

Study Guide

Stepping Into Eternity

Introduction

What is accurate or inaccurate about this statement: “The church does a fairly good job at teaching us how to live as Christians, but I did not receive any teaching or practical preparation for dying.”

Make a list of the things we need to “teach” people about dying from a Christian perspective.

Why is the following passage from John pivotal to our understanding of death?

John 14:2-3 where he says *In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*

Most believe this passage refers to the second coming. The author believes that also refers to the moment of death. Why would the author come to this conclusion?

Chapter 1: The Trip of Discovery

Dr. Rawlings’ radio interview and book on his experience with the dying was a turning point for the author. What insights of Dr. Rawlings’ testimony struck you?

Why would the Lord have Jan push Tom to drive to Toledo and then turn around and leave almost immediately?

What does this tell us about the way the Lord works in our lives?

Chapter 2:

A Conversation with Jesus Christ

The author cites John 5:24 *"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."*

Define "hear", "believers" "eternal life" and "condemned."

According to Jesus when does eternal life begin?

What does "Life" mean in this context?

If Life has already begun the moment we believe then what happens to us at death?

When Beatrice was dying several well meaning but insensitive Christians came to her and said, "that there had to be hidden sin in Bea's life that was preventing the healing." Why have we adopted the idea that everyone should be healed in this life?

The author said that his mother-in-law told him that Jesus was coming for her, welcoming her and telling her that this would all happen soon. Why did he believe she was talking to Jesus?

The author, following that experience, came up with several questions: A sampling of those questions:

“Does Jesus come personally for every believer on his or her deathbed?”

“If Jesus comes for the believer, what happens to those who do not believe?”

“Am I supposed to share this experience with others?”

“If I do share this experience, will they think I’m out of my mind?”

If you had been there with the author how would you answer those four questions?

Chapter 3:

Searching the Scriptures for Biblical Answers

•The author points out that following the horrors of WWII a large number of questions and misgivings that plagued many hearts were left unanswered.

Questions such as:

“Why would God allow so many good people to die?”

“Where was the church in Europe when the Holocaust was occurring?”

“What is the meaning and purpose to life in the midst of so much destruction and death?”

What Biblical answers can you give to these paramount questions 70 years later?

•In Hebrews 4:12 we read *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

2 Tim 3:16 *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*

These two passages are fundamental for our Christian belief in absolute truth.

•Define absolute truth.

•Explain why the average Christian has a hard time defending absolute truth?

- Why is the following information mandatory for Christians to know and be able to communicate to skeptics:

There is more evidence for the accuracy of the New Testament than all other historical writings. In fact, the New Testament has far superior evidence for accuracy than the 17 writings of William Shakespeare, who wrote in the 17th century. Remember also that he wrote after the invention of the printing press. In every one of Shakespeare's plays, there are gaps in the printed text. We have no idea what was written in these gaps. Scholars therefore "guess" what the text might have been. On the other hand, the New Testament alone has more than 25,000 handwritten copies that are in 99.000% agreement with one another. Remarkable!! (Josh McDowell, A Ready Defense)

- The author points out that in regard to absolute truth Jesus claims to be God in human form and the final arbiter of truth.

- How does this statement impact our understanding of Jesus' words?

•Since Jesus is the final word in all matters then what assurance does this give us when we read in John 11:25-26 *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?*

- The author lists **Thirteen Affirmations of Eternal Life**. Which one impacts you the most and why?

•Jesus defines eternal life in John 17:3 this way: *Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God,* and today as we live in a very uncertain world filled with terrorism and suffering.

•The author closes Chapter 3 with these words:
When a Christian breathes his or her last breath, something wonderful happens. Jesus himself, the resurrection and the life, comes for us to take us by the hand, speak words of reassurance and comfort, and to walk us into heaven. We can know for sure that those who die in Christ merely pass out of their bodies to be with the Lord forever.

Why it is so important that every Christian knows this truth and lives with this assurance?

Chapter 4:

Knowing What to Expect

The author writes: *The same is true when it comes to a supernatural encounter with the Lord at the bedside of a dying loved one. If you don't know what to look for, you can easily miss it!*

What things ought we to look for at the deathbed of a loved one that may reveal the presence of the Lord?

Describe what sparkling eyes look like.

Describe a penetrating stare.

Have you seen or heard of the reaching out of the hand?

Have you seen or heard of a conversation with someone not visibly present in the room and the dying person?

Have you seen or heard of a great presence of peace descending on the room of the dying?

Why do dying Christians, who have been in a coma, often quote scripture?

Have you seen or heard of dying Christians singing hymns or praise songs?

Have you ever experienced an urgent need to drop everything you are doing and go to be with someone at the moment of death? Describe that experience.

Have you ever experienced joy at the bedside of a dying Christian? Do you know of anyone who has?

Chapter 5:

Communicating Words of Life

The author says that words have real power. Explain what power words contain.

Why is it so hard to verbalize, "I love you," to those we care about?

Why do we often live with the illusion that we have plenty of time to tell those we love how we feel about them?

Another powerful phrase is "I forgive you." What does forgiveness do for others and what does it do for you?

The author points out that it is important for us to grant permission for the dying to depart. Why would he make such a statement?

What is the right and wrong type of question to put to the dying person?

Make a list of people you need to tell "I love you, I'm thankful for you, I forgive you, you have made a difference in my life."

Agree together, out loud, that you will make that phone call, write that email, send that letter, or see them face to face to tell them the things you want to say but never have.

Chapter 6:

What to do in the Presence of the Dying

With what you have discovered thus far in this book, identify those things that would make it easier to be at the bedside of a dying Christian. Why is it so hard to verbalize, "I love you," to those we care about?

The author lists several things to do in the presence of the dying. As a small group come up, with agreement, on the meaning to the following recommendations.

- To be expectant.
- To use effective listening.
- Listening spiritually.

The author advises that we ask some specific questions.

1. Do you have any regrets that you would like to resolve in the time you have remaining?
2. Do you live with the assurance that when you breathe your last breath Jesus will come to take you by the hand and walk you into the kingdom of God?
3. Is there anyone you want to communicate with before you go home with Jesus?
4. Have you told your family, spouse, children, parents, siblings, etc., that you love them?
5. Is there anything you need to confess or anyone you need to forgive?

What is the purpose of these questions and why are they rarely asked?

The author recommends sharing one or more of these scriptures with the dying person.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38,39

Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day. 2 Timothy 1:12b

I thank my God every time I remember you, In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Phil. 1:3-6

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Psalm 46

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" John 11:25-26

If someone watched you share these verses with the dying and asked, "Why did you feel the need to share those verses?" what would you say to them?

Explain the power of touch, especially with someone who is dying.

The author recommends that you pray for and with the dying person. How capable are you of praying with others and what do you need to learn to be more effective at this?

Why is it so vital to tell others what you have experienced at the bedside of a dying believer?

Chapter 7:

Christian Death and Near Death Experiences

Parish nurse, Judy Green, told the story of Ed who felt depressed and questioned his eternal relationship with Jesus Christ. Why is doubt such a big problem when people are nearing the end of their life?

How do you handle the doubts in your life?

Judy Green spoke of Alice who experienced near death and caught a glimpse of heaven. Some would say that this was an illusion. How would you respond to this point of view?

Why is the absence of the fear of death a good indicator that someone has already experienced the other side of death like Alice?

Sylvia Holmen told the story of her grandmother on her deathbed pointing out her window and exclaiming, *"Here He (Jesus) comes," laid back and died!*

Have you ever experienced something like this?

The author spoke with a nun and several nurses who told him that these kind of experiences are normal for believers.

If this is true then why have we heard so little about it in the church?

How can we help pastors, leaders and members of the church become more aware of these experiences and testify to their reality?

The author also pointed out that many believers struggle with the assurance of their eternal destinies. Why is there such a struggle?

If you were the pastor of the local church, what would you do, to clear up this problem? Be specific.

Chapter 8: Dying without Jesus Christ

Why did the author compare the balance of truth and love to the Flying Walendas?

The Bible is insistent that truth without love is nothing more than legalism. Love without truth is mere emotion. Based on this statement which direction do you lean in your faith walk?

What steps are you taking to make sure truth and love are kept in balance?

Most people in our culture don't relate well to the word "sin." Explain why the more familiar words "shame and guilt," can be substituted for sin when talking to unbelievers?

The author says that there are two requirements for salvation. What are those two requirements?

The author said that a transfer of faith, confidence, trust from us to Jesus Christ alone is necessary. How is faith a transfer of trust?

Have you memorized 1 John 5:12-13?

He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life .

What does this kind of transfer look like day to day?

Jesus took "hell" very seriously. Why do most pastors downplay hell in the 21st century?

What is "Universalism" and why is it such a great threat to the truth of Jesus Christ?

Explain why these two passages are pivotal to understanding the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

John 14:6 Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Acts 4: 12 Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

Have you memorized 1 John 5:12-13?

He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Agree together to memorize these two verses prior to meeting next week.

Chapter 9:

Ministering to Those Who Want to Die

What would you say to someone who said, "Pastor, I'm ready to die. Why doesn't Jesus come and take me home?"

Those who are skeptical of Christian claims are always ready to ask the question: "Why would a good God allow a child to die tragically and permit an older person with dementia to live a long time? What would you say to them?"

Read each of the three passages below and determine the characteristic of the Lord they identify.

Psalms 145:8,9 The LORD is kind and merciful, slow to get angry, full of unfailing love. The LORD is good to everyone. He showers compassion on all his creation.

Job 34:12 There is no truer statement than this: God will do no wrong. The Almighty cannot twist justice.

Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Explain how and under what circumstances you would share one of these three passages with someone who was dying.

The author says that when we are "in pain, or am confused, or am surrounded by frustration, my characterization of God's nature is often blurred and distorted. Instead of seeing him as a loving merciful Lord, I presume that he is acting toward me in an arbitrary, uncaring manner."

How do we keep the character of God and his kindness toward us in balance when we are filled with pain, sorrow, hurt or depression?

When the author visited Mildred and she was struggling with her pain, desiring instead to die, these words came out of his mouth.

"Mildred, indeed Jesus tells us in his Word that he loves you with an everlasting love. He loved you before you were even created in the womb. He knows your suffering and it hurts him too. Jesus has an eternal purpose for your final days, and when the time is right Jesus will come for you, take you by the hand, and walk you into his kingdom. In the meantime tell him about your pain and suffering, but also tell him that he is the Lord and you will wait for him."

What was good and not so good about this counsel? What would you have said to Mildred?

Isolation and loneliness are the common characteristics of depression especially for the elderly. If you have total power and control how would you organize the church to assure that no believer is ever isolated or feels lonely?

The author spoke of a "prayer of release" for the dying. Define what this means.

Chapter 10:

Overcoming the Fear of Death

Why is the assurance of our eternal destiny with Jesus Christ so difficult for many believers to hold on to when they face trials and pain?

The author identified three transforming truths that became the backbone, the foundation of the early Christians' faith and life.

1. The claims of Jesus that he was who he said he was.
2. These early Christians knew their ultimate destination was heaven.
3. They had an eternal perspective of life.

First: Decide why each of these is so vital to our faith.

Second: What do we need to do to make sure every believer fully understands and grasps these three monumental truths?

Values center on Jesus Christ and eternity:

- In Jesus is life alone.
- In Jesus we have forgiveness of sins and purpose for living.
- In Jesus we have objective truth that is universally binding on all people.
- Jesus being the author of life is also the master of death.
- The only real value of life is knowing Jesus and loving one another.
- At death Jesus will be present to take us into eternity.
- We will live with Jesus forever.

On a scale of 1-10 with ten being the highest, rate where you stand on each of the above statements. Then rate where you think the average Christian is on each of these values.

How do we reinforce these values over and over and over again consistently in the local church and in our homes?

On a scale of 1-10 rate where you stand on church history and the major controversies that shapes the church into its present form?

What happens when we fail to know the history of the church from the time of the apostles to the present?

If you could design a two-year study course for young Christians what would your curriculum contain?

Chapter 11: Stepping Into Eternity Preparing for the Final Moment

The author talked about visiting a new couple who had come to church. Finally he asked, *"Have you ever asked Jesus into your heart as personal Lord and Savior?"* To this the husband responded, *"You're the first person who has ever asked me that question."*

If Jesus is the center of Christianity why is it so difficult for Christians to ask others to receive him as Savior and Lord?

The author also discovered this truth, *"Jesus is truly present in each of these situations, but he seldom works exactly the same way. He treats people as individuals and responds to them in a very personal manner."*

If this is true then what does that tell us about how we need to be prepared to share the Gospel with others?

Explain the difference between "The God We Experience Vs. The God of Our Experience."

How is the "God of our experience" often a result of our imagination when the "God we experience" is not?

Why does the Word of God need to be the final umpire in our experiences of the truth?

Preparing for the Final Moment

We are prepared to die when:

- We know the truth of Jesus Christ in his word.
- We trust in the grace of Jesus Christ by faith alone.
- We make sure we have walked in forgiveness and love.
- We have said our final "goodbyes" to loved ones.
- We expect Jesus to come for us at that last moment.

-We live with an eternal perspective that governs our attitude, behavior, and decisions.

Rate where you stand on each of these statements on a scale of 1-10 (ten being the highest). Then rate where the "average" Christian may be on these statements.

The author talked about the importance of having an eternal perspective. Some would call this a biblical worldview. What things would an eternal perspective focus on?

Our youth are desperately in need of a worldview that will sustain them when they face the world. As a group, design a course of study and experiences necessary to make this worldview the fabric of their lives.

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. What makes this statement of Jesus so powerful and compelling for those who believe in him?

