

Don't Waste Your Life

Do you know, at some point in your life, you will reach a kind of December 31", not of the year, but of your life? It will be the last day of your earthly life, and it will be the doorway into an eternal life. And just as today is a day of evaluation, so that last day of your life will become a day of evaluating, judging, what did your life amount to? What did you do with your time, not just the last year, but an entire lifespan? Was it a life worth living? Or was it like the aged man, who resisted the call to salvation again and again, until finally, one day, he gave in and gave his life to Christ. But when the evangelist asked him why he was still sobbing, with his head still in his hands, he said, "Wasted! Wasted! My whole life lived for self, and only now at the twilight of my life am I saved! A wasted life!"

It's nothing short of tragic to see how most people waste their lives. Magnificent abilities, unrepeatable uniqueness, that could be used for God's glory, but it instead simply dissipated, leaked away into a life of trivial amusements, slouching its way to eternal destruction. Imagine: a creature capable of making glorious music, of painting masterpieces, of working out the maths to put objects in space, of splitting the atom, turning these abilities into nothing more than eating, sleeping, and being dozily amused, until it ages and dies. The waste alone is worth the wrath of God. Satan's tactic is to make great and public sinners out of only a few of the human race. The rest he would prefer live comfortable, narrow, petty lives, with no ambition outside of pleasing self.

Now you would think that when someone becomes a Christian, he renounces living a petty, narrow, selfish life, with low horizons and short-sighted goals. You would think that now life takes on an enormously widened scope, suddenly he sees life is about God, about God's glory, about a cosmic battle between good and evil, about souls being won for Christ, or lost to Hell and destruction. You would think the Christian sees his life now as a mission.

But sadly, you don't find that often. Instead, you find the average Christian envies the life of his and wants pretty much the same thing. He wants the nice house, the nice car, the pretty family, the healthy body and beautiful looks, the fun hobbies and the memorable holidays. And none of those things in themselves is sinister. The sinister thing is that that is *all* he wants. His vision of the good life, the life well-lived is hardly distinguishable from the unbeliever. His entertainments might be more morally upright, but there are plenty of unbelievers who share a desire for more wholesome entertainment -- nothing uniquely Christian about that.

In fact, there are two words for someone who cares only about the things that an unbeliever cares about. One is *carnal*, which means fleshly. The interest is entirely temporal, sensual, bodily, interested in what will not outlast you. The other word is worldly. Worldliness ignores God's claims about eternity and Heaven and the forever state of life, and attempts to make a Heaven out of this passing, mortal, fading world. A worldling, a worldly person buys into that value system, the one sold in the movies, the ads, the web.

The tragedy of the carnal Christian, of the worldly Christian is that he seeks to save his life, but really loses life. She tries to get what the world has, but can neither enjoy it, nor keep it, and finds she has then wasted irretrievable years of her life that could have been used to serve God.

The truly regenerate Christian, when spiritually healthy, cannot be concerned only with temporal matters. If you are a believer, then the Holy Spirit within you will be convicting you and urging you to live for what is permanent, to make full proof of your ministry, to run well. He will be prompting you to not be the steward who buried his talent and returned it to the Master with no increase. He will be urging you to grow God's investment in you, to seek treasure in heaven that is never stolen, and never loses value.

One of Jonathan Edwards' resolutions was this, "Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as I possibly can, with all the power; might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of."

One of the ways the Bible teaches us to live for eternity, to make our lives count, is by speaking of rewards in the forms of crowns. The Bible describes five crowns that can be gained by Christians. By speaking of these eternal rewards, the Bible is telling us that we cannot take things with us, but we can send some things on ahead of us. We cannot keep alive that which God means to fade and die, but we can live for what will outlast our funeral, outlive even the fading memories of us that our descendants will have. We can choose to live now for what will last forever.

Now just a word about crowns and rewards. When we speak about rewards, usually some Christian is going to raise the objection that going after rewards seems rather selfish, rather like mercenaries, who do not fight out of patriotism or honour, but merely for money. If we go after rewards, aren't we loving personal gain more than God?

The answer is, yes, only if you misunderstood the rewards to be separate from God Himself. But in he crowns is so linked to knowing and loving God, that the reward is not isolated from loving Christ. The Bible often offers incentives, such as joy, pleasure, eternal riches, eternal honour, eternal life, and it does not blush to do so. But it also tells us not to seek God as a means to an end. So the conclusion has to be that every reward and incentive the Bible gives us is so tied up with God Himself that to seek Him is to seek the crown, and to seek the crown is to seek Him. Now let me describe the image of crown that the Bible has in mind here. When we hear the word crown, we think of a kingly crown, a jewel-encrusted, glittering royal crown such as worn by monarchs at royal ceremonies. That idea does come up in the New Testament, but only in the book of Revelation, where the Greek word *diadeimata* is used, from which we get the English diadem. But when the Bible speaks of the crowns that will be given to believers, it is not the royal diadem. Instead, it is the Greek word *stephanos*, from where we get the names Stephen. This was not a jewel-encrusted ornament, but a wreath, usually made of bay laurel, or an evergreen. It was what crowned the victor at the Olympic Games or the Isthmian Games. Roman generals returning from a conquest were given parades of honour, where they wore a *stephanos*. It represented victory, success, overcoming, defeating your foes or competitors.

But in contrast to the laurel wreaths of the Graeco-Roman world, which dried up and perished in a short space of time, believers are offered crowns that will not fade, what 1 Corinthians calls the imperishable. Revelation describes people in Heaven having these wreaths of gold. Obviously the point is not that one day we will have laurel wreaths of gold, as if the greatest reward Heaven can offer is some kind of head jewellery. No, the point is what these represent. For those Christians who are disciplined, who endure, who do God's work, who finish, there is going to be eternal and unending and unfading forms of honour and victory. It will be the ultimate vindication of the life you lived, the ultimate success: a life lived for ultimate and permanent things, with ultimate and permanent benefits and joys.

And the Bible does describe Christians who will not be rewarded.

: 11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, Wood, hay, straw, 13 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. 14 If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Cor. 3:11-15)

|The thought of suffering loss and going into eternity stripped of reward is truly one of the great fears of my life. So much so that years ago, I came across a poem with that thought, which so gripped me that without trying to, I memorised it:

When I stand at the judgment seat of Christ
And He shows me His plan for me;
The plan of my life as it might have been
Had He had His way, and I see

How I blocked Him here and I checked Him there
And I would not yield my will,
Shall I see grief in my Savior's eyes;
Grief though He loves me still?

He would have me rich, and I stand there poor,
Stripped of all but His grace,
While my memory runs like a hunted thing
Down the paths I can't retrace.

Then my desolate heart will well-nigh break
With tears that I cannot shed.
I'll cover my face with my empty hands
And bow my uncrowned head.

Lord of the years that are left to me
I yield them to Thy hand.
Take me, make me, mold me, break me
To the pattern Thou hast planned.

There is no need for any one of us to waste our lives, to find that our lives were made up of combustible, temporal things, if we choose to go after the five permanent crowns.

I. Making Disciples of Christ Will Count Forever

19 For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? 20 For you are our glory and joy. (1 Thess. 2:19-20)

Philippians 4:1 Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved. (Phil. 4:1)

What is Paul's crown here? It is the crown of rejoicing, and it consists in souls who have been won to Christ, and are now growing in Him. Paul describes what he did to make disciples in Thessalonica in verses 7-12.

But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. & So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. ° For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; 11 as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, 12 that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. -- (1 Thess. 2:7-12)

What is more permanent and of greater value than seeing other people believe on Christ, and

become faithful disciples of His? There is no greater joy than to have spiritual children, who walk in truth. You cannot take your money with you. You cannot even take your achievements with you. You cannot even take your family with you. But you can take souls with you whom you will see over there. When you are in the work of evangelising and discipling, you are doing the most permanent and valuable work of all. The reward will be the presence of believers with you in eternity, whom you either evangelised, or helped to live the Christian life.

Now sometimes that work is the direct work of teaching another person. But sometimes it can be encouraging, visiting, listening, giving, assisting. Jesus said that Heaven notices when you give a cup of cold water to a disciple. But in some way, you should be part of the work of making disciples.

If you are a parent, God has entrusted you with someone of whom to make a disciple. The same is true if you are a grandparent, an uncle or aunt. If you are in this local church, God has surrounded you with people you can actively minister to to make them more like Christ.

D.L Moody once noticed one of his Sunday school teachers not in her class. So he asked her where her class was. She responded, "Oh, I went to the class and found only one little boy, so I came away." Moody replied, "Only a little boy! Think of the value of one such soul! The fires of a reformation may be slumbering in that [untidy]-headed boy; there may be a young Knox, or a Wesley, or a Whitefield in your class!?"

Every Christian should have a heart for the lost, and a ministry to the saints. This is a life worth living.

II. Suffering Like Christ Will Count Forever

12 Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (Jas. 1:12)

Here is some enormous comfort. A lot of our lives are not going to be glorious moments on the mission field, or teaching stadiums full of people. Most of our lives are going to be solving small and big problems at home, at work, or at church. Most of life is going to involve some kind of suffering: marital strife, the pains and trials of your job, deep financial struggle, a health trial. Some of you have experienced violence or loss from crime, some of you have experienced the loss of a you have watched children turn to the world, some of you have felt your body giving in to weakness and pain. Some of you have wrestled loneliness, singleness, childlessness, joblessness, or some other lack.

Here is the comfort. God promises that when we respond to trials with godly endurance, that turns into a reward. The crown of life. Increased, deepened, matured life, tenderised and seasoned through obedient suffering. This was our Lord's path: *8 though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which he suffered. (Heb. 5:8)*

What does it look like? *2 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (Jas. 1:2-4)*

If you turn to murmuring, you have not gone through the trial like Christ, and you have lost the permanent value of the trial. If you turn to complaining, you have not gone through the trial like Christ, and it will not turn into an eternal reward. If you turn to any work of the flesh: outbursts of anger, envy, malice, covetousness, discontent, unthankfulness, you are wasting your pain. Going through a trial like an unbeliever is a double punishment: one, you go through it without gratitude,

hope, and joy, which are pleasant emotions, and experience instead anguish, anger, depression, frustration. Second, when it is over, there is no compensation to look forward to in eternity. The pain has brought no gain.

But for the believer, every tear will be rewarded, every pain recompensed, when it is endured obediently. You can turn the trial of your job, your health, your children, your marriage, your relationships into eternal reward by viewing it through eternal lenses. That's the real meaning of Romans 8:28: *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Rom. 8:28)*

It doesn't mean all things become pleasant and nice for those who love God. Just seven verses later, we are promised plenty of suffering and trial. Romans 8:28 means, all things, all sufferings, when consecrated to God, when endured in Him, and through Him, and to Him, become of permanent gain to us.

III. Disciplining Yourself Spiritually Will Count Forever

24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. 25 And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. 26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. 27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (1 Cor. 9:24-27)

Here Paul is speaking of spiritual discipline. He compares discipline in spiritual matters to an athlete. An athlete has a goal, and to reach his goal, he controls himself in eating, sleeping, exercising. The athlete gets nothing more than a perishable crown. But for the spiritually disciplined Christian, there is the promise of the imperishable crown. Every act of spiritual discipline done for the sake of growth in Christ, for the sake of increased usefulness, for the sake of being a more Christlike husband, wife, father, mother, son, daughter, worker, manager is noted by God.

There are many spiritual disciplines, but most of us know the main ones: One, reading the Bible, and meditating on it. Two, praying regularly in private. Three, memorising Scripture. Four, worshipping regularly with the local church. Five, serving other believers in the local church. Six, giving to the Lord. Seven, studying the Bible and reading Christian books. Eight, evangelism and making disciples.

To do any of those, you have to apportion your time, get up at a certain time, go to bed at a certain time, give up certain easier or lazier activities, embrace some inconvenience, some difficulty, some risk. You have to lose in some other areas if you want to gain in the area of spiritual discipline. Sometimes, you may wonder if it is worth it all to keep these disciplines. It can feel like training for a sport, but the competition doesn't arrive. But God promises that spiritual discipline once gained in this life, continues into the next

If you want a wasted life, live a life controlled by your appetites. Always do what you feel like doing. Leave the worst things for last. Do the easiest thing first. Put off your spiritual disciplines till tomorrow.

IV. Faithfully Shepherding Others Will Count Forever

1 Peter 5:1 The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: 2 Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; 4 and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory

that does not fade away. (1 Pet. 5:1-4)

Here Peter addresses pastors, elders. He calls on them to shepherd God's church willingly, not for money, not using a tyrannical kind of leadership, but an exemplary kind. Peter tells those who are called to this office, and who perform it faithfully, there is a special reward, the crown of glory. Shepherding is not glorious work. Shepherds of sheep have never been high on the VIP lists. Shepherds of God's church, when the churches have been biblical, have also not been the among the mighty, noble, or wise of this world. But here God, in infinite grace, promises such men a special reward of glory, or honour in Heaven.

God may be calling some men here to the pastorate. Understand that if so, God is calling you to descend the social ladder, at least in the eyes of the world, not ascend it. You will be considered by many to be a man who couldn't get a 'real job' and can't make it in the 'real world', you will work longer hours than most for less pay than most. You will seek to shape an organisation the size of a medium company made up entirely of unpaid volunteers, but its lack of success will be laid at your feet. You will live in a fishbowl and your failures will be magnified. You will ride a rollercoaster of joy and heartbreak for the rest of your life.

But it is worth every moment for so great a Great Shepherd. And then this Great-Hearted Great Shepherd says to His under-shepherds: do the work faithfully. Get in there, and smell like sheep. Because one day, it will be known by all the citizens of Heaven who gave up earthly honour to care for Christ's Lambs.

Men, if you desire the office of a shepherd, you desire a good thing. Perform it well, and you will not waste your life.

V. Finishing Your Ministry Will Count Forever

5 But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. For am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Tim. 4:5-8)

Paul writes 2 Timothy to hand the baton to Timothy, to charge him to take up his ministry, since Paul is approaching his own death. But because Paul has not like Demas, forsaken Christ, having loved this present world, because Paul has fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith, there is a reward for finishers.

For those who keep their eyes on Christ's Return, or on seeing Christ in heaven, such people will endure to the end. They don't just finish their lives. They finish their ministries, they complete the work given to them. And there is a finisher's reward. For those who keep their eyes on Christ, they will run with endurance, and though a thousand voices call them to abandon the race, they strive to hold fast their confession of faith.

I remember many years ago at the 1992 Olympics, one of the 400 meter races became famous for an unusual reason. It wasn't a final, and no one set a record. During the race, British sprinter Derek Redmond's hamstring snapped before the halfway mark, and he pulled up sharply, unable to walk. The heat was already over, when Redmond got up and begun limping on one leg, with tears running down his face. His Olympic dream was over, but he was determined to finish. When his father, who was in the stands saw what he was doing, he muscled his way past the security, went to his son, and put his arm around him as they walked the last 100 metres to a standing ovation. When your hamstring is torn, finishing becomes an achievement. And when you are beset by sin,

and Satan, and the flesh, and error, and the world, then finishing while still owning Christ, is a grace-enabled achievement.

Some of you are retired from work, some of you are approaching it, some of you are far from it. Wherever you are with respect to your career, we never retire from serving Christ. He retires you by calling you home. That's when you break the tape, and receive the crown of righteousness. Each of these crowns is actually crowning you with more Christlikeness. Jesus made disciples, Jesus endured trials with godliness, Jesus was spiritually disciplined, Jesus shepherded others, Jesus finished His work. So just as rejoicing, life, incorruption, glory, and righteousness were His, so they will be yours as you become more like Him.

For this year, you don't have to sell everything and go on the mission field for your life to count. But you do have to reject the secular dream and think in terms of eternity. Am I part of making disciples? Am I consecrating my trials for Christ's sake? Am I being spiritually disciplined? If you're called to it, am I shepherding faithfully? Am I running the race, fulfilling my ministry with endurance. Souls for Christ. Suffering for Christ. Spiritual discipline for Christ. Shepherding for Christ. Steadfastness for Christ. That's a life that counts.