
A PHONE CALL AWAY



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IN FOUR PARTS

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Author's Introductory Note

Since I received a terminal cancer diagnosis a number of people have encouraged me to write about my journey, and I've finally decided to do so. I've written other things, but nothing like what you are reading. I am not a medical expert and certainly not a sage; I have cancer in my bones and elsewhere, and this is my essential qualification. Some may say that my more than four decades of Christian pastoral ministry also qualifies me, but that alone would not be enough. I write because I am among those who *know* they are on a journey toward death, and that makes what I am writing both possible and personal.

Writing about this journey is good for me, but more than that, I have a sincere hope that my reflections will be helpful and hopeful for others traveling this road. Everyone knows they will die one day, but I am one of the fortunate people who is no longer squandering time, and still has enough time to accomplish some good things before my end. Perhaps this piece of writing is among them.

If you are reading this as a fellow traveler, or as a person close to someone who is dying, my overriding desire is that first, you will be comforted, and secondly, that what I write will actually be of value to you. It might even be transformative, but that could be true only with the help of God. There are thousands of books any of us could read to fill our days, but with a terminal diagnosis, we are the least likely people to want to kill time. Time is our precious commodity, and I will attempt to keep this writing short, focused, and worthy of the time you spend with it.

Part One: TRAUMA

I had heard it many times — “We are all just a phone call away from bad news” — but I had never thought such a call would apply to me — until the phone rang. When it did, it was my doctor calling with results of the biopsy he had done four days earlier. The biopsy was supposed to have been precautionary — “just to be sure” — and we were both shocked by the results. Without mincing words, he told me it detected a lot of cancer, and he wanted me to get a scan as soon as possible.

It wasn't long before MRI and PET scans confirmed that my cancer had spread, was “stage four,” and barring a miracle, incurable. I had gone from seeing myself as living a full and active life, to learning I had a terminal condition. And if you are reading this because you or someone you love has received similar news, I hope what I share will help you on your journey.

The particulars of my cancer and treatment are not what this is about. Even though I write personally, I am addressing anyone dealing with a terminal diagnosis. My purpose in *Part One* is to explore the trauma that comes with that phone call, and touch on ways we can respond to it. Unless we are in complete denial, that call thrusts us into a multi-layered crisis which varies for each of us, and might include financial, relational, spiritual, physical, or other crises, because this is what a terminal diagnosis brings.

During my more than forty years of pastoral ministry I've had conversations with many terminally ill people who were

going through deep trauma. Typically, I'd show up at a home or hospital and enter a room to engage the ill person and any others in what I hoped would be a helpful dialogue. Often, we'd begin with small talk, but the art was in guiding the conversation into issues around their illness. How it went from there differed from person to person, and to some degree was determined by their age and how sick they were.

I will never forget the visit I made to a home where the dying father struggled to the kitchen table so the whole family could join together in Holy Communion — a Christian sacrament that remembers the death and resurrection of Jesus. He was very weak, but he wanted to be there. Our brief time was their tearful recognition that he was in his last days, but our consolation was the hope of life after death. Sharing the sacrament made our time incredibly meaningful.

But experiences like this are not always the case: On another occasion, at the request of some aging parents, I went to the home of a middle-aged man I did not know. His adult daughter led me to his bedside where he immediately and angrily told me he didn't want a visit from “no preacher,” and refused to let me visit or even pray for him. His anger was palpable — perhaps at the church, at parents, at God, or even his cancer — and his adult daughter accompanied me back to my car, apologetic for what I had encountered.

Looking back on my years of ministry, it occurs to me that until my own diagnosis, I had always been on the giving end — always been the healthy one visiting the sick — and consequently, had never understood cancer trauma the way I do now. These days I am happy when people really open up because I think it is a healthy thing to do, but I do not coerce them to share things they are not ready to share.

I remember Father Henri Nouwen writing that it is important

for clergy to know when to leave a sick person's bedside, because it is in our leaving that God shows up. His point was that as clergy we can become a kind of God substitute for some people, so they never really encounter the real Presence until we're gone. I think this is true, and I can only hope many seriously ill people had a profound encounter with God after my visit ended. I typically would leave when a conversation had gone as far as seemed appropriate. The sicker the patient, the shorter my visit, but regardless of duration, I have always seen the bedside of any dying person as sacred space.

With my own diagnosis I realize that in my visits I always had the luxury of leaving, and although I carried a sick person in my heart and prayers, I was still able to leave. With my own diagnosis the tables have turned, and I no longer have that luxury. The reality of my cancer follows me everywhere I go.

For at least a month after my diagnosis I only wanted a few chosen people to even know I had cancer. Was this because I knew how to be the care-giver, but didn't know how to be the care-recipient? I wanted people to relate to me for who I was, and was afraid they would only see my cancer. I let my siblings know, and my children know, but when my wife would tell me she had told some other person, I didn't object because she was carrying as much of this burden as I, and was weaving together a support team. She shared my diagnosis with the people she knew would be of support on our arduous journey.

Was I in denial? I imagined a follow-up scan in which they didn't detect any cancer at all, but my imagination couldn't override the truth my body was telling me. I didn't really know what led me to keep my cancer news close — I had never had cancer before — but people found out anyway. It wasn't long before we began getting letters, emails, and calls from friends both near and far. My wife and I slowly accepted our new

reality, and it sometimes sweeps over our emotions. My wife tells me she's had many crying sessions, knowing that after fifty years of marriage, the life we have known is ending, and while medical intervention can delay its end, there's nothing we can do to stop it. For me, it is like the slow winding down of a clock, with every day and every relationship feeling more precious than ever.

I wish I had known more about trauma years ago, but I could only learn it the way we all do — by experiencing it. My education escalated quickly when three months after my diagnosis I went to the emergency room in unrelenting pain. The assumption was that it was the unexpected advance of the cancer and consequently, the emergency room staff administered some powerful pain meds — which worked. They also did an additional procedure, and as I lay in a hospital bed the next morning I began wondering if that procedure had helped, but I needed to get off the pain meds to find out. At my suggestion we backed them off and I was thrilled to discover that the pain was gone.

I went home two days later — pain free — but educated in several important ways: First, I had learned that extreme pain could be managed. Secondly, I realized that I could participate in my own care plan since when I suggested backing off the pain meds my hospital doctor did so. Thirdly, I discovered that not every bump signals disaster. When my oncologist said we were in a marathon and not a sprint, I came to trust it was so. As a former cross-country runner, I remembered that there were parts of some races that made me want to quit, but then the course would level out and I would hit my stride again.

Even after I was home, I was reeling from the “drug set” still in my system combined with what I had just gone through. One evening my wife and I wanted to watch a movie but decided it

had to be “light and fun,” since neither of us had the capacity for anything else. I had never felt so close to “the edge.” Both of us experienced tears that week, overwhelmed by our trauma, and it changed us. Now, when someone begins telling me what they are going through, I listen more attentively, knowing that listening helps people get through it. I know that as my cancer progresses there will be more lessons to learn, but I am thankful for what I’ve learned so far.

My journey is made easier by some key people. I am fortunate to have a supportive wife who talks openly about these things, a daughter-in-law who is a cancer drug research pharmacist and has been a wonderful resource, an understanding sister-in-law who lost my brother-in-law to a similar cancer a few years back, a collection of siblings and adult children who are not afraid to discuss my cancer, a skilled and compassionate medical team, and my own decades of pastoral ministry that prepared me to sit at the bedside of dying people so I can now sit at my own.

Thankful as I am for these people, I have not mentioned my most important resource — my faith in Jesus. He is the bedrock beneath every step and has become the best part of a very hard time. In my four decades of teaching, preaching, and offering care, I understood faith to be crucial as I encouraged and supported others, but a question remained: “Would it bear the weight of my own pending death when my time came?” And yes, we all know we’re going to die one day, but this reality is greatly heightened when we receive that ominous phone call. It was one thing to convey hope to others, but would it be the same for me? Would I experience that “peace that passes all understanding” (Philippians 4:7) or would my faith collapse under the weight of my illness?

My cancer has come with so many unknowns. Among them:

“Is a loving God in control, and does he alone have power over my life and death?” “Did God awaken one day and say, ‘Oh no, I never saw this coming!’?” Or, “Will my family be okay after I’m gone?” And, “If the hope and promise of eternal life is so wonderful, should I still claw out every day I can if I am feeling miserable with no hope of recovery?” So many questions.

God has me on a journey of discovery, and he is teaching me some important things he wants me to know before I transition. I am committed to learning these lessons, and when my cancer really takes over, I hope to say, “God, my future is in your hands; give me what I need to face my final days.” What better alternative could there be? And some could say, “A better alternative would be to not die in the first place!” But really? Then what? Would it really be better to trade a longer life for lessons God wants me to learn? He apparently thinks they are important enough to put me through this. Would a longer life be of greater value than journeying purposefully toward God and coming fully into his presence a little sooner than I would have?

At the time of this writing, it’s been half a year since getting my diagnosis, and I have found that not only is my faith intact, it has actually become stronger than before. To some, it might seem odd or unexpected for me to speak of the blessings of what I am going through, but yes, there are blessings at a time like this. The greatest blessing is realizing that precisely because my faith has held, I do have that peace that passes understanding; I have no fear of death, and actually anticipate eternity. I am not defeated or fatalistic — I am filled with hope and joy. This does not negate the grief I feel as I release my grip on this life and walk through the long goodbye with the people I love, but my faith is the bedrock that sustains me.

Part Two: WHEN and WHAT?

My wife was at the kitchen stove when the phone rang, and her heart sank when she realized I had received bad news — really bad news. There are certain events in life that pin a person to an exact location and time, and this was one of them. My doctor was very factual when I answered his call, and three statements stood out to me. The first: “I was very shocked when your biopsy revealed that every quadrant of [what I biopsied] is cancerous.” The second: “When it comes to [this particular cancer], this is as bad as it gets.” And the third: “There are different types of cancer cells, and yours are the bad ones.”

My wife and I were stunned — maybe in shock — as the whole scope and focus of our lives suddenly shifted. How could we even begin to process my diagnosis? We were in our fiftieth year of marriage, had been walkers and runners who guarded our health all our lives, and when I retired my doctor told me half a dozen times that I was in excellent health — but now this! Cancer had snuck in and I was terminally ill. We had waited so long for retirement, but now we were facing the toughest days of our lives.

The doctor’s call was brief, but thankfully, my wife and I were able to sit with him a couple weeks later for a face-to-face conversation. That conversation was important for us and difficult for our doctor, since neither of us had seen this cancer

coming. We were the last appointment of his day, and he gave us all the time we needed.

In our visit he offered some encouragement, saying his impression was that we would navigate this well and that we could still anticipate “years of quality life.” That was a really broad statement and I began wondering what he meant by “years,” and what he meant by “quality.” I wanted to know precisely *how many years*, but what I have since discovered is that “years” can represent a very broad range — totally unpredictable because “everyone’s body is different.” In my case, the best scenario is acceptable, while the worst is very sobering, and in the meantime, I have entrusted my care to a team of incredibly bright and dedicated doctors and nurses whom I know will get me as far as my body is able to go.

“Quality life” is a different matter, and for now, is not dictated by my illness, though this will change as my cancer progresses. By “quality life” my doctor meant that for some unspecified length of time, I would feel good enough to take on projects, travel, and live pretty much as I chose. And I feel badly that this is not the case for all cancer patients, since many are told they have months, weeks, or even days to live — but not years. We all want our remaining days to have as much quality as possible, and there are choices we make along that pathway. A cancer-survivor friend gave me the advice that saw him through his darkest hour, “Don’t die before you die,” and while it sounds obvious, there are many ways one could die before they are actually dead. My oncology nurse said he has observed that many people with a terminal diagnosis are often more alive than ever, and I concur, because I now see every day as precious and don’t want to squander the time that remains.

For the first months after my diagnosis, I couldn’t get free from the shock of stage four cancer and hardly had a conversation

where it didn't come up. My cancer was like a motor running in the back of my mind — always close at hand. And powerful meds kept reminding me of changes within my body, forcing me to pay attention to pill schedules and other data I had never thought about before. The drugs all had the strangest names and I still lean on my wife to help me remember what some are called.

And then one day we had friends over for an afternoon, and after they left my wife remarked that for our entire visit, my cancer never came up. They knew about my condition, but the gift was that we could talk about so many other things. I suspect some people are afraid to bring up my illness — not sure how I might take it or maybe they're in their own denial — but this was not the case with them: they are facing their own cancer. Since then, we have spent more time together and have gone into all the details, but for one afternoon it never came up, and felt good, even if for a few hours.

I have known people who denied their illness completely — who refused treatment and died earlier than necessary. For me, balance is the goal — to not be derailed by trauma on the one hand or by denial on the other. Cancer is real, but over time a degree of normalcy has returned and it no longer occupies every waking moment. If you are on this journey and can't get cancer off your mind, I understand. Maybe you just need more time, more conversations, or something to distract you. I've been learning to look for activities that can give me the emotional break I need, and remember reading that Winston Churchill took up painting because it was one thing that occupied him enough to give him an emotional break but didn't demand so much that he went away exhausted. Anything like that seems like good advice.

As Saint Anselm has written, “The glory of God is mankind

fully alive,” and I believe that for terminal patients, fullness of life is found in the middle ground between trauma and denial. I am much more deliberate about how I spend my time and energy, and am looking for that space where I feel fully alive.

I’ve found that cancer has not only moved the end point closer, but is also shortening the productivity of every day. If you are receiving treatments, you’re probably experiencing what I am talking about — unusual tiredness. I’m on some powerful drugs — with lesser drugs to counterbalance these main drugs — and the collective effect is exhaustion. I have added at least two hours of sleep to every day — an hour nap during the day and longer in bed at night, and even with that I often feel sluggish. It’s not a complaint — just a description of my new reality. I told my oncologist I was going to be taking a golf vacation and wondered if all these drugs would help me play well. “I don’t know why not,” he told me, and with a smile I said “Good, because I wasn’t very good before.” He smiled.

I “cherry pick” my days, depending on my energy level: If I feel really good, I get out my tools and take on a project; if I am less ambitious, I stand at my easel and paint. When that doesn’t appeal, I sit in my comfortable desk chair and write, and when even that doesn’t work, I pull out a good book until I drift into my daily nap. My wife and I have looked for some lighter moments in all of this and we had to smile when our sweet daughter said, “Dad, you’ve got cancer,” and after a momentary hesitation added, “milk it.” It’s an old expression but my wife knows what it means, and when I tell her I spent the day just reading she says “Good for you.” She promised she would be with me every step, and there is no person I would rather be journeying with than her.

Part Three: STEPPING STONES

After my terminal cancer diagnosis, I began sorting and assessing my priorities, and realized they fall upon what I call the “four stones.” This stone metaphor comes from Psalm 40 which depicts a person struggling to get through a “miry bog” who discovers there are stepping stones just beneath the water’s surface. I picture this person swinging their foot as they find each stone, and this is how they reach the far bank. So, what are my stepping stones through the miry bog?

MY STUFF

My first stone is about all my stuff. One of my first realizations was that I had limited time and could anticipate reduced strength and stamina. I had been living as though I had decades, since my previous good health and the long lives of my parents led me to believe I had many more years. This is why I made certain purchases and formulated plans it would have taken years to complete, but when my diagnosis came, one of my first thoughts was to finish up.

I am a project guy, with tools, materials, workshop, and a list of projects. When I mentioned this to one person, their response was that this would be the least of their concerns, and that I should just leave everything to my survivors to deal with, but I don’t want to leave my mess for others.

So, I’ve been busy: removing a dead tree and its stump, laying

pavers, preparing items for sale, doing car repairs, finishing a deck, completing a bathroom, resurfacing the driveway, and on it goes. What a great feeling to check them off. There are other things too — like cleaning, throwing away weird items, and with all of this, grieving the things that fall below the cut-off line. It feels really sad to use a beautiful tool for the last time.

I should have been paying attention to this years ago. Jesus tells of a farmer who kept building bigger barns to handle his burgeoning crops. The farmer told himself, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.” But God said to him, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Luke 12:16–21).

Fortunately, I have been given more than a night to think this through. It would be easy to assume my adult children would want my possessions, but they have their own lives, and would more likely see my possessions as a burden than an inheritance. I don’t want them asking, “What do we do with all this stuff?” And granted, my wife will have a say too, but she has already told me she has no need for many of my things, though I am still trying to convince her she should learn to use my band saw — but to no avail.

It’s time to clean up and finish up, and although these are only material things, I want my wife to continue her life without having to clean up the aftermath of mine first.

RELATIONSHIPS

I’ve asked myself, “Am I responsible for any relationships that need mending?” I need to give others the opportunity to honestly express any hidden hurts or resentments — and I must do the same. Forgiveness is the answer, and I don’t want

any of the people I love to wish we had dealt with something after the opportunity has passed.

Relationships are not only about mending — they are also about celebrating! So, my wife and I initiate with friends, spend more time with family members, and because I may have spent my last Christmas with the scattered family gathered, I gave them gifts I had personally made.

I am happy when we can spend time with others without my cancer always becoming the topic. The orchestra members where I play viola know I have terminal cancer, and once in a while someone will ask how I'm feeling, but I love that we can simply make beautiful music together, since there is more to me and more to us than my illness.

I do better when I move toward people, and not away from them, and people are especially kind when they hear of my diagnosis. One of my four brothers called and said, “We have been talking and want to know how we can help you out.” I had a project hanging over my head with winter just around the corner, so when I told him what it was he immediately responded, “We’ll do it,” and he called in a few days to say, “It’s all arranged, and we’ll be there in two days.” All my brothers showed up for what turned out to be a wonderful time of working together.

PAIN

Certain cancers can be very painful, and mine may fall into that category, but not yet. I remember asking my brother-in-law what it was like when he got behind on his pain meds, and he described the pain as “screaming.” He added that it taught him a lesson though — to never get behind again. When I went into the hospital during my own bout of excruciating

pain it actually turned out to be a blessing because I discovered that what they gave me really worked.

We are so fortunate to live when and where we do, and I have thought many times about the agony people experienced in the past, and still do in many parts of the world. I asked a nurse how people cope with pain when there's no medication and her one-word answer was, "bourbon." Pain meds have side effects, but they sure beat the alternative. One of the first things my pharmacist daughter-in-law said when she learned of my diagnosis is, "Don't try to tough this out." She warned about the danger of chronic pain, and I don't know much about it but I understood her to say that by not taking the available meds the pain can get so out of control that pain meds can't catch up.

Pain has been my big fear, but a heart to heart with my sister-in-law, advice from my daughter-in-law, conversations with my doctor, recollections from my wife who administered pain meds to her dying mother, and my own hospital experience, have allowed me to feel more at ease about what I will face. I have been told that pain can almost always be "managed."

When the day comes that comfort care becomes paramount, I'll utilize my pain meds as much as needed, and am hoping the final remembrance of me will not be of the pain I was in. My beloved seminary professor, Dr. Dallas Willard, died of cancer and someone at his bedside told me his last words were "Thank you." He finished with a heart of gratitude, and I hope to do the same.

MEANING AND PURPOSE

I had originally thought I needed three stepping stones, but I had nearly missed an important one — meaning and purpose — because so much has shifted with my diagnosis. The end

point of my life has moved, so some things don't matter as much, and other things have come to the forefront. For example, after a trip to Costa Rica I had decided to study more Spanish, but since my likelihood of using it is greatly reduced, it no longer has the same priority. I have replaced the typical bucket list with goals for my remaining days. Certainly, I want to leave things in order for my wife and loved ones, but I am also working on a broader purpose.

This shift in meaning and purpose can be compared to the crisis that comes to many retirees who leave a profession they love, except that my retirement is on steroids. Instead of pointlessly filling my remaining days, I am investing in things that have some purpose within my context, and according to my gifts and abilities.

Memories for my grandchildren have become important, so I'm handwriting letters their parents say are bundled for safe keeping. For Christmas, I wrote and illustrated a children's book and added a personal note in each copy. My wife and I are traveling more to build important memories, and are even planning a canoe trip with our oldest granddaughter.

Another part of the meaning and purpose journey has to do with our cabin, which is a quiet spiritual retreat for us, family, and friends. We call it "the Cedars," because it is surrounded by a cedar forest. A Narnia-like lamp post we placed back in the woods reminds us that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Meaning and purpose also involves leaving something that will outlast me, so I am taking this in two directions — writing and painting. I've written a book entitled *Visage*, that uses a story to reveal important concepts I learned from my professor, Dallas Willard. For me it's not about leaving a legacy; it is about contributing even after I am gone.

As for painting, I am working on a portrayal of the Apostle Paul and early Christians meeting for the first time after his conversion. Paul was formerly known as Saul, a Jewish official who traveled from city to city arresting Christians, and on his way to Damascus, he was blinded by a bright light out of which Jesus spoke: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” This led to Saul’s conversion. He took his Greek name of Paul and became the first missionary to the non-Jewish world. So, what was it like the first time he met the very Christians he had been arresting? It must have been a very dramatic encounter, and it is on my mind as I paint.

My cancer is pushing me and compelling me to go to “work” nearly every day in order to complete these projects, giving purpose and meaning to my life while I am also having great fun!

Part Four: ETERNITY

I have written about the four stones by which I am navigating the miry bog of cancer (Psalm 40) – my stuff, my relationships, my pain, and my meaning and purpose – but what I will write about now is larger than a stepping stone; I will consider eternal destiny. And while eternity is often seen as vague, distant, or even frightening, Jesus says that as we place our trust in him, we have already entered that continuum.

I write not only *as* a Christian, but *because* I am a Christian, and while I understand the saying, “He is so heavenly minded that he is of no earthly good,” my terminal diagnosis has brought a shift to my life. While I still want to do the will of Jesus every day, I am living with new limitations, and it seems appropriate to also be more “heavenly minded.” I’ve found forty references to eternal life in the New Testament, and nineteen of them are from the mouth of Jesus. One of his best-known statements, John 3:16, says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him *should not perish but have eternal life.*” Add eighteen more to this — and it can hardly be said that eternal life is a minor theme with him.

Eternal life isn’t an easy topic, and I have been with people who were afraid to die, or others like the man who said, “I don’t know if we live eternally, but I don’t worry about it.” Another said, “I’m at peace with not having the answers.” And then there was the woman who never talked with her husband about

his cancer until his final day when he asked where he was going and she responded, 'I don't know.' These are the circumstances for a lot of smart, educated people who would never be blasé about what made their car run or how to heat their home, but when it comes to eternal life, many have concluded there is little that can be known.

But what if we don't have to face the end of life with this uncertainty? What if we can know more about eternity than so many have concluded?

Of course, to know more necessitates having a source of reliable information, and there are reasons I have concluded that the Bible is that reliable source. In fact, I believe it is the best source for all of life's most important questions. So, what follows is among the main reasons I have concluded the Bible is a reliable source when it comes to eternal life.

In processing reliability, I have been deeply impressed by *how the earliest Christians died for their faith*, and to validate this I've gone to non-Christian historians, since the biblical text cannot be used to prove the biblical text. Two secular historians, Tacitus and Suetonius, record that during the early days of the church a "vast multitude" of Christians were put to death under cruel Roman rule, and they describe a grisly scene of suffering. They tell how followers of Jesus were wrapped in the hides of wild beasts and "torn to pieces by dogs." Others were doused with oil, nailed to crosses, and lit as torches in Nero's Garden to light the nighttime sky.

So, my thought is, if these Christians had been the least bit uncertain about Jesus and his claims, why didn't they quietly blend back into the crowd? Undoubtedly some did, but those who chose death rather than recanting their faith had to have known beyond any doubt that Jesus who had been crucified was now alive, and thusly, his promise of eternal life would

be reliably true for them too. Without such a belief, a hideous death would have been too high a price to pay for sheer stubbornness.

I've concluded those who died were true believers, and the only reason they would have been so certain is that they had seen with their own eyes, or heard from others who had, that Jesus had come back to life. It would have driven them mad to deny what they knew to be true. Knowing the truth of resurrection is what gave them courage to face a Roman death, since eternal life was not some wishful notion — it was their source of great hope and joy! Their willingness to die is why I believe the Bible gives a reliable report concerning eternal life. I have not seen Jesus with my own eyes, but many of these martyrs did, and I accept their witness as my foundation for facing my own death.

A few years ago, my wife and I drove across Death Valley, and I said wryly, "Someone could die out here." Not only was it dangerously hot, but a strong wind kicked up so much grit that we ate our lunch in the car, and decided when we arrived at a National Park campground that we would keep moving. We had no interest in subjecting our tent, equipment, clothing, and bodies to such miserable conditions. But now, imagine if we had headed across Death Valley without filling our gas tank or making sure we had an adequate supply of drinking water. First, it would have been in pure defiance of the large warning signs and the required stop where a park ranger personally explained the risks. Nevertheless, I encounter people who do something even more unimaginable: they come to the end of their life without having given significant thought to eternity. To me, that makes less sense than if my wife had asked if we had enough gas or water to be crossing Death Valley, and I told her we would *just have to find out*.

Teachings on eternal life are found in many religions, though as a Christian I find something extraordinarily unique and special in what the Bible says about it. This is captured by Henri Nouwen who writes, “The unfathomable mystery of God is that God is a lover who wants to be loved.” God has been longing for a relationship with us, broken by our sin, and he wants that relationship to be restored. The biblical view of eternity is not only that our existence continues, but that we are restored into a loving relationship with our Creator. On the cross, Jesus took on the burden of our sin, paying the debt for the very thing that separated us from God. As classic theology puts it, Jesus was victorious over sin, death, and the devil. We become recipients of God’s loving mercy as we acknowledge our sin, ask his forgiveness, and become his followers. Following Jesus is the beginning of that restored relationship with our loving Father, and that is why it is said that Christians are already on a continuum that is eternal.

Eternal life in Christian belief is *not primarily about extending our own survival*, which could supposedly happen without any relationship to God at all. Therefore, it is not about reincarnation, nirvana, being kept in people’s memories, eternal bliss, being subsumed back into the natural cycle, or any other concept that relies on our accomplishments, connections, beliefs, or spiritual devotion in this life. Eternal life is about being restored into the presence of a loving Heavenly Father, and into an on-going eternal purpose.

It is a relationship that cannot be earned and is wholly undeserved. Instead of it being rooted in anything we have done, it is rooted in what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and we become recipients of new life by grace, which literally means “gift.” Any good that Christians do is not to earn what is called salvation, but is our thankful response to the gift we have received in Christ. Ephesians 2:8–10 says, “For by grace you

have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” For Christians, death is a comma, and not a period.

So, I have terminal cancer, but I face eternity with confidence that God has me in his loving grip. And anyone else can know that he has them in his loving grip too. As expressed in the verses above, this assurance does not come through any goodness or achievement; none of us deserves salvation, even when we have tried our best to be a good person. Until I became a follower of Jesus I lived independently from God, except for those occasional times when I called out to him in some crisis. And it could be tempting to see cancer as one more of these crises, but that is not what this is about. Knowing God is about something much larger than surviving cancer: it is about being restored into a loving relationship with the Creator.

I remember the night I said, “God, I don’t know for sure if you even exist, but if you do, will you please reveal yourself to me?” In that pivotal moment I acknowledged that I had been distant from him, asked him to forgive me for sins against him and others, and invited Jesus to come into my life. The implications of this continue unfolding and on the precipice of my death, I look forward to seeing what Jesus really looks like as I serve with him in his eternal plan.

If you are not sure what to do next but you would like to be held by this same gentle grip, you can pray something like this: “God, I know I have ignored you and have never asked you to forgive me, but now I do. Please forgive all my sin, and Jesus, I invite you to come into me and take control of my life. I choose to be your follower and ask for the help of your Holy

Spirit to live my remaining days well.”

That’s it — so simple but utterly transformative. If you prayed this prayer, you are now a Christian, and to help you follow him, I offer a few important things to do. First, connect with other Christians — not just church-goers — who will encourage and pray for you as you begin your new faith journey. Read from the Bible every day, starting with the New Testament gospels, and become a Jesus follower beginning with the very next thing you do. Ask God to lead you and he will.

Like me, you don’t know precisely how many days, months, or years you have left, but as my friend says, “Don’t die before you die.” Even though our bodies are diminishing, our spirit is alive, and if we have given our lives to Jesus, we will see him face to face.



About the Author

Alan E. Johnson retired in 2016 to International Falls, Minnesota, with his wife, Elaine. They are parents to three children and have four grandchildren. A son born to Elaine reconnected with them after fifty years.

Alan completed undergraduate studies with an Associate of Arts degree from Rainy River State Community College, International Falls, Minnesota, followed by an English teaching degree from Moorhead State College in Moorhead, Minnesota. He went on to receive a Master of Divinity degree from North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, and eventually a Doctor of Ministry degree from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Two years later he received certification as a Spiritual Director through the C. John Weberg Center in Chicago, Illinois. Alan served as a pastor to multiple congregations within the Evangelical Covenant Church for more than forty years.

