

Seeking Significance

By Pastor Alan Utting



'Real significance comes when we use our gifts to serve others rather than promote ourselves.' Christine Caine

A while ago I met an older person, someone who had been very active in ministry, and she made a comment to me, 'I am now an invisible' person. I instantly knew what she meant. She felt nobody saw her. She felt she was treated as someone who had passed their expiry date. I know it wasn't true as she continued living a very unselfish life. Those who made her feel like that had no intention of disrespect, but this is a Western worldview. Other cultures however value the wisdom and experience older people can bring to a situation. However, probably most of us who have been the centre of attention or in some demand in their life's work feel devalued at times especially as we reach old age. This lack of significance applies to many, for example those whose work is terminated, those who know their parent's disapproval and those who have some infirmity.

I wonder how the apostle Paul felt soon after his spectacular conversion. Before that experience he had earned the respect of all the religious leaders in Israel, especially the Pharisees. He had the highest form of education from one of the most respected teachers of his day, Gamaliel, and Paul himself was gifted with a brilliant mind and was able to argue with the elite of his day but soon after coming to Christ he was sent into obscurity in Arabia for 3 years (Galatians 1:17,18) where he learnt to become a nobody. Those years were not wasted years, but a time of reflection, prayer and instruction from the Lord Himself until he was equipped for a new ministry.

Elements of insignificance

1. Loneliness affects people of all ages but is especially common among seniors due to the loss of friends, some who have passed away, and reduced contact with past colleagues after retirement.
2. Our failing physical health and mental agility means we do not function as well as we did. We are not so quick 'off the mark' and we can embarrass ourselves.
3. I have noticed many people including myself have seasons where we struggle with self-esteem and issues of significance. This may become a greater problem as we age but we need to come to terms with these seasons of life and the sovereignty of God.
4. Older individuals are often less inclined to take risks, making them hesitant to embark on new adventures in serving the Lord. Their world will become smaller. Choosing personal comfort often involves less stress but that is not always a good thing.
5. Although God wants us to enjoy His creation, hedonism (pleasure seeking) and living for oneself is rampant in our world today, especially with older people who have more money than they need. This instant pleasure-seeking attitude is not always right.

6. We rely upon our achievements for boosting our self-esteem and even seek the attention of important people to make us feel significant.
7. After years of attention and praise, people now unwittingly discard us and give their attention to others. This tends to make us angry or full of self-pity which is very unattractive.
8. We can experience depression recognising there can be other causes. If we are not careful, we can lose all hope and purpose in living. In my teenage years I remember hearing about school teachers who loved to talk about how they longed to retire when they reached 60 years of age. That's understandable. Then sadly I heard about how so many of them died a couple of years or so after retirement through a lack of purpose for living.

How best can we find answers for the hurdles we face?

1. Talk over your feelings with a trusted friend or counsellor who is willing to listen.
2. Learn to consider others better than ourselves. 'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others' (Philippians 2:3,4).
3. Socialise and join a group of like-minded people. Settling in may take persistence.
4. Count your many blessings as the hymn says:

'When upon life's billows you are tempest-tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.'

5. Find comfort in God's Word and develop God's presence through prayer and meditation. Oswald Chambers writes, 'The real business of your life is intercessory prayer. Prayer does not fit us for the greater work; prayer is the greater work.' If you are not into praying why not start off praying for 5 minutes a day and build up from there.
6. It is in 'losing our life' for others that we find it. Jesus says, 'Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it,' (Matthew 10:39). We must learn to die to self. Joni Eareckson Tada, paralysed from the neck down at 18 makes this comment: 'The cross is the centre of our relationship with Jesus. The cross is where we die. We go there daily. It isn't easy.... In exchange, God imparts power and implants new and lasting hope.'

What ways can you serve the Lord? Consider visiting rest homes or shut-ins, having friendly phone conversations, sending encouraging emails, or offering a kind smile or word to a young mother managing a toddler. Engaging in practical acts of service within your church or local community can also be a tremendous source of fulfillment. Whether it's assisting in behind the scenes, organizing events, or simply offering a helping hand to those in need, these deeds not only benefit others but also bring a renewed sense of purpose to your own life.

Much of our natural sense of significance comes from achievements and busyness. David, before becoming king, was a commander for Saul's army. However, God wanted more than his service; He wanted David's heart. Under God's oversight, David fled from his position to become a refugee in the wilderness, leaving his accomplishments behind. Have you experienced such a painful transition?

It was through this wilderness experience however that he learnt more of the deeper ways of God. It was here that he wrote many of his inspirational Psalms which have inspired countless millions of people over the centuries. God now had his heart! This is not a one time experience. We will be glad if we by faith accept God's ways and learn His principles. Gradually being noticed or not will not matter at all.

Henri Nouwen's prayer

'Please accept my distractions, my fatigue, my irritations, and my faithless wanderings. You know me more deeply and fully than I know myself. You love me with a greater love than I can love myself. You even offer me more than I can desire....' Thank you, Lord.
Amen

Resources

Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*

Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Life*

Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spiritually*