

# Living on the Edge of Eternity

Jon Redmond

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## **Introduction**

Eternity. What do you think of when you hear that word? More than likely, you think of something that lasts forever. After all, that's what eternity is. It is an unending amount of time. But eternity is more than endless time. Eternity is also a place. Eternity is a *place* where we will spend an unending amount of *time*.

When a person dies, you often hear a minister say, "He has stepped out into eternity." What does that mean? It simply means that the person who died has gone to live in a place where he will be forever.

We don't like to think about *death* and *eternity*. Those thoughts can be frightening to us. But we would be wise to contemplate the reality of both.

For most of us, when we do think about death and eternity, we think of them in the distant, the very distant, future. In our minds, death and eternity are decades away. There is no need to trouble ourselves with those thoughts now.

But we never really know how far away death and eternity are. We hear about sudden

and unexpected deaths all the time. Car accidents, heart attacks, and serious illnesses claim the lives of people every day. Somehow, though, we think those things only happen to other people. But in reality, those things can happen to any of us. And since death is never far away, neither is eternity. You and I, just like anyone else, could step out into eternity before this day ends. We are literally, at this very moment, living on the edge of eternity. With each passing day, we are getting closer and closer to the place where we will live forever. Eternal life is clearly taught in the Bible. God's Word explains that there is life beyond this life. There is life after death.

When God made you, He gave you a *physical body* and a *spiritual soul*. Your body is mortal. One day, it will die. Your soul is immortal. It will live forever. Your soul is the real you. It includes your mind, your will, and your emotions. Your soul is what makes you special and unique. It is that part of you that people think about when they think about you.

Your soul is also that part of you that can relate to God. It is the spiritual part of your life. It has often been said that when God made us, He made us with a vacuum, or a hole, in our hearts that only He can fill. The great Christian theologian, Augustine, once said this to God:

“You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.” Only God can satisfy the longings of our souls.

It is this part of you, your soul, that will live forever. Your body is simply the house for your soul. It’s like a shell. The Bible calls our physical body a “*tent*” (*II Corinthians 5:1*). That’s a great analogy. We all know what tents are. They are those things we live in when we go camping. Tents are fun for a night or two...maybe! But you wouldn’t want to live in a camping tent permanently. Tents are for temporary use. One or two nights in a tent gives me a new appreciation for my house! And that’s what our new body in heaven is called...“*a house*” (*II Corinthians 5:1*). So when a Christian dies, he moves out of his tent and into his house. He moves out of that which is temporary and into that which is eternal. What moves out of the tent and into the house is the eternal soul...because souls never die.

What I am saying is this: When your body dies, your soul won’t die. It is going somewhere. Or I should say, “*You* are going somewhere.” After all, you *are* your soul, and your soul *is* you. And when you get where you’re going, you will be there forever. That’s why the life after this life is called “eternal” or “everlasting” life...because it lasts forever.

That's what eternity is. It's something that lasts forever. It's difficult for us to comprehend anything that will last forever because nothing in this life does. Childhood doesn't last forever. Adolescence doesn't last forever (Praise the Lord!). Youth doesn't last forever. Money doesn't last forever. Jobs don't last forever. Careers don't last forever. Houses and cars don't last forever. And, as I have said, our bodies won't last forever. They age. Sometimes they get sick. Sometimes they are involved in an accident. Ultimately, they die. But when we talk about eternity, we are talking about something that lasts forever, something that never ends. It's hard for us to wrap our minds around that thought, but it is nonetheless true. Eternity never ends.

You may have never thought about it, but there is a sense in which "eternity" is already within you. The Bible says that God "*has put eternity*" in our hearts (*Ecclesiastes 3:11*). He has put something in you that will live forever. Again, that something is your soul. It is the real you. And it is eternal. *You* are eternal.

The reason I named this booklet, "*Living on the Edge of Eternity*" is because that's precisely what we're doing. Our eternal souls are only a heartbeat away from the place where we will live forever. An accident, an illness, a heart

attack, or an aneurysm is the only thing standing between us and eternity. No wonder the Bible says, “*For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away*” (James 4:14). We are here today and gone tomorrow. Eternity is only a heartbeat away. Literally.

The obvious question is this: If our eternal *souls* are going to an eternal *place*, where exactly is that place? That is an excellent question, because as I have already said, eternity is not just an unending amount of *time*; eternity is also a specific *place*.

In the positive sense, eternity refers to heaven. That’s where a Christian goes when he dies. Heaven is the true home for all of us who have received Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The Bible says that “*our citizenship is in heaven*” (Philippians 3:20). We belong there, and eventually that’s exactly where we’ll be. We already have “*everlasting life*” living within us (see John 5:24). And one day, we will be in heaven...the everlasting city.

In the negative sense, though, eternity refers to hell. Jesus said there is coming a day when all unsaved people will end up in “*the everlasting fire*” (Matthew 25:41). That’s a description of hell. It is a place of eternal

punishment for sins. Remember, Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins. So if a person has *received Jesus personally* as his Lord and Savior, he will never have to go to hell because his sins have already been paid for. But if a person has *rejected Jesus*, then his sins are unpaid for. That person is on his own. He must pay for his own sins. And that's what hell is. It is a place of punishment for sins...sins that were never forgiven by Jesus because the unsaved person never *requested* and *received* His forgiveness.

Heaven is the presence of everything that is good. It is a place of life, love, joy, peace, togetherness, excitement, brightness, and singing. Hell is the presence of everything that is bad. It is a place of darkness, loudness, weeping, pain, and regret. I personally cannot think of anything worse than hell. To think that a person could actually go there and live forever makes me want to be a more diligent soul-winner and a better preacher of the gospel.

The fact remains, though, that as I write these words and as you read them, we are living on the very edge of eternity. We are closer than we can imagine to our eternal home. Even though we don't like to think about it, our lives on earth could end at any moment. And when life ends, we step out into eternity.



Christians go immediately to heaven. Non-Christians go immediately to a place called “hades.” Hades is a place of torment (*see Luke 16:19-31*). Hades is, for all practical purposes, a “pre-hell.” Non-Christians will actually be sentenced to hell after the final judgment. Hell is the place referred to in the Bible as “*the lake of fire*” (*see Revelation 20:11-15*).

### **The Reason for This Booklet**

You might be wondering why I chose to write on this subject. After all, it is a rather heavy topic. Some people have probably already laid this booklet down. The thought of death and eternity was more than they could handle. They don’t want to think about the reality of heaven and hell. For them, life is all about the here and now, and they find any thought about eternity to be troubling. So they have already given up on this booklet and turned on a movie. But you are still reading, and you deserve an explanation as to why I am writing on this subject.

Let me say, first of all, that I don’t think I chose to write on this subject. I really don’t. I think God chose the topic for me. I feel compelled to write on this subject. I feel a certain urgency about it.

The idea for this booklet was born as a result of some health issues I have had in recent years. In a time span of two years and two weeks, I had to go to the emergency room five times. God used those experiences to change my life. He taught me, and He is *still teaching me*, to view life from an eternal perspective.

My first visit was the result of a reaction to some medicine I was taking. The medicine completely got my body out of sync. I was messed up to say the least. Sometimes a medicine can create more problems than it solves. Anyway, by getting off of that medicine and taking some other medication, I returned to normal fairly quickly. No harm done.

My second emergency room visit was the result of some vision issues I was having. I was unable to focus clearly, and things were visually bouncing around. It was a scary experience. I called my doctor, and he told me to go to the emergency room. It turned out to be an accommodative muscle spasm in my right eye that has long-since resolved. I will always be grateful for the medical care I received from Dr. Norman Berkman, Dr. Daniel Goldman, and Dr. Danny Mathew. And I will always be grateful for the healing touch of Jesus. Our eyesight is a tremendous blessing. We should thank God for it daily.

My third emergency room visit was the result of the fact that I was passing a kidney stone. I had often heard men say that passing a stone is more painful than having a baby. I never thought a man was in a position to make such a comparison. Now, I'm not sure! At the emergency room, they did a CT scan on me. The scan revealed that I was indeed passing a stone and that I had approximately twenty other kidney stones. The scan also revealed that I had a tumor on my left kidney. A subsequent CT scan revealed that the tumor was most likely renal cell carcinoma, a cancerous tumor. Thankfully, a gifted surgeon, Dr. Richard Link, was able to remove the tumor, and the cancerous cells were all contained. Thankfully, the cancer hadn't spread. It was indeed renal cell carcinoma, but I thank God that it was successfully removed. Three months after that surgery, I had another surgery to remove all the kidney stones. Thankfully, that surgery was successful, too. God saw me through that trial.

Let me say, parenthetically, that had it not been for the kidney stone, I never would have known that I had the tumor. And, as a result, I would have died. Sometimes, the most painful experiences in life are really blessings in disguise. Remember, *there's a purpose for every problem God allows us to face*. But that's another sermon for another day.

My fourth trip to the emergency room was between the two kidney surgeries. It was the result of a fairly high fever that I thought might prevent my second surgery due to the timing. I was dehydrated and just plain-old sick. Had it not been for the upcoming kidney stone surgery, I wouldn't have gone to the emergency room, but I'm glad I did. An IV bag perked me up and got me ready for the kidney stone surgery.

My fifth (and I pray my final) visit to the emergency room came on a Sunday after church. For several weeks leading up to that Sunday, I had been having some very unusual heart palpitations, and they seemed to be getting worse. On this particular Sunday, two days after Christmas, I was scheduled to preach both morning services at our church. Between the two services, I said to my dad: "After the next service, I need to go to the emergency room. Something's not right." He wanted to take me then, but I insisted on preaching the next service (not my wisest move) and then we went to the emergency room. While there, an EKG revealed that I was having PVCs. PVCs are *premature ventricular contractions* of the heart. At first, they thought I was in A-fib. Thankfully, I wasn't. But my heart was beating out of rhythm...probably from a medication I had been taking. The EKG showed that every

twenty beats or so my heart was having a PVC. As I was lying there on my hospital bed in the emergency room of St. Luke's Hospital in Houston, I thought to myself: "What is happening to me? What is wrong with my body?" I can still remember looking at one particular ceiling tile in that little room and thinking to myself: "On the other side of that tile stands Jesus. I already have Him living in my heart, but His physical presence is just beyond that ceiling tile. If I die from this, I'll be with Him." I had such peace.

Thankfully, the PVCs turned out to be less serious than I imagined. As I got off the medication and made some other lifestyle changes, they gradually went away within a few months. But the experience on that hospital bed looking up at that ceiling tile is still very much a part of me. It reminded me of the *brevity of life* and the *nearness of eternity*. In those moments, the presence of Jesus was very real to me. He just seemed so close by.

These are the personal experiences I've had that led me to write this booklet. They reminded me that life can change, or even end, very suddenly. Let's face it. You've had experiences in your life, too. Some of them are perhaps similar to mine. So you probably already know that you are closer to eternity

than you've ever been. Even if you've never been to an emergency room, you intrinsically know it. Again, the Bible says that God "*has put eternity*" in our hearts (*Ecclesiastes 3:11*).

My prayer is that this booklet will be God's wake-up call to you to help you more fully understand that eternity is closer than you have ever imagined. It's only a heartbeat away.

### **The Brevity of Life**

Life is brief to say the least. Most of us cannot believe that we are the age we now are. Not long ago my college roommate called me. As we were catching up with each other and telling some old college stories, it seemed hard for me to believe that it has been 28 years since we were freshmen together at Baylor. Where have those years gone? How could it possibly be that many years since I lived in Room 185 in Penland Hall? It just doesn't seem possible.

Life is like that. It goes by so quickly. And one day, it will end...just that quickly. And when it does, we will step out into eternity. And we will be amazed that our time on earth is over and that we are forever in our new home.

No wonder our physical bodies are described as tents. No wonder the apostle Peter, as he contemplated his own mortality, said, “*Shortly I must put off my tent*” (II Peter 1:14). One day, we will put off our tents, too.

As a general rule, we can count on about seventy years on this earth. If we’re really strong, we might live to be eighty. Some people, of course, live longer. But that is what the Bible says we should expect. Moses, who wrote the 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm, said it this way: “*The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years*” (Psalm 90:10).

We all know, though, that many people don’t live to be seventy. Recently I spoke at a funeral of a fifty-four year old man. On a Friday night, he went to watch his son play in a high school football game. On Saturday night, he had a heart attack and died. He had no idea when he was at that football game that he would be in eternity in less than twenty-four hours. Thankfully, he was a Christian. Thankfully, he was ready to die. Thankfully, he is in heaven now. But he never thought, nor did his family, that he would get there so soon.

And that is the reason for this booklet. To alert us to the fact that, regardless of our age,

we are living on the very edge of eternity. Think of David's words in the Bible. He put it best when he said, "*There is but a step between me and death*" (1 Samuel 20:3).

In light of that truth, doesn't it make sense to live with eternity in mind? Doesn't it make sense to view life as what it really is...a passing, brief experience? Couldn't a proper perspective of life change how we live? That's why Moses, after thinking about the brevity of life, prayed this prayer: "*So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom*" (Psalm 90:12). He was asking God to make his life count. He was petitioning God to keep him from wasting his days.

Moses knew if we had the right perspective of life that we would live our lives better. He knew that if we lived with eternity in view that we would devote ourselves more fully to what really matters. He knew that if we kept the big picture in mind that we wouldn't trouble ourselves so much over things that don't really matter. And let's face it. Some things don't really matter.

A few days after going to the emergency room with those weird heart palpitations, I went to see a cardiologist in the Houston Medical Center. In fact, I went to see two. The



first one wanted to put me on a medication. Before I did that, though, I wanted a second opinion. So I got one at the DeBakey Heart Center. I had an appointment with Dr. William Zoghbi on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor of Smith Tower. As I sat in the waiting room wondering what he might say, I thought to myself: “Up here on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor at a cardiologist’s office, a lot of things don’t really matter. A lot of things that I would normally think about, worry about, or even get upset about don’t actually matter a bit.” After all, when your heart feels like a pinball machine, who really cares about politics, or the stock market, or an issue at work, or somebody who doesn’t like you, or something broken at the house. At a time like that, all a person wants is for his heart to get back in rhythm. Thankfully, with the medical help of Dr. Zoghbi and the divine intervention of God, mine did...and without any medication! But even as I write these words, I can still remember how I felt up on that 19<sup>th</sup> floor. My perspective of life was so clear.

If you think about it, compared to salvation and eternal life, even physical problems, no matter how troubling, don’t really matter. If you have ever had an operation, you know that as they are preparing you for surgery the only thing that really matters is your soul. The only thing that really matters is where you would go

if you died during the operation. The only thing that really matters is where you stand with Jesus. I've had four operations in my life, and on the way to the operating room each time I have said this to the Lord: "Jesus, I'm trusting You. When I wake up, I'm going to be with You. I'll either be with You in the recovery room, or I'll be with You in heaven. But either way, when I wake up, I'll be with You." In those moments, there was something more important to me than the outcome of the surgery. And that was my relationship with Jesus. My soul is more important than my body. My body is temporary. My soul is eternal. My body is mortal. My soul is immortal. My body will die (unless Jesus comes first). My soul will live forever. So will yours.

Think about what I've just said. On surgery day, compared to salvation and eternal life, our *health* doesn't even matter. Compared to salvation and eternal life, our *earthly lives* don't even matter. All that matters is the condition of our souls.

In the emergency room, only our relationship with Jesus matters. Going into the operating room, only our relationship with Jesus matters. On the 19<sup>th</sup> floor of Smith Tower, only our relationship with Jesus matters.

And if our relationship with Jesus is the only thing that matters in those moments, our relationship with Jesus is the only thing that really matters now.

When God allows us to have an experience where we discover how close to eternity we truly are, things have a way of becoming very clear to us. Our perspective changes. We discover what matters in life and what doesn't.

### **Some Things That Don't Really Matter**

After we take our first step into eternity, we will quickly discover that a lot of things we thought were so important in life didn't matter at all. It will be obvious that many of the things we devoted our lives to, worried about, pursued, and treasured were only earthly, temporary, and now, from the perspective of our new eternal home, of absolutely no significance. The moment we enter our eternal home, it will be abundantly clear that many of the things we considered to be important never were important at all. In eternity, we will be able to see things from God's perspective. And from His perspective, everything looks differently. The following list is not exhaustive, but think with me for a moment about some things in life that are not all that

important. They are certainly not important from the perspective of eternity.

**1. *How much money you have doesn't matter.***

Money plays too big of a role in some people's lives. It can play too big of a role in all of our lives if we're not careful. There is a sense in which money seems to define who we are. The more money we have, the bigger houses we can live in. The more money we have, the newer cars we can drive. The more money we have, the nicer clothes we can wear. The more money we have, the more extravagant vacations we can take. The more money we have, the cooler "toys" we can play with.

For some people, life revolves completely around money. They are obsessed with it. Money is the source of their security, identity, and purpose in life. For these people, life is all about making money, saving money, investing money, and using money to get what they want. Money, money, money. That's their life.

In eternity, though, in both heaven and hell, money is of no significance. Money is not allowed there. Sadly, untold numbers of people will end up in hell wondering for all eternity what good their money did them. In heaven,

people will wonder the same thing. People who were saved by the grace of God, but who placed entirely too much emphasis on money, will get to heaven and see that much of their lives on earth was a complete waste. They will be saved because they received Jesus, but their eternal rewards will be few because for them life was more about money than it was about God.

Jesus told a story about a man who had lots of money. In fact, he had so much money that he had to build bigger buildings to store his possessions. This man was so secure in his financial freedom that he even said these words to himself: *“Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 12:19)*. He found his peace and his security in his money. His focus, though, was wrong. And his peace was false. The Bible says, *“God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’” (Luke 12:20)*.

This man didn't understand that his soul would outlive his money. And he didn't understand that money was intended to provide for our needs, help others, and further the work of God on earth. He thought money was what life was all about. And God called him a fool.

In eternity, you will discover that the size of your bank account was completely irrelevant. Because in eternity, your money won't be there with you.

## 2. *Your status in life doesn't matter.*

We put a lot of emphasis on someone's job, position, title, and level of achievement. We stand up for the President. We admire the celebrity. We respect the doctor. We are impressed with the successful athlete. And while none of these things is wrong (the Bible tells us to honor those in authority, *see Romans 13:1-7*), it is dangerous to think that our worth as humans comes from positions like that.

When I was a teenager, my father told me a story that greatly impacted me. He had recently had a conversation with another pastor who said to him: "Charles, by the time I am forty years old, I want to either be the pastor of one of the largest churches in the nation, or I want to be the president of one of the most prestigious universities in the world, or I want to be the president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Those are my goals." The man who said that *was* and *is* a godly man. And yet, even as a teenager, it didn't seem to me that a minister should look at his work like that. I don't judge that man. For all I know, God had

placed those dreams in his heart. But even if that is the case, there is a danger in thinking that our significance in life comes from a title or a position. I'm not saying he did that. But I am saying that any of us could.

I once heard Rick Warren say, "The spotlight is blinding." He is so right. The spotlight is blinding literally and figuratively. If we think that climbing the ladder of what the world calls "success" is what life is all about, then we will end up greatly disappointed because being at the top of the ladder doesn't satisfy us. Being in a right relationship with God does.

If God chooses to put you in a position of power and influence, so be it. But don't pursue that position. Let it come to you. Spend your time pursuing God. Seek Him. Love Him. Live for His approval. Let Him place you where He pleases. The Bible says, "*For exaltation comes neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. But God is the Judge: He puts down one, and exalts another*" (Psalm 75:6-7). If promotion doesn't come from the east, the west, or the south, then it must come from the north. And that's where God lives...in the north. God is our promoter. We don't have to promote ourselves. So trust Him to place you where you need to be. But

remember this: Wherever He places you is not the most important thing anyway. The most important thing is your relationship with Him. In eternity, whatever your earthly status was won't matter. It was Jesus who said that "*the last will be first, and the first last*" (Matthew 20:16). Your significance doesn't come from your position in life. Your significance comes from your relationship with Jesus. The Bible says that "*you are complete in Him*" (Colossians 2:10). Find your significance in that relationship, not in your earthly status, job, or position.

### **3. *What other people think about you doesn't matter.***

It is easy to become obsessed with what other people think about us. After all, we don't want others to think negatively of us. We want people to think highly of us, to respect us, to hold us in high esteem. There is a sense in which that is just normal and natural.

But trying to gain the approval of others can actually become a real problem for us. First of all, at the end of the day, we simply cannot control what others think of us. We cannot control what others say about us. We cannot make somebody like us. Those things are out of our control.



There have been times in my life when I have wondered what certain people have thought about me. I have been in situations where I have thought to myself: “I don’t think she likes me,” *or* “I don’t think he approves of me,” *or* “I feel judged by them,” *or* “He thinks he’s better than I am.” Those are not good feelings, but we’ve all had them.

The typical way of dealing with those feelings is to try to make people like us. We tend to go out of our way to be extra kind to a critic. Or maybe we write them an encouraging letter. Or maybe we call them on the phone. I have done all of those things. As Christians, we don’t ever want there to be tension and friction between us and anyone else. We want the air to be clear. We want there to be love on all sides. We want there to be peace. And while it is admirable, and even biblical (*see Romans 12:18*), to pursue peace with people, there comes a time when we have to accept the fact that some people just don’t like us and that apart from a radical change of heart, they never will.

There have been times in my life, not many but a few, when I would have had to be disobedient to God in order to please another person. I would have had to go against God’s calling on my own life to appease a critic.

That's a tough spot to be in, especially if you want to please God *and* be considerate of others.

But I've learned this: If we are ever forced to choose between pleasing God and pleasing another person, it is always best to try to please God and let the consequences of that decision be what they are. Adrian Rogers, a godly pastor who is now in heaven, once said, "If we please Jesus, it doesn't matter who we displease. But if we displease Jesus, it doesn't matter who we please." What great wisdom!

When we step out into eternity, we will immediately discover that other people's opinions didn't matter at all. The only thing that ever mattered was what God thought. I fear that many people will end up in hell because they are afraid of what others would think if they were to become Christians. I also fear that many Christians will miss out on some of their heavenly rewards because their desire to please others is stronger than their desire to please God.

Once we get out into eternity, we will see that God's opinion was the only one that ever really mattered. If that will be true one day, then it's true now. I encourage you to love people, be kind to people, encourage people,

help people, and respect people. But don't spend your life trying to please people. Spend your life trying to please God. In eternity, you'll be glad you did. Because in eternity, His opinion is the only one that will count.

#### **4. Sports for the sake of sports doesn't matter.**

You might think it somewhat odd that I would put sports on the list of things that don't really matter. It's difficult for me to even say that because I am such a huge sports fan. I played football in high school, and I would have played collegiately and even professionally if I had only been bigger, stronger, faster, and better. Those were the only things holding me back! Were it not for those minor limitations, I would have made it to the *Hall of Fame* by now!

I mention sports because it plays such a major role in our culture. Sports is a multi-billion dollar industry. And many of us spend WAY too much time following it. I'm trying to cut back.

The problem with sports is that if we're not careful, we can spend more time thinking about it than we do about God. We can spend time watching sports when we should be spending

time at home with our families, at church, at work, or having our quiet times.

And it's not just college or professional sports that I'm talking about. It's all these sports leagues for teenagers and children that seem out of control to me. Don't get me wrong. There are certainly important lessons we can learn from sports that serve us well throughout our lives. Hard work, discipline, teamwork, and how to get up when we've been knocked down are just some of the things we can learn through competitive sports. But when we convince ourselves that these lessons are more important than our commitment to God and to His church, we are badly mistaken. Besides, these lessons are actually taught in the Bible and can be experienced at home, church, and school, so you don't have to play sports in order to learn them.

When I was young, there were no sports leagues, practices, or games on Sundays or Wednesdays. Those were church days. That's no longer true. Sunday is just another day now. For some people, sports participation has trumped church participation. This must certainly be an issue with God. I don't want to be a legalist, and hopefully I'm not, but the culture seems upside-down to me. Our priorities seem misplaced.

Not that I have “arrived” on this or any other issue (I’m still a work in progress), but my attitude towards sports has changed over the years. I still keep up with it. But if my team loses, I don’t really care. It doesn’t ruin my day or week like it used to when I was younger. After all, it’s just a game.

I now view sports as a nice diversion. It helps me relax to watch a game on TV every now and then. But I’ve noticed something. If we’re not careful, *diversions can become distractions*. Things that should relax our minds and give us a break from the routine can in fact distract us from God and from His church. Once that happens, *a distraction can lead to our destruction*. Something that should have been a temporary escape from reality becomes its own reality. And, if not dealt with, it can destroy our spiritual development and our Christian influence. This is true not just of sports, but of any hobby. Let your hobbies be hobbies. But don’t let them become a way of life. Let them be diversions, not distractions that could lead to your spiritual destruction.

I can’t tell you exactly how to deal with the sports issues that now confront you and your family. It wouldn’t be right for me to do that. I can only give you the principle of Scripture that says God must be first in our lives. That

principle is clear and unchanging. Ask God how that principle is to be lived out in your life. My advice is simply this: Don't let anything usurp the role of God in your life. It's just not worth it. Don't let sports, any sports, play too big of a role in your life. I can assure you that heaven is not the least bit interested in who won the Super Bowl, the World Series, or the NBA Finals. It's not an issue up there! And it shouldn't be too much of an issue with us either.

5. **Problems at work, irritations from others, and the imperfections of life don't matter.**

That's a pretty big category. And once we get out into eternity we will be able to say, "None of those things mattered."

How much of our time is spent being frustrated over work-related issues, aggravated by difficult people, or uptight because every little thing in our world isn't just right? I think it's safe to say we spend a lot of time frustrated, stressed out, and uptight over these things. But in reality, they don't matter. They don't matter from the perspective of eternity.

When I was in the emergency room at St. Luke's Hospital looking up at that ceiling tile thinking about stepping out into eternity and

seeing Jesus, those things didn't matter to me. My mind was a thousand miles from work-related issues, people who tend to get on my nerves, and the imperfections of life. I wasn't thinking about the fact that long meetings exhaust me, or that the brakes on my SUV were squeaking, or that my shoulder hurts sometimes. I was thinking about one thing: Eternity!

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that we shouldn't fix squeaky brakes. I later fixed mine. I'm not saying that frustrations at work aren't real. I'm not saying that people don't sometimes step over the line and hurt our feelings. I'm not saying that an injured shoulder doesn't hurt. I'm just saying that in the grand scheme of things, from the perspective of eternity, those things don't deserve all the mental energy we devote to them.

When my grandfather used to get upset about something, he would say, "In a hundred years, it won't matter." That's not a bad motto to have when facing frustrating situations. And actually, the time period he gave was very generous. For me to say that would literally mean that when I get to be 147 years of age, problems won't matter. Friend, the odds are that I won't be celebrating that birthday...at

least not on earth. What my grandfather was really saying was this: “When I get to heaven, this problem I am now facing won’t matter.”

Now use your brain for a moment. Think this through. If something won’t matter in a hundred years, or fifty years, or thirty years, or ten years, can it be all that important now? I don’t think it can be. And I certainly don’t think it should dominate our thinking.

God would have us to view our problems and frustrations as *opportunities* to grow closer to Him. He doesn’t want us to complain about them or to get all uptight and stressed out over them. Instead, God wants us to take our struggles to Him and ask Him to use these issues to develop our faith, our patience, and our character. After all, if He’s in control of things (and we know that He is), *there’s a purpose behind every problem He allows into our lives.*

The Bible says it this way: “*For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal*” (II Corinthians 4:17-18).



Isn't that liberating? Isn't it wonderful to know that the things that tend to *oppress us* were actually intended to *bless us*? Every problem, every frustration, every imperfection, every issue we face has been sovereignly allowed into our lives to make us more like Jesus. That's why I'm saying that the problems themselves don't really matter. What matters is how we *respond* to them. And if we respond to temporary problems with an eternal perspective in mind then we will grow, mature, and become the people God created us to be.

#### **6. *A religion without Christ doesn't matter.***

We actually live in a very religious world. Millions and millions of people are dedicated and devoted to their religions. Religious activity is expressed through the praying of prayers, lighting of candles, giving of money, acts of charity, and missionary endeavors.

While it is always good to help others, doing good deeds is *not* the way to heaven. Many people are confused on this point. I recently heard a well-known politician say in an interview that he had done so many good things for people that he would one day stroll right into heaven. While it is true that this man has done many good things to help countless numbers of people, it is *not* true that doing

those good deeds will get him into heaven. We only enter heaven through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said, “*I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved*” (John 10:9).

It breaks my heart to think that many well-intentioned and compassionate people will miss heaven because they are confused on how to get there. They think heaven is a *reward* to be *earned* instead of a *gift* to be *received*. They do a lot of good things and even help a lot of people, but since they don’t know Christ, their religion has no lasting value.

In eternity, it will be very clear that no one was ever good enough to get to heaven on his own merits. Heaven is simply a gift given to those who place their faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. Christians in heaven will forever appreciate this gift. Non-Christians in hell will forever wish they had received it.

Our prayers, acts of devotion, expressions of compassion, ministry efforts, and service to others should flow out of our relationship with Jesus Christ. We don’t do these things *in order* to be saved. We do them because we *have been* saved. The Bible says it this way: “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and*

*that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10). Notice that we are saved by God’s grace. But we are saved for the purpose of doing good works. Good works are the result of salvation, not the basis of salvation.*

A religion without Christ is empty, dry, and meaningless. It doesn’t satisfy the human soul in this life, and it won’t lead to heaven in the next life. Only Jesus can satisfy us now, and only Jesus can take us to heaven when we die. I can’t say it any more plainly than this: From the perspective of eternity, a religion without Christ has no lasting value.

There are many other categories I could have included in this section. There are many other things in life that don’t really matter. But I think you get my point. I think I have said enough in this section to help you see that when we get out into eternity we will discover that a lot of things we thought were so important didn’t matter at all.

## **Some Things That Do Matter**

You might be wondering, “If none of those things matter...if my money, my status in life, the opinions of others, sports, the problems I encounter, a Christ-less religion, and a host of other things don’t ultimately matter...is there anything in life that does matter?” And the answer to that question is a resounding YES! There are a lot of things in life that matter. Let me mention a few of them here.

### **1. *Your relationship with God matters.***

The most important thing in your life is your relationship with God. That’s actually what life is all about. God made you so that you could be in a relationship with Him. You were created to know God and to walk daily with Him. Developing a personal relationship with God is the greatest thing you could ever do.

If you fail to establish a personal relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ, your life will never really be “right.” Something will always be missing. You will try to fill that void with countless things, people, and activities. But it will never be filled. Only Jesus can give our lives true meaning.

Whatever else you do or don't do in your life, I encourage you to make your relationship with God your top priority. Let everything else flow out of that. Let everything else be subservient to that.

In eternity, how much money you had won't matter. Neither will your status while you were on earth nor other people's opinions of you. In eternity, the main thing that will matter is where you stand with Jesus Christ.

## **2. *How you treat other people matters.***

You cannot control how other people treat you, but you can control how you treat them. You cannot control how other people feel about you, but you can control how you feel about them. Be clear on this point: God cares how you treat others.

Jesus said that one day we will be judged in part based on our treatment of others (*see Matthew 25:31-46*). One of the characteristics of Christian people is that we want to help people. We try to be kind to people. We try to do what we can for others. No, we are not perfect. Many times we fail. But the desire of our hearts is to help and encourage other people. And that desire finds many practical ways to express itself.

Now would be a good time to ponder these questions: Do I truly care about others? Do I do what I can to help people? Do I express the love, compassion, and grace of God to those in need and to those who are hurting?

### 3. *Your words matter.*

How we treat other people is very important to God, but so is how we speak *to* others and *about* others. We've all heard the saying: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Whoever said that didn't know what he was talking about. Whoever said that had never had any unkind words spoken *to* or *about* him.

Our words have great power. We can either build people up, or we can tear people down. We can either speak highly of another individual, or we can set out to destroy his or her reputation. We can either maximize or minimize the sins and imperfections in others.

God is not just looking for genuine, saving faith in our hearts. Neither is He only concerned with our acts of benevolence and kindness. God is listening to our words. And one day, He will judge us for them. Jesus said it this way: "*But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of*

*it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37).*

Someone has said that we should make our words sweet because one day we might have to eat them! That’s good advice. Be careful with your words. Be kind. And speak well of others...even of those who don’t speak well of you. Some helpful questions to ask yourself before talking about another person are these:

1. Is what I am about to say true?
2. If I say what I want to say, will it make another person look good or bad?
3. Is there anything constructive that would happen if I said what I want to say?
4. Is my primary reason for saying this to try to make me look good by making someone else look bad?
5. Would I say this if Jesus were in the room?

Our words matter to God. The Bible says, *“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless”*

(James 1:26). That's pretty strong language if you ask me.

When we get out into eternity, we will discover the importance of the words we spoke while on earth. Who won the big ballgame won't matter, but what we said while we watched it will. Use your words to build others up, not to tear them down.

#### 4. Your obedience matters.

In eternity, it won't matter how rich and famous you were on earth, but it will matter whether or not you obeyed God. Every Christian in the world hopes to hear Jesus say to him or her one day: "*Well done, good and faithful servant*" (Matthew 25:21).

But those words are reserved for those who actually *do well*. Those words are reserved for those who *obey God*. Perfection is not a requirement for hearing those words. If perfection were required, none of us would ever hear them. God isn't looking for perfection. God is looking for a desire and a commitment on our part to do what He has called us to do with all of our strength until our time on earth is over. God is looking for a person who is obedient to Him even when being obedient isn't easy.



Some people think that being obedient to God would result in bondage. Just the opposite is true. Obedience leads to freedom and blessings. God said, *“Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go” (Joshua 1:7).*

When we look back on our lives from the perspective of eternity, we won't be reflecting on our reputation or our status while we were on the earth. But we will be thankful for every time we obeyed God.

I encourage you as I encourage my own self: Obey God. Wherever He leads, let's go. In eternity, on Judgement Day, we'll be glad we did.

### **5. Your motives matter.**

God isn't just interested in *what* we do. He is interested in *why* we do it. The Bible says, *“For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:14).* One day God is going to bring every secret thing out into the open. And our motives fall under the category of “secret things.”

As a minister, this convicts me. Much of my life is spent doing “spiritual” things. The nature of my calling and job provides me with almost endless opportunities to study the Bible, preach, witness, write, speak at weddings and funerals, dedicate babies, baptize new Christians, visit people in the hospital, and encourage people who are going through difficult times. By nature, a minister does a lot of “good” things. But the questions for us are these: Why do we do them? To be recognized? To be affirmed? To be known? To be popular? Because we’re supposed to? Or do we do these things because we love God and we love people and we want more than anything else to be faithful to our calling? It all comes down to our motives. And one day, God will reveal what our true motives really were.

Let’s ask God to help us to do the *right things* for the *right reasons*. Our sole desire should be to please God and to be recognized by Him alone. On Judgement Day, His opinion is the only one that will count. Our only motives for doing good things should be our love and gratitude to God for all He has done for us, and our love for others who were made in His image.

## **A Closing Thought**

Sometimes an illustration is just what it takes to make something clear. So let me end this booklet by trying to put into words an image I have in my mind.

Imagine a group of people walking along a path. At the end of the path, there is a steep cliff. As they are walking and talking, their minds are on everything except God and eternity. They are talking about sports, politics, money, and careers. They are so caught up in those things that they are unaware of the cliff, and, as a result, they plummet to their deaths.

That is a good picture of what a non-Christian's life looks like. Many non-Christians live wonderfully moral lives. They are benevolent, generous, and philanthropic. They are active in their communities, good to their families, and involved in noble causes. But they don't know Jesus. And, consequently, when they die they will fall off the cliff and drop into a place of eternal punishment. It is heartbreaking if you think about it.

Once they arrive in hades, and ultimately end up in hell, don't you think they will look back on their lives and see the futility of it all? They will think, "All the way to the end, all the

way to the cliff, I was convinced that meaning, and purpose, and happiness in life was found in money, status, my reputation, sports, pleasure, and even in a Christ-less religion. I was obsessed with those things until I fell off the cliff. Now my life on earth is over. And look where all those things got me.”

To me, one of the saddest things about stepping out into eternity without Jesus will be the regret people will have for all eternity. They will feel like they were deceived by the world and duped by earthly, temporary things. And actually, they will be right about that. Please don't let that happen to you.

If you have never received Jesus Christ, I encourage you to receive Him now. Just ask Him to forgive you and save you.

You might wonder, “How do I do that? What should I say?” Your exact words don't matter. But if you want to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, pray this prayer now:

*“Dear Jesus,*

*I am a sinner. I have done wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me. I believe You died on the cross to pay for my sins. I believe You rose from the grave thus defeating death forever.*

*I ask You now to come into my heart, forgive my sins, and make me a Christian. I ask You to save me, and I trust You to do it. Welcome to my heart, Lord. Thank You that You'll never leave me. Begin now to make me the person You want me to be.*

*In Your Name I Pray,  
Amen."*

Friend, if you just prayed that prayer, you are no longer headed for a cliff. You are headed for a launching pad. That's what you will experience when your body dies. Your soul will be "launched" into heaven to be with Christ forever.

Now that we're on the right path, let's make sure to make the most of our remaining time on earth. Let's appreciate the life that God has given us, and let's maximize the opportunities we have. Let's remember that we are living on the very edge of eternity and that we could be there at any moment.

Let's enjoy every minute of our lives. After all, life itself is a wonderful gift from God. But let's don't get too attached to this old world. Remember, it's only temporary. It's passing away. And we're just passing through. Eternity is only a heartbeat away.

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## *Jon Redmond*

Jon Redmond is the associate pastor of the First Baptist Church in Pasadena, Texas. He has served on the church staff at First Baptist since 1995.

A graduate of Baylor University (B.A.), Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div.), and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (D.Min.), Jon's desire is to lead people to trust Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord and to help them grow in their relationship with Him.