analysis, we found empirical evidence for an *age-associated decline of purpose in life, which became stronger in old age*." So, not only does purpose decline as we get older, but that downward slope gets even steeper the older we get.⁸

As I talk with people across the country, what I hear supports Pinguart's observations. For example, in response to an article I wrote about purpose and aging, a woman told me that since her husband died six years ago, she never thought God had any purpose for her life anymore. She was gratified to learn that, in fact, God had much in store for her. But she had lived for six difficult years without that expectation and confidence.

The research shows us both how important it is to have purpose in the third third of life and how common it is to lose our purpose for living. Thus, we are left with pressing questions: *How are we going to have purpose for our third third lives? Where will we get this purpose? What will sustain it?*

God's Purpose and Your Purpose

To answer these questions, we need biblical wisdom. We need to see how Scripture helps us identify our purpose and live it out. Perhaps the most important truth you learn from Scripture about your purpose is this:

Your primary purpose is first and foremost to live according to God's purpose for everything, including your life.

One way of talking about God's purpose for us is found in the New Testament letter of Ephesians. The opening section of Ephesians 1 describes how God is working out his cosmic purpose through Jesus Christ, something God determined even before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). Through Christ, God offers us adoption, forgiveness, and redemption

according to his grace (Eph 1:5-8). Moreover, through Christ, God is restoring the whole universe that was broken by sin. We are beneficiaries of and participants in that work (Eph 1:9-10). We see this in Ephesians 1:11-12: “In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, *having been destined according to the purpose* of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, *might live for the praise of his glory.*” God has a purpose for you and for me, namely, that *we live for God’s glory in everything we do in every part of life.* The Greek of Ephesians 1:12 literally says that we “exist” for the praise of God’s glory, using the verb “to be.”⁹

So, how do we glorify God through our existence, through who we are and what we do? We might at first envision the things we do when we go to church: singing praise, offering prayer, and so forth. We might also picture what we do in Christian service, such as teaching Sunday school, going on a mission trip, or sharing the gospel with a neighbor. These actions certainly glorify God, but they’re only the beginning.

Ephesians 2:8-10 reveals more about how we are to glorify God. It says: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. *For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*” It’s crucial to note that we have been saved *for* – *not by, but for* – *good works*. We don’t earn our salvation by what we do. It comes by grace received through faith. But we do live out our salvation through the good works God has for us to do. And these are not just the ones we associate with church. Ideally, we are doing the good works of God in our work and our family, in our friendships and our finances, in our prayers and our play. As it says in Romans 12:1, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, *to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*” We are to worship and glorify God through everything we do in life.¹⁰

Purpose and Calling

Ephesians 1-3 shows us that God has a purpose for the whole creation and this purpose includes us. We are to live for the praise of God’s glory. We do this by walking in the good works God has for us. Ephesians 3 adds that, as

Christians in fellowship together, our corporate purpose is to demonstrate the good news of God to the world.

But God doesn't just reveal his purpose for our lives. *He also calls us to this purpose.* As it says in Ephesians 4:1, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to *lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.*" God has called you to live a life committed to and shaped by his purpose. You are to live worthy of this calling, a calling that is based on the purpose of God.

In Scripture, *purpose and calling go hand in hand.* Take Romans 8:28 for example. It says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are *called according to his purpose.*" Similarly, 2 Timothy 1:9 affirms that God "saved us and *called us with a holy calling*, not according to our works but *according to his own purpose and grace* (2 Tim 1:9). God's purpose for our lives leads to God's calling in our lives.¹¹

Sometimes the language of calling can be confusing. So let's be clear about the biblical perspective on calling. Your calling is not the same thing as your job, career, family, or passion, though calling can touch all of these. Calling is not just for pastors, missionaries, and non-profit workers. Scripture teaches that *every single Christian has a calling.* We read in 1 Corinthians, for example:

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, *called to be saints, together with all* those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours (1 Cor 1:2).

First of all, in this verse you are called, along with all other Christians to be a saint, that is, to be set apart for relationship with God and service to God. This *primary or general calling* you share with all other believers. But it is expressed in distinctive *secondary or particular callings*, that is, in contexts, activities, roles, or relationships in which you live out your primary calling. So, though you share your primary calling with other Christians, your secondary, particular callings are unique, reflecting who you are and the good works God has planned for you.¹²

Let me illustrate what I'm saying by using myself as an example. My primary or general calling is to love and serve God, to be in relationship with God through Christ and to live as his disciple. You and I share this primary

calling. But the specifics of how I live it out are distinctive. My secondary, particular callings include being a husband to Linda and a father to Nathan and Kara, a senior strategist for the De Pree Center, a Bible teacher and devotional writer, a mentor, professor, and encourager. Leading the De Pree Center's third third initiative is an essential piece of my secondary callings. So, though my primary calling to God and God's service will not change throughout my life, how I live out this calling does change in different seasons and settings.

How Can I Discern My Particular Callings?

As I talk with folks in or entering the third third of life, I often hear a question that goes something like this: *How can I move from clarity about my general calling to clarity about my particular callings?* I get that I'm called to love and serve God most of all. But what does this mean for my daily life? These questions can be especially challenging as we experience transitions or losses such as retirement, the death of a spouse, or moving from one place to another. For many of us, whereas we once had clarity about our purpose and callings, now things are much foggier.

Friends, there isn't a foolproof magic formula for discerning your callings, nor are there "seven infallible secrets" to discovering your personal purpose in this season of your life. Clarity about purpose and callings comes, often slowly, as we engage meaningfully with God and God's people. I'd like to suggest *eight specific actions* you might take in order to identify your purpose and callings. These aren't a guaranteed roadmap to certainty, but I believe they can be helpful to you.

1. Be committed to God's purpose for all things, including your life.

The biblical theology I summarized earlier from Ephesians isn't just boilerplate you look at once and then forget. Rather, it gives you your core purpose in life as well as ways to reflect on how you are living. For example, you might regularly ask yourself these questions:

- Am I seeking to live for the praise of God's glory in all that I do? In my work? In my relationships? In my free time? With my money? With my talents and skills?
- Am I walking each day in the good works God has prepared for me?

- Do my relationships with my brothers and sisters in Christ reflect the reconciling work of the cross?
- Am I walking worthy of God's calling?

As you reflect on these questions, ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts. Moreover, you might find it helpful to talk through these questions with a wise friend, a spiritual director, or your regular small group.

2. Seek the Lord in prayer and surrender to his will.

To be sure, you can ask the Lord to guide you, to show you more clearly his purpose for your life. But I would also encourage you to offer yourself to God as you pray, surrendering your life to his gracious purpose.

Each morning, I find it helpful to say a prayer of surrender known as the "[Suscipe](#)." *Suscipe* is a Latin word meaning "receive or take," and is the first word in this prayer by St. Ignatius as it appears in Latin. The *Suscipe* goes like this:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will. All I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me.¹³

If you prefer a biblical prayer of surrender, you can't do better than Jesus's prayer in Gethsemane: "Not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36). You might also echo the words of Mary in Luke 1:38, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

3. Pay attention to how God has made and gifted you.

God has given you distinctive talents, skills, strengths, and gifts. As you transition into the third third of your life, you'll be able to use many of these, though perhaps in new ways. For example, in your full-time work life you may have been the supervisor of younger workers. Now, if you're retired, you might use some of those same skills to mentor younger folk in the workplace, in the church, or in underserved schools in your city.

If you're not sure about your talents, skills, strengths, and gifts, I'd urge you to ask people who know you well. You might also find it helpful to use the

[CliftonStrengths assessment](#) (formerly called StrengthsFinder). You can access it online. See the notes for details.¹⁴

4. Pay attention to what God is putting on your heart.

This isn't the same thing as discovering your passion, though sometimes our personal passions line up with God's stirring within us. When we offer ourselves fully to God, God may awaken in us new and unexpected longings or delights. In my case, for example, three years ago I was not especially passionate about this third third work. I knew it was important, but I did not have a personal passion to do it. Yet, in a variety of ways, God began to put this particular work on my heart. Today, I do feel deeply passionate about third third work, but I would say this passion was given to me. I didn't find it hiding inside of me somewhere.

5. Pay attention to where you are bearing fruit.

One crucial way to determine the specifics of God's callings is by seeing where God is using you right now. Even if you anticipate retiring from your current job sometime soon, it's possible that God will use you in similar contexts in the future. For example, my grandfather was a civil engineer. When he retired from the company for which he worked for forty years, he continued to do quite a bit of engineering on a *pro bono* basis, mainly for his church and other non-profit organizations. He once joked to me that he was working just as hard as he used to, only now he wasn't getting paid. But my grandfather wasn't complaining. He was getting paid, not in dollars, but in fulfillment, gratitude, and the joy of knowing his life still mattered.

6. Look for continuity but be open to surprises.

It's likely that your callings in the third third of life will be continuous with what you have done previously. But it's also possible that God will surprise you with new opportunities and responsibilities. Remember, Moses, at 80 years of age, wasn't exactly planning on leading the Israelites out of Egypt when God called him through the burning bush (Exod 7:7). And Elizabeth, who, according to her husband Zechariah, was "getting on in years," wasn't expecting that she'd soon be expecting a baby, the person we know as John the Baptist (Luke 1:18). So, while seeing if your skills and gifts can be used in creative ways in the third third, don't limit your vision to things you have done in the past. Be open to the new things God might have for you to do.

7. Discover and discern your callings in community with other Christians.

There are times when God calls people to specific things when they are alone. Moses was by himself at the burning bush and Zechariah, a priest in the temple, was alone when God told him he would soon become the father of John the Baptist. But, *especially since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all believers, the discovery and discernment of callings usually happens in community*: in small groups, friendships, mentoring relationships, spiritual direction, families, work groups, and other settings. One reason I'm doing this third third work is that some of my fellow Christians who know me best kept urging me to take it on.

Academic research confirms the importance of community for discerning and maintaining purpose as we get older. You'll recall that earlier in this lecture I referred to the work of the German psychology professor Martin Piquart. He's the one who found "age-related decline" in purpose as we get older. But, in his [article](#) entitled "Creating and Maintaining Purpose in Life in Old Age: A Meta-Analysis," Piquart also points to the way in which our relationships can help us live with purpose in the third third of life.

After examining 70 studies of aging and purpose, Piquart notes, "[W]e analyzed which factors may promote the maintenance of high levels of purpose in life in older adults We found that *social integration, and in particular a high quality of social contacts, showed the strongest association with purpose in life.*" He goes on to say, "we conclude that *developing close social ties and building up a large social network is an important way of preventing declines of purpose in life.*"

So, what encourages us to live with purpose as we get older? What prevents declines in purpose as we age? The answer sounds familiar: "Relationships! Relationships! Relationships!" to borrow a line from George Vaillant, former director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development. That study, as you may remember, found that the most important predictor of flourishing in old age is the quality of our relationships. Now we have new insight into one very practical way our relationships help. They enable us to forge a sense of purpose in life, and they help to keep that purpose strong even when we go through the transitions and losses of older adulthood.¹⁵

8. Experiment your way forward.

You don't need to fully figure out your purpose and callings before you begin to live into them. In fact, it's often better to try different possibilities on the way to clarifying your callings. Dave Evans, co-author of the bestselling book [Designing Your Life](#) says, "life design is an iterative [that is, frequently repetitive] process of prototypes and experimentation" (p. 25). You try something and see what happens. You learn from this experience and then try something a little different, to see how that goes. And so on, and so on. Therefore, rather than sitting around trying to plan your ideal future, you may be better off taking some small steps, experimenting with some things to see what happens.¹⁶

Review of Suggestions

So, to review, if you want to clarify your purpose and discover your callings, I'd recommend the following:

1. Be committed to God's purpose for all things, including your life.
2. Seek the Lord in prayer and surrender to his will.
3. Pay attention to how God has made and gifted you.
4. Pay attention to what God is putting on your heart.
5. Pay attention to where you are bearing fruit.
6. Look for continuity but be open to surprises.
7. Discover and discern your callings in community with other Christians.
8. Experiment your way forward.

What About Retirement?

You may have noticed that I haven't talked specifically about retirement. There are several reasons for this. One is that you can find some excellent books on retirement. Check the notes for several recommendations.¹⁷

Another reason I have not focused on retirement per se is that, increasingly, folks in the third third of life are not retiring in the "usual way." They're not working to 65 and then stopping work altogether. [In fact](#), adults age 65 and older are twice as likely to be working today compared with 1985. A recent

[article in Forbes](#) bore this headline, “A Third Of Seniors Seek To Work Well Past Retirement Age, Or Won’t Retire At All, Poll Finds.” Some plan to keep working because they need the income. But many are choosing to work for a sense of meaning and purpose. Quite a few of these people will retire from their current job, but will look for a different kind of employment or start a new business. These days, according to the Kaufmann Foundation¹⁸, the country’s premier observer and champion of entrepreneurship, more people in the third third of life are starting new businesses in the U.S. than people in any other age bracket.

I believe it’s important to think about retirement and to make plans if you’re going to do it. And not just financial plans. The vast majority of folks who retire haven’t really thought much about what they’re going to do with their lives in retirement. For followers of Jesus, wise retirement planning will be centered in the very things we’re talking about today: purpose and calling. So, even if I didn’t use the word “retirement” very much in this presentation, what I’ve said is absolutely relevant to the topic, whether you’re already retired, whether you’re planning to retire, or whether retirement is not on your radar screen at all.

Conclusion

As I wrap up this talk, I want to circle back to a crucial biblical passage having to do with purpose and calling. It’s Romans 8:28, which reads, “*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*” This verse affirms that we are people who have been called according to God’s purpose. *This gives us our fundamental “why” for all of life.* The purpose of God underlies all seasons of our lives, including the third third. And, because of this purpose, God called each of us into relationship with himself through Christ and into a life of service. As we think about our particular purpose and callings, this is bedrock truth. Everything depends on the gracious purpose and calling of God.

I quoted the NRSV translation of Romans 8:28, which begins “We know that all things work together for good.” This translation is both possible and familiar, mainly from the classic King James Version. But most recent translations read the Greek differently. The NIV, for example, says this, “And we know that in all things *God works for the good* of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Notice, it’s not that all

things somehow magically work together for good. Rather, *God is working in all things for good. The God who created all things, the God who is redeeming all things, the God who saved you by his grace, the God who has prepared good works for you to walk in, the God whose love will never let you go, that God is working in all things for God's good and for your good.*

Friends, this truth sets us free from having to get it all right. This truth frees us from anxiety, from inertia, and from fear. It releases us from the need to perfectly define our purpose before we begin to live into it. God's working in all things for good gives us the confidence to try new things, to experiment, to embrace challenges and opportunities in our third third. Why? Because no matter what happens, God is working for good in all things for those who are called according to his purpose.

Therefore, if you want to live with purpose, if you want to flourish in the third third of life, if you want to live fully, fruitfully, *and freely*, then you need to be in a deep, growing relationship with God. I'll talk more about this relationship in the next lecture.

Full Links from Talk

["Association Between Purpose in Life and Objective Measures of Physical Function in Older Adults"](#) in *JAMA [Journal of the American Medical Association] Psychiatry*, October 2017.
(<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/2648692>)

["Boosting our sense of meaning in life is an often overlooked longevity ingredient,"](#) by Marta Zaraska, *Washington Post*, Jan 3, 2021.
(https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/boosting-our-sense-of-meaning-in-life-is-an-often-overlooked-longevity-ingredient/2020/12/31/84871d32-29d4-11eb-8fa2-06e7cbb145c0_story.html)

["Effect of purpose in life on the relation between Alzheimer disease pathologic changes on cognitive function in advanced age"](#) in *Archives of General Psychiatry*, May 2012. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22566582/>)

["Aging With Purpose: Systematic Search and Review of Literature Pertaining to Older Adults and Purpose"](#) in *The International Journal of*

Aging and Human Development 2017, Vol. 85(4) 403–437.
(<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28391702/>)

[“The Pernicious Decline in Purpose in Life with Old Age,”](#) by Maclen Stanley, *Psychology Today*, April 15, 2014.
(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/making-sense-chaos/201404/the-pernicious-decline-in-purpose-in-life-old-age>)

[“Creating and Maintaining Purpose in Life in Old Age: a Meta-Analysis”](#) by Martin Pinquart, *Ageing International* (27:2).
(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226111244_Creating_and_Maintaining_Purpose_in_Life_in_Old_Age_a_Meta-Analysis)

[*The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*](#) by Os Guinness (<https://www.amazon.com/CALL-PB/dp/B007CZBFOQ/>)

[“Suscipe, the Radical Prayer,”](#) by Amy Welborn.
(<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/prayers-by-st-ignatius-and-others/suscipe-the-radical-prayer/>)

[*Designing Your Life*](#) by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans.
(<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01BJSRSEC/>)

[CliftonStrengths assessment.](#)
(<https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252137/home.aspx>)

¹ This is true today more than ever and there are many reasons for it. Partly, we’re longing for purpose because, as David Brooks observes in his article, [“What’s Your Purpose?”](#), there are fewer and fewer places in our world today where “people are talking about the things that matter most.” “As a result,” Brooks writes, “many feel lost or overwhelmed. They feel a hunger to live

meaningfully, but they don't know the right questions to ask, the right vocabulary to use, the right place to look or even if there are ultimate answers at all." Brooks wrote "What's Your Purpose?" before we were hit with a global pandemic. COVID-19 has made the problem of purpose even more acute and widespread. Evidence of this comes from what cultural pundits call "The Great Resignation." For several months now, around four million people are choosing to quit their jobs and look for something else. An article from *Worth* magazine asks, "What's Really Behind 'The Great Resignation'? A Crisis of Purpose." A recent piece in *Fortune* makes a similar point: "The Great Resignation is upon us, and purpose can help you resist its siren call."

Now, all of this talk about "The Great Resignation" might seem a bit irrelevant to those of us who are retired or considering retirement.

² I met a woman in Arizona who retired from her insurance career because she wanted to invest her life in helping immigrants to the U.S. thrive.

³ (Book Pete Peters)

⁴ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "purpose" means: "that which a person sets out to do or attain; an object in view; a determined intention or aim; the reason for which something is done or made, or for which it exists."

⁵ The study measured two things that usually decline with age: grip strength and walking speed. It also examined how much people were living with a strong sense of purpose. Four years after those measurements were taken, researchers returned to the same people to measure grip strength and walking speed.

⁶ The study measured two things that usually decline with age: grip strength and walking speed. It also examined how much people were living with a strong sense of purpose. Four years after those measurements were taken, researchers returned to the same people to measure grip strength and walking speed.

⁷ She offers many examples, including this one: “If a 90-year-old with a clear purpose in life develops Alzheimer’s disease, that person will probably [keep functioning relatively well despite real pathological changes](#) in the brain, one study found.” I checked out that one study. It appeared in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*. The [article’s](#) title is a bit of a tongue-twister: “Effect of Purpose in Life on the Relation Between Alzheimer Disease Pathologic Changes on Cognitive Function in Advanced Age.” The study examined 246 older adults from the Rush Memory and Aging Project based in Illinois. The mean age of these adults was 88.2 years. Here’s what the researchers found. “[P]articipants who reported higher levels of purpose in life exhibited better cognitive function despite the burden of [Alzheimer’s] disease. . . . [T]he protective effect of purpose in life persisted even after controlling for several potentially confounding variables. . . . [W]e found that higher levels of purpose in life reduced the effect of AD pathologic changes on cognitive decline.” In simplest terms, this study found that older adults with a strong sense of purpose were able to function at a high cognitive level even with Alzheimer’s disease.

⁸ According to Pinquart and the research he examined, there are several reasons for this decline, including:

1. Age-associated breaks in significant social and psychological involvement (things like retirement or death of a spouse).

2. Lack of clearly defined roles, norms, and opportunities for older adults. (Society doesn't expect us to live purposefully in the third third.)

3. Negative age stereotypes. (Ageism limits opportunity and motivation.)

4. Many earlier purposes were already fulfilled (such as family and work-related purposes associated with mid-life).

⁹ As Rick Warren writes in *The Purpose-Driven Life*:

It's not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose. (p. 17)

¹⁰ The latter part of Ephesians 2 and the first part of Ephesians 3 reveal that *your purpose is not just yours alone, but something you share with the body of Christ*. Ephesians 3:9-10 highlights our common purpose, referring to "the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in

God who created all things; so that *through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known* to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” Together, as the church, we share in the purpose of demonstrating to the whole creation God’s wisdom found in the gospel. That’s an essential element of our individual purpose as well as our corporate purpose. We are to be signposts of the good news of God’s grace in Christ.

¹¹ Os Guinness, in his book [*The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*](#) writes that our “purpose can be found only when we discover the specific purpose for which we were created and to which we are called. Answering the call of our Creator is ‘the ultimate why’ for living, the highest source of purpose in human existence. . . . [N]othing short of God’s call can ground and fulfill the truest human desire for purpose” (Kindle location 59-64).

¹² (In the book do nesting dolls here.)

¹³ A third third friend of mine prays this same prayer each morning as he seeks God’s guidance for this season of his life. We agree that it is really quite challenging to mean all of what we say in the *Suscipe*. Is God’s love

and grace really enough for us? God is stretching and growing us through the regular use of this prayer. By the way,

¹⁴ My wife is an executive and life coach who has used this tool with more than a thousand people. Again and again she's seen how helpful it can be for someone seeking clarity about purpose and callings.

¹⁵ I have witnessed the impact of Christian community on the discernment of purpose in part of my work at the De Pree Center. I get to lead what we call Road Ahead cohorts, six-week long groups of people in vocational transition. The groups I lead are composed of third third folk, some retired, some approaching retirement, some not planning to retire but wondering what new thing God wants to do through them. Together, we seek to discover God's callings. It's been exciting to watch this happen. A former CEO of a giant corporation discovered a fresh calling to focus more on family relationships, especially with her grandchildren. A man for whom faith and work integration had been so important felt called to help produce a new faith/work educational program for churches. An executive who used to be a musician decided it was time to renew her musical gifts so she could teach underserved children. A man whose work had required so much of his attention

decided that, in retirement, it was time to pay more attention to his wife. And so it goes

¹⁶ By the way, Dave Evans and his colleague Bill Burnett wrote *Designing Your Life* on the basis of a famously-popular course they taught undergrads at Stanford. Surprisingly, the principles of this book are actually quite relevant to those of us in or entering the third third of life. *Designing Your Life* is a great book to read if you're wondering what's next for you. Dave Evans, who is a thoughtful Christian, by the way, has written a [*Christian Companion to Designing Your Life*](#), which I also highly recommend.

¹⁷ including [*The Encore Curve: Retire with a Life Plan that Excites You*](#), by Andy Raub. I'd also recommend [*An Uncommon Guide to Retirement*](#) by Jeff Haanen and [*The Retirement Reformation*](#) by Bruce Bruinsma.

¹⁸ Note: The Kaufmann stats are in the HPPC intro talk, but not in any of the six lectures. Need to be sure this gets into the book. Maybe even future versions of the course.