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## **Meaning of Our Time on Earth: Growing and Contributing to the Advancement of God's Kingdom**

The influence of the spirit of the world pervades all of mankind and every aspect of life in this fallen world. The pulls and attractions of this world are seductive and deadly. It is easy to be conformed to the world and be drawn away from the kingdom of God.

It is a serious matter for a believer to be entrapped by the attractions of this world. Yet, we should not look at life on earth as merely one in which we must constantly be on the lookout for such traps. Neither should we regard our time on earth as merely a context filled with negative influences, pain and suffering, temptations and evil.

Many may be so enamoured with the things of the world that they are reluctant to leave this earth. But there are also Christians who view this world as a terrible place and the sooner they leave it, the better. They may be suffering much in life and feel that it is better to depart from this earth and be in heaven.

In an attempt not to be corrupted by the world, some believers isolate themselves by becoming hermits, or withdraw into monasteries or Christian communities in some faraway place. But is this what the Lord wants His disciples to do?

While we should guard ourselves against the world's negative influences, we should not opt out of society. This is not the Lord's intention for us. The Lord Jesus wants His disciples to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-14), to be witnesses for Him in this world, and we cannot do this if we isolate ourselves from society.

*A wholesome, biblical approach to life must emphasise the significance of our time on earth and the positive dimension of fulfilling God's intentions for our lives.*

### **Meaning of our time on earth**

In His prayer to the Father for His disciples, the Lord Jesus said, "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15). The Lord does not want us to be taken out of this world. He has placed us in this world and wants us to remain here until it is time for us to depart.

In the same prayer, the Lord said, "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). The Lord Jesus has sent us into the world, even as the Father has sent Him. Just as there was a purpose for the Lord coming into this world, there is meaning and purpose for us being in this world.

God has good reasons and important intentions for our time on earth. It is therefore important that we recognise what these reasons and intentions are and pay due attention to them.

In Ephesians 5:15-17, the apostle Paul instructs us in the way we ought to live our lives on earth:

**Ephesians 5:15-17**

15 Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise,

16 making the most of your time, because the days are evil.

17 So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Paul urges us to be careful how we live our lives, "not as unwise men but as wise" (v. 15). This would mean "making the most of our time" on earth (v. 16) as it is a very important time and the negative influences of the world are very great. We should therefore make every effort to understand and do the will of God (v. 17).

From the Scriptures, we can see *two basic reasons* for God placing us in this world:

1. To be witnesses for God and to contribute to the advancement of His kingdom
2. To learn, grow and prepare ourselves for eternity

It is helpful to approach and evaluate the issues of life and the situations we go through with these two basic reasons in mind.

**1. Witnessing for God and contributing to the advancement of His kingdom**

*Witnesses in this world*

In Matthew 5:13-14, the Lord Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth..." and "You are the light of the world". In Acts 1:8, the Lord Jesus told His disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses... to the remotest part of the earth."

The Lord Jesus wants to empower us so that we can be faithful and effective witnesses to the truth, to God and to the great salvation He has provided for all mankind.

*Ambassadors for Christ*

Let us look at 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, where the apostle Paul dwells on the subject of man's reconciliation with God.

**2 Corinthians 5:18-20**

18 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,

19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

"The world" in verse 19 does not refer to the fallen world and its trends and values, unlike in 1 John 2:15-17. Here, "the world" refers to the people of the world, as in John 3:16.

The Lord is not rebuilding or restoring the fallen world, which is destined for destruction. Instead, He is reconciling the people of the world to Himself, "not counting their trespasses against them" (v. 19). To this end, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. And to all of us who have been reconciled to God, He has entrusted the ministry of reconciliation. We are to be "ambassadors for Christ" (v. 20), reaching out to the world on His behalf.

*Fulfilling the Great Commission*

Let us now look at the passage in Matthew 28, often referred to as the Great Commission:

**Matthew 28:18-20**

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The fulfilment of what the Lord Jesus commands us in this passage does not merely involve our helping non-believers become Christians, but also our helping them grow unto maturity in Christ. The Lord Jesus instructs us to make disciples and to teach them to observe *all* that He has commanded us. It is important that the disciples are helped to understand and observe the fullness, comprehensiveness, and depth of all that the Lord intends us to know and attain to.

Helping believers grow unto maturity is actually a very major aspect of fulfilling the Great Commission and advancing God's kingdom. It has to do with believers' lives being transformed and they becoming more and more submitted to the lordship of Christ.

This is at the very heart of the meaning of the fulfilment of the Great Commission and the advancement of God's kingdom—the increase in the number of disciples and their growing in maturity, where the kingship of the Lord is being acknowledged, and He is reigning in the hearts and minds of His people.

Most Christians can recognise the importance of witnessing and contributing to the advancement of God's kingdom. But many understand this in the narrow sense of helping non-believers become Christians. They fail to appreciate the fuller meaning of witnessing, which includes witnessing by our lives all that we have been learning from the Lord; they also fail to see that helping Christians grow well is a major aspect of contribution to the fulfilment of the Great Commission and the advancement of God's kingdom.

The instructions of the Lord in Matthew 28:18-20 are intended to be worked out in the context of healthy church life and not just by individuals making disciples at a personal level. This was how the early church understood it and that was how they carried out what the Lord had committed to them, as seen in the Book of Acts and Paul's epistles.

This is our great privilege: Though we are weak and sinful, we can, by God's grace, contribute to His kingdom. We can make a positive difference to His eternal kingdom.

## **2. Learning, growing and preparing ourselves for eternity**

The second basic reason for our time on earth is that we may learn, grow and prepare ourselves for eternity. Learning and growing in the Lord is extremely important for several reasons. It is in itself an important contribution to the advancement of God's kingdom. It is also the basis for the first basic reason. How can we be effective witnesses if we ourselves are not growing well? *There is an urgent need for greater emphasis on growth in moral and spiritual stature so that believers may be more impressed with its significance and be convicted about it.*

*Growing unto maturity in Christ*

God does not want us to remain as babes in Christ; He wants us to grow unto maturity in the Lord. Let us look at Ephesians 4:11-16:

### **Ephesians 4:11-16**

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;

13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;

15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,

16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

God wants each one of us to grow in "all aspects into Him" (v. 15). That is, we are to develop wholesomely in Christ. Verse 13 tells us that the goal is the "measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ". We should therefore strive unceasingly to attain to an ever higher level of moral and spiritual stature.

But God does not want us to strive for spiritual maturity on our own or in a self-centred manner. He desires us to grow together in truth and love (v. 15), in the context of healthy church life. Each one of us is a member of the body of Christ, and each member ought to fulfil his part so that the whole body can grow and be built up in love and in the unity of the faith (vs. 13, 16).

#### *Growing in the midst of trials*

If we understand that learning, growing and preparing ourselves for eternity is a basic reason for our being on earth, it will help us understand why the apostle James exhorts us to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials (Jas. 1:2).

We may repeat this verse when we encounter painful situations, but do we truly identify with its meaning and spirit? Do we really consider it all joy when we encounter all kinds of trials? For many of us, it would be a great achievement just to be able to go through intense difficulties without grumbling, or without being unduly disturbed or discouraged. To consider it all joy may seem beyond us, especially when the trials are severe.

But James tells us that it is feasible for us to have this attitude and spirit when we encounter all kinds of trials. He tells us the reason in the two verses that follow:

#### **James 1:3-4**

3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The trials and testing of our faith are intended to perfect us—that we may be *perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*.

Our time on earth is meant to help us learn and grow towards being perfect and complete, and the Lord allows us to go through various trials so that we may increasingly attain this goal. With this understanding, we can more readily identify with the meaning of what James is saying here. We can now ask God to help us learn to rejoice as we go through trials and difficulties. As long as the difficulties are part of a faithful walk with God and not because of our own foolishness, we can count it all joy.

It does not mean that when we are faithful to the Lord, our path will be smooth and pleasant. Remember what Paul and Barnabas said to the disciples in Acts 14:22, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”, and what the Lord Jesus tells us in Luke 9:23, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.”

The trials we encounter in life include having to deal with difficult people, going through trying circumstances, spiritual opposition and spiritual warfare. God intends to mould, transform and nurture our inner being through such trials so that we will be increasingly conformed to the image of His Son. In addition, we will deepen in our knowledge of God and in our relationship with Him. The goal is our total development and eternal well-being.

Hence, we need not be perturbed, disheartened or devastated by the pain and difficulties. The evil one may seek to destroy us. Evil men may wish to harm us. But the Lord is sovereignly undertaking for us in the trials we encounter so that we can learn and grow as we go through them in fellowship with Him. This does not mean we passively accept what the evil one and evil men are seeking to do to us. Resisting the evil one and his intentions is an integral part of learning to fight the good fight of faith and helps us learn and grow in moral and spiritual stature.

We see then that God has placed us in this world, with all its temptations and trials, so that our development may be well-rounded. It is like being enrolled in a school that trains and develops our character. If we go through the trials well, together with the Lord, we will learn to be more humble, more patient, more considerate, more understanding, more persevering and stronger in the Lord. We will also learn to appreciate, in a deeper measure, God’s grace, His sovereignty and His other attributes. We will become men and women of faith and conviction, reliable and trustworthy servants of the Lord.

#### *Moral and spiritual development—an end in itself*

This second basic reason for our time on earth is primary. It is crucial as an end in itself because it has to do with moral and spiritual development. *From an eternal perspective, developing moral and spiritual quality is of supreme importance.* It is at

the heart of God's purpose in creating man, for it is the basis for man's personal well-being and a deep relationship with God and with one another. It is vital to the quality of our life both on earth and in eternity. Without it, we would not be able to properly fulfil the Great Commission, which is the other reason for our time on earth.

### **How the two basic reasons are related**

The two basic reasons for our time on earth are closely related. If we are not learning and growing well, we will not be effective witnesses, and we will not be able to contribute much to the advancement of God's kingdom, even if we appear to be doing so.

Where there is not that spiritual growth and reality within us, there cannot be the positive contribution coming forth. There can be the ministry of life and light from us only to the degree that there is life and light within us to flow forth. God can and does use people in spite of who they are. For example, God used Balaam (Num. 22-24) and the Chaldeans (Hab. 1:6-11) to fulfil His purposes. But that's not the way God desires us to serve Him. If our life is poor in quality, we will not be able to sustain a stable and consistent ministry of life and light. At best, our ministry will be sporadic.

On the other hand, if we are learning and growing well, our ability to contribute to God's kingdom will follow spontaneously. The spiritual principle in operation here can be illustrated by what the Lord Jesus says about He being the vine and we the branches:

#### **John 15:5**

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

If we are abiding in Christ and He is abiding in us, we will derive life from Him and we will grow. And if we are growing in Him, we will bear fruit. This is the natural and spontaneous outcome. But if we are apart from Him, then we can do nothing that counts for eternity. There will be no true fruit, even though there may appear to be fruit.

The meaning and quality of our abiding in Christ and He in us can vary. This will be reflected in the quality of our lives and the quality of fruit-bearing. The poorer the quality of our life in the Lord, the poorer will be the quality of fruit-bearing; the richer the quality of our life in the Lord, the more abundant will be the fruit and the higher will be its quality. It is important that we pay much attention to nurturing the meaning and quality of our abiding in Christ and He in us. How we can nurture this is elaborated in Message 8.

To appreciate further the relationship between the two reasons for our time on earth, let us turn to Colossians 1:9-11.

**Colossians 1:9-11**

9 For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

10 so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

11 strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience;

Paul prayed for the Colossian believers that they might be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (v. 9). Paul was addressing the believers' spiritual growth and maturity. When we are growing spiritually and progressing towards maturity, we will be able to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in all respects, and bearing fruit in every good work (v. 10).

And as we walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in all respects and bearing fruit in every good work, we will also be "increasing in the knowledge of God" (v. 10) and will continue to grow in our knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Thus we see a cycle of growth resulting in a faithful walk with God and in fruit-bearing, giving rise to further growth and greater fruit-bearing. And throughout this process, God will be strengthening us with His power, enabling us to become more and more steadfast and stable (v. 11).

*Spontaneous ministry of life and light and biblical emphasis on learning and growing*

The apostle John, writing about the Lord Jesus, tells us that "in Him was life, and the life was the Light of men" (John 1:4). When the Lord Jesus lived His life on earth, He was the true Light (John 1:9). He did not have to make a special effort to shine; the light shines forth because there was life and light within Him. It was spontaneous.

Likewise, as we abide in Christ and He in us, we will grow well and the light and life within us will shine and flow forth spontaneously, ministering to others. It is only on this basis that we can meaningfully contribute to the fulfilment of God's purposes. There must be the spiritual life and reality to enable and sustain our service and contribution. *When we concentrate on learning and growing well, and are truly available to the Lord to guide and use us as He sees fit, we will contribute effectively to the advancement of God's kingdom.*

Although the Scriptures teaches that we should help non-believers turn to the Lord and enter His kingdom, its emphasis, particularly in the New Testament, is on teaching and helping believers to grow to maturity.

When believers grow well in the framework of healthy church life, they will be properly equipped to help others, not only to enter the kingdom of God, but also to grow unto maturity and in turn contribute in service. This is an important area of truth and is the thrust of Ephesians 4:11-16 which we referred to earlier.

*Where there is strong emphasis on reaching out to non-believers and contributing to God's kingdom without sufficient emphasis on learning and growing, believers are likely to experience spiritual overstrain, unhealthy stress and inability to cope with the wiles and attacks of the evil one and overwhelming spiritual pressures. Various undesirable complexities may easily come about resulting in damaging consequences not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of those we are trying to help. Such a scenario is not uncommon.*

*Effective contribution flows forth from the quality of our heart*

If we are growing well, we will be contributing to God's kingdom. Such contribution will be meaningful and effective even if it is not obvious to us or to others. An example can be seen in the life of the poor widow who contributed two small copper coins (Mark 12:41-44).<sup>1</sup>

The Lord Jesus made the remarkable statement that "this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury" (v. 43). From the world's perspective, what she had contributed was but a meagre sum. But from the perspective of God's kingdom, the true value of her contribution was indeed very great. Why is this so? It was because of the meaning and realities within her heart.

*The moral and spiritual meaning and the realities within our hearts are of utmost importance and have a direct bearing on the meaning and impact of our contribution to God's work, whether the contribution is obvious to others or not.*

If we pay attention to our spiritual growth and development, if we have the correct attitude of heart, if we trust in God and are faithful to Him, there will be the corresponding and spontaneous contribution to the kingdom of God.

### **Continuing consciousness of the two basic reasons**

It is important for us to have at the forefront of our consciousness the two basic reasons for our time on earth and their relationship to each other. Being deeply conscious of these two reasons will help us to:

- have the right perspective, values and priorities
- learn how to use our time and resources well
- know how to evaluate our lives and understand the meaning of what we go through

We will, essentially, be helped to know how we can live well on earth, including how we can go through difficult circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> Message AR69, posted on the website [www.godandtruth.com](http://www.godandtruth.com), gives a fuller consideration of the poor widow who contributed the two copper coins.

*Helps us go through difficult situations well*

All of us do encounter difficulties. If we are always conscious of the two basic reasons for our time on earth, we would and should ask ourselves: Can and do these difficult circumstances contribute to our growth? Will they help us to be effective witnesses? Can they help us contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom?

If we can answer "yes" to these questions, we know we can rejoice, and can concentrate on learning and responding well in the midst of the difficulties. We would not have to flee from the difficulties or compromise our faith in order to avoid them.

*As we adopt such an attitude and posture, we will find that every circumstance we go through in life has meaning and provides an opportunity for us to learn and grow. We will then become more effective ambassadors for Christ.*

It is necessary, however, for us to first ensure that we are not in those difficulties through our wrongdoing, neglect or foolishness, and that it is God's desire for us to be in such contexts and to go through such situations. Having done that, we can rightly trust in God's sovereignty and undertaking, and exercise faith in Him in line with Paul's declaration in Romans 8:28.

**Romans 8:28**

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

Many believers claim this assurance, but often wrongly, when they do not have the proper basis to do so. What is the proper basis for having such confidence in God's undertaking? It is only when we love God and are seeking to work out His purposes that we can be properly assured that He will cause all things, including difficult circumstances, to work together for our good.

In the next verse, Paul goes on to talk about our being *conformed to the image of His Son*. One major aspect of God causing all things to work together for good is our being conformed to the image of His Son. If we love God and walk faithfully with Him, He will help us to be increasingly conformed to the image of His Son whatever our context. Our character will be developed and we will grow unto maturity in the Lord.

**Concluding remarks**

If we understand the two basic reasons for our time on earth, our primary concern would not be whether our circumstances are pleasant or unpleasant, but whether what we go through helps us to grow and contribute to God's kingdom. Our growth and contribution to God's kingdom would be our constant and consuming concern.

Does it mean then that our concentration on growth and contribution comes before our love for God and commitment to Him? No, God must always come first. Our worship of God, our fellowship with Him, and our obedience to Him, are of primary importance. Our concentration on growth and contribution is our response to His call, and the outworking of His intentions for our time on earth.

We can grow and contribute well only as we grow in our knowledge of God, love for Him, and commitment to God and truth. It cannot take place outside of this framework. We must therefore set our heart, soul, mind and strength on this. It is the basis for growth and contribution to the advancement of God's kingdom.

*Living with a sense of purpose and mission*

So then, we should not live like those without hope. We are already in God's kingdom and we are here on earth with a purpose and a mission.

Our time on earth is not meant for us to indulge in the things of this world or be immersed in the affairs of this life. Nor should we be merely trying to keep ourselves unstained by the world, important though it may be. Our lives should also not be seen as just undergoing pain and suffering in trials and testing without definite meaning and purpose.

Our lives should have a positive thrust and direction—to learn, grow and contribute effectively to God's kingdom. In the process of growing and contributing, we learn to appreciate more and more the unfathomable richness of fellowship with God and with those who love God.

*The two basic reasons viewed as advancement of God's kingdom*

The two basic reasons for our time on earth can also be viewed together as one, that is, both personal growth and contribution can be viewed as advancement of God's kingdom. Personal growth, besides being the basis, is also itself an integral part of the advancement of God's kingdom.

So we see that advancing God's kingdom should be our primary concern during our time on earth. This is at the very heart of the pattern prayer that the Lord Jesus teaches His disciples.

**Matthew 6:9-10**

9 "Pray, then, in this way:

`Our Father who is in heaven,  
Hallowed be Your name.

10 `Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

The prayer is directed to God the Father, and a major thrust of this prayer is the advancement of God's kingdom. As God's kingdom advances, God's name will be increasingly hallowed and exalted, and His will progressively fulfilled.

This prayer helps us to recognise that the advancement of God's kingdom and His will being done ought to be the deepest longing of our hearts and the consuming passion of our lives.

When the will of God is done, when men are increasingly submitted to the reign of God in their hearts, then "Your kingdom come" becomes a reality. God's kingdom is advanced when His name is honoured and glorified in our lives, in the lives of others, in all things and in all situations. This is what we should concentrate on and be committed to.

*Paying attention to personal growth not selfish or self-centred*

Some may feel uneasy or apologetic about concentrating on their own spiritual growth. They may wonder whether it is being selfish or self-centred. But we do not have to feel this way. Paying attention to personal learning and growing well does not imply that we are being selfish or self-centred. It is the Lord's will that we grow well. And when we grow well, we honour and glorify the Lord. It leads to increasing submission to Him and that is the basis for effective contribution to the lives of others. We will be more able to humbly contribute in whatever forms the Lord leads us, be it prayer support or showing care and concern for others, or in any specific ministry the Lord desires us to be involved in.

Wholesome learning and growing and service take place when we have a healthy relationship with the Lord and when we take our proper place in the outworking of body life as explained by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:11-16.

Paying attention to personal growth is consistent with the spirit and meaning of the pattern prayer the Lord Jesus teaches His disciples. Such a spirit will mean that we are supportive of all who are contributing to God's kingdom. We will seek to contribute in whatever way appropriate for us, and will rejoice whenever we see the kingdom of God advancing. We can wholeheartedly concentrate on our personal growth together with the brethren, giving it due priority. And we will do it in a spirit of worship and of love for God and man.

**Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. In this message, two basic reasons are given for God placing us in this fallen world. Share your understanding of these two reasons.
2. How are the two basic reasons related?

3. How can our continuing consciousness of these two basic reasons help us live well during our time on earth, including our walk with God and the advancement of God's kingdom?

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