



The Purpose of Living, The Purpose of Dying

Introduction

Many people in this world are searching for purpose and meaning in life. In some segments of our society it's the "in" thing to do; it's exciting, albeit sometimes challenging, to ponder why we are here. Even Christians often probe where God might be leading them—and why!

Unless forced into it, however, few of us stop to consider the purpose or meaning of our deaths. We avoid the subject as much as possible. Nevertheless, this truth remains: Hate it, fear it, or ignore it, there's no escaping it. Death will get us all. You and I are dying right now—so are your friends and loved ones, your spouse, and your children. It's no fun to think about that, so most of us don't. We put it off, ignore, and deny death as long as possible.

Finally, though, death's cold presence makes itself known in all of our lives and, ready or not, we are forced to face it. Maybe that time will be the first time, and perhaps the only time, that you will actually be curious about the person named Jesus, whom Christians say defeated death and promised eternal life to all who believe. Maybe you have heard about Him before. Maybe at one time in your life you even *believed*. But you gave that up. You didn't need it. You managed pretty well on your own as you dealt with life. But death can't be managed. So, perhaps at this moment, you are willing to look for a little help.

That's what happened to Rob Casteel. At age 31, Rob turned a corner in his life and found himself face to face with death. Rob had AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), a controversial and fearful disease. Because of the social stigma attached to this disease, AIDS often kills the victim's spirit before it kills the body. Rob Casteel was one such victim. In the face of death, though, Rob found life. He left the following personal account so that you might find it too.

A Personal Journey from Death to Life The Testimony of Rob Casteel

September 5, 1987, is a date that will forever remain etched in my brain. That day arrived for most bringing the usual day-to-day humdrum. For me it arrived with an impact, a fury that virtually shook and shattered the very foundation of my sanity. (Or so I thought.) This was the day I discovered I had AIDS. I had just turned 31 years of age, and I suddenly found myself on death row.

"I have AIDS." What a statement that is! It's a statement I've had to struggle for months, diligently and fearfully, to be able to give it a voice. More than that, it's a fact to face, a truth to understand, and a reality to accept (and not necessarily in that order).

What exactly does it mean to have AIDS? What does one see, what does one feel when peering from the inside out? Beyond the countless infections that plague the body, the endless medications with the often sickening side-effects, and the constant

fear that every cough or headache might mean death—there’s a lot more to see and feel; for this is merely the beginning. This is merely the initiation.

It’s the bogeyman you feared from childhood; only this time, he’s real.

More often than not, you see pain and rejection, financial disaster, and loss of self-worth. You suffer a loneliness that only the dying can suffer: a deep, dark loneliness that no amount of morphine or tears can wash away. There are those who judge you, some who fear you, and the ones who simply forget you as an embarrassment to society. You reach out to the others and cling to each other like frightened children. You watch helplessly, as one by one, you see friends fall by the wayside. There’s nothing you can do except hope and cry and pray. It’s the bogeyman you feared from childhood; only this time, he’s real.

This is but one side of living and dying with AIDS, as there are always two sides to every coin. Contracting AIDS (or any fatal illness for that matter) does not have to stop your world. It certainly changes life as you know it, but it could very easily be a new beginning. You ask how could this be? How could something so disastrous, so fatal, be a “beginning” to anything except the end? I speak for myself and many others: faith in yourself and, more importantly, faith in an unshakable God is all that matters in this situation. If there is any other solution, I have yet to see it.

God does not make people sick; He does not indiscriminately disease a human body. Those who believe otherwise have a sad theology and concept of who God really is and how He operates. There are certain laws of the universe that cannot be tampered with. These laws were implemented for a purpose. God has bestowed upon us beauty, laughter, and the opportunity to love and be loved. We have rebelled. We have fought. We have left Him. So, in turn, we must accept the laws of darker consequence: disease, heartache and, eventually, death.

As I lay on my hospital bed that day with a temperature of 105, hovering between two worlds, I was acutely aware of straddling the line to eternity. Physically, pneumocystic carinii pneumonia racked my body and I suffered severe dehydration. Mentally I was at the point of delirium. Spiritually I was terrified. Then I did what most mortal men do whenever confronted by the great beyond, I prayed, and I prayed hard.

I recalled that God is a God of compassion, of love and forgiveness. He is a Father whose arms held more warmth and strength than I could ever comprehend. The clock was ticking. I had to pray, and I had to do so immediately.

Against the attending nurse’s orders, and at three in the morning, I somehow strapped the overhead IV bag to a wheelchair and made my way down eight floors to the hospital chapel. I was met by a security officer who curiously, yet politely, opened the locked doors, assuring me that I could take all the time I needed. His eyes offered understanding, and I knew that he had answered many requests such as mine. It’s wonderful how sometimes words are never needed.

I had spent so many years rejecting Him ... And now I needed Him?

Sitting in the darkness of the small sanctuary, I began to wonder what I was doing there. Doubts crept in. I felt so ashamed. I felt dirty and unworthy. Who was I to face God with my sad story? I had spent so many years rejecting Him, choosing instead to wallow in a world of filth and despair disguised as pleasure and fulfillment. And now I needed Him?

Then from somewhere images floated through my fever: images of Mary Magdalene the prostitute, Saul the persecutor, and King David, adulterer and murderer. Next the Scriptures: *“At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly”* (Romans 5:6). For me? Yes. *“And whoever comes to Me I will never drive away”* (John 6:37b). Even me? Yes, even me.

At that moment I fully realized the purpose and mission of the Man called Jesus. I tried to visualize His pain, His agony as the stakes were hammered through His hands, as the spear was viciously thrust into His side, as He was humiliated and spat upon. He accepted the entirety of the world’s sin and immorality onto His shoulders alone. Surely, I thought, the pain in His heart far outweighed the pain from His wounds. He felt every disease, every fear, every loneliness that mankind has ever felt or will ever feel.

The blood that poured down the cross that fateful day, the same blood that dripped and seeped into the earth, was not to be wasted. It was not reserved for anyone; it was given willingly for everyone. And that everyone included me. He had stamped my ticket, PAID IN FULL. It was my only ticket out, and it was up to me to use it.

The blood that poured down from the cross ... was not reserved for anyone; it was given willingly for everyone.

Sitting there with so many realizations crowding my head, my heart began to ache. I had lost all control with my life, and my soul was unbearably heavy. Another remembrance: *“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28).

Grasping the IV tubing with one hand and the altar with the other, I broke. I poured out my heart and guts to God. I did not ask Him for a divine and miraculous healing, but for forgiveness, peace and the strength to face my destiny. I made a solemn vow that should He not take me, should I walk from the hospital, I would devote whatever time He spared me to helping those less fortunate than myself. Regardless of His decision, I placed the total of my being safely within His hands. Lightning did not strike; thunder did not roar; there were no heavenly bells ringing out (at least none I could hear down here). What did happen was an incredible lifting of my spirit. A warmth and peace settled down somewhere deep inside of me. I genuinely felt the assurance that everything was going to be all right—even if it wasn’t.

The next morning my fever was gone and two days later, my lungs were clear. I left the hospital with new priorities and a new sense of well-being. I had found the purpose for living as well as dying. And I found that they are the same.

I thank God for my illness in the sense that it has brought me back into the realm of His being, and I would never ask for His intervention if such a healing would release me only to return to the sewer from which I crawled. He is all-knowing and sees far beyond our humanness. This knowledge has been more than enough to sustain me.

I had found the purpose for living as well as dying. And I found that they are the same.

I have since become one of my doctor’s “star” patients, offering encouragement to the newly diagnosed. I’ve looked into their eyes, full of uncertainty; I’ve held their hands, trembling with fear; and I’ve listened to their crushed dreams about a world that has been taken away. I’ve watched many live productively. I’ve watched more die.

As is usually the case, there are those who rebel with bitterness and self-pity, deciding that their hurt is the only hurt in existence. But then there are those who reach far beyond themselves. They cry out as wounded animals, pleading with God to soothe their soul. It is for all of these that I am here. Just as Jesus lovingly stretched out His hands to the lepers and the outcasts of His day, it is my Christian obligation to follow His example, without fear, without judgment, and with unconditional love. There is no other way.

Yes, I have AIDS and I may very well die soon. However, I have something else, something that many people who live to be a hundred years old may never have. I have a purpose. I have hope, and I have God.

Because of Christ's death and resurrection, I now live with Him!

Robert Eugene Casteel

August 4, 1956 - March 21, 1990

Early in January 1995, Lutheran Hour Ministries wrote to Rob at the address given on his manuscript to ask permission to publish his testimony. On January 21, we received a reply from Sandra McTaggart, who had cared for Rob for nearly two years. She wrote:

"Yes, yes, yes! Let his message ring forth! He wrote it as a means of self-healing, but he proudly shared it, and before he died on March 21, 1990, felt extremely blessed each time word came back to him ... that it had comforted someone, or had been an inspiration to someone

"As is usual, Rob suffered from a variety of infections at the end, and was totally blind and bedridden in his last five months, with a groshong tube through his chest wall directly into his heart muscle, for both medication and nutrition.

"Robert Eugene Casteel died with dignity and grace that humbled every 'strong' person who witnessed it.

"Even in his periods of dementia, he rambled about seeing the East Gate open and waiting for him! He never doubted!

"Rob ... came to live with me in June 1988. I was his sole caretaker until the last two weeks of his life but, while he could, he also took very good care of me! What a joy he was, and how very much richer the rest of my life will be for having known him!"

Yes, we live our lives in a world of sickness, sorrow and pain. We will all one day face that last great enemy, death. But, we do not do so without purpose or hope. We pray that your life is richer for having come to know Rob through his testimony, and that you might face life and death with confidence and trust in Jesus Christ who said,

"I am the Resurrection and the Life. The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die" (John 11:25-26a).

"Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

*Check out LHM's online store
for a variety of ministry resources*

If you would like to get hard-copy booklets
of this item, you can do so by going to

<http://www.lhmgift.org/storefront/products.asp?by=topic&id=7>.

There you will find this and other **Project Connect** booklets,
with many titles in Spanish as well. Subjects like peace,
divorce, forgiveness, cancer, gambling, post-traumatic
stress disorder and loneliness are only a few of the topics
sensitively addressed in these concise, Christ-centered volumes.



©1997 Lutheran Hour Ministries
Revised 2013

Lutheran Hour Ministries is a Christian outreach ministry supporting churches
worldwide in its mission of *Bringing Christ to the Nations-and the Nations to the Church*.

Unless noted otherwise, Scripture is taken from the HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®,
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.
Capitalization of pronouns referring to the Deity has been added and is not part of the original New International Version text.