

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# LIVING FOR THAT FINAL DAY

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When was the last time you heard a sermon about hell? Heaven is a much more popular subject, but even that is often ignored these days. The trend in contemporary preaching is to focus not on our eternal future, but on our current “felt needs.” And while such messages may succeed at drawing crowds, they fail to develop maturity and build the Church. Listen to this excellent observation by Darius Salter from his book *What Really Matters in Ministry*:

Lack of rootage in the eternal may be the greatest shortcoming in the evangelical preaching that

“ A startling thing has happened among Western Christians. Many of us habitually think and act as if there is no eternity—or as if what we do in this present life has no bearing on eternity...Being oblivious to eternity leaves us experts in the trivial, and novices in the significant. We can name that tune, name that starting line-up, name that actor’s movie debut, name that country’s leading export, and detail the differences between computer models or types of four-wheel drives. None of this is wrong, of course, but it is certainly revealing when we consider that most Christians, let alone the general public, do not even have an accurate picture of what the Bible says will happen to us after we die. We major in the momentary and minor in the momentous.<sup>2</sup>

”  
— Randy Alcorn

attracts large numbers of people...The ultimate aim of preaching should not be accruing benefits in this life for parishioners but preparing individuals to stand in the presence of Christ. There is no greater goal or motivation than the knowledge that all of us are headed for eternity, and that shortly.<sup>1</sup>

If anyone was rooted in and motivated by the eternal, it was Paul. Without disregarding the practical needs of those he served, he constantly drew their attention to the life that was to come. And he tells us why in his second letter to the

From *How Can I Change?*, part of the Pursuit of Godliness series from Sovereign Grace Ministries, 7505 Muncaster Mill Road, Gaithersburg, MD 20877. [www.sovereigngraceministries.org](http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org)

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Corinthians: “For 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” (2Co 5:10).

This verse reveals one of Scripture’s most compelling—and most frequently overlooked—incentives for sanctification. It speaks of a day when we will be judged for the way we have lived in response to God’s grace. On the basis of that assessment, Christ will give each believer “what is due him.” One need not meditate for long on the implications of that verse to develop an appetite for godly living. We have one short life in which to determine our eternal rewards...or eternal loss. It’s this urgency Paul sought to impart to the churches he served.

### **Living by a Two-Day Calendar**

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. (Eph 4:1)

Every genuine Christian has received a calling from God. This call was conceived in eternity past. Before creating the world, God had already chosen us for himself (Eph 1:4). At the moment of our regeneration we experience the effect of that choice. This isn’t a result of human effort, nor is it a reward for good works—it is entirely a work of grace. And yet in response to God’s call we are responsible to live a certain way.

This is an often misunderstood point, so please follow carefully: We never were and never will be worthy of this call. Paul is not exhorting us somehow to qualify for our calling. That would be impossible and a denial of grace. He describes it to the Ephesians as a calling “you have *received*”—not something they had *achieved*. The “riches of God’s grace that he lavished upon us” (Eph 1:7-8) by way of election, adoption, redemption, and regeneration are unconditionally and freely given.

Every Christian needs to cultivate an assurance of and security in this calling. Yet it’s our privilege and responsibility to build on that foundation through the process of sanctification. As Paul said of himself, “By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect” (1Co 15:10). Having received a calling of which we were not worthy, we are now responsible to live worthy of that calling.

Paul lived with an intense awareness that each of us will one day stand before Christ to account for the way we

#### **For Further Study:**

Read Ephesians 2:6-7. What does Paul say is the purpose of God’s call on our lives?

#### **Meditate on 2 Thessalonians 1:11.**

It brings great assurance to know that God’s expectations of a worthy life are met because he empowers us to live up to that call.

**1** Read the second half of the verse mentioned above (1 Corinthians 15:10). How does Paul describe the effect grace had on him?

- Made him feel better about himself
- Helped him relax rather than feel pressured
- Assured him of God's acceptance
- Kept him from striving
- Motivated him to work hard for the kingdom

**Meditate on Job**

**34:11-12.** How do rewards—both good and bad—reveal the justice of God?

**For Further Study:**

What compelling motivation did Moses and Jesus have in common? (See Hebrews 11:26, 12:2)

have responded to his call. But to some this may seem like a contradiction. If Christ has forgiven us and accepts us, what's this about judgment?

As Christians, we will not be judged for our sins on the day of judgment. Jesus Christ has already been judged in our place. Because of his substitutionary sacrifice on our behalf we have been saved from the wrath of God. "Since we have now been justified by [Christ's] blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through

him!" (Ro 5:9; see also Ro 8:1).

But will we be judged for the works we have done—or left undone—since conversion? Definitely. Every one of us will give an account to God and have our lives evaluated. Paul presents this in vivid terms:

If any man builds on this foundation [Jesus Christ] using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work...If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. (1Co 3:12-13,15)

It's critical that we grasp this distinction. Though our *reconciliation* to God has been secured, our *rewards* (or loss thereof) will be determined by the extent to which we've pursued godliness in response to his call. Not that God is obligated to reward us—this, too, is an act of sheer grace, as Jerry Bridges describes so well:

This is the amazing story of God's grace. God saves us by his grace and transforms us more and more into the likeness of his Son by his grace. In all our trials and afflictions, he sustains and strengthens us by his grace. He calls us by grace to perform our own unique function within the Body of Christ. Then, again by grace, he gives to each of us the spiritual gifts necessary to fulfill our calling. As we serve him, he makes that service acceptable to himself by grace, and then rewards us a hundredfold by grace.<sup>3</sup>

But I think it's safe to say that most Christians have the attitude, *If I can just get past the box office I'll be set for*

*eternity*. They assume everybody will wind up in “General Seating.” But that’s just not biblical. Scripture clearly teaches that rewards will vary. To overlook this truth is to neglect one of the main incentives for sanctification.

Martin Luther said there were only two days on his calendar: “today” and “*that* Day.”<sup>4</sup> Each day brings us closer to *that* Day. It will be a day of unparalleled rejoicing

as we see our Lord face to face. But it will also be a day of intense scrutiny and examination. And as Randy Alcorn explains, “It is we, by virtue of our hourly and daily choices, who will determine what transpires on that day.”<sup>5</sup>

God will ask, “In light of the call you received, in

light of the grace I extended despite your unworthiness, where did you invest your life? What were your priorities and values? Did you serve me or use me? Did you live a life worthy of your calling?” Again, our answers to those questions won’t determine our reconciliation to God, but they will have everything to do with whether or not we receive the rewards God so eagerly desires to give us.

Randy Alcorn writes about this rarely considered subject in his excellent book *Money, Possessions and Eternity*. I find his perspective extremely helpful and motivating:

Heaven will be a wonderful place. But what we seldom consider is that at the entry point to heaven Scripture plainly tells us there is a judgment of believers that will determine for all eternity our place or status in heaven...Scripture simply does not teach what most of us seem to assume—that heaven will transform each of us into equal beings with equal possessions and equal responsibilities and equal capacities. It does not say our previous lives will be of no eternal significance. It says exactly the opposite...

We have been given fair warning that there lies ahead for each of us, at the end of the term, a final examination. It will be administered by the fairest yet strictest Headmaster in the universe. How seriously we take this clear teaching of Scripture is demonstrated by how seriously we are preparing for that day.

“ There will be great rewards, lesser rewards, and—for some—no reward. Hence there will be much diversity, even though all will share in the blessedness of the world to come. Such is the grace and justice of the good Lord.<sup>6</sup>

— J. Rodman Williams

**Meditate on Ephesians 5:16.** What critical “study habit” does this verse encourage?

When we took courses in college we asked ourselves and others about the teacher: “What are his tests like? Does he take attendance? Is he a hard grader? What does he expect in your papers?” If I’m to do well in the course, I must know what the instructor expects of me. We must study the course syllabus, God’s Word, to find out the answers to these questions. And when we find out, we should be careful to plot our lives accordingly—in light of the long tomorrow.<sup>7</sup>

Our Lord’s return was a day Paul eagerly anticipated. So should we. Secure in the fact that we stand justified in

**2** How might God’s final exam differ from the testing procedures common at universities today?

- We won’t be graded on a curve
- We won’t be able to cheat
- We won’t be able to appeal our grade
- We won’t be able to cram
- All of the above

his sight, we should devote ourselves to the good works he has prepared beforehand, fulfilling his eternal purpose in the context of the local church. Then we’ll be able to share Paul’s confidence that “there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day” (2Ti 4:8).

But crowns come at a cost. Paul had lived worthy of his calling. Let’s now look at someone who did not.

## The Wisest Fool

It can be quite sobering to examine the private lives of prominent figures. After studying one hundred of the most well-known leaders in Scripture, author Robert Clinton found that fewer than 25% of them finished life’s course with their reputation and leadership intact. Perhaps the most tragic of those failures was Solomon.

Solomon started off with such potential and promise. Soon after his birth, the prophet Nathan announced that God had a specific and special name for him: Jedidiah, meaning “loved by God” (2Sa 12:25). Every time someone used his special nickname it was a fresh reminder of God’s affection. (You can guess that Solomon’s brothers and sisters at times found it difficult growing up with him.)

As David’s successor, Solomon inherited the throne of a thriving kingdom. Initially he displayed genuine humility. One night after he sacrificed a thousand burnt offerings, God appeared to him in a dream and said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” Solomon, aware of his limitations as well as his responsibilities, responded, “I am

“ Resolved, never to do anything which I would be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life.<sup>8</sup>

— Jonathan Edwards ”

only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties...So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to

govern this great people of yours?” (1Ki 3:7-9). God was so pleased with the request that he promised to make Solomon the wisest man (other than Jesus) in history *and* to prosper and honor him above all other kings. With God’s anointing, Solomon was able to lead Israel into unprecedented and unparalleled prosperity.

But in the final analysis, Solomon squandered his call. How unprepared we are for Scripture’s final assessment of his life:

**For Further Study:**

Read Hebrews 6:7-8. What will become of the person who soaks up God’s grace without bearing fruit?

The Lord became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord...So the Lord said to Solomon, “Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates.” (1Ki 11:9,11)

What happened? How could a man with Solomon’s unique calling bring upon himself such strong discipline? The Bible doesn’t leave us speculating: “His heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been” (1Ki 11:4). Though loved, called, and uniquely gifted by God, Solomon developed a pattern of disobedience that led to his gradual, spiritual deterioration. He failed to heed his own wise counsel: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Pr 4:23).

In the mercy of God, Solomon repented before he died.

But God’s forgiveness couldn’t relieve the agony of regret as he pondered what his life could and should have been.

His reflections are recorded in the Book of Ecclesiastes, the painful memoirs of an old man who realized much of his life had been spent in vain. Rather than live worthy of his calling, Solomon pursued every form of personal pleasure (Ecc 2:10) and found it failed to deliver as advertised. There is much we can learn from his final words:

**3** Solomon let his many wives lead his heart astray (1Kings 11:3). Is there anything preventing your heart from being fully devoted to the Lord your God?

**Meditate on Hebrews 6:11-12.** An early lead in the race of faith is no guarantee of success; it's how you finish that counts.

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (Ecc 12:13-14)

As Solomon prepared to die, I believe he was painfully aware he would not hear the words, "Well done." Only those who have done well will. But his life has been preserved as a warning so that we might avoid a similar experience. There is no reason for us to end our lives with regret. By committing our lives to the process of sanctification, we can prove to be wiser than Solomon.

### How to Ask the Right Questions

One day we will stand before God—not as a group, but alone. He will then evaluate all that's transpired in our lives since conversion. Scripture gives us a preview of that moment: "He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God" (1Co 4:5).

God is eager to present eternal rewards to each of us. To make this possible, he has called us and regenerated

us, prepared good works for us to walk in, and placed us in the local church where we can apply and obey biblical teaching. However, we must be aware that he is a just God...and an objective grader. When that day comes,

“ In most graphic terms, on the day of judgment God will ask, 'What did you do?' He will not ask, 'What happened to you?' ”

— David Powlison

there will be no second opportunity.

History tells us of an individual who *did* receive a second chance. Randy Alcorn relates the story:

Alfred Nobel was a Swedish chemist who made his fortune by inventing dynamite and other powerful explosives, which were bought by governments to produce weapons. When Nobel's brother died, one newspaper accidentally printed Alfred's obituary instead. He was described as a man who became rich from enabling people to kill each other in unprecedented quantities. Shaken from this assessment, Nobel resolved to use his fortune to reward accomplishments that benefited humanity, including what we now know as the Nobel Peace Prize.

**Meditate on 1 Corinthians 3:8.** Can you find the phrase in this verse which indicates how we will be rewarded?

**4** What are three qualities or accomplishments you would like to be highlighted in your own obituary?

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Nobel had a rare opportunity—to look at the assessment of his life at its end, but to still be alive and have opportunity to change that assessment.

Let us put ourselves in Nobel's place. Let us read our own obituary, not as written by uninformed or biased men, but as an onlooking angel might write it from heaven's point of view. Look at it carefully. Then

let us use the rest of our lives to edit that obituary into what we really want it to be.<sup>10</sup>

Editing our obituaries begins with the willingness to ask some penetrating questions. In fact, every day of our lives should be marked by probing biblical assessment:

“Is my knowledge of and passion for God growing?”

“Am I regularly practicing the spiritual disciplines?”

“Can others confirm that I'm growing in character?”

“Am I committed and serving in the local church?”

“Is this activity worthy of the call I have received?”

“What am I doing that's making an eternal difference?”

No decision or activity should be exempt from this kind of questioning. “The reality of our eternal future should dominate and determine the character of our present life, right down to the words we speak and the actions we

take,” writes Alcorn.<sup>11</sup> If God is going to evaluate every aspect of our lives, so should we. This will transform the way we view work, leisure, church involvements, and relationships. And it will

“It ought to be the business of every day to prepare for our last day.”<sup>12</sup>

insure that a lot less goes up in flames on that final day.

The writer of Hebrews exhorts us to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:24-25). I trust this chapter has enabled you to see the Day that is inevitably approaching. And we pray this book has encouraged and provoked you in the process of sanctification.



**Meditate on  
Revelation 22:12,14.**  
Like Martin Luther, let's  
make this the most  
important day on our  
calendar...and start to  
live accordingly.

It's not an easy way you have chosen. Sanctification will be difficult, challenging, and painful—though nothing like the pain of God's disapproval. But when the Day comes and you hear God say, "Well done," all sacrifice will pale in light of your eternal reward. Compared to that, nothing else really matters.

Nothing. ■

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Darius Salter writes, "The preacher who best equips his hearers to cope with the pressures of American society may not be the preacher who best prepares his people for heaven."<sup>13</sup> Divide the group into two parts: the "Earthly Minded" and the "Heavenly Minded." Let each group come up with three relevant sermon titles which reflect its perspective, and then compare notes.
2. How can we show God we are worthy of his calling? (Warning: This is a trick question.)
3. Should we be afraid to appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ?
4. Before reading this chapter, did you think everybody in heaven would wind up in "General Seating"? Explain.
5. What's the difference between pursuing rewards and trying to earn our salvation?
6. Is it sub-spiritual to be motivated by rewards?
7. What were the highlights of your obituary? (Page 90)
8. How are you going to respond to this chapter?

**RECOMMENDED  
READING** *Money, Possessions and Eternity* by Randy Alcorn  
(Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1989)

## NOTES

1. Darius Salter, *What Really Matters in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), pp. 123, 124.
2. Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1989), pp. 138, 139.
3. Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), pp. 169-170.
4. Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, p. 151.
5. Ibid.
6. J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology, Volume 3: The Church, the Kingdom, and Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), p. 457.
7. Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, pp. 144, 149, 150-51.
8. *Jonathan Edwards—Representative Selections, with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes*, Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, ed. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, revised edition, 1962), p. 38.
9. David Powlison, "Crucial Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling" in *Journal of Pastoral Practice*, Vol. IX, No. 3, 1988, p. 61.
10. Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, p. 151.
11. Ibid., p. 139.
12. Ibid., p. 137.
13. Darius Salter, *What Really Matters in Ministry*, p. 121.