

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of my heroes of the faith was the unexcelled philosopher, mathematician, and Christian, Blasé Pascal. He spoke a profound truth 350 years ago that we'd do well to seriously consider today. He said that he had learned how to define life backwards and to live it forwards and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 and let's learn what that's all about.

## **DEFINING LIFE BACKWARDS**

I start with verse 17. There's a candy that's called *Now and Later* and that's essentially what we have in this verse. Paul mentions what we experience **now**, decay and affliction, and **later**, eternal glory beyond all comparison. His linking of now and later reveals one of the most significant truths of our existence. The meaning of our earthly lives now is largely a matter of what comes later.

Language is a good analogy of that because it's in language that meaning is most clearly expressed. Look at the word "water" on the power point. Is it a noun or verb? You can't know the answer to that simply by looking at the word "water." But suppose that I add the words "my garden while I'm gone." You now know what the word "water" is. It's a verb. Or suppose that I add the words "tastes so good when I'm thirsty." You now know that it is a noun. My point is this. In both cases, you know the meaning of the word "water" because you know the words that come after it. The meaning is found in what comes later.

It's the very same way with our lives. The meaning of our earthly lives now is largely a matter of what comes later. The significance of the activities, experiences, and events that make up our lives is always found in what comes after those lives are over.

Paul gives two examples of that in verses 16-17. In verse 16, he writes that *"our outer man is decaying."* He's referring to aging here. In verse 17, he goes on to mention "affliction." He's talking about the

troubles of life, including persecution. As some of you know, a blood clot paralyzed my brother-in-law last year. That is an affliction.

Anyway, having mentioned decaying and affliction, Paul goes on to place both in the context of what comes after our earthly lives are over. He reveals in doing so that the meaning of aging and trouble is found in what comes later. Is aging a process of gaining or losing for instance? We can answer that only in relation to what comes after our earthly lives are over.

That's the way it is with most things. The meaning of our activities, experiences, and events is largely a matter of what comes later. Meaning is a "going beyond" so to speak. It is a transcendence of what is present toward what is future. It is always found, when it's found, in what comes later, after our earthly lives are over.

The implication of that is profound. It implies that the only way that we can truly define our earthly lives is backwards. Let's go back to the word "water" again. To define it, we have to start not with it but with what comes later. It's the very same way with our earthly lives. To define them, we have to start not with them but with what comes later, after they're over. Or as Pascal said it, we define our lives backwards.

That's our call today. As Paul and Pascal did, we need to define our lives backwards. That's our call and answering it requires two things.

## **EXAMINE WHAT COMES LATER**

First, we must examine what comes later - as Paul did in verse 17. Knowing that the meaning of aging and trouble is found in what comes later, he examines what it is that comes later. He finds that it's "*an eternal weight of glory.*" That's what comes after this one life that we live on earth if we're followers of Jesus - a life of glory that never ends.

That shows us the first thing we have to do in order to define life backwards. We have to examine what comes later, that is, our eternal life of glory. We have to examine it and give it thought.

If you're like 99.9% of Christians, you have not done that. The

truth of the matter is that Christians rarely think about or discuss the nature of eternal life. I spent four years in a Christian college and three years in seminary. I never once heard a professor discuss it for more than a minute or so – even in eschatology classes. I also never once heard an entire sermon or Sunday school class devoted to the subject. Christians do emphasize and develop as a topic how we get eternal life. But they rarely emphasize or developed as a topic what the nature of that life is. It's beyond the scope of their concern.

There are several reasons for that, the primary of which is probably this. People think that the Bible reveals very little about it. Over the years, at least three people have quoted 1 Corinthians 2:9 to me in that regard, *"Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him."* They quoted that to me and concluded that we can't know much about eternal life. But the problem was that they quoted it out of context. The very next verse shows what Paul's point is. What we cannot know on our own God has revealed to us. He has revealed much, far more than you probably know, about eternal life.

We can intelligently speculate about these issues, for instance, regarding heaven. Where will it be? Will there be time and space? What will our bodies be capable of doing? What will they look like? Will we consume and digest food and water? Will we get tired? Will there be seasons and weather? Will we have emotions and desires? Will we learn and discover? Will we travel? Will we work and play? Will we be male and female? Will we maintain our own identities? How many sense will we have? Will we ever disagree? Will there be animals and if so will they communicate with us? Will we have friends? Will we see God?

Consider this issue as an example of what I mean. What will the age of our body be in heaven? Will a two-year old who dies look like a two-year old in heaven? If I die today, will I look like a 57-year old in heaven? We need to examine that.

I've done that and agree with Hank Hanegraaff that our resurrection

bodies will probably be in their 20's or early 30's. Listen to what he writes in his book Resurrection: *"Our DNA is programmed in such a way that, at a particular point, we reach optimal development from a functional perspective. For the most part, it appears that we reach this stage somewhere in our twenties and thirties . . . If the blueprint for our glorified bodies are in the DNA, then it would stand to reason that our bodies will be resurrected at the optimal stage of development determined by our DNA."* Thus, you ladies who claim to be perpetually 30-years old will likely someday be just that.

My point is this. Once we start digging, we can learn many more details about eternal life than most of us realize – and that's exactly what we should do. I've done that and will teach the details I've learned in a Sunday school class in September called *Life After Life*.

So that's the first thing that we have to do in order to define life backwards. We have to examine in detail what comes later, eternal life.

## **CONNECTING NOW WITH LATER**

There's a second thing that we have to do - correctly connect now with later. Paul did that in verse 17. He compared affliction now with the eternal glory it produces later. He determined in doing so that affliction now is momentary and light. We should do what Paul did. We should correctly connect now with later. Having examined eternal life, we should determine how the activities, experiences, and events of our lives now relate to it.

I once ministered to a Christian couple whose three-year old daughter died. The mother was grief stricken of course and kept saying over and over again, *"I'll never see her grown up."* I didn't know what to say then, 27 years ago, but I know what I'd say now. Based on what I believe about our age in heaven, I'd say, *"You will see her grown up."*

Or consider the time that I scored the winning run in the bottom of the ninth inning in an important college baseball game. My teammates mobbed me after I scored and we celebrated our victory together. Having

examined eternal life, I realize now what that experience was. It was a crack in time and space that gave me a taste, a sampling, of the joy that I'm going to experience in heaven.

In both of those situations, I correctly connected now with later. Having examined eternal life, I determined how that mother's experience and mine related to it. You can see, by the way, the importance of details to doing that. The more details that we know about eternal life, the greater our ability to correctly connect our lives now with it.

So that's what it means to define life backwards. We examine what comes later, eternal life. We then correctly connect our lives now with it. We determine how activities, experiences, and events relate to it.

## **LIVING LIFE FORWARDS**

But it isn't enough just to define life backwards. As Pascal said it, we also need to live life forwards. We need to live now in light of later.

That's what Paul meant in verse 18 when he said, "*While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.*" Looking at the things which are seen means that we **think about** and **act consistently with** what comes later – our eternal life with God.

An unsaved attorney once told me that Christianity is a "pie in the sky religion." That's one of the most common criticisms that secularists level against Christianity. What they're saying is that Christians just sit around all the time thinking about heaven and don't do anything constructive on earth as a result.

But I'll tell you what I told him. He's wrong on both counts. First, most Christians don't think about heaven too much but too little. And second, thinking about it makes us more constructive on earth not less.

That helps us understand what it means to live life forward. We think enough about heaven and act consistently with that. We live now in light of what comes later in other words. Randy Alcorn captures the gist of this in his book Heaven. He writes: "*Knowing that this present world will end and be resurrected into new heavens and a New*

*Earth should profoundly affect our daily behavior. Heaven should affect our activities and ambitions, our recreation and friendships, and the way we spend our money and time."* He's absolutely right.

I know, for instance, that our ultimate destiny is to reign in heaven. To reign means to have power and the authority to use it as we see fit. But God will give us only that degree of power and authority with which He can trust us. He therefore prepares us to reign now in several ways, one of the primary of which is through intercessory prayer, praying for others. So, I think about that and act accordingly. I commit myself to intercessory prayer - and live life forwards in the process.

I used to disparage Hillary Clinton to others because I don't like what she stands for. But I now keep two things in mind. She is an immortal who has an eternal destiny in either heaven or hell and all my words will be brought to judgment. I also now act accordingly. I don't disparage her anymore and live life forwards in the process.

That illustrates what it means to live life forwards. We think about and act consistently with what comes later, our eternal life with God.

## **CONCLUSION**

That then is our call, define life backwards and live it forwards, and what a critical one it is. Verse 17 reveals how dramatically it can alter our perspective and life. Notice how Paul describes our afflictions in light of what comes later. They're momentary and light. They're temporary and trivial.

Suppose that you go to my paralyzed brother-in-law and say that. You're affliction is temporary and trivial. How would he respond? Would he agree and praise the Lord or get angry and kick you out of the house?

It all depends doesn't it. If he's learned the same thing that Blasé Pascal did, he'd do the first. If he hasn't, he'd do the second. That's the difference it can make.

So let's learn what Blasé Pascal did 350 years and do it. Let's define life backwards and live it forwards.