



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613
(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG
WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

Living With the End in Mind

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Pr. Tim Boettger

Ecclesiastes 12 (ESV)

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low— they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets— before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Hebrews 9:27

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,

Author Randy Alcorn recounts this about Alfred Nobel. He was a Swedish chemist who made a fortune by inventing dynamite and other powerful explosives that governments bought to produce weapons. When Nobel's brother Ludvig died, a French newspaper accidentally printed Alfred's obituary instead. He was described as a man who became rich for enabling people to kill each other in unprecedented quantities. Shaken by this assessment, Nobel resolved to use his fortune to reward accomplishments that

benefited humanity, including what we now know of as the Nobel Peace Prize. He invested \$9 million in his attempt to edit his role in history.

Nobel had a rare opportunity, Alcorn writes, to look at the assessment of his life at its end. But he had the opportunity to do this while he was still alive. I have entitled this message *Living with the End in Mind*. Stephen Covey is famous for writing *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and Habit Number Two is *Begin with the End in Mind*. For you and I to do that, we have to project into the future.

What is the future ending of our lives, of which we can't know? But we do know a couple of things about it. We know this: God has told us that He has put eternity in the hearts of men and women, that actually our soul goes on living forever, that there is an eternity outside of time that He has created. Ecclesiastes 3:11 basically tells us very clearly that we know there is an eternal reality to our lives. But many of us think and act as if there were no eternity.

Our minds are so fixed on the things of this world that we forget all about this revelation of the Scriptures and the eternity that's written on our hearts. As a matter of fact, we suppress this truth, the Bible tells us. We try to suppress it, hold it down, and deny it. Especially in cultures where we don't like to talk about life and death. Here in the more modern cultures, the idea of death is often shunned and not dealt with until we're forced to deal with it by the death of a loved one.

But it's very effective and important in our lives to think ahead—not to be afraid of what lies ahead, but to come to terms with it. Become comfortable with it as much as we can through the work of God's Spirit and through the gift of faith, so that we can forge through life and use the time here as best we can.

As a matter of fact, Solomon, in his wisdom, said in Ecclesiastes chapter seven: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting." It's an interesting bit of wisdom. He's encouraging us that it's wiser to go to a place where you reflect on the realities of life and experience even the sadness of death and grief than to go to some great party. You learn more at the seat of mourning, at the seat of sadness.

And then he says why. He says the very same thing Stephen Covey says: because you start to think, and you work with the end in mind. You understand where you're heading. He says it this way: "Death is the destiny of us all, and the living should take this to heart."

Now, two things. I don't want to be morbid talking about death, but death is coming for all of us. It is 100% guaranteed—until the return of Christ—that every human being is going to encounter death. There's a time to be born and a time to die. We talked about it last week. Death is coming our way. Hebrews 9:27 says, "It is appointed unto each one of us once to die."

Now, that shouldn't cause you and I to be afraid. That's just a reality that's coming. The Lord wants us to be free from fear. As a matter of fact, the Bible talks about the evil one, the deceptive one, holding many people captive through fear of death. But God sent His Son into the world to set us free from the curse of sin and the curse of death, so that death has been defeated. When Jesus hung on a cross, He Himself died in our place and then was resurrected. So those that believe in Him, though they die, yet shall they live.

It's just a doorway into eternal life, and we know it. So, though death is coming and could make us nervous, and we don't like to talk about it, God says, "Embrace it. Think about it. Know it's coming."

Begin with the end in mind." Moses prayed about it: "Lord, teach us to number our days so that we may live them with a heart of wisdom."

We have a finite amount of time here. We know that death is coming, but we want to let the Spirit of God help us work through our fears, our concerns, and our worries about that day and set us free from fear about eternity. That eternity is coming—embrace it with some anticipation, some excitement of what lies ahead.

In doing this, in understanding what the Bible has said to us about this and our future, we can capture our lives more fully right now. We can have good perspective on them. We talked last week about the perspective of the temporary nature of this life and holding loosely to the things that are so fleeting and so heavenly. Solomon said that they're like smoke that's here and then dissipating, so we can focus on the things that are eternal.

Now, our bodies are not eternal. The first time I saw a dead human being, it was my grandfather. I went to his funeral, and I saw him there in the casket. It was a shaking time for me. It disturbed me to see a dead human body there. I was so thankful when the minister at the graveside put his hand on the casket of my grandfather and said to those of us who were standing around: "I just want you all to know, it's very clear—his name was Freddie—Freddie is not here. He's gone. He's left his body. His spirit and his soul have stepped out of this earth suit that God gave him. And now his spirit and soul are free."

For the believer in Christ, the minister went on to say: "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. The soul and the spirit doesn't actually die. It just steps out and goes into the presence of God. And that is something to look forward to. For God is the giver of life, the source of life, the fountain of living waters."

And so, death is then not to be feared. Perhaps, as Billy Graham said, "It's not death that I fear, but it's the process of getting there that concerns me." That might be a truth, but that final stage of stepping out of our bodies means that you and I, through the scriptures—for every believer in Jesus—they go into the presence of God and stand with the giver of life forever.

There is some great revelation about what lies ahead, so great that God can't reveal it all to us. He says in His word: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind can actually conceive what He has prepared for those of us who love Him." Perspective on eternity with Christ—allowing you and I to be in the presence of God—can help us endure faithfully what we endure in this broken world, the pains and sufferings of it. For the Scripture tells us that these are light and momentary struggles compared to the surpassing greatness that will be made known to us in the days ahead.

What I want to share with you, friends, about this is just so crucial. Once you have the issue of eternity solved, you can spend time in this life then saying: "God, what do I need to do to prepare? What is important in this life as I go through it and prepare for what lies ahead?" So, we pass through the doorway of death. And then what?

Hebrews 9:27 says: "In the future, it is appointed unto each person once to die, and then to face the judgment." You and I have an appointment with a judge in the future. This is another reality no one likes to talk about. No one is very excited about being in a courtroom and standing before a judge. I remember the first time I got put on a jury. We entered the courtroom, and there was a man on trial for drunk driving. We started going through the evidence about all that had been done.

There's just something eerie about standing in front of a judge and evaluating the truth of what's true and what isn't with another person. When we think about it, at the end of our days, all of our life being exposed before God—that's an uncomfortable feeling. But this is what the Bible says: God Himself will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it's good or evil.

King Solomon made this clear. The writer of Hebrews makes it clear. We die, and then we face the judgment. Those of us that know Christ face the judgment, and those of us that don't know Christ face a judgment before God. The idea of being afraid of that is something that should actually get us to contemplate and think about: What are our lives like? How are we living them?

The emphasis on a judgment for every person is very clear in the Scriptures. We see in the book of Acts: it says God will judge everyone. He will judge fairly. Specifically, He will judge us according to our deeds. The Bible says over and over again: "I, the Lord, search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."

Now, I think the Scripture divides judgment into two categories. There's the category of the judgment of a person who is forgiven and cleansed in Jesus, and then there's the category of the judgment of a different person who hasn't been forgiven by Jesus and stands before God, still guilty of all of their sins. Those two kinds of judgments are emphasized very clearly in the Scriptures.

God knows the motives of all man's hearts, and He judges us in that light. We're all sinners. The wages of sin is death, and all of us deserve to be judged for our sin, to pay the penalty for our sin. But God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son into the world to pay that penalty for you and I, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish—be cast away from the life of God, the giver of life. They should not perish, but they should have everlasting life.

And so, the person that comes to believe on Jesus for who He is, as the Son of God, sent to pay the penalty for human sin, that person then receives the forgiveness available from God through Christ. As his sin's penalty is already paid, he stands there fully cleansed. He is judged in light of what he accomplished in the work of Christ, in the power of Christ, while here on the earth. But there is no condemnation for that person. They are invited into the presence of Almighty God—pure, forgiven, righteous, and holy. They can stand confident before the throne of God, and they will be rewarded according to what they accomplished under the power and the work of the Spirit of God this side of heaven.

And then, we ought to pay attention to how we are living and working in the Spirit. Now, the second kind of judgment is the judgment of a person who rejects the gift of Jesus. It is hard to deny that the Bible makes it clear that hell is a real place. It's a real place designed for punishment—punishment for Satan and the fallen angels, those that have rebelled against God in the unseen realm (Matthew 25:41-46; Revelation 20:10).

It's also a place that will be inhabited by those who do not accept God's gift of redemption and forgiveness through Jesus Christ (Revelation 20:12-15). Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life—whose book of life is that? That is Jesus' Book of Life. Only those whose names are written in His book will be allowed to enter the New Jerusalem and the new heaven (Revelation 21:27).

And so, friends, I just wanted to emphasize one more time during this week, before we leave the wisdom book of Solomon written in Ecclesiastes about eternity and the temporary nature of this life, and move

on from here. I wanted to emphasize one more time how the wisest man who ever lived talked about being ready for the end—having our lives be stewarded in such a way that we're living with the end in mind.

This is why he said the summation of all things is that it is good for human beings to fear God and keep His commandments because of what lies ahead. Because we're created by Him and we're created for Him, we will stand before Him after we pass through the doorway of death and will give an account for our lives. To be ready for that day, there are a couple of things the Bible just continually emphasizes about our life here right now.

Certainly, that day is coming. For those that know Jesus, we will be clothed with a new body—a new resurrected body. We will have unending pleasure and joy. The foretastes of this life—the joys we experience even with good food and the beauty of this life—will be so surpassed in the next life that we can hardly comprehend it. But God has given us imagery in His Scripture and imagery in what we taste now to be ready for that.

The emphasis in the Bible is how we steward our lives here. We can look forward with great anticipation if, number one, we listen for God's voice in the world, hear His message—the good news of the message of Jesus—and open up our hearts to the gift of Jesus. Why God chose to do it through Jesus, I don't know.

But for God so loved the world, He sent His one and only Son, and it's in Him we live and move and have our being. When we come into Christ, there is no condemnation for us. Then the Spirit of God resides in us, and we start to ask Him: "Lord, the temporary things of this life are fading away. How should I now live? What should I give my time and energy to? How should I invest my life, my resources, my gifts, my talents? How should I invest the time You've put here for me to use for Your kingdom?"

As one great missionary said: "It's only one life; 'twill soon be past. It's only what's done for Jesus Christ that will last."

Friends, make sure you know Jesus and that your sins are completely forgiven, so when you stand before the judgment seat of Christ, you have no worries. Then, as best as you can, seek Him with your whole heart. Ask Him to empower you to use your gifts and your talents to advance His eternal kingdom here on the earth, so you can be more greatly rewarded in eternity under the power of His Spirit.

Father, help us with these things. Help us discern what's true about them. Teach us Your ways. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.