

You all know the term “the good old days,” right? It’s a term used to express a longing for those times from the past, times we reminisce about that seemed more gentle and pleasing and enjoyable. And given all that is happening nowadays, I would guess that most of us yearn for the good old days, don't we? But before you think I'm going to take you on a long trip down memory lane, I'm really just talking about the good old days of 2019. Because 2020 so far, has been a total bust.

Just think of some of the things that have happened in these first six months of 2020: Iran launched ballistic missiles at U.S bases in Iraq and then shot down a commercial airliner by mistake, there was the Senate impeachment trial, devastating Australian wildfires, Kobe Bryant and his young daughter died in a tragic helicopter accident, of course – the coronavirus pandemic, and now all the civil and social unrest that's happening. I don't know about you, but I miss the relative calm of 2019 with just mundane things like the Mueller Report, the college admissions scandal, Brexit - Briton leaving the European Union, the fire at Notre Dame, and the escapades of Harvey Weinstein and crew to upset me. Now I'm obviously being facetious, but the year 2020 does seem like God has given Satan a mighty long leash. It seems more and more evident that we live in a world where things do not always work out for the best, where the innocent suffer unjustly, where there is a huge amount of unreasonable tragedy and unexplained pain and pointless suffering. We live in a world that, on the whole, neither worships nor obeys our God. And the motto of our age is not, “What does the Lord require of you,” but rather, “What does life owe me?” Yet, as Christians we are called to be different. We are to be a light in the darkness, a beacon on a hill, the salt of the earth, a breath of fresh air to this world, all because of the hope and joy we profess in Jesus Christ. So why does it seem we aren't making a difference? Well maybe we should ask, why is it that we sometimes question life and let things get us down? Why do even we question our meaning and purpose in this life? And when we start to think like this, we can go one of two ways. We can try to let ourselves off the hook, saying, I’m doing the best I can, I'm just one person, what can I do? Or we can say, “What does the Lord require of me?” That's why I want to discuss a great book written some years ago by Pastor Rick Warren called the *Purpose Driven Life*. Because I think some of the things he discusses in his book could help us look at what's happening in the country and our lives today, and help us make a difference. So, let's begin.

“It’s not about you.” “It’s not about you.” With these four words, Rick Warren opens his book. And, truthfully, those are some hard words for us to hear. Because, down deep, there's probably a little part of us that does indeed feel, “It is about me.” After all, I don't want to get sick or die because of the coronavirus, and I worry about the political and economic fall-out that will result. I'm concerned about the social and moral fabric of this country, for me and also for my children and grandchildren. Perhaps I am a little selfish, as a relatively successful middle-class person wanting to enjoy life's pleasures, or as a parent wanting to raise my children and enjoy my grandchildren, or as any person who wants some of the perks and privileges of life. Yes, perhaps, it's a little about me.

But Warren isn't saying this to condemn us, rather he's presenting it as a challenge. What he's saying is that when we look at our lives from only our point of view, we're starting in the wrong place. Instead, we need to start with the One who created life itself, Almighty God. Warren tells us, “You were born *by* His purpose and *for* His purpose. It’s all about becoming what God created you to be.” So he suggests we look at our lives and all that is happening around us in three ways. First, that life is a test. Not a test as in the trials we might go through in life, but a test as to our accountability as Christians. Second, that life is a trust. And third, that life is a temporary assignment. Life is a test, a trust and a temporary assignment.

First, life is a “test.” This probably is the most difficult of the three. Because I imagine this idea of being tested puts us on the defensive. For being tested means our actions and decisions and motives are being critically evaluated by somebody else, who knows more and is considered better than we are. And you know what – you’re right. That “somebody else” is Almighty God. And when life presents us with difficult issues and situations, God does indeed observe how we handle them. Being tested is biblical. God told Moses he would test the Israelites to see if they would follow his instruction. King David once prayed, “I know, my God, that you test the heart.” At the feeding of 5,000, Jesus asked Philip the question – where were they going to get food for everyone. Then scripture tells us, “Jesus asked this only to test him, for Jesus knew what He was going to do.” So yes, we are being tested on a daily basis. Now I can go on and speak to you in generalities, but I thought a modern-day illustration might be best to make my point. It's told by Tony Campolo, and it's about the inner-city missionary program his church sponsors. I think you'll find his story very relevant given the situation our country finds itself in today.

Campolo's program recruits scores of college students to come to Philadelphia to work and minister to the young children who live there in the government housing projects. These college students teach the children about the Bible, sing songs and play games with them, as well get them involved in various cultural enrichment programs. At noontime, the children return to their apartment buildings to get some lunch from their parents. One day, a boy went up to his third-floor apartment and found a man there beating his mother, slapping her around, and yelling at her to give him money. It was his mother's "boyfriend," who was a junkie, and he wanted her welfare check to nurse his habit. The boy ran to the window and began to scream for help. "Our college volunteers knew exactly what to do," Campolo relates. They immediately called the police who seemed to be omnipresent in this overpopulated housing project. (Just as an aside, I wonder who they're going to call when they disband the police?) Anyway, the police responded almost immediately, charging up the steps and barging through the door, trapping the man in the apartment. There was no escape for him. It was found out later that he was a two-time convict and he must have known that if he was arrested again, he'd be put away for a long, long time. Because in desperation he ran to the window and jumped out, probably not fully thinking, given the chaos of the moment, that he was on the third floor of the building. The man jumped and landed on a large metal laundry pole that literally impaled him. For two or three minutes he convulsed and shuttered on that pole, then he was dead. "As horrible as that scene was," Campolo says, "what was even more tragic was the group of 40 children who stood around the pole watching the man die. The real horror of the tragedy was that it didn't upset them very much. Within a half an hour, after the body was removed, the children were back at play. You would think that children who had just witnessed an event like this would be traumatized. In an affluent white suburb, these children would've been put into special grief counseling for days. Not so in the inner-city ghetto. These children were hardened. They had seen too much death. They had witnessed drugs ravaging their families, turning their sisters into prostitutes and their brothers into pimps and drug pushers. Tragedy was an everyday event, and they had become used to it, their hearts and minds hardened. That, of course, was the saddest thing of all. But after that terrible day, several of those college students who worked with us, committed their lives to urban ministry. They believed that God had tested them by what they had witnessed. They believed that God had called them to soften the hearts of those inner-city children by caring for them and loving them into the kingdom of God."

That's an incredibly powerful story. One that begs the question, "In what ways might God be testing you?" To love kindness, do justice, and walk humbly with the Lord and do his work. It's something to

consider, given all that is happening in our country and communities. You see, when we view life as a test, we are moved make a difference.

Second, life is a trust. We are entrusted to take care of all that God has given us. The Psalmist writes, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it.” We are only God’s stewards – the managers, the caretakers, of God’s property. Again, this may be hard for us to understand. We like to think of ourselves as being “the owners.” But we need to modify our view of ownership. Remember, “it’s not about you.” You brought nothing into this world, and you will take nothing out of it. Therefore, it’s important for us to take our focus off our ownership of things and instead ask, “how will I use what God has entrusted to me?” You know, today, Linda sang "God is watching us," so let me ask, how are you caring for our environment. God's creation? How are you spending your money? Are you charitable? Are you generous enough? The Bible says your body is a temple of God. Are you treating your body with the respect it deserves? How about your time - are spending your time on worthwhile, Godly pursuits? And, how are you caring for other people. Remember, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Are you treating others, all others in the same way you want to be treated? God has entrusted us with so much, and he expects us to be worthy stewards.

And finally, life is a temporary assignment. Remember, earth is not our final destination. We are only visitors here for a little while. That’s why the Psalmist says, “I am as an alien on the earth.” C. S. Lewis calls this world, “enemy occupied territory.” Rick Warren says, “We’re not completely happy here because we’re not supposed to be! Earth is not our final home; we were created for something more, something much better.” And we have the assurance of something better, something beyond this world, because of what Jesus said to His disciples before He was crucified. He told them, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you.”

Yes, life is a test, a trust and a temporary assignment. And when we, as Christians, begin to see life this way, it will give us the strength, the encouragement, the desire, to go out and make a difference. Because the world will not change until and unless we change. I'm going to close by reading again from today's gospel, where Jesus tells us not to worry, but to live in his purpose. Let us listen with new ears. “What I’m trying to do here is get you to relax. Relax and not be so anxious over things, so preoccupied with getting, that you can't respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way he

works, fuss over these earthly things, but you know both God and how he works. So steep yourself in God-reality and God-initiative. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Don't be afraid of missing out, because you are my dearest friends! And the Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself." Yes, brothers and sisters, that is God's purpose, when we embrace the world for his sake and for ours. Amen.