Next week we start our new series in the Book of Acts, which I think is going to be wonderful both for its enduring encouragement and its challenge to us as Christians and as a church. But this week, rather than start a new series, I want us to look ahead to the new year, and I want us to do that by looking at a single verse from the book of Acts.

And it's a verse, that if you have read Acts, you will have read quite possibly numerous times, and you can pass over it, without really even noticing it's there. But it caught my attention a few weeks back, and it's been like one of those foods, or drink, or chocolate, that the more you allow it's flavours to come out in your mouth, the richer and the better it gets. And as I've thought about this verse and pondered it and meditated on it, this verse has done that for me. And so I want to share that with you, because I think it has some stuff to guide us into the year ahead.

And the verse is Acts 13:36:

'For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption.'

The Temptation to serve your own purpose

Now if every New Year is a time for making resolutions, it's also a pretty fertile time of temptation, isn't it? And I'm not talking temptation to drink too much or party too hard, I'm talking about a temptation that is as old as temptation itself.

Just throw your mind back to how the Bible describes the very first temptation. There are our first parents, Adam and Eve, enjoying the garden, enjoying this life that God has set before them, enjoying finding their place in his purposes for them. But then the snake, the serpent, comes along and says to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'you shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?.... You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Gen 3:1, 4-5).

And so at the root of that very first temptation lies one that you and I are going to face time and again this coming year: the temptation to try and find meaning and satisfaction and fulfillment somewhere other than in God's purposes. To be the one who decides what's good and what's not, rather than God. To be the one who sets your own agenda, rather than being constrained by how God sees things. To take your life and your future into your own hands. To be autonomous, to set your own path, to decide your own purpose in life. To decide for yourself how your life is going to flourish, ultimately, to set your own vision for your life.

And this year, as every year, you're going to be squeezed and pressed from every angle to think like that. When Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome, he said, 'Do not be conformed to this world' (Rom 12:2), to the pattern of this world. And that should tell us that it is very possible for that to happen. You see, what you watch on TV, or the movies you go to, or what goes on on campus, or the culture and environment of your business or office, is not encouraging you to conform to God's pattern and purpose for your life is it? For the most part, God's purposes

don't get a look in there. The prevailing culture is squeezing you in another direction, to get you to live for purposes and visions and agendas and values other than God's. And the tragedy of that is that, just as it did in the garden with the first temptation, it never delivers what it promises. And what promises to fill you and satisfy you, inevitably ends up leaving you feeling empty.

Which brings us to this verse in Acts 13. Because Paul is preaching on the Sabbath, in a synagogue in Antioch and he says of King David that he 'served the purpose of God in his own generation' (Acts 13:36). That rather than live for his own agenda, as long as he lived, David lived for and served God's agenda.

You see, the temptation Adam and Eve faced in the garden, the temptation you and I will face constantly this year, is to put ourselves in the position of God, and to want him to serve our agenda for the coming year. But what the Bible tells us is that we were created as the image of God, we're his image, we're not God himself, we're his creatures, and we will only really flourish if we recognize that, and recognize that we are here, as David realized, to serve God and his purpose in this world.

If David, then you

Now, how you respond to this verse may depend on how well you know David's life. You see, if you think of David as a great war leader, or as a poet, or as a just king, then you could hear Paul say that David served God's purpose in his generation and think, 'amen, preach it brother, and we need a few more like him, and maybe my new years resolution should be to be more like him in 2014.'

But the Bible paints a much more complex and honest picture of David, doesn't it? Was he a great man? Sure he was, but like so many so-called great people he was a deeply flawed man. After all, this is the same man who committed adultery with Bathsheba, and who then arranged for the assassination of Bathsheba's husband, one of his most loyal and faithful soldiers, to cover his sin. Here was a man whose family life was, to put it mildly, a mess, whose own son raped one of his sisters, and another son led a rebellion against him.

By no stretch of the imagination could David be described as a poster boy of the perfect Christian life. And yet, Paul tells us that David served the purpose of God in his own generation. Despite David's many serious failings, failings for which you and I would have long ago given up on him, he kept getting back up and serving God's purpose.

And that should tell us that in 2014 God is not looking for people who have it all together. He is not looking for people who on the outside seem to be sorted. Now, the Pharisees were, weren't they? In Jesus' day, the Pharisees – and I suspect you and I might very well have reacted the same – took a pretty dim view of Jesus mixing with and drawing to himself the prostitutes and tax collectors. And his choice of disciples, did not exactly reflect a desire to only make use of people who had it all together, did it? And Jesus' response to such criticism was that it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick, that he hadn't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

And David is just another example of God's willingness, in fact his desire, to take the broken and the sinful and give them a hope and a future and multiple second chances, serving his purposes. And so whatever 2013 was like, or any previous years for that matter, it does not disqualify you, and the frequent failings that are inevitably going to come in 2014, they don't disqualify you, from standing alongside David as one who served God in your generation. God is not looking for you to attain a certain level of maturity, or perfection, or even, young people, a certain age, before you can start to find your place in his story.

What matters is not primarily the external stuff – though saying that you've got to be careful, because the external stuff of our lives inevitably reflects what is going on at a deeper level. What matters is the heart. Listen to how Paul reminds his listeners of how God singled out David in the first place: Acts 13:22, God, 'raised up David to be their king, of whom he [God] testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' So knowing all the screw ups and mess ups David would make, God could still say: here's a man I can use, because his heart is not to be autonomous, it's not to push his own agenda, it's to do my will. And I know he's going to fail in multiple ways, but that's the kind of attitude I'm looking for.

And so as we enter 2014, none of us need be left on the sidelines. To live for and to serve the purpose of God, rather than our own agendas, to find our place in His story, rather than trying to get God to play the part we've allocated to him in our story, is open to everyone of us, whatever the past or the future, if it was open to David.

But did you notice the time limits Paul put on David's mention? Acts 13:36 again, 'David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption.'

Counting your days

Now there is a very real sense in which part of each of our responsibility is to invest in the generation to come, and that's not just for those of us with kids. Part of serving the purpose of God in this generation is to declare his glory to the next. As the psalmist, and it was probably David, says in Psalm 71, 'So even to old age and grey hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come' (Ps 71:18).

And yet, our primary responsibility, what each of us will be held accountable for, is not what the generations yet to come do with the purpose and the plan of God, but what we have done with it in our day. How have I served the purpose of God in this generation, in the time that God has placed me in now? Because we can look to the future and have great plans and visions of our own, of what God might do with us next year, or the year after, but what God is looking at is, are they being faithful in the small things of today?

You see, we humans are funny things aren't we? We always think there is going to be a tomorrow, that serving God's purpose can wait awhile, while we enjoy serving our own, and we'll get to God's at some point in the future. And we tend

to think of our lives as limitless, that there will always be time. And yet because we are created and not the creator, because we are in the image of God and not God himself, our lives are bounded by time, unlike him we do have a beginning and an end. The day will come when, like David, our bodies see corruption. Cheery thought for the first Sunday of the New Year, but it's true. It's why the Psalmist prays, 'Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom' Psalm 90:12.

And far from being a reason for gloom, understanding our own mortality, that we have these few short years in which to live for one purpose or another can be liberating. You see, that first temptation in the garden was not simply to put oneself in the place of God and set the agenda. It was also to question the consequences of our disobeying God. Look, the serpent said, if you disobey God, you're not really going to suffer any repercussions of that, you won't really die. And of course, we've been dealing with the repercussions of that ever since. And one day there will be another generation. You will pass on. The hard truth is that for the vast majority of us, not even our great-grandchildren will remember our names. We are tempted to think that we are God and that the universe revolves around us and we get to decide what is good and what is not, but within a generation or two we will all but be forgotten. As Peter says, quoting Isaiah the prophet, 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever' (1 Peter 1:24-25). In other words, God's purpose will still stand long after we have blown away like the seeds of a dandelion in the breeze.

And yet, recognizing that we are finite, that we do only have a certain time to live this life, that we are only going to see a finite number of new years in, rather than being depressing, can be wonderfully freeing. Most years at Christmas time I read Charles Dicken's A Christmas Carol to the girls. And it's such a great book, there's always some new thing to take away. This year what struck me was that it was as Scrooge knelt before the gravestone with his own name engraved upon it, Ebenezer Scrooge, as he came face to face with his own mortality, that finally brought him to his senses. That there will be a gravestone with your name on it.

And recognising your own mortality, entering 2014 with the acknowledgement that this could be your last, that one day your place will be empty, should keep us both humble and happy. Humble because we realize that we are not God, and that we are here to serve his purposes as long as he gives us breath, but also happy because we realize that He is God and we're his creatures and that we will thrive as we serve him, and that when our time does come, something far better awaits.

And something far better awaits, because ultimately this life is not about you, or me, or David, it's about someone far greater.

The purpose of God is bigger than you (thankfully!)

You see, the context of this verse in Acts is not about David at all. Paul is explaining to his listeners that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead – Acts 13:32-33, 'And we bring you the good news [the gospel] that what God promised

to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus.' And then Paul quotes from one of David's own psalms, Psalm 16:10, 'You will not let your holy one see corruption.' Which in David's original is immediately preceded by 'For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.' And Paul's point is that whilst David was not abandoned by God to Sheol, he did die, and his body did decay in the grave, he did see corruption; but then Paul says, v37-38, 'But he whom God raised up did not see corruption. Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man [through Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.'

You see David, great as he was, wasn't it. And God's purpose was not centered around David, as we sometimes wish he centered his purposes around us. His purpose was not all about David, and focused on David, and how can I make David happy and great. It was always about Jesus. And even David's failures, his moral failure, his family failure, were a statement, David isn't it, One greater than David, David's ultimate son is coming. And life and purpose and meaning, and finding your place in God's story, is all about Him.

And if the Bible opens with this temptation to think that we are God, and things should center on us, and that we get to set the agenda, and get to choose what's right and wrong, it ends in the book of Revelation with this great multitude of people, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, standing before the throne of God, and before Jesus the lamb, worshipping, and singing how great God is. And God's purpose has always been to win that multitude, to gather from every nation and every people group a multitude that discovers that joy and satisfaction and fulfillment is found, not in thinking they're at the centre, but that God is.

But as we finish, just ask yourself, how did David serve that greater purpose in his generation? Because this man lived a thousand years before Christ came. So in what sense can he have served God's purpose when at best he would only have had a very shadowy sense of what God was up to? Was it anything more than passing on his genes, so that one day Jesus would come from his lineage? That his part in this purpose was almost unwitting? And if that's the case, what's that got to do with us?

Well, I think the clue is there in that phrase, 'in his own generation.' Because David didn't just serve the purpose of God during one phase of his life, but with his life, throughout his generation. So when David was a shepherd, serving his father, he was serving God's purpose. When he was sat under a tree writing poetry and composing psalms, he was serving God's purpose. When he came to the throne and ruled with justice and integrity, he was serving God's purpose. When he led the nation in worship, he was serving God's purpose. Through all the various stages and phases of his life, David was serving a purpose higher than his own.

And so the same can be true for you and me in 2014. In 1 Cor 10:31 Paul says, 'whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.' Being a shepherd, writing a psalm, ruling as king, working for Nestle, studying for exams,

writing a research paper, changing nappies, from the important all the way to the mundane, can be done, Paul says, to the glory of God, out of gratitude and thankfulness, out of a spirit of praise and worship, with the desire that his name be made great not yours. And so this coming year, whatever you find yourself doing, whether it's work, or family, or how you handle your time and money, if you do it for Christ's glory, then like David you can serve the purpose of God in your generation, and so fulfill the first and greatest commandment to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.