

A Matter of Life & Death

A Biblical Perspective of
Living and Dying



Dr. Wayne Bray

Part I

A Vapor in the Wind

(The Vulnerability of this Life)

You only have so much life to live, and that life is fragile and filled with constant peril. No man can ensure his own survival. His days are numbered, and his steps filled with uncertainty.

The road of life is downhill, and we discover the brakes are out halfway to the bottom. Emily Dickinson once said, “To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.” By the time a man begins to appreciate life, his vapor is fading. How can we learn to understand and cope with the vulnerability of this life?

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’-- yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.” (James 4:14).

Chapter 1

Life in the Real World

“Life can only be understood backwards;
but it must be lived forwards.”

Soren Kierkegaard

“Life is far too important a thing ever
to talk seriously about.”

Oscar Wilde

“Life is what happens to you while you’re
busy making other plans.”

John Lennon (Beautiful Boy)

Between Comfort and Chaos

Life is fragile. In fact, every man begins to die the moment he is born. Ironically, he seems oblivious to this reality for most of his existence. Somewhere between comfort and chaos man lives his life, confronted by the reality of his imminent end but choosing to ignore it. Each man longs to beat the impossible odds.

So it is here, in the web of conscious denial, that he fights for his life to the last breath. Though he thinks the fate of every human before him might somehow be avoided, the unwanted future meets the inevitable present. The sun sets, and his appointment comes.

Though created with an innate desire to live forever, no amount of human determination will win the fight against death. Men are mortal, and no man is immune to the human curse of vulnerability. Sadly, life and death are a package deal; you can't have one without the other (Hebrews 9:27).

Recognizing that death is an unavoidable part of life, one must admit his obvious dependence on the Creator. Amid the comfort and chaos of life, man must trust God completely, and he must stop trying to understand that which the human mind cannot grasp. Our Father just wants us to depend on Him completely. In return He promises to provide divine direction throughout this journey (Proverbs 3:5-6). We are in desperate need of God, both for living and dying.

Beyond Human Comprehension

Death is not attractive, and it never plays by the rules. Even war has its guidelines, but death refuses to follow a consistent reasonable pattern.

- The baby of first time parents is stillborn after eight months of living inside a mother's womb. Grandparents waited in great anticipation. The nursery was finished, but the child will never come home.
- A rookie policeman graduates at the top of the academy. He is shot and killed while responding to a home invasion his first month on the job. His wife and two children never have the opportunity to say goodbye to their hero...
- A young girl is recognized as an honor roll student and exceptional athlete in her high school. Her teachers and peers know her as a leader in her community. She is in her prime, but cancer has no age limit. She fights for almost a year before dying at the age of 16...
- A teenage boy has loving parents who believe in him, and he is an active part of his youth group at church. He enjoys popularity and is known for

his musical giftedness. A community and family are shocked to hear he committed suicide...

- A vibrant group of third-grade children enjoy an exciting day away from class. They have anticipated this fieldtrip for months. Many of the children sing songs and laugh as the bus driver carefully makes his way down the freeway. A blowout results in a major accident, and four passengers die in the wreck...
- A United States soldier has served three tours in combat. He has proven his honor and love for freedom by defending his country against terrorists his entire adulthood. Tragically, he is killed in battle two days before returning home to his family...
- A student pastor, who is full of life, is serving in his first position of ministry. He is passionate about ministry and determined to reach the world. At twenty-four years old he has just asked his girlfriend to marry him. She said yes, but the wedding will never be planned. He lost his life in a freak skiing accident, while on a youth retreat with a neighboring church...

While we may not understand it, even the best of men have an appointment with death. One's charitable deeds do not ensure a longer life. No man can claim an exemption from the vulnerability of his human mortality. Faithfulness to God does not necessarily extend one's life expectancy. In fact, some of the most godly men and women have lived a relatively short life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a great German theologian and anti-fascist, died at the age of forty. Joan of Arc was burned at the stake at the age of nineteen (Bonhoeffer 1948, 44). Then there are stories like professional football player, Pat Tillman, who left the limelight to defend his country on the front lines. He died at the hands of friendly fire in Afghanistan at the age of twenty-seven.

Happily Ever After

Part of man's inability to understand death is his inaccurate perspective of life. As children we read fairytales that led us to believe that good guys always win, and that trials will always be followed by triumph. Yet, after reaching adulthood, it becomes obvious that our "happily ever after" may not be what we expected.

Take Cinderella for example. You might remember her evil stepmother and the two less attractive stepsisters. The story had a dreadful beginning with much heartache. Still, this was a fairytale. Though persecuted by her

female adversaries, Cinderella ended up vindicated and rescued with Prince Charming in the end.

Consider story of Snow White. She ate the poisonous apple, and all hope seemed lost until her handsome prince rescued her. And who could forget Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz? Though the wicked witch tried to kill her, and Oz turned out to be a fraud, she eventually found her way back home to Kansas.

Take your pick; you know the end of every fairytale. They all have the same fictitious theme. Tragedy strikes; trials are endured, but triumph is found in the “happily ever after.” That’s life, right? Wrong!

Unless you’re living in a fairytale, things don’t always end in storybook fashion. Occasionally we may find an exception to this rule, but life-long bliss is not likely your personal experience. Bad things do happen, but Prince Charming doesn’t always sweep in to the day. Every man will experience his share of suffering, pain, and loss; it’s all part of the human experience.

Ironically, children aren’t the only ones pulling for Cinderella. Countless fanatical men scream at the top of their lungs for the underdog, pulling for the unlikely champion in the Final Four of College Basketball each year. The sports world is notorious for its love for the “Cinderella stories.” This unlikely team (one that didn’t have a chance previously) beats the odds and makes it to the playoffs or defeats the expected victor.

The Cinderellas are few in this life, and it's naive to think that the glass slipper will fit your foot every time. For most of us, it seems midnight strikes far too early, and we live most of our lives with the pumpkin parked in the driveway. Life isn't always fair. Bad things happen to everyone. In fact, death happens to everyone. An inseparable part of a man's living is his dying. It is a statistical fact, barring the return of Christ for His church, 100 percent of the people reading this book at this very minute will die.

Since Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden, every man begins to die the moment he is born. "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned--" (Romans 5:12).

While excellent healthcare may extend one's life, doctors will never find a cure for death. The best any physician can offer is to prolong the inevitable demise of every patient they serve. Perhaps a sick man makes it through one, two, even three major surgeries. The doctor may even claim great improvement and progress in recovery, but the time will come when no treatment will be effective. Our medical hope is always limited by man's vulnerability and the doctor's limited knowledge and power. Life is but a vapor.

Chapter 2

The Cause of it All

“They say that nobody is perfect. Then they tell you practice makes perfect. I wish they’d make up their minds.” Winston Churchill

“The closest to perfection a person ever comes is when he fills out a job application form.” Stanley J. Randall

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
(Rom. 3:23)

“None are righteous, no, not one.” (Rom. 3:10)

“The wages of sin is death...” (Rom. 6:23)

The Wages of our Labor

Man's vulnerability to pain and death, stems from his humanity. Nobody's perfect! It's something we all have in common. We're all pretty pathetic when held to God's standard of righteousness. We have absolutely nothing to brag about outside of the cross of Christ (1 Cor. 9:16). Scripture reminds us all too often; we're just sinners saved by God's grace (Rom. 3:23).

Our sinful condition ensures both our physical and spiritual death; these are consequences of and payment for our sin in general. Death is what we've earned. It's what we deserve because of our works (Rom. 6:23). Thankfully, we're not counting on the wages of our labor. Instead, true followers of Christ receive salvation as a gift, not a reward.

No man deserves God's grace. If I rolled all my good works into a ball and offered them to God as evidence of my righteousness, the sum of my life-long work would not move me one step on the staircase of salvation. If we could earn salvation there would have been absolutely no reason for Jesus to die on the cross for our unrighteousness.

“Nobody's perfect.”

“I'm only human!”

“I can't do anything right.”

You might have made statements like this at some frustrating point in your life. We seem to prove our humanity at every given opportunity. It's impossible to live up to everyone else's expectations. Why? Hey, you're not perfect; no one is. Still, some people live as if they are oblivious to this simple truth.

We are only human. There is no such thing as a "Superman" or a "Wonder Woman." These are fictitious characters that embody the people we wish we could be, but the real world often provides us with a reality check. Just when we think we're becoming a real life version of a spiritual Superman, we're confronted by the fact that we're living on a planet made of spiritual kryptonite.

The Curse of Humanity

Our humanity is evident at every turn. The first reaction of a newborn baby is to cry. It's quite significant to realize that no one needs to train a child to scream; this response seems to come quite naturally. All babies are born into an imperfect world, which greets them with pain, struggle, and imminent death.

The moment we are born into this fallen world, we begin to die. In fact, life begins with somewhat of a fight. While the birth of a child is an amazing miracle to behold, it is quite a chaotic scene. The neonatal transition from womb to world is not a pleasant one for any newborn baby. They experience an enormous amount of

permanent environmental change in a matter of moments.

As children grow, they discover further evidences of their obvious humanity. I'll never forget the day my son Will returned from a friend's house covered with bandages from an accident. They were strategically positioned as to prevent us from panic as we discovered the countless abrasions caused by his altercation with the pavement.

He had taken his first go-cart ride without the permission of his parents. In the process, he had fallen off of the moving contraption, revealing his obvious physical vulnerability to the unforgiving dirt, pavement, and rocks. His humanity was brought to light in his own mind that day.

Our second son, Jake, began to ask a lot of questions about death the week before his salvation. He called me into his room nightly to discuss the likelihood of a runaway meteor falling to the earth and striking our house. His mortality had been revealed to him through life events, and he wanted some answers. He had simply begun to realize the vulnerability of his earthly existence. Somehow, he knew that he was not Superman, and truly, no man was made of steel.

Limited Time

Our state of imperfection constantly reminds us

that our time on earth is limited. With every new birthday I inevitably discover new aches and pains in my back and hip. It's more difficult to get out of the car and run the bases during a church softball game.

With today's technology, we can acquire spare body parts if necessary, like hips, knees, or even a heart. Still, regardless of our temporary efforts our lungs will eventually fail us. Our heart will cease its beating. The time will come for us when no more time will come. As sure as the sun's arrival at dawn, this planet is no one's permanent home. This is a matter of life and death!

This life will soon end. Once this page of existence is turned the scene will shift toward eternity, where one of two options awaits us: Heaven with God or Hell with Satan. James explains life's vulnerability better than any other writer:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"-- yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes (James 4:13-14).

The writer of James reveals that despite our arrogant attitudes, we know very little about our own lives. That which we think we know about ourselves is often found to be inaccurate when held up to the absolute truth of God. Consider the question in this text, "What is

your life?” Various opinions abound in the hearts of men, ranging from past accomplishments to future expectations. Still, most answers involve selfish motives and personal agendas. Surely this is not the sum of our lives. There must be some purpose and plan.

As the number of my family funerals increases, my physical end becomes more obvious every day. We are all going to die! This fact comes as no surprise. The evidence of our humanity is clear at every turn but somehow the natural result of our imperfection - death, seems to always catch us by surprise in the end. Why are men so shocked by death if we know it's coming?

James likens man's life to a vapor, which is temporary at best. Soon its presence fades away with the passing wind. Likewise, the life of every man and woman is but for a season, and like summer and winter, we too will be forced into the fading stories of yesterday. What will be said of your season? What impact will your vapor have made on this world? What will be your story, and who will dare tell it?

Chapter 3

Vulnerability in Context

“We cannot learn without pain.”

Aristotle

"What we call despair is often only the
painful eagerness of unfulfilled hope."

George Eliot

The great art of life is the sensation, to feel
that we exist, even in pain.”

Lord Byron

Many things in this life are uncertain, but pain and loss are a guaranteed part of the human experience. How are we to cope with such a dismal reality? Is there hope for any lasting relief, or will this life simply consist of a series of unfortunate events that lead to collective collapse in the end?

A Forecast of Pain

The weather is unpredictable, but that doesn't seem to stop the meteorologists from trying to provide us with a 10-day forecast. We now have satellites that help track the history of a weather system, allowing them to predict the likely path ahead.

Unfortunately, a meteorologist can only make an educated guess as to the probable progression of current weather conditions. The chances of 100% accuracy in the forecast are not good. In fact, there is a 100% chance that your meteorologist will, at some point be wrong. There are too many variables in the equation to guarantee a prediction's accuracy.

Every weather forecast is admittedly based on chance, and while one may claim to have an accurate expectation of the likelihood of rain at any given place and time, he can't know for sure that rain will, in fact, fall. We've all experienced the frustration of having made plans for a beautiful day, only to be surprised by storms that were not on the weatherman's radar.

Unlike rain, pain is relatively easy to predict. No one needs to seek the professional analysis of a meteorologist, not even a doctor. You can count on this simple truth; there is a 100% chance of pain in your life's forecast. Sure you may have extended periods of great weather, but a storm is coming.

We seldom realize we're walking into a painful experience, but if aware, we try our best to avoid the personal discomfort altogether. The first mention of pain in the Bible is Genesis 3:16, where Eve received a curse for every woman who would ever live. In this passage, pain in childbirth was the punishment for Eve's rebellion against God.

Perhaps the most well known Old Testament character who experienced a great deal of pain was Job. His life serves as an example of endurance through constant pain and distress (Job 30:17). This story stands in contrast to Adam and Eve, revealing that pain does not always come as punishment for one's individual sin.

We experience pain in many ways. It may come in physical form: like a scraped knee or an aching head. Perhaps your pain is emotional as in hurt feelings or broken relationships. Some pain is quick and severe (acute), while other pain is recurring and long-lasting (chronic). No matter the form, pain always hurts.

*Pain is happiness taking a break
It's the sadness leaving my heart
Pain is a dagger, through my chest
Pain is all good leaving my soul
Pain is a broken heart
Pain is my blood running dry through my veins
And shattered dreams
Pain is losing a loved one
It's love
Pain is endless days
And long black nights
Pain is here
Pain is inside me
Krystal P.*

Yes, we mortals are vulnerable to pain and death, which are both inseparable from life. All this chaos comes as a result of man's fall in the garden. Our vulnerability is extreme; yes, we are defenseless when we are born. Still, Christ has not left us alone to save ourselves.

An Offer of Grace

The secret to coping with the pain of life's tragedy is learning to lean on the source of life's victory. Our God will not leave His people unprepared for

suffering. His grace is enough to provide strength to walk through every valley (2 Cor. 12:9).

We could never run out of God's grace. He has provided a pound of grace for every ounce of pain we experience. Pastor John Piper puts it this way: "With every day's measure of pain, he gives new mercies" (Piper 1997, 26). Therefore, both God's mercy and man's testimony of faith are most recognizable in the context of pain.

With a background of personal pain, King Solomon, the author of Lamentations, cried out to God with hope for mercy. "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23).

So, the Father will provide us with sufficient grace and mercy to withstand today's struggle, even when facing great temptation. We know that Satan is out to defeat us, and he will succeed if we attempt to stand against his schemes in our own power.

The Apostle Paul offers support for this truth in his first letter to the church in Corinth.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Amid all this bad news that comes with pain and death, Scripture provides a promise of sufficient grace. The Bible teaches that death, sorrow, crying, and pain are all temporary for those who follow Christ (Rev. 21:4). These things will one day be considered “former things,” and they will have all “passed away.”

We long for that day of victory, a day of painless joy in eternal heaven. Can you imagine a place with no medicine, hospitals, or funeral homes? While this is outside our ability to fathom, it will be the destination of all those who trust Jesus as their Savior.

Yes, there is a 100 percent chance of pain in this life, but God has provided a marvelous guarantee grace as well. In biblical context, no amount of pain is greater than God’s provision of grace. He is enough.

Part II

What's the Point?

(The Vanity of this Life)

Life is meaningless if it's only a series of random events on a calendar. One's life will only find true meaning when he lives in total abandonment to his God.

'Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:2-9)

What's the point to this life? In a word, glory. Our lives are made for God, not us. Our greatest purpose and deepest sense of significance will be found only in Christ. Everything else is meaningless. We will never find real satisfaction anywhere aside from Jesus.

Chapter 4

Life isn't Fair, or is it?

“Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.” William Shakespeare

“Life isn’t fair. It’s just fairer than death, that’s all.”
William Goldman
(The Princess Bride)

“It is nothing to die. It is frightful not to live.”
Victor Hugo

Defining Fairness

Is life fair? Well, that depends on how you define “fair.” If we compare the lives of any two people, we might naturally feel that one was given an advantage, and the other was slighted in comparison. However, when one considers the universal rebellion of mankind (sin), and our individual lack of worthiness in respect to the life we’ve been given, we must admit that our lives are more than fair. Every man has been given more than he deserves.

In reality, our every heartbeat is a gracious gift from the Creator. This gift was not deserved before it was given, nor can we earn it during this lifetime. How can a perfect God who has given man every good thing he possess, treat that undeserving man unfairly?

God never promised that our lives would be fair. Saying “life isn’t fair” is like saying “My cat doesn’t bark.” Well, that’s true, but one’s expectations of a cat barking would be completely irrational, understand that – well – it’s a cat. Likewise, fairness is like the bark of a cat. It’s an unreasonable expectation under man’s unfortunate circumstances that came as a result of sin.

The Bible doesn’t speak in terms of fairness. I once heard Andy Stanley say, “God is not always fair, but He is always right.” While that statement seems simple, its application to our personal faith is broad. A righteous God has nothing to prove to His creation.

Fairness is a concept produced by sinful men who desire to make God subject to their own expectations. You see everyone decides subjectively – in his own mind – what is fair in his own opinion, but God never gave us the right to do so. There was never a vote; He never asked for our opinion. He alone has authority to judge, and no one else has the right to judge the actual JUDGE.

The Apostle Paul digs a little deeper, explaining how a submissive believer should see life.

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—
(Romans 9:20-23).

This scriptural principle is illustrated by the story of a blind man in John 9. This man had never seen the light of day. The disciples inquired of the reason for his disability in verse 2: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus didn't hesitate to correct His disciples for their false presumptions of physical illnesses. In verse 3, "Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents...'"

This presented a problem for the disciples'. Like many today, they sought fairness. They wanted people to get what they deserved. They eventually learned that God owes us nothing. If we received what we deserved for our labor (justice), eternal death would be our wage to possess (Romans 6:23).

So why was this man born blind? "Jesus answered, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.'" In other words, this blind man had been born blind for the distinct purpose of God gaining glory in both his blindness and his eventual sight. Don't waste your time trying to make this story fair. Instead, yield your own heart to the righteousness of God's every act in you.

Everything for Our Good

Paul offers an explanation of his personal experience with temporary struggle and pain in his letter to Rome: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us," Romans 8:18.

I am convinced that everything in life and death happens for a reason. Does this mean that God approves of every man's death? While we will discuss this further in later chapters, the quick answer is no. God would never condone the taking of one's own life, nor is He happy with murder. God does, however, allow these

horrible events to take place in the world, and He is never caught off guard by these events, good or bad.

Interestingly, God does seem to find unique ways of using tragic events in our lives for our own good. Some might suggest that God offers a preferential blessing on His children, but reality is even better. God doesn't just line things up to work out for Christians. He is actively involved in these events working out.

Paul provides a foundation for this concept in his words to the Church at Rome: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those of those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Pastor John Piper adds, "God is working for us around the clock. He does not take days off, and he does not sleep. In fact, he is so eager to work for us that he goes around looking for more work to do for people who will trust him" (Piper 1997, 29).

Piper refers to 2 Chronicles 16:9, "For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him. You have done foolishly in this, for from now on you will have wars."

The key to our understanding all of this is determining the purpose for God's work in our lives. Some people would suggest that this "working of God" in our lives is primarily for our happiness. This is an

errant view of God and the Bible, and is a major misrepresentation of His word, the Bible. Lean in, and don't miss this major point. Our happiness is NOT God's ultimate goal.

Consider Paul's description of the man in whom God works, "those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). In other words, God takes the events of our lives, good and bad, and works them out for our good, in the context of His greater purpose. Though things may not go the way we plan, our plan should not be our greatest concern.

God's kingdom purpose is always best for us, and His glory alone will ultimately bring us the fulfillment we're looking for. If Christians are ever going to really understand death, we must first seek to grasp the true purpose of life. Yes, our lives are more than fair because we are here for Him, not us.

God has given special attention to each of our individual lives, providing varied levels of gifts and talents, including different interests and preferences. All of these factors reinforce God's purpose for each man and woman in this world. We will only discover the true meaning of life in the person of Jesus Christ; then we must develop those personal gifts to best fulfill our God-given purposes.

Life doesn't have to be fair because God is always causing "all things work together" for our good.

Chapter 5

Longing for Significance

“Life is an opportunity, benefit from it.

Life is beauty, admire it.

Life is bliss, taste it.

Life is a dream, realize it.

Life is a challenge, meet it.

Life is a duty, complete it.

Life is a game, play it.

Life is a promise, fulfill it.

Life is sorrow, overcome it.

Life is a song, sing it.

Life is a struggle, accept it.

Life is a tragedy, confront it.

Life is an adventure, dare it.

Life is luck, make it.

Life is too precious, do not destroy it.

Life is life, fight for it.”

Mother Teresa

The Dragon Scroll

Life is a gift from God, but our personal pride can render this gracious gift meaningless. It's like we've received a box, and we expect it to be filled with countless items of joy and fulfillment. Our selfish motivation, however, voids the true value of the box. Though it's full of purpose and significance, carnal man is blinded by his selfishness and pride.

I've been the dad of small children for more than 20 years. So, I've watched my share of cartoon movies. Po is the name of a character in the movie "Kung Fu Panda." He is an overweight panda who was raised by a stork, and he is expected to take over his dad's noodle business eventually. Po knows there is more to life, a deeper purpose for him. The movie basically is the unfolding of that narrative.

In his pursuit of purpose, Po misunderstands the message of a magical item called the Dragon Scroll. The message of purpose and significance is present the entire time, but his blind expectations cause him to miss the clear meaning of life. This story made me think of how easy it is for us to miss the meaning and the calling of God on our lives.

What is life all about really? Deep within every man's soul is a longing for significance and purpose. Mankind is in full pursuit of personal happiness and peace of mind, yet once the goal is met the

accomplishment of winning the race falls far short of the expectations of the runner. The shine of the trophy will soon be worn, and the cheer of the fans will fade into background noise.

One might get all hyped up about a particular effort, only to find its substance wanting in the end. Anticipation and revelation are often a distant kin on this journey we call life. A dream job might end up in disaster. That dream car may end up driving like a tank, and the dream home could end up being a money pit. So what brings this empty end to what seems to be a plentiful promise? Why do we never seem to be satisfied in what this life has to offer?

Neither our lives, nor the people around us, are to blame for our life circumstances. Realistically, we can blame life. It's neutral; it has no personal agenda. While one's life may seem to be filled with evil, it only responds to three major influences: the general fall of mankind, our subsequent deeds, and the providence of our sovereign God.

Adam's sin still affects us today (Rom. 5:12). Every newborn baby is brought into this life as a sinner. We're not a sinner because we sin; we sin because we're a sinner. David declared, "I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5). So many, if not most, of life's evil circumstances are a result of the universal fall of mankind in the Garden.

Like Po, we are all searching for significance in life, but we will not find it in a dragon scroll. Our fulfillment will only be found as we make God's glory our life's greatest goal. Look into the mirror of God's Word, and you will inevitably see yourself in a whole new light. The longing of your heart will be satisfied in the surrender of your life.

The Law of Consequence

Humans are on a constant search for significance, for purpose and meaning in our lives. But finding it seems almost impossible to most people. They don't struggle for lack of trying. They're just looking in all the wrong places. Where can we find true fulfillment and purpose for living?

Just as Newton's Law of Motion states that, "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction," Scripture teaches a similar spiritual law. In Galatians 6:7 Paul says, "whatever one sows, that will he also reap." For every spiritual action, there is an equivalent reaction.

I'm afraid that most people in the 21st Century have forgotten there are consequences to every action we perform, good or bad. Simply stated, we often find ourselves in the valleys of life because we chose to take that first step down the mountain at some point in the past. I heard Pastor Andy Stanley once say, "Direction determines destination." In other words, you'll always

end up where you started going.

One might intend to go to New York City, and he might say, “I’m going to New York City” repeatedly to everyone around him. But what if the man turned onto I-75 South, and is headed toward Miami? This man’s declaration doesn’t determine his destination. Instead, his direction overrules his intention.

Again, this equation is simple: Our willingness to move, plus the direction we begin to walk, equals the eventual destination of our journey. People may look for someone or something to blame for their condition, but we usually get where we are because that’s where we choose to go in the first place.

Many people live their entire lives pushing themselves to the limit and working their fingers to the bone, all for a reflection of their dreams. Human nature tells us that we will find fulfillment around the next corner, but there is always another promise left unmet. Jim Carrey once said, “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see it’s not the answer.”

Our dreams are nothing but a synthetic mirror, a reflection of our own selfish desires. The substance is actually just behind the mirror; significance in Christ sits waiting on the other side of the glass. If we would only shatter the reflection of our sinful expectations, authentic purpose would be in full view.

Paul provides additional insight, into how sin blinds the hearts of men.

This I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ! (Ephesians 4:17-20)

The secret to one's finding significance in this life is his knowing where to look for it. If we're waiting for perfect circumstances to begin our service to God, we will miss our greatest opportunities to see Him glorified in our lives. It's been said, "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass...It's about learning to dance in the rain."

We stand at a crossroads of purpose, where we choose between waste and worship. Will we invest our lives in God's kingdom and glory, or will we squander our best on us?

Chapter 6

Don't Waste your Life on You

“We are here to add what we can to life,
not to get what we can from it.”

William Oslar

“We must learn to live together as brothers
or perish together as fools.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Many people die at twenty five and aren't
buried until they are seventy five.”

Benjamin Franklin

Life's a Beach? Really?

Life is short. We're here one day, and we're gone the next. Most people, however, live life like it's a vacation tour. Relaxation and ease seem to be man's greatest goals. He works to earn, and he earns to buy. Man buys to rest, but then he rests to work again. What's the point? Is this all life is about?

Words like purpose, significance, and value are common in our day, but the average man misses the forest for the trees. The activity of life tends to hypnotize us into an ignorant slumber, leading us to miss life altogether. Man fools himself into thinking he's living, when his heart never truly beats.

Life is more than a series of fun events; at least, it can be. Your life can count for more than a house, job, car, and temporary possessions. While all these things are great, they are to be seen as means to an end. God has provided us with possessions that we might glorify Him. Our home is His; our automobiles are His. The balance in our bank account is His. God has made an investment in us, and we must be responsible stewards with His possessions.

We obviously enjoy many things about this world that God has created. Its beauty is unparalleled, and we should learn to enjoy it. But Satan attempts to blind us from the reality of our true existence by convincing us that this world is all about our own pleasure.

The Devil's goal is to have us pour our life's investment into this 70 to 80-year existence. He tries to keep our eyes on the ground in front of us, but he is defeated when we lift our eyes to see the reality of our eternity with Christ. Our minds, hearts, and passions must be set on heavenly things (Col. 3:2).

We must always remember that we were created to live for Him, not waste our lives on us. When we fail to see beyond this short earthly existence, our lives are not fully lived. It's more tragic to continue living an insignificant life for 80 years than to die a purpose-filled life at 20 years old. Don't waste your life on you. Give it and live it for God's glory.

“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25). In other words, learn to be a loser for Jesus. When one loses his life, he really gains life in Christ, which is far better.

What is your life?

Consider your own earthly life for a moment, and answer this question. What on earth are you living for? The stuff of this world can easily cloud our view, distracting us from more important things. We easily begin to live for earthly gain, accomplishment, or recognition, but Jesus clearly taught us not to do this. His words in Matthew are significant:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Writer, Rita Mae Brown, once said, “About all you can do in life is be who you are.” I would only change one word in her statement, the word “are.” Life is not just about being who we are. Instead, it’s about being who God made us to be. There is a big difference in these two ideas.

If we seek to be who we are in our own power, we will inevitably invest in this earthly existence alone. It’s in our human DNA; we long to waste our lives on us. But God has not called us to serve ourselves, nor has He called us to squander our gifts on this temporary landscape.

The average human only has 683,280 hours (2.4 billion seconds) to live on this spinning rock (Hitchcock 2005, 13). So, what are we waiting for? Distractions are many, but none of them hold a candle to our purpose in Christ. God expects us to invest everything we have in His kingdom, for His eternal glory. Now is the time to charge on in Jesus’ name.

Part III

What's it Worth?

(The Value of this Life)

Who can measure the value of life? One can purchase a Porche 911 Carrera Cabriolet is only \$93,700. Russian billionaire, Roman Abramovich, owns a boat worth over \$1.2 million. But that's nothing compared to Johnny Depp's \$3.6 million island in the Bahamas. Then again, Bill Gates has a reported net worth of over \$56 billion. Yet none of this comes close to the worth of a man's life.

The value of one life is far greater than any other possession known to man. A wealthy man would surrender all he owns to buy just one more day once he stands at the door of death. What is a human life really worth?

Chapter 7

Human Worth

“Try not to become a man of success,
but rather try to become a man of value.”

Albert Einstein

“We're all human, aren't we? Every human life is worth
the same, and worth saving.” J.K. Rowling

"It is a poverty that a 'child must die', So that you may
live as you wish..." Mother Teresa

Life's Standard of Value

Once upon a time, I was a baseball card dealer in Rockmart, Georgia. I started my own business right out of high school. The baseball card industry was booming at the time, and trading them was my favorite activity. It was an added bonus that I made some money doing it.

Baseball enthusiasts would come into the store to buy, sell, or trade these collectibles. It was a big industry, and it was all based on a standard of value. While the standard had a framework, it was not an exact science. Determining the value of any given card was a subjective endeavor, requiring the dealer to carefully examine two specific features of the card: character and quality.

The character, or baseball player, on the front of the trading card was always the primary factor in determining the value. For example, a rookie card of Chipper Jones is worth more than a rookie card of Bob Horner. Both players filled the third base position for the Atlanta Braves, but Horner's career doesn't compare to that of Jones'. So the character on the face of the card made the piece of paper more or less valuable.

Still, there was another factor to consider. One might own a Chipper Jones rookie card that has been physically mistreated, a bent corner or a faded face. This was very common. After all, kids were the primary buyer of these collectables. As a child, I remember attaching a baseball card to the spokes of my bike for an awesome

sound affect. While this made my bike sound cool, this resulted in the destruction of the card. A baseball card treated this way would lose most of its trading value.

I am grateful that God's grace has made mine a different fate. Had I been examined for flaws, my value would have been poor. But God says we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" in Psalm 139:14. Then in Jeremiah 1:5 he offers more clarity. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

God has made every human being uniquely beautiful and filled with spiritual potential. Still, many miss this affirming truth from God, and live in fear, feeling unacceptable and unworthy. Though people long to belong, some never find compassion they're looking for in the eyes of those closest to them. So who determines the worth of any given individual?

The Image of God

While none of us are in "mint" condition, God has made every human being special and of more value than any other living creatures on earth. It's important to make a significant point here. This special human value is not just recognized by God; it's provided by the Creator Himself. He is the one who has determined the value of all living things, including the human race.

Mankind has been created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27). What exactly does “image,” (*imago Dei*) mean? Some say the “image of God” speaks to man’s authority over the animals, while others point to man’s capacity to possess relationships. Still more say that God’s “image” denotes a fundamental dignity and value that is distinctly human (Hollinger 2002, 72).

Regardless of how we define “image” and “likeness,” we know that God created mankind unique. Humans are unlike any other living creature. Special attention has been given to humanity over all living things. This issue of unique human worth becomes more interesting as we discover the purpose for His preference, that is, His own personal glory. We have not been given divine likeness for our own benefit, nor has He minimized His glory for our story.

In eternity past it became part of God’s perfect plan that we should know Him and make Him known to the nations. This God of all creation desired a personal relationship with us, but somehow mankind missed this opportunity to commune with God. Remarkably, even those who acknowledge His gracious gift of relationship today, misunderstand the purpose by making it more about them than Him.

Yes, we were created in the image and likeness of the Creator of this universe, but His image was not given

that people would see us. God gave us His image that men might see Him reflected in and through us to the world.

The Danger of a Utilitarian Ethic

So, God created man for Himself, but men have a difficult time grasping this concept. The carnal nature of mankind draws him toward a lifestyle of self-gratification. Our society has adopted a low-pain, high pleasure approach to living. This philosophy is referred to as utilitarianism. At its heart, this ethic makes moral decisions based entirely on the end result.

Proponents of choice, for example, scoff at pro-life advocates for their defense of the unborn child, pointing to the right of a mother to choose in regards to the birth of her unborn baby. Their worldview is skewed by a desire to avoid personal pain and inconvenience, primarily seeking personal pleasure (Rae 1995, 84-85).

Individuals in our culture tend to seek that which is best for them personally, ignoring the impact of a decision on the lives of others. Scientists offer great promise from controversial research such as embryonic stem cell and cloning studies, but these researchers discount the consequences of their efforts.

Consider the words of physician and columnist, Alan Malnak:

“I well understand the present conflict over the moral status of the human embryo reflects deep differences in our basic convictions and is unlikely to be resolved through deliberation or debate. Could anyone be more pro-life than those dedicated to working to prevent and treat innumerable horrendous illnesses? I ask, whose future is more important, that of a cluster of frozen, destined to be destroyed cells or a sick or injured child or adult and that person’s family?” (Alan Malnak, MD, Naples Daily News)

Dr. Malnak’s words demonstrate the irreconcilable problem with utilitarianism. He advocates the destruction of millions of embryos, which are human life, to better the lives of others. In other words, he sees the loss of one form of human life acceptable exchange for the return of saving more “valuable” human life.

Professor Scott Rae has this to say: “The most common charge against utilitarianism is that it cannot protect the rights of minorities, and sometimes it can justify obvious injustices when the greater good is served” (Rae 1995, 86). Rae goes on to explain that slavery might have been justifiable in the pre-Civil War South from a utilitarian perspective.

Human life at any stage, and in any form, still remains human life. Christians would be hypocritical to compromise their consistency on this issue. In other words, if the believer wavers on the issue of embryonic stem cell research, he then has little ground to stand in

regards to abortion. Consistency is the key in any case of ethics. If human life has special value, then it must possess that value in any circumstance.

Abortion after rape is another challenging example of inconsistency for some Christians. While one must enter into this discussion with great sympathy for those who are victims of rape, the baby's life remains a legitimate issue of concern for those who value life. Is this unborn baby not still as much a living child as any other? If abortion in any particular case is murder, then it must be murder in every case. If one's moral position changes because of the negative effect the standard has on his life, he immediately surrenders his own character to circumstantial ethics.

The Slippery Slope

We are currently on a slippery slope of morals and ethics in our modern day. Any time the church has given an inch in the past, the culture has taken a mile. It's easy to rationalize and politicize every sin under the sun, making everything acceptable under the social mandate of "tolerance."

But compromise always comes at a higher price than expected. That which we reluctantly accept today, will be enthusiastically embraced tomorrow. Those who believe we are gradually becoming better and better as a society are terribly confused. With each new day, man

becomes more sinful. Our denial of sin does not lessen its consequence.

The life of every human being is valuable to our God. Therefore, Christians must consider life valuable as well. Despite our past circumstances or past struggles, God cares for us. Perhaps you have been told that you are worthless all of your life. That is not true. God sees in us that which we cannot see in ourselves. You are significant to God, and He has a grand plan for you.

Chapter 8

A Question of Personhood

Every human being possesses personal value, and this value is further guaranteed by personhood, which is unique to humanity. Most people would agree that a dog cannot be a person, but you'd be surprised how that may be changing.

While most would define a “person” as an individual human being, many debate the legitimacy of this claim today. They argue that personhood is less about physical biology and more about practical characteristics. Dan Becker offers great insight on the Evangelical view of personhood:

“Because we bear the image of God, all mankind, and, by extension, each and every human life has a “specialness” and worth that demands respect and legal protection. Each human life, from its earliest stage of development, is a unique person which bears God’s likeness, and should have the same protection of law that is afforded other “persons” in our society” (Dan Becker).

Defining Personhood

The discussion of unique human value leads naturally to the definition of personhood. The question in

the abortion debate used to be, “When does life begin?” I can remember hearing this debate rage through most of my childhood. In fact, I was born just nine days before the historic “Roe v. Wade” verdict (January 22, 1973).

This was the landmark decision by the United States Supreme Court that legalized abortion. Though the court made this decision, the nation has remained divided over the issue of abortion (life and choice) for the past forty years.

But today the conversation has shifted; it’s no longer about determining the beginning of life. It seems that this issue has been settled. Very few people today even attempt to dispute the fact that life begins at conception. The debate has now shifted from the beginning of life to the definition of personhood. The question that now rages is at what point does a life develop qualities and characteristics of a “person?”

Scott Rae, Professor of Christian Ethics at Talbot School of Theology, says, “Most philosophers agree that the fetus either has personhood from the point of conception or it acquires it at some point during the process of gestation” (Rae 1995, 138). He says a very small minority would question the personhood of a human infant.

And yet, Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University, brought this debate to light in 1979 when he suggested that, “The life of a newborn [human]

baby is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee..." (Swinton 2007, 187). He called for the abandonment of all distinction between humans and other animals (Stott 1984, 185).

Later in 1996, Singer suggested that parents should have a 28-day trial period to determine if they desired to keep a child. While this seems inconceivable to most people, he argues that it should be the parents' decision to accept the child before he/she reaches the status of "personhood" (Singer 1996, 217).

This opinion was on full display in the words of Virginia Governor, Ralph Northam, when he was interviewed in January 2019. He suggested that a mom should have the right to have a conversation with her doctor after the birth of the baby, to determine if she would abort or keep the child.

Peter Singer's definition of personhood includes the need for both self-awareness and conscience (Singer 1993, 189). Self-awareness reminds us of Descartes reasoning, "I think, therefore I am." Philosopher, Ed Miller correctly adds, "if I am mistaken about this [his existence], then there is no 'I' to be mistaken!" (Miller 1998, 81). So, Singer suggests one's personhood depends on a certain level of cognitive reasoning and moral determination.

When considering a child with a disability, Singer showed no sense of conscience himself. He

stated, “When the death of a disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed” (Singer 1993, 186).

This view of human dignity attempts to redefine personhood in terms of “usefulness” and “worthiness” of life (McQuilkin 1989, 312 - 313). But who has the right to declare one human life more useful or valuable than another?

The Gift of Personhood

Unlike Singer, John Stott, one of the most widely respected scholars of our day, argued for “the reality of personhood from the moment of conception” (Stott 1990, 319). He clarified that a person needs not be awarded the title of “person” to be considered a person. While a personal encounter with a born child with both self-awareness and a conscience may verify his personhood, Stott says this is only the final stage of several levels of personhood development. Personal relationships confirm that which the Creator established (Stott 1984, 170).

Robertson McQuilkin, former President of Columbia International University, agrees with Stott, stating, “Perhaps ‘soul’ is the theological equivalent of the secular ‘person’” (McQuilkin 1995, 309). If, in fact, the possession of a soul substantiates the identity of a person, the unborn fetus possesses personhood.

Scripture supports the personhood of the unborn in Jeremiah 1:5. “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Though self-awareness may be in question, God’s awareness of Jeremiah’s personal value is obvious.

So we believe that every human being possesses value in the eyes of God. To be human is to possess some level of personhood status, and no person or group of persons has the right to discount the value of another human being. God alone possesses the right and authority to set value on His creation.

Personhood is not something achieved or earned by approval. Human beings don’t possess the authority to exclude someone from their ranks. One’s possession of personal identity is a gift from God. He alone has the right to give life, and every human, regardless of his stage of development, is a valuable person.

Understanding that God alone gives life and personhood, one must admit that God alone holds full right to take that life away. Some would argue that a fleeting quality of life would justify the termination of a disabled individual. Perhaps it would be a young child born with a challenging disorder, or it could be an elderly man with Alzheimer’s.

The major problem with this logic is us. There is only one God, and I am not Him. The Creator alone

holds the right to terminate the life of any person, regardless of the circumstance or stage. Remember that we were created in God's image. Therefore, He is to be the giver and taker of human life.

Chapter 9

The Stewardship Life

“Life consists not in holding good cards, but in playing those you hold well.” Josh Billings

“We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.” Winston Churchill

“After all, what's a life, anyway?
We're born, we live a little while, we die.”
E.B. White (*Charlotte's Web*)

Hidden Treasure

A collector made his way to the Tulsa Oklahoma filming of the well-known “Antiques Roadshow.” He collected cups for the past 40 years, and had one particular set that he wanted appraised. He presented the collection of five Chinese cups to the PBS show’s Asian Art expert, Lark Mason.

Mason’s jaw dropped, as the owner submitted the uniquely carved 17th century cups. To everyone’s surprise, these cups set a new record as the most valuable item ever discovered on the show. These previously insignificant cups were determined to be valued at approximately \$1.5 million.

Now, that was quite the discovery. Can you imagine learning that something you own was worth that much money? Listen, your life is worth far more than a rare collection of Chinese cups on a television show. Now that you’re aware of the treasure of life, what will you do with it?

Jesus shared the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-28. Christian stewardship is the core teaching here. Three servants were given three different amounts of treasure to invest while their master was on his journey. Two of the three servants were faithful stewards, but the third servant was foolish, hiding his one talent in the ground. The master rewarded good stewardship, but punished the foolishness of the other.

If your life is seen as a treasure the Master has given you to invest, which servant are you? Are you actively investing your life in the work of the gospel, or have you buried it for fear of losing it all.

Sponge or a Spout

This treasure we possess is not for us, but God. Its value has been determined, and the Master has entrusted us as stewards. Will we retain or release the measure of His treasure? Is your life best described as a sponge or a spout? A sponge is made to absorb and retain all it can, while a spout is fashioned to release its contents for a specific purpose.

Believers have an unlimited supply; God is our source. While a sponge can only retain a certain amount of water, a limitless supply can flow through a spout. A man living to please himself will soak up all the glory he can, while a follower of Jesus is called to deny himself as a spout, choosing to direct all the glory to God.

We must realize the world does not revolve around us, and the irony of life is the paradox of self. Those who seek selfish gratification will end up least satisfied, but those who seek to gratify others will experience the greatest fulfillment.

The Apostle Paul speaks to this issue in Philippians 2:3: “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”

The reader of the book of Ecclesiastes might feel a bit discouraged in reference to his purpose and direction in life. Solomon expounds eloquently on the undeniable meaninglessness of a self-centered, agenda-driven world in which we live. “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher; ‘Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?’” (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3)

Without God-given purpose, we are simply watching the sun rise and set about 26,000 times. Without Christ, a man is confronted by a confusing life, filled with uncertainty and fear. We must not bury the treasure; make it count for the kingdom.

Making it Count

The glory of God is the only legitimate profit of man’s labor in this life. Solomon learned that one’s personal effort to accumulate and gratify his flesh is empty because his motives are wrong. He is soaking up the glory, hoping to find complete satisfaction.

Physical living can easy get in the way of our spiritually dying. A man living for himself sees no need to invest in eternity, for his hope is built on the accumulation of earthly objects and recognition. The sponge attempts to live in the moment and soak it up.

This misunderstanding of material goods skews even our perspective of poverty. As my wife, Amy, and I

have visited other countries on mission trips we often initially feel sad because of the peoples' lack of material possessions in third world countries.

But the more we consider the legitimacy of our feelings, we soon become envious of the people we once pitied. Our material possession can easily become a curse of sorts, and that which God has given to us for to distribute with our spout can get trapped in our sponge. This is a practical picture of poor stewardship.

Our attraction to material goods can easily become an obstacle to a missional life and a distraction from our eternal life. Material goods can lead believers to lose sight of the treasure we have found in knowing Jesus.

Sure, we sing songs and hear sermons that speak of our eternal home, yet we jokingly admit we'd rather stay here on earth for a little while longer. Really? Is that the testimony of our longing to be with Jesus? We really love you Jesus, but man this place (Earth) is nice too. Give us a little more time to live it up!

We dream of that one last experience; maybe it's our wedding, or the birth of our first child, or grandchild. Once we have those children, our longing to stay here will only grow stronger. We want to see them grow up and do this and become that. Every earthly experience, good or bad, will leave us longing for more.

It's very easy for our expectation of earthly events to skew our heavenly rationale. We can temporarily lose

our spiritual minds, thinking that any self-gratifying earthly experience might be worth missing another moment of Heaven with Jesus.

It really is this simple. The more we long for the things connected to this world, the less we long for our eternal home with God. This world is not the main event; it's only the opening act. The church must wake up, and Christians need to do everything possible to make this life count for eternity.

From Vanity to Value

Most of this world's population spends the passing hours wasting valuable time. We wake up, eat, work, eat, watch television, eat some more, and return to our sleep. Then the charming chase begins again on the next morning.

The believer must become more focused on the reality of his major mission in life and refuse to become attracted and distracted by the trash this world throws our way. If we try to do nothing, we will succeed every time. The child of God must make effort to become that which God has called him to be. This earthly life is full of vanity, but life found in Christ transforms man's vanity into God's value.

Part IV

Running the Race Well

(The Victory of this Life)

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run,
but only one receives the prize? So run that you
may obtain it.” 1 Corinthians 9:24

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith.” 2 Timothy 4:7

“Life is like a coin. You can spend it any way you wish,
but you only spend it once.” Lillian Dickson

Chapter 10

Life with Purpose

Life without purpose is life without victory. The author of Hebrews challenges believers to, “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1). The writer compares our daily lives to a race, not a stroll, and we are encouraged to run this race not walk. The requirement of endurance leads us to assume this is a lifelong race, ending only at the finish line of death.

The final words of the verse are remarkable, “the race that is set before us.” God has a specific plan and purpose for every man and woman on the planet, a particular race has been placed before him. Every man is responsible to run his own individual race, but God has already selected a path filled with purpose.

The Cost of Discipleship

A man’s ability to live with true purpose in life is completely dependent on his becoming a disciple who is willing to die to himself. After our new birth in Jesus Christ, we’re no longer the one living. Scripture is clear that Jesus has now taken over, residing inside of us and living through us (Galatians. 2:20). Plainly stated, no dying equals no living.

No man can live for eternity in heaven without first dying to himself on this earth. Truly, death is but a gateway to glory. God said, "Whoever finds me finds life," Proverbs 8:35. Then Jesus made a similar claim in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

So, life can only be found in God through Jesus Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian known for his stand against Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party, once said, "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die." While this is not a popular thought for most believers, it is the most accurate description of salvation I have ever heard.

American Christians in the 21st Century tend to make faith something entirely different from New Testament account of discipleship. Many desire to embrace Jesus as Savior, but they'd prefer to wait on yielding to Him as Lord. This logic leads some to assume they can pick and chose which part of Christ's calling they accept, but Jesus makes it clear in Luke 9:

And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? (Luke 9:23-25)

While these verses present a paradox of sorts, this is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though some preachers attempt to sell a cheap gospel of “health, wealth, and prosperity,” they construct such theologies in shallow waters of scripture, ignoring the crashing waves of surrender. Many attempt to make humanity the central focus of the gospel message, but Jesus remains the main character. Without Him, there is no gospel at all.

Jesus calls His disciples to deny themselves, to pick up a cross, to follow Him – no matter the cost, being willing to lose it all for His sake. Modern Christianity often views faith as an easy option, requiring little sacrifice from the believer. This is the religion Paul speaks of in 2 Timothy 3:5, where he describes a people who possess “an appearance of godliness but denying its power.”

Andrew Murray speaks directly to this issue in his book, *Full Life in Christ*:

The Christian who thinks only of his salvation from curse and condemnation cannot understand this. He finds it impossible to deny self. Although he may sometimes try to do so, his life mainly consists of pleasing himself. The Christian who has taken Christ as his example cannot be content with this. He has surrendered himself to seek the most complete fellowship with the cross of Christ (Murray 2000, 52).

Following Christ is much more than “accepting” Jesus, walking down an aisle, filling out a card and standing up in front of a crowd. While these are steps in one’s public declaration, they are merely launching pads of faith. Scripture tells us that even Satan and his demons admit Jesus is the Messiah (Mark 5:7; James 2:19).

Surrender goes beyond intellectual belief or emotional acceptance. We all know that, “faith without works is dead” (James 2:20). This doesn’t mean we earn our salvation at all. In fact, we have no power for obedience until we’re saved.

God saves us that we might become His instrument of good works. This is Christian victory, losing ourselves in the purpose and work of Christ. Paul reminds us that we were created to serve God. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

Therefore, Christians are not saved from their works; followers of Jesus are saved for their works. Our obedience to the Father is the purpose for our salvation. We were created to bring glory to God, and victory is found in His glory alone.

Our Work as Worship

If the stained glass windows were broken and the musical instruments were incapable of making a sound,

would our perception of American Christianity be impacted? YES! Why? This is the result of hundreds of years of traditional trends forming a religiosity that does not exist in the New Testament. While there is nothing inherently wrong with our traditional forms of liturgy, they can easily become the focus of our worship.

Now, consider the church in context of technology. Imagine church without electricity. How would our people respond if we conducted our Sunday's services without a sound system or power point presentation? Many approach worship like a spectator sport, and it seems the evaluations of worship are often based on entertainment value. The purpose of worship, however, is not primarily observation or experience for men as much as glorification of God. While the experience of worship is beneficial to man, it's primary intent is the adoration and elevation of our God.

Please understand; I am not bashing traditional or contemporary models of ministry. My point goes beyond the musical style of a church, digging beneath the surface. When all the extra-biblical products of what we call "church" is stripped away, we are left with very little, yet this is where we find true worship.

Worship is not just a corporate service in a building; it's personal service in our spirits. God wants your worship every hour of every day. When you're on the job, work as unto the Lord. Michael Kendrick says,

“God has a plan for your life’s work. And he means for your career to dovetail perfectly with your purpose in life” (Kendrick 2011, 148).

When you’re at the game or out to eat with your family, make much of Jesus. God calls the true disciple to die to himself and live a surrendered life, passionately pursuing Him, not religion or denominational loyalty. Our work is worship; our family activities are worship. We are called to worship Him at all times. This devotion is our purpose for living, and this worship is the finish line of our faith.

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

When we were born again, we died to our sin and self. The old man and his deeds were discarded, nailed to the cross, and placed in the grave with Jesus. The transformed Christian is called to “put on the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:20-24). He now has reason to rejoice because he has died to all that is corrupt, and have now been born anew to all that is right and good.

The believer’s new identity is found in Jesus Christ alone. He is our source of strength, sufficiency, and security on the difficult road ahead. It is in Jesus we find

a new beginning. Paul declares, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old things has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

So we were dead in our sin, but we also died to sin and self, looking unto Jesus. He then made us alive again through the power of God and gave us a new life in Him. So what do we do now? We must now live for Christ. We do not work for the cross. Instead, we work from the cross. We serve our Lord because of His sacrifice on the on Calvary. We could never earn our salvation, but we seek to be used for His kingdom purpose.

Paul challenges us in his letter to the Colossian church, to turn our hearts to Heaven, setting our minds on God’s glory.

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death - sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Colossians 3:1-10).

While we were born into the vanity of this

temporary world, those who trust in Jesus are born again into a life of purpose and direction. The most significant point of this truth is our newfound ability to bring glory to God forever. He is our purpose for living, and He is our victory in death.

Are you confident in your eternity? Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? Would you like to have assurance and hope in your eternal destiny in Heaven with God?

1. First, you must admit that you're a sinner who needs a savior. Simply stated, you're not perfect. (Romans 3:23)

2. Second, you must believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins because of His love for you. This is more than an intellectual admission. You must trust Him, believing with your heart that the Father raised Jesus from the dead. (Romans 10:9)

3. Finally, we confess our sins and trust Jesus as your Savior and Lord. This is a public profession of that which we've already acknowledged in our hearts. We confess our own sinful condition, but we simultaneously confess him as Lord.

Receive this gift of salvation today. Make this your

prayer. “God, I realize that I am a sinner, and I am unable to save myself. But I know you love me and sent Jesus to die for my sins. As best as I know how, I ask you to save me. I surrender my life to you today. Amen.”

Chapter 11

Gaining True Victory

The main problem with our lives is us. We unconsciously adopt an errant perception of this world. Familiarity becomes our enemy, and that which was meant to be the means to accomplish the mission becomes an end unto itself, robbing the believer of his true victory in living.

The irony of this life is found in our inaccurate estimate of this world. Those who seem destined to come in last are inevitably the ones who win the race, while those who appear to be in the lead are found in the end, running on the wrong track entirely (Matthew 20:16).

Just stay the course, Paul says, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). Keep your eyes on the prize, and press through till morning. It will be worth it all at the finish line.

Joy in Your Mourning

God has promised us the victory in this race of life, but He never said we wouldn't get tired of running. We all experience bumps in the road along the way, and injuries are a natural part of the race. If you run the race, you will have an occasional set back, but you must never

stop running.

While our darkest hours bring tragedy and trouble, good news is just around the corner. “Weeping may tarry for a night, but joy comes with the morning” (Psalm 30:5b). The Hebrew word for joy in the text can also be translated “a shout of joy.” There is a shout of joy on its way, and the source of this shout will be our Lord Jesus.

God enables us to rejoice in the midst of mourning. Though we weep in the flesh, we rejoice in our hope, which is securely fixed on Jesus. The yielded believer is not subject to the sorrow of hopelessness found in an unbeliever. Death is victory for a Christian because we have a future hope in Jesus. Paul reminds us that this life is not the end:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of a trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

The Comfort of our Hope

The good news of Jesus’ return, and our subsequent resurrection, brings hope to the despondency of this world. Remember that Paul says to, “encourage [or comfort] one another with these words.” This is a

challenge we easily overlook.

How? Well, it's comforting to know that the present circumstances of this world are not the final word. While we are now surrounded by pain, a day will come filled with perfect healing. Though we struggle in this night, the morning will bring a beautiful sunrise.

The believer's victory stands on one side of a sin-filled gulf, found between God and man. The wages of our sin are positioned on the other side of this canyon. At birth we stand with sin and death, but death is only one side, man's earthly reality. God's gift is located on the opposite side of the gulf, positioned for all those willing to cross over the bridge of grace to the other side.

This gift answers the problem of sin and death, providing eternal life through the righteousness of Jesus Christ. In fact, we learn from Romans 6:23 that, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

But how did we get in this sinful predicament, and how can we possibly hope to get to the other side of the canyon of human impossibility? Mankind stands at the edge of eternity. Looking back he sees a failure to obey in Adam; on the other side he finds Jesus, realizing in Him our sin debt paid in full. Consider this truth in light of Romans 5:12-21:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned...yet death reigned from Adam to Moses...[and] if because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:12-21)

The Wages of our Labor

It's not fair to place all the blame on Adam and Eve in the garden. They were no more guilty than we who suffer from the fall. If we had been in the garden the result would have been the same. None of us have reason to accuse Adam of misrepresenting us. His infamous failure was consistent with our personal track records.

So we all sinned in Adam, and the consequence of that sin was the curse of death to all mankind. This death is the "wages of sin," but what kind of death was it? Before the forbidden fruit was eaten there had been no pain, trouble, or death recorded. Everything was literally perfect. We had no unsweet tea, no decaffeinated coffee, and no need for diet plans.

Sleepless nights, emergency rooms, and man's general feeling of disappointment didn't exist. We are talking about a perfect world! Adam and Eve lived in paradise with God, but that would soon change. After sin, man's eyes were opened and they saw in a way God never intended. The results of this introduction to sin were struggle, trouble, pain, and death. Both Adam and

Eve were ashamed of their nakedness, Genesis 3:10-11.

While describing everything included in the curse of sin, God concluded His discourse by explaining when the trouble would end. “Till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19b). And so, here we are, destined for temporary trouble in this world, but promised eternal joy in Heaven.

Made Alive in Jesus

So, is the death spoken of in Romans 6:23 physical? The entrance of sin in the garden was the cause of all imperfection, including every form of sicknesses and death. The result of sin was the fall of man. While the word “death” in Romans 6:23 speaks of our physical end, it also includes the spiritual death we inherited through Adam. We were born spiritually dead, but God intended new life for His creation. Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins...But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). (Eph. 2:1, 4-5)

Therefore, because of Adam’s sin and the death that came with it, mankind faced a hopeless predicament on his own. Through God, however, hope returned to the

human race. Though the “wages of sin is death, the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

The victory of this life comes by the gift of God, which is salvation through His only Son Jesus Christ. It is imperative to grasp our total insufficiency as sinful men and women. Without Christ we are hopelessly lost in our sin. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8).

We were incapable of paying the wages of our sin, making it necessary for us to satisfy the debt with our lives. God, however, was fully capable of paying the price, and He accomplished this by giving us His Son, Jesus. In fact, it was Jesus who said, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). God is offering you a victorious life through Jesus today.

Consider the biblical concept of this gift: “He gave His only begotten Son” (Jn. 3:16); “the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus” (Rom. 6:23); and “it is a gift from God, not of works” (Eph. 2:8). No one has the ability to earn his salvation.

The question remains, do we realize what we’ve been given? God’s gift is abundant life that never ends. Remember the second part of John 3:16, “whoever

believes in Him (Jesus) should not perish but have everlasting life.” Consider Romans 10:13, where it says, “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

You can gain true victory today, and give your life to Jesus. Admit that you’re a sinner in need of a Savior. Then trust in the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. His finished work still has the power to liberate you today.

Part V

The Appointment is Set

(The Surety of our Death)

One of the most basic developmental imperatives for our children is his ability to learn how not to die. Our desire to teach them how to survive leads us to say things like, “Look both ways before crossing the street.” Others may instruct their children, “Don’t touch the stove; it’s hot.” We teach our children to avoid danger and ultimately death.

Unfortunately, no instruction can prepare a person to avoid death forever. English author, Neil Gaiman, puts it bluntly, “Everybody going to be dead one day, just give them time.” We agree that everyone has an appointment with death; you can bet your life on it. Scripture testifies to this fact in Hebrews 9:27, where the author writes, “And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).

We may feel as though life is a cruel game. Writer, Robert Heinlein, once said, “The supreme irony of life is that hardly anyone gets out of it alive.” While the odds of living this earthly life are stacked against us, the way in which we live this life we’ve been given is entirely up to us.

Every man has a choice to make. Will he endure this life or enjoy it. This decision is not just a one-time choice. Instead, each day brings a new confrontation with our unavoidable end. The expectation of this imminent death will either drive a man to fear his death or embrace his purpose.

We must learn to condition ourselves to live joy-filled lives for the sake of Christ. Our joy will not be found in the things of this world, but Nehemiah 8:10 reminds us that, “The joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Chapter 12

You Can Bet Your Life

I'm dying, and so are you. I started dying on January 13, 1973 – the day I was born. We are surrounded by uncertainty, but this we do know. We will all die one day. Poet, Robert Herrick puts it this way:

“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.”

Yes, our appointment with death is set, and we have no option to reschedule. Understanding that our time is limited, Christians must, therefore, live every day as if it were their last. Though born to die in this world, we were born again to live for Jesus eternally. As we live and die, may we do so with a bold demonstration of God's love for this world? We must embrace our purpose for living.

Born to Die

Perhaps the most puzzling fact of life is that most men live their entire lives in denial of their approaching

death. We seem to realize that our life is limited, but we'd rather not think about it right now. We carry on with our lives as if we are certain that the end is far away. Yet, it is quite possibly the most certain bet we can make; we will inevitably die.

There is absolutely no doubt about it; death is on its way. In fact, 100% of people who were born previous to 115 years ago are no longer breathing. None of the founding fathers are alive today in the United States, and all that remains to testify of our nation's civil war are silent battlefields and weapons of death. Rest assured, our current road will reach a dead end.

It's Guaranteed

The book of Ecclesiastes deals with life and death in a practical manner. Solomon explains that everything has its proper time. This proper order includes death. Every living person has been assigned a time in which he will die, and he will leave this world behind.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time

to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

We all have an appointment on the books of heaven (Hebrews 9:27). Our God has already determined the date and time of our departure from this life and entrance into the next. Unlike the doctor's office, we cannot call to cancel or reschedule our appointment if the predetermined time conflicts with our calendars. We are out of control in this regard.

One thing we do control is what we do with the time we have been given. Will we use our time wisely or squander it without any thought of purpose? Death is not a respecter of persons (James 2). The end of life will come to every man, rich and poor, strong and weak, innocent and guilty.

Even Solomon, with all his wisdom and riches, came to the end of his life. He had everything a man could possess: fame, fortune, and fortitude, yet he eventually rested with his fathers. This son of David seemed to be a man of men, having chosen wisdom over all else. Still in the end, despite his best efforts, Solomon died like everyone else. His wisdom did not save him. His wealth could not buy him a detour at the grave (I Kings 11:41-43).

Likewise, the innocent get no free pass. In Joshua 7:10-26, the reader finds the story of Achan and his family. Achan blatantly disobeyed God, but his children

didn't do anything wrong. Still, the Scriptures say the children died the same horrible death as their guilty father. This raises other theological issues related to the holiness of God, but in the context of this study, we suffice it to say that death is not always easy to accept or understand. The most certain thing about this life is that it will end. Because we live we will also die.

Brad Weiser

No one can adequately explain to me the death of my dear friend Brad Weiser. Brad served as Youth Pastor at the Oak Hill Baptist Church in Millen, Georgia until the year 2006. One Sunday evening, while preparing for the evening services, the phone rang. The voice on the other end was desperate and confused, hoping for a miracle but realizing the inevitable. He had been holding the lifeless body of my friend, Brad, who had fallen from a cliff in West Virginia while snow skiing.

My brother and friend, David, attempted to verbalize this unspeakable truth, the unimaginable sight that had been forever engraved into his memory. It seemed so impossible to imagine, our friend gone. He was so full of life and love. Countless others could have taken his place in line at death's door. Why did God take him at that time and place? Only He truly knows the answer to that question.

My tears were never for my twenty-three year old friend. Brad was immediately with his Savior in Heaven, but the surprise of Brad's death shook me. He was the last person I could have imagined would die, and he beat me to the door of eternity. We know he is with Jesus today, and we are not far behind him. You and I will surely die. Even Jesus suffered and died a cruel death on the cross. No one is exempt from the door of death. The day will come when no more days will come.

A Passion for Compassion

Knowing that our end is inevitable, we must be deliberate in our efforts, making certain that we do not live worthless lives. Too much is at stake for us to fall short in our mission for the Master. We have a desperate need in our world to realize the seriousness of death and the significance of life. For the believer, death is victory, but billions of others face a different fate altogether. Should our concerns about life and death end at our own doorstep? God forbid!

We must pray for God to give us His heart for souls, allowing us to show compassion for those yet to receive Him. The lost desperately need to place their trust in Christ. They sit on a train destined for catastrophe, but we have life-saving direction that will lead them to eternal life with Christ. While we should have a passion for compassion, most Christians remain

silent, waiting for someone else to move.

Are you doing all you can for the kingdom of God? Understanding the uncertainty of life and the certain death we face, the children of God must learn to adjust their lives to become more effective servants of the Lord. Our day is coming. Your number will be called. As you stand before the Lord, giving account for all the resources of which He entrusted to you, how will He respond to your efforts? Will He say, “Well done,” or will He ask, “What happened?”

Chapter 13

Finding Joy in Every Moment

I was born the son of a Southern Baptist pastor. My father, Phil Bray, was attending Bible college in Graceville, FL, while pastoring his first church in Slocumb, AL.

We moved around quite a bit throughout my childhood, but I have nothing but memories of a hero when it comes to my dad. I was probably around 10 years old before I realized my dad was a little different than most people. Okay, he was a lot different!

Dad was always full of joy. Growing up in his house was like living with a full-time motivational speaker, truly. He always seemed to find the good in every single circumstance. Up or down, in or out, Phil Bray has always been filled with the joy of the Lord.

As I grew older I discovered my dad's secret. Sure, he has a unique personality that contributes to an energetic approach to life, but much more lies below the surface. His approach to life is simply a biblical one. My dad lives by, James 1:2, where it says, "count it all joy when you fall into various trials."

This has been the testimony of both my parents. Regardless of the trial, they have maintained God's joy. Examples of my parents' experiences include the loss of

two babies, my grandmother's long battle with Alzheimer, their home burning down to the ground, and my mom's battle with cancer. My parents have learned to always find God's joy in the midst of these trials. How can we be filled with joy in the midst of tragedy?

Lee Trevino once said, "In the game of life it's a good idea to have a few early losses, which relieves you of the pressure of trying to maintain an undefeated season." While no one likes to experience pain, suffering and loss, we can learn to appreciate these challenging times. In fact, our losses help us recognize our victories even more.

Strength for Every Struggle

Our ability to find joy in every circumstance is ultimately a product of our dependence on God. Our dependence is proven by our obedience to God's commands. So the believer's joy in living is realized in obedience to God. This is contrary to the world's view of a happy life. This society leads you down a road of selfish ambition and conceit, and the end of that road is disappointment and vanity.

Man's Dependence = God's Strength

God's Strength = Power for Man's Obedience

Man's Obedience = Man's True Joy in Life

Maybe you're skeptical of the equation. Consider

what scripture has to say:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
(2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

Paul had learned to “take pleasure” in the bad circumstances of this life. In other words, he discovered how to find the joy in every moment. His source of power, and ultimately joy, was the power of Christ. He realized that our admitted vulnerability and subsequent dependence on God brings supernatural strength.

Every moment will not be filled with celebration of circumstances, but through Christ we can find and display joy, regardless of the struggle. God gives us sufficient strength for every struggle.

Strength for Obedience

Man’s problems are not exclusive to his physical suffering. While we all constantly struggle to overcome temptation, we do not like to admit our imperfections. Therefore, we often attempt to compensate for our failures by lowering God’s standard.

When I was a teenager, I enjoyed going to youth

lock-ins. Later, when Amy and I were serving in youth ministry, we discovered that lock-ins were a tool used by Satan to kill youth ministers. But that's another story.

As a teenager, I loved to play basketball at my youth group lock-ins. My friends and I would play full court till midnight. Then, as people got tired, we would begin to pull out old furniture from the side storage room. We carefully positioned the chairs and desk to help improve our dismal athletic abilities.

Why? We all wanted to be able to dunk the basketball, but none of us were tall enough. So we changed the rules of the game to accommodate our lack of physical ability. We would get a running start, jump from the floor to the chair, then to the desk, and that's where the magic happened. After forcefully stuffing the ball through the hoop, we would hang from the rim like an NBA superstar. We were awesome! We could slam-dunk!

While this brought temporary satisfaction, it was superficial and empty in the long run. Why? Because we knew what the real standard was, but we could not meet it. Our best was not good enough. So we changed the standard to make ourselves feel better.

God's expectations are set, and they are always good. Man doesn't have the authority to lower the bar to accommodate his unwillingness or inability to meet God's perfect standard, but God does provide the power

needed to meet these high expectations.

We must learn to lean on Him for strength. Without God's power we are weak and vulnerable in life's valleys. We know that Nehemiah 8:10 says, "The joy of the Lord is your strength," but we might add, the strength of the Lord is your joy. Aside from God's power man cannot find joy in every moment, but in His strength we find complete satisfaction. God is enough!

The challenges of both life and death stretch us to our limits, but we can't truly learn to depend on God until we're at the end of ourselves. It's at this point of hopelessness that we find His grace sufficient.

A Proper Perspective

In order for a believer to live a joy-filled life he must learn to see the world through God's eyes. Scripture reveals the challenge involved in this endeavor. In fact, Jesus says things like, the greatest will be a servant (Matt. 23:11), and the first will be last in the Kingdom (Mk. 9:35).

These statements may seem to be extreme impossibilities. It's only when we see this life through God's eyes that we begin to understand these radical statements. A similar paradox is found in Philippians 1:21, where Paul says, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

While virtually all believers have heard this

passage, few live like they believe it. One's theology is often found practically incompatible with his actions. Still, by faith we must seek a renewal of the mind (Romans 12:1-2). Our mindset on living and dying must be reset to match God's perspective.

We must not be sad for a Christian who has died. He has truly won the victory in Jesus Christ; that loved-one is in the presence of the Father. He has left a world of trouble, depression, pain, disappointment, and death, but he has entered an eternal city of hope, health, and happiness. The death of a believer is a precious thing in the eyes of God (Psalm 116:15).

Precious Death

These two words, "precious death," don't seem to go together in any circumstance. Still, the psalmist says it without reservation, "Precious in the sight of the Lord Is the death of His saints" (Psalm 116:15). How can something so painful be precious to God? Death robs the family and friends of future experiences, and it does so with total disregard to anyone's plans. Yet, God considers the death of His children precious?

The revelation of this scriptural truth doesn't make God any less compassionate. Instead, it allows us to see God's view of things, His heavenly perspective. He sees this life as it truly is. God is in the unique position of both establishing a plan and watching it

develop into reality. He sees the big picture of eternity. In fact, He has painted the picture.

This is why Paul could say, “We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). The Apostle teaches that we can be both “confident” and “pleased” in death. This shows that pleasure in death is not God’s alone, but every child of God should share this view of precious dying. Though it’s more difficult to see from this side of eternity, we must live by faith not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Nothing Compares

The only reason we can find pleasure in death is that we see the worth of eternity. We get wrapped up in the struggle of leaving this life and lose sight of where we’re going. This is a difficult truth to grasp, but it is one we all must learn. No amount of suffering in this life can discount the glory of eternity with Jesus. “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

Nothing can compare to the splendor of Heaven. The Bible describes our eternal home in human terms, but this picture is limited by our earthly conceptions. John speaks of heaven as being made of pure gold (like clear glass) with gates of pearl. Even the streets are made

of gold, and every believer will have his own personal dwelling place (John 14:2).

Listen to John's description of Heaven. It's unlike anything we can imagine:

The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysolite, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass. (Revelation 21:18-21)

While Heaven's beauty will be stunning, the most beneficial part of our eternal home will be the presence of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Our faith will literally become sight as we see Him face-to-face (1 Corinthians 13:12). All hopes and expectations will eventually be realized in Christ, our source of eternal joy.

While we know our appointment is set, we have nothing to fear. God has provided strength sufficient for our struggle. We can learn to have joy in our journey, finding both life and death to be glorious and precious opportunities to give our God glory.

Part VI

The Long Expected Surprise

(The Shock of our Death)

“Surprise death” is an oxymoron. While dying is obviously less common at some ages, we all live this life in anticipation of our death. In fact, we’re reminded at every funeral that no one will escape this fate. It’s never a question of “if,” but only “when.”

Of course, the cause of our distraction from reality is our attraction to this world. We really like living. The well-known poet, Kathleen Norris, rightly said, “In spite of the costs of living, it’s still popular.”

We become so mesmerized by the events of this life that we lose sight of our spiritual reality. It’s like we forget this is all temporary. So, death often shocks us, though we expect it around every corner.

So, men live life on constant defense, attempting to avoid every potential danger, while simultaneously eluding his God-given purpose. But this life is just an opening act for God’s main event that begins in heaven. John Piper poses this question: “Oh, how many lives are wasted by people who believe that the Christian life means simply avoiding badness and providing for the family” (Piper 2003, 119).

We must learn to yield to God's perfect plan, even if it means enduring personal suffering for the sake of His fame. God may choose to use our strengths to bring Himself glory, or we may be called by God to find His goodness in our grief.

Chapter 14

Good Grief

“Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It’s the transition that’s troublesome.” Isaac Asimov

“The only thing I regret about my life is the length of it. If I had to live my life again, I’d make all the same mistakes - only sooner.” Tallulah Bankhead

Never Welcome

Death is never easy. I have witnessed the death of a beautiful 100-year-old lady and a cute little 1-week-old baby. Both families were devastated at their loss. I've known some people who say they would prefer an extended time to say goodbye at death. Still, others argue that the pain of watching their loved one die a slow and painful death would be too much to bear. Inevitably, we are not happy about the way our family and friends die. Though we may trust in God, the process of dying is not pleasant for anyone involved.

I've discovered that there is never a good time to die. If someone is young when they die, it seems premature. We dwell on our friend's lost opportunities to experience all the joys of life. The young or middle-aged adult, on the other hand, usually has a spouse and children. It's always difficult to see families pick up and push forward without mom or dad in the home.

Still, even older adults are grandparents, experiencing the best years of their lives. These senior adults often find their grandchildren to be the greatest joy. I've learned that senior adults have just as many plans as their younger counterparts. They just have less time to fulfill those plans.

No age seems right, and no day or time seems best for death. Some people die in the day, while others pass away in the middle of the night. One may die in a violent

automobile accident, while another finds his end with an incurable disease. Despite the individual cause, the death scene is often the same. A mother cries. A dad blames himself. A child feels confused and alone. Questions run rampant as the parent or sibling wonders how this could have happened to his loved one.

Is he really dead? Why would God allow this to happen? It simply does not make sense. This must all be one bad dream. No, death is never welcome, but it must always be expected.

Biblical Examples of Death

The Bible has many examples of death and man's reaction to it. Take King David for example. In II Samuel 18:19 - 19:8, the Scripture records the death of David's son, Absalom, and the King's reaction to these events.

To say Absalom was a bad son would be an understatement. He had betrayed his father, attempting to kill him and take his throne by force. Still, the King loved his son. In fact, David greatly mourned Absalom's death. His son's betrayal didn't make the shock of his death any easier for David to receive. The scriptures say that David wished he could have died in his son's place. Death's impact is never easy.

Jesus also understood the pains of death. In John 11, Lazarus died, and Mary and Martha thought Jesus

was too late to do anything about it. Jesus saw their troubled hearts. He hurt because of their faithlessness, and He most certainly experienced some personal sadness over the loss of his beloved friend.

There in the midst of all the chaos and confusion, sadness and grief, amid the noise of mourning and pain, Jesus displayed His humanity in a very real sense. The scripture says, “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). Some feel a sense of guilt when showing outward emotion at the death or suffering of a loved one. Perhaps they feel as though their crying or grief reveals some lack of faith and trust in God.

While some people might take their sorrow to an unrealistic extreme of hopelessness, we all possess a natural degree of sadness and pain at the passing of a loved one. Though we understand this is a temporary world, the finite mind cannot completely grasp the eternal. Therefore, our physical, mental, and emotional senses respond to the reality of the moment.

Natural Grief

C.S. Lewis once said, “Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery’s shadow or reflection: the fact that you don’t merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief.”

Christians should weep and mourn the temporary loss of a friend or family member. Even Jesus shed tears at a funeral. While we do celebrate the home going of a believer, we must also remember that grief is a natural reaction to death. God has established a process of healing that we must all go through.

Though we all have an appointment with death, we cannot see the schedule. We have absolutely no idea when our time will come. This creates anxiety within some who worry constantly about the time and place of their approaching death. Nothing can be done to change our ignorance in the matter. Therefore, common sense and biblical teaching tell us to keep on living with eternity in mind.

Worry, anxiety, and stress will not solve anything. Death will always be shocking for us, even Christians. Circumstances and struggles gain the greater part of our attention, but we must look beyond these distractions and choose to fix our eyes on our eternal future in heaven.

This paradigm shift does not remove the shock of death, but it can help us to cope with that shock. As Christians place things in proper perspective we find real victory in the place of perceived defeat. Death is not the end, only a darkened door, leading believers to a glorious hope and future with their Creator.

Chapter 15

Grace and Glory

The shock of death is a direct result of our missing the big picture of life. We get so wrapped up in our personal lives that we lose sight of God's whole purpose for our existence. The grace of this life is given to man that he might bring glory to God, not happiness to himself.

For if because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the One man Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:17)

It's tempting for Christians to adopt the self-serving mindset of our society, but this causes us to lose sight of our actual purpose. We agree with Piper that, "Living to magnify Christ is costly" (Piper 2003, 61), but the price of discipleship is worth the benefit of His seeing glory revealed in us.

Proper Perspective of Grace

Why does God choose to bless us? Our answer to this question reveals much about our worldview. Some

may think God loves one group of people more than another, but this is totally contrary to scripture.

Others might say, “God helps those who help themselves.” And while we should be motivated to work hard for a living, we must never believe that our work alone brings success. Modern culture has sold us a lie of self-sufficiency. We’ve learned to believe in ourselves, to depend on ourselves. But we are truly all dependent on God for everything.

Still another group of people is blind to God’s blessings altogether. It’s sad to hear Christians complain about their lives, as if God has somehow let us down. No circumstance legitimizes our complaints against God. This life is a gift of God’s grace, and He owes us absolutely nothing.

Exposure to another culture tends to open our eyes to a huge world that would consider our basic amenities to be luxury. We need to wake up from our American daydream. The things we find outside our borders surprise us because we’ve convinced ourselves we have it bad. In truth, we are a country of self-centered narcissists who have an entitlement issue.

There are countless places we’ve never been that are filled with hurting people who are hungry for the truth. The reality is that most countries have a desperate need for the gospel that we take for granted. Many people around the world are told they cannot worship

God. Everyone doesn't have a church on every corner, and even when they do, the gospel they hear is often skewed by superstition or heresy.

Why has God allowed us to live a life of relative ease? Why has He shown such an abundant amount of grace to you and me? The cars we drive, the houses we sleep in, the food we eat, and even the water we drink are all extraordinary luxuries in a global context.

But we must remember that our lives are not about us, nor was the grace of God intended for our personal benefit alone. God gives us grace so that glory might be returned to Him. The relationship between grace and glory has everything to do with life and death. The blessings of this life are not only for our enjoyment, but our eternal investment (Platt 2010, 64-65).

Grace and Circumstances

Is our uncommon favor a result of God's special love for us as Americans? We'd better be careful how we answer this question. The theological implications of this perspective can be devastating. We don't deserve God's blessings any more than a man in a remote China village or a homeless woman on the streets of Mexico City.

Consider how often we say, "God is so good," only because we received something "good" from Him. Does this mean that God is not good to others when they don't receive the same gift? Is God less good to us when

He chooses not to give us these things? Does God love the children of China or Africa any less than those in Canada or the United States? Is God a respecter of persons? The obvious answer is --- NO (Acts 10:34).

We need to ask ourselves some tough questions. Why has God been so “good” to us? On the one hand we know that God created us to enjoy His grace (Platt 2010, 65). Remember, we’re the only species created in the image of God. He does love us, the human race, but He doesn’t love one ethnic group more than another.

Grace and Responsibility

Here is the question grace is asking us, “What am I going to do with God’s blessings?” The blessings of God must be married to the purpose to which we’ve been called. David Platt, Pastor of the Church at Brook Hills and well-known author of *Radical*, says we must connect God’s grace with His glory (Platt 2010, 69-70).

And what does the Bible say about Giving? “It’s more blessed to give than to receive,” Acts 20:35. “Give, and it will be given to you,” Luke 6:38. God will consistently give His grace to those who give Him glory. In other words, we are given the opportunity to enjoy the grace of God that we might proclaim His glory to the nations (Platt 2010, 65).

The glory of God never begins with man’s conditions, agendas, or restrictions. God’s glory is found

when the follower of Christ says yes to the question yet to be asked by God. I once heard Pastor Bob Pitman ask this question, “Is your yes on the table?” There was no mention of a particular question. He was challenging us to say “yes” to God no matter the question.

Our response must never be about “my” life. God now has sole possession of my life. So what does He desire to do with “His” life in me? God may be calling you to live His life in a foreign country or share the gospel to a people group whom you know nothing about. Just listen closely...He is speaking. The call of God is often a silent roar, yet we have so much drowning out the sound of His voice that we seldom hear a word. When all the needless noise of this life fades, we hear Him clearly.

We must remove the distractions that drown out God’s voice, leaving our position of silence and moving to where God is. We must follow His voice and begin to listen for every word. Say yes to God saving grace. Say yes to His calling to ministry and missions. Say yes to God’s purpose for your life. Make a commitment to stop living “your” life, and start living His.

Yes, regardless of the circumstances of life or death, this long expected surprise is coming our way. Understanding life and death in proper perspective, let us learn to find God’s good in our grief and invest every drop of grace in His eternal glory.

Part VII

The Door to Eternity

(The Significance of our Death)

Once we've gained a proper perspective on life and death, it's imperative that we rest in the hope of our eventual resurrection. As I mentioned earlier, the promise of Christ's return brings comfort in our hope. This life is not the end; Christians have hope in death. Christ has made us alive, and this abundant life will be lived for eternity by the power of Christ.

Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame. But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies...What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power." (1 Corinthians 15:34-36; 42-43)

Chapter 16

Hope in Death

Man's hope is not found in this life. In fact, a believer finds more hope in his death than his life. Ecclesiastes 7:1 speaks to this issue: "A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth".

Death is better than life? Obviously, this passage is not suggesting we wish to die, but Solomon is attempting to help us understand the hope we have in death. Solomon shares a similar thought in Proverbs 14:32: "The wicked is overthrown through his evildoing, but the righteous finds refuge in his death".

This promised refuge is not given to everyone who dies, but anyone who dies as God's child. There is a clear distinction here between the wicked and the righteous. God's people see death as a hope-filled door into eternity, while the lost are wondering through life without any hope at all.

The Meaning of Life and Death

What is life all about? Are we simply here on earth as imaginative creatures that mystically float inside an

irrational bubble of nothingness? Do we only seem to exist, believing a lie our entire lives? What is reality anyway? Can there possibly be any real purpose for humans, or are we just living to die? Questions are numerous at every turn, but for the unbeliever answers to these questions are nowhere to be found.

Like Christians, unbelievers are fully aware of their humanity and imminent demise, but questions remain on the other side. What happens when we die? Are Heaven and Hell real? If so, who gets to go where? Why? People have many opinions, ranging from soul sleep to mystical unity with the universe. Countless people believe they will die only to return to life's circle as another animal.

I cannot imagine facing death without faith in a loving God. Suffering and grief are given a whole new meaning for people who have no expectation for eternity. They see death as the absolute end, and no amount of grieving will heal their heart. Even most religions put man's eternal hope on his own shoulders, making man's deeds the measure of salvation. Similarly, reincarnation may give a man hope for something better next time, but his hope still lies in his own works.

While outwardly we may convince others of our personal goodness, our countless flaws confront us every day. And if our eternal state were dependent on our own righteousness we would be on a one-way train toward a sinner's Hell.

The Bridge to Eternity

Life is full of purpose, but this purpose is not to achieve perfection or to attain some goal of personal holiness. Human beings can only find true meaning and purpose in life through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus takes our sin and transforms it into His significance. He makes our pain His purpose. Christ replaces our hurt with His healing by providing salvation to all who believe.

Death too possesses an unmatched significance for believers for it serves as our bridge to eternity with our God. As we see things in a proper biblical perspective, we understand that while we are living to die, we are also dying to live. The life we live today is only a temporary runway for the flight of eternity, and there will be no round trips. No landing gear is required because once we takeoff, we will never come down again. Come to think of it, we can't even pack our bags. Nothing goes with us on our journey into eternity. Every investment must be sent on ahead.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21).

Regardless of your destination, the flight you choose will be one of permanence. Your destination choices are simple, Heaven or Hell. The significance of the day of your death is the fact that it serves as a door into the eternal realm, where God is waiting for those who love Him and where Satan makes ready an everlasting punishment for those who choose to rebel against their only hope or help in this life and the next, Jesus Christ.

Everyone will spend eternity somewhere, but that destination is determined by your faith. Who do you really trust with your eternity? If the answer to this question is anyone or anything aside from Jesus you're headed down the wrong path. You will be eternally disappointed. We really are all born to die, but Christ offers us the hope of life in our dying. Trust Him in living and in dying.

Chapter 17

Alive From the Dead

The child of God can approach the door of eternity with a great hope of Heaven, but this hope is not only for eternal life one day. Instead, Christ provides us with an abundant life to be lived today, here and now (Jn. 10:10). Though he died an ardent opponent of organized religion, Mark Twain's statement on death is fitting. "The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time."

True believers have nothing to fear in death, and therefore, they live life abundantly. Ernest Hemingway had this to say about life and death: "Every man's life ends the same way. It is only the details of how he lived and how he died that distinguish one man from another."

Followers of Christ must live differently; we are God's special people (1 Peter 2:9). We've been saved by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8), adopted into the family of God (Romans 8:15). Now we must live this life to bring glory to God.

Victory in Death

Many grieving families have been comforted by Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:50-58, which describe

death in proper perspective for a child of God. The Apostle Paul begins by explaining, as best as he can, the physical transition our bodies will make on that coming day. He speaks of an immediate change, “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye...we shall be changed.”

Though we are continually being changed now through sanctification, this future change is one of glorification. It is at that moment that,

Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (I Cor. 15:54-57)

Speaking of this change, Helen Keller once said, “Death is no more than passing from one room into another. But there's a difference for me, you know. Because in that other room I shall be able to see.” The former things will have passed away (Revelation 21:4).

“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (1 Corinthians 15:56). Everyone is born vulnerable to sin because of Adam’s rebellion in the garden (Romans 5:12). We are all imperfect, fallen men. And just as the sting of a bumblebee is painful, so is the sting of death. Christ, however, has removed the strength of sin by establishing a covenant of grace.

Victory in Life

In the midst of our vulnerability, God offered us the vaccine, His perfect grace. In Ephesians 2, Paul explains that we were dead in sin, but Christ “made us alive.” He describes our previous condition as alienation. We were estranged from God, and we had no hope of reconciliation. The marvelous truth is that we “who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:1-13). This passage reminds us of both our future hope and present victory.

So the believer has been delivered from the sting of death. The consequences of his sin have been removed, but it’s easy for a born again believer to forget what he has been saved from. Paul reminds us in Romans 8:12, that we are no longer a debtor to the flesh. Instead of being bound by sin, we’ve been adopted by God, becoming “joint heirs with Christ.”

Death Disarmed

Still many crawl back toward the chains is temptation, choosing to live defeated lives of sin and shame. Paul echoed a similar message to the Church at Rome:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and

your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will not have dominion over you, since you are not under the law but under grace. (Romans 6:12-14)

We're all born vulnerable to death, and its impact on our earthly lives is significant. Though Christ has won permanent victory over sin, we all experience temporary loss and pain at the death of a loved one. Consider a bee, which has been captured and physically disarmed by removing its stinger. Even without a stinger the bee would likely attempt to strike its target. Likewise, though Christ has removed the sting of death, we must still face the confrontation of life's harmless end.

This is explained in Romans 6:23a, "The wages of sin is death." Because we are sinners, our appointment with the bee has been made. The confrontation with death is a direct result of our sinful nature, but that is not the end. Because of our relationship with God, the sting of death has been neutralized. The bee cannot hurt one who places his/her trust in Christ. "The gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23b).

Free to be Saved

So we have been released from the sentence we deserved. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1). What about those who are lost? Do they receive the same free

gift that we have received? Aren't they under the same grace from God?

Unfortunately, many chose not to trust in Christ Jesus as their Savior, but He remains the only answer to the sin problem. If you are reading this book and have never received Christ gift of grace, now is the time. Without His forgiveness and grace, you will be found hopeless and alone at the door of eternity. Jesus remains the answer to our sin problem regardless of our acceptance of His forgiveness.

If you've never been saved, you haven't received the antidote of life. Christ alone can give you what you need to walk through death's door. Jesus explained this to Nicodemus in John 3:14-15. This is a reference to Number 21, where God sent poisonous snakes to attack the rebellious Children of Israel. Moses cried out for mercy, and God offered an antidote. Moses was told to lift up a bronze serpent, and everyone who looked to the serpent would be healed.

This is a perfect parallel to our testimony. We too were snake-bitten as a result of our rebellion against God. Like Moses lifted the bronze serpent, Christ was lifted up on the cross. As a result, everyone who is willing to look to the cross in repentance can find healing for his/her sin-sick soul.

Part VIII

Finish in a Sprint

(The Shadow of our Death)

The Bible is filled with many promises, offering hope to all who trust in God. The Apostle Paul presents one such promise in 1 Corinthians 15, where he declares the end of all death.

Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (1 Corinthians 15:24-26)

Therefore, Christians have nothing to fear in life or death. Our hope is found in the substance of all life, our God who possesses all authority and power. We do not fear the shadow of death, and we refuse to live defeated lives filled with fear. We endeavor to finish this race of life in a sprint, seeking to find strength and contentment in Christ alone.

Chapter 18

No Fear

“It's better to die laughing than to live each moment in fear.” Michael Crichton

“Only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live.”
Dorothy Thompson

“No one really knows why they are alive
until they know what they'd die for.”
Martin Luther King, Jr.

Losing it for Life

Are you willing to be a loser for Jesus? That's what Matthew 16:25 says is required to truly follow Christ. "If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life."

A surrendered life is a secured life, yet fear plagues our hearts if we run from God's will. We can never hope to live our lives by God's grace tomorrow unless we're willing to lose our lives for His glory today. Our direction in life will always be driven by one of two forces: faith or fear.

Faith doesn't always have the answers, but it does remember God's promises. Faith drives us toward God's plan and gives us the strength to trust Him more. Fear, on the other hand, is never short on a report, but the story is always straight from the mouth of the enemy.

So, confidence and courage are required for a man to lose everything for Jesus. A coward, on the other hand, tries to gain everything he can for himself, refusing to submit to the greater plan of God. Our obedience requires faith, but this faith only comes to those who are willing to lose everything in exchange for God's glory.

Faith not Sight

Believers are not limited by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). This world gives us a lot to look at, but most of

these sights are meant to distract us from God's plan. The Enemy is out to destroy your testimony, and he wants to neutralize your life's purpose for Christ.

Satan will try to speak fear into your life, but faith counters fear. The Devil will attempt to convince you to live it up, enjoying life while you can. He will whisper lies to your heart, leading you on a path of vanity. Countless numbers of believers lay on the sidelines today, neutralized by the schemes of this liar (John 8:44).

The enemy knows what he's doing. He is aware of many of your weaknesses, and he enjoys causing you to stumble. Jesus referred to Satan as the "thief" in John 10:10, saying he confronts you for three general reasons in this life. Satan wants to steal from you, kill you, and destroy God's plans for you.

So, Satan brings death, but Jesus offers life. Towards the end of John 10:10, Jesus draws an important distinction when He says, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." Faith in Jesus produces abundant life, while demonic fear produces spiritual death.

Fear speaks destruction and leads to a wasted life, while faith speaks peace and purpose to our hearts, providing much substance to our otherwise meaningless existence (Heb. 11:1). We walk by faith in God, not in the fear of this world. Jesus has overcome this world,

John 16:33. David reminds us: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1)

Because He Lives

The resurrection of Jesus provided us with the confidence necessary to live this life. Bill Gaither had it right when he wrote, “Because He lives I can face tomorrow. Because He lives all fear is gone. Because I know He holds the future; and life is worth the living just because He lives.”

His life is what gives us life and hope. We deserved eternal death, but God gave us grace for living. Are you living an “abundant” life by faith? Or have you settled for an average life bound by fear and death. Only lives of earthly abandonment can be lived in divine abundance. Paul said it best, “To live is Christ...” (Philippians 1:21). Can you say this is your heart’s cry? Can you truly say that Christ is your all in all?

Make a new life commitment to Christ. Stop living life as if it is for your enjoyment alone. Embrace the broken road behind you and the purposed road before you. Remain constantly aware of your vulnerability to Satan’s tricks, but reject the fear that debilitates your Christian witness.

Live every day with eternity in mind, refusing to become distracted by the needless things of this temporary world. We must fear nothing and no one but God. He alone can judge your life's work. Death is not your enemy; instead, it's your door into eternity. Our last breath on earth will be our first in heaven. A wasted life is the worst reality for any believer.

Lose it all for Jesus! Give Him everything, and you'll find fulfillment in your life and coming death. You are living to die, but your death will mark a new beginning of a life beyond comprehension. This is truly a matter of life and death.

Chapter 19

It's Only a Shadow

Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, once said, “It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live.” While the end of life should terrify an unbeliever, Christians should focus their attention on living an abundant life that Christ offers.

Death cannot harm the follower of Christ. Consider these words from Paul to the Church at Rome:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

Death lost its power at the cross, and all that remains is an empty shadow of fear. We have nothing to fear in life or death. Our comfort is found as we cast our cares on Jesus. He is the Light that shines on our darkened path.

Spiritual Darkness

I don't know anyone who likes the dark. We've always heard that bad things happen in the dark. We like

to shed a little light on every situation, but what makes darkness so creepy? Why are we reluctant to walk through a dark alley?

I must admit that I find it extremely unsettling to walk through the church's sanctuary late at night with the lights out. I know it is God's house, but God has placed something within my inner most being that feels uncomfortable in the dark.

We know that 1 Corinthians 14:33 teaches us that, "God is not the author of confusion but of peace." Jesus refers to Himself as "the Light of the world" (John 8:12 and John 9:5). Christ is our Light, but the Devil is the ruler of darkness. Children of God must walk in the Light (John 12:35), avoiding the shadows when we can. It is in the shadows of life that Satan can gain the most ground. Of course we know these shadows often come our way uninvited.

Uncertainty in the Shadow

Life's successfully keeps us all guessing. At times it feels as if our every step is unknown, and each new day in the valley is unpredictable. Our vision becomes blurred by the shadows that fall on our path, and we're tempted to give in to doubt.

It's during these times that we must remember the promise of God from Psalm 23. Our shepherd will meet our every need and lead us through this darkened valley

(verses 1 & 2). He has not forgotten you; He brings restoration and comfort (verses 3 & 4). But our Shepherd doesn't stop there. He provides protection from our enemies and promise for our future (verses 5 & 6). All this is found in the valley of the shadow of death, not on the victorious mountaintop.

When these shadows confront us, we must remember several key factors in relation to the shadows. First, consider the condition of the shadow. A shadow only exists as a hollow reflection; its strength is in our uncertainty and fear. A shadow, which has been cast on a wall, possesses no real substance itself. It must borrow its bluff from its source.

Ironically, the actual object that cast the shadow is normally much smaller than the shadow itself. A tiny stuffed animal, strategically positioned in front of the night-light, may appear to be an enormous monster to a small child. Satan may position a shadow in the center of your lives, in hopes of pushing you away from the Light. If you are in the shadow today, stay the course. Though it may not be easy, the path through the valley of the shadow of death leads us straight to the mountain of life.

Don't turn around and run for fear of tomorrow's uncertainty. God can be trusted with your life, and He is in control. When you can't see the path ahead, just close your spiritual eyes and listen for the still small voice (1 Kings 19:12). He will guide you all the way.

The Sign in the Shadow

The mountain's peak is shining
from fallen beams of light.
The valley is full of darkness;
it seems it's ever night.
The mountain top is peaceful;
the view is oh so fair.
The valley is ruled by doubt;
fear has set its snare.
Some set camp and call it home
for fear of mountain heights.
Others beside the peaceful stream,
they quit without a fight.
More press through the rough terrain;
they can almost see the end.
But here they come; the shadows fall
and kill the faith within.
These shadows in the valley
may appear to be your foe.
But look and make for certain
it's not from the mountain you're to go.
Raise high your eyes above the trees,
the answer you will find.
God has made your mountain top
cast a shadow as a sign.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6). The word, “direct,” can also be translated, “to make smooth or straight.” When all seems chaos and the path ahead is rough and long, God has the ability to make your road smooth. It’s amazing to watch some believers endure great adversity in their personal lives. How can people go through shadows of despair? The only answer is the grace of our awesome God.

God’s grace makes our way straight even when the path appears to be crooked. His grace makes the rocky road calm. He provides a peace that cannot be comprehended or explained by men. Though everything around us may be filled with turmoil and pain, He will never change. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

Casting our Cares

In order to learn how to walk through fear, we must discover how to walk in victory. Fear is often a result of burdens we carry. These worries and afflictions slow us down and cause us to doubt God’s plan for our lives. We try to be strong, but our stubborn pride and self-sufficiency block God’s deliverance.

The encouraging news is that God desires to lift your burdens at every stage in the journey. Pain, fear,

confusion, doubt, and worry are all enemies of faith. The secret to strength is not self-sufficiency but self-humility. “Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:6-7).

Remember, a shadow cannot exist without a source of light. The believer must trust that Jesus Christ is shining on them, and the very existence of the shadow is living proof of the light behind the mountain. Press on in faith. Don't quit!

The shadow must submit to the light because it bows to its maker. We know that a mountaintop cannot exist without a valley, but neither can a valley exist without a mountaintop. The very existence of your present valley validates the mountaintop ahead. The shadow you are now walking through is a pre-victory taste of the Light at the end of your tunnel. Go ahead and start celebrating.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.
(Psalm 23)

We must not stop in the valley of the shadow of death. Walk through the shadow, refusing to allow Satan to sidetrack you in the midst of confusion and fear. Stay on course, deliberately maintaining focus on the mission and purpose of your existence; that is God's glory.

Remember that this life is not about us; we are here for Him. Look beyond the shadow unto the mountain of promise that is before you. Perhaps today's struggle will bring tomorrow's strength. You will only grow in understanding and peace as you go in obedience and trust.

Chapter 20

Hope for a Hurting Heart

Jesus is all about tomorrow. God describes His forgiveness in Jeremiah 31:34, explaining that He does not remember forgiven sins. Paul encourages believers to forget “those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

I once heard John Piper say, “Not even God will change the past. All the expectations of God are future expectations.” Regardless of the past circumstances, you must lift your eyes to your future hope. The Prince of Preachers, Charles Spurgeon, once said, “Faith goes up the stairs that love has made and looks out of the windows which hope has opened.”

Yes, Jesus offers hope for your hurting heart. He is enough to get us through any challenge this life may bring. We will find strength and ultimate contentment in Christ alone. Look to Him for help; it’s a matter of life and death.

Strength in Christ

While everyone who experiences brokenness and pain might hope for healing, that hope is only as valid as

the object of trust. We may hope a storm will pass over quickly, but we have no power over the rain. The good news is that we are “more than conquerors” through Christ. He gives us the strength we seek (Romans 8:37).

He is stronger than our sin and struggle. God is so much bigger than any situation, and He understands our hurt and wants to provide comfort and healing during these difficult times. Remember it is in our weakness that He is made strong (2 Corinthians 12:9). God is able to meet your every need in the day of trouble. “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

It takes time for pain to go away. In fact, some experiences will have an impact on us for the rest of our earthly lives. Still, if you’re a follower of Christ it is impossible for you to face a hopeless situation. Our eternal joy rests in Him alone, and no temporary tragedy should be allowed to neutralize our personal relationship with our God.

Contentment in Christ

While we often find supernatural strength for the victory, there are other times we are given strength for the struggle. One of the most well known passages of scripture in the Bible is found in Philippians 4:13, where Paul says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” At first glance, this verse seems to be a

promise of strength for the believer's victory, but the context indicates the opposite is true. Verses 10-12 reveal that the heart of this text is the Christian's contentment during challenging circumstances. Paul explains that God has taught him how to be content even during the difficult times of life.

It adds more legitimacy to his words when we discover that Paul wrote these words of confidence during his Roman imprisonment. He understood pain and struggle, yet he chose to praise God even in the shadows of life. He saw the light of Christ shining in the shadows of his jail cell.

Likewise, we must lift up our heads and learn to live in contentment even if we experience suffering. Mourn, this is natural, but remember that God has not left you alone. He is beside you in your prison of pain and despair. He is the God of the shadow. Therefore, take comfort in knowing who is in charge of your destiny. He loves you, and He desires for you to find rest in Him today.

Life and Death

While most people will live and die without ever fully understanding the reason they were born, believers must live with eternity in mind. The time has come for us to acknowledge our God-given responsibility to live for Jesus, and to invest our resources to glorify the Father.

“Whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the Lord” (Proverbs 8:35). Still, this divine favor is not intended for our comfort but God’s fame. We have been given the gift of life to invest in eternity.

Challenges will find us, and suffering may be just around the corner. Yet, the grace of God will be enough to satisfy our every need. We must endeavor, with each new day, to develop a Christ-centered perspective, refusing to bow to sin and self.

Our days will be filled with distractions that lead us to embrace this world as our home. We will be tempted to make earthly living our primary concern. Some will experience hopeless sorrow, while others see eternal gain. Some will complain in suffering, while others count it all joy. Some will worry at every uncertainty, but others will trust in God. This truly is a matter of life and death. Live and die to the glory of God.