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Forever

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THE EVIDENCE IS EVERYWHERE

Why is it so hard for us to be satisfied?

Why do so many of our marriages struggle over the long run?

Why do we have such a hard time getting along with family and friends?

Why do we carry around so much debt?

Why do we stand in front of full closets and say we have nothing to wear?

Why do we look into fully stocked refrigerators and say we have nothing to eat?

Why do so many of us consistently spend more than we earn?

Why do we struggle so much with envy?

Why does our culture tend to be overdrugged and oversexed?

Why do we spend so much on making sure that we are incessantly entertained?

Why do our trials paralyze us more than they should?

Why do people disappoint us so easily?

Why does life in the here and now never seem to deliver what we hoped it would deliver?

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Why?

Where do you go, where do you look for answers to questions like this? What helps you to understand life? We all want to do it. We're all investigators trying to solve the mystery that is our own life. We all ask questions, and we all search for answers. At times, not knowing and not understanding doesn't bother us because we are locked in our busy schedules, distracted by the details of life or thankful that our life is comfortable at the moment. At other times, not knowing is painful and scary because we are facing something we can't ignore but are unable to make sense of.

Where do you look for meaning and purpose? What do you reach for to give you that inner rest and well-being that every one of us seeks? What unpacks and explains life for you? All of us want to think that what we believe is true. All of us want to think that we are living life the way it is meant to be lived and are prepared for what is to come. But the evidence is that many of us aren't. The evidence is all around us: *something is wrong*.

I saw this evidence again and again as I sat with clients in life-changing moments of disappointment, anger, confusion, and grief. I helped them tell their stories so I could interpret their stories from the unique perspective of the one story that could make sense of it all: God's story, unfolded in the pages of the Bible. I listened to the man who had lost his job and in so doing had lost himself, the woman dealing with marriage disappointment, or the person who was simply lost in the middle of his own story.

Again and again I sat there thinking, "What I need to do is give eternity back to this person." It became increasingly clear that many of the people I counseled were struggling because there was a critical element in their story that they either never knew or had completely forgotten. And it wasn't too long after reaching this conclusion that I began to admit to myself that I was more like the people I counseled than unlike them.

Like them, I often lived as an eternity amnesiac. I, too, often lived with the unrealistic expectations and functional hopelessness

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that always results when you tell yourself that this life you have right here, right now, is all there is. I was confronted with the fact that in very significant ways, at street level, we don't always live in a way consistent with what we confess to believe.

One of my reasons for writing this book was to tell the story of the many people whom God brought my way in dark passages of their lives. (Of course, I have altered the details of their lives to protect their identities.) I wanted to do more than tell their stories; I wanted to tell my story. But I wanted to do even more than that. I wanted to help you understand our stories and yours from the unique perspective of forever so you would begin to understand that the unshakable promise of the future grace of eternity does more than give you hope for the future. No, embedded in the promise of a future is the guarantee of grace for what you're facing right here, right now. You see, the God of eternity enters your story in the here and now, or he couldn't guarantee your future. And that makes all the difference in the world.

Perhaps you too have pockets of confusion. Maybe there are moments when you feel overwhelmed. Maybe you're near someone who has lost hope. Perhaps there's a place in your life where you are looking for a reason to continue. Keep reading and you will find people like you, but you'll find more. You'll find the most beautiful story ever told. It is the only story big enough to make sense out of our little stories, and it is the only story that guarantees the one thing you and I daily need: grace.

The book you are about to read is not written only out of my own experience or my parents' wisdom. It looks at life based on the wisdom of the Book of books, the Bible. The Bible is God's origin-to-destiny manual for living. There is no more reliable place to look to understand life, even at street level, than the Maker's book, the Bible.

God's Book is so rich and deep that you can pull on the thread of one theme and gain more practical, life-shaping wisdom than you ever would have imagined possible. So in this book I've taken

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one wisdom perspective from God's Word and looked at life from that perspective—the perspective of eternity.

The story of the Bible doesn't end with this world that we are all living in right now. What would seem like the last chapter, death, really isn't the last chapter in God's story. The Bible welcomes and requires you to face the inescapable reality of life after death. This present life is not all there is. There is a forever on the other side of this life. Eternity is not a mystical creation of overly spiritual people. Forever is a reality. It is the product of God's plan and design. And once you believe in forever and live with forever in view, not only will you understand things you have never understood before, but you will live in a radically different way than you did before.

So I invite you to step off the treadmill of your busy life and consider what life looks like when viewed through the lens of forever. What if this present life is not a destination but a preparation for a final destination? What if you and I have forever hardwired inside of us? What if this life really does have consequences in the next? What if human beings were created to live forever? What if you can't make sense out of life without eternity?

Then what?

Chapter One

WHO STOLE FOREVER?

No matter who you are, where you are, and how old you are, you long for a perfect world and struggle with the fact that the address where you live is anything but perfect. The young couple getting married have visions of the perfect marriage free from the struggles that they have seen others have. The pregnant mom dreams of giving birth to a perfect baby, easy to parent in every way. We imagine the perfect meal, the perfect job, the perfect vacation, the perfect house on the perfect street, the perfect friendship, and the perfect retirement. The list is endless. We're all dreamers because we all have forever wired inside us. It's hard for us to be content with the world that is, because all of us have an inclination to crave for what could be. We're not perfect, the people we live with are not perfect, and the world around us surely isn't perfect, yet the dream lives on in unrealistic expectations and dashed hopes. We are forever people; it is the way we were designed. We were created to live in a perfect world where death didn't exist and where life would give way to life on into eternity. So we hope much, dream much, imagine much, groan much, sorrow much, and cry much.

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Every human being recognizes that this is not the way things were meant to be. Children aren't supposed to grow up and never know their biological parents. Husbands and wives were not meant to leave one another in the heat of acrimony, hurt, and selfishness. Boys and girls aren't supposed to live in the daily fear of the mockery of peers. Pleasurable experiences and substances aren't supposed to have the power to addict us. The world shouldn't be scarred by violence and war. Your skin color shouldn't be a reason for being rejected. Human beings were not meant to use other human beings for their own pleasure. Government was meant to protect people, not to use people to consolidate its own power. Human lives were not meant to be cut short by hunger, natural disaster, or disease. Innocent peoples' futures were not meant to be destroyed by political and financial scams. A person's capacity to hope was never intended to be kidnapped by false hope. Daughters were never meant to despise their mothers, or sons their fathers. Siblings were never meant to spend their developmental years in daily conflict with one another. The soil of earth was never designed to grow weeds better than it produces food and flowers. No person was meant to go to sleep with tears or wake up with anxiety or dread.

In some way we all get it. At some level we all understand. No, we may not have stopped to meditate on it, and we may not be able to articulate the sense that we carry around, but we all know this is not the way things were meant to be. So we imagine, we dream, we hope and pray. We kick the chair in frustration, hang up the phone in anger, or silently cry in hurt. We have forever inside us, and it creates a natural disappointment with the brokenness of the here and now. Let me show you what I mean.

DREAMS OF A PERFECT WORLD

He looked out the window of his penthouse in Philadelphia onto the lush greenery of Rittenhouse Square, but he didn't notice it;

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Josh was too deep in his thoughts. The last five years had been a row house to penthouse ride. The pharmaceutical company that hired him had exploded with growth, and Josh was a benefactor. He had always dreamed of this kind of success, and he had worked hard to get where he was. From his clothes to his car to his penthouse, Josh had acquired all the accoutrements of success. But what occupied his thoughts and what drove him crazy was one inescapable fact: he wasn't happy and he didn't feel fulfilled. Sure, he enjoyed the things that he was now able to afford, and when he was out with his friends, he could laugh with the best of them. The quiet moments were what got to him. What he felt just before he went to sleep or when he was in that "still lying in bed, but I've got to get up" fog was what he hated. He had worked hard for many years. He had delayed getting married. He had been willing to alienate friends and crush competitors to be able to experience what he thought would be the good life, and now that he had it, it just didn't mean what he thought it would mean.

No, Josh wasn't about to quit his job and sell the penthouse, but he was tired of having it all and feeling as though he didn't.

Sally couldn't believe it was still dark outside as she was yanking on her sweats one more predawn time. The alarm had somehow fit into that final early morning dream before the dream evaporated and she realized she was being summoned to face another day. She could already hear the kid noises down the hall reminding her that there wasn't much time between putting on her sweats and putting the kids on the bus. Her mind began to buzz through the breakfast menu, a mental assembly of lunches, and an assessment of what clothes were clean and ready for each child to wear. She walked down the hallway, and as she stretched and yawned, she wondered how she pulled it off day after day.

It seemed at times as if her life was living her rather than her living her life. Her husband's voice yanked her back to reality, announcing that he had an early meeting and was about to leave.

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Sally yelled an “I love you” as she chased their son Jared down the hall, carrying the clothes he didn’t really want to put on. She could probably make breakfast and lunches with her eyes closed, and it seemed that was exactly what she was doing this morning.

After the final kid was on the final bus, Sally sat slumped on the big leather couch in the family room with the requisite cup of Earl Grey tea, and she had trouble remembering the morning she had just been through. Had she been patient with the kids? Were they all dressed appropriately? Did they all eat breakfast? What in the world was in their lunches?

Often on these frenetic school mornings, Sally’s head wasn’t in her own life. She had begun to feel that most of the time she was elsewhere. It was not that she was unhappy or that she wanted out. Sally loved Jack, and she had always wanted children. The routine was what got to Sally. It felt like the proverbial roller coaster that never stops but goes and goes and always ends up at the same place. Is this what life was about—repetitive routines on an endless stream of similar days?

Sally didn’t want to change anything, but as she got up to restore order to the kitchen, she told herself that she was not satisfied with what she was feeling.

Josh and Sally, two people who seem to be different from each other, are deep down very much the same. They share the same dream, and they are in the middle of the same struggle. Hardwired inside each of them is a desire for life to mean something, for it to be going somewhere. Hardwired inside of each of them is distaste for meaninglessness. Hardwired into the very cells of their personhood is a thing called eternity. Deep inside them is a cry for forever.

The curse of the old man at his inability to get his leg to do what it was meant to do is a cry for forever. The hurt inside the teenager who has been mocked by a peer is more than adolescent angst; it is a cry for forever. The whimper of the toddler who has

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had a toy wrenched from his hands by his older brother is more than a scream of protest; it is a cry for forever. The tears of a mom at the end of a talk with a lost and wayward son are more than tears of parental grief; they are the tears for forever. The anger of the man who has just been laid off by a boss who didn't seem to care is more than anger at a career injustice; it is a plea for forever. The sad silence around the casket of a dear one is more than the silence of the bereaved; it is a wordless longing for forever. The frustration of the erstwhile gardener that weeds grow faster than the flowers is more than a fight with the forces of nature; it is a wish that forever would come.

Forever is more than a hope and a dream. It is more than a theological formulation. It is more than a distant spiritual expectation. The Creator placed forever inside you. Longing for eternity doesn't mean you're spiritual; it simply means you are human. Life that never ends was the Maker's original plan.

Now, I'm not saying that we all live with a consciousness of forever or with an intentionality about life that is formed by a belief in forever. I'm not talking about forever as an essential piece of our theological paradigm. I'm not talking about how you are thinking about eternity or what you are doing about eternity. I'm talking about something God wired inside you when he made you. If you are a human being, you are a forever being. So much of your distress at what is, is really a hunger for what will be. It is just the way you were made. You may not have been aware of it, but this longing for paradise is an essential part of what makes you human and on a moment-by-moment personal quest. Yes, paradise has been hardwired inside all of us.

You may escape formal religion. You may avoid signing on to some theological system. You may question whether there is such a thing as life after death. You may think that the concept of a heaven and a hell should be left for naive, unscientific Christians. You may never call yourself a Presbyterian, Buddhist, Lutheran, Hindu, Mormon, Baptist, or Muslim, but you will also never

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successfully escape forever. It is inside you. It has been constructed inside you by your Maker. You and I didn't have a vote. We were hardwired for eternity. We were made to live forever. This is not first a matter of what we believe; it is first a matter of who we are. Eternity lives and longs inside us; there is simply no escaping it. This is why Josh and Sally struggle. This is why you and I struggle. Deep inside each of us is a cry for forever. It is every human's struggle this side of eternity. That is why the whole world groans. (If you have a Bible near, read Romans 8:18–27.)

SOMEONE STOLE SOMETHING, BUT WE DIDN'T NOTICE

If we understood this reality and lived as if it were true, much of our discontent would disappear. But it isn't that simple, because we don't believe in eternity anymore. Sure, if you poll average citizens in Western culture as to whether they believe in an afterlife, most respondents will tell you that they do. The problem is that eternity doesn't mean anything to most people. It's not formative in the way they live their everyday lives. As a culture, we believe in eternity the way we believe in God. Most people say they do, but you wouldn't know it from observing the way they live. Most people live in a constant state of *eternity amnesia*.

We have abandoned a self-conscious allegiance to the reality of eternity that structures the way we think about and approach the here and now. The functional philosophy of the modern person is simply devoid of eternity. Forever isn't a topic written about much in our newspapers and magazines. It isn't a topic of interest in our popular entertainment media. It isn't a serious topic of interest in the university or in the halls of government. The thought of forever simply isn't a thought many of us carry around anymore, at least not in a way that makes much difference. We're forever people who have lost sight of forever.

Is it odd to think of eternity as being a topic of interest in the

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university classroom? Yet this was once the case. The finest institutions of higher education in America—Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, for example—were all founded by people who held firmly to a biblical worldview that has eternity as its final hope. Yet today eternity is not a category that our culture takes seriously when we think of what life is all about. Consider, for a moment, the huge philosophical transition that has taken place in the way the average person thinks about life. We have gone from the words that Ben Franklin penned for his own epitaph:

The Body
Of
Benjamin Franklin,
Printer,
(Like the cover of an old book,
Its contents torn out,
And stript of its lettering and gilding,)
Lies here, food for worms.
But the work shall not be lost,
For it will, as he believed, appear once more,
In a new and more elegant edition,
Revised and corrected
By
The Author.¹

To the bitter words of bestselling novelist Frank McCord: “I had to get rid of any idea of hell or any idea of the afterlife. That’s what held me, kept me down. So now I just have nothing but contempt for the institution of the church.”²

In our functional worldview, we have traveled from the eternity-driven lyrics of Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic”—

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are
stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.

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Refrain:

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Our God is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;

They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;

I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps;

His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:

“As ye deal with my condemners, so with you my grace shall deal;

Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with His heel,

Since God is marching on.”

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;

He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat;

Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!

Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,

With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me;

As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,

While God is marching on.

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave;

He is wisdom to the mighty, He is succour to the brave,

So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of Time His slave,

Our God is marching on.

—to the content of popular entertainment and social media that has little sense of reality beyond an obsession with the pleasures and comforts of the here and now. Consider the words from a blog post by University of Minnesota professor Paul Zachary “PZ” Myers: “That is the godless view of death. It’s an end, not a transition. It deserves all the sorrow the living bring to it, and the absurd attempts of believers to soften it with lies are a contemptible disservice to the life that is over.”³

This change in worldview does beg the question, “Who stole forever?” No, there is no bunker where a group of nefarious philos-

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ophers are plotting the philosophical demise of Western culture. But the functional worldview of Western culture denies a belief in the hereafter.

The shift has been subtle but nonetheless seismic in its impact. This life-altering change didn't begin a few years ago. It has been percolating for generations. The movement away from a biblical view of life coupled with the materialism of our modern scientific culture has affected the way we think about who we are and what is important.

The larceny of forever shapes our lives more than we realize. Eternity amnesia grips us all, making it hard, if not impossible, for us to imagine living forever. We find it hard to believe in anything that contradicts the "here and now is all you get" perspective that rules the day. So we have functionally discarded the once widely held belief in an afterlife, a reality we cannot embrace without it influencing the way we live. Without forever in the center of our thinking, our picture of life is like a jigsaw puzzle missing a central piece. You will simply not have an accurate view of the picture without the piece of the puzzle entitled "forever."

This void has had an enormous impact on how we think about ourselves and the struggles we daily face. When it comes to the university classroom, the public square, and popular media, the concept of eternity is fundamentally absent. You will never hear Katie Couric close her nightly news broadcast by saying, "I know things often look bleak and chaotic, but remember that this is not all there is. We are all heading for eternity, where all that is broken will be finally and forever fixed. This is Katie Couric, *CBS News*. Good night." Children watching morning TV have been robbed of forever. Junior high kids studying history will not be taught how to examine history through the lens of forever. University students in a psychology class will not be assigned an essay on the impact of eternity on a human being's emotions and behavior. Most businesspeople investing money don't have eternity in their minds, let alone in the way they think about their portfolio.

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Most couples embracing one another at the altar don't get the importance of also embracing the sure and coming reality of forever. The young mother looking at her newborn doesn't think that forever is hardwired inside her child. So someone has entered the house of Western culture and stolen a precious family heirloom, but most of us don't know a robbery has taken place. We go on living as if nothing has happened, but it has, and in powerful and practical ways it affects us all.

We get up in the morning and do the kinds of things people have done for generations. We buy and sell, plant and harvest. We relate, commit, laugh, love, and fight. We get married and we make families. We work hard, create things, and reengineer our surroundings. Some of us build cities, and others of us thank God for the suburbs. We think, we analyze, and we critique. We try to learn from our mistakes, and we attempt to educate and prepare the next generation. We spend lots of our time eating and sleeping. We hate to be lonely, and we do our best to avoid pain. We search for meaning and purpose, and all of us long for an inner sense of well-being. We have eternity amnesia, and consequently our lives are much more difficult than they need to be.

Here is a quick overview of the consequences of eternity amnesia on our lives.

1. *Living with unrealistic expectations.* Why are our expectations less than realistic? Because in our eternity amnesia we are asking this present world to be what it simply never will be. We want the here and now to behave as if it is our final destination, when actually all that we are experiencing in the here and now prepares us for the destination that is to come.
2. *Focusing too much on self.* Human beings were created to live big-picture, long-view lives. We were made to live with something bigger in view than this present moment's comfort, pleasure, and happiness. Eternity confronts us with the fact that we are not in charge, that

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we do not live in the center of the universe, and that life moves by the will and purpose of Another. The instantaneous, self-serving, me obsession of our culture never results in inner peace and contentment. Eternity confronts me with the realities that transcend my momentary wants, feelings, and needs.

3. *Asking too much of people.* When we fail to live with forever in view, we unwittingly and consistently ask the people around us to provide the paradise for which our hearts crave. The people around us do not have the ability to give us, in the here and now, that constant inner peace and satisfaction that we can only ever experience in eternity. Asking others to give us what they cannot give ends in disappointment, frustration, conflict, and division.
4. *Being controlling or fearful.* Why do we tend to swing from fear to control and back again? Because, in our eternity amnesia, we feel as if somehow, someday, life is passing us by. Those unfilled longings, which none of us escape, do not so much announce to us that this world has failed us, but rather they alert us to the fact that we were designed for another world. Peace in this world is found only when we live with the coming world in view.
5. *Questioning the goodness of God.* If we don't understand God's agenda, we will tend to end up questioning his character. Unless we live in the knowledge that God's promises only reach their fulfillment in the world that is to come, we will feel as if we have been hit with the cosmic bait and switch in the world we now live in. We get a taste of God's good gifts in the here and now to keep us hungering for the full meal that is waiting for us in eternity.
6. *Living more disappointed than thankful.* Unrealistic expectations will always lead to disappointment. Many of us are disappointed, not because God has failed us, or we have suffered much, or the people around us have

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been particularly difficult to live with, but because we approach life hoping that it will deliver to us things that we can only experience in eternity. Our disappointment reveals more about our own eternity amnesia than it does about the world around us.

7. *Lacking motivation and hope.* All of these consequences weaken our motivation and our hope. The fact that this world is not an endless cycle of dashed hopes and fading dreams but by God's plan is marching toward a moment when all that is broken will be restored can fill you with a reason to get up in the morning and press on. Yes, life is hard and you will face things you never imagined you would face, but this world is not all there is. You are not living in the final chapter of the story. What is broken will be fixed, what has been bent will be straightened, and what has decayed will be restored. Eternity really does give you a reason to continue, even when nothing right now seems as if it is working. Eternity challenges my feelings of futility by reminding me that what I am experiencing right now is not permanent.
8. *Living as if life doesn't have consequences.* Eternity forces me to face the fact that life does have consequences. We can believe whatever we want to believe and live however we want to live, but we will face the consequences of poor choices. There is life after death, and I could argue that eternity *is* the ultimate consequence. A day of reckoning is coming that no human being will escape, and realizing that reality infuses today with a moral seriousness that you will find no other way.

WELCOME TO YOUR SCHIZOPHRENIA

We are forever people who have quit believing in forever. We live in the middle of a massive contradiction. No, I'm not talking about

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the functional demise of organized religion. I'm encouraging you to think about something fundamentally profounder than that. I am getting you to think about the intersection between who you are by design and how you live every day. Perhaps I should state it more forcefully. The *forever-ism* that is hardwired inside you collides with the *now-ism* that is everywhere around you, resulting in a lot of carnage.

What we all internally long for in some way collides with what we end up living for every day. What we were hardwired to be collides with how we live. What was designed to propel everything we do collides with what motivates us. What our minds were designed to grasp and hold on to collides with what our senses tell us is real. In our heart of hearts, in myriad situations of life, the future wars with the present. It is one of the abiding contradictions of modern human life yet was never meant to be this way. Now was designed to be an introduction to hereafter, and hereafter was designed to be the living hope of now. But the schizophrenia is all around us.

Most of us will live in a state of happy delusion, failing to grasp the beauty we have missed as we live in a way we were never meant to live. Consider these words of C. S. Lewis.

Most of us find it very difficult to want "Heaven" at all—except in so far as "Heaven" means meeting again our friends who have died. One reason for this difficulty is that we have not been trained: our whole education tends to fix our minds on this world. Another reason is that when the real want for Heaven is present in us, we do not recognize it. Most people, if they really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise.⁴

Life, real life as it was designed to be, simply cannot work without eternity. It is the nature of design. You will never see your neighbor drive his speedboat out of his garage and down the

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street. His boat is an amazing creation, but it was not designed to travel over macadam. You will never see a fish lounging in a tree. Everything around us only works, is used, or lives according to its design.

You were made for forever. That is your inescapable identity. Life only works as it was meant to work when you live with forever in view. Could it be that you have been like a bird underwater, trying your best to find life in the here and now while forgetting forever? There really is a better way.

These words by C. S. Lewis say it all: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”⁵

Chapter Two

THE PACK-IT-ALL-IN MENTALITY

Jack wasn't a philosophical guy; he didn't step back and examine why he did the things he did. But he did think about one thing: his debt. It had simply gotten out of control. He had burned through his savings and liquidated a couple of retirement accounts, and he still wasn't keeping up with his creditors' demands. His problem wasn't the economy. No, he had a great job that paid him well. His problem was that his cravings were bigger than his paycheck.

Raised in a poor family, Jack determined early that he was going to be financially successful and give his family all the things that he had had to live without. He worked himself up the ladder and gave his family things he wouldn't have dreamed of as a child. The house Jack and his wife, Jennifer, decided on was bigger than what they needed, and the pool out back was just too cool to resist. Turning the family room into a full-blown game room was expensive, but it kept the kids from getting bored. The vacation home at the shore was the icing on the cake—a place

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where memories would be made. Jack's "buy the best and then you have no regrets" philosophy fueled their debt. Sure, the gourmet kitchen with its top-of-the-line appliances was used way too little, but those dinners out as a family surely did break up the week. Yes, the debt load was a bit scary, but no one was taking drugs or committing adultery; and anyway, didn't God create these things for us to enjoy?

But hiding the debt from Jennifer was getting harder and harder to do, and Jack knew that if his wife found out, she would lose it. Jack had coped by shuffling money from account to account, but there wasn't much left to shuffle. His stomach would tighten as Jen left for the grocery store. He hoped and prayed her ATM card would not be rejected. Jen didn't know how often he waited to mail checks that she gave him because he needed to get funds into the account before they cleared.

As he lay in bed waiting for sleep to take him away from his financial woes, Jack beat himself up for being such a poor money manager. He rehearsed old financial decisions again and again, looking for the moment when things began to go bad, but all it got him was less sleep and more anxiety. On the way to work, Jack rehearsed the conversation he needed to have with Jennifer, but he never had it. Nothing was left in their home equity line, and he had no more friends he could tap for help. Jack couldn't figure out how he had made such a mess of things, and he wasn't creative enough to think of a way to turn it all around. What he didn't understand was that his problem was much deeper than a series of poor money decisions.

David and Beth were as excited as they had ever been. They were on their way to the airport for a culinary vacation around Europe. Paris, Madrid, Venice, and Berlin—they couldn't believe it. They were foodies—no doubt about it. They knew they ate out too much, and they had to face the fact that both of them had gained weight since they had married. But they lived in a big city

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populated by celebrity chefs who never seemed to stop opening cool new restaurants. Beth loved the gourmet kitchen they had designed and built together. It looked like a Food Network studio, and that's just what she had in mind. The fact that the kitchen redo had cost about a quarter of what they had paid for the house didn't seem to faze David and Beth. Beth was occasionally guilty that she didn't use the kitchen as much as she thought she would because they so frequently went out to eat. Maybe the wine cellar was a bit over the top, but it seemed to go with the kitchen, and they couldn't resist.

While reading *Bon Appétit* magazine, Beth discovered the culinary vacation. Sure, they were financially strapped, with the loan for the kitchen and all the implements they had charged to stock it properly, but this seemed too good to resist. When she showed the ad to David, he was immediately hooked and began finagling ways to finance it. The new credit card, with 0 percent interest for three months, made it possible. David didn't want to think about bills right now; he was about to hit some of Europe's finest culinary destinations, and he wanted to savor what was to come. His boss was not excited about him taking extra vacation time, but David promised to work overtime when he got home to make up for the time off.

As they sat at the gate at the airport, Beth found it hard to believe they were about to do it. Not only would they eat as they never had before at places unlike any they had ever been, but they would also be hosted along the way by celebrity chefs! So much for her newly begun diet. Beth was not about to be bothered by calorie or cholesterol counts for the next two weeks. She was not about to waste the \$3,500 apiece that she and David had invested in this trip by being anything less than a full participant. David and Beth loved the "good life," and as they boarded the jet, they knew it was about to get a whole lot better—at least for the next two weeks. They would deal with their bills and waistlines later.

RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW

Jack, David, and Beth all have eternity amnesia. They are living as if this life is all there is. If this is all the life we have, then the name of the game is this: experience, possess, and accomplish everything we can, right here, right now, because this is all there is. The old beer commercial captured it powerfully: “You only go around once in life, so you’ve got to grab for all the gusto you can.” If you’re not moving toward a glory so glorious that it will overwhelm the pain of anything you suffer, then this is all the glory you will ever get. Don’t sit on the sidelines. Don’t find reasons to say no. Pack everything you can into this moment, because this moment is all you are ever going to have.

Jack, David, and Beth are not alone. Hundreds and thousands of the people around them are doing the same thing—loading all their hopes and dreams into this present moment. Eternity amnesia makes present pleasures more magnetic and seductive and present difficulties more painful and disappointing, so we obsessively work to experience the good thing and, in anxiety, do everything we can to avoid the bad thing. This way of living makes us crazy in ways we may not be able to recognize.

Think of Jack. His life plan can’t work, because a person simply cannot continue to spend more than he makes. And he cannot be successful for long at robbing one account to finance the needs of another. But Jack’s problem isn’t really financial. He has a forever problem. He is so driven to fix his own story right here and right now that he has gotten himself into a mess that he probably won’t be able to get himself out of. At street level, Jack is a man without eternity. All he knows to do is dig deeper and work harder and hope that the “good life” that he has cobbled together won’t suddenly crumble at his feet.

Jack thinks that he is offering his family the “good life,” but it isn’t that good after all. As a husband, he is tense and uptight, ready to argue over every penny Jen wants to spend. As a dad, he is seldom at home because he is working constantly to stay ahead of

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financial doom. And when he is home, he is not the relaxed relational dad that every child needs. Jack's children will remember the big house and the vacation home, but they will also remember Dad's absence and distance.

Consider how different things would be if Jack understood what eternity teaches us about the here and now. Imagine if he understood that the deepest, most satisfying joys are not to be found in the possessions and experiences of this brief here-and-now moment. Imagine if that freed Jack to be content with a smaller home, a summer rental at the beach, and fewer toys for him and the children. Imagine if Jack remembered every day that the God who was moving him toward eternity would give him everything he needed along the way. Then Jack wouldn't need to work as much, he wouldn't need to worry as much, and he could spend more time doing the most important work assigned to him this side of forever: lovingly serving his wife and joyfully parenting his children.

David and Beth are also committed to a lifestyle that will not work. They are modern-day epicureans on a pathway to disappointment. Maybe the deal breaker will be bills that they are unable to pay or a health issue that alters life as they know it, but the pleasure-at-any-cost paradigm won't work in the long run. They have placed all of their joy in the basket of physical, material experiences in the here and now. They are so convinced that the good life is a life of present, physical pleasure that they have forced themselves not to look at the real cost (personal, relational, and financial) of this kind of lifestyle. While celebrating here and now, they have become skilled at denying the inescapable realities of here and now. They are engaging in a "smile and deny" way of living that is much emptier and more dangerous than they understand.

Beth and David don't have a food problem. They have an eternity problem that results in food being in a place it should not be. Cutting the foodie aspect out of their lifestyle would not solve

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their problem, because their pack-it-all-into-the-here-and-now quest would just migrate to another arena, and they would be as driven and in danger as they are in the area of food.

Jack, David, and Beth each need to be rescued from a view of life that has no movement toward eternity. They need to be rescued from the here-and-now drivenness of their own functional present-ism. Jack, David, and Beth need forever to be given back to them. It is the only way real change will take place in the way they live.

DESTINATION VERSUS PREPARATION

Many of us treat here and now as a destination. Whatever our confessional theology says about eternity, at the functional level we live as if this is all there is. We live with a *destination mentality* instead of a *preparation mentality*. This present world with all of its joys and sorrows is not our final address. When we treat it as if it is, we try to get from this world what we can only experience in the next. We try to pack into our present life all the pleasure, happiness, and excitement we can. We do this because what comes with the thought that this life is all there is, is an inescapable fear that somehow life will pass us by. Here is what a destination mentality fails to understand: our complete, present, personal happiness is not what God is working on in the here and now. Why? Because the plan of his grace is to deliver us out of this world to one that is much, much better. Whether we live with eternity in view or not, there is one thing we all need to understand: God always responds to us with eternity in view.

You see, God has designed that this would not be the final destination for his children. He knows that this is a terribly broken world that, in its present state, does not function the way that he intended. This world is not a safe place to look to for a sense of well-being. For that, we need to live with a preparation mentality, approaching each day knowing that this world is not intended to

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be our final destination, and that God is preparing another world for us. Living with a preparation mentality also means living with the knowledge that God is using the disappointments and difficulties of this world to prepare us for the next. God uses the pressures of the present to craft us into the kind of individuals with whom he would choose to spend eternity.

Living in this present world is designed by God to produce three things in me — *longing, readiness, and hope*. Rather than deepening my drive to have it all now, the disappointments of this present world are intended to make me long for the next. God also knows that we are not ready for the world that is to come. There are ways in which we still are too impressed with our own wisdom, strength, and righteousness. We still struggle to love the Creator more than the creation. We still want to have our own way and write our own rules. So there are important character changes that grace needs to work in us to make us ready for our final destination. And God is using this present moment to produce in us sturdy hope. As by his grace we experience tastes of what is to come, we don't panic in the face of difficulty and disappointment, because we know that God is moving us toward a place where the suffering of this present moment will be no more.

When we ask now to give us what only eternity can, we end up driven, frustrated, discouraged, and ultimately hopeless. We begin with unrealistic expectations and end feeling as though life has passed us by. We try to exercise more control than any person ever has over their circumstances and relationships in order to ensure that we get what we have set our hopes on. But we are not sovereign, and we soon realize it. Because we fall into thinking of this life as our final destination, we place more hope in our situations, relationships, and locations than they are able to deliver. We ask people, places, and things to satisfy our souls and redeem our pasts, but they can't. We require a broken world that is not functioning as God intended to make us happy, but it never can and never will. We place way too many expectations on the people

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in our lives, and they never reach our standards, and we tend to get hurt or angry when they don't. We reduce all of life to a personal comfort and pleasure delivery system, but life never operates the way we wish. Because we live as if this is all there is, we are perennially demanding and disappointed, thinking that we have been dealt a particularly difficult hand. We envy the people around us who appear to have what we don't, and we find it hard to celebrate the successes of others. With the assumption that this is our final destination, we constantly want more and better. We're never able to say, "I have enough." We possess too much, eat too much, spend too much, dream too much, demand too much, complain too much, expect too much, keep score too much, ask too much—and we are disappointed too much. You see, we don't need a better now; no, we need forever to reshape our here and now.

One of the good things the Bible keeps in front of us is that this is not all there is. The world and everything in it is marching toward eternity, and when we understand that, everything changes. You know you don't actually just go around once, so you don't expend all of your life energies trying to do with gusto all you can now. You know you won't experience it all in the here and now. You understand that this life is but a brief preparation for the forever that is to come and that the messiness and hardship of the here and now are not an interruption of the plan, but a part of the plan. The one who is in charge has chosen to keep you in a world that is less than perfect, not because he has forgotten you and what you need, but precisely because he loves you and is delivering to you exactly what you need.

As Jack, David, and Beth discovered, the pack-it-all-in mentality simply doesn't deliver. The frenetic pace of the "good life" doesn't result in the lasting peace, joy, and rest that they are seeking—for them or for the people around them. No, the legacy of destination living is drivenness, dissatisfaction, and disappointment. Sure there are temporary highs, but they are short-lived and work only to keep you driving toward the next bite of the "good life."

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Peace is found only in knowing that this world is meant to prepare us for the next and that the temporary pleasures and pains of this world are not our final address. When we live knowing that the God of grace will lift us out of this broken world and is now readying us for the world to come, we can face difficulty without wanting to give up and experience pleasure without becoming addicted to it. We live with hope in our heart, eyes to the future, and hands holding this present world loosely.

Everything in this world is meant to be a preparation for the next. That means that your marriage isn't a destination; it is a preparation. Your job isn't a destination; it is a preparation. Your friendships and family aren't destinations; they are a preparation. The sight and sound, touch and taste experiences of this present world aren't a destination; they are a preparation for a final destination. No, it isn't wrong to celebrate marital sex or a beautiful bouquet, or a silky chocolate pie, or a wonderful painting, or a death-defying roller coaster. It is right to stop and smell the roses along the way—as long as you don't treat those roses as a final destination.

We're fat, disappointed, driven, in debt, and addicted because we treat this here-and-now moment as if it were all we have. We have acted as though it is a destination, when all that is going on now is somehow, someway a preparation for the final destination that is to come.

LONGING FOR HOME

One of the ways Scripture talks about the impermanence of the here and now is to say that we are dwelling in tents (2 Corinthians 5:1–5). This word picture is of pilgrims traveling toward their final destination, who set up their portable dwelling places along the way. Your tent reminds you that you are not at your destination yet. It announces to you that you are not yet home.

Most of us have no pilgrim experience, so perhaps the closest thing in our experience to the journey of a pilgrim is rustic

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camping. I am persuaded that the whole purpose of camping is to make a person long for home! On that first day in the woods, putting up the tent is exciting, but three days later your tent has unpleasant odors you can't explain. You love the taste of food cooked over an open flame (that's ash!), but three days later you are tired of foraging for wood and irritated by how fast it burns. You were excited at the prospect of catching your dinner from the stream running past your campsite, which is reported to be teeming with trout, but all you have snagged are the roots on the bottom.

You're now four days in and your back hurts, there seems to be no more felled wood to forage, and you're tired of keeping the fire going anyway. You look into what was once an ice- and food-filled cooler to see the family-sized steak you have reserved floating gray and oozing in a pool of blood-stained water. Suddenly you begin to think fondly of home. You think of your soft and inviting mattress, the stove in your kitchen where you just twist a knob and get flame, the red New York strips you left in the freezer, and the house that you are pleased to call your home. You stand there hoping that someone will break the silence and say, "Why don't we go home?" Your four days in the wilderness have accomplished their mission. They have prepared you to appreciate home!

But generally in America we treat camping as a destination rather than a temporary location. We camp in sixty-foot motor homes that have a kitchen like Emeril Legasse's, a forty-two-inch flat screen, air conditioning, and indoor plumbing. We work to make the campsite more comfortable than home! No wonder we don't care if we ever return. No wonder we want life to be one endless vacation. No wonder we want to pack it all in.

But the pack-it-all-in mentality is not only bad for the people around us who will never be able to measure up; it is debilitating to us as well. It ignores the fact that we are broken and our world is broken and that both are in need of redemption. And it misses the hope that someday what is wrong will be righted and what is

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broken will be fixed. Our world isn't a very good amusement park. No, it is a broken place groaning for redemption. Here is meant to make us long for forever. Here is meant to prepare us for eternity. Now is not about wishing for personal sovereignty so that we get our dream. Now is about crying out for a Savior, because like our world, you and I have something broken inside us and desperately need to be redeemed. There is more to come, and when we realize that there is, we will stop living as if this is our final destination.