

Passion on Purpose

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Introduction

1

*W*hat do you have to say about your life? I long for the day when a friend asks me how I'm doing and I can reply, "I'm doing all the things that God wants me to be doing." Instead, my usual answer is, "I am busy." I respond that way because to honestly share about what I am really doing would take half an hour, and I know that's not what my friend wants to hear.

I used to be proud to say, "I am busy," as if being busy meant I was living well—that I was important and valuable because I had a lot to do. I don't think that way anymore. I realize that I can be the busiest person at my church or office yet still not be doing what is most important in my life.

My prayer for this book is that it will be a guide to help women examine the busyness of their lives. I hope it will reveal how to find a fulfilling life, a life full of meaning and purpose. Ideally, I'd love to encourage women to read this book in a small group or in a one-on-one discipleship relationship. Most of us need to take a good long look at our lives and discover what is really important. To do this most effectively we often need a friend to walk with, one who will point out strengths we didn't notice or weaknesses we would rather not face. The appendix provides guidelines and suggestions for using this book in a small-group Bible study or for a one-on-one discipleship relationship.

Journal Exercises

At the end of each chapter you will find journal exercises. Please don't skip over the exercises. They provide essential steps to discovering and pursuing a life that matters. After reading the chapter, give yourself time to think through the questions in each journal exercise.

Goal for the Week

The goals for the week are easy, practical challenges to keep your mind centered on what you've read. They act as daily reminders about the changes you are making.

You will get the greatest benefit from this book if you make some preparations. If it is your desire to definitely pursue a life full of meaning and purpose, you can't just read these words; you need to follow up on the instructions given in each chapter. Here are some guidelines to follow in addition to reading:

First, find a journal in which to compose your personal thoughts. You can use your journal to complete the journal exercises at the end of each chapter. Also use your journal to record your thoughts to God about how you are living your life. Reflecting on your life is important if you are going to make meaningful changes, and this book will give you opportunities to think about your life, your feelings, and your relationships. Keep a record of your progress, and try to reread your journal at least monthly. Sometimes you might miss what God is saying to you, but reviewing your journal will help you catch what you missed the first time.

Second, find a friend to share this journey. Women grow, heal, and change through relationships, and relationships are central to who we are and how God made us. (For more on this read *A Woman's Search for Worth*.¹) You will receive the most benefit from this study if you have someone with whom to share your hopes, fears, and dreams. (Though its primary focus is women, this book is also useful for married couples seeking to grow in their lives together.)

Third, set aside a specific time on your calendar to read each chapter. I hope you won't just read this book and then put it on the shelf; I'm praying that it will become a tool to help you hear what God has to say about your life. I recommend you read only one chapter a week, taking time to thoroughly think through the issues addressed. Make appointments with your study group or partner to review what you have learned on a weekly basis. Make appointments with yourself to have time for reflection and reading. Believe me, your busy life will take

over, and you will never find the time to make meaningful changes unless you decide it is important and follow through by making it a priority on your calendar.

Fourth, keep your commitments to change. Changing your life doesn't happen overnight. It happens in the small decisions you make. You will not reach your dream life by the end of the book, but you will be much closer to it than to your old life if you will do the "small stuff." Take it one step at a time. Don't be a perfectionist, saying, "If I can't be a super saint in two years, why try?" If you commit to making small changes, the fruits will be well worth the effort.

Fifth, celebrate the changes. You need someone who can be happy for you when you make a simple decision that was difficult for you. You need someone to make a big deal out of it. This is why it is so helpful to have a partner on your journey. You also need to make a big deal of it yourself. As you will learn, we have a God who rewards us. We need to enjoy the rewards and use them to motivate ourselves to strive for even more.

So, let's get started on this journey of pursuing a life that matters and enjoy the discovery of what it means to live life well.

What Drives Your Life?

*You have made my days a mere handbreadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before you.
Each man's life is but a breath.*

PSALM 39:5

1

Emma's navy Suburban was fourth in the carpool line to pick up her third-grade son. He had a doctor's appointment across town in 20 minutes. Her eight-month-old was asleep in her car seat, and Emma had arranged for her five-year-old daughter to go home with a friend after preschool.

Everything was working like clockwork as Emma anxiously awaited her son's smiling face. A few minutes later, after calling his number several times without a response and being asked to pull up out of the way of the other cars, Emma was churning with anger. *Where in the world could he be? Why didn't he hear his carpool number? I don't have time to wait for him!*

Suddenly he appeared, a grin from cheek to cheek, arms overloaded as he juggled the class hamster cage, a big bag of food and supplies, and his backpack. His arms were so full he looked like he could fall over. Once he saw his mom, he naively exclaimed, "Mommy, my name got drawn to take home Hermie the hamster for the night!" His moment of

celebration was short-lived, ended by the explosion of anger that erupted from his mother.

“David, what did I tell you this morning when I let you off?” she asked, without giving him time to answer. “I told you we would have a tight schedule because you have an appointment with Dr. Geoffrey. Get in the car. Hand me that thing!”

Between commands, eight-month-old Lilly woke up and started crying.

“Just get in the car, David.” Emma slammed the doors after jamming the hamster cage and supplies in the backseat and David and backpack beside the hamster. She tore down the road, her tirade of disappointment in David rising over Lilly’s screams. Emma was driving so fast and was so determined to make the appointment that she couldn’t even see what was going on in the lives of the people she loved most. She didn’t have time to think; she could only react, go, keep moving. She thought the only thing wrong was that she would be five minutes late. That and the question of what to do with a hamster while they were inside the doctor’s office. She had no idea what was really wrong with her life.

It turned out the doctor was running late too, and Emma found time to regroup with David and Lilly. She told David she was sorry for getting so angry at him. They were able to go back out to the car and put Hermie in a safer place, carefully cracking each window. When they finally got in to see the doctor, Emma balanced Lilly, Lilly’s bottle, and her own discontented disposition, while trying to take in everything the doctor was saying about David’s asthma treatment. She scribbled a few notes with her left hand and prayed she’d be able to read them later.

After an hour and a half, Emma left the doctor’s office and drove straight to her friend’s house to pick up five-year-old Molly. Apologizing profusely for being late, she added Molly and Molly’s just-finished art project to the Suburban and plunged ahead. It would be impossible to make dinner now, so she called from her cell phone and ordered pizza delivery.

At home, she cut up a few raw vegetables and set the pizza out for her family. By dinnertime her husband, Jim, was home, and he took over

feeding Lilly while Emma ran back to change clothes, freshen her makeup, grab her things, and rush out to a women's event where she was hosting a table. She could feel a headache coming on, so she grabbed two aspirin, then quickly kissed everyone good-bye. She never noticed that Lilly's sticky fingers left her with a big smudge of cereal on the back of her dress.

No sooner had she gotten out the door than the cell phone rang. It was Jim, who didn't know what time to put the kids to bed. "Does David need a bath tonight?"

Having answered all Jim's questions, Emma pulled up to the church. The phone rang again. This time it was her best friend, Jane. Jane's boyfriend had just broken up with her, and she was distraught, calling to say that she couldn't pull it together enough to come to the dinner that night. She begged Emma to come by afterward; she desperately needed to talk.

Emma was concerned for her friend but also realized that Jane had forgotten she was to bring fresh flowers for the vases decorating the table. Jane was so upset that Emma couldn't ask about it, so she pulled out of her parking space and drove to the nearest grocery store, comforting Jane on the phone all the while. She arrived at the store and was dismayed to discover that the only available flowers were wilted carnations. She bought them anyway and rushed back to the church.

The event started five minutes later, and Emma felt like a fool reaching over the seated guests to place flowers in the vases. She looked around and sensed that every other table was more beautifully decorated than hers. She felt humiliated that she wasn't ready on time, and worse, as she reached to place the last flower, a woman sitting nearby noticed the white cereal smudge across her back and pointed it out to the whole table.

Emma quietly sat down, letting the back of the chair hide her smudge. She made an excuse for Jane and took full responsibility for being so scatterbrained that the table wasn't ready. She graciously led the table discussion and prayer, hiding her insecurity and exhaustion from everyone. It took her an hour to finish cleaning up after the event was over.

There was nothing Emma wanted more than to go home, go to bed, and forget this day, but she couldn't get Jane off her mind. First of all, she was mad at her for dumping on her at the last minute, but at the same time she felt sorry for Jane. It was 11 P.M., but she rushed right over to Jane's house and stayed until midnight, when she guiltily excused herself. She went home, left everything in the car, and fell into bed.

What's wrong with Emma's life? Does her life resemble yours? Maybe you don't have children at home or you're not married. Maybe you're a single mom or you're retired. But can you identify with Emma? Are the activities different but the scattered life the same? Are you very busy but feel you are letting everyone down? Maybe you can't remember the last meaningful moment you've shared with someone else, but you know you have a million things to get done. You can't remember the last time you had a totally guilt-free day, but you just keep pressing ahead, hoping that tomorrow will be different.

GOD CALLS YOU TO LIVE A LIFE THAT COUNTS

"Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15-16).

If Emma had read these verses right before she went to bed that night, they might have been the last straw for her. She might have curled up in a ball and faced the fact that she was just a big failure at living. She might have decided to give it all up, thinking, *What's the use anyway? I've got one more demand on my overly complicated life.*

But God's Word doesn't do that to us. It is sharper than a two-edged sword piercing the soul (Hebrews 4:12). Ephesians 5:15-16 is Emma's true liberation, for from this passage Emma can learn to find real excitement about the life she is living. If Emma will take time to stop and think about her life, she may find her life choices are causing her to miss important opportunities. She could discover how to live in a way that would make a big difference in the overall scheme of things.

You see, God wants Emma to live a life that counts, a life full of

meaning and purpose. God wants to invite you to live a life that counts too. Our time here on earth is short compared to the time we will live eternally, but our first steps toward eternity begin the day we are born.

The apostle Paul decided that for him “to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21). From that one decision he made many other decisions that brought peace and joy to his life on earth. Too many of us don’t decide how we are going to live—life just happens. It’s almost as if a job, a relationship, or a duty becomes your life. Living a life that matters involves being sure you are living a meaningful life. It requires making solid choices about how to live your life, rather than just letting life happen to you.

The problem with Emma’s life is that she is so busy doing the things she needs to do every day, she doesn’t have time to make changes. She may spend her next 10 years simply responding to what is asked and demanded of her without taking time to figure out what makes a life meaningful. Isn’t it meaningful to take care of three young children, comfort a friend, and work at a church event? Emma doesn’t stop to think about it, but deep down she sure does hope she’s living a life that matters. What a sad reality she might wake up to if she discovered all the effort she put into her life didn’t really count for much. She would get discouraged. Wouldn’t you?

How Do You Know If You’re Living a Life that Matters?

If there is some ingredient missing from Emma’s life, she would like to know what it is. She is doing the best she can, and the last thing she needs is to have someone tell her there is something more she needs to add if she really wants to have a meaningful life.

It’s not that Emma needs to add things to her life to make it count. In reality she needs to stop doing some things and rearrange other areas. In fact, that is what I found I needed to do in my own life to sense the fulfillment and assurance of the meaning I sought. I had to stop and ask myself some bold questions in order to get somewhere in the life I was living. I needed to get in touch with why and how God created me to find the right perspective on living a life that counts for Him.

Bold Questions

Ask yourself these bold questions to consider whether your life is in need of a transformation:

1. When you think of your relationship with God, do you feel guilty or wrong? Emma can never do enough for God. She loves Him and she knows He loves her, but she also feels He must be just as disappointed in her as are her parents, best friend, husband, and everyone else. But since He's not in her face, she doesn't think about it as much.

2. Are you afraid to yield your life to God's plan because He may have more for you to do than you are already doing now? One reason Emma doesn't slow down for God is she's trying to manage her already-packed life. If she were to slow down, God might give her something else to add to her list of things to do.

3. When you look at your calendar, checkbook, and daily experiences, do they seem like heavy burdens to bear? Emma's husband is great with the checkbook, so Emma doesn't worry there, but the calendar and daily experiences are definitely heavy, heavy burdens. She feels like a failure for thinking so.

4. Do you have relationships that deplete you? Do you think you might feel a bit depleted with a best friend like Jane? Emma believes it is her own failures that prevent her from giving Jane what she needs.

5. Do you ignore your bodily signals for rest, good nutrition, and exercise? Rest and exercise are down the drain in Emma's life. Nutrition does get met, but how good is it when at least three times a week your only vegetables are french fries?

6. Are you in financial bondage? Actually, Emma is not in financial bondage. She is very disciplined in this area of her life and so is her husband. She doesn't realize how blessed she is.

7. Do you sense God's disappointment in the way you live your life?

Emma couldn't even imagine God being delighted in her. That seems so far from what a relationship between a sinful woman and a Holy God is all about.

God wants you to be able to answer no to every one of these questions. He doesn't want your life to be a burden. He wants you to be living a life that matters. He doesn't say that living a life that matters won't mean hard work and discipline. But all the hard work and discipline will have a specific purpose and bring deep meaning to your life. If Emma were living a life that matters, she could be looking forward to the breaking of each new day, rather than dreading what catastrophes it will hold.

Madge is a retired schoolteacher. She taught fourth grade for 35 years. When she retired five years ago, she went into a severe depression and found she no longer knew how to live her life. For so many years each day was determined for her by curriculum, school policies, and the calendar.

Suddenly, she was dropped into an unfamiliar world. It dawned on her that she had never developed the art of "hanging out" with friends during her years of working. She had friends, but she saw them at church, at school, and at social functions, not in day-to-day living.

When she told her doctor what was happening, she asked for a little time before she agreed to go on the antidepressant the doctor suggested. Instead, she went to see a counselor. The counselor became a sort of coach and simply taught Madge how to match God's priorities, her new life circumstances, and her personal interests to a life that was worth living. Eventually Madge could answer no, on most days, to every one of the bold questions asked above. She made important decisions about her life that brought true joy in living.

Characteristics of a Life that Matters

1. You feel loved and accepted by God. Being retired gave Madge many more opportunities to build her love relationship with God. Because she was not constrained by her job any longer, she had time to read Christian books, attend retreats, and go to a regular Bible study. All of these experiences increased her sense of how much God loves and accepts her.

2. You trust God's wisdom for your life. Madge discovered that God must have more life for her to live, since He had blessed her with health beyond her working years. Her husband had died before he had a chance to retire. Madge accepted her life as a gift from God with meaning and purpose. She began to see how much God could use her when she joined the intercessory prayer ministry at her church.

3. Your life—calendar, checkbook, experiences—reflects your priority of relationship with God and loving others. Even on a limited income, Madge didn't face financial worries. She learned how to depend on God for wisdom and guidance with her finances, her calendar, and the rest of her life.

4. You know how to deal with relationships that drain your energy, and you set proper boundaries. Madge didn't have a problem with draining relationships, but she had no meaningful relationships built into her life. Madge made an effort to build a tight support network of women she could count on to share her deepest fears and struggles.

5. You take care of your physical energy needs. One of the best decisions Madge made to fight her depression and contribute to a continued healthy life was to start an exercise program at the local YMCA. She swims four days a week and unexpectedly found a friend there too.

6. You live in financial freedom. Madge gained financial freedom through her school's excellent pension plan. She also realized that God helped her live off of what she had and saw her money as a gift from God. She determined not to use it selfishly.

7. You sense God's pleasure with you. In the end, Madge would say, "God is pleased with my perspective on life and how I am living." She still gossips and complains a little too much. She gets worried from time to time, and she isn't sinless. But she does know that she is walking in the general direction in which God is calling her. She wants to walk with Him more and more each day.

We are all aware of the kind of life that counts when it comes to the world's perspective. If you can make a lot of money, look attractive, be invited to join certain clubs, have political power, or have influence over a lot of people, you feel your life is important. But what kind of life does God honor?

In Hebrews 11 we learn that the ancients (biblical characters of history) were commended for their faith. Living a life that counts according to God's Word involves, among other things, not participating in gossip or slander, being sexually moral, sharing His love with other people, using our spiritual gifts, loving our families, and more. But all of these godly actions proceed through faith. What would God commend you for about your faith?

By faith Abel offered the pleasing sacrifice.

By faith Enoch was taken from this life without experiencing death.

By faith Noah built an ark.

By faith Abraham became the father of a nation through a barren, elderly wife.

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob.

By faith Jacob worshiped God.

By faith Joseph prophesied about the coming exodus.

By faith Moses' parents hid him from Pharaoh.

By faith Moses led the children of Israel to the Promised Land.

By faith the Israelites passed through the Red Sea.

By faith Rahab hid the spies and was not killed when the walls of Jericho fell.

By faith kings were conquered, justice was administered, promises were received, lions' mouths were shut, fires were put out, wars were won.

Because of their faith many were tortured, beaten, and killed.

By faith Deborah ignored the voices that promised her what she could be and listened to the Voice that called her by name and promised her nothing except that which she really needed.

How would God complete this sentence about you? "By faith, _____ (your name) _____."

A life that matters is a life of faith. You won't necessarily see how

much a person's life counts by how many recordings he sells or how high she ranks in the popularity profile. In God's accounting system, a life that counts may be obscure to the world. It may not receive attention from anyone or be recognized as anything special by our culture's standards. But a life of faith is a life that counts.

Do You Want to Live a Life that Counts?

The answer to that question seems obvious, doesn't it? Everyone wants to live a life that counts. I'm sure of that. But too many of us are unwilling to give up what seems comfortable in order to make our lives count. We're afraid of change. We are afraid to abandon what has worked for us for years (even if it's no longer working). What would make it worth it for you to change? God motivates us with promises of rich rewards, which we'll look at in the next chapter.

Journal Exercise

1. How would I be willing to make major adjustments in my life if I felt God leading me to make them?
2. Am I willing to think outside of the box to discover what I can really do with my life? How?
3. Do I see my life as a gift to me that has many choices I can make about how to live it? Why or why not?
4. What I like most about my life right now is . . .
5. What I think God is most pleased with about my life right now is . . .
6. The part of my life that I am most resistant to change is . . .
7. The way I would describe my dream life is . . .

Goal for the Week

Imagine what it would be like if you could honestly answer no to the seven bold questions:

1. When you think of your relationship with God, do you feel guilty or wrong?
2. Are you afraid to yield your life to God's plan because He may have more for you to do than you are already doing now?
3. When you look at your calendar, checkbook, and daily experiences, do they seem like heavy burdens to bear?
4. Do you have relationships that deplete you?
5. Do you ignore your bodily signals for rest, good nutrition, and exercise?
6. Are you in financial bondage?
7. Do you sense God's disappointment in the way you live your life?