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WILL YOU BE READY?

THOMAS A. TARRANTS, III, D.MIN.

PRESIDENT EMERITUS OF THE C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE




Scott was an intern at the C.S. Lewis Institute during his final semester in college. He was a fine young man and a committed follower of Jesus. He was also a bright and accomplished student and was planning to start a doctoral program at Princeton in the fall. During the summer, he would need surgery to correct a problem with his heart, then he would be all set to pursue his academic career. But the fall never came for Scott. Unexpectedly, he died on the operating table.

More recently, death came unexpectedly to Dr. Harry Reeder, the highly respected and greatly loved senior pastor of the 4,100-member Briarwood Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Birmingham, Alabama. He was a prolific servant of Christ, described as “a towering oak of a pastor.” On the morning of May 18, 2023, as he returned home from leading a prayer service, he crashed into the rear of a dump truck and was killed instantly.

And while I was completing this article, the C.S. Lewis Institute staff was shocked by the unexpected death of Dr. Randy Newman, our much-loved Senior Fellow for Apologetics and Evangelism. He collapsed one evening with a heart issue and was taken to the hospital, where he died the next day.

The Bible reminds us often of the brevity of life and the certainty of death. Three thousand years ago, King David observed, “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more” (Psalm 103:15–16). James asks, “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (4:14). And the writer to Hebrews says, “It is appointed for man

A photograph of a cemetery. In the foreground, a large, dark, arched tombstone is partially obscured by tall, dry grass. To its right, a wooden cross stands in the grass. In the background, several other tombstones are visible, some with inscriptions. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, likely from a low sun, creating a strong lens flare effect in the upper left corner. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

As you and I ponder how to prepare for our own departure from this world, I hope we too can say that we have been a good soldier of Jesus Christ and fought the good fight against the world...



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to die once, and after that comes judgment” (9:27). But the Bible also reminds us, as C.S. Lewis put it, that “there are better things ahead than any we leave behind.”²

At a date certain, you are going to die and so am I. God knows exactly when and how, but we do not. What we do know is that when that time comes, it will be too late to go back and take care of things we overlooked, neglected, or postponed. This sobering reality calls for serious and sustained reflection. And it raises the question: How can we be ready for our departure from this world, which is getting closer each day?

The apostle Paul’s example can stimulate our thinking and preparation for how to die well. When Paul wrote the following words, his death was near. He was in prison in Rome, probably in the dark, gloomy Mamertine dungeon, just off the Forum. He had presented his case before Nero and was awaiting the emperor’s decision. In his final letter, he said to Timothy,

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6–8)

As Paul looked back and assessed his life since meeting Christ thirty years earlier, he could say that he had fought the good fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil; that he had finished the mission Jesus had given him “to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15); and that he had held fast to the faith in his own mind and heart, kept it pure and unadulterated, and accurately passed it on to others. This gave him great hope as he faced death and the sure expectation of



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being awarded a crown of righteousness on the day of judgment.


As you and I ponder how to prepare for our own departure from this world, I hope we too can say that we have been a good soldier of Jesus Christ and fought the good fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil; that like a well-trained athlete, we have faithfully run the race in serving God; and that we have held firm our faith in Jesus and His teachings to the end. And I trust we are eagerly awaiting His return. If so, we can look forward to receiving the crown of righteousness that Paul says will be awarded “not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8). What a glorious hope!

But what if we haven’t lived like that? What if we have failed God in some way—maybe many ways? Is there any hope for us? Can we somehow get back on track? Paul would say yes, and he can help us see how.

Three or four years before penning these final words to Timothy, Paul told the Philippians that his passion was, “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10). After three decades of knowing and following Jesus, Paul says that he longs to know Him more intimately and become more like Him.

But Paul is not yet where he wants to be with Christ, and he goes on to say:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature

A close-up photograph of a person's hands, one holding a key, with a teal color cast. The image is monochromatic, featuring shades of blue and green. The hands are positioned in the center, with the right hand holding a key. The background is dark and out of focus, showing some blurred lights. The overall mood is contemplative and somber.

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Paul would go on to remind us that when by God's grace we were born of the Holy Spirit and united to Christ, the Spirit broke our enslavement to sin and freed us to obey God (Romans 6:1–11).





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think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. (Philippians 3:12–16)

Paul is telling us that he has not arrived at perfection, and he repeats himself to emphasize the point. Many—perhaps most of us— can identify with him on this. Neither have we arrived at the intimacy with Christ and the Christlike life to which God calls us. We fall short. In some cases, very short. We may even have lived for a long time in sin and compromise. Facing this can bring discouragement or even despair.

But it doesn't have to be this way. There is a way forward, and Paul demonstrates it. He doesn't let his past failures and defeats discourage and hold him back. Instead, like a marathon runner, he strains vigorously to press toward the goal. And he encourages the Philippians to follow his example, saying "join in imitating me" (3:17) and "what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you" (4:9).

If we will heed Paul's exhortation to faithfully pursue Jesus in daily discipleship and run the race ahead with perseverance, we will be ready to face the hour of our death as Paul did his, with confident hope!

Carol is an example of someone who is doing that. She was a successful business woman and lifelong church member. But while participating in the C.S. Lewis Fellows program, she came to see that she had never given herself fully to God. She surrendered wholeheartedly to God and has been living for Him ever since. She pursues Jesus daily and uses her gifts and abilities to serve Him and others.

Ken is another example. In the midst of a successful career in politics, he came to see that even though he had been raised in the church and thought he was a Christian, he was living for himself



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and not for God. On retreat, he committed himself fully to Christ and began seek to grow and mature spiritually. He transitioned into the business world, became active in serving the Lord, and has been serving Him for years with significant impact.

How do we make our own fresh start? Paul would tell us to start with prayer and sober self-examination. This is a crucial first step in being awakened to where we stand with God. From there, we can move into heartfelt repentance, confession of our sins, and return to God wherever we have strayed. That is, confessing any sins that God brings to our attention and asking His forgiveness, with a firm intention to forsake them, surrender ourselves fully to Him and walk in obedience to His will.

Paul would go on to remind us that when by God's grace we were born of the Holy Spirit and united to Christ, the Spirit broke our enslavement to sin and freed us to obey God (Romans 6:1–11). "Never forget that," he would say. "Reckon it true every day and live accordingly! You are no longer a slave to sin! You are able to obey God. Therefore . . ."

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (Romans 6:12–14)

The members of our bodies—eyes, ears, tongue, hands, feet, genitals, etc.— are the instruments by which we carry out the intentions of our hearts, whether good or ill. Since God's grace has freed us from bondage to the law and to sin and has liberated us for obedience, we must refuse temptations to use our bodily members for sinful purposes and instead use them for righteous

Simultaneously, you must start (or resume) the process of being transformed into Christlikeness by the renewal of your mind (Romans 12:2).





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purposes. We must choose God as our master and act on our choice repeatedly throughout the day.

This is such an important matter that Paul returns to it with urgency a few chapters later:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1–2)

In other words, out of gratitude to God for His wonderful mercy and grace toward you, give yourself wholeheartedly to Him for His purposes, no matter the cost, for as long as you live. Then put your self-surrender into day-by-day action by refusing to be conformed to the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the fallen world—a world which is constantly trying to ‘squeeze you into its mold.’ Simultaneously, you must start (or resume) the process of being transformed into Christlikeness by the renewal of your mind (Romans 12:2). How to do that is beyond the scope of this article, but at a minimum it involves commitment to a Christ-centered, Bible-believing church and community, as well as daily prayer and reading of the Bible and being filled with the Holy Spirit daily.

From that point on, Paul would have us prepare daily for our departure by following his example: “one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3: 13–14). Straining forward is a very strong word in the Greek—picture an Olympic runner straining with all of his or her might to cross the finish line first. This kind of effort can now be successful because by giving ourselves fully to God,



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the Holy Spirit is able to continuously fill (Ephesians 5:18) and empower us to resist the flesh and walk in obedience (Galatians 5:16–18).

Paul would also stress—and this is essential—that for these choices to bear fruit and be sustainable over the long haul, we must, as noted above, be actively engaged in a Bible-believing, Christ-centered church, where we can be nurtured through Bible teaching and preaching, fellowship with other committed believers, worship, and prayer (Acts 2:42).

These guidelines can help us live in joyful anticipation of Christ's return. We can make changes in our lives that will put us on track to hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23).

NOTES

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from *English Standard Version*.

² Letter to Mary Willis Shelburne, June 17, 1963, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, vol. 3, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 1430. Lewis died five months later.



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...I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would be either be a lunatic - on a level with the man who says he’s a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*



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1

Early in his article, Tom Tarrants identifies a question that is critical for each one of us: How can we be ready for our departure from this world, which is getting closer each day? After considering the article, how would you answer that question? How would you explain your answer to a family member or friend?

2

Are there any actions you would like to take in light of reading this article? What are your plans over the next several days and weeks toward taking those actions?



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Thomas A. Tarrants is President Emeritus of the C.S. Lewis Institute. After serving twelve years as president and nine years as vice President, he retired from his position as Vice President for Ministry and Director, Washington Area Fellows Program, with CSLI in June 2019. He holds a Masters of Divinity Degree, as well as a Doctor of Ministry Degree in Christian Spirituality. Tom is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Church

Alliance and a member of the Evangelical Theological Society. He spends his time writing, mentoring, consulting and traveling. His life story is told in *Consumed by Hate, Redeemed by Love*, published by Thomas Nelson Publishers.

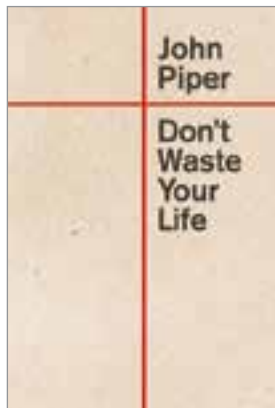


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RECOMMENDED READING



John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life* (Crossway, 2023 edition).

Many spend their lives on trivial diversions, seeking earthly comfort and pleasure above all else. But Jesus said, "Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it," calling us into the eternal purpose and God-exalting life for which we were made.

In this bestselling book, John Piper warns readers of the dangers of an irrelevant life that counts for nothing and calls Christians to the deeper joys, and risks, that matter for eternity. This new edition features a fresh cover, a revised preface, and updated statistics.



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RECOMMENDED READING



Dane Ortlund, *Deeper: Real Change for Real Sinners* (Crossway, 2021).

“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”
—2 Peter 3:18

How Do Christians grow? Few question the call of the Bible to grow in godliness, but the answer to exactly how this happens is often elusive.

In this book, Dane Ortlund points believers to Christ, making the case that sanctification does not happen by doing more or becoming better, but by going *deeper* into the wondrous gospel truths that washed over them when they were first united to Him.

Drawing on wisdom from figures throughout church history, Ortlund encourages readers to fix their gaze on Jesus in the battle against sin, casting themselves upon His grace and living out their invincible identity in Christ.



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RECOMMENDED READING



Guy Prentiss Waters, *Facing the Last Enemy: Death and the Christian* (Ligonier Ministries, 2023).

When we're standing at the gravesite, death gives little closure and leaves many questions unanswered. Despite the common claim that "dying is just a natural part of life," people seem to avoid this unsettling subject more than ever. Yet the Bible doesn't shy away from the reality of death. God's Word

has the answers we need to face the grave with confidence in our risen Redeemer.

In this book, Dr. Guy Waters provides the Bible's answers to essential questions about death, dying, and what comes after this life. Here is balm for the grieving, counsel for caretakers, and guidance to help God's people rest in Christ's victory as we come to life's final battle.