

Preparing For Eternity

Insights into Eternity - Session Two

Warm-up question: Were you ever punished unfairly as a child for something you did not do?

I had a difficult childhood due to the fact that my mother died when I was five years old. My father remarried but my stepmother could be quite harsh at times in the way she treated my brother and I. Sometimes I felt that we were being punished unfairly. Of course, I must admit there were also plenty of occasions when we got exactly what we deserved. The whole idea of being treated fairly is very important to us as children. I remember one instance when I was in my fourth year of primary school, around 10 or 11 years old, I was the only boy in my whole year that was not wearing long pants/trousers. I was quite “a picture” in my little grey shorts, with my knobby knees. I remember thinking that I was really too old for shorts. None of the other kids my age wore shorts any more, only long trousers, and everyone at school made fun of me. My stepmother didn’t want to buy me long trousers because I would wear out the knees, so even in the winter I had to wear shorts. (Winters in England are not as severe as they are in Ohio). This was something I considered to be a great injustice at that age! After being teased for months, I had enough. I stole some money from the pocket of my father’s trousers and went to buy myself a pair of trousers that reached my shoes. I decided that I had to change every day on the way to and from school, so I hid my shorts under a Beach hut near the sea. (I lived 300 yards from the beach on the East coast of England). Every day before school I would stop at the Beach huts that lined the Promenade and find that special one that hid my secret stash. I would reach underneath and find my long trousers, change into them, and stuff my shorts underneath the wooden beams supporting the beach hut. Then I would change back again into my shorts before I went home on the way back from school. This ritual went on for a few days until one fateful afternoon when I returned from school and stopped at the beach hut only to find my shorts had gone. I knew that when I got home, I would really be “in for it.” I sure got a beating that day as I tried in vain to explain my way out of my predicament. I knew that it was not right to steal

the money or to lie but I still thought it was very unfair because everyone else was wearing long pants except me. My attempt at bringing a little justice into my life had gone terribly wrong!

We can probably all think of situations in our lives where we feel that we have been treated unfairly, punished unfairly, or have been misunderstood. We do not always see justice prevail in our lives or in the lives of others. Often we wonder why bad things happen to us. How many times have you heard people voice the question; “Why do bad things happen to good people?” That is a hard question to answer, but the truth is, we are living in a world which is flawed, along with other flawed people. Flawed people cannot be perfect in their judgment, but we know One who is. God the Father knows each and every heart and has perfect knowledge of every situation and the motives behind each action, therefore He has perfect judgment. He is the only one who can really bring perfect justice to this world. When we hear the word “judgment”, we may cringe inwardly, but God brings perfect justice and mercy together when He judges. In the Old Testament, God’s people often spoke of God’s judgment in a positive way, knowing that God would judge oppressors and protect the weak. For instance:

³⁶ The LORD will judge his people and have compassion on his servants when he sees their strength is gone and no one is left, slave or free (Deuteronomy 32:36).

What this passage is saying is that God will adjudicate on the side of God’s people. He is full of compassion for us when he sees that we have no strength left to fight against our enemies. The Lord Himself will be our strength when we come to the point where we have no resources left, no strength of reserves to call on, no one else but Him to trust in. He wants to fight our battles for us just as He did for King Jehoshaphat when he was confronted with a vast army from Moab and Ammon. Jehoshaphat prayed, “O our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do,

but our eyes are on you” (2 Chronicles 20:12). Sure enough, God stepped in and a mighty battle was won without any losses to God’s people. We lose sight of the beauty in the Judgment of God if we do not know the character of God or trust in His goodness. In this session, we will look at preparing for death and judgment and how it will affect each one of us. We may not want to think of that time, but scripture tells us that we will all need to give an account at the end of our lives when God determines that our time has come. Before we look at the topic of judgment, let’s think together on the kind of preparation we should be taking before death and judgment takes place.

Preparing for Death

Last session we looked at what a person experiences at death. It is a subject that most people try to avoid. J. Kerby Anderson got it right when he said, “Death is the most universal and most democratic of all human functions. It strikes people at any time with little respect for age, class, creed, or color.”¹ Death has a 100% success rate and yet the majority of people still refuse to discuss or think about the topic. Woody Allen’s often quoted remark is, “I’m not afraid of death. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” As much as we try to avoid it, death does not go away. All of us must face it without exception. It does not matter how much money you have, or what kind of insurance you carry, it is simply a matter of time. None of us knows how much time is ahead for us. The remarkable thing about it is, even though we know we cannot escape it, many of us will do anything to avoid thinking about it, and many people will do little to prepare for it. An article in the *Boston Globe* some while ago listed the well known people that had died in that particular year saying that they had gone to join “the great majority.” Death, we might say, is the great certainty, and those who have died are the great majority. My wife, Sandy, and I took her parents to Scotland on vacation while we were living in England. As it started to get dark one evening we had to look for a hotel along the road. We passed some black painted wrought iron gates with a sign over it saying, *Black Barony Hotel*. We couldn’t see the buildings from the gate, so we decided to check it out to see what kind of hotel it was. Because of the time of day, and the wrought iron gates, we started to joke amongst the four of us, saying that we were going to the tower of terror and it would probably be a haunt-

ed castle or something. As we came through the trees, sure enough it was a castle! A very large castle with not a single car in the parking lot! As we got out of the car a man with a severe hunchback approached us from the door. To cap it off, over the door were these words in large letters; **Prepare To Meet Your God, Amos 4:12**, words found in scripture. It was also weird to find out that we were the only people that were staying in the hotel that night, 75 other rooms were empty. Evidently, they had a tour party that had cancelled at the last minute. Sandy and I slept that night in a four poster bed that King James used to sleep in, the king whose name is on the King James Bible. We found out later that the bible verse above the door was for soldiers that had used the hotel to stay while they were training for war to prepare them to face eternity if they were lost in battle. It is a good thing to prepare now to meet your God on that day.

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

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

Last session we looked at the scripture found in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, which says that man has three parts to his nature; the body, soul and spirit. The soul and spirit leave the body at death. We used the analogy of getting out of a car. My car is dead or ‘asleep’ to the world without me in it. When Jesus comes, the body will be resurrected a glorious body (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). The question arises, what does the bible

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

mean by the soul and spirit? What is the difference? Most bible teachers believe that the soul is made up of the mind, will and emotions, whereas the spirit is the part of us that directly connects with God. In the book of Genesis for instance, we are told that Adam and Eve were warned that they must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good or evil, “for when you eat of it you will surely die.” (Genesis 2:17). When they ate of the fruit, they did not physically drop down dead, but something happened in their inner nature, their spirit ‘died,’ being cut off from God because of sin (Ephesians 2:1, 5). Of course, their body began to decay at that point too, so it wasn’t something that affected them just in a spiritual sense. Before they sinned, Adam had an amazing mind and creativity. He named all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air that God created (Genesis 2:19-20). I think that when we have our resurrected bodies, our minds will be restored to the same capacity as Adam experienced in the Garden of Eden. The direct result of man’s sin on his spirit was that when God came to enjoy fellowship with Adam and Eve, they hid from the Lord (Genesis 3:8). Why did he hide? Sin causes a separation between God and man, a state that God calls ‘death.’ When we come to Christ, our spirit is renewed or made alive from its dead state of being apart from God. God wants to renew and transform our mind, will and emotions as we meditate on His word and are obedient to His Spirit. King David said it well in the Shepherd’s Psalm: “He restores my soul” (Psalm 23:3). Peter, in his letter wrote: “for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:9). Our mind, will and emotions are to be brought under the domination and leadership of the Spirit of God. Character is the goal of our faith. We will be rewarded by how much of the character of Christ is in us.

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

made into the representation of Jesus Christ.

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

What situations has God used in your life to shape your character in preparing you for eternity?

God foreknew you and predestined you to be made in the image of His Son. We can easily go by this passage without thinking through the implications of what the Spirit wants to teach us. We cannot blame God for the bad things that have happened in the course of our lives, sometimes these things have happened because of our own choices. What God says is that He will use each situation to work good into our lives if we will be open to His teaching and leading us by His Spirit. The wonderful thing is that God has seen the end from the beginning. He had each of us on His heart before the world was made. He foreknew you and predestined you to be shaped and molded into a person like His Son. “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:16). The work of God in the world is to prepare you for eternity.

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

A very popular book a few years ago that I read was Stephen Covey’s 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. One of the most important habits of effective people is to **Begin With the End in View**. What do you want the outcome of your life to be? If you want to be effective with your life and leave the world a bit better by being here, then it is wise to stop and ask yourself, what kind of a difference are you making with your life? Is it a difference that only lasts for this life or is it something that is eternal? Do you labor for temporary rewards for your skills, time, energy and money that you spend, or eternal rewards?

What do you think are things that you can take with you to heaven?

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

- 1) Other people, as in the lives that we have helped along the way.
- 2) The things we have learned, e.g. the word of God that is imprinted in our hearts.
- 3) The character of Christ that's imprinted on our spirit.

We cannot go back and get more of the above, and there's no such thing as reincarnation that we may try again. The bible is clear that we only have one life to live:

²⁷ man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

If Christ appeared to you today and told you that tomorrow you would be going home to heaven, how would you feel? What things do you need more time to do while you still have the chance?

What Happens After We Cross Through Death's Door?

Either at death or at the return of Christ, the door of our earthly life is closed behind us (2 Samuel 12:23). The idea of Reincarnation is a lie according to the scriptures. We have only one life to live. I don't think that there is any scripture that causes me more sadness than when I read this passage:

²³ Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" He said to them, ²⁴ "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. ²⁵ Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' "But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' ²⁶ "Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' ²⁷ "But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!' ²⁸ "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. ²⁹ People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of

God. ³⁰ Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last" (Luke 13:23-30).

What do you think Jesus means when He says, "I don't know you or where you are from?"

What are your feelings as you read this passage?

The first thing I notice is that the door is shut. I feel extreme sadness at the thought that many will come to the door of Christ with the expectation of entering but will find that they are shut out. I think of the many misguided fundamentalist Muslims who think that they have been on God's side, but have been deceived into killing innocent people for the political gain of others, due to the spiritual darkness of their leaders. The blind lead the blind. How sad it will be to see men and women that have attended church all their lives, having had a vaccine of religion that kept them from the real thing, a personal knowledge of God. Jesus says, "I don't know you or where you come from" (verse 25). How tragic that is! Is it possible to spend a life doing works that you feel will justify you and find at the end of it, that you have been laboring in vain? Jesus indicates this here. Some people believe that they will be fine when the Day of Judgment comes because they have done some good work or remarkable feat. Surely, they think, that will gain me a place in heaven. Some think that God will take into account all the good that they have done and weigh it against the bad and if it balances well, they think that they will get in. How the enemy loves to deceive people with that thought! If this were to be true, what would the balance be? Would there be a "cut off point" which would separate some on one side and some on the other based on one more good deed or one less noble act? If you think that you can enter just by "being good", you are sadly deceived and the worst part is that you cannot take the test again. It is too late! The door is shut! There will be many knocking on the door and weeping, but the door is shut and will not be reopened (Matthew 25:10-12). We only have one life to live. That is why the passage above says to: "Make every effort to enter..." (Verse 24). If you are not sure that you are are a child of God, the scriptures do not leave us in the dark. The apostle John writes:

¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ² This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands

(1 John 5:1-2).

We show our love for God by carrying out His commands, but the actions of obedience in carrying out His commands must come out of love for God. It is possible for someone to do their works of righteousness with the wrong motive, and without knowledge of God. 1 Corinthians 13: 3 says, “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.” Can you imagine any act of sacrifice as great as that? Yet we are told that this act could be done without love, and it would be worthless. How could someone commit such an act of sacrifice without love? We see it daily in our newspapers when we read of terrorist activity for political and passionate, yet misguided beliefs. There are other motives. Fear can be a motive. 1 John also tells us: “In this way, love is made complete, among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment” (1 John 4:17). If you are not sure whether you are a child of God, I urge you to take the time to consider Christ’s invitation. Now is the time to consider the claims of Christ and his invitation to you. The scriptures say that there will be much weeping for there are many who will try to enter but cannot. They will pound on the door in vain. There is only one door and it is a narrow entrance. Christ Himself is the door or gate (John 10:7). There is no other way for man to be saved apart from coming to the person of Christ (Acts 4:12).

What does it mean that there will be some who are last but will be first, and others who are first and yet will be last? (Luke 13:30)

I interpret this to be something that surprises the great majority of people. There are those in this world that many of us think to be great men of God as they have had great notoriety, but just because a person has had notoriety on earth does not mean that they will be great in heaven. True Christ-like character will be seen by all. I believe that there will be many surprises in store for us. We will all see the fruit of our labors, the people we have shared Christ with or given water to on the way, they will surprise us by being there and perhaps even closer to Jesus than we are. We often wonder about this person and that person, as far as you know they did not respond to the gospel, but how do we know what a person has decided in his heart. If a man in the

depths of his heart is open to God but never has an opportunity to hear the gospel, don’t you think God can show him how to be saved? God is not willing that any should perish, but that all may come to a place where they respond to God’s showing him His salvation (2 Peter 3:8).

²³ He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God (Psalm 50:23).

I interpret that verse as saying that when God finds that a person is open and crying out to him in the depths of his heart, no matter which country he is in and how far he is from another believer sharing with him, God will get the gospel to him. Isn’t that exactly what happened with the thief on the cross? He didn’t get to say the words that we would expect that he should say, but Christ accepted him because his heart was prepared. God looks on the heart not the words we speak (1 Samuel 16:7). Those of you that have had to say goodbye to loved ones that are now in eternity, you may not know where they are because they didn’t do what you expect a Christian should, but you may be surprised in that day. Only God knows a person’s heart.

When the Door Shuts Behind Us, then the Judgment.

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

There are two judgments that we are told clearly about. There is a judgment that takes place at the Second Coming of Christ when believers in Christ are separated from unbelievers, as sheep are separated from the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). This begins a time of peace for a thousand years. After the 1000 year Millennium, there will be what is called the White Throne Judgment where only the dead appear to be judged. We are told that death and Hades gives up the dead to be judged and thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15). I believe that there will be a judgment that takes place at the death of each of us, whatever time that happens. Otherwise how did the Rich man get sent to hell and Lazarus sent to Abraham’s side? We will look deeper into this passage in Luke 16 at a later time, but it is clear that there is a judgment that takes place at death:

²⁷ man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

The believer will not be judged according to his sins. He is quite secure in what Jesus has done for him at the cross.

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

But there will be a judgment which will determine his reward. This will be a judgment which will reveal how he has used his resources; such as his time, energy, skills and money. Each of the below scriptures are written to believers and refer to a time where believers are called to give an account of their stewardship while on earth.

John Bevere, in his book *Driven By Eternity*, writes:

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

¹⁰ For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat....

¹² So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God (Romans 14:10,12).

⁹ So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:9-10).

This judgment, called in the above two passages the *judgment seat*, may occur at the Return of Christ or perhaps it could take place at the death of the believer. The Greek word that is translated judgment seat is *bēma*; it had four usages in the common Greek language of the day when Paul the Apostle wrote to Rome

and Corinth.

1. One’s stride, or manner of walking (which reveals character).
2. A platform for a public official (cf. Acts 25:6, 10, 17).
3. A “rewards platform” in sporting contests. Because of this meaning, some claim the “bema” is only a place for rewards—not judgment. But in secular legal contexts it also denotes
4. The place where litigants stood for trial. Paul repeatedly stressed this meaning; Acts 25:10, Romans 14:12.³

Vine’s dictionary says that the word *bēma*, literally means, “to set (his foot) on.” It denotes “a raised place or platform, where was the place of assembly; from the platform orations were made. The word became used for a tribunal, two of which were for the accuser and one for the defendant; it was applied to the tribunal of a Roman magistrate or ruler.⁴ There are a number of things that are significant about it, the first being that before Christ, every motive and every act will be brought out into the open:

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

¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:13).

Again, Bevere writes:

“Many have the erroneous idea that all future judgment is eradicated by their salvation. Indeed, Jesus’ blood cleanses us from the sins that would have kept us from the kingdom, however, it does not exempt us from the judgment of how we conducted ourselves as believers, whether good or bad.”⁵

At last all will be made known. All things will be uncovered. We will find out the great mysteries of this life. Nothing will be hidden. We shouldn’t take this just in the negative, for there are acts of kindness that many of us have done in secret before men, but God has seen the desire and motive of our hearts and will reward us openly. There will be others that few know anything

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

³ Walk Thru the Bible

⁴ Vines Concise Dictionary, Nelson Publishers, Page 201.

⁵ John Bevere, *Driven by Eternity*, Warner Faith Publishers, Page 186.

about for they have had no notoriety, but they have been laboring quietly in the backwaters of some jungle someplace where their labor has been sweet to our God. Some of you have given generously and sacrificially to care for the poor and have done it to God alone in that you have kept it a secret from men. "...your Father, who sees what is done in **secret**, will reward you" (Matthew 6:18).

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

The Lord sees everything we have ever done for Him and nothing escapes His attention. We may say:

³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes

and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' ³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' ⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me' (Matthew 25:34-40).

I find it interesting that the believers had forgotten the acts of kindness that they had done, but God hadn't. Every act of kindness was recorded by Him and He will reward us openly at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

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

Pastor Keith Thomas
Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com
Email: keiththomas7@gmail.com
or: pastorthomas@groupbiblestudy.com