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SAVED FROM SOMETHING FOR SOMETHING

“My faith demands—this is not optional—my faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference.”

—JIMMY CARTER

In 1981, I (Eric) was recruited to help get the word out and sell tickets for an unknown film called *Chariots of Fire*. I was given several 10-packs of tickets and asked to sell them to folks in my Christian circles or give them to my neighbors. Much to everyone’s surprise, the film eventually captured the attention of the nation and the Motion Picture Academy by winning Best Picture of 1981. The story line highlights two athletes preparing for and then competing in the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. One of the featured athletes in the film is Scotland’s Eric Liddell, who is dubbed The Flying Scotsman. In the film, as Liddell is competing in the finals of the 400-meter race, he pulls away from the pack and, with his head tilted back and a smile on his face, we hear his thoughts in a voice-over: “God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure.” This is the affirmation of someone who has found his or her purpose in life. Liddell was a committed Christian who went on to serve God as a missionary in China after the games were completed.

Are there times *we* feel God’s pleasure in what we’re doing? Have we discovered the place where our passion intersects with God’s purpose and we feel fully alive? This isn’t an accident. God has created each person with a purpose in mind. One of the all-time best-selling books is Rick Warren’s *The Purpose-Driven Life*. It is a profound and powerful book that has sold tens of millions of copies, been translated into dozens of languages, and been embraced even by people who don’t normally read Christian books. The subtitle of the book is *What on Earth Am I Here For?* No book on discovering God-given purpose has captured the attention of our world like this book. It’s obvious that people sense they are here to do *something*; they’re just not sure what that something is.

For the past 40 years, the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA has been conducting a comprehensive survey on the attitudes and values of incoming freshmen. One of their recent studies was based on the responses of more than 112,000 freshmen at 236 colleges and universities.

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According to this study, 79 percent say they believe in God, 69 percent say they pray, and 76 percent say they are searching for purpose or meaning.[1] Helen Astin, co-principal investigator of the study, observes, “They are searching for

answers to big questions: What is the meaning of life? What is my purpose in life? What will happen to me? Will I leave my mark in this world?”[2]

Discovering purpose is not a longing just of college students but of every human heart. God delights in revealing his purpose to us. Each of us is created and designed by God to do something that he prepared beforehand for us to do. He designed us not only to be someone but also to do something! Brennan Manning captured this idea when he said, “When being is divorced from doing, pious thoughts become a substitute for washing dirty feet.”[3]

As we read the Scriptures, we discover that the Bible is full of verses that both relate to finding purpose and giving directions on how to find it.

God gives us leaders to *prepare us* for good works: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:11-12).

God gives us the Bible to *equip us* for good works: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

God gives us other Christians to *spur us on* toward good works: “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24).

God gives us spiritual gifts to *enable us* to do good works: “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10).

God gives us money to *finance* good works: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share” (1 Timothy 6:17-18).

Think about this. We are created in Christ Jesus to do good works. God gives us leaders to prepare us for those good works, the Bible to equip us for those good works, others to encourage us to do good works, spiritual gifts to enable us to do good works, and money to finance those good works. Do you think he’s trying to tell us something?

TWO QUESTIONS

These two aspects of our lives of faith (who we are and what we do) have lasting implications. One day we will stand before God to “give an account” (Romans 14:12) of ourselves. The way I see it, we each will have two questions to answer. The first question will be something like “Why should I let you into heaven?” And the correct answer to that question is “I am

trusting Jesus Christ alone for my salvation (see Ephesians 2:8-9). He said if I believed in him I would not die but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

But there is also a second question. Paul writes, “We make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may

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receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:9-10). The second question centers on what we did here on earth. It might be something like “What did you do to love, help, and serve others?”

We’ll have to give an account for what we did for others as a result of knowing Christ. What did we do for the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the sick, and the prisoners (see Matthew 25:31-46)?

We can’t answer the second question with the answer to the first question any more than we can answer the first question with the answer to the second question. If that sounded a bit like double-talk, here’s some clarification. When God asks us why he should let us into heaven, our correct answer is not “Because of all of the good things I’ve done.” Remember that salvation is a gift from God. We can’t earn it. Likewise, when God asks “What did you do for others?” our answer can’t be “When I was a teenager, I walked down the aisle in church and accepted Christ as my Savior.” That’s the type of answer that serves us well for the first question but not for the second. The right answer for the second question is to tell God how we focused on others with this life he gave us—what we did to help, love, and serve others that connected them to God’s grace. God wants to hear about how we loved our neighbors as ourselves as an extension of his love to us.

The two-question concept stems from what is called the Great Commandment, found in Matthew 22:37-39. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment in all of Scripture was, his answer was twofold—

in short, to love God and to love people. It makes sense that he will ask us, “Well...how did you do in loving me and loving others?”

When we live externally focused lives, we really have the questions answered ahead of time. We belong to him. That answers the first question. Our passion for God should then automatically motivate us to right actions. That answers the second question.

Two Vacuums

Our lives have a God-shaped vacuum

In the 17th century, French philosopher, mathematician, and physicist Blaise Pascal penned these words: “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.”[4]

He was right. As a physicist he knew something about vacuums. But it doesn't take a scientist to know what a vacuum feels like. Several centuries earlier Aurelius Augustinus, later to be known as St. Augustine, wrote of God in his *Confessions*, “You have made us and directed us toward yourself and our heart is restless until we rest in you.”[5] God has created a place in our hearts for himself, and we will always feel a sense of incompleteness or emptiness until he takes his rightful place. No accomplishment, achievement, fortune, or fame can fill that void. He created a space in which he alone can dwell. When we receive God's gift of salvation, that vacuum is filled.

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A story is told about a man who died and went to heaven, where he saw a sign hanging on the pearly gates that read: “To enter you must have 100 points.” The man was then asked by St. Peter, “Why should I let you into heaven?”

The recently deceased and eulogized man gave a litany of reasons why he should be allowed into heaven. “Well...I've been a good man...I tried to

do the right thing. Let's see...I was a deacon in my church for seven years...uh, I went on a mission trip to Mexico where I painted a cinder-block church and ate bad food. Um, I've been a faithful husband and good father and tried

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to love my neighbor as myself. How's that? How many points did I get?"

St. Peter answered, "Well...let's see now...add three...carry the two...time off for good behavior...The final total is zero points."

"Zero points?!" the man exclaimed. "You mean all the good I did adds up to zero? If that's true, it's only by the grace of God that I'll get into this place!"

"Now that's 100 points. Come on in."

That's what grace does. Christ comes into our lives apart from any personal works we could ever boast about. Salvation can't be earned or merited. It comes as God's gift to us. God, and God alone, fills the God-shaped vacuum.

Our lives have a purpose-shaped vacuum

There is another vacuum in each life that is just as real. Ephesians 2:10 states that we "are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." In other words, we've been given this life because God has something for us to do. He's already planned and prepared how our stories can be part of the bigger story. God, who has repaired our souls, also extends his grace to fix the holes in our hearts—the purpose-shaped vacuum.

Our lives matter. They count. We can—and do—make a difference in the world. But for most of us, it's easy to feel fairly insignificant and not of much value. All of us, if we are honest, have moments when we wonder whether our lives really matter or what difference we can possibly make. This reflects the purpose-shaped vacuum. The verse says, "We are God's workmanship." That is, he created us exactly according to his specs

and design. And he's also created each person "to do good works, which [he] prepared in advance for us to do." Because God has prepared these good works in advance, that creates a vacuum for us—not to invent but to discover and step into.

Unlike the God-shaped vacuum that is "one size fits all," the purpose-shaped vacuum is individual. Ours is found at the intersection of the way he has made us and what he wants to accomplish in this world through us. So think of all God cares about in this world...all that is on his agenda. God has designed us with a predisposed passion to co-labor with him in doing what he wants done. Wow, that's a pretty huge responsibility—but God thinks we're up for it!

God's hope, his plan, is for us to know his love. His invitation is for us to discover his grace, grow in that grace, and learn to live gracefully (extend that grace). When we allow God's grace to show up in our lives, we can live passionately for him. Our purpose-shaped vacuums will be filled. And the grace we know will spill over into other people's lives.

Most pastors, missionaries, and other vocational Christian workers will say that they frequently experience the intersection of their passions with God's purpose, where they feel God's pleasure—where they feel fully alive. And some people believe that this intersection is reserved *only* for those who are in the vocational Christian service professions. But it can and should be the normal experience for every believer—including each one of us. The second vacuum is filled when we spend our time passionately doing what God has given us to do.

A TWO-PART STORY

Do we have a story that tells about how we met Christ and the difference he has made in our lives? Most Christians do. Normally this story, or testimony, centers on the enrichment in our lives since Christ entered it—because we have Jesus, we have more peace, more joy, and less worry. We may describe some of those improvements this way: "I used to lose my temper, but now I'm

more patient” or “I used to drink all the time, but now I only drink when I’m depressed, celebrating something, or am hanging out with my friends.”

But that’s really only one aspect of our stories, isn’t it? That part centers on what God saved us *from*. But the second piece should be all about what God saved us *for*. This is the portion we share with others about

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how knowing Christ can help make this world a better place. Wouldn’t the world be different if all Christians had the second component to accompany the first? After hearing and understanding this concept at a pastoral staff meeting, one pastor of

a large megachurch in Southern California told me that it was his goal to have a church full of “two-testimony” Christians.

On December 26, 2004, a giant tsunami rolled over the coastlines of South Asia, taking its tragic toll in property and tens of thousands of human lives. Countless people were left homeless and orphaned. On January 7, 2005, TV host Larry King invited representatives of different faiths to come on the *Larry King Live* show to express their views regarding faith in a loving God during a time of tragedy.[6] On the panel were R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Deepak Chopra, New Age spiritual adviser; Michael Manning, a Roman Catholic priest; Dr. Maher Hathout, Muslim scholar and retired physician; Michael Lerner, a rabbi; and Henepola Gunaratana, one of the senior monks at the Buddhist Vihara Temple in Queens, New York. Each one of them was asked, “How do we find God after losing so much in a historic tragedy? How much is our faith in a higher power tested by the tsunami killing more than 150,000 people in a matter of moments?” Despite the mental and spiritual acumen represented, it was hard to find a satisfying answer.

Perhaps the best apologetic, or answer, to this question is a combination of healthy agnosticism coupled with rock-hard certainty: “You know, I could give you some classic answers regarding what philosophers and

theologians have written throughout the ages, but to be honest, I really haven't a clue. What I do know with absolute and crystal-clear certainty is how Jesus would respond to such loss, tragedy, suffering, and pain, because there are four books of the Bible written about how he did just that. And that is how my family and my church are trying to respond. We are trying to think and act as Jesus would—to be his hands, feet, and voice in whatever situation we find ourselves in.” This is just what externally focused believers do.

In 2006 I (Rick) and LifeBridge Christian Church invited radio host, entertainer, and composer John Tesh to lead a worship experience at LifeBridge. Over dinner he told me his story. Touched by the images he saw on television following the tsunami, John couldn't simply sit and watch.[7] He wasn't content to watch the story; he wanted to shape the story. In the weeks following the tsunami, John and his family traveled across the world to help. Not knowing exactly what they could do to help, they landed in a Red Cross shelter area where hundreds of families, mostly children, were staying. John's son, Gibb, played soccer with the displaced children. His daughter, Prima, showed the young girls how to dance to American music. Those simple acts of sharing routine life again brought moments of laughter and small pieces of normalcy to a place filled with fear and despair. John's wife, Connie Selleca, pulled out crayons and paper. And the children of the tsunami began to draw. They drew amazing pictures of their families and the great wall of water that had changed their lives in an instant. John listened to the stories, over and over, from families who had been separated and lost everything. The stories, pictures, and compassion experienced during John and Connie's visit turned into a little book titled *Shades of Blue*. Back in the States, the book helped raise awareness of and funds for the children who experienced the disaster.

But not everyone can respond in such a direct and generous way as the Tesh family. What do we have to give? Recently I (Eric) was in Indiana visiting my friend Doug Ehr Gott at Northview Christian Life Church. Doug took me to lunch at Eddie's Corner Cafe, his family restaurant.

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Doug told me he was organizing a fund-raising drive to build a cinder-block house for a pastor friend in Ghana—a location of frequent mission trips. Doug set a big pickle jar on the counter

with a bit of information about his friend and asking people to donate one dollar to buy one brick. One day Doug's 4-year-old granddaughter wanted to "help" Doug's wife Sandy wait tables at Eddie's. At the end of the day, Sandy gave the little girl a five-dollar bill and she immediately ran over to the counter, climbed up on the stool, and began to stuff the five-dollar bill into the slot in the lid of the jar. Sandy asked, "But honey, don't you want to keep some of the money so you can buy something for yourself?" Shoving the five-dollar bill into the jar, her granddaughter answered, "But Grandma I already have a house." We may not be able to do everything, but everyone—even one of these little ones—can do something.

GOD'S GIFT, OUR GIFT

Salvation by grace through faith might be considered God's gift to us. The good that God prepared for us to do is our gift back to God and to the world. Peter Semeyn, senior pastor at Faith Reformed Church in Traverse City, Michigan, says, "Part of our conversion is to be shaped and formed to more perfectly reflect the image of Christ for the rest of our lives. Part of that shaping is to respond in heart, mind, and deed as Christ would respond. That is our testimony. No change has taken root in our lives until it is given an outward expression. We are called to not only receive grace, but to be grace dispensers." [8]

Another way to look at the first aspect of our stories (what God saved us from) is to consider this: If we were to die tonight, do we have the assurance that we are going to heaven? Here is what Paul says about this: "Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major

role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving" (Ephesians 2:8-9, *The Message*). We can rest assured that God is able to save us.

The second part of our stories (what God saved us for) asks something different. If we were not going to die for another 50 years, do we have a purpose big enough to carry us the distance? *The Message* describes it this way: "He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing" (Ephesians 2:10). Have we ever thought of ourselves as partners in the work God has for us? He has invited us to join him in the work he does!

FINDING OUR SWEET SPOT

If you've ever played golf, you are probably familiar with the concept of the sweet spot. The sweet spot is that place on the club that wastes the least amount of energy when it comes in contact with the ball. When you hit the ball close to the sweet spot of the club, the club transfers more energy to the ball—resulting in a ball that goes long and straight. If the ball connects too far to the inside or outside of the clubface, you hook or slice the ball. Too far near the bottom of the clubface and you top the ball, driving it into the ground. And if you connect with the top of the clubface, it sends the ball skyward. To connect at the sweet spot is poetry in motion and appears nearly effortless. Golfer Tiger Woods knows how to find that sweet spot.

Where is our sweet spot? It is at the intersection of two things:

- 1) Our passion—the way God designed us, and
- 2) God's purpose—the good works he prepared in advance for us to do.

Our passion

The first component of the sweet spot is our passion—the way God designed us. We have been fashioned by God as unique individuals. There is no one

like us. The artist Pablo Picasso, though not known for his faith, understood this concept of unique design very well. “My mother said to me, ‘If you become a soldier, you’ll be a general; if you become a monk, you’ll end up as the pope.’ Instead, I became a painter and wound up as Picasso.”[9]

We have talents, abilities, passions, experiences, and relationships that are uniquely ours. The psalmist says, “You created my inmost being [*inner qualities of talent, strength, and disposition*]; you knit me together [*our outward body*] in my mother’s womb.” Then he bursts out, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:13-14).

In 2001 Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton released a book titled *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. The book is based on interviews conducted by The Gallup Organization with more than 2 million of the best “doctors and salespeople and lawyers...and professional basketball players and stockbrokers and accountants and hotel housekeepers and leaders and soldiers and nurses and pastors and systems engineers and chief executives.”[10] The focus of their interviews was discovering what made these people so good at what they did. In the course of the research, patterns began to emerge that led to defining 34 strength patterns of human talent. The authors note that the 34 patterns, or themes, are as complete as the 88 keys on the piano. In the right combination, anything can be played. The point of the book is to learn to identify and capitalize on our strengths, not to try to fix our weaknesses. The authors define strengths as “consistent near perfect performance in an activity.”[11] Strengths are made up of three components:

- 1) Knowledge—both factual knowledge and experiential knowledge,
- 2) Skills—the defining steps of an activity, and
- 3) Talent—any recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied.[12]

The authors point out, “Skills determine if you *can* do something, whereas talents reveal...*how well and how often you do it.*”[13] “Your talents are innate...whereas skills and knowledge can be acquired through learning and practice.”[14]

What strengths do we bring to the table? What is our combination of knowledge, skills, and talents? How has God uniquely fashioned us to contribute to what he is about in this world? It is good to remember that most skills have a neutral moral quality to them. G.K. Chesterton said, “If a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of 500 yards, I would call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man.”[15]

God’s purpose

The second ingredient of the sweet spot is God’s purpose—the good works that God prepared in advance for us to do. Remember, because they are *prepared* for us, they are ours to discover, not invent. God’s creating us and his preparation of these good works for us go together.

In the New Testament book of Acts, Peter says about the life of Christ, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and...he went around doing good” (Acts 10:38). Since Jesus’ life was defined by doing good, his life can serve as a guide. So what were some of the good works of Jesus?

“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs are people who have come fully alive.”

- He cared for the physical needs of people.
- He fed people who were hungry.
- He helped at a wedding.
- He alleviated suffering.
- He served others.
- He restored people to wholeness.
- He prepared people for eternity.
- He did anything that advanced the will of God in the lives of others.

Interestingly, Jesus often chose to serve others during the very times we might feel it is inconvenient or untimely. Jesus served others when he was:

- *Celebrating*—He turned water into wine at a friend’s wedding (John 2:1-11).
- *Sad*—He fed the 5,000 during a time he had withdrawn from the crowds to mourn the death of his cousin John (Matthew 14:6-21).
- *Tired*—After a long day of ministry, Jesus was asleep in the boat when his frightened disciples woke him. He then calmed the storm (Mark 4:35-40).
- *Angry*—After overturning the tables and driving out the money changers, the blind and lame came to him and he healed them (Matthew 21:12-14).
- *Teaching*—While Jesus was still speaking, some men interrupted him, which led to the healing of the synagogue ruler’s daughter (Mark 5:35-42).
- *Arrested*—When Jesus was in the midst of being arrested, one of his followers cut off a soldier’s ear, but Jesus healed him (Luke 22:50-51).
- *Near death*—Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world, and he took the time to wash his disciples’ feet (John 13:1-5).

Serving always seems like an interruption unless, like Jesus, it is part of who we are. We give hands and feet to the words of Jesus when we engage in doing good to others. Sometimes that service comes in unlikely packages.

Clay loves chainsaws. You might say that Clay’s passion is chainsaws. As a concert pianist’s hands are blessed with long fingers to reach all of the keys, Clay’s hands are made to hold a chainsaw. Since he’s a contractor by occupation, chainsaws are part of his vocation. To hold a humming, air-injected, nonvibrating Model 340 Husqvarna chainsaw is a dream come true. So when a call went out for people capable of running chainsaws to cut up fallen trees after Hurricane Katrina, Clay’s palms started sweating. These words were music to Clay’s ears: “And if the chainsaw breaks, we’ll have another for you. We’ve got chainsaws...we need people to run them.” The thought of being on the working end of a chainsaw for an

18-hour stretch absolutely invigorated him. His passion intersected with God's purpose.

I once heard John Eldredge quote Howard Thurman as saying, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs are people who have come fully alive." [16] Clay is fully alive and feels God's pleasure as he works the chainsaw. Imagine the smile on his face when he got back, and the stories he shared with his co-workers. Now imagine an entire church full of people who have contagious smiles on their faces because they have discovered the ministry where they feel fully alive.

GET BUSY

Each of us should take a look at our life stories. There is never anything wasted in God's economy. Our stories were not thrown together without a plan. Understand that our lives—our monies, things, talents, experiences—are not for us alone, but all are to be used to further his plan in the world.

We may have to "test drive" several opportunities before we find our sweet spot. But don't give up. Just get started. A friend noted that service, ministry toward others, has always been part of the Christian's DNA, but most of the time it is a recessive gene in the gene pool! Wouldn't it be wonderful if it were a dominant gene?

We are never too old to make an impact for Jesus. We like to think that the best years are still ahead of us. It's true, you know. As followers of Christ, we can live with the conviction that the best years are still ahead of us, up to and including the day we die.

Benjamin Franklin, who (among other things) brokered France's help in our Revolutionary War at the age of 76, went to France with the expectation of accomplishing something great. He felt that life, like a play, should end with the best act. An author and business guru once asked Peter Drucker (recognized as the Father of Modern Management) which of his 26 books he was most proud of. The 85-year-old Drucker responded, "The next one." [17]

Peter Drucker gives us a challenge in our quest for leaving our mark: “The critical question is not, ‘How can I achieve?’ but ‘What can I contribute?’ ”[18] What will our contribution be? What were we saved for? Go do it!

INTERSECTIONS

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus told his followers (Matthew 5:13). Salt not only adds flavor to food, but it also serves as a preservative. More significant, humans need salt to survive! And Jesus let it be known that his followers were this very salt.

Jesus also told his followers, “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). Both salt and light are agents of influence, not agents of power or control. Influence is the ability to produce an effect seemingly without any direct or apparent effort. In calling us “salt” and “light,” Jesus was defining our incredible power to intersect others’ lives.

In this same Matthew 5 passage, Jesus tells us how we lose our influence—by losing our saltiness (v. 13) or by hiding our light under a bowl (v. 15). This can happen when we hide within the confines of our church or Christian community; we may be avoiding the very intersections God has brought our way.

If we open our eyes...wherever we are...and use our intersections for his glory, our influence has the power to change the ending of another person’s story.



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