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Live in the Light of the Cross

Do you find it hard to envision heaven? If so, you're not alone. And I suspect that's one reason why so many of us don't understand what it means to "live with an eternal perspective." We're not there yet! And we don't—can't—see as God sees. So we put heaven out of our minds, thinking, *I'll deal with that when the time comes. It's a long way off.*

Maybe. Maybe not.

But I believe God gives us a glimpse of eternal life by first letting us experience a new life here on earth. That was the experience of Harold Thompson.

Harold was a notorious bank robber who stole, literally, millions of dollars. He was finally caught, charged, convicted of armed robbery, and sentenced to life in prison. He was a pretty tough character and became one of the prison bosses. Many thought his sentence was permanent—not only a life of physical incarceration, but also a lifetime of sin and spiritual darkness.

But something happened to Harold. He heard the gospel

and eventually gave his life to Christ. He dramatically changed. He developed a hunger for the Word of God and a deep desire to see his fellow inmates come to Christ. Although he was behind bars, God set his soul free. And he took every opportunity to share that message with others.

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Many of his fellow prisoners came to Christ, and Harold began a Bible study to help them grow in their faith. He became a model prisoner. Eventually, through an amazing chain of events, the president of the United States heard about his story and decided to pardon him. And when Harold Thompson was released, he became a part of the prison ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ.

In talking with Harold, it is readily apparent that he is a man who lives with profound gratitude that God stepped in to give him a second chance. He lives his new life committed to eternal priorities. And though our own stories may not appear to be as dramatic, God stepped into each of our lives to give us this same gift. We have been given new life, and we are going to be with Him forever.

The gift of eternal life also affects our time on earth because we no longer need to fear death. Think of it: If you are a believer—if you have given your life to Christ—death is not final. It is just a transition from one life to another, almost like walking through a door. Though death is sorrowful, it is not the end.

If you are not afraid of death, it releases you to live the Christian life with a sense of holy freedom. The fact that you

will live forever brings a sense of humble confidence about what you do *right now*. You do not need to walk through life burdened by the worries and fears of this life.

IN JUST A MOMENT . . .

For you, as for me, it all began with a defining moment—a moment on which all history hangs.

You've probably heard the term *defining moment*. For example, September 11, 2001, stands as a defining moment in American history. The planes that were hijacked by terrorists and flown into the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and crashed in western Pennsylvania forever changed the way we view our safety and security as Americans. I remember thinking that day that this was the first time in my lifetime that America had been attacked on her own soil. I sensed that things would never be the same in this country—and every time I go through security at an airport now, I am reminded how our way of life was altered on that sunny September morning.

When Karen and I were married on May 22, 1971—that was a defining moment. Even as we exchanged vows, I thought, *You're really going to have to step up here . . . you're the head of a household now*. In fact, as we stood in the receiving line during the reception, my father said to me, "Son, I want you to remember that Karen didn't ask to marry you—you asked to marry her. You better take care of her." I realized, whatever I was before this day, I ain't no longer!

And I remember standing in a hall at Riddell Memorial Hospital, looking into the newborn nursery and seeing our first child. As I gazed at that baby boy, my eyes filled with tears as I prayed, "God, help me to be the best dad that I possibly

can be.” I knew I had the charge and care not only of his physical well-being but also of his soul. That was a benchmark.

Often defining moments are dictated by circumstances outside of our control. The death of a loved one . . . an accident or illness or sudden calamity . . . or even an unexpected opportunity at work or in ministry—all of these situations force us to make decisions. What we do in response to these life invasions will determine the course of our lives.

Two thousand years ago, God orchestrated a defining moment so profound that the world still debates its meaning today. Through this one incredible act, He demands a response from every person born into this world. There’s no such thing as choosing not to choose. To not respond favorably is to choose both a way of life apart from God and an ultimate destiny forever separated from Him. Our lives and our futures depend on our response to God’s defining moment.

I’m speaking of the focal point of history—the death of Christ on the cross.

“WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM GOD?”

It was a Sunday morning in January 1964, and I was almost fourteen. Our pastor had finished preaching, and he asked those who sensed that they had a particular spiritual need to come and kneel at the altar.

In my heart I knew this was my moment. For several weeks I had been haunted by the question, *What will happen to me if I die? Where will I go?* Furthermore, I felt guilty because of the wrong things I had done. No one had to convince me that I was a sinner—I knew in my heart that I was guilty. God had made me aware of my need.

So that Sunday morning in 1964 was a divine appoint-

ment. Through our pastor's invitation, the Holy Spirit was forcing the issue in my heart. I was brought face-to-face with God's defining moment—the death of His Son on the cross. I knew I had to make a decision and settle the issue, and so I came to the altar.

My pastor knelt beside me and put his arm around my shoulder, asking, "Son, what is it you want from God?" I began to weep as I expressed my need to be forgiven and have Christ in my life. He led me in a prayer of repentance and faith. It was my defining moment. That day my life and destiny changed. My sins were forgiven, and I became a citizen of heaven.

To be sure, in the words of my dear friend Josh McDowell, there are many ways to Christ but only one way to God, and that is through Christ (John 14:6). We each have our own story about our spiritual journey—but at some point all of us must come to the cross. That is the place where lives are transformed and our future is determined.

I am concerned that too often we lose sight of the cross in how we do Christianity these days. We participate in church worship and ministry activities, and we spend time reading the Bible and growing in our relationship with God. We look for ways to feed the poor and heal broken marriages and keep our children unstained by the world and resist temptation and address cultural issues from a biblical perspective—and somehow the cross becomes a peripheral issue in our lives.

But the cross *is* Christianity. We live within its shadow, as D. L. Moody understood. When asked about the source of his success as a Christian and an evangelist, he would often say "Before I came to Christ, I worked toward the cross. After I came to Christ, I worked from the cross. The source and the secret is the cross."

HIS PASSION, OUR PENALTY

Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* reminded us forcefully of why the cross matters. The months before and after the release of the movie saw a remarkable national debate unfolding. I found it amazing that questions like "Who killed Christ?" and "Why did Christ die on the cross?" were actually discussed on prime time, national television.

Many people assailed Gibson for his unsparing, gut-wrenching portrayal of Christ's suffering, for focusing so much on this one part of Jesus' time on earth, and even for relying too much on the gospel accounts. They feared the film would spark a wave of anti-Semitism. What these critics did not understand was the "why" behind the Passion—that Christ suffered and died to pay the penalty for our sins.

But many Christians did get it. They—we?—wept as they watched because they knew Christ endured each lash on the back, each agonizing step on the Via Dolorosa, each painful breath while hanging on the cross, because of the ugliness and enormity of their own sin. They thought of the selfishness and deceit and pettiness and cruelty that they fought on a daily basis, and marveled anew that their sins are forgiven because of what Christ went through for them/us on the cross.

You see, the focal point of Christ's mission in this world was to once and for all deal with the problem of sin. It was God's plan for His only Son to experience unimaginable suffering, to be tortured and hung on the cross for the sins of the world. What He went through for us is beyond human description. And to think that the God-man, Christ Jesus, as an act of His will, submitted to His Father's plan. As Jesus said in John 10:14–18:

“I am the good shepherd; and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock with one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.”

In his description of the willing submission of the Savior to suffer on our behalf, the apostle Paul says in Philippians 2:8, “And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” That last phrase, “even death on a cross,” underlines an incredible irony—that innocent royalty was submitted to a common criminal’s death.

The cross was a means of capital punishment throughout the Roman Empire, reserved for the worst murderers and other despised criminals. The cross was created to punish the guilty—and that’s the point. Jesus was *not* guilty. He was sinless, but He bore our guilt and our sin.

As Jesus hung on the cross, He uttered three words just before he died: “It is finished” (John 19:30). He was not referring to the end of His physical suffering on the cross. He was talking about the completion of His mission, the fulfillment of God’s plan. The debt was paid in full. Nothing else needs to be done.

Pastor C. J. Mahaney said it well: “The Christian who desires to live a cross-centered life will regularly face his or her own depravity and the seriousness of personal sin, squarely and unflinchingly. It’s a reality. But the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin is even greater.”¹

I don't know about you, but this truth—this profound, severe grace and mercy—causes me to bow in worship and adoration to our awesome God. His love for us is both incomprehensible and unspeakable.

WE BECOME

SLAVES OF

WHATEVER

WE YIELD

OURSELVES TO.

I am reminded of a man I know who accumulated an incredible credit card debt. He had grown accustomed to a rather extravagant lifestyle and had an addiction to things. He was using credit cards to pay other credit card bills. Finally, his “smoke and mirrors” game caught up with him. He could no longer manipulate the system. The chickens came home to roost, and he had to declare bankruptcy.

Similarly, we were born morally and spiritually bankrupt. But the good news is that when we acknowledge and declare our spiritual bankruptcy before God, He forgives us and pours upon us the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:3–8).

EVERYDAY SURRENDER

But that's not all!

When we commit our lives to Christ, we not only receive forgiveness of sin but we are also given the gift of eternal life. Our future is changed—as Harold Thompson found out. By placing our faith in Christ, we are no longer condemned to eternal separation. We are given a new life, an eternal life; we know we will live with Him forever in a special place reserved for us (John 14:1–3). By giving us this gift, God is in effect declaring, “My child, I love you so much that I want you with Me forever.” It says that He has bought us, purchased us, and we are His (1 Peter 1:18–20 and Ephesians 1:13–14).

But how does this affect the way we live our lives day in,

day out? When we placed our faith in Jesus Christ, then the crucified, resurrected Son of God came to take up residence in our lives. In some mysterious and profound way, we by faith have experienced His crucifixion (“I have been crucified with Christ,” Galatians 2:20). Sin’s controlling power over our lives has been broken. Sin is always with us; never are we going to be sinless and perfect in this life. However, we do have a perfect Savior living inside us.

We become slaves of whatever we yield ourselves to (Romans 6). And because Jesus has broken the power of sin over us, we have to choose, on a moment-by-moment basis, to yield to the victorious Christ who lives within us. When we yield to the indwelling Christ, He lives His life in and through us and empowers us to overcome sin. In this regard, victory over sin or conquering sin is the result of moment-by-moment surrender to the power of the cross.

This power also allows us to declare and maintain our allegiance to the One who has changed our lives. When empowered by the Spirit, we are not ashamed of the cross. To be a follower of Christ means to be a member of the community of the cross. Jesus said in Matthew 10:38, “And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.” In other words, we should be willing to identify with all that the cross means and implies—not just forgiveness and eternal life, but also times of suffering and rejection. We say yes to all that the cross calls for.

Paul put it this way in Galatians 6:14: “May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” This does not imply we should not enjoy this life and some of the good pleasures this world has to offer—but when we surrender our lives to Christ, He claims all of us: every thought, every action, every moment.

“IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME”

We must never forget the cross; it should be like the wallpaper on our computer screen. We should live our lives against the backdrop of the cross.

This is why every follower of Christ should regularly celebrate communion, as Paul declares in I Corinthians II:23–26:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.

Communion is a call to remember the suffering of our Savior on our behalf—to not forget what He has done, what He has given to us, and who we are. One of my most tender, cherished childhood memories has to do with a communion service. At the church where our family attended, we celebrated communion on the first Sunday of every month. As a young boy of perhaps five or six, I sat on the pew between my mother and father. As they passed the elements, the congregation would sing, “Let Us Break Bread Together.” And even as I write these words, I can still hear those sweet sounds of the congregation singing:

*Let us break bread together on our knees.
Let us break bread together on our knees.
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
Oh Lord, have mercy on me.*

*Let us drink wine together on our knees.
Let us drink wine together on our knees.
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
Oh Lord, have mercy on me.*

*Let us praise God together on our knees.
Let us praise God together on our knees.
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
Oh Lord, have mercy on me.*

I remember one particular day when I looked up at my mother as she sang along, and I watched tears of remembrance fill her eyes and slowly run down her cheeks. She loved Jesus, and she had experienced the power of the cross. She was living in the light of that single defining moment that changed history.

Are you living in that light?