



## When Normalcy Does Not Prevail

by Dr. Jack Crabtree

*Adapted from "The Two Most Important Things I Have Learned," a paper given at Gutenberg College's 2014 Summer Institute*

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What happens to our understanding of the meaning, purpose, and significance of our existence when normalcy does not prevail? If turmoil and disorder were to ensue, how would we understand the purpose of our existence then? And how ought we to function as human beings if such conditions were to prevail?

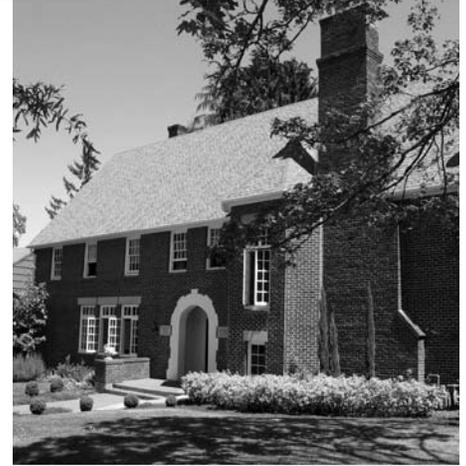
We can speak of a person's "purpose" in two important senses. On the one hand, we can speak of a person's ultimate, objective purpose—his purpose from God's perspective—to be the protagonist in a story that somehow puts the person and glory of God on display. But, on the other hand, we can speak of a person's subjective purpose—his purpose from his own standpoint—that which provides focus and direction to his choices. His subjective purpose is his perception of what task or responsibility has been given him to do.

Now a person's objective purpose does not change. No matter what circumstances he finds himself in, his objective purpose remains the same: He is the protagonist of the story centered in him. One's subjective purpose, however, can be drastically altered if and when life circumstances become drastically altered, and so I want to make some observations about how to think about subjective purpose in the midst of circumstances where normalcy is threatened or destroyed.

So much of human life is lived under the assumption that tomorrow will be much like today. I can know what to expect. I can plan

and dream and hope and act, expecting that the orderly reality of today will be the same orderly reality that exists in the future. The moment I allow myself even to imagine that the order of today will dissolve into unpredictable disorder tomorrow, the very foundation of how I live my life crumbles. How can I plan when I don't know what world and reality I am planning for? How do I dream when I can make no assumptions about what will even be possible? Uncertainty with respect to the future is paralyzing. It brings normal life to a halt. It destroys my ability to live.

With respect to the issue at hand, uncertainty about the future makes it impossible to identify any subjective purpose for my existence. On the one hand, whatever subjective purpose had defined my existence previously would vanish at any point that normalcy is destroyed. At that point, my subjective purpose would be made obsolete and irrelevant. And, on the other hand, because I cannot possibly know the future, it is impossible for me to know what subjective purpose to put in its place. How can I know what role has been given me to play in the future when I have no clue what the future will be? Normalcy is vital to my everyday life precisely because it allows me to make assumptions about the future. Any prospect of the loss of normalcy brings vertigo, paralysis, and fear. It makes knowing my subjective purpose utterly impossible, which, in turn, makes knowing what to do impossible.



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Clearly, then, times that destroy normalcy are difficult, disorienting times. But they do occur in human history, and it is not hysteria or paranoia to fear them. If I remember correctly, God has the Old Testament prophets depict Israel as "reeling" when they are faced with the chaos and disorder brought upon them by God's judgment. To experience the abrupt end to life as we have always known it produces a very unpleasant sort of vertigo. History is full of such episodes. One people group after another has undergone the destruction of normalcy and the end of life as they have known it. We are ignorant if we believe it could never happen to us.

When I contemplate the prospects of such an experience, my first temptation is to engage in denial. I want to respond just as Israel responded to their prophets when they were warned of the divine judgment coming upon them: "No, nothing bad's gonna happen. Everything will be okay. Life will go on



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## When Normalcy Does Not Prevail, continued

just as it has always gone on. There is really nothing to worry about.”

But denial is shortsighted and ignorant. Human history is filled with divine judgment, the collapse of civilizations, revolutions, and various other chaotic transitions into very different circumstances. To consider the signs of the times in which I live, to heed the pronouncements of any genuine prophets, and generally to be wary of what lies ahead is not a sign of hysteria or paranoia—it is a matter of being awake. Being awake is healthy. Engaging in denial is unhealthy.

Slumber is much more comfortable than wakefulness. While one sleeps, he does not feel fear. The one who is awake must feel his fears and face them. Uncertainty about the future is very disturbing. It is far preferable to close my eyes to any future danger and remain ignorant that it exists. That way, I can go on living my life. To permit myself to fear the future would paralyze me. So, rather than fear the future, I would prefer to deny that any danger exists. Not only is such denial ignorant, it is immoral.

### Consider the End of the World

Nothing more dramatically disrupts normalcy than the end of the world. In order to better understand the dramatic effect that the end of normalcy has, let us take a brief detour to consider the extreme case of the end of the world itself.

Whether it is historically accurate or apocryphal, Luther famously is claimed to have said, “If I knew the world was going to end tomorrow, I would plant a tree today.” His point is either incredibly profound or nonsense, depending upon what he meant.

I seriously doubt that Luther meant this: “If I knew the world was going to end tomorrow, I know that, as a matter of actual fact, I would find myself motivated to plant a tree today.” That would go against everything we know about the logic and nature of human motivation and action. It makes no sense to suggest that I would do something today for a reward that I know with certainty could never be realized. Specifically, it makes no sense to plant a tree today in order to one day enjoy the beauty and shade of a full grown tree

tomorrow, when I know with certainty that that tomorrow will never come.

Rather, I expect that Luther meant something more like this: “So that I might illustrate for you, my students, that the meaning and significance of one’s existence is not located in the outcome of his actions—that it is not located in what one does, accomplishes, achieves, or produces—if I knew that the world was going to end tomorrow, I would go out and plant a tree today.”

I think Luther is absolutely right if that is what he meant. The meaning and significance of my existence is not tied to the success of what I do, nor is it tied to the personal benefit that might follow from what I do. The meaning and significance of my existence is found somewhere else entirely. Namely, it is found in how the story of my life reflects the glory of the Author.

Clearly, then, the objective purpose of my life is not the least bit affected by the prospect of the world coming to an end. The end of the world does not threaten to rob my existence of its objective meaning and significance. Rather, it simply provides the context within which the objective meaning and significance of my life will unfold. But a certain knowledge that the end of the world is coming would have a radical effect on my subjective purpose and on my specific choices and actions.

There is no virtue in ignoring ordinary human rationality when it comes to human choice and action. If a positive reward that I could normally expect to follow from an action were made impossible by the specific circumstances in which I found myself (for example, the world being about to end), then it would be irrational for me to take that action in order to attain that positive reward. Nothing is gained by defying the logic of this; there is no special virtue or righteousness in thinking otherwise. So, in truth, if I knew that the end of the world were coming tomorrow, then there are many things I would no longer be motivated to do, and it would be utterly irrational to think otherwise.

An important point needs to be raised in response to Luther’s interesting thought experiment. We have a tendency to think of the end of the world as more of an end than

it actually will be. There are two important ways in which this is so.

First, the end of the world will not be the great negation of everything that has gone before—not, at least, with respect to the purposes of God. Assume for the sake of argument that I am not destined for eternal Life. My destiny is destruction. Even if my existence ends in destruction and I do not live on, my story has been told nonetheless. It is my story that counts. My significance as an individual creature is a derived significance. I am significant because I am the protagonist in a significant story. I do not have intrinsic significance in and of myself. And since the meaning and significance of my existence lies in the story that my existence tells, my personal destruction does not nullify nor destroy the significance of my story. My destruction was part of my story. It was my denouement, the resolution of my story. Just as history could never cease to be history, a told story can never become untold. It said what it said, meant what it meant, and had the significance that it had. Its message, meaning, and significance live on, even if I, its protagonist, do not.

Second, if we assume instead that I am one of the elect and that my destiny is eternal Life, then the end of the world is clearly not the end of my story. My existence continues on into a whole new chapter. The end of this present world is not the negation of my history in the present age. To the contrary, it would simply be a transition into the next phase of my story. And there will be continuity from one phase to the next. My existence will not consist of one story coming to an abrupt end and an entirely different, unconnected story beginning from there. My existence is one ongoing coherent story that spans the divide between this present evil age and the eternal age to come.

### What Should One Do?

The main point in what I have been saying is this: one’s subjective purpose is dramatically affected by any circumstances that threaten to destroy the normalcy of everyday existence. For those of us who see current happenings as harbingers of danger and change, the threat to normalcy is exactly what we fear right now. Many of you may not be experiencing such fear, so my comments will be strictly theoretical for you. But the issue is an important

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one nonetheless. Some generation at some point will face the end of normalcy. What is such a generation to do? What should one do when he is faced with the destruction of normalcy?

There are three observations that I want to make in response to this question:

**First Observation:** This particular question is ultimately unanswerable in principle. In effect, the question comes to this: What should one do when it is impossible to know what to do? It should be obvious that this question is not capable of an answer.

The fact that the future is unknown to me is what gives rise to this question in the first place. The future is always unknown. But under conditions of normalcy, I can plan for the future because normalcy allows me to make reasonable assumptions about that unknown future. But if normalcy goes away, then I have no basis for making any such assumptions, and I am left completely in the dark. The already unknown future then becomes altogether opaque.

In such a situation, when I have lost every possible basis for planning for the future, I desperately want someone to tell me what to do. Normal human reasoning fails me in such a situation. What am I to do when normal human reasoning cannot tell me what to do? I desperately desire for someone or something else to tell me what to do. But no one else can know any better than I. How could he? Unless God has revealed the future to him, he is in exactly the same position that I am in.

Therefore, I must accept the fact that there is no clear and definitive answer to my question. I must acquiesce to the uncertainty that such a fact entails. How do I do that? By keeping in mind the following three things:

(1) The uncertainty that I am being asked to face is not unique. Throughout human history, many have been required to endure uncertainty with the destruction of normalcy. It is one of those things that Paul would include when he comments that “no trial has overtaken you except what is common to man’s experience.” God would not be asking me to endure anything that has not been endured by many others before me. It is part of the fabric of human life, experience, and history as God has willed it.

(2) God, because he has created me to be the protagonist in a story that he has purposed to create, has every right to take me through the discomfort of just such darkness and uncertainty. In the worst case, God may very well reduce the subjective purpose of my existence to nothing but bare survival. That is a terrifying prospect. But God has every right to do it. God does not owe it to me to grant me peace, safety, and an ordered existence. He is fully within his rights, as the Author of my experience, to withhold these things from me. Yet, on the other hand, because every second of my life and every inch of my existence is determined by him, I must understand that not a single hair on my head will face danger unless God himself wills it. I am utterly and completely secure in the hands of God. God’s control of reality does not guarantee comfort to me, but it does guarantee that I will not experience anything that is senseless, meaningless, random, or purposeless. Nothing can befall me that God has not scripted especially for me. The Author of my story never abandons me; he is always on the job, creating every step of my journey and guiding me to the choices and decisions that he wants me to make.

(3) And, finally, the total darkness and complete lack of direction that I might be asked to endure will only be for a brief period, at most. Even in the worst of apocalyptic scenarios, human beings would establish a new order, a new normal, to replace the one that has been destroyed. The tunnel that God takes me through may be dark, but there will always be light at the other end of the tunnel.

**Second Observation:** When normalcy has fled and I am left clueless about what to do, I must place no greater burden upon myself than to do the best I can. I must do the best I can to perceive what is happening around me. And I must do the best I can to judge what action to take in response. But that is all I can expect myself to do. I can do no more.

My perception of what is happening will likely be wrong. My judgment about what to do will likely be mistaken. I will likely miscalculate my situation and do something that, in hindsight, I shouldn’t have done. But I must do something, and doing the best I can is all I can ask of myself. If I expect more of myself than that, I will be paralyzed. Fear of

making a mistake will lead me to do nothing at all. So I must choose a path and follow it, come what may.

Yet I must avoid false confidence. I must remain humble and realistic with respect to my assessment of the future. I cannot really know what is going to happen, and I cannot really know what I should have done. But I had to do something, so I chose the path that, as best I could know, seemed to be the right path at the time. My choice may have been wise, or it may have been foolish. At the moment of decision, I was in no position to know. I could only trust God, the Author, to create my story as he wills.

**Third Observation:** Finally, no matter what circumstances I find myself in, the most essential task of my existence does not change. The essential task that has been given to me as a human being—the task that is given universally to every human being—is to come to understand God’s purposes—both his purposes in and for history and his particular purposes in and for my own existence. I must come to understand God’s purposes in order that I might learn to know the Creator and Author of my being and thereby come to love him. This, in turn, is so that I might finally be willing to define my life and existence by a commitment to follow his instructions and serve his purposes. No matter what circumstances I find myself in, serving the Creator’s purposes is the most essential thing I must do. Whether I am surrounded by peace and order or cultural chaos, serving his purposes remains the fundamental task of my existence. And since understanding the teaching of the Bible is the most reliable way to understand God’s purposes in and for history (and the best way to be equipped to understand God’s particular purposes for my own existence), then coming to understand the message and teaching of the Bible is one of the most important elements of my task. In good times and in bad, this is what I always must do: I must strive to understand the Bible and its message.

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**Dr. Jack Crabtree** is the director of MSC; a tutor at Gutenberg; the author of *The Most Real Being: A Biblical and Philosophical Defense of Divine Determinism*; and co-author of *The Language of God: A Commonsense Approach to Understanding and Applying the Bible*.

## Please be praying...

This is the time of year that high school seniors are making their college decisions. Please be praying that we will see new students this next fall who have a strong desire to pursue truth and who will respond to the guidance of Gutenberg's tutors who occupy themselves with the same pursuit.

Even as we consider high school seniors, we have often found that Gutenberg is the right place for students who are a little bit older, perhaps disenchanted with some other college or university experience,

and perhaps are at a more mature place in knowing what they want to learn and how they want to go about it. If you know of anyone like that, regardless of the age, send them our way, and please be praying that we will have a healthy seasoning of older students at Gutenberg.

Please pray for the staff as they adjust to the significant pay cuts that began back in December. Their willingness to stay with Gutenberg illustrates their commitment, but none of them can make ends meet financially for the long run if we cannot bring their salaries back to at least the

previous level. Please be praying that might be possible.

If you have any thoughts or questions, feel free to contact me (Peter A. Wierenga, "pwierenga@gutenberg.edu" or 541-337-7688) or others at Gutenberg College.

### Summer Institute 2015 Recordings

Recordings and handouts from Gutenberg's 2015 Summer Institute are now available online in the audio section at [www.gutenberg.edu](http://www.gutenberg.edu) and iTunes U. While you're there, check out the other 100+ series.

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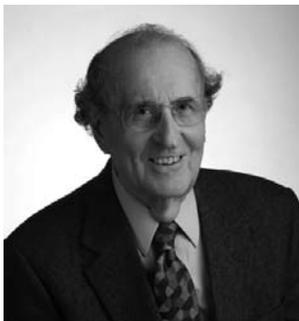


Photo by Bruce Berg

### Dale Crabtree March 24, 1916 – December 1, 2015

Dale Crabtree passed from this life in December, just shy of his 100th birthday. In addition to his many years of public service—Klamath County District Attorney, Assistant Attorney General of Oregon, and Administrative Law Judge with the Social Security Administration in Eugene—Dale worked tirelessly to help found Gutenberg College. And after the college opened its doors in 1994, he continued to work for

Gutenberg and its faculty—serving on its board of governors, dealing with reams of paperwork, seeking grants for the college, painting walls, helping dispose of old roof shingles, and helping in countless other ways. His faith and service were an inspiration to many people.

Dale is survived by four of his six sons, including Gutenberg tutors Jack and David Crabtree; his wife of seventy-seven years, Linore; eighteen grandchildren; and forty-three great-grandchildren.

### Friday Evening • March 11 Gutenberg Student Art Show & Performance at 7:00 PM

The annual art show at Gutenberg College highlights the performing and visual art of students from Gutenberg College.



Performance begins at 7:00 PM. Limited seating is first-come, first-served. A gallery reception follows. A donation of \$5.00 for admission is requested but not required. All donations help support the arts at Gutenberg College.