

Discovering Connection, Purpose, and Hope – 3 Part Series

*This three-part series on faith draws on stories and thoughts from the book, **Hard Questions: About Life, Death, and After Life** by Pastor Richard Braun. Faith is a living, dynamic organism. Nurturing connection, purpose, and hope leads to a vibrant and active faith life. When one element is missing, it's like removing one of the legs on a three-legged stool. The stool becomes unstable and no longer supports a meaningful and rewarding life. Please visit my website at: hardquestionsforsmallgroups.com for other small-group topics and studies.*

I've written a book and want to share it with pastors and leaders nationwide. It's called **Hard Questions: About Life, Death, and After Life**. The book is not about me being God's vessel; it's a new vehicle to deliver God's word to a grace-starved world.

The book includes small group questions at the end of each chapter. If you'd like to review or use my written materials, go to my website, www.hardquestionsforsmallgroups.com, and download them. They are free, and if you wish to buy the book, it's available on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Apple iBooks.

The book details how I discovered connection, purpose, and hope by asking hard questions about life choices. These ingredients for life are like a three-legged stool for life. Removing one leg makes it unstable. In the book, I share my struggles, failures, and successes as I questioned my way through life. The questions helped define me, leading to growth in my faith.

The website highlights a book-specific, three-part small-group series: **Discovering Connection, Purpose, and Hope**. The descriptions of each small-group session and the small-group studies support various book sections.

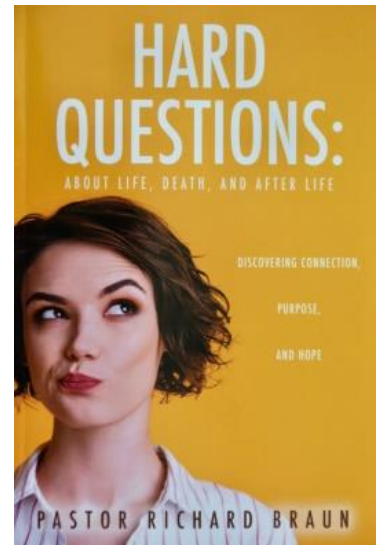
If you're new to small groups, I am also available on a consulting basis to help you establish a small group program at your church. I can provide training for small-group leaders, or I will provide material for you to do the training. (949-278-9181 – mobile phone – The Hope Connection)

Connection with God and one another is essential in our splintered world. The grace-filled message of the gospel is lost when it's not the church's primary purpose. Connection and purpose lead to hope for us as individuals and the church.

Thanks for taking the time to advance the gospel message in the world!

Peace,

Pastor Richard Braun



Part One - Connection is an essential element for happier, healthier living.

Last summer, while walking, I came across a bed of beautifully brilliant blooms. As an amateur photographer, I enjoy taking pictures of gorgeous flowers. While pausing to experience the moment, I noticed the flower's sweet fragrance wafting through the air. It was overpowering. This connection with nature felt profound. I remember what God said upon finishing creation; Genesis 1:31 ESV, *God saw everything he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day.* God wants us to enjoy, experience, and connect to nature. I wanted to experience this connectedness at home, so I cut some flowers and took them home. I put them in a vase to replicate my nature-filled moment, but a week later, I found them wilting, drooping, and dead. Cutting flowers and removing them from their source of life leaves them without hope of growing or thriving. To bloom where planted, we must stay connected to God, the source of life.

Humans thrive when connected to God's creation but also experience connectedness through other people. Our humanness is intertwined, and connecting to others is necessary to stay emotionally healthy. Is it about knowing lots of people? Not necessarily! Perhaps connectedness is a place where everybody knows your name. I liked the long-running TV show Friends, but I don't think that's a good example of connectedness. Am I talking about being on the phone and having numerous internet or Facebook connections? No. Many psychologists, pastors, researchers, and others chide electronic connectivity, stating we are now more isolated as a society than ever before.

Connectedness is the art of having meaningful relationships with God and other people. Not the mile-wide and inch-deep variety, but connecting emotionally, physically and spiritually. Studies show the lack of holding, cuddling and caressing babies leads to a failure to thrive. We know putting people in solitary confinement is harsh punishment that can lead to psychosis. Studies show married couples live longer than people without mates.

God endowed us with the desire to connect with others and Him, but where do we learn how? Many of us experience connectedness as we grow up in a family unit. We can learn connectedness through involvement in a church community or a local neighborhood. I describe connectedness in chapter two of my book, *Hard Questions: About Life, Death, and After Life*. I grew up in a large farm family with eight siblings, where the church was the focal point of our family, and the entire farming community taught me connectedness. After all my siblings left home and my father passed, my mom still experienced connectedness from the church and farm community where she remained. It was a powerful witness to the importance of connectedness.

God envisioned connecting with us so important He sent a human into the world to demonstrate connectedness. We celebrate Christmas every year and embrace an image of God coming to earth as a defenseless baby. Connectedness takes focus as the story of Mary and Joseph unfolds, as recorded in the first chapter of Matthew. The writers encouraging words are, "*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*"²¹ *She will bear a son, and*

Discovering Connection, Purpose, and Hope – 3 Part Series

*you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*²² *All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.”*¹ These words are not only about God making himself flesh and blood to the world, but they also amplify God’s desire to connect with us. God wants a personal relationship with us.

Paul wrote to the church in Phillipi, telling them that God thought connectedness was so crucial that Christ, the God/human, needed to bring people into a new understanding of God. It says in Philippians 2:5-8 NRSV: *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Where and how do you find connectedness today? Do you practice and nurture close relationships with others? Does the church help or hinder connectedness for you? We have not done a stellar job of connecting people as a church. Gangs seem better models for connectedness than churches. People in gangs believe others in the gang have their back. They will protect them, look out for them, and include them in practicing survival. I’ve recently heard someone on the street say the homeless people she hangs around with are more connected and supportive than her church community ever used to be. Why?

Jesus was asked one day (Matt 22:28-34) what is the greatest commandment of the law? He responded, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”*² As reinforcement for this idea, the writer of the book of John says in the fifteenth chapter: *“I’ve told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends.”*³ Both of these passages are the essence of connectedness. Do I experience this depth of connectedness in my life? What allows or inspires me to attempt this level of connectedness?

If you want what Jesus offers to the world, be willing to share yourself with the world. How do you spell love? T-I-M-E. Connectedness involves time, giving of yourself in a meaningful way. This statement is true in marriage, friendships, family, and community and is the core element of being alive. Do this, and you will immediately feel alive. It won’t be easy. It may sometimes not seem rewarding, but connectedness is necessary for long-term happiness. Take that to the bank!

¹ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version](#) (Mt 1:20–22). (1989). Thomas Nelson Publishers.

² [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version](#) (Mt 22:37–39). (1989). Thomas Nelson Publishers.

³ Peterson, E. H. (2005). [The Message: the Bible in contemporary language](#) (Jn 15:11–13). NavPress.

Part Two – Purpose-driven living is more fulfilling.

Studies show that people with purpose live healthier, wealthier, happier, and longer.⁴ If that's true, then why do so many people live lives of quiet desperation and sadness? Perhaps you don't. Maybe you're an exception to the multitude of psychological studies out today. Many people struggle when wrestling with an answer to the question: What's your purpose for living?

In my book, *Hard Questions: About Life, Death, and After Life*, I write about my struggle with defining my purpose for living. It wasn't because I didn't have a sense of call or hadn't taken numerous tests to self-evaluate my strengths and weaknesses. I asked hard questions of myself starting as early as the third grade when I decided I'd become an airline pilot. As a young child, I had recurring dreams of flying while sleeping. These were not just passing fancies; I can still remember some of those dreams as though they were yesterday. Flying over our farm, saying hello to the birds I'd meet, and feeling euphoric in the morning were all part of that experience. I still enjoy an occasional dream where I'm flying, but now at my age, it's more like the fear of landing has become my top priority. Perhaps it stems from my fear of falling on ice, which has been such an issue this winter.

I didn't write a lengthy book like Rick Warren about living *The Purpose Driven Life*. However, I cover lots of ground in my book comparing a circumstance-driven life to a purpose-driven one. Perhaps most of my early life was circumstance-driven more than purpose-driven. I got married one year after Bible School, so next, I needed a job to support the marriage. My earliest ideas of what I would do with my life were on hold because of the circumstances. After two layoffs, a year apart, from the same company, I started a computer and software development company. If you've read my book, you know I didn't become an airline pilot. I finally ended up as a pastor, the logical alternative.

Becoming a pastor didn't come without some heart-pounding failures. My software company failed due to a lack of capital. My first approval for pastoral candidacy failed because I didn't answer the committee's questions insightfully. Moses failed until he came upon a burning bush. Finally, a significant emotional event interrupted his circumstance-driven 40 years of sheep herding. God called him to lead the people out of Egypt, but he said, "I'm unqualified. I can't do it." I felt a renewed call into Christian ministry when my software company failed. I'd been writing small-group studies and working on Walk to Emmaus events on a parallel track to running my business. These experiences were my burning bush. They forced me to take stock of my life and wrestle with the purpose-driven idea.

As with Moses's fear, I stressed over being able to speak well enough to become a pastor. My later-in-life, ten-year struggle to become a pastor had many ups and downs. Taking Hebrew and Greek early in my training helped settle my nerves and gave me a small shot of confidence that I could, indeed, complete the M.Div program. Finally, Paul's words to the Ephesians became clear to me. The Apostle told them, "*It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone*" *Ephesians 1:11-12, MSG. It was like God speaking directly to me from my burning bush. My fear subsided, and my self-doubt ended because Christ was there. It's in Christ we find our purpose.*

⁴ (Fredrickson et al., 2013), (Kim et al., 2013), (Hill & Turiano, 2014), (Hill et al., 2019), (Bronk et al., 2009)

Leaving behind the engineering and software world frightened me because I had some expert skills in this arena. In the pastoral environment, I was an infant in a new world. As I discovered who I was in Christ, it became easier to think of carrying out God's purpose for the world, but what is God's purpose? God created humans to be an object of His love. The Bible clearly says, "*God is love,*" in 1 John 4:8. God made us to show his love to the world. "⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another."⁵ Purposeful living connects with God. God created us; we were not accidents. Our purpose is to live and breathe God's love into each other. Do we do this flawlessly like Jesus did while here on earth? NO? We are not God; we are human, but that must not stop us from living out God's purpose in the world.

As a young adolescent, my job was to get the cows from the wooded pasture, where they spent most of their day. They would slowly meander toward home until they came within 100 yards of the barn. At this point, a few would pick up the pace, and pretty soon, several of them were edging each other out for pole position. Next, they began to trot when seeing the cool flowing water in the trough by the barn. Their purpose was to quench their thirst and satisfy themselves with a long drink. In one of my candidacy approval interviews, I spoke about people being thirsty and gathering around a trough of grace. I found purpose in keeping the water of grace flowing to quench their thirsty souls. Keeping this trough filled with God's love and forgiveness became a tangible image of my purpose for becoming a pastor. I thank God for that childhood memory and realize we all experience purpose-driven living differently.

The beauty of living with purpose has positive side effects. Do you wish to live healthier, wealthier, happier, and longer? I certainly do. Will it make life perfect? Not unless you can walk on water as well. However, God's great news is that when we follow God's purpose for living, it's not only good for us, it improves the world.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version](#) (1 Jn 4:9–11). (1989). Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Part Three – Connection plus purpose leads to hope.

Fear overwhelmed me when I was about five or six years old. My parents took the family to the zoo one day, but as I admired the peacocks, my parents left me standing at the chain-link fence separating me from the big birds. Their majestic tails, which filled a ten-foot semi-circle, were brilliant. I'd never seen anything so beautiful, so magnificent, and I was awestruck. My family walked away to view other animals at the zoo, and I didn't notice them leaving. After realizing I was alone, I panicked. I clutched the chain links as though they were my lifeline to the world.

Although it seemed like an hour had passed, within minutes, my older brother waltzed back into my field of view. He asked why I was lagging behind everyone, like it was my fault. My fear turned to anger, and my abrupt retort was, where are Mom and Dad? About two minutes later, Dad approached me from behind and touched my shoulder. All at once, my fear faded, melting like an ice cube on a hot stove. Hope overpowers fear when love arrives on the scene.

When God connects with us, hope grows. The anticipation of connecting to a better world reduces fear and allows hope to thrive. During my mother's later years, she experienced hope as people, family, friends, and the church came to her aid. She was a Bible-reading, devotion-oriented Christian who found hope in promises from scripture.

What makes us feel hopeless? What rebuilds hope in us? From where does hope come? How does hope replace fear? We feel hopeless if we only focus on sin and failure. When Paul wrote to the church in Rome, he pointed believers to Christ and affirmed that Jesus brought us a new way to live. I've found over the years hope in one particular verse, Romans 8:28. "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*" Paul explained how God's love reduces fear as we accept that overpowering love and that touch on our shoulders. As we know Christ in our lives, the promise of hope in the life to come solidifies and becomes trustworthy.

Sometimes hope can be elusive, as revealed in the gospel story of the disciples in a boat during a storm. (Matthew 14:22-33, Mark 6:45-52, and John 6:15-21) Jesus sent the disciples off to Capernaum and told them he'd catch up with them later. The clouds darkened, and the waves became choppy. The sea turned nasty, and they began to fear for their lives. The disciples saw someone walking towards them on the water but thought it was a ghost. As the water walker approached, they saw it was Jesus, and fear subsided. Overcome with emotion, Peter asks Jesus if he could meet him on the water. Jesus said, "Come." As Peter stepped from the boat, all was well until he took his eyes off Jesus. Noticing the wind and huge waves, he began to sink. Once again, fear overpowered Peter. Immediately, Peter cries out, "Lord, save me." Jesus reaches out His hand to Peter and says, "You of little faith, why do you doubt?" Peter traveled through fear of death to victory over death, only to fear losing his life again. Many of us experience a similar path; finding hope is challenging to master in this life.

In my book, *Hard Questions: About Life, Death, and After Life*, I describe in chapters five and six a time when, after being married for a few years, my wife and I began to think about starting a family. I'd come from a large family, and we hoped to have a family of at least 4-6 children. Early attempts failed, and we struggled with the possibility of not having any children. We experienced hard times and felt hopeless about achieving the family we envisioned when we first married. Finding hope in this challenging circumstance was almost impossible, but somehow for us, God found a way. Sometimes the

Discovering Connection, Purpose, and Hope – 3 Part Series

difficulties in life pull us apart and lead to hopelessness. For others, similar circumstances lead to hope becoming more persistent and significant. What determines the difference?

For Peter, hearing from Christ and seeing his outstretched hand increased his faith, and his fear subsided. When Peter wrote his two epistles, he likely remembered his water-walking experience and how easily hope can vanish. It says in 1 Peter 3:15-16: *Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,*¹⁵ *but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;*¹⁶ *yet do it with gentleness and reverence.*⁶

In chapter fourteen of my book, I tell a story about losing my business and doing some serious soul-searching to find a new career. Work I'd been doing in Walk to Emmaus reminded me of my earlier dream of becoming an ordained minister. With that mindset, I set out to become an ordained minister at age 50. My first experience sitting for the initial candidacy interview became a fiasco and disappointment. I got a rejection letter in the mail two weeks after the interview. There's much more to the story, which I hope you read about in my book.

Throughout my book, you will see it took me a lifetime to learn that asking hard questions leads to discovering connection, purpose, and hope. These three elements are like three legs on a stool. Remove one of the legs, and the stool is unstable. Once these three legs for life are in place, they can support a tremendous amount of disappointment, fear, and even some stupidity, as in my case. Understanding how God works, asking hard questions, and relying on the Bible for answers helped build my faith through a lifetime of learning.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#) (1 Pe 3:14–16). (1989). Thomas Nelson Publishers.