

## FINDING GOD ON PURPOSE

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Series: On Purpose  
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Adam Mosley  
God, Religion, Spiritual Journey  
Romans 2:14-15, Acts 17:24-28

I spent four days in the desert fifteen years ago, and I've never been the same since. It was late August of 2000, and I, along with 4 friends rented what we call in America and RV - basically a home on wheels - and headed off on a 2,200 mile (over 3,500 km) trek across the United States to the Black Rock Desert.

The Black Rock Desert is a dry lakebed that sits over 150 km from the nearest city, Reno, Nevada. It is a remote place, and the alkali surface of the playa (as it's called) is so uninhabitable that not even insects dare to take up residence. Nevertheless, there we were.

But we weren't alone. You see, we had made this trip to the desert - 3 pastors, a wide-eyed church member, and a crazy friend from Florida - to participate in what has been alternately called an arts festival, a pagan ritual, and a hedonistic Nirvana. It was not the kind of thing church people typically show up for.

The festival is called Burning Man, and that week nearly 30,000 people would converge on that desert wasteland for an experiment in what they call "radical self-expression," which includes just about every form of indulgence you can imagine. Our purpose for being there was to do the kind of stuff Jesus did. We had purchased 5,000 bottles of water to give away to the Burning Man attendees, or "Burners," and we were just going to have conversations, give away water, and see where things went.

As we rolled our RV onto the playa, seriously overloaded with water, we were greeted by a flood of the unusual. My friend Randy Bohlander, who organized the trip, wrote about it in his book, *Jesus Killed My Church*. Let me read you his words:

*The 120 miles from Reno to the Black Rock Desert may have been the longest of my life. We had prayed and fasted all summer for this but we really didn't know what to expect... Finding a sign directing us to pull off the highway, we eased the water-laden rig off the shoulder and on to a dry lakebed. We joined a convoy of hippies, techies, and oddballs driving RV's, VW vans, rental trucks, sedans and even motorcycles. Behind us, a man drove a rare UNIMOG truck. In front of us, there was a long white limousine...with sunbathers on the roof. With tension high, we approached the six lane gate where greeters, in (and out of) various costumes, were checking tickets and welcoming people. We were warmly welcomed*

*and our RV was quickly searched for stow aways. Of course, every cabinet or storage area they opened was full of water.*

*“Are you guys really thirsty?” the greeter asked.*

*“Uh...” I stammered. “We brought some extra water...”*

*The greeter grinned and said, “I see that.” In light of all that would come through the gate of Burning Man that day, five guys with a thousand bottles of water for each of them did not even register on the strange-o-meter.*

Indeed, it did not. Within our first 24 hours on the playa, I had a long conversation with a guy who had built a propane-powered, fire spitting pipe organ on the back of a golf cart, I rode on a giant teeter-totter which put the rider about 30 feet off the ground at it’s highest point, and we strode innocently past a 100 person yoga class - only to notice about midway past them that they were all completely naked. Burning Man is a strange place.

And strange was personified by the first non-staff Burner we encountered on the playa. As we drove our RV across the lakebed, looking for our assigned camping spot, we stopped to ask directions from a neighbor. For some reason, the guy we chose to talk to was wearing a pair of metal-studded black leather underwear, several bracelets made of leather and feathers...and nothing else.

In talking with our new friend, we learned that his name was Brin and he was a Shaman priest, and he and his girlfriend Brie lived in a converted school bus - two busses actually, with the body of the second welded to the top of the first in order to give them an upstairs bedroom and balcony. He offered to pray for us. We didn’t want to be rude, so, scared to death, we let him.

I have no idea what he said in his prayer, but I know what we said when he was finished. “Let us return the favor!” We prayed for Brin and Brie, for their relationship, and for the difficulties they were facing, and then we set up camp next door.

Over the next few days, we would come to be known as “Camp Soaking Man.” As we gave away our 5,000 bottles of water, we began to attract a crowd. People would stop in, share a meal with us (because word got out that we always cooked extra food), and inevitably, would ask why we were giving away all this water. Randy recalls one such encounter:

*Once inside...we went to work setting up our cases of water as a sort of wall around the front of the RV. It almost felt like the cowboys fortifying against the Indians. Just then, a native rode up on a bike. He was wearing bike shorts and a paper-mache goat’s head mask. I greeted him and handed him a bottle of water. As he took the cap off the water, he pushed his mask up to the top of his head to allow himself to drink.*

*Eyeing our stash of water, he asked, “Why are you guys doing this?”*

*“Doing what?” I replied, as if we regularly wandered out into thousands of pagans with an RV full of water.*

*“Giving away water. Why are you giving away water?” he pressed.*

*There are times in life where you get into situations you just haven’t thought through. For all of our preparations, all our spreadsheets, all of our overcoming the craziest of situations, this was one question I hadn’t considered. Of course, I knew why we were doing it, but I hadn’t thought through explaining it to a man in a goat’s head mask.*

*I looked straight at him and said, “We’re doing this as a prophetic declaration of what God wants to do in your life. He wants to bring water to the dry places inside you. He’s water in the desert.”*

That man’s name was Tom. At burning man, he was a scary, goat-head wearing guy on a bicycle. But once he took off the mask and sat down with us, he was just Tom - a mild-mannered guy who worked for the telephone company, had recently gotten engaged, and had walked away from the church as a teenager. As we ate food and talked, Tom began to talk about God. He believed there was a God, but hadn’t seen anything in his church friends that led him to believe they had *found* God.

He explained that when he read about Jesus, he was really drawn to that, but when he spent time with people who claimed to follow Jesus, he was turned off.

I was reminded of the words of Mahatma Gandhi when asked about his deep interest in the life and teachings of Jesus.

*“I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”*  
*Mahatma Gandhi*

After about an hour and a half of sharing life with Tom, talking about his anxiety about getting married, how his fiancé really wanted to have kids, and how he worried about what kind of father he would be, he eventually put his mask back on and road off into the desert, but not before he said, “Yeah, I would really like you guys to pray for me.”

So we did.

And Tom left us with these words, “If I can find church people like you when I get home, I just might go to church.”

Those days in the desert changed me. They left an indelible mark on me that has forever altered the course of my existence. It was in the Black Rock Desert that I realized, truly for the first time, that regardless of our background, our vices, our clothing, or our masks, we aren’t really all that different from each other. We’re all on a journey - some of us confidently striding in what we hope is the right direction, others turning in circles, disoriented and lost,

but all on the same quest. It's a quest for what is true, what is good and right, what is purposeful. It's a quest for God.

Today, as we continue our series called *On Purpose*, I want to look at what it means to enjoin other people on this journey - to learn from others and invite others into our process of *Finding God On Purpose*.

Let's pray that God will open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what he has for us this morning.

### **Prayer**

I think the Apostle Paul might have gone to Burning Man if it had been around during his time. Paul was the kind of guy who spent a *lot* of time in places and among people whom the church had written off - people deemed unworthy of God's love.

He taught within some of the largest metropolitan cities in the world - among people who gave us some of the world's greatest philosophers and artists - places like Athens and Rome. But not only did he teach, he also listened and learned. Like my Burning Man experience, Paul sat in the midst of these people and discovered something about God and about humanity. In his letter to the Romans, he speaks of something he's discovered among the Gentiles - the non-Jews he's spending time with. In chapter 2, verse 14 of the book of Romans, he says this:

*Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.*  
*Romans 2:14-15*

This is what is known in theological circles as prevenient grace - an awareness of God and Godly virtue *prior to actual knowledge* of God. The *United Methodist Book of Discipline* puts it this way. Prevenient grace is:

*"...the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will, and our 'first slight transient conviction' of having sinned against God. God's grace also awakens in us an earnest longing for deliverance from sin and death and moves us toward repentance and faith."*

Awareness of God prior to the knowledge of God.

Helen Keller, blind and deaf from the age of 2, famously wrote to her friend Bishop Philips Brooks that she had always known about God, even before she had any words. But in her darkness and isolation, she knew she was not alone. Someone was with her. She felt God's love. And when she received the gift of language and heard about God, she said she already knew.

As human beings, we lean toward God - we *sense* something of him even before we *know* about him. Think about it: What if the reason nearly every culture around the world has a god or gods is because we are hard-wired to be aware of God? What if there is something in us that *knows* there is a God, but we are left to our own devices to actually find him?

That would both explain why concepts of God vary from place to place (as we fill in the gaps in our knowledge), and why some teachings and ideas are very similar in different parts of the world (as we verbalize that which we naturally know).

So, we have this prevenient grace - this awareness of God - built into our being, but how do we go about finding God on purpose?

I think our starting point has to be something I talked about last week - this idea of taking a centered set approach. If you were here last week, you'll recall that I said that this centered set concept is at the core of the kind of church we want to be.

To quickly recap, a centered set can be best understood in relation to its counterpart - a bounded set. A bounded set says that there are certain criteria that must be met in order for someone to be included in the set.

You can think of a bounded set as a circle - a boundary. And we human beings can be represented by dots all around that circle. Some of us are outside the circle, so we aren't part of the set. Others are inside the circle - they meet all the criteria, so they get to be part of the set.

It's easy to see bounded sets when we consider people's approach to God. Most world religions have at least some adherents who are very "bounded set" in their mentality. In the Christian tradition, we even have bounded sets *within* our group - denominational boundaries where one must adhere to a checklist of criteria in order to be considered "in."

But what if we remove those boundaries. What if, instead, we take a centered set approach. What does that look like?

Centered set, I explained last week, is like that same set of dots, except now, instead of a boundary separating the "ins" from the "outs," we have an ideal center. For us, the ideal center is Jesus. Not only does he represent God, but he also represents the perfect human

being. In any part of my life, if I become more like Jesus, I'm drawing closer to God *and* I'm becoming a better person.

And the centered set is perhaps seen *most vividly* in our pursuit of the things of God. If we're trying to find God, a centered set says, "There he is!" Right there in the center. Unfortunately, we don't get to see our lives from an arial view. We aren't given a map with points that say, "You're here and God's there." But if we were, it would look something like a centered set - with God in the center and all of us people scattered around, different distances from him.

One of the greatest promises *and* most challenging aspects of a centered set approach is the realization that someone who has a lot of crazy theories about God could, in some respects be closer to God than I am. For instance, I have some friends who, from my vantage point, seem to have really missed some major pieces of the God puzzle, but they have these really intense prayer lives that I'm envious of. Other people with whom I have disagreements in theology nevertheless have mastered personal discipline to a degree that I can't even fathom. I know other people who don't even believe in God, but kind of along these lines of prevenient grace have managed to embrace a Godly life, even if they wouldn't describe it as such. They treat people better than I do. They serve the poor. They help the sick. Their compassion is greater than mine - more like Jesus.

A centered set approach allows for the possibility that we can learn from these people - people who are, like us, journeying toward God. Even if they are veering a bit off-course, they might have something to teach us. But in order to allow ourselves to be teachable in this regard, we have to be willing to admit that we don't have it 100% figured out. I say this all the time, nobody is 100% accurate in their theology - the things they think about God. We all have errors in our assumptions and conclusions about God.

So, if I'm willing to admit that I might not be right about everything and that even someone who thinks *very* differently than me might still have something to teach me about God, then I can enter into really interesting conversations without feeling like I have to defend a position. I can learn from others rather than battling against them. I can respect their deeply held beliefs, while also journeying my own path toward the center.

This seems to be the operating theory of the Apostle Paul when he speaks to the people of Athens in the book of Acts. I said Paul spent a lot of time in these types of places - places that were wholly not Christian or even Jewish. The Greek religious system was something completely different. But Paul looked around and said, "You know, these people have figured out some things." Look at this little speech in Acts 17, starting in verse 24:

*"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything*

*else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'*

*Acts 17:24-28*

That first quote, “For in him we live and move and have our being,” is from a Cretan philosopher named Epimenides. Paul quotes this Cretan guy, even though the Cretans had a very different theology than Paul’s, and they weren’t really known to be upstanding citizens. In fact, the guy Paul quotes here, Epimenides, is the same guy he quotes when he tells his friend Titus in another letter that “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.” It’s tough when your own philosophers write stuff like that about you!

But, it seems Paul was studying the writings of Epimenides - and in them, he found some truth - something that resonated with him - some common understanding of God between his Jewish tradition and a Greek tradition that was far removed from Judaism.

So, like the Apostle Paul, we can begin our journey toward God with other people by taking a centered set approach.

And then we have to look at how people usually find God. Because one thing about this journey - something that the biblical writers make very clear - is that though this is a deeply personal endeavor, it is not a solo effort. As we journey toward God, we do so with others - in the words of the author of Hebrews, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

Any understanding of our own God journey has to be understood in the midst of a communal journey toward God. So, how do people find God? Typically, it looks something like this:

### **Skeptic > Explorer > Believer > Lover**

Now, last week, I showed you a similar pathway to friendship. But there’s a big difference here, because unlike relationships, where everyone starts out as a stranger, when it comes to finding God, we don’t all start in the same place.

Where we begin on this journey is largely dependent on our upbringing - the geographical location, the family situation, the life circumstances that shape us - all of these things shape our beliefs and become the unseen currents drawing us to or pulling us away from God.

You might have been a Believer your whole life because you’re parents were believers. Or maybe you started out as a Skeptic. Maybe you’ve bounced around a bit. There are lots of



starting points on this pathway, but the direction we hope to move will be the same, so let's take a look at how it works.

For someone who starts their journey as a Skeptic, the first step is to become an Explorer.

How does someone move from Skeptic to Explorer? It's actually pretty easy. It just requires *Openness*. We move from Skeptic to Explorer simply by being open to the possibility that God exists - willing to entertain the idea of God.

I read a really interesting book this week by a lady named Nancy Ellen Abrams. Abrams is a lawyer, a Fulbright Scholar, and a philosopher. Her husband, Joel Primack, is one of the world's foremost astrophysicists, specializing in the study of the formation and evolution of galaxies. He was one of the originators of the theories of dark matter and dark energy. This is a smart couple! And up until recently, there was no room in their life or minds for God.

But that changed for Nancy. And it changed when she began attending a 12-step recovery group for an eating disorder. To make a long story short, what she found in that group was that when people began relying on God to help them overcome their addictions, they actually got better. Then, she made a move from Skeptic to Explorer in an effort to see if God (even a God she didn't believe in) might be able to help her. And what do you know - he did!

She didn't believe in God yet, but he still helped her overcome the impulses of her addiction. This is what it looks like to move from Skeptic to Explorer. You say, "I'm not sure about this God thing, but I'm willing to entertain the idea."

And honestly, this is a really fun place to come along side someone. Because Explorers tend to be really honest. They haven't learned yet what is "appropriate" to say or what questions you aren't "supposed" to ask. They move from, "I don't believe God is real," to, "I wonder if God is real." And that sense of wonder can be a whole lot of fun.

Then, what we hope happens is that this Explorer - this person who is curious about God - eventually has some revelation, some epiphany that moves them from Explorer to Believer. That's what it takes. Let's call it *Insight*. In order for someone to move from Explorer to Believer, they have to receive some *Insight* - personal revelation.

That's why we can't *make* people Believers. We can talk until we're blue in the face, but until they have a personal revelation, until they receive some kind of insight on their own, they're not going to believe.



But once they've received that insight, for a lot of people, it's a pretty quick jump from "I wonder if God is real," to, "I *know* God is real." Some may take a slower journey. For some, it may take multiple revelations, but that kind of insight is what leads them to believe.

And then that's where a lot of people get stuck - Believer. In fact, that's as far as some people think you need to go. Our churches are full of believers - they'll even identify themselves as such. "I'm a believer!" they'll say. And that's great! But we're not finished yet.

Someone who becomes a believer and thinks they're done is like the runner who stops running with one lap left in the race, thinking he's won! Just being a believer falls short of all that God offers us and all that he wants in this relationship.

The other night, I was with some friends and made this point that just believing in Jesus without it affecting your life would be like me deciding that simply because I signed the marriage certificate, I was going to have a happy marriage. It doesn't work that way. The strength and joy of my marriage is dependent upon what I put into it. If I love my wife, then I'll pursue her and my life will reflect that.

It's the same with God. Believing is great, but believing should affect the way we live. The writer of the book of Hebrews says:

*Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.*

*Hebrews 12:1b-2a*

He's writing to Believers and telling them that there's more. The race is still ongoing. There's still distance between us and Jesus, the center of our set. We must move from being a Believer who says, "I know God is real," to being a Lover, who says, "I know and am known by God."

If you were here last week and were paying attention, that language might sound familiar. Last week, I spoke of a friendship between two people where both knew and were known by the other. That is the model of relationship God offers us. It's the kind of relationship he wants us to have with other people, and it's the kind of relationship he wants to have with *us*.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God with our heart, mind, soul, and strength. That's a lot of love! Think about those words - to love with all my heart, all my mind, all my soul, and all my strength - every single part of me.

Practically, what does that look like? How do we get from Believer to Lover? I think the key is *Devotion*. When we begin to devote ourselves to God, and to realize his devotion to us, then we begin to see the fruit of that relationship.

I go back to my wife. How did I come to love my wife? It was a gradual process. Once we got to know each other, I eventually began devoting a little time to her. Then a little more. I started devoting a bit of effort toward treating her well. Then a little more. I started to get to know her deeper, and then a little deeper. And eventually, my heart, mind, soul, and strength were engaged in these acts of devotion toward Melody.

Being a lover is something you work at, but then it also kind of sneaks up on you. You work hard on the devotion side, then the fruit of that devotion is true love.

The interesting thing is that the God Pathway is very interlinked with the Friend Pathway. This is where so many of us get it wrong when it comes to things like sharing the good news of Jesus.

Sure, there are those times when you can share about Jesus and people will just say, "Yes!" Typically, this works well when people have never heard about Jesus before. The good news of Jesus is truly good news to those who have never heard it.

Unfortunately, in a place like Kenya, there are many, many people who have heard plenty about Jesus, but like Gandhi, they see Christians who don't act a whole lot like Christ, so the good news of Jesus doesn't seem like good news to them.

In those cases, that person's God Pathway can't be energized until their Friend Pathway is moving. It's amazing what happens to human response once you develop friendships. I've found that the most close-minded people are those whose friends all look, think, and act alike.

But when we invest in relationships with people *not* like us, then we begin to see things from a different perspective. That's why I think this church stands to play such a pivotal role in this city - because we are a *multi*-church - multi-tribal, multi-ethnic, multi-age, multi-faith. We're attempting to do something here that others say won't work, but God says, "Sure it will work. This is the way I created things to be!"

And so our friendships help lead us closer to God, who in turn helps us to love people better. The two are inextricably and universally linked.

So, where are you? Where are you on this pathway to God? Are you a Skeptic - someone who really doubts that God is real? Are you an Explorer - someone who has tons of questions, but is open to the idea of God? Maybe you're a Believer - you know God is real, but you're trying to figure out how to get close to him, what it all means, where you are on the map. Maybe you're a Lover - you know and are known by God, you love him with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Regardless of where you are, you have a responsibility to those around you - to help others along the journey, to recognize that you can learn from those around you, and you can encourage and strengthen them as well.

J. Philip Wogaman, a Methodist Minister, has written a really intriguing book called *What Christians Can Learn From Other Religions*. And while I don't agree with all of his conclusions, I do agree with his premise. We stand to learn from others who are seeking God.

Wogaman says he's learned about the grandeur of and reverence for God from Hindus, about the responsibility of chosenness from Jews, about the power of discipline from Muslims, the equality of women from Sikhs, the tragedy of war from Taoists, and the spiritual significance of the physical world from the ancient religions of Native Americans, Africans and Asians.

This church will be a church where we are opening up that kind of dialogue in this city. Not only are we going to sit down with people from different churches and Christian denominations, but we will sit down with people of different faiths and no faith at all, in an effort to learn and listen, rather than judge and confront.

We begin with a centered set mentality, we allow others to teach us, and we journey as a community on a pathway toward God. It won't always be easy. It will almost certainly be messy. But in the end, it will be Godly - because we will be loving him and loving people in a way that honors him.

Let's pray

## **Prayer**

We're going to close today with a time of personal response. And there several ways to respond:

### **1. Singing**

We're going to sing some songs together that help us reflect on some of these things.

While that singing is taking place, you will also have the opportunity for prayer.

### **2. Prayer**

If you need prayer for anything at all, we have people here who are eager to do that.

Also, while that is going on, you'll have a chance to take communion

### **3. Communion**

Communion is a symbolic act, instituted by Jesus as a way for us to remember the way he willingly died for us. The unleavened bread serves as a symbol of Jesus' body broken on the cross. The wine or juice symbolize his blood that was spilled for us.

We have people ready to serve you communion. Juice is on your left, wine is on your right. Feel free to partake of either, as it fits with your tradition. Just break off a piece of the bread, dip it in the cup, and eat.

We offer communion each week for *anyone* who wants to take it. There's no membership requirement or hoops to jump through. You are guests at this symbolic table of Jesus, so please feel free to partake.

### **4. Giving**

Lastly, during this time, you will have an opportunity to give financially to the work of this church. If you're a guest with us today, we don't expect you to give anything. However, for those who consider this your church home, and for those who believe in what we're trying to do here, this is our chance to give back to God a portion of what he has given us, and to support the work he has called this church to in Nakuru.

There is a tall box at the back with a slot in it. You can place your gifts in that box at any time as we are singing together.

So those are the four ways to respond: Singing, Prayer, Communion, and Giving. All will be happening simultaneously. There's no order you have to do them in. You don't have to do them all. You don't have to do any of them. This is your time to respond in whatever way you desire.

At the end of that time, I'll pray a prayer of blessing over you before you go.

### **Closing Prayer**