



PARENT GUIDE

Purpose

He who has
a why to live
for can bear
with almost
any how.”

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

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Is your teen looking for meaning?

In the summer of 2023, the blockbuster film *Barbie* **took over the world**, introducing viewers to a powerful ballad that later won the Oscar for Best Original Song and the Grammy for Song of the Year. “What Was I Made For?”—by Billie Eilish and Finneas O’Connell—highlights Barbie’s journey in the film as she travels from Barbie Land to the “real world” in search of meaning. The song resonated with audiences everywhere because it can be hard to understand our purpose as humans, so aspects of Barbie’s journey seemed all too familiar.



Several decades before *Barbie* was released, Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist, neurologist, and Holocaust survivor, theorized that humanity’s primary motivation is finding meaning in life. In his popular book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, which has sold **more than 16 million copies in 50 languages**, he discusses his experiences in four concentration camps and his conclusion that having purpose in life can help a person survive even the worst conditions. Frankl’s work in neurology and psychiatry included a focus on depression and suicide. In the 1930s, he set up youth counseling centers in Vienna that successfully decreased teen suicide by focusing on helping teens find meaning.

More recently, former US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy introduced a framework for combatting **loneliness** and health conditions like depression and **anxiety**. Known as the “triad of fulfillment,” Dr. Murthy’s **parting prescription for America** outlines an ecosystem of meaning and belonging grounded in relationships, service, and purpose. He says we are living in a time when many people lack a sense of purpose, citing a **study from the Harvard Graduate School of Education** that found nearly 60% of young adults feel they lack meaning and purpose in their lives.

As a Christian parent, you might be wondering how to help the teen under your roof find meaning. Should they find it in work, family, relationships, hobbies, or religion? Can they turn to teachers, government leaders, or other authority figures for a sense of purpose? Those aren’t bad places for teens to look for meaning, but the search can ultimately be fruitless if not paired with the meaning that comes from a relationship with God. Only the Creator can help us understand our purpose and answer the question Barbie was pondering: *What was I made for?*

This guide will help you answer the following questions:

What is purpose?

What is the difference between purpose and identity?

Can I miss God’s will for my life?

What does the Bible say about the meaning of life?



What is Purpose?

Before we explore some ways to help your teen find purpose, we must answer that elusive question: What *is* purpose anyway?

People have used many words to describe the core longing to be who and what we were made to be: vocation, passion, desire, identity. While purpose may overlap with these things, it is set apart as a God-given objective. In other words, we don't decide our purpose from a list of options—it is our preordained “why,” or reason for living.

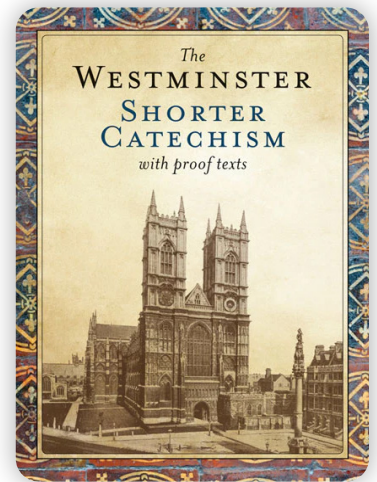
According to the **Westminster Shorter Catechism**, a collection of theological questions and answers used by the church since 1647 to help Christians understand the heart and meaning of the Scriptures, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” The phrase “chief end” is another way to say “primary purpose” or “ultimate pursuit.”

So it seems that the overarching purpose of human beings is found in enjoying and glorifying God. But what does this mean, exactly? Let’s break it down a bit further.

Enjoying God

It may be helpful to dissect the word “enjoy.” Enjoy means, according to **Merriam-Webster**, “to take pleasure or satisfaction in.” However, the word’s etymology reveals a secondary meaning. Enjoy comes from the Middle English word *enjoien*, which means “to rejoice.” This is close to the meaning of “enjoy” that we understand today, but it goes a little deeper.

The additional meaning points to the idea of enjoying ourselves *and* taking joy in a situation; we are to not only take pleasure in the presence of God, but also to celebrate the existence of that presence in the first place. If we go back just a little further in time, *enjoien* comes from the Anglo-French word *enjoier*, which means “to gladden, to bring joy to.” And that’s really the heart of the word. We may take satisfaction from God’s presence, and we may rejoice in the existence of God’s presence to begin with. But above all, to enjoy means to *cause* pleasure. Part of our purpose, then, is not only to enjoy God, but to bring Him joy by our actions and existence.



Glorifying God

We glorify God through worship and prayer, as well as through the proper use of our bodies and our time. Glory is something we bring to God, like an offering.

In the 18th century, a 22-year-old named Robert Robinson wrote the beloved hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” The hymn talks about grace and our constant need to return to God. The first line in the second verse says this: “Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by Thy help I’m come.” Though we may sing the words with conviction, it’s not likely that the definition of “Ebenezer” comes easily to our minds, except perhaps as the first name of a particular Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. **Merriam-Webster** defines Ebenezer as “a commemoration of divine assistance.” In other words, it is a marker of a time when God helped us. To raise our Ebenezer means to lift to God our memories of His faithfulness as an act of worship. What better form of offering could we bring?

The glory of God is set in stone. We don’t make Him *more* glorious with our actions towards Him. However, as we consistently remember His faithfulness, it becomes easier to carry out His desired purpose, and therefore celebrate His glory as it is.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How do you understand the concept of purpose?

Do you think it’s something you can decide? Why or why not?

What do you believe God’s purpose for humanity is?

What is your “Ebenezer”?

Who is someone who *enjoys* you? How do they do this?



What is Identity?

It's easy to shrink teens' purpose down to what they plan to "do with their lives" (how many times have teens heard that phrase?). Are they destined to be a doctor? A cosmetologist? A singer? An architect? More than likely, they feel the pressure to make that decision *now* and spend much of their time worrying about it.

But purpose isn't just what we do, it's the pursuit of who we were made to be—who we are in Christ. If you're a Christian parent who wants to disciple your teen as they look for a sense of purpose, consider starting with a **conversation** on identity.

We can go right to Scripture to learn about God's design for us as humans. In **The Message version of Genesis 1:26–28**, God declares His design for humanity: "God spoke: 'Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature...' God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God's nature."

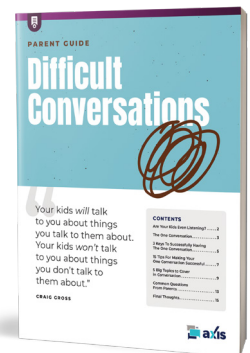
Humans are designed to be like God in His goodness. We have many of the same characteristics as He does—His creativity, His dominion, His justice and mercy, His capacity to love and forgive. However, our design is cracked—broken by sin. By instinct, human beings are lazy, irresponsible, unjust and merciless, hateful and unforgiving. This means it is difficult to live into God's design, but not impossible. We are redeemed by the death and resurrection of Christ, whose teaching and sacrifice helps us get reacquainted with our design.

Seeking to live out our identity can be frustrating and confusing, especially in a postmodern world in which our identity is supposedly self-imposed. Everywhere we look, some group or another invites us to absorb our identity from them. We also may experience the temptation to find our identity in what we do or have—our partners, our jobs, our families, or our friends. But ultimately, these things are all secondary.

So how do we find and root our sense of identity within God's design? We do it by understanding that we are who God says we are, and then knowing and living out of that understanding.

All throughout Scripture, God tells us who He has designed us to be. Each of us must internalize these truths:

- 1. I am a child of God.** "But to all who have received him—those who believe in his name—he has given the right to become God's children." (**John 1:12**)
- 2. I am a friend of Jesus.** "I no longer call you slaves, because the slave does not understand what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, because I have revealed to you everything I heard from my Father." (**John 15:15**)



- 3. I am joined to the Lord and am one spirit with Him.** “But the one united with the Lord is one spirit with Him.” (1 **Corinthians 6:17**)
- 4. I am a new creature in Christ.** “So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come!” (2 **Corinthians 5:17**)
- 5. I am no longer a slave, but an heir.** “So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if you are a son, then you are also an heir through God.” (**Galatians 4:7**)
- 6. I am chosen, holy, and blameless before God.** “For he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him in love.” (**Ephesians 1:4**)
- 7. I am redeemed and forgiven by the grace of Christ.** “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our offenses, according to the riches of his grace.” (**Ephesians 1:7**)

It can be easy to dismiss these and other “I am” statements as trite, but they impact the choices we make and the way we walk through our lives if we allow ourselves to believe them. If you are no longer a slave, do you *have* to take another drink, or are you free to stop? If you are a new creature in Christ, does your past sin *have* to influence who you are today, or can you live as though your past is gone? If you are a child of God, do you *have* to do things on your own, or can you call for help with the knowledge that you will receive it?

Our identity springs from our design, and our design is clearly displayed all throughout Scripture. We are to reflect God’s nature and live as though we believe we are who He says we are. In this way, we glorify and enjoy God, bringing him pleasure and praise through our choices and what we believe.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How can you shift the way you talk to your teen away from “what do you want to do” to “who do you want to be”?

How can you live into God’s design?

What is a verse that tells you who you are?

How can you choose to believe that it is true?



What is God's will, and can we miss it?

This is the hard one. How are we to know and live out God's will? Sure, there may be some directives in the Bible like don't lie, treat others how you want to be treated, and honor your parents—but how do we know God's specific will? How do we *know* if it's His will for us to get that job, move across the country, or date that one person?

Dallas Willard, a theologian of the 20th century, said this in his book *Hearing God*:

Obviously God must guide us in a way that will develop spontaneity in us. The development of character, rather than direction in this, that, and the other matter, must be the primary purpose of the Father. He will guide us, but he won't override us. That fact should make us use with caution the method of sitting down with a pencil and a blank sheet of paper to write down the instructions dictated by God for the day. Suppose a parent would dictate to the child minutely everything he is to do during the day. The child would be stunted under that regime. The parent must guide in such a manner, and to the degree, that autonomous character, capable of making right decisions for itself, is produced. God does the same.

Here is a principle that may help: The story of Scripture is never at odds with itself. During the Reformation, Martin Luther and his contemporaries posited five tenets of absolute truth to guide the Christian in his or her walk through life. *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture is the only authority on God and His plan for salvation), *sola Christus* (Christ is the only basis for salvation), *sola fide* (we receive Christ's redemptive power only through faith), *sola gratia* (salvation is given to us by grace and grace alone), and finally *sola Deo gloria* (our end and aim as creatures is the glory of God... sound familiar?). The one we're interested in here is *sola Scriptura*, the idea that the Bible is all we need to understand God's character and His will. In other words, we can go to any number of sources to try to get specific understanding of what we should do when difficult choices cross our paths, but the Bible is whole, complete, and in unity with itself to tell us *everything* about God's general will. We don't need anything else.

This all sounds good, but when it comes down to the nitty gritty, we don't always understand how to find God's specific will within Scripture. Sometimes the issue is not that we're looking in the wrong place, but we're looking in the right place in the wrong way.

We get tripped up trying to discern God's will because our thinking is too narrow. We wish we could crack open the Bible right in the middle and see a verse saying, "Thou shalt spend this week's income on that green dress that looked so cute on you. Thus sayeth the Lord." Sometimes reading that kind of super-specific guidance would be nice, right?

Instead, we often need to pull back and examine the whole story of Scripture, as it reveals the whole will of God. At the end of the day, the will of God is that Christ would die and rise again to redeem His creation, and that we would be set free to love and serve Him for all eternity. All of this is already in motion—and inside of



this, there are any number of ways that we can live within His will. If we accept Christ's sacrifice, we are within God's will. If we love God with our whole hearts, souls, minds, and strengths, we are within God's will. If we have faith for an eternity that is not seen, we are within God's will. Whether or not we go to one college over another cannot disrupt or confuse that will.

In other words, if we are living in God's love, we can't miss His will because it is permanent, fixed, and righteous. As Augustine once put it, "Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved."

That said, we can also look at the people in the Bible who *did* literally hear from God, and line up what He said to them with His greater will for salvation.

In **Genesis 22**, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on an altar to make a covenant with him. Obviously, Abraham is confused; *didn't God just give him this son to be the father of many generations?* But he trusts God, and as the knife is about to fall, God audibly tells Abraham to stop, and sends a ram to be sacrificed in Isaac's place.

What do we learn about God's will through this story? That He wants us all to give child sacrifice a go and see what happens? Absolutely not! God's will in this situation was for Abraham to trust God so much that he would do anything for Him, even something he didn't understand. Then, once he made up his mind and began to do the impossible task set before him, God provided a way out.

Or take Jairus, the religious leader from **Mark 5**. He went to Jesus, trusting that his daughter would be healed, but on the way to Jairus's daughter, Jesus

stopped to heal someone else, and in the meantime, Jairus's daughter died. But Jairus did not lose faith; he knew that if Jesus came to his house anyway, a miracle could happen. Jesus followed Jairus home, and there He raised the little girl from the dead, telling everyone that she was just sleeping and that she should get up and walk. Jairus' faith was rewarded, even when it seemed like Jesus wasn't listening.

So where is God's will in this story? Through the actions of Jairus, we see faith exemplified by his insistence that Jesus could do what He said He would do and that He was powerful enough to do it. When Jesus stopped and Jairus got word that his daughter died, he probably lost faith a little. But he still believed that if Jesus had done miracles before, He would do them again. He trusted the character of Jesus, and it fueled his faith. God's will in this scenario was not only that Jairus' daughter would live, but that Jairus would develop an unshakeable faith through tragedy. It was not God's will simply to let Jairus suffer, but to allow him to experience pain and disappointment so that his joy would be stronger in the long run.

Let's go back to the idea of the Ebenezer. When we "raise our Ebenezer," we call out to God, saying, "This was Your will before, and I know it will be Your will again." Though our circumstances may change, God's overarching will never does. His will is that all situations work together for our ultimate good (**Romans 8:28**), that He would receive all the glory for everything that happens (**Hebrews 1:3**), and that we will be with Him forever in paradise (**John 10:28-30**). If we believe the story of the Bible and what it says about God, and then live like it, we will always be walking in the will of the Lord.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How can you pursue God's will?

What is a Bible story that shows you a part of God's will?

How can you apply that to your life?



Helping Your Teen Understand the Meaning of Life

On a 2026 episode of **The Jess Connolly Podcast**, pastor and author Alex Seeley said this:

I think purpose anxiety is at an all-time high with the younger generation and with all generations when you don't know this part: If God orders the steps... and if He is a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path, then that means He's going to give you steps along the way. I think we are so wanting the end result that we forget about the process.



Helping a teen find meaning can feel like a daunting task, but it doesn't have to be. The Bible tells us that God has already planned our steps (**Psalm 139:16**) and that He waits patiently for us to come to Him and discover what we were made for (**2 Peter 3:9**). Our primary purpose, then, is to know God in His fullness through His Scriptures, living in His will as we were designed, and to bring Him joy and glory all the days of our lives and into eternity.

Recap

- **Purpose is predetermined; we can look for it, but we don't decide what it is.**
- **The Westminster Catechism says man's purpose is to "glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."**
- **To enjoy God means to take pleasure in Him, to celebrate Him, and to bring Him joy.**
- **To glorify God means to bring Him an offering of our trust and faithfulness, our memories of His goodness.**
- **God's design for us is to find our identity in Him.**
- **God's will for us is to be saved by Christ and to live into eternity with Him.**



FAQ

What are spiritual gifts?

Through the Holy Spirit, God has given each of us spiritual gifts that we are meant to use to serve others and build up the body of Christ. **Romans 12:4–8** discusses these gifts, which include prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership, and mercy. Several assessments exist to help believers identify their God-given skills or abilities so they can lean into those as they live out their purpose.

What are God's greatest instructions for life?

When we want to know how God directs us to live, we need only turn to the first three Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all quote Jesus as He shared His two greatest commandments. In **Matthew 22:37–39**, Jesus says this: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

What does it mean to have a calling?

We sometimes hear people say they feel called to something. But what does that mean? **Merriam-Webster** provides a helpful definition of the term “calling”: “a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action, especially when accompanied by conviction of divine influence.” So a calling can be thought of as a godly pull toward a particular decision. It’s important to note that discerning a calling requires time spent in the Word and in prayer; without knowledge of God’s Word and a personal relationship with Him, you will struggle to understand the types of promptings that could come from Him and may not recognize Him in the call.

