

2. Preparing for Eternity

Insights into Eternity

Preparing for Death

In our last study, we looked at what a person experiences at death. It is a subject that most people try to avoid. J. Kirby Anderson got it right when he said, “Death is the most universal and most democratic of all human functions. It strikes people at any time with little respect for age, class, creed, or color.”¹ Death has a 100% success rate, and yet the majority of people still refuse to discuss or think about the topic. Woody Allen’s often-quoted remark is, “I’m not afraid of death. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

As much as we try to avoid it, death does not go away. All of us must face it without exception. It does not matter how much money you have, or what kind of insurance you carry. It is merely a matter of time. None of us knows how much time is ahead for us. The remarkable thing about it is that, even though we know we cannot escape it, many of us will do anything to avoid thinking about it, and many people will do little to prepare for it. An article in the *Boston Globe* some while ago listed the well-known people that had died in that particular year, saying that they had gone to join “the great majority.” Death, we might say, is a great certainty, and those who have died are the great majority.

An epitaph on a tombstone reads, “Stop, as you pass by, as you are now so once was I, as I am now, you will surely be, so prepare yourself to follow me!” One person scrawled underneath, “To follow you, I’m not content until I know the way you went!” The passerby was right. It’s important to know where one is going when we die, but when we are pointed in the right direction, we should prepare ourselves for what lies beyond.

My wife, Sandy, and I took her parents to Scotland on vacation while we were living in England. When it started to get dark one evening, we had to look for a hotel along the road. We passed some black-painted wrought iron gate with a sign over it saying, *Black Barony Hotel*. We couldn’t see the buildings from the entrance, so we decided to check it out. Because of the time of day, and the wrought iron gates, we started to joke among the four of us, saying that we were going to the tower of terror and that it would probably be a haunted castle. The road kept winding around through trees, giving us more time to imagine what this place was going to be like! We wondered if they might have a butler who looked like “Igor” from the movie *Young Frankenstein*. I pictured Marty Feldman’s face greeting us at the door.

As we came through the trees, sure enough, it was a castle— an enormous castle without a single car in the parking lot! As we got out of the vehicle, a man with a severe hunchback approached us from the door. He did have one wandering eye as well, though he looked nothing like Marty Feldman. To cap it off, over the door were these words in large letters; ***Prepare to Meet Your God, Amos 4:12***, words found in Scripture. It got better! The man who met us at the door told us that we were the only people that were staying in the hotel that night; 75 other rooms were empty. They had a tour party that had canceled at the last minute! Sandy and I slept that night in

¹ J. Kirby Anderson, *Life, Death and Beyond* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), p.9.

a four-poster bed in which King James had once slept. (Yes, *THAT* King James, as in the King James Bible.) This bed was a claim to fame for the hotel. It was a terrible bed, by the way, with a significant dip in the middle. I am sure it could not have been the same mattress, but it felt like it could have been around since the 1600s! We found out later that the Bible verse above the door was for soldiers that had used the hotel to stay in while they were training for war to prepare them to face eternity if they died in battle.

It is a good thing to prepare now to meet your God on that day. That sign stuck in my mind: “Prepare to Meet Thy God.” In this study, we will look at preparing for death and judgment and how it will affect each one of us. We may not want to think of that time, but Scripture tells us that we will all need to give an account at the end of our lives when God determines that our time has come.

**Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (Hebrews 9:27).
So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God (Romans 14:12).**

In my thirty-eight years of studying the Bible in-depth, I have concluded that there are three judgments cited in the Word of God. The first one mentioned in the passage above happens at the point of departure from the world. This judgment concerns what a person has done with the free offer of a pardon as to his or her sin. The believer in Christ will not be judged according to his sins. He is quite secure in what Jesus has done for him at the cross. At death, those who have placed their trust in the Savior's finished work on the cross will go to be with the Lord. They will return with Jesus at the Second Coming of Christ: “**For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him**” (1 Thessalonians 4:14). When they believed and trusted Christ, something happened deep within their soul—they passed from a state of death and slavery to Satan to having eternal life imparted to them:

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24 Emphasis mine).

As we said last week, when a believer dies, he or she is separated from their fleshly body but is very much alive and with Christ. When Jesus comes, and the Rapture and resurrection take place, the believer is given a new body, a glorified body no longer dominated by the sin nature inherited from Adam. We will look at the topic of the Resurrection Body, i.e., what it is like, in a later study.

The second judgment happens at the return of Christ and is a judgment as to rewards given to the believer. This appearance before God is called the Bema Seat Judgment. The third judgment concerns those who have rejected God's offer of a free pardon. This judgment is called the Great White Throne judgment when all those who have served self and Satan are consigned to the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:13-15). We will focus much of our study today on preparing ourselves as Christians for the judgment seat of Christ.

The Bema Seat Judgment of Christ

At the Second Coming of Christ, after putting down all rebellion upon Earth, Jesus will then take His seat at the place of the Bema Seat Judgment, where the Lord Himself will sit and judge.

Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son (John 5:22).

For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done (Matthew 16:27).

⁹So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰For 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 (2 Corinthians 5:9-10).

1) About what will this Bema Seat judgment of believers be? What do you think?

This judgment concerns the believer's rewards for how he or she has invested their time, energy, gifts, talents, and money. The Greek word, *bēmatos*, is translated into English with the words, "judgment seat." The judgment seat was a place in the common Greek language of the New Testament for a rewards platform in sporting contests. In secular legal context, the word *bēma*, literally means, "to set (his foot) on." It denotes a raised place or platform, where was the location of the assembly. This platform will be the place where we Christians will be judged, I believe, as to two different things. 1) How much of the fruit of the Spirit is in our lives, i.e., our Christ-likeness or character. 2) How we have used our resources, such as our time, energy, skills and money.

The author and conference speaker, John Bevere, in his book *Driven by Eternity*, writes:

Any finite number divided by, or compared to, infinity is zero. It doesn't matter how long you live on earth. Even if you were to make it 150 years before dying; our life on earth is zero compared to eternity. That means, that as believers in Christ, everything we do here in this zero window of time will determine how we spend eternity. Remember, *where* we spend eternity is determined by what we do with the cross of Jesus and His saving grace, but *how* we will live for eternity in His kingdom is determined by the way we lived here as believers.²

A little later in our study, we will focus more on the reward of Christ-like character. For now, let's focus on what we are building with our lives, i.e., how we are using our time, energy, gifts, talents and money.

Our Investment in God's Kingdom

² John Bevere, *Driven by Eternity*, Warner Faith Publishers, Page 187.

¹⁰By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But **each one** should build with care. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³their 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 person's work. ¹⁴If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

In verse 10, Paul says that each one of us is building something with our lives. He reminds each of us to build with care. All labor in the Kingdom of God is built on the foundation of an intimate relationship with Christ. All other good works are just wood, hay, and stubble. The quality of the building materials depends on the motives of the deeds done. Some things are significant about it, the first being that before Christ, every motive and every act will be brought out into the open:

For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open (Luke 8:17).

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 (Hebrews 4:13).

Again, John Bevere writes:

Many have the erroneous idea that their salvation eradicates all future judgment. Indeed, Jesus' blood cleanses us from the sins that would have kept us from the kingdom; however, it does not exempt us from the judgment of how we conducted ourselves as believers, whether good or bad.³

At last, all will be made known. All things will be uncovered. We will find out the great mysteries of this life. Nothing will be hidden. We shouldn't take this just in the negative, for there are acts of kindness that many of us have done in secret before men, but God has seen the desire and motive of our hearts and will reward us openly. There will be others who have had no notoriety, but who have been laboring quietly in the backwaters of some jungle someplace where their labor has been sweet to our God. Some of you have given generously and sacrificially to care for the poor and have done it to God alone in that you have kept it a secret from men.

“...your Father, who sees what is done in **secret**, will reward you” (Matthew 6:18).

And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward (Matthew 10:42).

The Lord sees everything we have ever done for Him, and nothing escapes His attention. The day will come when we will gain our inheritance given to us in Christ before time began.

³ John Bevere, *Driven by Eternity*, Warner Faith Publishers, Page 186.

³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” ⁴⁰The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:34-40).

2) What do you think Jesus means when He says “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me?” Who would be the least? (v. 40).

I find it interesting that the believers had forgotten the acts of kindness that they had done, but God hadn't. He recorded every act of kindness, and He will reward us openly at the Judgment Seat of Christ. To whom was He referring to in calling some the least of His brothers? I think it would be those around us who are little noticed. Perhaps, they are those who cannot help themselves, those sick, or in prison. He is ever close to those who are poor in things of this world, those that are strangers to us, those who are in bondage to a religion of works. He wants to use each of us to set them free, to visit them, to feed them—not only bread and water but also to give them the Bread of Life, too (John 6:35).

The Reward of Christlikeness

Preparation for eternity can only take place while we are here on Earth because we graduate to eternity with the character that we have at death. I believe that our “position” or “rank” in heaven depends on how much of the servant nature of Christ we have demonstrated while on Earth. To whatever degree the character of Christ has been imprinted on your life while on Earth, that will be your degree of reward in eternity. The word *character* was first used to describe the imprint on paper of the letters of a printing press. God has sought to divinely imprint the nature and the character of Christ deep into your soul for others to read.

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being **transformed into his image** with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).

When we come to Christ, our spirit is renewed or made alive from its dead state of being apart from God (Ephesians 2:1, 5), but there is still work that needs to take place on our soul—our mind, will, conscience and emotions. God wants to renew and transform that inner part of us as we meditate on His Word and are obedient to His Spirit. King David said it well in the Shepherd's Psalm: “He restores my soul” (Psalm 23:3). Peter, in his first letter, wrote: “For you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:9). Our mind, will, and emotions are to be brought under the domination and leadership of the Spirit of God. Godly character is the goal of our faith. We will be rewarded by how much of the nature of Christ is in us.

Dictionary.com defines the word *character* as: “the aggregate of features and traits that form the individual nature of some person or thing.” We are being transformed day by day in the area of our souls and spirit through every event that we experience. Everything in life is a test of our character, and his reactions to life's inequities accurately measure a man's character. Reputation is not a godly character. Reputation is what men think you are; character is what God knows you are. If we respond in obedience to the Spirit of Christ in each situation we encounter, we are made more and more into the image or likeness of Christ. If you are a Christian, you are predestined by God to be changed into the representation of Jesus Christ.

²⁸And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (Romans 8:28-29, Emphasis mine).

3) What situations has God worked for good in your life to mold and shape your character in preparing you for eternity?

God foreknew you and predestined you to be made in the image of His Son. We can quickly go by this passage without thinking through the implications of what the Spirit wants to teach us. We cannot blame God for the bad things that have happened in the course of our lives. Sometimes, these things have happened because of our own choices. What God says is that He will use each situation to work good into our lives if we will be open to His teaching and leading us by His Spirit. The beautiful thing is that God has seen the end from the beginning. He had each of us on His heart before the world was made. He foreknew you and predestined you to be shaped and molded into a person like His Son. “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:16). The Message Bible translates that verse in this way, “Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth; all the stages of my life were spread out before you, The days of my life all prepared before I'd even lived one day.” The work of God in the world is to prepare you for eternity.

"Character on earth will prove an everlasting possession in the world to come" (J.C. Ryle). If you want to be great in the sight of God, how are you responding to the difficult circumstances that have come your way? Are you ready and prepared to meet your God? How much of His character will you reflect on that day?

A top-rated book a few years ago that I read was Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. One of the most important habits of productive people is, to **Begin With the End in View**. What do you want the outcome of your life to be? What do you want for Jesus to say when you stand before Him on that day? He will speak to many, "Well done, my good and faithful servant," but for what do you want Him to say that? If you want to be effective with your life and leave the world a bit better by being here, then it is wise to stop and ask yourself what kind of a difference are you making with your life? Is it a difference that only lasts for this life, or is it something that is eternal? Do you labor for temporary rewards for your skills, time, energy, and money that you spend, or for eternal rewards? ¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰“But store

up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal” (Matthew 6:19-20).

4) What do you think are things that you can store up and take with you to heaven?

I am sure this is not a comprehensive list, but three things come to mind.

- 1) Other people, as in the lives that we have helped along the way.
- 2) The things we have learned, e.g., the Word of God imprinted in our hearts.
- 3) The character of Christ that’s been molded by the Holy Spirit into your inner being.

Spiritual Investment

Now, back to thinking through what we are building with our time, energy, talents, and money. There is an interesting parable that Jesus teaches in Luke 19:11-27. It's a story about a nobleman who goes on a far journey to receive for himself a kingdom. Before he goes, knowing that it will be sometime before he gets back, he gives his ten servants an amount of money each, a mina, which equaled about three months' wages for a laborer. He tells them to each engage in business, to put the money to work, until the nobleman returns. The Greek word that is translated by the phrase "put this money to work" (NIV) or "occupy" (KJV) is *pragmateuomai*. It means to do business, to invest, or to trade intending to bringing a return on the investment. It is interesting that we get the word *pragmatic* from this Greek word. Being pragmatic means to deal sensibly and realistically with something. We are to sit down and think through ways that we can pragmatically invest our resources in such a way as to get a maximum return for the kingdom of God.

Knowing the character of our Nobleman, King Jesus, we should labor and invest in the things that He has on His heart. The thing He cares most about is people—we must have the heart for people if we are to build with gold, silver or precious stones. In the parable, the first steward invested the master's money and used it to bring him a return of ten minas for his one mina. The response from the Nobleman was for the steward to not only keep the ten minas but also the reward was ten cities. There was a vast difference between that which was invested and the compensation he was given for his excellent stewardship.

I think the cities are metaphorical language to help us understand that for what we do for Christ in this sinful world, i.e., how we care for the people for whom He cares, there will be a vast difference between what we invest and the excellent reward that He will give in that Day. I don't know what the award will be, but I can wait to find out. Your duty and mine for our Noble Master are to put our character, our time, energy, and resources into His Kingdom. As Christians, we are strangers and pilgrims in this world.

Again, if you have indeed believed and placed your trust in Christ, you will enter the eternal kingdom. Your entrance into the Kingdom of God does not depend on your works, but by receiving the gift of God—eternal life in Christ, but those who genuinely believe should invest their resources into people, while we still have time to invest.

Prayer: Father, cause us to be aware that every day is a preparation for eternity. Help us to be open to the ways that You want to teach us and prepare us for that day. Thank You for watching over us until that day comes. Amen.

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