

"CREATED TO BECOME LIKE CHRIST
(Adapted from *The Purpose Driven Life*)
(Rick Warren)

You were created to become like Christ.

From the very beginning, God's plan has been to make you like his Son, Jesus. This is your destiny and the third purpose of your life. God announced this intention at Creation: "Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in our image and likeness.'"

In all creation, only human beings, are made "in God's image." This is a great privilege and gives us dignity. We don't know all this phrase covers, but we do know some of the aspects it includes: Like God, we are spiritual beings—our spirits are immortal and will outlast our earthly bodies; we are intellectual—we can think, reason, and solve problems; like God, we are relational—we can give and receive real love; and we have a moral consciousness—we can discern right from wrong, which makes us accountable to God.

The Bible says that all people, not just believers, possess part of the image of God; that is why murder and abortion are wrong. But the image is incomplete and has been damaged and distorted by sin. So God sent Jesus on a mission to restore the full image that we have lost.

What does the full "image and likeness" of God look like? It looks like Jesus Christ! The Bible says Jesus is "the exact likeness of God," "the visible image of the invisible God," and "the exact representation of his being."

People often use the phrase "like father, like son" to refer to family resemblance. When people see my likeness in my kids, it pleases me. God wants his children to bear his image and likeness, too. The Bible says, "You were . . . created to be like God, truly righteous and holy."

Let me be absolutely clear: You will never become God, or even a god. That prideful lie is Satan's oldest temptation. Satan promised Adam and Eve that if they followed his advice, "ye shall be as gods." Many religions and New Age philosophies still promote this old lie that we are divine or can become gods.

This desire to become a god shows up every time we try to control our circumstances, our future, and people around us. But as creatures, we will never be the Creator. God doesn't want you to become a god; he wants you to become godly—taking on his values, attitudes, and character. The Bible says, "Take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you."

God's ultimate goal for your life on earth is not comfort, but character development. He wants you to grow up spiritually and become like Christ. Becoming like Christ does not mean losing your personality or becoming a mindless clone. God created your uniqueness, so he certainly doesn't want to destroy it. Christlikeness is all about transforming your character, not your personality.

God wants you to develop the kind of character described in the beatitudes of Jesus, the fruit of the Spirit, Paul's great chapter on love, and Peter's list of the characteristics of an effective and productive life. Every time you forget that character is one of God's purposes for your life, you will become frustrated by your circumstances. You'll wonder, "Why is this happening to me? Why am I having such a difficult time?" One answer is that life is supposed to be difficult! It's what enables us to grow. Remember, earth is not heaven!

Many Christians misinterpret Jesus' promise of the "abundant life" to mean perfect health, a comfortable lifestyle, constant happiness, full realization of your dreams, and instant relief from problems through faith and prayer. In a word, they expect the Christian life to be easy. They expect heaven on earth.

This self-absorbed perspective treats God as a genie who simply exists to serve you in your selfish pursuit of personal fulfillment. But God is not your servant, and if you fall for the idea that life is supposed to be easy, either you will become severely disillusioned or you will live in denial of reality.

Never forget that life is not about you! You exist for God's purposes, not vice versa. Why would God provide heaven on earth when he's planned the real thing for you in eternity? God gives us our time on earth to build and strengthen our character for heaven.

It is the Holy Spirit's job to produce Christlike character in you. The Bible says, "As the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more." This process of changing us to be more like Jesus is called sanctification, and it is the third purpose of your life on earth.

You cannot reproduce the character of Jesus in your own strength. New Year's resolutions, willpower, and best intentions are not enough. Only the Holy Spirit has the power to make the changes God wants to make in our lives. The Bible says, "God is working in you, giving you the desire to obey him and the power to do what pleases him."

Mention "the power of the Holy Spirit," and many people think of miraculous demonstrations and intense emotions. But most of the time the Holy Spirit's power is released in your life in quiet, unassuming ways that you aren't even aware of or can't feel. He often nudges us with "a gentle whisper."

Christlikeness is not produced by imitation, but by inhabitation. We allow Christ to live through us. "For this is the secret: Christ lives in you." How does this happen in real life? Through the choices we make. We choose to do the right thing in situations and then trust God's Spirit to give us his power, love, faith, and wisdom to do it. Since God's Spirit lives inside of us, these things are always available for the asking.



We must cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work. Throughout the Bible we see an important truth illustrated over and over: The Holy Spirit releases his power the moment you take a step of faith. When Joshua was faced with an impassible barrier, the floodwaters of the Jordan River receded only after the leaders stepped into the rushing current in obedience and faith. Obedience unlocks God's power.

God waits for you to act first. Don't wait to feel powerful or confident. Move ahead in your weakness, doing the right thing in spite of your fears and feelings. This is how you cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and it is how your character develops.

The Bible compares spiritual growth to a seed, a building, and a child growing up. Each metaphor requires active participation: Seeds must be planted and cultivated, buildings must be built—they don't just appear—and children must eat and exercise to grow.

While effort has nothing to do with your salvation, it has much to do with your spiritual growth. At least eight times in the New Testament we are told to "make every effort" in our growth toward becoming like Jesus. You don't just sit around and wait for it to happen.

Paul explains in Ephesians 4:22-24 our three responsibilities in becoming like Christ. First, we must choose to let go of old ways of acting. "Everything . . . connected with that old way of life has to go. It's rotten through and through. Get rid of it!"

Second, we must change the way we think. "Let the Spirit change your way of thinking." The Bible says we are "transformed" by the renewing of our minds. The Greek word for transformed, metamorphosis (used in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18), is used today to describe the amazing change a caterpillar goes through in becoming a butterfly. It is a beautiful picture of what happens to us spiritually when we allow God to direct our thoughts: We are changed from the inside out, we become more beautiful, and we are set free to soar to new heights.

Third, we must "put on" the character of Christ by developing new, godly habits; Your character is essentially the sum of you habits; it is how you habitually act. The Bible says, "Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

God uses his Word, people, and circumstances to mold us. All three are indispensable for character development. God's Word provides the truth we need to grow, God's people provide the support we need to grow, and circumstances provide the environment we need to practice Christlikeness. If you study and apply God's Word, connect regularly with other believers, and learn to trust God in difficult circumstances, I guarantee you will become more like Jesus. We will look at each of these growth ingredients in the chapters ahead.

Many people assume all that is needed for spiritual growth is Bible study and prayer. But some issues in life will never be changed by Bible study or prayer alone. God uses people. He usually prefers to work through people rather than perform miracles, so that we will depend on each other for fellowship. He wants us to grow together.

In many religions, the people considered to be the most spiritually mature and holy are those who isolate themselves from others in mountaintop monasteries, uninfected by contact with other people. But this is a gross misunderstanding. Spiritual maturity is not a solitary, individual pursuit! You cannot grow to Christlikeness in isolation. You must be around other people and interact with them. You need to be a part of a church and community. Why? Because true spiritual maturity is all about learning to love like Jesus, and you can't practice being like Jesus without being in relationship with other people. Remember, it's all about love—loving God and loving others.

Becoming like Christ is a long, slow process of growth. Spiritual maturity is neither instant nor automatic; it is a gradual, progressive development that will take the rest of your life. Referring to this process, Paul said, "This will continue until we are . . . mature, just as Christ is, and we will be completely like him."

You are a work in progress. Your spiritual transformation in developing the character of Jesus will take the rest of your life, and even then it won't be completed here on earth. It will only be finished when you get to heaven or when Jesus returns. At that point, whatever unfinished work on your character is left will be wrapped up. The Bible says that when we are finally able to see Jesus perfectly, we will become perfectly like him: "We can't even imagine what we will be like when Christ returns. But we do know that when he comes we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is."

Much confusion in the Christian life comes from ignoring the simple truth that God is far more interested in building your character than he is anything else. We worry when God seems silent on specific issues such as "What career should I choose?" The truth is, there are many different careers that could be in God's will for your life. What God cares about most is that whatever you do, you do in a Christlike manner.

God is far more interested in what you are than in what you do. We are human beings, not human doings. God is much more concerned about your character than your career, because you will take your character into eternity, but not your career.

The Bible warns, "Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out . . . Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you." You must make a counter-culture decision to focus on becoming more like Jesus. Otherwise, other forces like peers, parents, coworkers, and culture will try to mold you into their image.

Sadly, a quick review of many popular Christian books reveals that many believers have abandoned living for God's great purposes and settled for personal fulfillment and emotional stability. That is narcissism, not discipleship. Jesus did not die on the cross just so we could live comfortable, well-adjusted lives. His purpose is far deeper: He wants to make us like himself before he takes us to heaven. This is our greatest privilege, our immediate responsibility, and our ultimate destiny.