



THE BUCKET LIST!

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church

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IF YOU HAD 6 MONTHS TO LIVE?

This book is based on a series Common Ground did in 2010 called THE BUCKET LIST. In 1788 Benjamin Franklin wrote that nothing in this world can be said to be certain, except death and taxes. One day we will all 'kick the bucket'. There's no avoiding it.

A bucket list is a list that people write to remind themselves of things they want to do before they die. There is a movie by the name – based on two men who are terminal, who have limited time to live. But here's a sobering thought: all of us are terminal!

AND NOT ONLY THAT: OUR LIVES ARE MUCH SHORTER THAN WE REALIZE!

On the Internet there is something called 'the death clock' (www.deathclock.com). After finding out some details of your life it tells you how much longer you likely have – and gives a date and time for your death, and a count down clock! Scary as it sounds, our short time to be on earth is constantly ticking away. We all have an appointment with death – and every new day means we're 24 hours closer to it! Chilling, isn't it?

However, should we really spend time thinking about how short our lives are? Isn't that just depressing? To answer those questions, there's an interesting verse in the Bible that tells us that we should consider our mortality and life's brevity – and ask God to really help us feel them...

'LORD, show me my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure. (Ps 39:4-5).

LORD, show me how brief my life is. Why do we need to ask God for this revelation? Answer: so we can live right. Until we can think right, we can't live right.

In this book we're exploring a bold idea. It requires that you use your imagination:

**IMAGINE YOU HAD JUST 6 MONTHS LEFT – HOW WOULD YOU LIVE THEN?
AND ONCE YOU CAN FIGURE THAT OUT, WHY NOT START LIVING LIKE
THAT TODAY.**

(Besides, who knows but some of us may not even have six months left anyway!)

THE DASH

The dash is a punctuation mark (-) which is used especially to indicate a break in the thought or structure of a sentence.

Have you ever walked around a graveyard and read the inscriptions on the grave stones? Have you noticed 'THE DASH'? See, after the name of the person who lies there there are two dates: the first date is their birthdate and the second is their deathdate. And in between each date is a little dash.

We all know that we had no control over our birthdate. Likewise, we have little (if any) control over our deathdate. The only thing we actually have some control over is that little dash. Now this is not advocating what you might think – that we need to dash around all over the place before we die in order to find meaning. Rather, in light of our mortality and life's brevity (the dash), how should we live? How do we best use our dash? By being present, being proactive, and being surrendered.

1) BE PRESENT

If we're to make the most of that dash we need to live in the present.

Oliver Wendell Holmes said, 'Many people die with their music still in them. Why is this so? Too often it is because they are always getting ready to live. Before they know it, time runs out.' How do we miss the music? Answer: by failing to live in the present moment.

For example, while we are home our thoughts are still absorbed with solving the challenges we face at the office. And when we are at the office we find ourselves worrying about problems at home. We go through the day without really listening to what others are saying to us. We may be hearing the words of our wife or husband, but we aren't absorbing the message. As we go through the day we find ourselves focusing on past experiences or future possibilities. We're eating food but we can't taste it because we're not present. We are so involved in yesterday and tomorrow that we never even notice that today is slipping by. We go through the day rather than getting something from the day. We are everywhere at any given moment in time except living in that moment in time.

If we spend our lives chasing goals, constantly thinking that when this happens or that happens, then I will be able to start living, you will never learn to be present in the moment.

Here's some practical ideas to help you start living more in the present:

1) START YOUR DAY – EVERY DAY – QUOTING PSALM 18:24:

"This is the day the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it."

Receive everyday as a gift from God. And rejoice in the opportunity it holds. Refuse to take this day for granted. And refuse to enter into this day glum and depressed. Your altitude every day is determined by the attitude you enter that day with!

2) SLOW DOWN:

Let's slow down. Eat slower. Drive slower. Take sufficient leave. You're a human being not a human doing. David Livingstone tells of a long trip with some African guides, who after several days of constant hiking refused to trek on one day. Their reason: today, we wait for our souls to catch up to our body.

Slow down. Be present. If you are an adrenaline junky, and you thrive in speed and pace of life, the great cost is this: you miss life's greatest gift: the joy available to you in the present moment.

3) ENJOY AND BE GRATEFUL FOR LIFE'S LITTLE PLEASURES.

A walk on the beach, playing with your kid on the couch, or a great glass of wine. Use all your senses. What do you smell? What do you hear? What do you taste? What do you see? And what if you were to give thanks to God – not just before a meal – but spontaneously while you experience the simple joy of splashing in the water with your child, or ... (you can think of more). One way to both be present and to heighten one's joy in the moment is to say Thank You to God more often. After all, 'the wise person knows that all good things come from heaven above.' (James 1:17)

4) GAIN ENERGY THROUGH RECREATIVE STUFF.

It's difficult to be present if we're always worn down. Consider cutting out some entertainment and replacing it with more recreative things. Things that, although they don't always provide the same quick thrill as entertainment, they recreate you and energize you. Things like putting the TV off, putting some good music on, having a face-to-face meal with the people you live with, playing a board game, walking the dog, getting in bed earlier to read a good book. You'll notice that you start your next day with energy! Learn the difference between entertainment and recreation.

5) WHEREVER YOU ARE, BE THERE.

No matter where you are, if you're with your wife, if you're with your husband, if you're with your kids, if you're with a friend, if you're with people at work, no matter where you are make sure that you are all there. If you have children, you're not off in your mind working and engaging, solving some problem at work but you are all there. With everything in you at that moment, fully engaged. If you're with your spouse, you're not off thinking or flipping the television channel, you're all there. Every bit of you, fully engaged. If you're talking to somebody at work or engaged in a conversation you are with them.

You know that you've tried some of these methods but your old habit of haste creeps in stronger than ever before. What is the key to making these tips into habits that flow out of a character that is sweetened by the adventure of life and enjoying every moment fully?

6) THE NUMBER ONE SECRET TO LIVING IN THE PRESENT MOMENT IS THAT YOU LEARN TO DRAW NEAR TO THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

God is fully totally absorbingly present (though Revelations speaks of his ability to be present past, present and future: 'The God who was, who is, who is to come'. But for us the only place to encounter God and to experience his presence is in the present moment. Listen to some verses in Acts 17 for some insight into this...

Verse 24 says, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.' He is a Living God. If you want to live fully in the present then draw close to God who is the source of Life.

Verse 25 says, 'And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.' He is a self-sustaining God. We are meant to draw sustenance from him. If we are to thrive in life, we need God's presence as much as our lungs need air. By the way, a simple prayer you can pray to help you live in the present is, 'God, thank you for this breath of air. And for this one.' Andrea Boydston reminds us, 'If you woke up breathing, congratulations! You have another chance.'

Verse 27 and 28 says, 'God is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' He is the close God, so much closer than we can imagine. So ready to respond to our prayers, so ready to draw near to us as we draw near to him. Oh, let us draw close to God – to this living God, this God who sustains us, this God who is so much closer than we can imagine. Surely that is the secret to living in the present: to live in His Presence.

2) BE PROACTIVE

If we're to make the most of that dash we need to be proactive. In Psalm 90:12, Moses reflecting on life's brevity prays, 'Teach me to number my days well (i.e. use my time well) and to gain a heart of wisdom'. A good prayer to pray: God help me to use my time wisely.

Listen to similar words in Ephesians 5:15-17...

15 Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.

Verse 16 is here translated 'make the most of every opportunity'. But it is more accurately translated, 'redeem the time you have'. The word 'redeem' means to set something free by purchasing it. The picture here is that the daily moments and opportunities that come our way are like precious items on sale in a market, but they currently are 'enslaved' – and you need to search them out, buy them and set them free. God wants you to find these opportunities, and through applying yourself to them to bring them to fulfilment. Make the most of every opportunity you have!

If I were to find the one word that sums up the way to make the most of every opportunity it would be: proactivity. Proactivity means you're on your front foot. Reactivity is the word that describes the life where we are always being swept this way and that by events. Picture a boxer taking blow after blow, all the time on their back foot.

That's reactivity. Life is happening to us. But proactivity is about mastering your own life, it is about being in the front foot, it is about letting your values and choices shape your life, not your circumstances. It's about giving more punches than you're taking.

Of course we will receive some punches, but still we stay on our front foot. We can't prevent life from happening to us but we can choose how we will respond when it does happen. Circumstance doesn't determine my life, but rather my choices, and my response to those circumstances. Every difficulty is either a stumbling block, or a stepping stone – depending on whether we're reactive or proactive.

The first way to be proactive is to envision your life in advance.

Why not (once a year) write a list of the aspects or roles of your life, both personal and public. Then under each role use your imagination and go forward 6-12 months and ask yourself, 'What could this aspect of your life look like?' This is called vision, a picture of the future that motivates you to move toward that.

Then asked yourself about each role and its vision, 'What rhythms would you have to build into your life to guarantee that your life heads in that direction?'

So to recap: 1) Clarify your life's roles. 2) Describe what you want that role to look like 6-12 months from now. 3) Figure out what rhythms will help you get there.

Said simpler: ROLES. GOALS. RHYTHMS.

Go through that process once or better yet twice a year. That's the easy part. The fourth element is DIARISE. The next part is the challenge: to actually implement those rhythms into your life. And you do this by regularly putting those rhythms in your diary in advance. And then you stick to those rhythms, though you will need some flexibility of course.

The second way to be proactive is to not procrastinate really important things. How many people on their deathbed say, 'My whole life I was running around like a chicken without a head. Responding to this demand and that urgency. But all the things I really wanted to do – should have done – I procrastinated them, and now it's too late. If only I spent enough time with my kids. If only I didn't pour my life chasing meaningless stuff like reputation and wealth. If only I loved my husband like I should have. If only I pursued Christ like I should have.' Oh, live regret free! Put your dreams in your diary. And turn those wonderful prophecies into plans. Turn your visions into ventures. You will never find time for anything. If you want time you must make it. Don't fall into the Someday Trap. Someday I'll write a book. Someday I'll learn to dance. Someday I'll plant a tree. Start today. Williams James said it like this, 'To change one's life: Start immediately. Do it flamboyantly. No exceptions.'

Live every day proactively. On the front foot. As Spurgeon once said, 'The truest way to lengthen our life is to actually live while we live, wasting no time but using every hour for the highest ends. Starting today!' Abraham Lincoln said, 'In the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years.' And Stephen Levine said, 'If you were going to die soon and had only one phone call you could make, who would you call and what would you say? And why are you waiting?' Make the dash on your gravestone count!

3) SURRENDER.

Ben Erwin wrote, 'Most of us spend our lives as if we had another one in the bank.' He's so right. We have one life. Only one. And the main question you have to ask yourself is? Whose will will be done – yours or Gods? You have a will. It consists of plans, dreams and aspirations. Not for wrong things just your things. But God also has a will for your life. He has a plan and a purpose for your life. And ultimately you have to choose between the two. 'There are only two kinds of people', wrote CS Lewis, 'Those who say to God, 'not my will but your will be done' and those to whom God says, 'Not my will but yours be done, then.'

Let's look at James 4...

13 Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money."

In the Roman Empire there were great opportunities for travel and business. People enjoyed the thrill of living life to the full, doing what they want, where they want, when they want. Revelling in their autonomy they'd say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money."

Still today, but even more so, people like to feel like they're the master of their destinies. We relish our freedom, our right to do what I want, when I want, with who I want. It's my life.

But this Scripture tells us that this is not only wrong to assume we're the master of our destinies, it is silly...

14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15 Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.

We see that God, not us, is the true master of our destiny – so we should surrender our lives to him, for a few reasons.

1. We should surrender because we don't even know what will happen tomorrow (v14). In our arrogance, we begin to assume we can plan our futures entirely and then just go and make it happen. We are meant to be humbled by the simple thought that there is so much in this world that is beyond our control. This sense of unpredictability is meant to increase our sense of dependence on God. After all, we do not know what the future holds, but we do know the one who holds the future.
2. We should surrender because our lives are so fleeting and fragile. 'What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.' Our lives are remarkably short. This thought of how fleeting and fragile our lives are should increase our sense of dependence on God, and our readiness to surrender our lives to Christ.
3. We should surrender because God, not us, is in charge. Verse 15 says, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or do that.' God is sovereign over our lives, over our circumstances, over the timing of our death, and over what he wants us to do with our lives.

4. We should surrender our lives because it breaks the power of arrogance in our lives. The sentence, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or do that' is another way of saying, 'I will make my plans, but ultimately my life and my times are in God's hands. I am willing to lay down any of my plans if it is revealed that you have another plan for me.' Notice that these verses do not condemn travel, nor making money, nor planning for the future. Rather they address the arrogance with which these things can be done in. The opposite of arrogance is humble surrender.
5. We should surrender because the opposite of surrender is sin. Verse 17 says, 'So then, if you know the good you ought to do and don't do it, you sin.' It is a verse that calls us to total surrender, to give ourselves to doing all that God wants us to do with our lives. To fail to say yes to Christ and his will is to say yes to sin.

In summary, this verse teaches that we should surrender fully to Christ and his will. And it reminds us that Christ, not ourselves, should be trusted as the master of our destiny. The prayer we should pray every day from the bottom of our hearts is, 'Not my will, but your will be done.'

See how he surrendered himself totally to his Father. In the garden the night before he was crucified he prayed 'not my will but your will be done.' We too should pray, 'Not my will but yours be done.'

See how he surrendered himself not only to the Father but to love. He lay down his life in love. The cross became the fountainhead of our salvation. We too should pray, 'God use my life as a riverbed of your love to others.'

See how the Father looked after his surrendered Son. He raised him from the dead. He exalted him. And still today when we surrender our lives to the Father his love and care becomes so evident in our lives. He takes full responsibility for the one who gives full surrender to him! Oh, let's hold nothing back. Let's surrender our entire lives to him. Let's trade in our dreams for his dreams, our hopes for his hopes, our plans for his plans, our will for his will. Surely, there's no better way to live the dash!

Life is short – a simple dash between your birthdate and deathdate. How will you use your dash? Why not be present? Why not be proactive? Why not surrender fully? Surely there's no better way to live!

THE EULOGY

On a gravestone somewhere these words are inscribed:

*Remember friend as you walk by
As you are now so once was I
As I am now you will surely be
Prepare thyself to follow me.*

We tend to forget just how short life is. We all have an appointment with death – and every new day means we're 24 hours closer to it!

Think of this then, when you die there will be two evaluations of your life. First, the people you leave behind will evaluate your life on earth and, second, the God who made you will evaluate your life in heaven. This chapter considers the earthly evaluation. The earthly evaluation really comes to a head at your funeral, when people gather – and people begin to give eulogies of your life.

Now for the first big question: 'What will they say about you at your own funeral?' Yes, they'll mention some fond memories, they might retell some of your life story, they might mention some of your accomplishments. But one thing will stand out more than anything to all the people there: who you were as a person, how you treated them and others, and your character.

JR Miller summed it up like this, 'The only thing that walks back from the grave with the mourners and refuses to be buried is the character of the person. Who a man or woman is survives him. It can never be buried.'

By the way that is your main legacy: the impression you make on the people you leave behind. It is an impression of what a life can become, or scarily what a life can fail to become. People will find themselves thinking, 'I want to develop into the kind of person they were' or (scarily) 'I don't want to be anything like that person was'.

Next question, 'what would you like them to say about you at your own funeral?' And this is a soul-searching question that hopefully will get you to change track in your life. And your answer may be multi-faceted.

There are 2 ways to have a large funeral: 1) be famous or 2) love people your whole life through.

BECOMING A MORE LOVING PERSON

There is no better use of your short life than to become a loving person. Let's look at the famous chapter on love in the Bible – 1 Corinthians 13 starting with verses 1-3...

1If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

The first thing we notice about love is that LOVE IS THE HIGHEST MOTIVATION.

Paul is writing to the Corinthian church. They were people that believed that achievement and ability were more important than love. And this skewed their understanding of real spirituality. They thought real spirituality was about impressing people, and impressing themselves with all sorts of spiritual gifts (tongues, prophecy, knowledge) and dramatic feats (such as performing a miracle – like throwing a mountain into the sea by faith – or by giving everything you had to the poor or by dying as a martyr for your faith in flames).

Now notice that all of these things are not bad. They're good. But look what Paul is saying: these things, good as they are, are worthless if they are not done in a loving way, and if they are not motivated by love. It is common in our lives to do all these things with lower motives:

Motives like fear. 'Oh I'll do anything to avoid being left out or looked down on by God or others'. Motives like trying to prove ourselves. 'If I can just do this then surely I am someone and my life has significance'. Motives like pride. 'Hey everyone look at me. Look at what I can do!'

But when we do good things motivated by low motives this is what it is: noise without music. Paul describes it as 'a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal'. Noise without music. Deeds without substance. Action without love.

The highest motivation is love. Whatever we do, let's do it in a loving way and let love be the driving force. That's the first thing God wants us to know about love.

Next, let's look at verses 4-7

4Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

The second thing we notice about love is that LOVE IS CHRIST-LIKE CHARACTER.

The beginning of verse 4 and then verses 6-7 lists seven descriptions of loving, Christ-like character:

1. Love is patient. We're able to endure waiting or delay without becoming annoyed or upset. We persevere calmly when faced with difficulties. We're able to tolerate being hurt, provoked without complaint or loss of temper.
2. Love is kind. If patience is passive – i.e. the withholding of negative response – kindness is active. It means we have a generous, warm, compassionate nature. We're gentle and not harsh. We show courtesy and care to people. We take the trouble of thinking about ways we can bless other people. We're hospitable and tender in how relate to people. We treat everyone, even the undeserving, in warm, caring ways.
3. Love rejoices in the truth it does not delight in evil. The double-clause phrase 'does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth' describes two sides of the same reality. We don't ever take delight in, or gossip about any kind of evil, whether it be war, the ill-treatment of the poor, the fall or failure of another, or some sin or crime at work, or in our family, or in our government. Instead we rejoice in all that is true, noble, right,

pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy (Phil 4:8).

4. Love always protects. We do all we can to prevent people from being harmed in any way. We warn people about what threatens their wellbeing physically, personally and spiritually.
5. Love always trusts. We're not cynical. We trust in God to work in a person. If a person has failed us, and wounded our trust in them, and if they are sincerely repentant (and evidence it by a changed way of relating to us) we give them another chance. This 'trust' is not directed toward people, as much as it is toward God. Our trust in God enables us to keep on keeping on in our relationships with people.
6. Love always hopes. We're filled with the joy and peace that comes from trusting in the God of hope. We know that God always has the ability to turn a situation around, or to work in a person's life. We're not prone to negativism. We see the potential that God has put in a person, and what a person, by God's grace, could become. And, by God's grace, we believe in people, even when others don't.
7. Love always perseveres. Though a person disappoints us many times over, we remain committed to them, without backing off from them. We don't give up on people. After all, Christ never gave up on us.

The second part of verse 4, and the whole of verse 5 lists seven unloving qualities, qualities that are not Christ-like:

1. Love does not envy. We don't experience, or at least don't give in to resentful and jealous feelings of wanting for ourselves another person's success, good fortune, qualities, or possessions.
2. Love does not boast. We don't praise ourselves, and speak arrogantly about things we possess, or know, or have achieved. Since we're not overly concerned about what people think about us, we don't call undue attention to ourselves. And we refuse to look down on anyone, even if they possess, know or achieve less than we do.
3. Love is not proud. We don't have an exaggerated view of ourselves. We are not 'puffed up'. We see ourselves like God sees us. We are in touch with reality. We refuse to claim credit where credit is not due, and are ready to give it to whomever it is due. And we refuse any thoughts of superiority to take root in our lives.
4. Love is not rude. We don't act shamefully or disgracefully. We don't relate to people in a way that is inconsiderate, insensitive or contemptuous. Even when we disagree with people, or need to confront them, we do it in a dignifying, respectful and non-attacking manner.
5. Love is not self-seeking. We're not caught up in ourselves – in our needs, our wants, our dreams and our desires. Rather, we live for the greater good of others. Being preoccupied with the wellbeing of others makes us self-forgetful. We're also not interested in gaining an advantage over others.
6. Love is not easily angered. We don't become deeply annoyed or irritated easily. And when feelings of annoyance or irritation do rise up inside of us, we waive them off.
7. Love keeps no record of wrongs. We don't hold grudges, nor nurse feelings of resentment.
8. Wow! Now we know what it means to be a loving person! What a brilliant practical description! Love is who you are. Love is how you relate to people. Love is Christ-like character. That is the second thing God is saying to us in this Scripture.

Now, let's look at verses 8-11:

8Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. 11When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.

The third thing we notice about love is that LOVE IS ETERNAL.

'Love never fails'. This is Paul's way of saying 'Love is eternal. It outlasts everything else.' Paul does something very interesting now. He compares love with the abilities that God gives to Christ-followers (he lists prophecy, tongues, teaching and knowledge as examples of these abilities).

One major difference between the two is that love will endure beyond the end of life as we know it and beyond the coming of Christ, whereas those God-given abilities from the Holy Spirit won't. The abilities and gifts will 'cease', 'be stilled' and 'pass away', but love 'never fails'. Love is here to stay forever! Love is eternal.

One way of thinking of this is to think of the kingdom of God being a building that is busy being built in our lives. The very substance the building is made of is love. But the God-given gifts and abilities are like the scaffolding that is needed to build this building. On completion date, when Christ returns, the scaffolding will be removed, but the kingdom of love will still remain standing. Love is eternal. The gifts are temporary.

'For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.' Though the kingdom is already here, it is only here in part. The abilities and gifts of the Spirit help us to experience and advance the kingdom progressively and in part. But there is a day when 'perfection' (or perhaps a better translation in this case 'completion') will come.

Then in verse 11 Paul gives an analogy that highlights the fact that the gifts are only appropriate for our earthly existence, but not for final glory: 'When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.' Redeemed humanity experiences two main stages: life on the earth, and life in eternity. Paul here likens life on the earth to childhood, and life in eternity to adulthood. Childhood is a temporary phase, whereas adulthood is the destination. In the same way that toys are appropriate in childhood, but not in adulthood, so the abilities given by the Spirit, though being totally appropriate for life on earth, will not be necessary in eternity. But in the same way love is necessary in both childhood and adulthood, so love is appropriate both now and forever.

Can you hear what God is saying to us? In a world that is besotted with achievement and ability, we can so easily miss the main thing: who we are is more important than what we do. Ability and achievement are important, but not nearly as important as love. And pity the person who spends their whole lives trying, through fear or pride, to achieve – and forgets to love people everyday of their lives. They are like an adult who still acts like a kid – devoting their lives to their toys.

On this point let me jump down to verse 13 because it makes a similar point:

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Faith is so important. Faith rests in the goodness of God to us right now. And hope is so important. Hope rests in the goodness of God to us in the future. But as important as faith and hope are, love is supreme. Why is that? Answer: because love is eternal, whereas faith and hope are not. Redeemed humanity has two stages: life on earth, and life in eternity. While we're on earth we need to live by faith, but in eternity we will no longer need faith because it will be replaced by sight. And while we're on earth we need to live by hope, but in eternity we will no longer need hope because it will be replaced by fulfilment. But in eternity we will still love. The new

heavens and the new earth will be a kingdom of love. Love is what we will be doing forever. Love is the greatest because love is eternal! That's the third thing God is saying to us through this Scripture passage.

Lastly, let's look at verse 12:

12Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

The fourth thing we notice about love is that LOVE IS FROM GOD.

Paul is still making the point that love outlasts spiritual abilities. Now he says something interesting. He says that spiritual abilities (like preaching and prophesying and healing for example) can help us get to know God, but ultimately in eternity we will know the God of love face to face.

Paul compares these spiritual abilities with a mirror that gives us a reflection of God. Now the city of Corinth was famous for making some of the best mirrors in the world. So Paul was in no way insulting the effectiveness of the gifts. The gifts indeed have the potential to provide us with an understanding of who God is – think about the gift of preaching for example. They enable us to know God. But, as wonderful and full as this knowledge is, it is still incomplete. Not incomplete in the sense that we have wrong doctrine about God, but rather incomplete in that, though we have so much information about God in the Bible, yet many of our questions remain unanswered. Not only that, but we only have a limited insight into and experience of God personally and as a church. It is as though we see God's face, but only in a mirror reflection. The gifts of the Spirit enable the church, and the world, to see something of who God is.

But in eternity we will see God face to face. Then the mirror image (that the gifts provide) will no longer be needed! We will have unrestricted face-to-face intimacy with God.

Now let me make my point by asking, where does love come from? This Scriptures gives us the answer. It comes from seeing the God of love with the eyes of our heart. We can't see him as fully as we one day will but we can see him enough to know that he is a God of love.

'God is love' (1 John 4:16). And Christ came to this earth to show us who God is as concretely and practically as possible. 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being' (Hebrews 1:3). As we observe Christ's life and death as recorded in the four Gospels, we notice that indeed...

'Christ is patient, Christ is kind. He does not envy, he does not boast, he is not proud. He is not rude, He is not self-seeking, He is not easily angered, He keeps no record of wrongs. Christ does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Christ always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Christ never fails.'

Wow. Christ alone is perfect love. Now I want you to do something scary. I want you to put your name in the place of the word 'love' in verses 4-7...

' ___ is patient, ___ is kind. ___ does not envy, ___ does not boast, ___ is not proud. ___ is not rude, ___ is not self-seeking, ___ is not easily angered, ___ keeps no record of wrongs. ___ does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ___ always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.'

Ouch. When we do that, it becomes so clear that we are so not loving, so not like Christ! We're more sinful than we realized, aren't we. But the good news is also that we're more loved than we imagined. 'Christ demonstrated his love for us while we were still sinners by dying on our behalf' (Rom 5:8).

Christ's perfect love makes it possible for us to be forgiven of our lack of love toward him and others. And not just forgiven. We're told that 'God pours out his love into our hearts through the Spirit he has given us' (Rom 5:5). Christ does more than forgive us. As we look to him with the eyes of our heart – as we gaze upon the reflection of his face his love flows into us and begins to transform us! We have the hope of becoming more like him. 'We all, who with unveiled faces gaze upon the Lord's glorious character, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3:18). Every Christian can expect to grow progressively more loving as we continue to gaze upon Christ's loving character and yield to the Spirit of love.

Love is from God. That is great secret to become a loving person! Let his love drive out the fear and the pride and the need to prove yourself. Love is the greatest force in the world. It has the power to displace evil in our hearts and lives. Let Christ's love for you, and Christ's love through the Spirit in you transform you. Let it produce in you Christ-like character. Let his love give you a taste of eternity where you will one day see him face to face.

Listen to Spurgeon's words to describe what it will one day be like to look God in the face:

'The streets of gold will have small attraction to us, the music of angels will but slightly enchant us, compared with the King in the midst of the throne. He it is who shall rivet our gaze, absorb our thoughts, enchain our affection, and move all our sacred passions to their highest pitch of celestial ardour. We shall see God.' And when we see him we will fully understand what is meant by the description, 'God is love'. Finally, we will fully know and grasp how long and wide and deep and high is the love of Christ'.

But between now and that day I know what I want to put in my bucket – God's love. And I know what I want people to say and think about me at my own funeral. 'He loved so many people – he loved me – he was patient, kind, not envious, not rude, not self-seeking, not boastful, not easily angered, forgiving, protective, hope-filled, persevering.'

LIFE BEYOND

“And finally there is the painful riddle of death, for which no remedy at all has yet been found, nor probably ever will be.” Freud

Let me be bold and say that I believe that on this point Freud was dead wrong! There is a remedy. In this chapter we want to answer 2 questions: What does the Bible teach about the death of a believer? AND What does the Bible teach about the Life Beyond for the believer?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT THE DEATH OF A BELIEVER?

1. God knows the day of our death

There is a day coming that will be our last. God knows that day already. In Acts 12 we see that James the apostle while still a young man was martyred. It was his time. Then we see Peter arrested shortly thereafter. Though he was likely scheduled for execution like James, he miraculously escaped prison. It wasn't his time. We don't know our future, but we know the One who holds our future. We can pray with calm confidence, “My times are in your hands”(Ps 31:5).

2. God's presence will comfort us at that time

The comic Woody Allen once wrote: “It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens.” The thought of death is scary for many of us. But we can take comfort already now because God's word promises that “even though (we) walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we need not fear, for God will be with us” (Ps 23:4).

Now, we cannot possibly imagine how God will be there for us when that time comes, but he will! When the famous missionary Corrie Ten Boom who survived the concentration camps was a little girl in Holland, her first realization of death came after a visit to the home of a neighbour who had died. It terrified her that some day her parents would also die. Corrie's father comforted her with words of wisdom.

“Corrie, when you and I go to Amsterdam, when do I give you your ticket?”

She replied, “Why, just before we get on the train.”

“Exactly,” her father said, “and our wise Father in heaven knows when we're going to need things too. Don't run out ahead of Him, Corrie. When the time comes that some of us will have to die, you will look into your heart and find the God-given strength you need-just in time.”

A word to doubters: If you battle to believe that Christ will be there for you when you're about to breathe your last, you just need to comfort yourself with the wonderful stories of so many Christ-followers who have been there before you. Spurgeon wrote, “Expiring saints have often said that their last beds have been the best they have ever slept upon.” Think about DL Moody. He was a man who God used a century ago to lead nearly a million people to put their faith in Christ. He used to say, “One day you will read in the newspaper, ‘Moody is dead.’ But you don't believe a word. I will be more alive than I am right now.”

While on his death bed, he suddenly whispered: "Earth recedes, and heaven opens up." His son, Will ran over to the bed. "Will, if this is death, it is sweet! God calls me – don't hold me back. There is no more pain, no more valleys – only bliss." And he breathed his last.

3. We'll suddenly be with Christ in heaven

Many times the Bible describes death for the believer as 'falling asleep'. In the same way that as we fall asleep we lose consciousness of what's happening in our bodies, so in death, we simply slip out of the realm of earthly consciousness into a realm of restful bliss in Christ's presence. And it will be the sweetest moment ever. Jesus comforted a believing criminal dying on the cross next to him by saying, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Paul, a great leader in the early church, who at the time was in danger of being martyred said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." And that to die is to "be with Christ, which is better by far" (Phil 1:21,23). These are not the words of a depressive, but of someone who knew that to be "away from the body was to be at home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8). Theologians sometimes call what happens in this moment "the beatific vision" because for the first time we will see Christ face to face – a sight too wonderful to comprehend.

A word to doubters: If you battle to believe that Christ will be there for you when you die, you need but read and ponder the experience of Stephen, the church's first martyr. As he was being stoned to death we're told that "Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'" (Acts 7:55-56). This is why he could with confidence pray his last prayer: "Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit." You too will be able to confidently make that your last prayer. Death is not extinguishing the light from the Christian; it is putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT THE LIFE BEYOND FOR THE BELIEVER?

1. The present heaven is not our final destination

This point always comes as a shock to those who think that once we're with Jesus we've finally arrived. Truth be told, the journey has just begun. Once we're with Christ in paradise we will then wait for the return of Christ to earth to climax human history. Theologians sometimes call this wait the intermediate state.

While we wait for our bodily resurrection, will we get bored? Certainly not! Jesus calls this intermediate state 'paradise' for a reason. Besides, even if the wait is thousands of years, we can only speculate that it passes by relatively quickly, since a thousand years in God's sight, and no doubt in God's presence, "is like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night" (Psalm 90:4). Some theologians argue that we won't even be aware of the length of time between being at home with Christ and what happens next:

2. Christ will return

Though we now know Christ by his Spirit, yet on the day of his return we (and everyone!) will see Christ in all his splendour. Listen to the last sight the apostle's had of Christ: "After he said this, he was taken up before

their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'" (Acts 1:9-11). Jesus will return! The angels informed the disciples that in the same manner he went up, he will return. But when? We have no idea.

But what we do know is that he has ascended and he will return. "He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Heb 9:28). His return will be dramatic, visible and personal. The first time he came as a suffering servant, with his glory veiled under his humble humanity. The second time, his glory and power will be on full show for all to see. Christ is already the Master of the Universe, but so few know it. On that day all will know, and all will bow – some with joy, and some with terror.

A word to doubters: If you battle to believe that Christ will really return, you need to just consider this argument: The Old Testament prophesied that Christ would come to this earth (and gave significant details we could expect). And the promises came to pass 2000 years ago! Similarly, the New Testament now prophesies that he will come again (also giving significant details we can expect). With a track record like that, surely these promises will also come to pass.

3. We'll receive amazing transformed bodies

"We eagerly await a Saviour from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil 3:20-21). If we are still alive when Christ comes then we will bypass death altogether – our living bodies will be transformed. If however we are dead and with Christ, we will be clothed with a resurrection body too. This is amazing news. If you've seen the movie Avatar, you may have caught a glimpse of what I'm talking about. We're still the same person, but we're given an immortal super-body that is in some ways patterned after our earthly one. It is not that our bodies will be replaced as much as they are transformed, much like a seed sown in the ground is not replaced by a plant, but is rather transformed into a plant. Listen to what the Scriptures tell us about this body:

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:42-44).

1. Our bodies now are perishable.

They get sick. They break, age and deteriorate with time. They have a time limit. But our bodies then will be imperishable. They will never age, nor deteriorate nor end.

2. Our bodies now tend toward dishonour, especially in death.

There are few things as ghastly as a rotting corpse. But our bodies then will radiate with God's glory. This will be the visible outshining of God's holiness. We have a glimpse of this in Moses as he descends from Mt Sinai with his face glowing: "the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory" (2 Corinthians 3:7). And another glimpse of this with Jesus' transfiguration: "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (Matthew 17:2).

3. Our bodies now are weak and fragile.

The older we get the weaker we become, until one day our heart becomes too weak to even continue pumping, our lungs too weak to continue breathing. But our bodies then will be powerful. We'll have heightened senses and abilities. Fascinatingly, Jesus' resurrection body had new powers. Think of its ability to move great distances in a moment (see Luke 24:13, 33 and 36), and its ability to walk through walls (John 20:26) for example.

4. Our bodies now are natural (v44).

The Greek word is 'psuchike' (also used in 2:14). A natural body refers to 'a body characterized by ordinary human life'. But then our bodies will be spiritual, or better translated, 'Spirit-ual' (v44). This refers to the fact that in the new heavens and the new earth our bodies will be vehicles of the Holy Spirit's power and glory. It does not mean, as some wrongly take it, that our bodies will be made of 'spirit' and will be immaterial.

A word to doubters: If you're a believer, and yet you battle to believe that you will receive a resurrection body, you have an amazing encouragement. Much Scripture (1 Cor 15:12-24) is devoted to making a single point: Jesus' own resurrection is God's gift of a picture and a pledge of your own resurrection body one day. Though it is beyond this talk to show, the evidence of Christ's physical resurrection from the dead as a fact of history is unbelievably great! This means that the evidence of your own future resurrection is great too! In the same way your future body will be you, only better.

Luke 24:49 - Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

4. Judgment Day will come

2 Cor 5:10 - For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that everyone may receive what is due them for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Such an important theme – we're looking at that next week.

5. We'll live forever in a glorious renewed earth

Christ didn't come to take us as disembodied spirits to some distant spiritual realm somewhere that we live forever – he came to see "life swallow up death" and to "renew all things" (Matt 19:28).

We live in a fallen world. Humanity's fall plunged this entire world into a state of brokenness and death – resulting in things like wars, natural disasters, sickness and injustice becoming the order of things. The Scriptures use a metaphor of what God will do with fallen creation: he will purge it with fire. This speaks of how he in a moment of dramatic intervention will bring an end to all evil, injustice, suffering, death and sadness. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelations 21:4).

But he will do more than purge it. He will transform it. The apostle Peter wrote, "In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Peter 1:13). Mysteriously, it is not just our bodies that will be resurrected and glorified, all of creation will also be.

But what will the new world be like? The new heavens and the new earth will be unimaginably amazing. The Bible says that eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the imagination of people what God will prepare for us in the future.

But we can draw out some insight by reflecting on what happened on earth before sin and death entered in. All that this world was ever meant to be, but wasn't able to be because of the entrance of sin and death, that world will be able to become. In that world redeemed humanity will enjoy:

Counselling Dave, the teenager... "I'm so scared of being bored in heaven"

Get it into your head – you won't be a disembodied spirit in a timeless space-less realm. You'll have a body – much like you do now, only unimaginably better and not plagued by sin, suffering and death – and you will live in a new Earth – much like you do now, only without sin, suffering and death – a world so much more wonderful...

A look at various Scriptures reveals that in this new Earth you will enjoy:

1) Intimate communion with God and the endless discovery of the wonders of who God is The dwelling place of God. Eph 2 – ever-deeper revelation of God's grace in Christ.

Augustine wrote, "We shall not be wearied by the praise of God, nor by his love. If your love should fail, so would your praise; but if love will be everlasting, because the beauty of God will be uncloying, inexhaustible, fear not that you will lack power ever to praise him, whom you will have power ever to love."

To look into God's eyes will be to see what we've always longed to see: the person who made us and for whom we were made. Seeing God will be like seeing everything else for the first time. We will discover that seeing God is our greatest joy, and life itself. Every other joy of Heaven will be derivative, flowing from the fountain of our relationship with God. Beholding and knowing God, we will see ourselves, and all other people and events, through God's eyes. We will spend eternity worshipping, exploring, and serving our great God. We will see his breathtaking beauty in everything and everyone around us.

2) Deep and rich relationship with other people, who are very different to ourselves.

- We will be reunited with loved ones.
- There will be an uncountable variety of ethnicity, culture and languages there.

3) Creative and thrilling work, play, adventure, growth, travel and learning.

Ever worked on some exciting project as a team – with everyone pulling together – everyone's abilities and gifts coming to the fore – no ego's involved – well, if so, you've tasted heaven.

4) Unspeakable beauty and pleasure.

There will be animals there. There will be nature – there will be plants we haven't yet seen. We will eat and drink and feast – there will be tastes and smells we've yet to experience. There will be beauty – there will be new sounds and new colours we've yet to experience.

A word to doubters: If you struggle to believe this new world will ever come about, Scripture helps us. It tells us that we have "tasted the powers of the coming age" (Heb 6:5). Elsewhere we're told that the Holy Spirit is

“a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (Eph 1:14).

2Cor 5:5 – “The one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” This speaks of how believers who have experienced the joy and wonder of the Holy Spirit’s powerful presence, have in fact experienced a foretaste of what’s to come. If you haven’t experienced God’s outpoured presence yet, you have something to look forward to – we believe that God really does want to pour out his Spirit upon all his children. And if you have, then you know that you have even more to look forward to – the new heavens and earth!

SO WHAT?

Trust in Christ. If Christ really is who the Scriptures say he is – the maker of the world, the incarnate Son of God, the one who saves us and the world through his death and resurrection, the one who reigns the world now and leads his followers through his Spirit, the one who will return one day, the one who will judge the world, the one who will renew all things – then trust in him. To spurn him would be to miss the very meaning of life.

HAVE NO FEAR OF DEATH (IF YOU’RE A BELIEVER)

The sting of death is gone!

Death was once an executioner – now through Christ, it has become a gardener – what is sown in perishable, but what is reaped is imperishable! Christ came to set us free from – amongst many other things – the fear of death!

Abandon yourself to God’s purposes.

We believe that Christ, through his first coming, introduced his kingdom in part on the earth. Through his second coming, his kingdom will be fully realized: a redeemed humanity will enjoy immortal resurrection bodies as they celebrate God’s manifest presence and grace forever in the new heavens and new earth, a world purged of all suffering, injustice, sin and death. The church is to both live in joyful anticipation of this certain future, and to provide the world with ‘foretastes’ of it. We do this through proclaiming the gospel, living counter-culturally, building authentic community, serving the poor and marginalized, confronting injustice, and protecting creation, all the time praying, ‘Let your kingdom come. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

THAT DAY

Have you ever noticed how quickly a mist can come in and then how quickly it disappears? Have you ever noticed a flower appear in your garden, and then days later fade away?

If so, then you understand how brief our lives are. The Scriptures compare our brief life on earth to a mist and to a flower that – glorious as they are when they're here – is all too soon gone with no trace left behind! How sobering!

We realize how short our lives are by imagining, "What if I had six months to live?" Now most of us probably have more time than that left – but surely how we'd live if we had just 6 months left should be more or less how we should live always?

Two chapters ago we said that at the end of your life there are two evaluations when you die. The one evaluation happens on earth as the people you leave behind reflect on who you were as a person. But we also said there is an evaluation that happens in heaven – and that's what we're considering now.

Have you ever watched a TV program that replays a helicopter view of a car chase in the USA? The guy is going through red lights and going so fast not even the devil can keep up with him. And you imagine the guy is thinking, "I'll drive, drive, drive as fast as I can. No one can catch me. I'm the ginger bread man." But you know what's coming, right? And you can't believe he can't. What's coming? A collision. The guy never gets away with it.

Well Scripture gives us a helicopter view on our lives. We can live our lives fleeing God and his plan for our lives. We're thinking, "I'll run, run, run as fast as I can. I'll do what I want, when I want." Most of us also add, "I won't break any major laws – I'll avoid getting in trouble with the police and all – but still I'll push the envelope on how I live, what I do." But where's it going?

Judgement Day. Collision Day. The Scriptures say that "It is destined for a person to live and then die, and after that to face judgment" (Heb 9:27). The funny thing is that most people don't believe they'll ever face their Creator and be judged. But it's coming. Today we're one day closer. We will see our Creator face to face and our entire lives, what we did, what we believed, why we did what we did – all of it will be replayed and judged. "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb 4:13). There is coming "the day when God judges everyone's secrets" (Rom 2:16).

The book of Revelations tells us there are two judgments that will come. First, the judgment of people who have spurned Christ and his grace. Second, the judgment of people who accepted Christ and his grace. We will now unpack those two judgments. Here goes:

1. THE JUDGMENT OF THOSE WHO SPURNED CHRIST AND HIS GRACE

Listen to what the Scriptures say: “But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed” (Rom 2:5). The Bible says we’re all sinners. And God is perfectly holy and hates the sin and rebellion in our lives. We were meant to be image-bearers, reflecting his face and goodness and love into the world. But instead we defaced him with sin in our hearts and deeds. If you ever doubted that sin is serious just look at how God promises to respond to it on That Day. He will pour out his righteous anger on it. Though our selfishness, lovelessness, disobedience and failure to love him, we defaced him from our lives! And he will judge us for that. But there is more than that: “They (who do not know God and spurn the offer of Christ’s grace) will be punished with everlasting destruction and be shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory” (2 Thes 1:9). This is a reference to hell, the eternal separation from God in a realm of consciousness that is devoid of all signs of God’s grace entirely.

Hell is such a hot topic, often creating more heat than light. And the question most people ask – and what a good question – is: “How can a loving God send people he loves to hell?” On our website – just click on Tough Q’s on the top bar - we answer that question in detail but there are three points to be made:

First, there are degrees of punishment in hell

The Scriptures don’t develop this theme in much detail, but they do seem to teach that though hell will be terrible for all, it will be more terrible for some than others, depending on how they lived.

For example in Matthew 11:20-24 Jesus speaks how, depending on how people respond to God and his word, judgment will be more agonizing for some than others. And in Luke 20:47 Jesus speaks of how self-righteous religious leaders who use their positions of power for self-glory and exploitation of people will – quote unquote – “be punished most severely”.

Second, God doesn’t send us to hell, we choose to go there

Listen to how Tim Keller unpacks this thought:

“(Hell) is God giving us up to what we have freely chosen-to go our own way, be our own “the master of our fate, the captain of our soul,” to get away from him and his control. It is God banishing us to regions we have desperately tried to get into all our lives. Scripture sees hell as self-chosen. Hell appears as God’s gesture of respect for human choice. All receive what they actually chose, either to be with God forever, worshipping him, or without God forever, worshipping themselves.” If the thing you most want is to worship God in the beauty of his holiness, then that is what you will get (Ps 96:9-13.) If the thing you most want is to be your own master, then the holiness of God will become an agony, and the presence of God a terror you will flee forever (Rev 6:16).”

And God is not so cruel as to force a person who doesn’t want to worship him to be in the place where he is worshipped forever.

Third, God doesn't want anyone to go to hell

2 Peter 3,9 says, "God is patient with you. He does not want anyone to perish. Rather, he wants everyone to turn their lives over to him."

The important thing to recognize is that we are not the only ones unsettled by the thought of hell. God doesn't want anyone to experience life or eternity apart from him. And so, in Christ, God himself experienced hell so we wouldn't have to.

Again let me quote a long quote from Tim Keller:

"In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says that no physical destruction can be compared with the spiritual destruction of hell, of losing the presence of God. But this is exactly what happened to Jesus on the cross—he was forsaken by the Father (Matt 27:46). In Luke 16, we read of a rich man in hell who is desperately thirsty and on the cross Jesus said "I thirst" (John 19:28). The water of life, the presence of God, was taken from him.

The point is this. Unless we come to grips with this "terrible" doctrine of hell, we will never even begin to understand the depths of what Jesus did for us on the cross. His body was being destroyed in the worst possible way, but that was a flea bite compared to what was happening to his soul. When he cried out that his God had forsaken him he was experiencing hell itself. But consider—if our debt for sin is so great that it is never paid off there, but our hell stretches on for eternity, then what are we to conclude from the fact that Jesus said the payment was "finished" (John 19:30) after only three hours? We learn that what he felt on the cross was far worse and deeper than all of our deserved hells put together. And this makes emotional sense when we consider the relationship he lost.

If a mild acquaintance denounces you and rejects you, that hurts. If a good friend does the same, that hurts far worse. However, if your spouse walks out on you saying, "I never want to see you again," that is far more devastating still. The longer, deeper, and more intimate the relationship, the more tortuous is any separation. But the Son's relationship with the Father was without beginning and infinitely greater than the most intimate and passionate human relationship. When Jesus was cut off from God he went into the deepest pit and most powerful furnace, beyond all imagining. He experienced the full wrath of the Father. And he did it voluntarily, for us."

This means that if we trust him, we don't have to experience hell ourselves. As the familiar verse says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

2. THE JUDGMENT OF BELIEVERS

If you're a Christian, this may come as a shock you, but you too will be judged. Listen to how 2 Corinthians 5:10 puts it: "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

There is no danger of going to hell, but there is danger of losing your rewards.

Our judge will be Christ. It is God's judgment too (Romans 14:10–12), but John 5:27 tells us that God "has given him authority to execute judgment". So God the Son and God the Father are one in their judgment, but the Son is the one who stands forth as the immediate Judge, to deal with us.

Our judgment will be after we die. "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). We know that before we enter the final state of glory with our resurrection bodies on the new earth, we will stand before Christ as our Judge. Here we will be judged according to our deeds in this life. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." This is not an isolated teaching in the New Testament. Jesus said in Matthew 16:27, "The Son of Man is going to come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and will then recompense every person according to his deeds." And in the very last chapter of the Bible Jesus said, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to render to every person according to what he has done" (Revelation 22:12). In other words the way you live is not unimportant.

But why will Christians be judged if in fact Christ has already been judged for us (Romans 5:8–9), and if there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)?

Is the aim of this judgment to declare who is lost and who is saved, according to the works done in the body? Or is the aim of this judgment to declare the measure of your reward in the age to come according to the works done in the body?

Piper writes that he thinks the answer of the New Testament is both. Our deeds will reveal who enters the age to come, and our deeds will reveal the measure of our reward in the age to come.

Ephesians 2:8 says, "By grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God—not of works lest anyone should boast." Salvation is not "of works." That is, works do not earn salvation. Works do not put God in our debt so that he must pay wages. That would contradict grace. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 6:23). Grace gives salvation as a free gift to be received by faith, not earned by works.

How then can we say that the judgment of believers will not only be the public declaration of the measure of our reward in the kingdom of God according to our deeds, but will also be the public declaration of our salvation—our entering the kingdom—according to our deeds?

The answer in a couple sentences is that our deeds will be the public evidence brought forth in Christ's courtroom to demonstrate that our faith is real. And our deeds will be the public evidence brought forth to demonstrate the varying measures of our obedience of faith (cf. Romans 12:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:11).

In other words, salvation is by faith, and rewards are by faith, but the evidence of invisible faith in the judgment hall of Christ will be a transformed life. Our deeds are not the basis of our salvation, they are the evidence of our salvation. They are not foundation, they are demonstration.

Now let me show you why I think this.

REWARD IN ACCORD WITH DEEDS

There is teaching both in Paul's writings and in the words of Jesus that believers will receive differing reward in accord with the degree that their faith expresses itself in acts of service and love and righteousness.

IN PAUL'S WRITINGS

For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:8 Paul says, "He who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor." And in Ephesians 6:8 Paul says, "Whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord."

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

And most of us remember the parable of the talents in Luke 19:12–27. Jesus compares his going to heaven and returning to a nobleman who went away and gave to ten of his servants one talent each with the command to trade with them so that his estate would be advanced in his absence. When he returns, one had traded so as to turn his talent into ten. And the nobleman says that his reward will be to have authority over ten cities. Another had turned his talent into five. And the nobleman said that his reward would be to have authority over five cities. Another had just kept the talent and done nothing with it. To this one the nobleman said, "I will condemn you from your own mouth." And he took the one talent from him.

Now what this parable teaches is the same thing Paul taught, namely, that there are varying degrees of reward for the faithfulness of our lives. But it also moves beyond that and also teaches that there is a loss not only of reward but of eternity for those who claim to be faithful but do nothing to show that they prize God's gifts and love the Giver. That's the point of the third servant who did nothing with his gift. He did not just lose his reward, he lost his life. Jesus says in Matthew 25:30, "Cast out that slave into outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

SALVATION DEMONSTRATED BY DEEDS

That leads us to the second purpose of the judgment. The first, was that the judgment makes a public demonstration of the varying degrees of reward that Christians receive for the exercise of their faith in obedience. The second purpose of the judgment is to declare openly the reality of the faith and the salvation of God's people by the evidence of their deeds. Salvation is owned by faith. Salvation is shown by deeds. So when Paul says (in v. 10) we "will be recompensed . . . according to what we have done," he not only means that our rewards will accord with our deeds, but also our salvation will accord with our deeds.

There are numerous texts that point in this direction. One is in Paul's letter to the Romans (2:5–7) where he refers to "The revelation of the righteous judgment of God," and then says (in vv. 6–8), "[God] will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality [he will render] eternal life; but to those who . . . do not obey the truth . . . [he will render] wrath and indignation." In other words, just as our text says, the judgment is "according to what a person has done." But here the issue is eternal life versus wrath.

"FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD"

Several times Paul listed certain kinds of deeds and said, "those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:21; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10). In other words when these deeds are exposed at the

judgment as a person's way of life, they will be the evidence that their faith is dead and they will not be saved. As James said in James 2:26, "Faith without works is dead." That is what will be shown at the judgment.

JESUS' WORDS

Jesus put it like this—and he used exactly the same words for good and evil deeds that we have here in 2 Corinthians 5:10. He said (in John 5:29), "An hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment." In other words the way one lived will be the evidence whether one passes through judgment to life or whether one experiences judgment as condemnation.

He says this even though five verses earlier in John 5:24 he said, "Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears my word and believes has eternal life." To hear and to believe is to have eternal life—it is by grace through faith. But when that faith is real—not dead—the life will change and Jesus can say, with no contradiction: the deeds of this life will be the public criteria of judgment in the resurrection. Because our works are the evidence of the reality of our faith. And it is faith in Christ that saves.

A CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

Let me close with an illustration that I think makes clear how deeds will function in the final judgment. Remember the story of how two harlots brought a baby to king Solomon, each claiming that the baby was hers (1 Kings 3:16–27). They asked king Solomon to act as judge between them. He said that a sword should be brought and that the baby should be divided and half given to the one and half to the other. The true mother cried out, "O, my lord, give her the child and by no means kill it." Solomon said, give this woman the child, for she is its mother.

What was Solomon looking for? He was not looking for a deed that would earn the child. He was looking for a deed that would prove that the child was already possessed by birth. That is the way God looks at our deeds. He is not looking for deeds that purchase our pardon in his judgment hall. He is looking for deeds that prove we are already enjoying our pardon. The purchase of our pardon was the blood of Jesus, sufficient once for all to cover all our sins. And the means by which we own it is faith—and faith alone.

CONCLUSION

WHAT IF YOU HAD 6 MONTHS TO LIVE?

So what if you had 6 months to live?

It is our hope that as you went through this ebook you were reminded that while it is sobering to know that our lives are so much shorter than we realize, our lives when lived in the purposes God sets before us are so much meaningful than we know.

In the recent Man of Steel Superman movie a profound quote was made when Jonathan Kent says to his son, "You are my son, but somewhere out there you have another father, and he sent you here for a reason. And even if it takes you the rest of your life, you owe it to yourself to find out what that reason is."

We believe that God has put every one of us here for his purposes. He does not hide his purposes from us and expect us to guess what they are. The bible promises that when we seek God we will find him and he will make our paths straight.

Our hope is that going through this material has started you on a journey to seeking God more for your life.