

Parenting children

for a life of purpose

Empowering children to become who they are called to be

Rachel Turner

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Foreword

This book fills me with hope. Its author believes that children are powerful individuals who can have a profound effect for God—now as well as in the future. She champions the truth that we were created for something much bigger than merely living our own lives or achieving our own dreams, and that partnering with God to be a world-changer has no biblically recognised minimum age limit.

Like its prequel, *Parenting Children for a Life of Faith* (BRF, 2010), the book combines clear, visionary thinking with solid biblical grounding. It voices a passionate realism that recognises both the urgency and achievability of the transformation it longs for. The real-life stories demonstrate the author's deep awareness of the competing pressures facing young people, and the practical ideas model the way change comes simply by allowing new thinking to enter existing discipleship approaches.

Our churches and our world desperately need the kind of children and adults that *Parenting Children for a Life of Purpose* invites us to be. We are called first and foremost to respond to our Father's love by living out Jesus' command to love God and others with every fibre of our beings (Luke 10:27) and by making him known to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:16–20).

In an age of me-centred thinking and celebrity culture, I am deeply encouraged to find a book on calling that doesn't start from a place of ascertaining individuals' specific gifts or strengths. Instead, it asks us to be inspired by Christ and his call to the whole church, and to make this our primary purpose. As we live this out with our resources, talents and time, we will discover that everything we do is invested with new meaning.

Our purpose is really to ask the same question again and again in every situation we face, from personal relational issues through to globally powerful consumer choices, campaigns or career paths:

'Jesus, what could I do here to put you and your other children before myself?'

Imagine if this kind of thinking were to inspire a generation! My prayer is that it will.

Liz Baddaley

Author, worship leader and co-founder of the Sanctuary



Introduction

‘OK, so here’s the thing,’ he began, rubbing his short greying hair with one hand as he quickly scanned the other picnic tables filled with families laughing. He paused as he tried to figure out a way to begin. ‘My daughter is eight. She is tiny, just a child. I look at her and see my baby, my precious little daughter. She comes home and tells me that her heart beats fast and happy when she thinks about helping people get close to God. She wants to start talking to people about God, now. In church and out of church. She feels like this is what she is meant to do. If she said this when she was a teenager, I would understand better. But talk me through how my little, tiny child is going to do this in her everyday life, and what I am supposed to do? Is this OK? How do I help? How do I ground her and give her a foundation? She’s just eight!’

Most of us would agree that our children have specialness inside them. We can see possibilities of the future flicker in their hearts and souls as they grow. We look forward to cheering them on as they get older and ‘discover’ their calling in life. But what if there is more for them now? What if the flickers we see are meant for use in their everyday life as well as the future?

We all hear of extraordinary children doing extraordinary things. We see them on the news or in magazines. Billy saw a need and did a fundraiser and now has funded over 600 wells in Africa. ‘Good for him,’ we discount as we make lunches in the morning. ‘How much effort did his mum have to put into that?’ Gemma organised a postcard campaign to the prime minister to discuss child poverty. Over 100,000 postcards were sent. ‘Weird political child,’ we judge as we drive around. ‘No way would a real child want to do that.’ Those big stories can seem to us to exist for those families who have extra time to do it, or for the unique child who cares about issues like that, far removed from our one-year-old mashing bananas into

the carpet or our seven-year-old boy who adores football or our teen girl whose phone is attached to her hand. ‘Raising children with purpose,’ we think, ‘takes effort, time... and someone else’s children.’ Or does it?

Children are designed to be purposeful, to have power within themselves and with the Spirit, and to live life heart-to-heart and in step with the Father. We often mistakenly think that ‘purpose’ is the same as ‘accomplishments’, and we can become overwhelmed with the thought of facilitating such achievements in our children. But that isn’t what true spiritual purpose is.

Having purpose is to exist for a reason, to live and sacrifice for something bigger than ourselves, and to pursue the will of God in our lives and in the world. Whether or not our children’s purpose will result in being in leadership, I don’t know. Leadership is just one result of purpose, not the inevitable conclusion. Purpose is expressed by faithfully choosing to walk each day in relationship with God, knowing that we are a part of his plans today, tomorrow, and the next day. Our children deserve to have a life filled with purpose.

This book isn’t ‘354 Things to Add to Your Week to Raise Purposeful Children’, because to be honest I can’t cram anything else into my life, and I assume you are the same. This book is about allowing our children their spiritual birthright to be purposeful and powerful. It is about training our eyes to see beyond what we hope and want for them, in order to see who God is shaping them to be now and what he is calling them to do here. It is about easily and lightly coaching our children to live ‘heart-connected’ with the Lord and to walk in their purpose every day to affect their home, community, church and nation.

This book is my offering to you, to encourage you and equip you to raise your children to be who God has made them to be, so that they can walk in close relationship with God, doing all God has for them to do today, tomorrow, the next day and for all eternity. I believe that this is a key part of our ordinary calling as parents, and

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that God designed it to be light and joy-filled. May God bless you mightily, give you lots of sleep, and help you to see clearly the joy and the fruit of parenting your children for a life of purpose.



— Chapter 1 —

Identity, relationship and purpose

Her eyes were glowing as she beamed a smile at me. For the past 15 minutes, nine-year-old Jessi had been sitting on the ground, praying for an adult who had come to the side of the room during a church service to meet with God. She had confidently and gently prayed for this woman, handed her tissues when she cried, and throughout the 15 minutes whispered encouragements and prayers to her as she helped the older woman meet with God. As the grateful woman went back to her seat, I leaned over to check in on Jessi. ‘How was that?’ I asked. She could barely contain herself. ‘It’s amazing. I’m normally really shy and can’t say what I want to, but when it’s God’s words I feel strong and all the words that are in my heart actually come out of my mouth.’ I asked if she wanted to continue to pray with people and she nodded emphatically. ‘I want to do it all the time! Because I think this is what I’m meant to do. I think he made me this way, to do this—help people who hurt meet with God. I’m me when I do it. I want to do it loads.’

Purpose strikes to the core of us as humans. The search for purpose is everywhere. Why am I here? What is life all about? Who am I supposed to be? What am I supposed to do with my life? The questions resonate for all of us.

The truth is that our children are powerful people called to a great purpose on this earth. And we as parents can help them find it and live it each day.

When we begin to think about how to parent children for a life of purpose, I find that it’s most helpful to look at how we were created and what we were created for. For that, we go to our Father: the first parent, the ultimate parent.

Genesis 1 and 2 tell us the story of the creation of people. God was in the process of creating the world and he had the idea to make people: children for himself. He carefully and lovingly made them in his likeness, and then he spoke to them. ‘So God created humans to be like himself; he made men and women. God gave them his blessing and said...’ (Genesis 1:27–28, CEV).

We assume that God’s initial doting was similar to ours. When we first meet our children, we often want just to hold them and watch them. We tell them how beautiful they are, and we want to protect them forever. But look at what God does with his new children. He blesses them, which I’m sure was lovely, and then says to them, ‘Have a lot of children! Fill the earth with people and bring it under your control. Rule over the fish in the ocean, the birds in the sky, and every animal on the earth’ (v. 28).

His children are brand new, and the first thing he does is give them a job! They are fresh out of the package, and yet they have been given a purpose for now and a vision for how to develop that in the future. God considered it vital to impart to his newly formed children their purpose.

Identity, relationship and purpose in the Bible

Adam and Eve were created in God’s image, directly able to see and experience their own similarities to him. They knew who they were and what their identity was: they were created by the Creator, and were his children.

They were also given a relationship—a relationship with God as his children, able to hear his voice, interact with him and know him. If you look at Genesis 2 and 3, you will see that Adam and Eve conversed with God and knew his voice well. They even knew the familiar sound of him walking in the garden. They had a natural and real connection to God.

And almost immediately, they were given purpose: a task, a vision, a thing to give themselves to. All three are important in their

own right but are also inextricably linked. God gave them their identity and lived in relationship with them, and that experience shaped how they found and walked in their purpose.

We can see this pattern throughout scripture. The people we most admire tend to have identity, relationship and purpose emblazoned in their spirits.

Abram's *identity* was shaped as God told him who he was and would be: a blessing to nations, the father of many nations, and fruitful. God even changed Abram's name to reflect the new identity he was shaping in him, from Abram (which means father) to Abraham (father of many). God drew him into a covenant, a formal binding *relationship*, and talked with him openly and often, in direct conversation with him throughout his life. God gave Abraham a mighty *purpose*, and he obeyed faithfully (and sometimes not) as he pursued his purpose in response to God's direction and in confidence of who God made him to be. Abraham lived his purpose walking the length and breadth of the land he was given, interceding for people, and holding firm to the tangible promises of God (see Genesis 12, 13 and 17).

Jeremiah was only a child when God told him that before he formed him in his mother's womb, he had appointed Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations. His *identity* as a prophet had been planned even before he was created. God added to his identity, saying that he also made him as a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land. God promised his constant voice in *relationship*, his presence and his faithfulness to rescue Jeremiah. God also laid out clearly Jeremiah's *purpose*: to go boldly and without fear, speaking the words he would give him to kings, priests and people in order to change the nations. Without his purpose, Jeremiah wouldn't have his identity. Without the tangible relationship with God, he would have nothing to speak and no purpose to fulfil (see Jeremiah 1).

In the life of Jesus we see the intertwining of the three. When Jesus was baptised, God spoke and named Jesus as his Son, affirming his

identity. Jesus walked confident in this every day, accomplishing all his Father had for him to do because of his unique identity. He lived life in *relationship* with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ministering with the Spirit and often spending time on his own in prayer to the Father. His *purpose* on earth was clear: to redeem us to the Father and to show us how to walk in relationship with him. Identity, relationship and purpose are expressed best in Jesus showing us the perfect balance of how to live healthily with all three (see the Gospels, for example Matthew 3:17; 9:13; Luke 4:16–21; John 3:16–17; 17:1–26).

The examples can go on and on: Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David, Peter, Mary and Paul. Identity, relationship and purpose gave people strength and ability to live great and significant lives.

An entwined approach

This entwined and balanced approach is something we naturally do as parents. As our children grow, we deliberately help them to understand themselves and their place in our family (*identity*). We help them to feel secure in their relationship with us and assist them in navigating their relationships with others (*relationship*). We also give them the skills and understanding to be productive, conscientious and independent members of society (*purpose*). We do it so naturally that we often don't notice how holistic our approach really is.

When it comes to growing our children spiritually, though, we can often lose confidence in our holistic approach. We can lean towards focusing heavily on identity and relationship. Our instinct can be to want our children to know that they are loved by us and by God and be comfortable in that. But when we begin to face spiritual purpose we can shy away, leaving it out almost entirely for the first decade of our children's lives, not wanting to drop the bombshell that there are other requirements that we have to 'do' as part of the Christian deal. We don't want to stress them out or

make them feel pressured to perform, so we often leave purpose on the sideline, to be picked up at a later time when it is convenient. In doing this, I believe we are stunting the spiritual growth and happiness of our children.

Without purpose, children's faith can become insular and selfish, focusing on their experiences first. Boredom and confusion can creep into their faith because it has become purely about what they are getting out of it.

Without purpose, children are robbed of the power of their God-given identity. What is the use of having authority in Christ, if you have nowhere to use it? What is the use of being unique, if you cannot apply it to something?

Without purpose, children's relationships with God will be limited. God is a God of action and creation, as well as of love. He has purposes and plans. He is in the world accomplishing and doing. Purpose reveals a different side of God, adding depth to our understanding of God's heart in action. It is important for our children to know the fullness of God, which includes his purposes and actions, so that they can learn to see him in the world and choose to join him in his plans.

God is a God of completeness. When identity, relationship and purpose exist side by side, our children can walk in spiritual health, thriving confidently in their relationship with God, and in being an essential part of something bigger than themselves. We cannot and should not teach one without the others.

What we will do in this book

Given that an entwined approach to spiritual growth is important, why a book specifically on purpose? In essence, this book is a continuation of what was begun in my first book, *Parenting Children for a Life of Faith: Helping children meet and know God* (BRF, 2010). I believe it is crucial that a child is God-connected, not just God-smart, and *Parenting Children for a Life of Faith* exists to empower

parents to feel confident in spiritually growing children to thrive in a two-way heart-to-heart relationship with God. Purpose is a natural expression of our relationship with God, and so this book on purpose cannot exist in isolation from the ideas in my first book.

This book seeks to explore in depth how to grow children spiritually to know and live out their God-given purpose. It will give you ideas on how to help them entwine their purpose with their identity and relationship with God and others, and how to disciple them daily in being powerful people in this world.