

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Palms 57:1–3, ESV

- ¹ *Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,
for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,
till the storms of destruction pass by.*
- ² *I cry out to God Most High,
to God who fulfills his purpose for me.*
- ³ *He will send from heaven and save me.*

Having a purpose.

Have you ever had that moment where you stop whatever you're doing, you tune out the world around you – and you wonder why the hell you are on Earth? It's even worse when you perceive the ones around you as truly enjoying their lives and finding purpose in what they do. Keep in mind, by the way, that many people put on a great show, but are sad and cold inside, and find life just as meaningless as you do. During the pandemic, many people have found themselves isolated, with no other people to distract them, no errands to keep them occupied, no job to commute to. That's why hospitals have seen an incredible increase in drug and alcohol related cases, why mental health workers are reporting spikes in severe depression symptoms, part of the reason why there have been so many acts of gun violence, and partly why seemingly sincere demonstrators have turned into

arsonists and thieves. It's not that the pandemic has robbed people of their purposes in life – it's that the sudden increase in quiet time has made people realize that they have no purpose.

Our Bible passage today is short and simple, but I will be reading it to you more than once. We're going to look at it very carefully:

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Psalm 57 is a Psalm of mercy, and it is attributed to King David, although we cannot be sure that he wrote it. The psalmist is asking God to bless him, to give him an extra measure of grace, and to grant him a request. The psalmist is praying that God will give him refuge, to come from above and save him. He is asking for God to fulfill God's purpose for him. That's the critical part: *God's* purpose for him. Not his purpose for him. *God's* purpose for him.

God does not want you to live a life of drudgery. God does not want you to slog through every day, wishing it would all go away, and periodically panicking because it will *not* all go away. But here is the thing: our media - television and

the Internet - teaches us that there are two kinds of people, those who suffer in boredom and fatigue every day, and those who live the magical lives of celebrities, rich in money and experiences. This is a very false narrative, though. Each and every one of us, no matter how ordinary our lives and our skills, no matter how many problems we must confront in life, no matter how many responsibilities we have, can live with a fulfilling purpose. Often it has to do with using your gifts to serve someone else, even if it's in a very modest way.

Not long ago, I saw two men in the same day, and they were both taking care of chronically sick wives. We'll call the two women Sandy and June. These men didn't know each other. Both men were about my age. Their wives' illnesses were very different. The first, Sandy, had an early dementia that made the woman confused, impulsive, and sometimes highly disagreeable. She was a constant danger to herself and had to be carefully watched. June had Parkinson's. She also was confused, sometimes very confrontational, and was constantly trying to do physical things that were beyond her. Once June fell and received a serious concussion and a scalp laceration. Both of these men loved their wives. I listened to their stories, first, in the morning, the husband of Sandy, then, in the afternoon, June's husband. I was empathetic, supportive, and affirming of the love they had for their wives, and in both cases, the men asked

me to pray with them. Interestingly, neither man was a churchgoer, but over and over, I have seen people who find themselves in a panic turning to God. There's nothing wrong with that. God welcomes us lovingly at any moment in our lives. Often something tragic can thereby have a partially positive result.

But here is the big difference. Sandy's husband was angry and resentful. He loved his wife dearly and he accepted help from caregivers who came to the house once a day. He was very gentle as he cared for his wife. Yet, he felt cheated. He had worked hard all his life at a job that he liked some of the time and hated more often, and he was looking forward to retiring in just a couple of years. Now, though, he was burdened. He saw the years ahead of him as agonizing. This man had always wanted to be a photographer and he had planned on traveling widely, taking nature and wildlife shots from all over the world. He had already built a website where he was going to display his photos for the world to see. He wanted to show people the beauty in nature that we are throwing away by abusing our planet. June's husband was different. He had just retired, a bit early, actually, so he could care for his wife fulltime, with the help of home healthcare workers. His job was something that, like the first man's job, was sometimes challenging and rewarding, sometimes tedious and boring. He had a vision for his life after retirement, too. In his work, he had spent decades

making connections all over the world. He knew people who packaged, shipped, and deployed goods for private companies and for government agencies. Let's give these two men names: Ryan was Sandy's husband and Rodney was married to June. You know that I am changing details to protect their privacy. Rodney's dream was to use the connections he had built up over a lifetime to help one of his adult daughters, who was a nurse, get highly specialized medical supplies to people in poverty-stricken areas, both in the U.S. and around the world, especially in Central and South America. He told me that the one thing that people outside America often cannot get are medicines for common diseases - diseases that we routinely treat. He wanted to make sure that everyone could get insulin, along with drugs for things like Parkinson's. But here's the big difference between the two men. Ryan was bitter and desperate. Rodney was dedicating his new vision for his life to his wife. He was lifting up his passion and offering it to needy people in the name of his wife.

But let me say a couple of things. Rodney wasn't living a life of joy and ease, taking care of his wife and organizing delivery efforts for folks in need. He was suffering. It wasn't easy taking care of his wife. He was not some saint like the ones I learned about as a Catholic kid; he wasn't gloriously living a hard life in the name of God. He was clinging to his purpose. He was afraid that it would all

crumble and disappear, that he would be overwhelmed by taking care of his wife and not be able to see out his vision for his later years. Let's look at our Psalm fragment again:

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Notice that this says, *"I cry out to God who fulfills God's purpose for me."* Both men identified themselves as Christians and said that they wanted advice from a reverend. They both asked me to pray with them, so, individually, I told them that praying isn't just a form of meditation. It's not just a way to relax and ignore our problems for a while. Prayer is a way to get direction from God. We all want to have a purpose in life. We all want to do the nasty things we have to do, but to also find something, well, *Christian* in doing them. Both Ryan and Rodney did want to view themselves as taking the high moral road. They both made a point of telling me that they did not want to "dump" their wives into institutions. I told them that they needed to keep in mind that if they were overwhelmed, and if their wives would get better care living somewhere else, then that would be the truly Christian thing to do. Much of the time, this is the better way to go. Many

of us often fail at caring for chronically ill people. I also told them to talk about what they were confronting with their adult children, their friends, whomever they trusted. It's good just to talk, I told them, but it's also good to get input on how to better take care of their wives while also not living in desperation.

And when it comes to purpose, to that goal that we all have in life, the one to turn to is God. We need to find quiet time, on an ongoing and frequent basis, and pray. We need to pause for just a moment many times a day and let God fill our minds. And we must pray maybe once a day in a more intense, sustained fashion. Something magical happens when we totally relax and pray. We connect with God. It can take many, many prayer sessions to get to this point. The time does come, though, when we feel God touch us and the answer arises within us. Both men had good visions for their future lives. There is nothing like the photos that Ryan wanted to take that could make us all truly value the life that God put on this planet and commissioned all of us to protect. A species is classified as endangered when there are fewer than 2,500 mature individuals alive. Imagine if we were suddenly reduced to 2,500 adult humans left on Earth? How threatened would we feel? And surely, no one would question the godliness of Rodney's mission to bring lifesaving and dignity-giving medicines to people who would otherwise not have access to them. But did either Ryan or Rodney talk to God

about their purposes in life? When I asked these two men these questions separately, Ryan said no, he hadn't. Rodney said no, he hadn't, but that he wished he had.

We all need to honestly appraise ourselves. What skills do we have? What are our passions? Then we have to talk to God about how our skills and our passions mesh with the reality of our immediate lives. The truth is that Rodney was probably more prepared to go before God and pray for guidance. But it's something that we all have to do, if we want to find something that gives us that warm sense of purpose, if want to serve - in perhaps a very simply way – those who were made in the image of God.

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We don't serve God this when we are embittered and angry and feel cheated.

We must be thankful for what God has done for us, and we must be comfortable laying it all before God and seeking refuge in the shadow of God's wings. Psalm 57 uses a pair of powerful wings as a metaphor for the protection we get from

God. We are like a young bird, unable to go it alone in the world, with a mother bird protecting us with her wings. We have to be that humble. We have to admit that there will never be a day when we can spread our own wings, lift up into the wind, and be totally independent. We don't find a purpose for us. God decides that purpose and then helps us fulfill it. Please pray with me.

God, we need to feel purposeful in life. That is how you made us. Please keep us from making the mistake that so many people have made. Don't let us believe that if we do not have an awe-inspiring purpose, that we are lost forever. Don't let us look at the human world around us, and see rich and powerful and worshipped people, and come to the conclusion that we have no hope, that we can never have a meaningful purpose in our lives. Let us accept the protection of your wings. Let us listen to you. Let us find something modest, something that matches our skills, and offer it up to all people made in your image. Amen.