

Chapter 1

Why we need a goal

Early in 2009, an American plane nosedived shortly after take-off from New York having hit a flock of birds causing engine failure. Keeping calm, the pilot brought the plane safely down, but into the Hudson River. The terrified passengers thought their last hour had come, both during the crash and as icy water began to fill the cabin. It became a seven-day wonder that all 155 people on board were rescued. Afterwards, one of the survivors told a reporter how, thinking he was about to die, he had asked himself, 'If this was the end, was I the person I wanted to be all my life?'

Most of us probably start off with at least a few vague ideas about what we would like the future to hold for us. When we were very young, kindly grownups would often ask, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' to which we usually had some kind of an answer. How much does what we said then match what we are now?

Different ambitions

Today's children may reply, 'I want to be a spaceman', 'a pop singer', or perhaps, 'a brain surgeon'. I once met a very junior American medical student who hoped to become a specialist in electro-encephalography. I afterwards lost track of him, so I don't know whether he expanded his ideas before graduation. Others of us have perhaps had times of uncertainty about what to do at all. Or we cling on to some long-held ambition.

Dense fog once grounded the plane I needed to catch to attend an important interview. I was left feeling very let down and uncertain which door to knock on next. Many others must have known that kind of experience.

Is anyone out there and is he interested?

It is often when our plans run into the ground, whatever the cause, that questions start to arise: 'Am I what I wanted to be?' 'Am I on the right track?' 'What's life all about anyway?' Perhaps the advice of our seniors doesn't inspire, and can even upset us. One of my doctor friends, having failed a higher medical examination, was asked by her consultant if she had ever thought of going in for nursing. She had a great respect for the nursing profession, but had worked so hard to get to where she was in medicine that his suggestion greatly offended her. She therefore made even greater efforts to do well in her chosen career and was eventually successful.

Discouragement makes many of us start to wonder who to go to for help. Could that friend be right who says there is a God who is bothered about my plans and prospects? The rescued American passenger might have asked himself, 'Am I the sort of person *God* intended me to be?' We could argue, 'If God exists at all, he has a universe to run, so why should he trouble about me?' Yet if God really is the one who made us, then he is likely to be interested in how we live the lives he created.

Someone else may attempt a kind of personal league table, adding up good deeds or high scores and seeing how they compare with those of other people. Surely a brain surgeon would come out higher than a pop star, whatever their respective earnings. Isn't it better to save lives than to entertain people? Like a good manager, if God comes into this at all, he must surely want me to get to the highest possible place in my career. Successful competition is surely what it's all about. Yet a young pop singer could argue along the same lines, hoping to reach the top of the charts – if not actually saving lives on the way, then at least making life more enjoyable for a lot of people.

Worldly-wise can be unwise

Is professional success God's goal for everyone? Is he not interested in life's 'little people'? Clearly, if we all came out at the top there would be no difference between bosses and workers, interns and consultants. In George Orwell's novel, *Animal Farm*, the ambitious pig Napoleon

tells the other farm animals that ‘All animals are equal’, before adding ‘But some animals are more equal than others’. He secretly intended that all others in the farmyard should do as he said. Is this how humans should think and behave? That some of them do so does not make that right. A young friend of mine, brought up in a closed country under the tight rule of a dictator, had thought that Orwell’s book must be about her homeland.

Wanting to stand over others, or simply to win their admiration, are poor goals. Once, I was with a fellow student when a passing motorist stopped and asked for directions. My companion so quickly told him which way to go that I later expressed surprise, admiring his knowledge of the route. ‘I don’t really know where he wanted to go’, he admitted, ‘But the driver would think I did.’ Self-serving hinders us from being of true service to other people.

This is confirmed by lessons from history. By the time of Christ, Imperial Rome had come to rule over many countries and a series of emperors climbed in turn to the top of the Roman tree. Most of them became so proud, greedy and corrupt that the whole empire suffered and finally fell apart.

A better alternative

The Roman Empire was still flourishing when Paul, an early Christian and Roman citizen, wrote to his fellow believers living in Rome:

‘Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.’¹

Part of Paul’s meaning here is that they must rid their minds of the common Roman attitudes of self-interest and self-serving. Instead, they should link up with God’s perfect wisdom, even if this went against the norms of the majority. To rely on human reason alone would in the end prove fatal to national survival, but how amazing to be offered access to God’s own mind.

It is not popular to think that God often chooses to do his work through little people, instead of using those who are full of their own importance. Paul therefore warned the Greeks of Corinth against ignoring God's wisdom and going instead to ask advice of a few people with big names.² There is a true story about a group of disabled children competing in an important race when one of them fell. Without hesitation, the others stopped to help the one who was down. The faster ones then kept in step with their slower companions until they all arrived at the finishing tape together, to receive a standing ovation. The crowd in the stadium had witnessed a greater victory than is usually seen in competitive sport. Weak in the eyes of the rest of the world, and in some places thought of as total misfits, these youngsters had publicly underlined an important principle. We are here to help each other, not to benefit from someone else's downfall.

If this is the sort of person God wants me to be, I clearly need to look at a different set of standards from those commonly held. Perhaps God is more interested in our running the race well than being first past the post. He may be less concerned about my aim for a successful career than whether I tune in to him to be guided by his wisdom in helping others. If this should still bring success, the thanks would first go to him.

Where to start

When about to travel to an unknown place we will look at a map and perhaps talk to others who have been that way before. Should we be any less thoughtful about considering our journey through life? What difference does it make to believe that God, in his wisdom, will guide and direct the paths of those who trust him? If, as Paul wrote, there is a 'good, pleasing and perfect will' for each of us, how do we find it? This is an all-important question if we are to live our lives to the full.

Are we willing to be told what to do and how to do it?

There are successful people who claim with some pride that they have arrived where they are by their own efforts. Yet many of them never stop to ask where their inborn intelligence and drive have come from.

This can be true even for those in the caring professions. Many began by doing better than others at school, before going on to university or medical school. Over the years they have constantly been treated as rather special by family and friends, until they begin to think that they are indeed very special. Whether applied to physicians or surgeons, pop stars or footballers, climbing high can become a matter of personal pride. Films sometimes joke about surgeons who throw their instruments about and swear a lot, but jokes sometimes tell us a few home truths. We should all take warning from this, and when perplexed about the best course should consult others further along the road, avoiding those who would simply say what we want to hear.

Guidance needed

I once knew a surgeon who for a time had to work alone at a mission hospital. He sometimes felt that the operations he had to do were beyond him. He had an old surgical textbook and at such times he would read up first what he should do. How he would have loved to have the author of that textbook looking over his shoulder and telling him the next move!

In the same way, as we look for guidance in planning either surgical operations or journeys, so we need to find directions for our journey through life. God has provided all the directions we need in his inspired guidebook, the Bible. It does not give us many obvious job descriptions, but it can come as a surprise to find repeated assurances that God cares for us with unfailing love, and that he has a good plan for each of us. He promises to lead those of us who are ready to consult, trust and obey him throughout our journey. He offers many assurances that he will not leave us on our own if things get tough.³ He does not simply act as a critical observer, but offers us his wisdom – wisdom that is completely dependable.⁴ He even said to his chosen people that if they carefully obeyed him he would ‘set [them] high above all the nations on earth’ and they would ‘always be at the top, never at the bottom’.⁵ Sadly, we have seen the alternative verified in the history of certain once God-fearing peoples. He longs for us to pay attention to him and so find the best way to live.

As we go on to consider this further, readers who are already walking in God's ways are asked to be patient for the sake of those who are still just looking, and perhaps give them a helping hand. In any case, a refresher course could be a good thing, even for you!

For further thought:

- What are you aiming at?
- How do you plan to arrive there? Do you need any help?

References

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| 1. Romans 12:2 | 4. Proverbs 3:5-6 |
| 2. 1 Corinthians 1:11-14 | 5. Deuteronomy 28:1, 13 |
| 3. eg Deuteronomy 31:8; Psalm 23:4;
Romans 8:38-39 | |