

ANSWERING THE FEAR OF DYING

by Daniel Knauft

As a U.S. soldier in Iraq, my son vied for his life for 176 days. From the dangerous trek toward Baghdad, the demolition of ammunition dumps, gun battles, house raids, patrols and guard duty, he dared not relax his state of alert.

In a letter, he wrote: "I've seen too much death, destruction. . . going out on missions, not really knowing if I'm coming back or not, makes me cherish life so much."

When he was stripped of his weapon (a twenty-four-hour companion) upon exiting Iraq, he felt naked and defenseless. For months upon his return to civilian life his acquired instinct for danger interfered unduly. Self-preservation is one of the strongest natural instincts of human existence.

How widespread in our day is the fear of dying? On Wednesday, February 4, 2004, CBS television's 60-Minutes II, looked in on Larry King's seventieth birthday celebration. King is the American icon of radio and television talk shows with over 30,000 interviews to his credit. Now the interviewer was the interviewee. When asked, "What is your greatest fear in life?" He answered: "It's the fear of dying."

Death rarely gives advance notice. Nicole (not her real name) lay critically injured in a hospital bed following a late night auto accident. She was a "good-looker" campus coed, a weekend party favorite. Now her life hung in the balance. At a moment of conscious awareness and amidst sobs of panic and anger, she confronted her mother who held her hand: "Mom, you taught me how to hold my liquor. . . you taught me how not to get pregnant . . . but you never taught me how to die. Please, Mom, tell me how to die!"

That's right! Hardly anyone ever gets taught how to die—not at home, not in an elementary, high school or university classroom, and surely not on MTV. Curious, isn't it, that an event so seriously far-reaching is given hardly a thought in our death-denying culture. Yet millions of people hunger to know the future; and these same millions are inquisitive about life beyond death.

Have you, dear reader, ever wondered: If this were my last day alive, would I be certain that in the resurrection of the just I would come back to life as Jesus promised when He returns?

Only One Life

As a researcher evaluating the material to present to you, my reader friend, I believe the question of this chapter is the reason for this booklet. I'm writing because I sincerely care about your future. The limited span of every person's lifetime is all there is to complete a

decision for eternity. “For the grave cannot praise thee, death can not celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit [grave] cannot hope for thy truth.” (Isaiah 38:18)

So what is the most crucial question ever to be asked by mortal humans? It is simply this: What must I do to be saved? What must I do to rightfully claim eternal life?

The person who actively pursues this question is, in the truest sense of the word, smart! And I would add two other words—intelligent and wise. When the answer to this question is found, embrace it and never let it go. “ ‘Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.’ ” (Revelation 2:10, NRSV)

To the one who is afraid to die because you are unprepared; to the person who has no hope beyond this life; to the one living life without reference to the Creator God, it is His wisdom that urges: “ ‘Happy is the one who listens to me...whoever finds me finds life . . . but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.’ ” (Proverbs 8:34–36, NRSV)

The fact of the matter is that God is actively trying to arrange your rescue with your consent. He is longing to have a passionate, saving relationship with you. Here are the steps you must take if you are serious about the question, “What must I do to have the certainty of eternal life?”

Step 1: Say “yes” to God

He is searching for a way to get your serious attention. Here is His challenge: “When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.” (Jeremiah 29:13, NRSV) In the pages of the Bible and through His providence in your life, God reveals Himself.

Why is this important? Hours before going to His death on the cross, Jesus said this in His prayer: “ ‘This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’ ” (John 17:3, NRSV)

Your intellect, emotions and senses were made to enjoy God. You have the intellectual and emotional apparatus to dynamically interact with the Being who designed you. (Genesis 1:27) He wants to be the first One you turn to. He delights in you. Don’t let anything rob you of your richest, truest, forever Friend!

Step 2: Admit who you really are

“All have sinned.” (Romans 3:23) Sinful living is the “pits.” As a sinner, you are under the sentence of death—you are on death row. Sin is a capital offense and you deserve to die. Admit your sinful condition and that you cannot free yourself. You cannot appreciate clearly the solution to your dilemma unless you acknowledge the magnitude of the price

you will pay if your sins are held against you. God finds no pleasure in anyone being lost forever. Like a friend who cares deeply, He cries out: “turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you [choose to] die?” (Ezekiel 33:11, NRSV)

Jesus has given you the opportunity to escape. You are not alone! He will fill your cup of inner thirst! He will never fail to stand by you!

Step 3: Embrace the pardon offered to you

When Jesus died on the cross, He suffered the full, just punishment for the sins of everyone who lived on this earth. He took in His body your sins and took your place in death. “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities . . . and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:5, 6)

In doing so, Jesus won the right for God to give full pardon for your past life of sin. When you begin to realize the magnitude of Jesus’ love for you and that your sins caused His death, your conscience will be awakened to bring inward remorse and sorrow. This is God’s working to bring you to repentance, which means you have turned away from sin.

Claim the pardon Jesus offers you. You can tell God: “Because Jesus died for me, I accept Your full pardon and the forgiveness of my past life of sin. And I receive Jesus into my life as my Savior and Lord.” At this moment you have passed from death row to life in Jesus Christ. You are a forgiven person and stand pure before God. Trust God that this is truly so.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:8, NRSV)

Step 4: Celebrate your new beginning

When you receive Jesus as your pardon from sin, you have become God’s new creation with a new beginning. This will stay new for as long as you choose. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17, NRSV)

Because the true measure of your life is valued by what it cost to pardon you, you have been placed on a new level of self-worth and self-respect. You are a new person with noble purpose and meaning in life. You have an exciting future!

Step 5: Live your life with honor

Jesus has given you a noble future. Make your choices to honor Him. Start today! He is your new point of reference for everything. Your understanding of His will for your life

will grow like a flower grows from a seed. Your motivation is love: “For the love of Christ urges us on, . . . he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.” (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15, NRSV)

Step 6: Don't be afraid! Just be faithful!

Jesus is the ultimate Hero. He has no rivals. No one can do what He has the authority and power to do. If you have Him, you are safe! “And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” (1 John 5:11, 12, NRSV)

Jesus is anxious to return with His army of angels in the grand finale of this world's gruesome history to claim what is rightfully His. You are His treasured reward for the death He suffered on the cross. You will be His eternal joy and happiness. Should you die before He returns, remember, this is only temporary. Jesus holds the key to your grave: “ ‘Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades [the grave].’ ” (Revelation 1:17, 18, NRSV) The important thing is not your gravestone. Jesus has marked your grave, knows your DNA, remembers the “fingerprint” of your whole person; and He will delight in re-creating you in the resurrection better than you could ever imagine. His universe will welcome you!

For the Person who Hesitates

Jesus met a young man whose material possessions, influential position and popularity left him empty and unfulfilled in life. He came to Jesus with the right question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16–22) His question was the clue that he felt a great lack in life even though he had everything anyone could want. Now he meets the one Person who could point the way to what is truly of value in life.

Jesus gave the answer inviting him to sell his riches (which claimed the loyalty of his heart) and “come and follow Me.” Jesus had given the terms that would fill his life full of meaning and guarantee life eternal. Unfortunately, he turned away “sorrowful, grieved and sad.” He had chosen his earthly valuables and human accolades in place of a relationship with the Sovereign of the universe. He was actually forfeiting an eternity for the brief, present pursuit of his own lusts and selfish ambitions. After this encounter with Jesus, he is never heard from again; unknowingly, he was actually throwing his life away and writing his own death warrant.

Dear reader, will you make this same fatal mistake? (Forgive me for being so direct!) Or will you choose wisely? Will you allow the eternal to overpower this moment of hesitation?

Choose Wisely, Choose Wisely!

A precious little girl was given a choice between two items. Before her stood her favorite uncle holding her choices, one in each hand. In the first was a sparkly, shining, silver dime. In the other was a crumpled wad of paper printed in pale green—a hundred dollar bill. Which would she choose—the glittering coin or the piece of paper? Would it be the one that flattered her senses or the one whose worth was a thousandfold greater? If you could you would urge her to choose wisely, wouldn't you? Now her little hand clasps the silver dime. Out of ignorance she has made a costly mistake.

What will you do with the life choices before you? Much more is on the line! Will you make a costly mistake with full awareness and forfeit your inheritance? Or will you choose wisely?