

Foreword by DAVID KINNAMAN

DISCOVER YOUR CALLING AND CREATE
THE LIFE YOU WERE MEANT TO LIVE

YOU ON PURPOSE

DR. STEPHANIE SHACKELFORD
and BILL DENZEL

Featuring new research from BARNA

“*You on Purpose* is a sound book of wisdom for those searching for their life’s calling and steps to walk it out. It doesn’t matter what life season you’re in when you pick up this book, it will change you and the path you’re on for the better!”

Lysa TerKeurst, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author
and president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

“For years, people have come to me and asked me for advice on what job to take, what career to pursue, and what vocation to embrace. Finally, I have a practical book I can hand them with confidence. Stephanie Shackelford and Bill Denzel have done a fantastic job outlining a clear, faithful decision-making framework that will help a generation get out of career paralysis and the angst that comes with not knowing what to do with your life.”

Carey Nieuwhof, author, speaker, podcaster

“*You on Purpose* is a simple, practical guide to helping you discover your God-given calling and gifts. This book enables you to redefine what you want your life to be about to help you live a purposeful life.”

Rebekah Lyons, bestselling author of *Rhythms of Renewal* and *You Are Free*

“Working in a university setting, it is common to find students who are uncertain of their career path or vocation. Shackelford and Denzel have written an ideal text that faith-based colleges and universities can adopt for their first-year seminars, career centers, mentor programs, and senior capstones to help students identify their true calling. Packed

with insightful research, thoughtful journaling exercises, and relevant examples, this practical resource invites readers on a self-discovery process that ultimately leads to a better understanding of how their passions and context inform their purpose.”

Stella Erbes, PhD, divisional dean and associate professor of teacher education, Pepperdine University

“Purpose is life-changing. It provides the clarity, focus, and inspiration we all need to live out our intended design. *You on Purpose* provides insightful research, helpful framing, and serves as a practical guide for anyone seeking to live out their calling.”

Charles Lee, CEO at Ideation and author of *Good Idea. Now What?*

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DR. STEPHANIE SHACKELFORD

and BILL DENZEL



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For John, Grant, and Macy—
you bring tremendous purpose to my life.

And for Mom and Dad—
you taught me that the best place to be is where God calls you.

S.S.



For my mother and father, Marina and Emil, bold adventurers
who traveled to new lands to see their dreams come true—
thank you for everything.

And for Amorisa, Zion, and XuXu—
I can't wait to see your callings unfold as we
journey through life together.

B.D.

We must set out to discover what we are called to do and what we are made for, and then after we discover it, we should set out to do it with all of the strength and all of the power that we have in our system. When you discover your life's worth, set out to do it so well that the living, the dead, or the unborn couldn't do it better. And no matter what it is, never consider it insignificant because if it is for the upbuilding of humanity it has cosmic significance. And so if it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Rafael painted pictures. Sweep streets like Michelangelo carved marble. Sweep streets like Beethoven composed music. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, "Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well."

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

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FOREWORD

What should I do with my life?

How do I discover my true calling?

What should I do next?

What is my purpose?

Life's Big Questions, such as these, often rattle around the human brain. Everyone asks them. When you do, it means you're alive and connecting the dots between your present and your future. And, if you're anything like me, wrestling with these matters doesn't necessarily go away by settling into a good job or even by growing older. I've found that existential questions form in my mind like puddles after a soaking rain.

Just as storm clouds gather, life throws us into vexing seasons of discernment and decision-making, often fueled by doubt, disillusionment, disappointment, or just plain drudgery. When this happens, we must set off to wander and wonder what we are here on earth for. We seek direction. I'm guessing you picked up this book at a time in your life when you are contemplating deep questions about what's next.

These seasons of life may heat up or cool off, but they never completely go away. Whether you're just beginning to ponder your

life ahead, in the middle of your working years, or considering the final season of life, everyone wants to live *on purpose*.

That's what this wonderful book, *You on Purpose*, is all about—helping you to answer these kinds of tough questions about the future you're stepping into.

Now, a relevant question is *how* to best answer Life's Big Questions. What is the best way to practice discernment and make decisions? Is there a better approach to discover our calling?

I believe so, absolutely.

I lead a company—Barna Group—that answers important questions by mastering the power of observation. Our team has spent the last three years doing a massive amount of research on how people find purpose. You'll encounter snapshots of our wide-ranging project as you read. We interviewed thousands of people just like you, who are on the journey to discover their calling. Our team has uncovered persistent and thorny myths about meaning and purpose and calling that far too many of us wrongly believe. We've diligently listened to experts who have lots of experience and wisdom to offer on finding your life purpose: people who serve as life coaches and career counselors as well as those who are just a bit ahead of you on the path to discovering what it means to live with purpose. We can all learn from these purpose-oriented individuals. They aren't perfect, but they seem to know a secret code that has helped them discover and live the life they were meant to live. You will hear more about this amazing group of purpose-oriented people as you dive into this book. Unlike a lot of books on calling, this project is based on a rigorous attention to patterns in the data and the stories we've collected.

My colleagues and friends, Stephanie Shackelford and Bill Denzel, have distilled all this input into four practical steps—a powerful, insights-based framework you can use to discern and make decisions. Think of Stephanie and Bill as your guides to finding your purpose, with a handful of key mileposts along the road. I can't wait for you to learn from all that they have learned.

For her part, Stephanie has a doctorate in this field. I was introduced to her work by virtue of her thoroughness and thoughtfulness; she had summarized a mountain of work in a compelling “poster” of her findings. I was captivated by her ability to turn complex ideas into useful insights. She’s an accomplished career coach. She specializes in assisting Millennials and Gen Zers to think about what’s next for them, but her work applies broadly to all groups. She’s been working with Barna on this research project for nearly three years.

For as long as I’ve known Bill, which is more than twenty-five years, he’s helped people practice discernment and make good decisions. He’s a servant and cares deeply about the flourishing of those around him. That is actually surprisingly rare. He’s helped me immensely when Life’s Big Questions hit hard. He’s been a driving force on Barna’s Vocation Project for the last five years, and this book represents his passion and dedication to making people’s lives better.

Together, Bill and Stephanie serve as Barna Senior Fellows and create a formidable team in their calling, which is to help you find your calling.

Our vision for this project is to unleash more people who live with a deep sense of their purpose. It is our firm conviction that discovering your purpose comes ultimately from knowing that God has made you—that the most important things about you were gifts given to you by your Creator. That the process of discernment is a journey to align ourselves to what God is doing in our lives and saying to our hearts.

What our project shows unequivocally is that you are not alone. You are not isolated or strange for asking Life’s Big Questions. The research shows that literally thousands upon thousands—sometimes even *millions!*—of other human beings feel the same way as you do. It’s okay to struggle and to wrestle. Many other people—maybe your coworker, your neighbor, or your family member—are grappling with the same kinds of questions as you

are. You are normal to be asking what to do with your life, whether you're nineteen or ninety!

We are all trying to find our place in this world, to live *on purpose*.

We all want to know what to do with our lives.

We all want to live with a sense of our truest calling.

We all want to have confidence that we are doing the right thing.

We hope this book, *You on Purpose*, is your go-to guide to that journey.

David Kinnaman
Bestselling author
President, Barna Group



1

YOU ON PURPOSE

A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT YOUR CALLING

Each one of us has some kind of vocation. We are all called by God to share in His life and in His Kingdom. Each one of us is called to a special place in the Kingdom. If we find that place we will be happy. If we do not find it, we can never be completely happy. For each one of us, there is only one thing necessary: to fulfill our own destiny, according to God's will, to be what God wants us to be.

THOMAS MERTON

■ JOSELYN BEARS A TATTOO across her right shoulder blade that reads “Here be dragons” in her own handwriting. Legend has it that ancient maps marked uncharted realms with that phrase, indicating unexplored and potentially dangerous territory that lay beyond the known lands. To Joselyn, “here be dragons” means

intrigue and mystery—primary values of hers. She is always ready for adventure and often asks herself, “What’s next?”

When Joselyn graduated from college, she took a job at a start-up and nannied on the side. The work at the start-up left her feeling unfulfilled, so she took a job at a bakery. She would wake up while the rest of the world was still sleeping, leave her apartment in Brooklyn, and walk three blocks to the subway in the dark. After a full eight hours at the bakery, she would hang up her apron and swap pastry dough for Play-Doh to nanny a toddler and preschooler for the rest of the day. It was a grind but a necessity to live in New York City, which was her dream since college. The hard part was that neither job felt like a calling. As she says, “At that point I really had no idea where I was going.”

When a friend asked for help planning her wedding, Joselyn agreed—mostly out of love for her friend. The wedding was a huge success, and her friend, knowing Joselyn was frustrated with her current work, suggested that she should consider becoming a wedding planner. Joselyn remembers cringing at the idea as she pictured the stereotypical image and said, “That just isn’t who I am.” But deep down, the idea struck a chord. She kept turning it over in her heart and mind. “I sat on the idea for a couple of weeks and eventually realized that maybe all wedding planners don’t have to be the same.”

Joselyn took on some simple weddings on the side to test it out. The next thing she knew, she had an entire wedding season booked. Today she has a thriving event planning business, and her days of walking to the subway at 3:00 a.m. and nannying a couple of kids in Manhattan are over. Joselyn recognizes her calling as being a change maker in the event industry. She also enjoys giving back to her community through her work. While her work is challenging, she finds joy and fulfillment in it now that she can see it as a calling.

The frustration and uncertainty that Joselyn felt in her first few jobs are common among young adults starting their career

journeys. But the truth is that too many of us—at all stages of our careers—are living on the edge of the map, where the dragons live, in this time of great change. Perhaps you were in your dream job, thinking everything was set, when you were laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now you’re wondering, *Where do I go from here?* Or maybe you’re a mom preparing to reenter the workforce after a decade at home, thinking, *Do I have what it takes?* Or it could be you’re approaching the close of your career and asking, *What’s next for me?*

Regardless of who we are, when we look at a map, we want to see a blinking marker that clearly indicates our present location. We want to be able to type in our desired destination and hit the “Directions” button. But when it comes to our calling and the future, it feels like we’re being forced to travel through “Here be dragons” territory to get there. Adventurous, yes, but also dangerous and uncertain. *Will I fall off the face of the earth if I go in that direction?* As we look ahead and try to make informed decisions about our lives, the rush of activity, technology, and unplanned things like pandemics blur our vision. How can we make decisions about our work—much less have a vision for our futures—when we can’t see what’s ahead? What’s going to emerge from the haze? The unknown is at best disorienting but more often leaves us fearful and anxious. What will we do?

Who Are You and Why Are You Here?

What are you going to do with your life? is a huge question that we all feel like we’re supposed to know the answer to. That’s why you picked up this book, right? Whether you’re just starting out on your journey or are well down the road and want (or are being forced) to change direction, you need to know what to do with your life. You want to gain a clear vision so that you are not living by accident but on purpose. We’re here to help you catch that vision and create a plan.

To start, understand this: **You were made on purpose, for a purpose.** You were handcrafted with great intention, by a loving Creator who has had a plan for you since the beginning of time. Every fiber in your being knows this is true. There's a place for you—you just need to find it! Discovering that purpose is the journey of a lifetime. And while it will take your whole lifetime to

completely realize your calling, there are things you can do today to start catching glimpses of it, so that you can take steps in the right direction—toward your life's purpose. By finding the right path and walking in it, you'll not only eventually accomplish your purpose, you'll also live a good life filled with meaning and satisfaction. And deep down, that's what all of us desire.

Vocation does not come from a voice “out there” calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice “in here” calling me to be the person I was born to be.

—Parker Palmer

dignity. And we want to discover that special role for which we were uniquely created. In short, we want to know our calling.

We wrote *You on Purpose* to help you discover that calling. Our hope is to help you gain a vision for who you are and what you should do with your life and develop a plan to get there.

How, you ask, is this even possible? Can I really know myself and what I'm here on earth to do? Or are we all just destined to stumble through life without any idea of why we're here?

We believe God has created a unique plan for each one of us—a calling, purpose, or vocation—and he wants us to find it. It's not hidden, but in the midst of all the distractions and competing messages we face every day, our calling needs to be uncovered, rescued from beneath all the layers of stuff (good and bad) that

obscure it in the course of our daily lives. We must get away from all the noise in order to hear our Caller telling us who we truly are, why he made us, and what he has planned for our lives. It's a process that takes time and intentionality. That's what this book is all about.

The Process

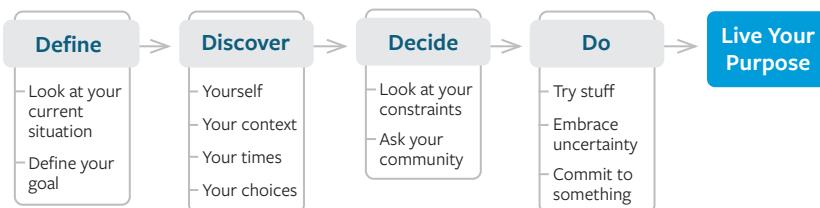
As researchers, when we want to understand something, we use a simple process—one that helps us take a closer look, strip away all the fluff, and get to the heart of the matter. Barna, one of the nation's leading social and market research firms, developed a proven research process that we can apply to understanding our life's calling as well. Barna's process has four steps:

1. **Define:** Assess the situation and define the goal
2. **Discover:** Design and implement a research-based solution
3. **Decide:** Analyze, understand, and explain the data gathered
4. **Do:** Take action based on what you've learned

The four sections in this book will walk you through these steps as you seek to discover your calling. In Part 1: Define, you'll look at your current situation and set your intention for what you want to achieve. Part 2: Discover is the research phase, where you'll dig deep into who you are as well as your context, times, and available choices. Then it's on to Part 3: Decide, where you begin to narrow things down and zero in on what your calling might be. Finally, in Part 4: Do, you'll start taking action—doing things to move toward your calling, one step at a time.

To understand this subject, we surveyed thousands of people about their views on career and calling. We interviewed career counseling professionals to get their input on what has worked

You on Purpose Process Map



best in their experience. And we spoke to a number of successful people from diverse professions as well as some who are just starting out. Throughout this book you'll see statistics and hear real stories from these people—individuals who are wrestling with or have found answers to hard questions about their calling.

All that research was done for one purpose: to help you discover and move into your calling. Our goal was to gain useful insights that would help us guide you toward a meaningful and fulfilling life. On these pages we dive into what we learned and try to bust the myths we all tend to believe about purpose and calling. We'll guide you through a framework to help you understand who you are and what you're uniquely positioned to do.

People Who Understand the Times and Know What to Do

Barna's purpose is to understand culture and interpret it for Christians and Christian leaders. This mission is based on the story in 1 Chronicles 12, when David was banished to the wilderness and God began to surround him with warriors who would help make him king. The tribe of Issachar sent two hundred chiefs and all their relatives. Their role as those "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (v. 32) was an essential function of the army God assembled for David. That same role is Barna's calling in the world today.

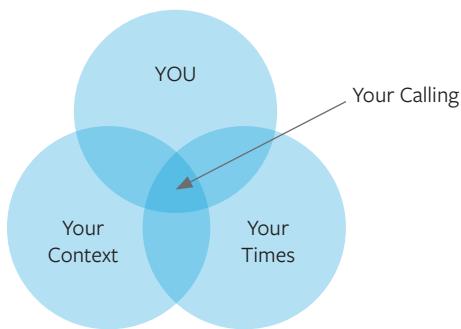
In order to gain a clear vision of our calling and navigate the confusing tide of change surrounding us, we must *understand the times* just like the tribe of Issachar did. At the end of each section in the book, we provide a research summary to highlight important themes seen in the data that affect how you approach your calling. These “Field Notes” are intended to help you on your journey.

Equally important, we must *understand ourselves* and know who we are. While it isn’t stated in 1 Chronicles, the tribe of Issachar must have known the strengths, capabilities, and anointing of King David and his army (who they were), in addition to understanding the times, in order to determine what to do.

Finally, the tribe of Issachar also needed to *understand the context* that King David and his army were operating in—their immediate surroundings and situation—in order to develop a plan of action. We, too, need to understand our context, because it shapes our calling and the options available to us. It will help us know what to do.

To find your specific, individual calling, you need to know who you are (yourself), where you’ve been placed (your context), and what’s happening in your world (your times) so that you can determine what to do. This is what we call our “Framework for Calling Discovery,” depicted in the Venn diagram below. The options for

Framework for Calling Discovery



your calling are found in the overlap between these three circles. In the pages to come, we'll guide you in a process of defining those options, identifying which ones seem best to you, and deciding how to take action.

Your Guides

Research is a tool to help us understand more deeply. It's not about the facts and data. It's about the knowledge and insight the data can provide. And ultimately, it's about people and their lives—in this case, you and your life. Consider this a research project on yourself. In this process you'll gather facts about yourself and your situation. Through these facts, God guides us toward what he wants us to do. But the breakthroughs only come when you take the time to consider those facts deeply—when you step back, look at, and listen to what God is communicating to you. That's when insight is gained. Be ready to be surprised by what you find—hidden in plain sight—when you look closely at yourself, your situation, and your times using this process.

The insights will be yours alone, as unique as your DNA. This book is simply meant to be something to assist you in uncovering *your* story. Our hope as authors is to serve as advisors and guides. And just like any good guides, we've traveled this road ourselves. We've used this process in our own lives and the lives of our kids and clients.

The theme of calling is one that both of us have felt and thought deeply about for years. Stephanie wrote her doctoral thesis on vocation and calling, and in this book she shares some of what she learned from her years of study. She is the founder of two college and career coaching companies, teaches at Vanderbilt University, and works with Barna as a Senior Fellow.

Bill's passion for helping people discover their calling and live a good life comes from his work mentoring creative people—including his son, who is currently in college and trying to figure

out his life's path. A lifelong reader and writer, Bill has worked in advertising, marketing, and publishing and now runs a creative and literary agency. He was vice president at Barna for over five years.

Though we're serving as your guides, we are on the journey with you as well. We both still have questions about how our own lives and callings are going to play out, discovering as we go. With Stephanie in the early stages of her career, and Bill solidly in midlife and midcareer, we each bring our unique perspectives to the table and offer what we've learned through our coaching, mentoring, and working experiences. We'll share some of our stories, and the stories of those we've worked with, to give you ideas and examples of how to discover your own purpose.

Mostly, though, we're here to draw *your* story out. If we were across the table from you right now (and as we write, that's what we imagine, sitting across the table at a favorite coffee shop, having a personal conversation) we would be doing less talking and more listening. What *you* think about your life is the important thing here. So, to try to approximate a conversation, you need to talk to this book—by stopping and imagining what you would say to us at that coffee shop as we ask you questions about your life. Give us your thoughts (maybe not out loud if you're in public). Do it in writing. Go buy a new journal just for this process. Or find someone you trust who is also in a similar stage of self-discovery and agree to accompany each other on this journey with weekly check-ins and conversations. When doing so, protect yourself—make sure it's someone who believes in you and knows how amazing you are.

Before We Begin

As we get started, here are a few key principles to keep in mind.

A Calling Implies a Caller

When we use the term *calling*, it implies that someone is on the other end of the line, calling us. For us as Christians, we know

that it's God who calls us—our Creator who made us with a good plan in mind. A vocation is not a self-directed creation of who I want to be. It is, by definition, a calling from a Caller—given and received, not fashioned solely out of one's own wants, desires, and inclinations. Sometimes a calling goes against our natural grain (think of Moses) and sometimes it aligns with our strengths (think of Michael Jordan). But it is always assigned, not selected. Otherwise, we'd call it a "choosing" or something like that! So while the word "calling" is widely used and understood (even in very secular arenas) as meaning something we were made for, wired into our very being, that we didn't choose for ourselves, people don't always acknowledge the logical extension of that idea: there is a Caller who made us that way. In this book we acknowledge our Caller and look for his involvement in helping us to discover what our calling is.

We All Start with the Same Calling

For Christians, the most foundational part of our vocation is to follow Christ and base our lives on his teaching. We are to be the presence of Christ in the world. This is our primary calling. Your secondary calling, then, is personalized, describing what a life based on Christ looks like for you—depending on your personality, strengths, interests, opportunities, the current time and place in which you live, the context of your family, relationships, community, society, and, of course, your work. This secondary calling is what we will try to help you find. It's a way of seeing your life as integrated for one great purpose.

Calling, Vocation, and Purpose

As you've probably noticed by now, we use the terms *calling*, *vocation*, and *purpose* somewhat interchangeably. Our definition for these terms is *all the special activities that God created you to perform in the world—a fulfillment of his intention and design for you—which will naturally result in service or benefit*

to others. Calling includes the ways we think about our work in the world, our neighborliness, our involvement in community, our support of the next generation, our generosity, and our free time, to name just a few of the things that make up a good life.

Vocation: Not a Synonym for Work

Your vocation certainly includes your job, or the work you get paid for, but it also encompasses your broader purpose. It can help address those questions of *What am I here for?* and *What am I meant to do with my life?* Each person longs to know the answer to these questions. And while we don't claim to have the exact answer for you in this book, our hope is that these words, stories, and examples will draw you closer to understanding your purpose through the step-by-step process we provide.

Work, yes, but also families, and neighbors, and citizenship, locally and globally—all of this and more is seen as vocation, that to which I am called as a human being, living my life before the face of God.

—Steven Garber

Calling Unfolds over Time, on a Winding Path

Your calling isn't revealed in one flash of insight; it unfolds as you take repeated steps in the right direction. If you're willing to do the work, we think we can help get you started in the right direction. It's also essential to understand that the road to your purpose is never a straight path. It's a journey that involves twists, turns, and detours through the unknown—all the things that make a life interesting. In this unknown landscape and these uncertain times, let this book be a map, guiding you to a clearer picture of where you should be headed and which road you should take.

Journal the Journey

Set aside some time daily to work through the questions in each chapter as you’re reading through this book. Treat yourself to a new journal just for capturing the thoughts you have, the answers to the questions, and anything you think God is saying to you. The more time you can take in reflection and contemplation, the more you’ll get out of the process. Dig deep and be honest with yourself.

Choose Your Traveling Companions Carefully

Choose good companions to give you feedback along the way—a loving community that will be honest with you without throwing cold water on your dreams. As we mentioned earlier, perhaps you can find one or two individuals who can accompany you on this journey. Support each other as you talk about what you’re learning and hearing.

Enjoy Yourself

You’re diving into some deep waters. Answering life’s basic questions is one of the most complex, difficult things you can do. It’s hard work, so make sure you take time to enjoy the truths

Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great.

—Mark Twain

you’re discovering about yourself. As you unearth the true you—removing all the junk you and others have placed on you over the years—notice what an amazing creation you are! No one else is exactly like you. Nurture that unique creation and take care of yourself. You may not be used to doing that. You may be accustomed to only being dutiful and doing what others want or need you to do. As you discover more about yourself, try doing some things that you’ll enjoy—just for yourself. It’s part of the process. Enjoy you!

God is not hiding your calling from you. He promises that when you seek his wisdom, you will find it. He has placed clues all around you. In this process, you'll learn to see them. Have confidence: when you pursue God's good purpose for your life, you will find it. Step out on this journey with honesty, courage, openness, and curiosity. Prepare your heart to listen, and then be ready to respond.

Let's find out what it means to be you, on purpose.

**Ask and it will
be given to you;
seek and you will
find; knock and
the door will be
opened to you.**

—Matthew 7:7

QUESTIONS

- 1** What emotions are you feeling as you start this journey?
- 2** How are you feeling about your future? Are you optimistic and hopeful or feeling anxious and fearful? Be honest with yourself about where you are now, at the starting point of this process.
- 3** Do you feel like you have inklings of what your calling is already? If so, list them.
- 4** Who is a safe person (or two) whom you can invite to walk through this process with you? Reach out to them today.

PART 1

DEFINE

Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself.

VIKTOR FRANKL

ABOVE ALL THINGS, the human heart seeks happiness. But what will make us happy? And is happiness truly the ultimate goal?

The journey toward discovering your life's purpose starts with a pause. The first thing to do is to stop, take a look around, and consider deeply where you find yourself today. The process starts by taking the time to define your current situation and what it is you're truly after. We all want a feeling of fulfillment, a sense of satisfaction. We want to know that we matter, that we have a place in the world, that our lives are being lived on purpose. These are life's deepest questions, and every heart longs to know the answers.

Let's start by agreeing on this: you are here for a reason—a God-given purpose, designed into every part of your being. So

stop for a moment. Look around at where you are right now. This is your starting point. Say a word of gratitude for everything that has brought you here, the good and the bad, because beginnings are part of God's plan too. Now where do you want to head?

Though you may feel uncertain, allow hope to fill your heart as you embark on this journey. Get ready to explore in Part 1: Define. Good things are ahead!

You on Purpose Process Map

