

Eternity

*Reclaiming
a Passion for
What Endures*

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Eternity

*Reclaiming
a Passion for
What Endures*

JOSEPH M. STOWELL



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With enduring gratitude to my Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ,
whose assurance of a better, more enduring world beyond
makes this book worth writing, life worth living, and dying gain.

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SETTING THE STAGE

Paul Azinger was at the height of his professional golf career when the doctor told him that he had life-threatening cancer. Up to that moment he had not given much thought to dying. Life was too all consuming for him to stop and consider the reality of the grave and all that is beyond. But that encounter with the inevitability of eternity was an abrupt reality check. His life would never again be the same. Even the \$1.46 million he had made as a professional golfer that year paled to insignificance. All he could think about was what the chaplain of the tour had said: “We think that we are in the land of the living going to the land of the dying when in reality we are in the land of the dying headed for the land of the living.”

Embracing the reality of the world to come radically alters everything in this world. Our values are prioritized and purified. Money, things, time, friends, enemies, family, and life itself are all adjusted and given their appropriate worth and place.

If anyone should express the reality of eternity, it's those of us who have been guaranteed safe passage to the other side through Christ, our divine passport. Yet interestingly, we who are marked with heaven in our hearts usually live as though it were real but irrelevant. We are consumed with the tyranny of the temporal, and we trade both the character and power of a life with an eternal focus for the ordinary.

We are not unlike the average person on the street who lives out an existence in the limited confines of a one-world point of view.

Blinded to the reality of the world beyond, this earthbound person's all-consuming expectation is to experience maximum pleasure and prosperity here. Quality of life is measured in terms of accumulating stacks of stuff and ascending to platforms of power and position. Life is defined by eating this world's best food and drinking its best wines. Leisure and large doses of comfort shape the pursuit. Finding maximum peace and the thrill of maximum pleasure become an illusive quest—illusive because ultimately this world is, at best, a hollow experience and, at worst, leaves us disillusioned and in despair. When eternity is off the screen, all of life is compressed into the distorted assumption that this is all we have. And, frankly, it's never quite enough.

Why? Because we are built for eternity. We are built for an eternal, unhindered relationship with God, who created us to know the deep pleasure of His companionship. But sin altered the landscape and forced these innate longings to search this fallen planet for satisfaction instead. Our best experiences are only feeble, futile attempts to regain paradise lost.

Thankfully redemption has put us back in touch with the eternal world beyond and has placed eternity in our hearts. Saving grace has blown down the walls that obscured our view of eternity and has given us a present relationship with Christ the King of eternity, who now lives within.

If you sense that you are missing something—that you had expected more—then perhaps you have neglected the pressing pre-eminence of the world to come and its first-wave expression in the person of the King who dwells in the world that is in our hearts. It is only when we actively embrace the world beyond and the world within in their proper perspectives that we become capable of finally coping with and conquering our fleeting experience in this present world.

Eternity welcomes you to the expanded perspectives of the world to come; the privileges of living in the light of a new, redeemed world within; and the real nature of this temporal, fading world that looms larger than it should on the horizon of our existence. No life, no experience can be all that it is intended without an accurate understanding and application of the dynamics of all these worlds.

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May God bless you with the pleasure of a life that is lived with eternity clearly in view.



P A R T

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IN OTHER WORLDS

Life is most disappointing, most despairing, when it is lived as though this world is all we have. Questions have few answers, and crises become all consuming. Thankfully, this is not the only world. Christ connects us to the eternal world to come and provides for us an eternally redeemed world within. This present world makes sense only when we live here in light of these other worlds.

As Paul said, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

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BEYOND OURSELVES

A World Out of Sync

In 1994 the Willises appeared to be an average family—average, that is, except for the fact that they had been blessed with nine children. At that time Duane “Scott” Willis was a schoolteacher and part-time minister in the Mount Greenwood neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. You’ve never seen his name in lights, listened to him on the radio, or picked up a book with *Willis* on the spine. But that’s never been important to him. What has been important is his love for his children and his wife, Janet, and faithfulness to his Lord.

Scott and Janet have an unusually strong commitment to their children. Their three oldest children had flown the nest, and Janet home schooled the others: Ben, Joe, Sam, Hank, and Elizabeth. Peter, at only six weeks, was the newest member of the family. Much of who they were as a family revolved around raising their children. Like most families they stayed busy with school, work, Little League, and local park district activities where Scott served as coach and cheerleader for his boys. Unspoiled by the greed of the shallow world around them, they happily and contentedly gave themselves to the few things that really counted—rearing their family and tending the flock at church. Quite frankly, these kinds of people are my heroes.

This “average” family met with extraordinary circumstances in November of 1994 when Scott, Janet, and six of their nine children

climbed into their new van to drive north of Milwaukee to visit one of their older children. That day would not be just like any other day for the Willis family. As they continued north on the interstate that skirts the west side of Milwaukee, a large piece of metal fell from a truck in front of them, piercing the underside of their fuel tank and igniting the gas. Immediately flames engulfed their van. On fire, Scott and Janet tumbled from the van. After rolling on the grassy knoll to extinguish the flames, they stared back at the roadway. All but one of their children was still inside the van. The inferno had entombed five of their children; the sixth would die the next morning in the hospital. Janet cried out in anguish, “No! No!” Scott tried to comfort her. But the children were gone.

This devastating event in Scott and Janet’s world reminds us afresh that there is something wrong—something unsettlingly out of sync in our world. Why them? Why then? Why would God give them a desire for children and the joy of a full quiver and then suddenly snatch them away? And why, in a world full of neglectful and abusive parents, would God permit this to happen to a family with such qualified and concerned parents?

And, quite frankly, we wonder why God would allow this to happen to His own. It seems an embarrassment to His divine character. Fairness, justice, mercy, and love all come into question in moments like these. An event such as this threatens to erode our confidence in God. It shakes the foundations of our faith.

When I was in elementary school, my teacher once distributed pictures that were full of inconsistencies and contradictions. Across the top of each picture the words “What’s Wrong with This Picture?” challenged us to identify the discrepancies, which upon close observation became obvious: a boy with no eyes on his face, a dog with no tail, a squirrel taking a bird bath.

SOMETHING IS WRONG

You don’t have to look long to see that something seems dreadfully wrong with the Willises’ picture.

Granted, the story of Scott and Janet is unusually tragic, the kind of suffering that few of us will ever face. Yet their tragedy reminds

us that our own lives are full of dissonance and disappointments that unsettle our faith and trust.

Inequities abound in our imperfect world. Consider those who through no fault of their own have been abused—individuals who have grown up in unsafe, violent environments. And how can we justify the fact that some children who've grown up in godly homes break their parents' hearts by pursuing destructive, rebellious lifestyles? What of wayward parents who shatter the serenity and crush the dreams of their children? Or what about the faithful pastor who spends his entire life in a small, unknown ministry with little income or fame? And what of the fact that he may work harder and be even more faithful to his Lord than others who land in bigger, better, and more comfortable places of ministry? Why has God rewarded him so slightly when others have so much?

Or think of those who have claimed Christ as Lord of their lives yet, instead of increased peace and pleasure, face problems and challenges for their commitment. Or why is it that those of us who want to experience a deeper, more intimate relationship with Him even in our best moments find that there is a distance that keeps our hearts from being finally, fully, and completely satisfied? And what of those times when He seems so silent, so far away?

What about common, good folk who just never seem to win at the lottery of life? Who struggle more than bad people and have far less than many who manipulate and use their power and prosperity to advance that which is not good?

Why do the righteous so often struggle and suffer when the wicked seem to prosper?

All of us can list the times and ways that unsettling, seemingly unanswerable questions like these have challenged our faith.

Everything seemed out of sync to me on that day before I was to preach at the memorial service for one of the great missionary statesmen of our time. My struggle did not relate to the fact that he died; that's a given for all of us. It was *how* and *when* that seemed so very wrong. Phil Armstrong, who as a young man gave his life to Christ and then rose to leadership in the Far Eastern Gospel Crusade, was broadly recognized for his gifts and contributions to global evangelism. I remember as a seminarian sitting under Phil's ministry and

being challenged by his message and impressed with his life. Quite frankly, I was surprised that I now had the privilege of being his pastor. Though he was traveling most of the time on mission business, I can still remember his wise input and counsel in board meetings and his personal encouragement to me in those early days when I felt insecure and wondered whether I would be able to shepherd that rather high-profile flock.

He and his wife, Bobbie, had dreamed about the day that his ministry load would be reduced and he would step away from mission leadership and do only those things for Christ that he really loved to do. For Bobbie this meant finally having more time with her husband. She had given him to the cause of Christ for decades of their married life, all with the hope and dream that someday they would buy a little place in the North Carolina mountains and enjoy each other more fully in their twilight years. And now, as Phil was approaching the time when he would step down from his executive directorship of the mission, they had picked out the place where their dreams would be realized.

I'll never forget that September morning during Sunday school when we received word that the small plane Phil had been flying in across the Alaskan Ocean had disappeared in the night and had not yet been found in those dark, cold waters. We called Bobbie out of her Sunday school class and shared the hard news with her. Little did we know that in the days to come the party would eventually abandon its search without finding either the plane or Phil.

And now, with family, close friends, and ministry leaders gathering from across the country, it became my task to somehow find the right words to put all of this in perspective. It was a tough assignment, given the fact that there seemed to be so much wrong with the picture.

FAITH ON THE LINE

Life has a way of driving our faith dangerously close to the edge. What we expect from God so often seems to contradict what we experience in life. We find ourselves wanting to ask, *If God is good, then why? If God is all-powerful, then where is He now? If God loves*

me, why am I not happier? Richer? Why don't I have fewer problems and more peace? If God is pleased with me, why don't I experience more pleasure?

Unanswered questions like these threaten our enthusiasm and heartfelt commitment to Christ. We find our faith growing more stoic, our view of God less emotive. We develop a kind of Christianity that shrugs its shoulders and says, *Well, that's just the way it is*, and since the stakes are too high to deny God, we just decide to buck up, grin, bear it, and hope that no one ever asks us these kinds of questions. In fact, we may even come to believe that in order to maintain spiritual sanity we need to park our brains and questions outside the door of faith and separate the spiritual realm from the realities of life. At this point faith itself becomes unreal and irrelevant.

We are left to slug it out on our own, believing that the only relevant resources are in this present world.

A disintegrating faith creates a resigned, despairing Christianity that lacks vibrancy and enthusiasm for God and His Word. Our edge is dulled, leaving us passionless and pessimistic. This decline of confidence in and commitment to God may be why there is something dreadfully wrong and out of sync with us.

When faith doesn't make sense and this world becomes our only reality and resource, greed consumes us, leaving us disenfranchised from generosity toward those in need and ministries that advance the cause of Christ. It leaves us vulnerable to harboring ongoing, sometimes lifelong bitterness. It may have something to do with the fact that we seem to be involved in such a frantic search for happiness—here and now—and feel disappointed when we don't find it. A fallen faith leaves us vulnerable to the unending pursuit of pleasure and prosperity. Believing that the only real world is this world, most of us view our careers as merely platforms upon which we can establish our own sense of significance, build our own kingdoms, and secure safety and security for ourselves in the present world.

Our disorientation is compounded as we search the Scriptures only to discover that throughout the ages our world has been out of sync and filled with contradictions. In earliest times Job suffered in horrendous proportions for no apparent earthly good; Joseph was thrown into the slammer for three years for being righteous; God's

own people killed the prophets He sent to minister to them; God came to live among us and was crucified; and the blood of the martyrs has stained the soil for centuries.

SOMETHING BEYOND OURSELVES

Yet these and a multitude of other people rose above their out-of-sync world with an unshakable confidence in a sustaining divine presence within and a better, more blessed world beyond this one.

When Janet Willis looked back toward the burning minivan and cried out, “No! No!” her husband’s comfort was more than just a touch. He had a perspective beyond the moment—indeed, beyond this world. Scott touched her shoulder with his blistered hand and whispered, “Janet, this is what we’ve been prepared for. Janet, it was quick, and they’re with the Lord.”

Clearly Scott was in touch with something beyond this present world.

In a front page story, the *Chicago Tribune* reported, “Burned, bandaged, and still in physical pain in a Milwaukee area hospital, the couple displayed extraordinary grace and courage Wednesday as they calmly presided over a news conference they had requested to tell of how their unquestioning belief has sustained them through the loss of six of their nine children.” At the news conference Scott said, “I know God has reasons . . . God has demonstrated His love to us and our family. There is no question in our mind that God is good and we praise Him in all things.”¹

Could it be that our faith has not yet grown big enough to embrace something of significance beyond ourselves? Beyond this present world? Could it be that we expect Him to give us the best of all worlds in this world?

The fault is not with God. It is with us; we have assumed that this world should be a pleasant and friendly place and that the answers to the troublesome questions of life can be found in the temporal realm. We have assumed that the answers to life’s dilemmas lie somewhere within us, among us, or within the realm of the immediate world around us. We are wrong.

The questions are ours. But the answers are often found in the perspectives of the world beyond.

We have assumed as well that solutions to our enigmas can be forged in this single, flat, earthbound existence. We are wrong.

The problems are ours. The solutions lie beyond ourselves.

Stanton is a small English village that dates back to the thirteenth century. At its center stands the Church of St. Michael's and All the Angels. Inside this timeworn house of worship are burial markers in the floor and on the walls, memorializing the faithful who have gone on from there. On one intriguing plaque, mounted just to the right of the pulpit, is this statement, etched for all to note:

Sacred to the memory of Frances, third daughter of Reginald and Frances Wynniatt, who died March 12, 1808, aged 19 years. Cut off in the morning of life her many amiable virtues had endeared her to all who knew her. Sensible and prudent in all her actions she lived unspotted from the world and untainted from any of its vanities . . . Upheld by the animating prospect of a future and a better state of existence, she supported the lingering illness, which brought her to a premature grave with exemplary patience and cheerful resignation.

Frances Wynniatt was a woman who found her strength and confidence in something beyond herself—in something beyond her world.