

# The Importance of the Eternal Life and the World to Come

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How often does anyone talk about the salvation that we share? We hear people saying that we need to talk about everything else more. We need to talk more about purity (which we do). We need to talk more about abstract concepts like giving yourself to God completely (what does that even mean?). Sometimes we are even told that forgiveness of sins and going to heaven is great, but what's really important is how Jesus shows Himself in our lives now. I have heard that sentiment at ROCKHARBOR more than a few times. We need to talk more about Hell, we are told. Largely as a response to Rob Bell's *Love Wins*, evangelical superstar Francis Chan even wrote a book about it just this summer, a book which I praise in my blog for its emphasis on submission to God and being teachable, but that ultimately adds nothing new to the discussion. All those things are important. But what about eternal life, and the things that await us in the next world? How often does anyone talk about these things? Not often. Heck, even when Jude was about to, he had to divert his attention to the more pressing matters of heretics and false believers infiltrating the church (Jude 3). But what of these things?

First of all, how could anyone say that we talk about them too much? I'm not sure I have even heard a single sermon that was just about the next world. And is it that easy to talk about the kingdom of heaven too much? Doesn't the future world that awaits us, God's new and redeemed creation that is free of sin and all misery, play a pivotal role not just in us feeling good, but in how we view just about everything?

Just think about what is said about the new world. It is written: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away'" (Revelation 21.3-4). Even

though Revelation is a highly symbolic book, there isn't much that such a statement would be symbolic of except for the idea that the new world will have no pain or death or mourning or separation from God. As our current vice president would say, that's a big mother-and-father-honoring deal.

I don't believe that we often think enough about how important that is. Everything that is bad, everything that harms us in anyway, would be wrapped up in the above declaration. There will be no pain. Although pain serves a purpose on earth, it is one of the worst things there is. If it is bad enough, many would choose death over it. Although we all fear death, I know that I am not quick to be too affected by the abstract thought of it. Put torture into the mix, however, and who doesn't at least cringe (if not worse)? But we won't be afflicted by it.

We will no longer be afflicted by pain because there will be no need for it; as the angel also declared, there will be no death. Our bodies will be immortal (1 Corinthians 15.53). Not only will they be immortal, but when we rise from the dead, they won't be like they are when they go in, or even as they are while we live. It is written: "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power" (1 Corinthians 15.42-43). This will be the end of any physical ailment, and more importantly, never again will we mourn the loss of a loved one. On this earth, what matters to us most? God of course, but He (alone) is immortal (1 Timothy 6.15-16). Behind Him, what is there if not the people we love? I can think of nothing that breaks more hearts, that leads to tears any more bitter than those born from death as it robs us of everything that matters most, until finally we ourselves are consumed by it. And yet, it is a hollow victory. In the end, there will be no more death. God's final enemy, death, will be

abolished forever (1 Corinthians 15.26). If that does not hit particularly close to home at this moment, it will soon enough.

No more crying or sorrow? That is perhaps the most profound of all. What is life but a stream of anguish and sadness, where even when we get what we want, and even when things are good, they are never what they should be? That much makes perfect sense if you think about it – unlike in eternity, we are not yet in the perfect fellowship with God that we were created for. At the risk of sounding like I have clinical depression (a real medical condition that needs to be taken seriously and not treated with contempt and derision, by the way), how can anyone really be happy? But this will not always be the case. Whatever afflicts any of us, whether "little" things like a break-up or feud with close friends, to sadness of the death of a loved one to anything else, all of these things will be gone, for ever and ever. This knowledge alone is a source of comfort, a resource we have in this world, that I think is overlooked.

Now, when things go wrong, we have all sorts of truths to comfort us. It's not as though this is the only thing we have to hold onto. After all, we know that:

- God works everything for the good of those who love Him (which means us) (Romans 8.28), and He declares, "For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55.9). Therefore, we can be confident that, in all of our sadness and darkness, God is doing it for good. Our pain and hardship is like the discipline of a father towards his sons; it is done not out of hatred, but for our sakes (Proverbs 3.11-12; Hebrews 12.4-11). We never have to wonder *if* God is still treating us with kindness and love. It is simply a matter of *when* we will see the fruits that our suffering bears (which may not be until we are in His kingdom).

- God is always with us (Psalm 139.7-8). The Lord promised His disciples that He would always be with them, even though He was going to the Father (Matthew 28.20). He did not lie and leave them orphans (John 14.18), but rather He sent them the Holy Spirit, as promised (John 14.26; Acts 2.4). That gift was not for them alone (Acts 2.38, Romans 8). That includes all of us, all who can say, truly and from the heart, that Jesus is Lord (1 Corinthians 12.3).

These are important truths, but so is the fact that nothing that is wrong with the world, nothing that causes us to question even the goodness of God (who alone is good) will last forever. There will be a day when all of this is gone. Although this doesn't totally solve the problem of evil, it takes a lot of the bite out of it.

As of late, one of my favorite theologians is a man named Edward Fudge – he is insightful, humble, devout, and hasn't burned anyone at the stake for disagreeing with him, at least as far as I am aware. He is most well-known for *The Fire That Consumes*, a book on conditionalism that I believe is even longer than “The Bible Teaches Annihilationism.” However, he also writes on and speaks about a lot more than that. As you might imagine, when he appears in any sort of podcast, or writes a new book, I am on it. Naturally, when he appeared on a podcast called Theopologetics (which I highly recommend listening to), I gave it a listen.

It was Fudge's apparent reaction whenever he spoke of our future life, of what awaits us, that really stood out to me. Whenever he would speak of it, perhaps by quoting or paraphrasing passages like Revelation 21.4, his voice would crack and get much higher in pitch. It sounded like a cross between him laughing and crying. At first, I just attributed this to his Parkinson's disease (which he will not have in the next age). But then, a number of comments talked about

how touched the listeners were by his genuine emotion as he spoke. That made me think about it some more.

As I thought about it, I more and more could understand Fudge's reaction, because of what I had come to understand a few months prior. Some time before hearing his interview, I went on the Spring break trip to Tucson. I was unsure if I was going to go, but I am glad I did for a number of reasons. Surely the biggest thing that occurred for me, however, was that the significance of having eternal life really started to hit me at the heart level. I mean, obviously I believed all this stuff before. I just didn't think about it that much. I don't think we are really taught to. I have always been comforted by it, but it was a passive comfort. Knowing that eternity was taken care of by Jesus allowed me to focus on this life, doing the things that needed to be done here and now. After all, we are here to serve our master. And I always took comfort in knowing God's love, and in knowing that, as I said, eternity wasn't something I had to worry about anymore. However, just simply taking genuine comfort in this supposed pie-in-the-sky hope that we believers have was not something that I really did.

What then, you may ask, happened at the Spring break Trip? Honestly, it wasn't anything big or exciting. We were worshipping, and the song "I Will Rise" by Chris Tomlin came up. That in itself is not the big thing that did it. That song had always been kind of emotional for me, but for a somewhat different reason. Now, understand, I don't often cry in front of others (or really, at all). Who among you has even seen me cry once? But I have to say, I love that song, and sometimes I might sorta cry whenever the line "and I hear the cry of every longing heart, worthy is the lamb" comes up. In fact, I am right now, because we have hearts that long after God. Every hour of every day (though we might not always realize it), that piece is missing from who we are. Yet we all know that we are not away from our God and Father, but simply

finishing up our tour of duty in this life before things are back to how they should be, and how they will always be. That is the biggest thing of all. Eternal life is knowing God, really knowing God, our Father, and Jesus Christ whom He sent (John 17.3). Like Paul, we only have a dim picture, but we will one day know God, really know God, our Father, and Christ whom He sent, as we are today known by God (1 Corinthians 13.12). The point is this: although it's always been an emotional song for me, I kind of glossed over the rest of the song before. My thought process was along the lines of, "Yeah yeah yeah, something about rising, no more pain, etc...okay here's the good part!" The rest was kind of just filler.

I didn't gloss over the rest of the song this time, however, because the pastor said something. I don't remember it anywhere near verbatim, but he basically told us to think about what we were singing, and to think about the things that were afflicting us, so that we could think about the significance of the fact that we will rise, and there will be no more sorrow or pain. That's what started it all.

Last year, my senior year, actually wasn't so bad. In fact, it had a lot of high points. But here's the thing: put bluntly, my junior year sucked. It really did. It was to my college career what the book of Judges is to the Old Testament (obviously I don't think the book sucks, but it does record arguably the darkest period in Israel's history). They weren't even huge things that happened. Nobody died or anything, and my family didn't go broke or anything, but a lot of little things really went downhill. Really, this started even the year before (and freshman year was no picnic either), but a lot of things just really went wrong. I had a lot of pain in my heart. All that pain did sort of carry over into the start of my senior year (which itself began with the death of my dog, which was expected, and the suicide of a once-close childhood friend, which, unfortunately, was also kind of expected). Even though my senior year got a lot better, things

that had occurred before, especially the arguably smaller things from the previous year, caused a lot of disillusionment and left me kind of scarred. They still do today. And it's not cool to bring up those things, especially things to which there isn't really a solution (except for the intervention of the God on not only a few individuals who claim to be His children, but on His body at large). I don't think I am unique in this regard either. Our lives are all full of pain and sorrow. Some are full of it more than others, and some are far more full of it than mine, but I'm not going to downplay my pain because somebody has it worse. I would never be so cold-hearted and ungodly as to take that attitude with someone else who is hurting just so that I can feel self-righteous (like ungodly people on television tell us is the right thing to do), and I am not going to take that attitude with myself. On top of all that, I was really sad about graduating soon and leaving everyone behind, which I know a good number of us can relate to. And so, I thought of those things.

You can imagine what happened when someone told me to put two and two together. I had heard this song about the future state before, and was already deeply touched by it. I also had thought about all kinds of things that were bringing me down before (perhaps too much, though perhaps not). But, I never put the two together. You'd think I would have, but that's the thing about humans when it comes to just about anything; we so often have to be told things that you would think would be obvious. I dare say that one sign of a good pastor is simply being able to hone in on those things in the minds of those in his congregation. It was then that I finally understood fully, or at least, more deeply than I had before. It certainly is not as though God does not want me to deal with those problems, and it is not as though He doesn't carry me through while I live now. However, when it comes down to it, none of these things are eternal, and that's what matters. None of these things are going to be able to bring me any pain or sadness or



anguish or disillusionment when we are finally with the Lord. I know there will always be things to bring me pain and heartache; if it is not the “little” things now, it will only be “bigger” things, or perhaps other “little” things later. But even if, like whatever that thorn in Paul’s flesh was (2 Corinthians 12.2), I am tormented until the very end, they will not truly stick with me until the end. After all, what is death but an intermission? Their time will be done. They will walk out of the theatre and the doors will lock behind them, but I will go on, as will we all. Just as Edward Fudge could truly see the heart-melting significance of what we know awaits us, so too did I finally start to see it.

Now, as I said before, I’m not much of a cryer. I’m really not. I know, I know, boys don’t cry, just as girls don’t...well, the list there is quite long. But in all seriousness, it’s not common. The thing is, I did cry. And I don’t mean my eyes started to water like when you are groggy or touch them with still-slightly-soapy hands. I mean, I wept. Of course, I tried to hide it and I think I probably succeeded, but that’s not the point. Just give it some deep thought. There won’t be pain on the other side. There won’t be sorrow on the other side. There won’t be death. Bigger than that, one way or another, everything in our lives, everything about us, will be redeemed. Of course, some forms of redemption will be more direct than others. Some things, like the loss of a loved one who is a believer, will be directly remedied, as we really will see them again. Other things may be less direct, and it’s not clear how God will resolve all that has gone wrong in our lives. I come from a family of unbelievers, so this problem isn’t some abstraction that I don’t really understand. However, I do know that there will be no more crying or sorrow or pain, so I know that all that troubles us will no longer be able to hurt us anymore. All the pain and sorrow we have, no matter what causes it, will be gone for ever and ever. God, in His great compassions

towards us, will destroy it all, will blast it away so that it never shows its faces again, as I imagine He yearns to do as much as we long for Him to do it. So yeah, I cried.

If I could be brought to tears with this sentiment, than who couldn't be. No matter who we are or how "good" our lives are, they are all full of tears and sadness and pain in one form or another. It may be the sadness of losing a loved one. It may be the pain of a damaged relationship with someone you love. It may be a "small" thing, like your justified dissatisfaction with your job, or the unending feud or feuds you may have with other believers with whom you hardly know but love deeply by virtue of them being believers. It could be the pain of injury or the uncertainty of the future. It could be the scars of war, or of rape, or of even the verbal ravaging of a hateful parent. It could even be the torment of seeing all kinds of wrongdoing, not just murder and violence, but smaller, every day wickedness, like the lying and utter lack of integrity that seems to be second nature to most politicians, and with that, the discouragement that comes when you realize that ultimately all people are full of sin and evil (Genesis 8.21; Ecclesiastes 9.3; Jeremiah 17.9; Romans 3.23), that most don't know Jesus, and that therefore it is all totally to be expected. All of these things and so many more, those that are "big" and those that are "small," all these things terrorize us night and day, whether we really think about it or not. But in all of this, God gives us two remedies. First of all, He comforts us now. He sends His people to us. He sends His very Spirit to us. He is never actually out of our presence. But most importantly, as truly sunk in at that moment, we are reminded of what is to come. We know that whatever afflicts us now, under no circumstances, will it always be a problem. It simply won't be. God will wipe every tear from our eyes (Revelation 21.4), and with that, we will have no more tears. As that old man managed to squeak out while almost too choked up to say anything, there

will be no more pain. There will be no more crying or mourning or sorrow. Just as Jesus' blood does to our sin, so too will it wash away any sting of what is and what will then be the past.

So then, what else does the Bible say? How does God fulfill these promises? What is the world to come actually like? It's tough for me to give a straight answer. Revelation tells us that it will be a place of God's immediate presence and no more suffering, but it doesn't tell us much about what we actually do. The prophets speak of a future time of joy and celebration and godliness, but for every 100 theologians you ask about it, you'll get 101 different answers about what it all really amounts to. What parts are literal? What parts are figurative? What parts are even speaking of eternity? What parts are just speaking of the return of the Israelites from exile? What parts speak of the millennium (if there even is one)? Though I do plan on going to seminary either next year or the next (pending God's approval which I think I have), I don't have a master of theology degree with emphasis in Old Testament, so I'm not about to be dogmatic.

Ultimately, so much of what we hope for is speculation. This is one area of theology where I am okay with that. God leaves so many questions unanswered here, so what is wrong with coming up with ways that God may fulfill His promises? What about parents who have an infant die of Tay-Sachs, or a small child get run over by a car? I'm going to just throw out there that, while I don't think the Bible actually gives a straight answer, I am more inclined to side with what I think is the majority view among evangelical Christians, that infants and probably really young children will be saved (based on the very very few passages that even speak specifically about dead children like 2 Samuel 12.23, Jeremiah 19.4-5, and Ezekiel 16.20-21). Under any circumstances, we know that the pain of that mother or father, which they have had to live with all of their lives, will be completely destroyed and done away with by God, once and for all forever. Remember how I said I'm not normally a cryer...? Who can imagine how God

will do that? Wayne Grudem suggests that the young children, unlike most of humanity, will be raised at the resurrection as small children, so that their parents can raise them and watch them grow up in Heaven. Is that right? Who knows? But who could blame that mother who longs for the day when God frees her of all her pain, and what better way to at least imagine God doing that than by seeing Jesus hand her her baby to hold and love once again?

I am by no means saying that we should lie, or that it is not the case that we must always acknowledge that God may have His own way. However, what I am saying is that sometimes we can't imagine what other ways God could actually have. I know that most of you I will not see much anymore, and that there will come a point where many of us will never see each other again. That does really hurt me. I also know that, for so many different reasons, sometimes simply because of time, I never had the closeness to many of you I would have wanted. But I also know that all my sadness will be wiped away forever. Since you who read this will be in God's kingdom with me, I obviously long for the day when we are all together, but this time, without time or distance or whatever personal issues we have stopping us from all being best of friends, as we are all children of God, family bound together not by biology, but by blood. I know we can all relate to this sentiment, especially those of us who have graduated. Have I not heard things to the effect of "I can't wait for eternity, because then, you can never leave" from some of you? Who can forget last year's spring launch? As heart-breaking as all that was, it was also heartbreakingly beautiful, because it was born out of love, and tempered with hope. This isn't just some cotton-candy ideal. When we have to say goodbye to our closest believing friends, who really are like our brothers and sisters (as we should regard all believers, of course), it really leaves a lot of sadness behind. Even months later, it hasn't gotten any easier for me. But this is the kind of thing that God will eliminate: the pain of separation (just as He will do with other

painful separations, be them tragic like an untimely death, or natural like a child growing up). Now, will we really all get together and hang out for eternity? Who knows? It's not as though there might not be another way. What if we really do just spend eternity worshipping God? What if, in the process, we'd be so happy and free of any pain or sadness that God will have fulfilled his promise? After all, what would it even matter if not for the presence of God? No amount of abundance and lack of sorrow can truly satisfy our hearts if God is not the center of it. And yet, how could any of us really, in our hearts, imagine God redeeming all of the pain in our lives without visibly undoing it? The idea that I would actually never get to see any of you again even in eternity is to me worse than death. It really is. Yet I am fully aware that God made the promise of what would be, not how it would be, so that no matter what the new heavens and new earth are like, I know that I will be more happy than I could ever imagine. I just can't reconcile those ideas now, and I don't think I will ever be able to this side of eternity. So for now, I have no qualms about imagining the day when everything between us will be as it should be but can never be now. And when you have eternity, time is never an issue. Speculation is never meant to bind God, but rather to enable us, who have not seen, to at least have some ability to understand how unspeakably wonderful the eternal future will be.

One of the most poignant moments in the Bible occurs in Revelation 7. John sees those who came out of the "great Tribulation," those who suffered and were in large number murdered, perhaps quite cruelly. What does the angel tell him? "For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them" (Verse 15). And those who suffered in life for their faith will always be cared for by God; "They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd,

and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Verses 16 and 17). I’ve never been a martyr (obviously), but for them, it’s finally over. They are finally free. They starved, but now never hunger. They were tormented by the heat and thirst of the desert, but now they never will be again. Many in the first century who followed Christ suffered the worse forms of death. They were eaten alive by lions. They were crucified. They were even burned alive. I’ve never been burned alive, but it’s supposed to be the most painful form of death imaginable (although it is much shorter than some others). How can you even imagine what someone who is burned alive goes through? It is all of the worst fears of mankind come true. Although is probably more my imagination than anything else, I can’t help but envision the state of mind of those martyrs. When it finally ends, even the boldest, strongest men would become like little children, finally able to express the utter anguish of what had happened, and yet, "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you" (*NIV*, Isaiah 66.13). God will wipe the tears from their eyes, and as we know, there will be no more tears after that (except perhaps tears of joy). God was always with them, even as they burned, and the moment they finally died, it was all over. They will never know pain again. They will never suffer. They will never hunger or thirst or be tormented by the heat of day or the hate of the world. Do you have any idea how encouraging that is? Even if one of us has to surrender their body to the flames (which thankfully is much less common than it was then), I know that none of us are alone, and that God is there, and that the moment it ends, God will wipe away the tears, and it won’t even be a haunting memory in any of our minds.

Along these lines, there is more than just the negative side of things. Aside from all that is bad being gone, there will be plenty of good things awaiting us as well. Repeatedly, we are told of a feast and celebration (Isaiah 25.6; Revelation 19.9). Are these descriptions literal? Will

there be a giant table where people recline with the patriarchs (Matthew 8.11)? I don't know, but does it matter? Either we will be enjoying the choicest of foods with God and His people at one enormous table, or our experience will be as joyous and happy as if we were. Revelation speaks of the tree of life from which we will eat (Revelation 22.2). Will we literally be eating the fruit that Adam and Eve were cut off from (if that was even a literal tree)? I don't know, but either way, God will grant us eternal life and immortality. Will we eat literal food? There is good reason to believe so. Jesus spoke of eating and drinking with the disciples when they would join Him in the kingdom (Matthew 26.29). Maybe He was being figurative, but either way, we will either enjoy food, or enjoy life as if we were. Will there be games and sports and music and all sorts of fun things that we have on this earth? If there are not, it will be because whatever is there will be even better. What can be said is this: if there is no sorrow, then how can there be anything from this life that we will miss? Either everything we think we could ever want will be in God's Kingdom, or, it will be as good as or even better than if it was. Who can have any misgivings about that?

Lastly, we can't forget the most important thing: We will have God. We will have Jesus. The author of life will always be with us. It is written: "There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name *will be* on their foreheads" (Revelation 22.3-4). I can't even wrap my mind around seeing the face of God. Not even the holiest of holy men like Moses could see God's face and live (Exodus 33.20). Reading Matthew 18.10 still gives me chills. It is written: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven." I can't envision seeing the face of the Father, and yet, we will. But we won't be in terror. Surely we will be in awe; the more we

understand, the more we will worship and bow down. And yet, what does God say to John? It is written: "He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son" (Revelation 21.7). How is it possible that anyone could see the face of the infinite God? And how do you see Him with the intimacy with which a child looks at their father? I can't understand it, and I would never believe it were it not in the Bible, had God not said it Himself. It is literally awesome. It is the one thing that truly is "amazing" in all of the universe. And yet this is what God created us for, and this is what awaits us.

I hope that in reading this, you will experience at least some of what I feel writing it. I am not Shakespeare; God forbid if I ever tried to reach you with His word that I would move you with my eloquence and not His power. And yet, what am I saying? I am speaking the truth, not telling you anything that wasn't already given to us by the Holy Spirit thousands of years ago, but hopefully carrying out His will in reminding His children of how great His love is. Whatever is afflicting you, whatever pains you, whatever is breaking your heart, God will destroy it. Even now, He is with us. Soon, He will stand up against all that hurts every one of His children. He will destroy it, no doubt with a passion and fervor far greater than even our own, "and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away," (Revelation 21.4). I pray that this reminder reaches you in whatever way you need to be reached. If you need to cry, then cry. If you need to pray, then pray. If you need to turn your entire life around, then do so. And if you just need some encouragement, I pray that that is what will happen.

And lastly, we can never forget the One who brought this to us, the Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us. I will leave you with what Paul wrote to



Timothy as he knew death was knocking at his door, words that still bring tears to my eyes, for one reason or another:

"For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day"

(2 Timothy 1.12).

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