

How Life Works: The Proverbs

“Purpose”

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Digging Deeper

How Life Works — **The Proverbs: “Purpose”**

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: Proverbs 19:21; 20:5; Haggai 1:1-15; Esther 4:14; Romans 8:28

Introduction

God is mighty, but does not despise men; he is mighty, and firm in his *purpose* (Job 36:5).

I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills his *purpose* for me (Psalm 57:2).

The Lord will fulfill his *purpose* for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands (Psalm 138:8)

But the *plans* of the LORD stand firm forever, the *purposes* of his heart through all generations (Psalm 33:11).

The poets of Israel frequently praise the capacity of Yahweh their God to bring to completion whatever He determines to do. However, God’s intentions reach fulfillment, not by coercion, but by what the poet calls “steadfast love.” He is able to accomplish His good work for Israel because of His covenant with Israel which takes the form of promises witnessed by His prophets in written form. The Hebrew word for such covenant love is *hesed*, sometimes translated as “kindness” that includes “goodness” given as “benefit and favor.” God is thereby persistent, consistent, and utterly reliable in achieving His “ends” (goals) in the life of His people. This commitment to fulfill what He promises comprises His *purpose* in and through those who are in covenant with Him. When we use the words “end or ends,” it is just that purpose we have in mind. All of this takes place through the stories shared by God and His people — the dramatic unfolding in time and space of promises made to the ancient ancestors (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). Such promises create new identity (a chosen people) and new callings (to be a light to the nations), together forming the character of a holy nation. These “ends” are the reasons for which His people have come into being and their obedience to live up to the identity and the calling for which they were made by their God.

What is true on the lips of the poets, as illustrated in the texts above, is also true for the sages — the wise ones of Israel whose words comprise the books of the Bible we know as *Job*, *Song of Songs*, *Proverbs*, and *Ecclesiastes*. Poets encounter the God of faithful promises and purposes through *imaginings* that are kindled by their muse, the Spirit of God. Sages receive *insight* from their attentive observation and examination of the world God the creator has made. Purpose is no less present in the natural world than in the spiritual realm. The world declares the glory of God, and so the wise ones perceive the handiwork of God’s wisdom in the starry heavens above and in the living creatures below. Both realms disclose the active purposes of God understood by human minds and hearts. Together, poets and sages give voice to this purpose for the blessing God’s people. Through them, the purposes of God, above and below, come to fulfillment in the life of the faith community, individually and collectively. God’s purposes on the lips of the poets and the sages become the purposes of the persons and the people who are formed by them through faithful practice and obedience. We *fulfill* those purposes when we are *filled full* with them. The written witnesses of Scripture read and heard in the community awaken the heart and inspire the purposes, bringing them to completion. God’s purpose becomes our purpose.

Our study this week examines the purposes of God understood in the wisdom of the sages, given in the book of *Proverbs* and then elsewhere confirmed in the wider context of the Bible.

Purpose: The “Counsel” of God

²⁰ Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise. ²¹ Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's *purpose* that prevails (Proverbs 19:20-21).

The *purposes* of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out (Proverbs 20:5).

The word translated “purpose” in our English translations (above) comes from the Hebrew word *‘ēṣāh*, commonly understood as “counsel” or “advice.” The verb root is *yā‘aš*, meaning “to give counsel, deliberate, purpose, or determine.” Further study uncovers a rich world of meaning. Paul R. Gilchrist in his article from the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament offers a helpful summary:

This verb is translated in LXX [Greek translation known as the Septuagint] by *bouleō* or a compound over seventy times, “to give counsel, deliberate, purpose, determine.” The first occurrence of *yā‘aš* is in Exodus 18:19. Jethro, seeing the tremendous burden of Moses, says, “I shall give you 'counsel,' and God be with you.” He then gives him an organizational plan and advises him how to carry out the administrative responsibilities for ruling and judging his people. Jethro gives counsel from wisdom attained by age and/or experience. One may remember King Rehoboam's rejection of the counsel (*‘ēṣā*) of the old men (1 Kings 12:8, 13). Moses, as chief administrator of the people of God, is not obligated to accept such counsel. A case in point is Absalom's rejection of Ahithophel's good counsel which was countered by Hushai's evil counsel (2 Samuel 17). Jethro, as counselor, presents a carefully thought out plan together with a procedure for its implementation. In 2 Kings 18:20 Rabshakeh's taunt of Hezekiah's claim, “I have counsel and strength for the war” reflects the usual careful deliberation that goes into planning for battle, in this case for defense.

Psalm 33:10 speaks of nations and peoples devising counsels and plans (Heb *maḥāshābā* “thought, device, plan, purpose”) albeit not in accordance with God's “counsels (*‘ēṣā*) and plans” (see also Isaiah 8:10; 30:1).

In contrast to the counsels of men and nations, the OT speaks of the “counsel of the Lord.” Psalm 33:10ff presents this thought most clearly. “The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The ‘counsel’ of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart from generation to generation.” Noteworthy here is the overruling power of God as he nullifies and frustrates the plans of men. The case of Ahithophel's counsel is apropos. In 2 Samuel 15:31 David prays to the Lord to “make the counsel of Ahithophel foolishness.” He thereby acknowledges that God sovereignly disposes what man proposes. Further, in 2 Samuel 17:14 after Absalom chooses the advice of Hushai over that of Ahithophel, the inspired author makes the theological comment, “For the Lord had ordained to thwart the good counsel of Ahithophel, in order that the Lord might bring calamity on Absalom.” Compare Nehemiah 4:15.

The counsel of the Lord is eternal, “It stands forever.” The of God's counsel and plan is grounded in the unchangeableness of God himself. The “plans of his heart” may be equated with “the secret things” which belong to the Lord our God, It is God who guarantees the accomplishment of his eternal decrees. Isaiah beautifully integrates these thoughts, “Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all my good pleasure’; Calling... the man of my purpose (literally, “the man who executes my purpose,” i.e. Cyrus) from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly, I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it” (Isaiah 46:9-11). It is well to remember that *‘ēṣā* is translated in the LXX by *boulē*, a word replete with theological significance in the NT (see Acts 2:23; 4:28; 5:38-39; 20:27; Ephesians 1:11 where “the counsel of his will” expresses the immutable foreordination of God's will); compare Hebrews 6:17, “the unchangeableness of his purpose”).

Arising from the word's theology are human and ethical conclusions. Moses anticipates the waywardness of Israel as a “nation void of counsel,” i.e. not following the plans and purposes of God (Deuteronomy 32:28). Job acknowledges that through lack of knowledge, he has darkened counsel (Job 42:3; also, Job 38:2). In *Proverbs*, counsel is rejected and spurned to one's own detriment (Proverbs 1:25, 30) but “he who listens to counsel” is a wise man (12:15). From 19:20-21 we understand that the counsel the godly man is urged to listen to is the “counsel of the Lord” which will stand, in contrast to the many “plans in a man's heart.” The blessed man of Psalm 1:1 is one “who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly.” Further, in Psalm 32:8 the psalmist is encouraged by the Lord's instruction and teaching, together with the assurance “I ‘will counsel’ (*yā‘aš*) you with my eye upon you” (compare Psalm 73:24). Two Christ-related passages need to be studied in this connection. The only hope of Judah, Isaiah claims, is to be found in the person of the Messiah, who is characterized by four compound names, the first being “Wonderful Counselor” (Isaiah 9:6). The child who is to come, on whose shoulders the government of the world shall rest, is one whose plans, purposes, designs and decrees for his people are

marvelous. We further learn from Isaiah 11:2 that "counsel" is a gift of God's own Holy Spirit. Consequently, Jesus Christ is revealed as the counselor *par excellence*.¹

What *Proverbs* pursues is wisdom which reveals the hidden purposes of God, but which also uncovers the dark recesses of human hearts where sinful purposes lurk. Bringing the depths of the heart to light is the work of God through His wisdom. There is divine counsel/purpose, and there is human counsel/purpose. The sages of Israel knew both, and as the teachers within Israel, their calling was to compose God's wisdom in the form of proverbial sayings to act as counselors to the people, reminding them how human purposes can go badly wrong and how God's purposes can bring them back from the edge of disaster. Beyond the role of correctives to bad decisions, the proverbs function as guides toward the final purpose (or end) of human life from God's point of view. Human beings have a perverse tendency to pursue short-term and near-sighted ends that fail to ask the larger question, "What is all of this for?" God's goal for human life is the *good* toward which all things find their ultimate fulfillment, and that Good is God Himself. God is the goal. God is the destination where the smaller purposes reach their true rest.

Proverbs wants to lead the community of God's people toward the *Purpose of purposes*. Without this larger vision, our life disintegrates into scattered and disconnect ends that take us nowhere. The sages pose the question, "What is the Good for the sake of which all other goods are done?" The sage, who gave us the companion book of *Ecclesiastes*, poses the bigger question when he writes:

¹³ Now all has been heard; here is the *conclusion of the matter*. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the *whole duty of man*. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

By "fear of God" the writer intends to identify that orientation we need toward God that recognizes His supreme place in the world. We experience that orientation in regular acts of worship which praise the person of God and acknowledge the goodness of God. At the heart of this worship is faith which trusts the purposes of God. Then, empowered by our deep desire to pursue God above all else, we are called to "keep his commandments." That is, we are called to consistent acts of obedience in the form of regular practices that shape and form our characters to resemble the One in whom we have placed our supreme trust through acts of worship. Commandments, understood in light of Israel's faith, provide the necessary instruction and guidance to put into practice the ethics of wisdom. In so doing, followers of God engage in the kinds of behaviors that move them forward toward God's Purpose. Worshipping persons become obedient persons who regard the Word of God as the true counselor, the true companion on the journey to the complete life in God.

Purpose: Build the "House" of God (Proverbs 8-9)

Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars. ² She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table. ³ She has sent out her young women to call from the highest places in the town, ⁴ "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" To him who lacks sense she says, ⁵ "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. ⁶ Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight" (Proverbs 9:1-6)

Notice the leading statement: "Wisdom has built her house..." (9:1). The verb form in Hebrew underscores the complete and lasting nature of the action "built." This is no temporary dwelling thrown together from flimsy materials, assembled by careless workmen, and according to poor design. Each action ascribed to wisdom carries the same weight: "has hewn," "has slaughtered," "has mixed," "has set," and "has sent." Nothing wisdom does is an afterthought or mere improvisation. Wisdom builds her home "in the way of insight" and in "the fear of the Lord" where all her work "begins." For such a home, "days are multiplied" and "years will be added."

By contrast, Lady Folly is a seductress. She acts only in the moment and "knows nothing." "At the door of her house" or "in the highest places" of civic life she appeals to those "passing by." She builds nothing lasting or permanent, but attracts to her house persons who "lack sense." It is not wisdom which guides her efforts, but

¹ Paul R. Gilchrist, "yā'as," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Volume 1. Ed. R. Laird Harris, et. al. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 390-391.

sentimental platitudes (as in 9:17). As a result of following her, human beings do not find a home but become guests “in the depths of Sheol” — that is, the house of Death.

Building anything requires planning and purpose. Our Lord teaches us that simple truth in the Gospels:

²⁸ "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? ²⁹ For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹ "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³ In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:28-33).

Jesus might well have had in mind the text above from Proverbs 9.

In that text the master builder is Wisdom personified as a builder and a woman. It is a continuation of themes from Proverbs 8 where Lady Wisdom is represented as the counselor of God in the creation of the world:

¹² "I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion. ¹³ To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech. ¹⁴ Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have understanding and power. ¹⁵ By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; ¹⁶ by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth. ¹⁷ I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me. ¹⁸ With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity. ¹⁹ My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver. ²⁰ I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, ²¹ bestowing wealth on those who love me and making their treasuries full. ²² "The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; ²³ I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. ²⁴ When there were no oceans, I was given birth, when there were no springs abounding with water; ²⁵ before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, ²⁶ before he made the earth or its fields or any of the dust of the world. ²⁷ I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, ²⁸ when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, ²⁹ when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. ³⁰ Then I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, ³¹ rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind. ³² "Now then, my sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. ³³ Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. ³⁴ Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. ³⁵ For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the LORD. ³⁶ But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death" (Proverbs 8:12-36).

Wisdom embraces *purpose* since wisdom is at work *before* anything is attempted or anything is completed:

“Before his deeds of old ...”

“Before the world began ...”

“Before he made the earth ...”

Having purpose for Lady Wisdom meant living under the “appointment of God from eternity, from the beginning...” It meant being “a craftsman at the side of God.” It meant “being filled with delight day after day, always rejoicing in his presence, rejoicing in his *whole world* and delighting in humankind.” What Lady Wisdom meant to God in His creation of the world, she desires to be for us. She comes to bring the same kind of purpose to us, and with that purpose comes “blessing.” Receiving that purpose requires obedience: “listen, watch, and wait” at the doorway of Wisdom. From such obedience to Wisdom’s purpose comes “life” and rescue from the perils of “death.”

By appealing to the wisdom figure in chapters 8-9, the sage of *Proverbs* makes the created world out to be imbued with intrinsic meaning, and thus with purpose. Since human beings are situated within that world as its stewards and innovators, the purpose of the world also becomes their purpose. Through thoughtful reflection on the ways of creation, we have access to the intentions of God. His world is orderly, and so our purposes can be orderly. His world is rich and full, multiplying fruitfulness at its every turn, and so the purposes we imagine are also funded by the generosity of God within creation. More obviously, perhaps, His world is a *possible* world for us because He made it to be an *actual* world for Him! Our striving to fulfill good ends as human creatures in God’s world need not be viewed as uncertain projects with uncertain outcomes, but real projects with realized outcomes. Purpose, immersed in the wisdom of God the creator, shapes the kinds of persons we are becoming.

What seems like meaningless in the reflections of the sage in *Ecclesiastes* is countered by the hopefulness of wisdom-through-purpose in *Proverbs*. In the dialog between the two perspectives, there is constructive engagement, making possible the transformation of pessimism into creative optimism.

Once more we consider the lively statement in Proverbs 8:34:

Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway.

Here is the invitation of Lady Wisdom who offers the reward of blessedness (divine flourishing) to the faithful pursuer of wisdom's goals, intentions, purposes, and ends. The work of purposeful pursuit requires "daily" attention to doors and doorways, and thus to opportunities which flourish in the world Wisdom has made. The disciplines of wisdom undergird the purposes of life, and without the willingness to form habits through constant practice, we fail to achieve purposes that result in good ends. Such work does not leave us on our own, but calls us into relationship, beautifully expressed in the sentence from 8:17:

I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me.

Purpose is not an impossible dream for lonely dreamers, but the shared vision of a community in relationship with personified wisdom. It is no wonder that the New Testament connects wisdom with Jesus, eloquently stated by Paul, who gathers together the themes of community, love, and wisdom into the person of Christ:

² My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:2-3).

In the very act of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we channel Christ's wisdom to everyone within our hearing with the explicit purpose of bringing persons of faith to completion "in Christ." This, then, is the work of the whole Church, empowered with the Spirit's energy "to this end."

²⁸ We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me (Colossians 1:28-29).

The language behind the word "perfect" is the Greek word *teleios* from the root *telos*, meaning "end" or "goal." So this might be translated "that we may bring everyone to their *God-designed end or purpose in Christ*. In its teaching and admonishing roles, the church initiates its congregations into the practices of worship, service, and obedience toward the special purpose for them in Christ.

Carriers of Purpose: The Prophets (Haggai 1:1-15)

In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest:

² This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'"

³ Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴ "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" ⁵ Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. ⁶ You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." ⁷ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. ⁸ Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. ⁹ "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. ¹⁰ Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. ¹¹ I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands."

¹² Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD. ¹³ Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD. ¹⁴ So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, ¹⁵ on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius (Haggai 1:1-15).

How do a people begin again long after its accustomed way of life has been disrupted by catastrophe? What practices must be established, what material structures need to be built, and what leaders must assume their

appointment roles? To what end will they direct their activities so that their original purposes may once more guide them to a flourishing life? Those questions swarmed around the little community of Jews after 70 years of painful exile in a foreign land. Finally back in their land, they discovered widespread ruin, the loss of agricultural rhythms, of religious worship, of economic and political order, and most of all of purposeful hope.

The year is 520 BCE, or there about, and a small remnant of Jews set about the task of making things right. From the text of the biblical book of *Haggai* we have a glimpse of the state of affairs in the land of Judah at the end of the 6th century BCE. Would things ever get back to normal again? This band of returnees began with basic necessities, salvaging the fields for crops and herds, and living a marginal existence on mere subsistence. According to this account, the first effort met with widespread failure, due in part to the long neglect of the soil and livestock, dealing with land depleted and human spirits deflated. Grain, oil, grapes, and cattle were ravaged by drought, resulting in pathetic yields. Faced with a new crisis, they complained and blamed each other. The old social bonds failed to unite their wills for the purpose in front of them. After all, what can a people without adequate resources for life do when the weather doesn't cooperate? No rain, only ruin. No rain, no harvests.

Into this malaise of the human spirit stepped the prophet Haggai whose appearances on the scene did not come too soon. The text dates his arrival precisely in the second year of Darius I, king of Persia who ruled 522-485 BCE. He succeeded rulers like Cyrus who had originally authorized the Jewish return in 539. Someone remembered that Haggai began his prophetic ministry "on the first day of the sixth month" and wrote it down. Troubled peoples naturally recall such things because they are desperate for a good word, good news, and hope. Haggai included these memories because "the word of Yahweh came" to him; when the word of the Lord comes to a person, he must bear witness to that word for the sake of others. Judah, the people, needed that good word. While they had two faithful leaders, Governor Zerubbabel and High Priest Joshua (or *Yeshua*), they needed a fresh word from out and beyond their present crisis. Governor and priest also needed that word.

What does the prophet say in his witness to the gifted word from the Lord? He begins with a divine reality-check contained in the words of the people, for the divine word always confronts the human words in order to lay bear with honesty human purposes. The people say "the time has not yet come for Yahweh's house to be built" (1:2). From the prophet comes the perspective of eternity which sees the near-sighted purposes of the human heart. Divine purpose has its own time which encompasses all human time. Human purpose operates with tunnel vision and only sees what is of immediate concern to creatures, contained within the bubble of self-interest and private need. What the prophet sees is that Judah only cares about "a time for you yourselves" (1:4), consisting of "your paneled houses." Consider the stark contrast of "Yahweh's house" (not yet built) and "your houses" (already built). To build Yahweh's house means having a deep longing to have God present in the midst of His people, celebrated with practices that contribute to His worship. To build my house means desiring my own comforts, provisions, and safety. My house is about my property. God's house is about His presence. Judah reversed the order of priority, placing human purposes above divine purpose.

Haggai gives further witness to the word of the Lord that keeps coming to him: "Give careful thought to your ways" (1:5). We might say something like, "How's that working out for you?" A person's "ways" are the sum total of his *actions, situations, outcomes, and purposes*. "Take a good look at yourselves." An authentic experience of God's gifted word turns bright lights on the road we walk and on what happens to us when we walk that road in the way we walk it. The proof of our purposes, how adequate they are and where they are taking us, appears in the kind of life they produce for us and in the quality of character they form within us. Haggai forces Judah to face up to the lack of goods, the poverty of aims, and the failure of ends that result from the short-sighted purposes they pursue:

⁶ You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it" (1:6-7) "How's that working out for you?" Or as my Hoosier dad used to say, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." "The proof of purposes is in the living of them."

For Judah to continue down the same failed path toward limited purposes, short-sighted ends, would be like doing the same things in the same way and expecting different results. We have a name for that: *insanity*²: Practical insanity, not clinical insanity, of course. The remedy, declares the witnessing prophet, is heeding the command, “Give careful thought to your ways.” In the immediate historical setting that would mean embracing the larger purpose, the overriding one, to build the house of God with timber from “the mountains” where the elevation is high and the vantage point is long-sighted. “Go up into the mountains and bring down the timber” (1:8) is a command with divine purpose. That purpose is noble and holy: the pleasure of God (not mine); the honor of God (not mine). Otherwise, we expect too much from too little, and our meager accumulation is “blown away” (1:9). In place of high purpose there is nothing more than “busyness.” To be busy is a poor substitute for living toward divine purpose. God the Creator wants to live among His people, and so the prophet calls for building the house of God while reducing to nothing the petty purposes aimed at only private fields, land, grain, wine, oil, cattle, and human labor. God has so ordered His world in wisdom that when human beings choose private purpose over higher purpose, then human effort comes to naught. That, says the prophet, is *how life works*.

Faithful leaders, like Zerubbabel and Joshua, are energized by divine purpose and by the promise of divine presence: “I am with you” (1:13). The Lord “stirs up” His leaders and His people, writes Haggai (1:14). The Hebrew text helps us here by its use of the word *’ûr*, meaning “to arouse, awaken,” a verb reinforced by its noun companion *’ûr* (“excitement”). Pursuing purpose may well begin with thought and intellect, but its execution requires action which arises in “the gut,” where energy bubbles up to the surface in elation, excitement, and strong desire. We might say that the community of Judah “caught” the vision from the power of the word which came to them through the prophet Haggai. That vision morphed into visceral energy that animated their bodies, beautifully expressed in the verbs which follow in the text: “They *came* and began to *work* on the house of Yahweh Almighty, their God.” By *coming* they responded to divine purpose; by *working* they received divine power. “Their God” is not a generic god, but is Yahweh *Almighty*. Haggai uses the Hebrew term *šābā’*, commonly translated “army, war, warfare, or host.” No longer is Judah’s purpose a private project but a national one, implemented with the plans and strategies of a disciplined army, intent on forming rank and marching to victory against their enemies. Using such language suggests that Judah proceeded with purpose *because their lives depended on it!* Purpose, so understood, is militant. After all, Judah became the carriers of high purpose to welcome God into their midst in His newly built house, the palace of His coming kingdom.

Gospel Purpose: God Fulfills His Purpose in Us (Romans 8:26-30)

One of the truly majestic texts in Paul’s letters comes from Romans 8, a chapter which begins with words of liberation and then proceeds to work out the plan of God for human beings. By becoming members of Christ’s community, we embark on a journey with each other under the wise direction of the Triune God. Father, Son, and Spirit take active roles in fulfilling the higher purpose of all creation. At the start of this journey, led by our faithful God, we are novices in kingdom ways and stand in need of gracious gifts to reach God’s purpose for us. Paul focuses on the drama of our progress in specific terms when he writes Romans 8:26-30, the remarkable celebration of what God does for us and through us now that He is truly our Father, Jesus is supremely our Savior and Lord, and the Holy Spirit is our indwelling companion and power for living (read Romans 8:1-25 as background). In what follows, Paul offers insights in this marvelous text which reveals the wisdom of God in His purpose for us.

Paul begins with the role of the Holy Spirit who, he tells us, “helps us in our weakness” (8:26). When purpose begins to shape our character, it is because the Spirit “helps us in our weakness.” The Greek word for “weakness” is *astheneia* meaning “lack of strength, feebleness, or sickliness.” Earlier in *Romans* Paul spoke good news to his audience when he wrote, “When we were without strength, Christ died for the ungodly” (5:6).

² The origin of this saying has a long and jagged history of attribution, but has deep roots within “recovery” communities. It’s clearest literary case is from a novel by Rita Mae Brown, *Sudden Death* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), p. 68: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and over again, but expecting different results.”

Our bodies are “sown in weakness, but raised in power” at the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:43). From his own experience, the apostle disclosed, “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10; 13:9), as he reflected on his “thorn in the flesh” and the words of Christ to him: “My grace is sufficient for — my strength is made perfect in your weakness.” This is true because “the weakness of God is stronger than men...” (1 Corinthians 1:25). When the Spirit “helps us in our weakness,” he engages in a special act of prayer, described by Paul in 8:26 with the words, “he intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” The word “groans” comes from the Greek *stenagmos* meaning “sighing, groaning, or moaning,” and belongs to a collection of similar terms, all of which have to do with mourning or grief.

This ministry of the Spirit is astounding for it addresses a common question about how it is that God *feels* the afflictions of human beings. Theologians speak about the *impassibility* of God, using a cumbersome term that has to do, among other things, with God’s inability to suffer or to be *moved* by the experiences of human beings. In the shadow of Auschwitz it’s hard to maintain that God is essential aloof from the fact of suffering. In point of fact, the whole story of the gospel — the good news — confidently affirms that Jesus shared fully in the range of human emotion (see Hebrews 4:15), while not succumbing to the tyranny of sin during his lifetime. On the cross his suffering was palpable and real, not merely apparent. As Jürgen Moltmann consistently maintains in his writings, “Only the suffering God can help.”³ Authentic biblical Christianity is not at home with the ancient Greek notion of *apatheia*, the idea that a self-sufficient, self-determining, and independent God cannot be affected by something else. Paul’s teaching in 8:26-27 assures Christians that the God who understands human suffering and creational suffering does so through the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit.

If the Spirit “groans or sighs,” he does so genuinely and not virtually. When the Spirit prays for Christians, he does so *from within the deepest place* — from within. Here, once more, is the mystery of the Trinity as the “divine dance of persons” (*perichoresis*) where each member of the Godhead remains in continuous communion with the others, operating in a three-dimensional community, simultaneously hearing, giving, feeling, knowing, and moving. God is a community of love acting in love for the whole world He has made, and, through the Spirit, constantly in touch with His human creation. The sighs of the Spirit are not just to create an impression on us: they are the authentic expressions of human need uttered at the emotional level to the Father and the Son. Paul makes clear: what the Spirit knows, God knows (8:27).

The word “intercedes” has special importance to Christian theology. Primarily, we have been told, it is Jesus our great high priest who sits at the right hand of God and “intercedes for us.” Paul says as much later in this chapter (8:34). The writer to the Hebrews credits the risen Jesus with eternal intercession (Hebrews 7:25). These statements about intercession have roots in Isaiah’s great “Suffering Servant” texts (see 53:12), and God’s promise to be Israel’s intercessor (59:16). How are we to distinguish the intercession of the Spirit from that of the Son? Largely the difference depends on the *place* where the intercession takes place. The Son intercedes in a priestly way in the heavenly temple at God’s right hand. His concerns are with forgiveness of sin and standing before God. For the Spirit, intercession takes place in the hearts of God’s people, where personal attention is paid to individual needs, especially those occasioned by the ever-present reality of suffering (again, 8:18ff).

“Words cannot express” (8:26) suggests that Paul does not have the gift of tongues in view.⁴ The Greek word *alalētos* means “cannot be expressed in words.” Whatever Paul imagines about the Spirit’s intercessory work, the emphasis falls on what it accomplishes more than with how it takes place. The goal—the purpose—is “God’s will” (8:27b). What the Spirit does for those in Christ is to act on their behalf to bring them in line with the will of God, especially in the midst of “present sufferings.” Not all spiritual activity operates with words, whether of a known or an unknown tongue. There is a place for Spirit-crafted words in communicating divine truth, as the apostle taught in 1 Corinthians 2:9-14. Yet, God’s ability to “know the mind of the Spirit” does not

³ See Richard Bauckham’s excellent article in *Themelios* 9.3 (April 1984), 6-12.

⁴ For the contrary view, see the commentary of Gordon Fee, *Empowering Presence*, 584ff.

depend on the utterance of any human words (8:27). What we can be certain of is that the Spirit diligently and constantly remains at work in each believer's heart, uncovering and then communicating the truth about each one to the Father in heaven. The Spirit intercedes about life on the ground so that the will of God in heaven may be done on earth in us.

From that thought the text takes its next turn in 8:26-30. Think of it this way: the Spirit supplies good, up-to-the-minute intelligence about us within the Godhead; the Spirit is the Godhead's eyes and ears (see also Revelation 5:6 where the Spirit and "eyes" are associated symbolically; this is a borrowing from Zechariah 3:9; 4:10). Based on what God knows about us (through the Spirit's intercession), he crafts a personal action plan that will accomplish His will. Or, as Paul puts it in these familiar words:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (8:28).

Compare "called according to His purpose" with "in accordance with God's will" in 8:27. The "all things" mentioned here include "our present sufferings" of 8:18, as well as the other vicissitudes of life that often bedevil our journey. What God seeks to achieve is the arranging of everything comprising the Christian experience so that everything "works together for good." The Greek word "works together" is *sunergeō*, meaning "work with, work together with, cooperate, or help." Our English word "synergy" comes from this root. As Paul explained earlier, creation struggles with the chaos of unfulfilled expectations. Glorified Christians hold the key to creation's re-working, and between creation and those in Christ there exists a God-directed synergy, directed toward the fulfillment of God's purpose.

What does Paul mean by the "purpose" of God? The Greek word used here is *prothesis*. In classical usage, the term meant a "public laying out," such as a "public notice." Other meanings included "the statement" of a case, or something proposed or supposed. The base word is *thesis*, the familiar root for its English counterpart: something that is "placed or put forth or set forth." The thesis is the main point of a speech, for example; the thing being argued or advocated. Everything else about the speech simply rises in support of the thesis. We might want to say that God has set forth His thesis for creation and human life, something we call His will or purpose for us. Considering the very personal activity of the Spirit in each believer's heart, we can see how each person contributes in their unique way to God's purpose *for them*.

There is yet another crucial element: "For those who love God and are called..." There is no automatic gift of divine purpose for those who do not love God. Persons who choose to live their lives without God succumb to the disasters of Romans 1:18-32. God still loves the whole world, including the personified creation. However, His will and purpose cannot become effective in individuals unless they cooperate with the divine call and reciprocate His love with their own. There is no synergy without cooperation. Paul reminds his audience that love for God and not mere mechanical obedience is necessary for God's purpose to advance. Considering the considerable space dedicated to teaching about the Spirit, we can only conclude that the Spirit's work in the Christian's heart includes the nurturing of true love for God. Indeed, the sanctifying work of the Spirit aims at a heart that is wholly surrendered in love for God and in possession of *perfect love*. Progress in holiness requires this love, rooted in genuine relationship with the holy God through the Holy Spirit and clothed with the holiness of Christ. Is not the first "fruit of the Spirit" *love* (Galatians 5:22a)? Did not Paul teach earlier in Romans 5:5 that "God has poured out his love into our hearts *by the Holy Spirit* whom he has given us"? And does not our love for God grow out of His love for us ("We love, because he first loved us," 1 John 4:19).

What follows in 8:29-30 puts into tightly sequenced format the various acts of God's grace that moves the Spirit indwelt believer from the point of divine calling to the climax of divine transformation. The Spirit acts with purpose!

1. The first term needing study is "foreknew," from the Greek noun root *prognōsis* and its parallel verb form *progignōskō*, commonly translated as to "know, perceive, learn, understand beforehand, foreknow, or provide." An act of prognostication is a prediction about how things will likely turn out. Looked at fatalistically, this might suggest some form of predestination that removes the role of free will or choice from the process. In Greek thought, such determination was common and was tied to the idea of *fate*.

However, within the Hebrew covenant experience, God's relationship with Israel began, not with a prior intellectual knowledge of who Israel was, but with a *choice*. Listen to these moving words:

⁷ The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: ⁸ But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹ Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations (Deuteronomy 7:7-9).

Of special interest is the priority of *love* over actual circumstance (number, etc.). One of the prominent ways that people "knew" in the biblical sense was that they "loved." God's knowledge of human beings is not confined to intellectual awareness or even to intellectual purpose. Instead, God knows when God loves. We might even propose that *to love* is yet another way of *knowing*. Or, *that to love is to know, and to know is to love*.

If that analysis is correct, then for God to *foreknow* is for God to *fore-love*. That is, God loves humanity before he does anything else. Did God foreknow the creation only by having an intellectual experience of it? Or did he foreknow the creation by *loving* with His imagination what such a world might actually be like, and then, out of this love He made that world. Creation, on those terms, was conceived as an act of divine love, not only as an act of divine foresight. Everything begins and rests with the love of God. God loves with purpose!

2. The next term is "predestined," a controversial word usually associated with certain theories about God's will and human choice. For example, Calvinist theology presumably rests heavily on believing that God predestined all things, including human will. How does Paul use this term? The Greek word is *proorizō* having the classical meaning of "to determine beforehand." But what is determined beforehand in this context? Is it persons for salvation or for damnation? Not according to Paul. What is determined beforehand is what will become of these persons whom God has *fore-loved* and who love Him in return (8:28). The *destiny* of those in Christ is plainly set forth: "to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (8:29). Once more, the issue of Christian identity is in view. Gathering up the deeply personal knowledge which the Spirit has of the believer, God applies His will and purpose to each life with the goal of each Christian becoming, in fact, like Christ. Up till now, the person in Christ has been *declared* a co-heir with Christ (8:17) and *justified* through the faithfulness of Christ (5:1). But what Paul reaches for in 8:29 is the *actual conformity* of every believer to the prototype Son, the only begotten son, the firstborn Son.

The Greek word for "conform" is *summorphos*, literally meaning "to share the form." Throughout this passage, Paul has shown a fondness for root words prefixed with the preposition, *sun-*, meaning "with, together with, joint, etc." Contemporary language might suggest that Christians are *morphed* with Christ. Some care is needed here. Ideas do not easily transpose from one language to another, especially across two millennia. Given Paul's fondness for words beginning with *sun-*, perhaps he means that just as the Christian's inheritance is bound up with Christ, so also the Christian's destiny is bound up with him as well. If we are "in Christ," then our identity is wholly contained within the future of Christ: what is true of Christ becomes true for us. Certainly Paul taught that the Son is the true image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; 3:10). Therefore, in their relationship to Christ they are *shaped* by his image.

They are, that is, to become true ... renewed human beings. ... The image of God, distorted and fractured through idolatry and immorality, is restored in Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God; and the signs of that restoration are visible in those who, like Abraham, trust in God's life-giving power and so truly worship and give glory to God (4:18-22). But the purpose is never simply that God's people in Christ should resemble him, spectacular and glorious though that promise is. ... it is that, as true image-bearers, they might reflect that same image into the world, bringing creation the healing, freedom, and life for which it longs. To be conformed to the image of God, or of God's Son, is a dynamic, not a static, concept. Reflecting God into the world is a matter of costly vocation.⁵

⁵ Wright, *Romans*, 602.

Conformity to Christ is not the end-point of a mechanical scheme of predestination. Rather it is Paul's way of saying that what "is true of the Messiah is true of his people." That includes sharing in his death (Philippians 3:10-11) and suffering, themes of great importance to Paul's apostolic ministry as seen in such texts as 2 Corinthians 4 and 6, and highlighted in Colossians 1:24.

The sequencing of God-directed actions in Romans 8:30 takes up and leads on to consummation the great themes already introduced in *Romans*: predestined, called, justified, glorified. Of special interest in this chapter has been the glory to be revealed when God's project reaches its goal at the resurrection of the children of God and the restoration of all creation. History is going somewhere, and the redeemed find themselves at the center of the drama. If Christ is the firstborn "among many brothers," (8:29) then the whole family on heaven and earth looks to the Church of Jesus Christ for the purposeful sign that God is making all things new. "Many brothers" isn't intended to restrict gender, and we can just as easily translate that phrase as "many members in one family." Elsewhere, in places like *Ephesians*, Paul (or his disciple) takes up the grand theme of reuniting all things *in Christ*. Something of that grand vision already appears in Romans 8 where the Christian identity shines in the midst of the groaning creation, the sign of the glory to come when the purpose of God finally reaches its completion.

Conclusion

Near the end of the history of Israel told by the Old Testament is a wonderful short-story which bears the name of its leading lady, a woman called "Esther." You will want to find her book in the Bible and give it a serious read. At the heart of the story told in *Esther* is the drama of a people (Israel) living under the rule of the Persian Empire. Through a series of events, the Jewish Esther becomes a queen-wife to the Persian king Ahasuerus, known to history as Xerxes I. Eventually she finds herself caught up in the crossfire of a wicked Persian named Haman who hates the Jews still living in Persia. Haman weaves an evil plan of genocide that aims to exterminate this people who chose to worship only Yahweh, the God of Israel. Sowing seeds of suspicion among the palace authorities, Haman seeks to persuade to king to join him in his dark deed. But a faithful Jew named Mordecai whose name appears more than 50 times in the book learns of a plot by some officials to assassinate the king and communicates this attempted coup to Esther who then tells the king, thus saving his life. Later Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman whom the king had elevated to the highest place in his court. At this, Haman's hatred for the Jews reaches a fevered pitch:

⁵ When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. ⁶ Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes. ⁷ In the twelfth year of King Xerxes, in the first month, the month of Nisan, they cast the pur (that is, the lot) in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar. ⁸ Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. ⁹ If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business." ¹⁰ So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹ "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please" (Esther 3:5-11).

Mordecai sends word to Esther who is, in fact, the daughter of his uncle and so cousin to Mordecai seeking her help in thwarting the folly of Haman. She replies through a messenger, excusing any immediate action because of the royal protocol that only allows her to enter the king's presence if summoned. Mordecai's reply is stunning:

¹² When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" ¹⁵ Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶ "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." ¹⁷ So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions (Esther 4:12-17).

The telling words are “And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (4:14). Mordecai believed in the higher purpose of his God and chided Esther into courageous action. Perhaps up to this point in her peculiar place as queen to Xerxes —a Jew with a Gentile — she had not completely grasped the unique opportunity to fulfill the higher purpose of God for her fellow Jews. Her reply, filled with the humble request that Jews everywhere *fast* for their well-being, shows that she had finally embraced the purpose of God, mysterious though it might be. Having fasted herself, she promised to break the protocol and request the king’s audience without his invitation. Her added words reveal a deeper faith and sense of purpose: “And if I perish, I perish” (4:16). Esther believed, based on her words and actions, that it *costs* something to be persons who pursue purpose even when that cost means giving up their lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 20th century Christian martyr, once wrote that “when Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Remember Jesus’ words cited above, “Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost” (Luke 14:28). In Esther’s case, she rose to the occasion and saved her people. To this day, Jews around the world celebrate her courage during the feast of Purim.

One unusual feature of the book of *Esther* is that the name of God appears nowhere on its pages. How is it possible for a writer to tell this remarkable story and not address God’s name? Scholars have wisely noted in reply that although the *name* of God is absent, the *hand* of God is everywhere present. That is, as readers we witness the purpose of God behind the scenes and within human agents. The felt wisdom of God unfolding in plans and designs equals God’s name for the Jews who knew the story of Esther. Purpose means presence.

“God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” As a young Christian I was instructed to take the journey of Jesus with those hopeful words. From our study this week, we learn that the wisdom of God taught by the sage of *Proverbs* begins our journey with His creation of the world. If we embrace God the Creator, then the course of our lives starts to move “with the grain of the universe,” *for that is how life works best*. From the moment God made the world, He undertook a magnificent building project. Observing the wisdom of God in Creation, His human creatures discovered the ways the world worked with plan, purpose, and final end. Then, God called a people named “Israel” to be the witness of His deeper nature, that He is the God most powerful, supremely wise, and everywhere present. But He is also faithful and loving, committed to the well-being of everything He made. Through the purpose-driven lives of people like Abraham, Moses, David, and a host of prophets like Isaiah, God identified Himself as “Yahweh” the God who is, was, and will be. He called His people to become the prototype for His purpose for all human beings. Through tragedy and triumph, God wisely guided His people to the crucial moment when He would step into the world He made in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, His own beloved Son. Jesus embodied in human form the wisdom and purpose of God, “The Word become flesh and living among us” (John 1:14). By dying and rising again on behalf of His beleaguered human creations, the faithful God initiated the final stage of His kingdom plan, namely, to unite all of His creation into a single people who would witness His glorious presence for all to see.

All of these great movements of God, including Esther’s, were informed by the wisdom of His purpose — a purpose He chose to give to each of His people. We are, then, a people of purpose, invited to share in His larger project for creation. The times now in front of us — our time — become a fresh opportunity to implement what God in Christ has achieved for us. In Jesus’ death and resurrection, he becomes for us the “new way” of being human. By trusting faith, we receive His gift of eternal life which begins here and now amidst the brokenness of a suffering creation. Jesus calls us to follow him in doing His Father’s willing and sharing in His Father’s work. Like the nation of Judah in Haggai’s time, our spirits are stirred up to build the house of the Lord, and therefore choosing God’s purpose over our own. It is through the wisdom of Jesus that together we build the Lord’s house, according to the blueprint of His purpose by making His purpose our own. And so the leading question with which we end this week is simply, “Are my purposes aligned with God’s purpose?”

To God Be the Glory! Amen!