

Paradigm Spirituality
Chapter 3

Defining Life Backwards

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Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.
Søren Kierkegaard¹

One of the primary reasons it's so difficult to maintain an eternal paradigm is because we don't really think much about eternity or how to prepare for it. Having only a tenuous grasp on what we think eternity might be, we plan for the trip but not for the destination. How different would our lives be if we planned them with the end in mind?

The Journey and the Destiny

Suppose a man is moving from Dallas to Atlanta, where he'll spend the remaining 50 years or so of his life. He plans every detail of the two-day drive: what he'll wear, his rest stops, where he'll eat, where he'll get gas, where he'll spend the night. He plans it all out, down to the most meticulous detail. But when he arrives in Atlanta, he has no idea what he's going to do. We all recognize that this is absurd; but what we understand to be palpably absurd on this level is not so evidently absurd to people looking into eternity. In this analogy, the two-day drive is a clear metaphor for our time on earth, and the 50 years in Atlanta is our eternal destiny.

What is obvious in the physical realm is not so obvious in the spiritual. Why are we not much bothered by our lack of regard for the future? We plan, we engage, we pursue our various activities with tremendous relish. We write purpose statements for our businesses, but few of us write purpose statements for our lives. We plan our businesses with more diligence than we plan our lives!

Our present condition is very real, and our current activities demand our attention. But this is a passing age, and whole cultures, civilizations, indeed the whole world will have been gone long before we experience even the beginning of the fullness of our eternity. The fact is that we will last forever, and the things that we see before us now will depart.

In *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis says:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day

¹ Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, ed. & tr.: Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, vol. 1, A-E, (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 7 vols., 1967-1978), entries 1030 and 1025.

be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is ...with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no 'ordinary' people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind...which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously.... And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner.

We are all immortal creatures, destined either to live an eternal, resurrected existence with Jesus Christ or destined to successfully have avoided God and his claims and to live in a Christless eternity. These are our only options. And this truth should make a tremendous difference in the way we plan and live our lives.

Lewis also said, “Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”² But that’s what most church-goers choose; isn’t it? Most people choose the third option, the one that is really no option at all. We regard the truths of Christianity as moderately important. The fact is, though, that it’s either all or nothing, everything or not anything. If this radical stuff is true, then it has the most profound and compelling implications for all of our lives and destinies. It will define our destiny, because, in life, the journey is always defined by the destiny.

Last Words

W. C. Fields hated Philadelphia for some reason, and he derided the city often. He said jokingly that he would like his tombstone to read, “I’d rather be in Philadelphia,” which is very funny, but also rather sad. There is another story about him which says he was caught reading a Bible near the time of his death. The story goes that when he was asked about it, Fields responded, “I’m looking for a loophole.”

It is doubtful that Fields really wanted mention of Philadelphia on his epitaph, and the story of his looking for a loophole on his deathbed may be apocryphal. There is no dispute, however, about the last words of P. T. Barnum: “How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?” Talk about a guy who never got the point of life!

The words a person utters on his deathbed, believer or non-believer, demonstrate his perspective. Contrast Fields’ last words with those of D. L. Moody, one of the world’s greatest evangelists

² C. S. Lewis, God in the Dock, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA : Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), page 101

who preached for 40 years, founded three Christian schools and inspired many preachers after him. Some time before his death, he said:

*Someday you will read in the papers that D. L. Moody of East Northfield is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now; I shall have gone up higher, that is all, out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal – a body that death cannot touch, that sin cannot taint; a body fashioned like unto His glorious body.*³

It is said that he died after a restless night saying: “Earth recedes, Heaven opens before me!” When his son concluded his father was dreaming, he responded: “No, this is no dream.... It is beautiful. It is like a trance. If this is death, it is sweet. There is no valley here. God is calling me, and I must go.”

Wrestling with the Tough Questions

I had a terrifying experience when I was 19 years old. I had a whole weekend planned, a big weekend; but for various reasons, the whole thing fell apart, and I found myself alone in my fraternity house. The break from my frenetic activity forced me to focus on the big questions of life. Where am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? I was terrified, because I had no answers. And, having no answers, I endeavored to be sure that I would never be without something to do again. Like so many others of our time, this became my way of avoiding the fundamental issues of life.

It reminds me of filmmakers like Ingmar Bergman and Woody Allen. Both of their earlier films focused on the fundamental questions of life, of love, of God and of death – painful questions for them. Bergman went through one film after another, exploring the apparent meaninglessness of life without God. *The Seventh Seal* is a tremendous example of this, in which a medieval knight plays a game of chess with Death and loses. But a turning point came after 1968 and *The Hour of the Wolf*, when Bergman seemed to no longer wrestle with those questions. His films became psychological instead of metaphysical, because a person can only wrestle with life's hard questions out of a context of unbelief for so long. Eventually, it becomes too painful, even unlivable.

Woody Allen was indirectly mentored by Bergman, and followed the same path. Initially, he dealt with love and death (he even made a film with this name), with the issues of purpose and meaning in life. Then, after 1989's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, the metaphysically-oriented films ceased, and the films became purely psychological.

You can only live without hope for so long before you'll have to manufacture some kind of a false optimism in order to go on. You cannot live for long without some kind of hope, even if it's not founded in reality, because it is a necessity for life. The worth of that hope, though, will become more obvious the closer to the end you are.

Forever Young

³Shelton Smith “Sword of the Lord Biographies.” 2002. [Http://www.swordofthelord.com/biographies/moody.htm](http://www.swordofthelord.com/biographies/moody.htm).

In his 1973 book, *The Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt Vonnegut – who was turning 50 and wrestling with the issue of his own mortality – put one of his characters through something quite unusual.

At the end of the novel, Vonnegut shows up in his own novel, driving a Plymouth Duster that he's rented from Avis. From inside his Duster, he gets the character Kilgore Trout's attention. Then he says: "Mr. Trout, you have nothing to fear. I bring you tidings of great joy. I'm a novelist, and I created you for use in my books."

Trout asks if he's crazy. Vonnegut says he is not, and then "shatter[s] his power to doubt [him]," by transporting Trout to "the Taj Majal, and then to Venice and then to Dar es Salaam and then to the surface of the Sun where the flames could not consume him - and then back to Midland City again." Trout crashes to his knees.

Vonnegut tells his character:

"I'm approaching my 50th birthday, Mr. Trout. I'm cleansing and renewing myself for the very different sorts of years to come. Under similar spiritual conditions, Count Tolstoy freed his serfs. Thomas Jefferson freed his slaves. I'm going to set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career. You are the only one I am telling. For the others, tonight will be a night like any other night. Arise, Mr. Trout. You are free. You are free."

The shaking Trout rises to his feet. Vonnegut promises him a Nobel Peace Prize and offers to answer any questions he has. Finally, Vonnegut wishes his character, "Bon Voyage," and dematerializes. As he disappears, he hears Trout calling in his father's voice, "Make me young, make me young, make me young! And those are the last words of the novel."⁴

Now stop and think how you might feel if you discovered you had just been used by some novelist; and that was the only purpose for your life. You'd fall into despair. In fact, the worldview that Vonnegut communicates by his writings is one in which life is utterly absurd. In another of his books, *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut claimed that the pyramids, the Great Wall of China, all of those great symbols of civilization, were little signs left by aliens in the past, so that the next alien that came by could read them. From space, all these things together would say, "Greetings." What an absurd theory of earth's history!

The contrast between this and the truth couldn't be more startling. God also enters into his creation. The author does come. However, instead of telling us we were created for someone's entertainment, he says, "I created you for intimacy with myself, and I want you to experience true reality." Entering into our world, he became one of us; and in solidarity with the human condition, he now identifies with our experiences. He says he wants to be with us, not for a few days, but forever. He wants intimacy with us forever.⁵

⁴ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Breakfast of Champions* (Delacorte Press, 1973), pp. 290-295.

⁵ Revelation 21.

There are several ways we can determine value and significance. One measure is longevity. If something is only beneficial for a period of time, it may be good but not that good. The fact that the work of Shakespeare – or the Bible, for that matter – has survived as long as it has (and remains good) proves something about the worth of Shakespeare and the Bible. The question of longevity can also help with worldviews. There is something innate in us that causes us to want to believe in something that lasts.

This is why Kilgore Trout cries out, “Make me young, make me young, make me young!” We all want to be young forever. This is part of the Good News: Scripture tells us we will be. Our resurrected bodies will not age. We will not die or get sick or experience death again. God says, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5). That’s the reality that we embrace. That is what gives us hope. That is what puts this small, fleeting planet within a much broader and more meaningful context.

Contrast Vonnegut’s dismal ending with a believer’s fictional account of the end. In the final chapter of his book, *The Last Battle*, C. S. Lewis tells of a conversation between Aslan (the Lion character who sang the mythical world of Narnia into being) and the children who helped him save a Narnia-gone-bad. The land “is itself destroyed while saving all that is good (beast and man) and transporting them to Aslan’s land, a country like Narnia in every detail yet infinitely better in every way.”⁶

Aslan turned to them and said:

"You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be."

Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often."

"No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not guessed?"

Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them.

"There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are--as you used to call it in the Shadow-Lands--dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning." And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story,

⁶Michael Dean Bellah. “A Celebration of Joy: Christian Romanticism in the Chronicles of Narnia.” February, 1995
http://www.bestyears.com/thesis_1.html

*which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.*⁷

The end of Narnia is a reflection of what the end will be like for us. Lewis' portrayal demonstrates a hope, a radically different paradigm than is demonstrated by the hopeless, broken figure of Kilgore Trout.

Broken Stories in the Context of Eternity

All of us have broken stories: shattered dreams, failed plans, disappointments. For most of us, life isn't what we thought it would be like when we were younger. People have disappointed us. Our careers aren't everything we wished they would be. We have financial setbacks, health problems, relational difficulties and alienation. All of us have experienced shattered dreams; that's the nature of our earthly life.

We need not despair, though, when we remember that God has a way of repairing the broken stories of this fallen but temporary world. History will reach a denouement. We are moving toward a grand climax in which all will be well. We are moving toward the beginning of something that will last forever, in which every day is better than the day before. We will continue to grow in our emotions, our intellect, our knowledge of who God is. We will never be able to plumb the depths of the mystery of God; and we will, therefore, never be bored. Scripture invites us to believe that somehow we'll recognize each other. We'll be radically different in ways we cannot even begin to imagine (1 John 3:2). We'll see each other (as God now sees us) glorified. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, we will not look at anyone according to the flesh. We'll see them in a new way, in a different light, as immortal beings.

The things we declare now to be important about a man – what his position is, how much wealth he has, where he lives, what he drives – these will all be insignificant. Socioeconomics, race, status – all these things are trivial. The things that cause us to have real solidarity with one another are a common destiny and a common Lord and a common life. That's our commonality; and it gives us far more dignity, far more identity, than any of these surface things that we presently use to try to position people. None of those matter, not in light of eternity.

Don't confuse this world with home. We live with more comfort and more prosperity than kings lived with as recently as two centuries ago; and in our unparalleled affluence there is danger. The more prosperous we are in this world, the harder it will be for us to live as if this world is only a passing thing. The more we clutch it, the more we hold onto this world, the more it holds onto us. And we can find ourselves clinging tenaciously to position and possessions which take hold of our hearts and lead us to confuse the temporal and eternal perspectives yet again.

Very often, it takes what Sheldon Vanauken called the "severe mercy" of God to bring us down to the point of absolute desperation, to break us. Only then are we made aware of our desperate condition and lack of control. Only then will we be willing to receive the good news of Christ. Until then, it's not good news. You don't seek out good news when you're feeling fine.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, (New York: Collier Books--Macmillan Publishing Co., 1956), p. 183-184.

Please hear this warning: Even *after* you come to faith in Christ, you're not nearly as likely to be dependent upon him and radical in your trust if things are going well for you. This is when you most need to be cautious.

There's nothing wrong with prosperity. God is not opposed to wealth. What Scripture says he is opposed to is wealth consuming you, taking your heart. Hold to the things of this world with a loose grip, because, eventually, those things will be someone else's anyway. You'll leave everything behind.

Planning

Like the man driving from Dallas to Atlanta, some of us plan for a two-week vacation better than we plan for the rest of our lives, because on a two-week vacation, we understand that the destination should determine the journey. But isn't this even more true for our lives? Søren Kierkegaard had a great idea: Define your life backwards and then live it forwards; determine at the outset where you want to be at the end of your journey. Steven Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says that most successful people make a practice of beginning with the end in mind.

Imagine your earthly life is over. You have nothing but memories behind you and the grave in front of you. Now ask yourself, "What would it take for me to look back over my shoulder to my past and say that I lived a satisfied life?"

With the answer to that question, you can plan your journey, preparing with the end in view. Certainly, this is preferable to just hopping in the car. While people have done it ("Come on kids. Let's hop in the car. We're going on a two-week vacation. We have no idea where we're going, but it's going to be great!"), it's a gamble. And there's a big difference between gambling with the next two weeks and gambling with the rest of your life.

Why do so many people engage in this lack of planning without seeing the absurdity in it? I believe it's because our destiny and our purpose seem so vague and frail to us. We give orthodox opinions about eternity. We claim to believe there really is a heaven and a hell. We claim that this earth is brief; but our so-called beliefs have little bearing on the way we live. All of it seems so far in the future that we mistakenly act as if it's not really there at all. We can lull ourselves into a false sense of security in this world, when we act as if what we do on this planet really won't have any bearing on eternity. Scripture invites us to see it otherwise.

What might a life look like if it were defined backward and lived forward? First, we must know what our *telos* or purpose is. The Westminster Shorter Catechism starts by defining life backwards, with this question: "What is the chief end of man?" The answer: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." You can't ask for a better start than that. But, certainly, we can add more specifics. We can remember the certain things that God says will last: His Word, and relationships. The more we love and serve others in Christ, the richer our relational rewards. And, just as there is continuity between earthly and heavenly relationships with the people of God, so those who cultivate a growing appetite for the experiential knowledge of God in this life will presumably know him better in the next life than those who kept God in

the periphery of their earthly interests. There can be no more compelling reason to maintain an eternal perspective in this life than to know that perspective relates to our future capacity to see God. Living in light of this desired destiny, we can live every day forward as we press on toward the goal (Phil. 3:13-14).

Renewing Your Mind with the End in Mind

If we are to maintain an eternal perspective, we should not take lightly the admonition to, “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2). With truth from Scripture and reinforcement through relationships with other children of the kingdom, we can both define and maintain our perspective more easily. Our study of Scripture and our exposure to its message will sustain us. Unfortunately, very few people, even Christians, are exposed to the Bible on a regular basis. A commitment is necessary, and we must not lose our perspective by ignoring or discounting the importance of God’s word. Something happens in our lives when we immerse ourselves in Scripture.

When I seek and pursue and am reminded of the things that last, I can remember that I too am destined to last. Then, I can maintain my eternal paradigm. If I lose sight of my purpose and destiny, then the eternal perspective will become very remote. This is the ongoing struggle that we can expect to encounter for the remainder of our sojourn, because this struggle between the visible and invisible will not go away.

Reading the Bible Backwards

When the followers of Jesus Christ lose their interest in heaven they will no longer be happy Christians and when they are no longer happy Christians they cannot be a powerful force in a sad and sinful world.

A. W. Tozer⁸

Who doesn’t want to be happy? And if by the same pursuit that brings us happiness we can also become a powerful force in this world, it would be edifying to occasionally look at the place we are destined for. It is described with great detail at the end of Revelation.

“[W]e must not lose sight of the fact that Scripture consistently portrays this new creation as a place of great beauty and joy.”⁹ There will be no more crying or mourning (Rev. 21:4). We will see “the glory of God, its radiance like a rare jewel” (Rev. 21:11). There will be no evil there or any falsehood (Rev. 21:27). We will reign forever (Rev. 22:5). But above all these things, we will enjoy unhindered fellowship with God. “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 21:3-4).

⁸ A. W. Tozer, *Who Put Jesus on the Cross and Other Messages on Christian Maturity*, (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, Inc.), p. 105

⁹ Wayne Grudem *Bible Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), p. 469.

Wayne Grudem, in his *Bible Doctrine*, says:

In the Old Testament, when the glory of God filled the temple, the priests were unable to stand and minister (2 Chron. 5:14). In the New Testament, when the glory of God surrounded the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem, “they were filled with fear” (Luke 2:9). But here in the heavenly city, we will be able to endure the power and holiness of the presence of God’s glory, for we will live continually in the atmosphere of the glory of God.¹⁰

To be sure, there will be singing and rejoicing and worship,¹¹ the kind of worship we have only experienced traces of on earth, during which we’ve realized it is “our highest joy to be giving him glory.”¹² In that heavenly city, this joy will be enhanced as we are surrounded by mighty armies of heaven, friends who have welcomed us and the tangible presence of God himself. The joy will no longer be fleeting. We will be with him forever, and in his presence “there is fullness of joy...[and] pleasures for evermore.” (Ps. 16:11).

There is a goal great enough to keep all of us driving forward.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 470

¹¹ Revelation 5:9; Jude 1:24; cf. Rom. 3:23; 8:18; 9:23; 1 Cor. 15:43; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:17; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 2:12; Heb. 2:10; 1 Peter 5:1, 4, 10; Rev. 22:3

¹² Grudem, p. 470