

# Edge of Eternity





# Edge of Eternity

by Brian Johnston



# 1. A peaceful departure

Recently, I was watching some documentary footage on the Grand Canyon, that great hole in the ground in the United States at the bottom of which runs the Colorado River. In opening, we saw people abseiling over the rim and dangling off the rock sides on their way down. The narrator then voiced over this using an expression I've never since been able to get out of my mind: he spoke of "clinging to the edge of eternity". I don't know whether the thought in the narrator's mind was that these exposed rock layers at the sides of the Grand Canyon might be supposed to indicate vast periods of time or whether it was simply the thought that one mistake, or piece of equipment failure, would have sent the climber plummeting to his death; all I know is that was the expression he used: "clinging to the edge of eternity".

I've thought about it since. We can forget the Grand Canyon; that phrase is relevant to all of us. For everyone living on the face of this planet is only clinging to the edge of eternity. The old Bible word for eternity is 'time out of mind'. It's the great beyond, beyond time, when our days on earth are finished. In the Bible, the apostle James graphically reminds us that our lives are only a vapour, soon passing away. A limitless eternity beckons in contrast

to these few and fleeting years of time. As we move about on the crust of this tiny planet, our very life and existence is just like a fragile foothold on the rock-face of eternity.

Such talk, of course, may not be popular; after all, the subject of death is the last taboo subject. Many important subjects, some of life's greatest misfortunes, have become the targets for humorous remarks - but death is no joke. In any group, when the subject turns in that direction, a hush descends - which may in part be a fear of the unknown. The philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, said on his death-bed: "now for a fearful leap in the dark".

One of the four Gospels in the Bible stands out in its frequent mention of this subject. It was written by a doctor, and perhaps this is an aspect of his own professional interest which shines through: Luke's medical interest in death. No doubt, he had often have been obliged to attend the bedside of a dying patient. For a time in Luke's life he might have wondered about death, and what lay beyond, not only for his patients, but also for himself. But there came a time in his life when he found the answers in Jesus Christ. Naturally enough, in writing his gospel, he was eager to share the answer he had found.

In this booklet called 'Edge of

Eternity' our aim will be to trace Doctor Luke's mention of the dead and the dying, not out of any morbid curiosity or obsession, but to pick up his point that we, the living, can learn from the dying.

We mentioned earlier the agnostic's reaction to death when his time came, (as it must for all of us). He said, "Now for a leap in the dark". There's a much better way to enter eternity. The first dying man Luke draws our attention to proves the point. We'll let Luke take up the story, but just let me say that it's a story set very soon after the birth of Jesus Christ. His parents are complying with the Old Testament Law in bringing the child Jesus to the Jerusalem temple ...

*And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.*

*And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, According to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light*

*of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."*

*And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed - and a sword will pierce even your own soul - to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2:25-35)*

So the first character Luke introduces us to - as someone who's approaching death - is Simeon. He was a man who had lived a long and consistent life of devotion to God. I think it's fair to assume he had lived in the closest intimacy with God, for God had revealed to him that he wouldn't die before seeing the arrival of the Messiah, or the Christ.

Then came that exciting day in his experience when he saw Mary and Joseph coming into the temple, carrying a very small baby. Suddenly, he just knew this was the long-awaited Messiah - and knew at the same time that his own time on earth was now at an end.

What a wonderful scene unfolds as the old man lifted the child from Mary's arms and cradled him in his own, *and blessed God, and said, "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, According to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all*

*peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."* (Luke 2:29-32)

Here now is a man on the edge of eternity. Picture him with his white hair and noble features. The light of eternity is already dawning upon him, like a mountain peak lit up in the sunrise.

Knowing that his last day on earth was fast approaching, think what his final speech might have contained. It could have been a reminiscence of his great spiritual achievements. He might have asked to be remembered for his missions of mercy, or wanted a last opportunity to impress with his stories about his sometimes rapturous prayer-life.

But there's not a word from his lips about his own works. You see, why mention them, for they were no grounds for entering eternity in peace? As time is about to be swallowed up in eternity, where is the focus of the old man in Luke's story? See him standing holding the baby; he only has eyes for the Christ of God. He's gazing intently at the Christ-child. His final thoughts are not taken up with his own life, but with that of another: the Son of God made flesh, come as man to be his saviour.

And he came to offer to be our saviour too. For notice Simeon's words again: *"... for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the*

*Gentiles ..."*

Simeon wasn't only thinking about his own needs at that hour, but the needs of others too, right down to this present time. For here was a salvation big enough for whoever will receive Christ as Saviour and Lord.

What a picture of receiving Christ we have here! An old man with a baby in his arms: the Christ-child. Simeon needed nothing more - he had Christ. Both his arms are holding Christ. He's not thinking selfishly about himself, but his thoughts are full of Christ.

Simeon had the Saviour - he needed nothing more! As we take our leave of Simeon, we'll take a last glimpse of this man holding Christ in both of his arms. He's not holding Christ in one hand and something else in the other. There's nothing else you can take into eternity. You can't take your money, your possessions or your reputation; you need only take Christ. Does he hold a place in your heart?

This is the secret of Simeon's peace. It can also be ours when the time for our cross-over comes: when we, too, must cross over from time into eternity. Here's the classic example of how we can enter the margin of eternity in profound, certain and utter peace – if for our salvation we have personally received the Saviour, so as to depend on nothing but only him as we lose our grip on time.

## 2. Stop the funeral!

The story is told about a man in an aeroplane who grumbled when the captain announced that, due to a failure of one of the four engines, their arrival would be delayed by an hour. Some time later this was followed by another announcement in which the captain spoke of the loss of a second engine, so they would now be three hours late in arriving. The same passenger who had earlier grumbled then vented his frustration by saying, "If the other engines fail, we'll be up here all night!" It seems he was not a happy traveller!

I happen to like travelling (which is rather fortunate, as I do a lot of it!) but I also enjoy arriving at my destination. Suppose a ship was steered in never-ending circles round and round in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean without ever progressing to the other side. How pointless that would be! And yet, very often we live as though we're going to stay here forever; as though this life were everything and there was no eternal goal - our life just an endless going round in circles, the daily round, the trivial task, with no clear thought as to where we're heading. That's got to be unwise!

Luke, the writer of the third Gospel was a doctor by profession, and he's the Gospel writer who introduces us, in a way that no other Gospel writer

does, to people who are about to leave, or who have left, this world. He does this because he wants us to wise up.

The other week, I accompanied a patient to see their doctor. We sat and waited in the doctor's waiting-room until the patient's name was called and we could keep our appointment. It's made me think since about Doctor Luke's waiting-room. His writing, with its frequent encounters with the dead and the dying, is consistently pointing us to the fact that our existence here on earth is like being in eternity's waiting room.

It's as if he's repeatedly reminding us that we're not going to be staying here forever, and so we'd better not live as though we are. In this booklet, I hope that Doctor Luke's Gospel will make it obvious to us that it's a mistake to live as though this life were everything and there was no eternal goal.

Yes, it's a mistake to forget the reality that we're simply 'clinging to the edge of eternity' like those abseilers mentioned in the previous chapter. Isn't that what we're all doing?

So we come to the seventh chapter of Luke's Gospel:

*Soon afterwards He [Jesus] went to*

*a city called Nain; and His disciples were going along with Him, accompanied by a large crowd.*

*Now as He approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a sizeable crowd from the city was with her. When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, "Do not weep."*

*And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!"*

*The dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother.*

*Fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and, "God has visited His people!"*

*This report concerning Him went out all over Judea and in all the surrounding district. (Luke 7:11-17)*

On the occasion we've just read about, Christ was approaching the village of Nain, when he encountered a funeral procession. A broken-hearted widow was following the remains of her one and only son to the grave. Christ stopped the procession, touched the coffin, restored the young man to life, and gave him back to his mother.

A young man. How sad when a young person dies. In some correspondence I received today, a friend wrote, 'We buried our niece

yesterday in Ayrshire, Scotland.' She was a young woman who had been seriously ill for some time. Her uncle was asked by the family to take the graveside service and referred to two questions asked by another junior relative, not yet four years old, who when overhearing the news of the young woman's death had immediately asked: "When will she get better?" and, "When will she be alive again?" The deceased's uncle, in conducting the funeral service, and reflecting his understanding that the young woman had previously placed her trust in Christ as saviour, used these two questions as the basis of his message. He said her own answer to the first question: "When will she get better?" would be: "I'm already much better - very far better" (Philippians 1:23), if she were to be asked at this very moment how she was. As for the second question: "When will she be alive again?" the clear answer given was, 'when Jesus comes again and Christians are resurrected' (1 Thessalonians 4:14-16).

What a comfort to heart-broken Christian parents should a young son or daughter die after he or she also has personally trusted in Christ, the Saviour. They will sorrow of course, and the Bible acknowledges that, but then adds: not as those who have no hope. The Christian's sure hope when a loved one dies as a believer in Christ is that the person - though not the body, of course - has passed into the presence of Christ in heaven.

That's the sure hope for all who have met Christ by faith just as surely as the widow woman met Christ by the gate of Nain that day in our story from Luke chapter 7.

Christ had looked on her with compassion, and stopping the funeral procession, had said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" Then he that had been dead, sat up. The Saviour said that: *an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live ...*

*"Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth ..."* (John 5:25-29)

Yes, just as surely as we expect to die, we may expect to be raised from the dead, like that young man. The Bible says: *it is appointed to all ... to die once, and then comes the judgement* (Hebrews 9:27). But how will it be for us in the resurrection? That will depend on how it will be for us in the judgement; it depends on our standing before God.

Surely that young man from the city of Nain in Luke chapter 7 had been ready to die, not just the second time, but the first time. After he died, he met Christ. I want us to think about that very specially now. After he died, he met Christ. So will we all. All of humanity is going to wind up at the feet of Jesus Christ. We'll all meet him after we die; but the eternally

significant issue is, will we meet him as our Judge or will we meet him as our Saviour?

Often when someone mentions death, maybe their own impending death, we're lost for words, or else clumsy words come pouring out. We're suddenly conscious we could have phrased things much better than we just did. That happened to the disciple Peter one day. Jesus was talking about his own death, his exit from this world, when Peter suddenly blurted out something about building a booth for Christ. How inappropriate! Christ was not talking about staying, but about going! - his departure from this world at Jerusalem. What, then, was the point of a booth, far less the point of any of us dreaming about building mansions down here! As a Christian friend of mine says: "When we die, or when the Lord comes, we can't take anything except people!" He means that by sharing the good news of how we can be saved from the judgement to come by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, we can be instrumental in bringing others to glory. We certainly can't take any money or possessions.

Jesus died and rose again and went back to heaven to prepare a place for us (John 14:1-6) - a place for people who are prepared - prepared by means of their faith in Christ. Make sure you meet Christ before your funeral!

# 3. The sleep of death

There was once, apparently, a little girl whose route home from school took her past a cemetery. One day, she was asked: "Little girl, are you not afraid to walk past the cemetery?" "No," she replied, "because my home is just beyond."

Each true Christian believer can say the same. He or she has a home beyond the grave, a place in glory with Jesus Christ because of all he did for them in his death on the cross 2,000 years ago.

Another little girl, and the idea behind the word 'cemetery', both feature in what we wish to share today from another of Doctor Luke's brushes with death. Not personal brushes, but his Gospel record of how and when he encountered death in the lives of those around him as he followed with Jesus. We've noted how Luke seems to pick up on this angle more than the others, perhaps it's something of his professional interest as a medical doctor shining through. He seems convinced that we, the living, have so much to learn from the dying. In the process, his writings are an effective reminder that we're all simply 'clinging to the edge of eternity'.

The girl mentioned in Luke chapter 8 was doing precisely that: she was clinging on to life, and her hold was

becoming more precarious as each hour passed. But let's allow Luke to take up the story. He's about to announce the arrival of the girl's father:

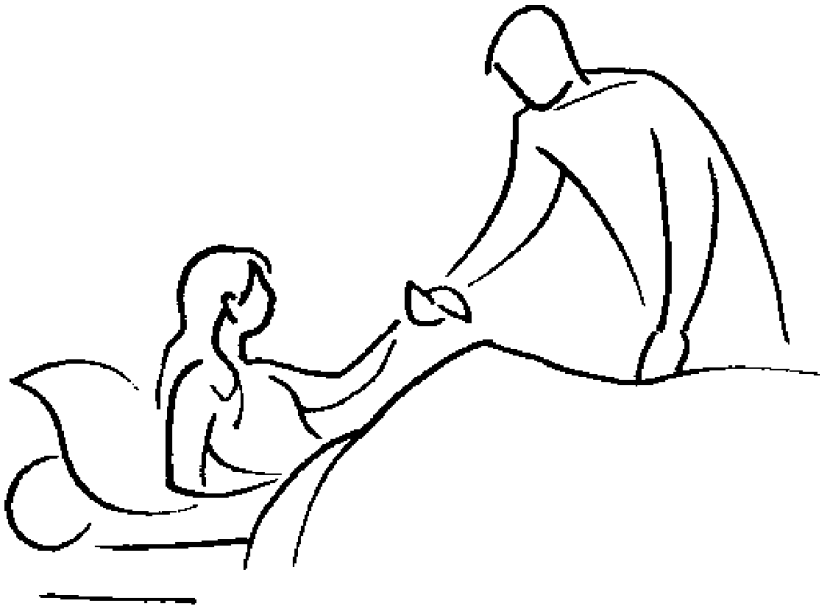
*And there came a man named Jairus, and he was an official of the synagogue; and he fell at Jesus' feet, and began to implore Him to come to his house; for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, and she was dying ... [later, while Jesus was on his way there] ... someone came from the house of the synagogue official, saying, "Your daughter has died; do not trouble the Teacher anymore."*

*But when Jesus heard this, He answered him, "Do not be afraid any longer; only believe, and she will be made well."*

*When He came to the house, He did not allow anyone to enter with Him, except Peter and John and James, and the girl's father and mother. Now they were all weeping and lamenting for her; but He said, "Stop weeping, for she has not died, but is asleep." And they began laughing at Him, knowing that she had died.*

*He, however, took her by the hand and called, saying, "Child, arise!"*

*And her spirit returned, and she got up immediately; and He gave orders*



*for something to be given her to eat. Her parents were amazed; but He instructed them to tell no one what had happened. (Luke 8:41-56)*

So, when Christ arrived at this home of the synagogue ruler in Capernaum, he - by all reports - found the young girl of twelve, the only daughter of the family, to be dead. Outside the house, the hired professional mourners were already filling the air with their weird, heartless wailings. Christ ordered them to be quiet, with his famous words: "She is not dead, but sleeping".

That was when the wailing suddenly turned to mocking - at the claims of Christ. These people recognized the evidence of death, and even many of their religious leaders didn't believe in such a thing as resurrection. Here, then, were people who had no real comfort to give. The best they could offer the relatives was to help them work their grief out of their system by encouraging an emotional release by

means of their deliberate and exaggerated wailings. Their professionalism knew nothing of true comfort. In fact, it resented the loss of income which would be the result of Christ's words being proved true.

"She is not dead but sleeping," Jesus had said. What had he meant by that? For Doctor Luke doesn't indicate that his understanding was anything

different to the mourners' diagnosis: that the girl was dead. But Christ said, "She is not dead." Could it be that the girl was dead, but death was not going to be the outcome of that day? Death was not going to have the victory over the girl at this time. Christ would show his power as victorious over death when he took her by the hand and raised her up.

Christians have been helped to dry their tears by the knowledge that 'sleep' is not the ultimate, or permanent, disaster which others assume death is. The English word 'cemetery', though now a cold and cheerless word, once bore its witness to the Christian faith: it's a word borrowed directly from the Greek language, and means 'a place where people sleep'. Followers of Jesus Christ who have died, are spoken about in the Bible as having 'fallen asleep in Jesus' (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Jesus Christ, at his promised return, will speak the word and all

true believers on Christ, his Church, will 'arise' and be with him for ever.

Well, when Jesus had gone inside the home of the synagogue ruler that day, and taken the child by the hand, raised her to life again, and given her back to her parents; he had not gone in alone, but with selected witnesses. The three disciples Jesus took with him on this occasion were also chosen to accompany Christ at other times when he was in the presence of, or in close association with, death.

Peter, James and John were taken closer than the rest, not only here, but on the Mount of Transfiguration and also further into the Garden of Gethsemane at the time of Christ's arrest. The favoured three disciples saw Jesus victorious over death here in this story from Luke 8; then they saw him displayed as being glorified through death on the mountain where he was transfigured in glory before them; and finally they saw him in the garden just before his arrest - saw him there becoming subject to God's will in personally embracing death for our sakes - yes, even the death of the cross with all that involved. One day, because of that, we'll share his own victory over death when we cross over and are glorified with him.

Luke's story today has involved the concern of a parent for a dying child; but we close today with a story of a child's concern for a dying parent. A well-known preacher was getting

ready for bed one night when he heard a knock at the front door. Upon answering it, he found a little girl dressed in rags. As he stood looking into her thin, haggard little face, she said, "Are you the preacher?"

"Yes, I am," he replied.

"Well, won't you come down and get my mother in?" she asked.

The preacher answered, "My dear, it is hardly proper for me to come and get your mother in. If she is drunk, you should get a policeman."

"Oh, sir," she replied, "you don't understand! My mother isn't drunk; she's at home dying, and she's afraid to die. She wants to go to heaven, but doesn't know how. I told her I would find a preacher to get her in. Come quick, sir; she's dying!"

The preacher could not resist the appeal of the little girl, so he promised her he would come as soon as he was dressed. The little girl led him into the slum district to an old house, up a rickety stairway, along a dark hall, and finally to a dismal room. There the dying woman lay in the corner. "I've got the preacher for you, mother. You just tell him what you want, and do what he tells you and he'll get you in!"

Too weary to sit up, the poor woman raised her feeble voice and asked, "Can you do anything for a sinner like me? My life has been lived in sin, and now that I'm dying I feel that I'm going to hell, but I don't want to go there; I want to go to heaven. What

can I do now?"

Looking at her sin-weary face the preacher thought: What can I tell her? I have been preaching salvation by reformation, but this poor soul has gone too far to reform. I have been preaching salvation by character, but she hasn't any. I know what to do. I'll tell her what my mother used to tell me as a boy. She's dying and it can't hurt her even if it doesn't do her any good.

Bending down beside her the preacher began: "My dear woman, God is very gracious and kind, and in His Book, the Bible, he says, 'God so loved the world, that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'"

"Oh," exclaimed the dying woman, "does it say that in the Bible? My! That ought to get me in. But, sir, my sins, my sins!"

He was amazed at the way the verses came back to him. He continued, "The Bible says that 'the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.'"

"All sin, did you say?" she asked earnestly. "Does it really say ALL sin?"

That ought to get me in."

"Yes," he replied, kneeling down beside her. "It says all sin. God's Book also says: 'This is a faithful saying and worthy of acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.'"

"Well," she said, "if the chief got in, I can come."

The preacher bent down and prayed with the poor woman. Just as she was, she came to Jesus, who never turns anyone away, and she 'got in'. "In the process," added the preacher, "while she was getting in, I myself got in. Two sinners, the preacher and that poor woman, entered salvation's door together that night."

The preacher's good living didn't get him in, nor did the poor woman's bad life keep her out. Both were sinners - 'for all have sinned' - and as such they entered through the same door to life and peace, by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't mock Christ's claims; he represents the only true comfort that's to be found in the face of death.

# 4. The centre-point of time

One of the favourite clichés in the world of sport is the description of a game as being a game of two halves. This means that the half-time break proved to be a pivotal moment as far as the result of the game was concerned. Sometimes it can be one-way traffic in favour of one team in the first half; followed by one-way traffic in the other team's favour during the second period of play. That's the kind of game that would be described by the saying: 'It was a game of two halves!'

We're following Doctor Luke's writings in the Gospel which bears his name. I suppose you could say his Gospel is one of two halves! Or perhaps I should say 'two sections', because they differ in length. As we make our way, reading through Luke's Gospel, we come to chapter 9 and verse 51, where we read:

*When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem ...*

That verse seems to mark a distinct change of direction in Luke's Gospel. Up until that moment, it's as if Christ has been coming into our world and continuing to draw ever nearer to us in all our circumstances; but from that verse on, the indication is that Christ is now progressing towards

leaving our world again and returning to his Father in heaven.

It's worth asking ourselves: what significant event happens around this time? Is there something that has the character of a defining moment about it? The best answer seems to be found by going back to an event recorded in the earlier verses of the same chapter. It's the incident often referred to as 'Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration'. This is what happened:

*... [Jesus] took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*

*Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him.*

*And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for*

*Moses, and one for Elijah" - not realizing what he was saying.*

*While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud.*

*Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!"*

*And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen. (Luke 9:28-36)*

The title of this chapter is 'the centre-point of time', because from this time on, Christ's face is set to go to Jerusalem, which would become his departure-point from this world - just as Bethlehem had been his entry-point.

Other Gospel writers tell us of the transfiguration of Jesus, when the visible glory he had laid aside in coming into this world was allowed to be glimpsed by Peter, James and John on that earthly mountain. But, typically, only Luke tells us what the topic of conversation was on that most exalted and glorious of occasions. The subject in question was 'death' - not just any death, but the death of Christ. Once again, Luke's special interest in this topic shines through.

As mentioned in the previous chapter of this booklet, Peter,

James and John were taken closer than the rest on three occasions. The favoured three disciples saw Jesus victorious over death in the story from Luke 8 about the raising from the dead of Jairus's young daughter; then they saw him displayed as being glorified through death on the mountain where he was transfigured in glory before them; and finally they saw him in the garden just before his arrest - becoming subject to God's will in personally embracing death for our sakes - even the death of the cross with all that involved. One day, because of that, as Christian believers, we will share his own victory over death when we cross over and are glorified with him.

Now the three disciples, whom Jesus took to be with him, saw not only Jesus, but also Moses and Elijah appearing with him on the mountain. The word used for Jesus' death seems just a little unusual: it was spoken of as his departure, exodus or exit from this world. Interestingly, both Moses



and Elijah who appeared with Jesus, both had remarkable exits from this world too - and both persons were connected with mountains.

Elijah never actually died, but a chariot of fire appeared to receive him up out of sight of this world, and from his successor Elisha in particular (2 Kings 2). The mountain we associate with Elijah is Mount Carmel - it's the mountain where he put a vital decision before the Israelite people (1 Kings 18). The days of Elijah were ones of falling away from the true and living God of heaven, the God of the Bible. Many followed the god Baal. Elijah summoned the 450 prophets of this false god to a contest on Mount Carmel in full view of all the people, and to help them make up their mind whom to serve: Baal or God. Two altars were constructed: one to Baal; and the other to God. First the prophets of Baal, then Elijah in his turn, would offer sacrifices on their respective altars, and it was agreed that the god who answered by fire in showing he had accepted the sacrifice was the true God. After the utter failure of the false prophets, after they had vainly danced around their altar until past midday, Elijah took over. Despite dampening his altar, its sacrifice, and all around with water, when Elijah called on God there was an immediate answer as fire fell from heaven. So to that people at that time, the question asked by every generation since: "Is there a God?" was decisively

answered. "Yes! There is!"

But if the presence of Elijah as the representative of the prophets makes us realize that there really is a God; then Moses, the representative of the law, reminds us by his presence there that we have offended the requirements of the God who is really there. For with Moses, we associate Mount Sinai, where the Israelite people came after they had been released from Pharaoh's tyranny in the land of Egypt. There, on the mountain, Moses was handed the two tablets of stone on which were written the Ten Commandments - the very commands which were quickly broken in the camp at the foot of the mountain. But, in fact, we've all broken these laws. When one man came to Jesus claiming he'd kept them, Jesus asked him to go and do something which he couldn't bring himself to do - and which revealed he had not fully explored the depth of these commands. None of us would fare any better than that young man whom the Lord loved, but to whom he pointed out this fatal flaw.

Remember, the topic of conversation on the mountain of Jesus' transfiguration was death, and we would do well to relate this background information about Elijah and Moses to that same theme. For all of the law and the sum total of all the prophets pointed forward to the cross where Jesus died. If, as Elijah has shown, there's a God I must go to meet when I die, then I need to be

prepared for that meeting. This is all the more necessary, as we are reminded by Moses' presence that the God whom we must meet is one we've offended by our sins. Our sins are all those times we've missed the mark by not reaching God's perfect standards.

In the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he says:

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:56,57)*

Why was the theme of death backlit with such glory that day on the mountain when Moses and Elijah appeared with the Lord Jesus? Because Jesus' death - which was the focal point of all that glory - was to be the means of extracting the sting from death itself. What's the sting of death? You may say, "I know what the sting of death is: it's pain, I dread a lingering, painful death." Someone else says: "No, an even greater sting is leaving behind our loved ones." Terrible as these things

are, the sting of death is, in fact, sin. For, after death, the Bible says, we face judgement (Hebrews 9:27). Judgement on account of our sins - that's truly the sting of death. And sin will always matter until the law is removed - which will never happen (Matthew 5:18).

So, only the death of Christ - which has removed the sting of death - can become the gateway to a glorious eternity for all who believe in him. Let's not make the same mistake Peter made when responding to all this on the mountain. He wanted to make three booths: one for Christ, one for Moses and one for Elijah. He was probably intending this as an honour to Christ, but he'd just done what all false religions and cults do today when they put Christ on the same level as others. Only when we truly see Christ as unique, will we too glimpse something of the glory associated with his death, and the victory over death which it has brought all who truly turn from sin and believe totally on him.

# 5. Cancel the retirement plans!

Not every story has a happy ending. In this booklet, moving among the dead and dying of Luke's Gospel - in every case so far - the power of Christ over death, or the promise of a glad eternity beyond, has relieved what would otherwise have been a very sombre scene indeed.

But, sadly, we next come across in Luke's Gospel a couple of stories which have no happy ending. From chapter 12, we're introduced to a rich and successful farmer who lived without any thought of God – and certainly no thought of death or the life to come. He was busy planning for an early and enjoyable retirement, but instead he was ushered into eternity. Sadly, he'd been preparing for his retirement, but not for eternity.

Here's how Luke records Jesus' story of the rich farmer:

*And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?'"*

*"Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all*

*my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.""*

*"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?'"*

*"So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16-21)*

Here was a man who thought more about his body than his soul; he thought more about time than eternity; he thought more about his goods than God; and more about the gifts than the Giver. This is Jesus' portrait of a fool.

The rich farmer was so successful in his farming that he found himself with more goods than he could possibly use or enjoy. He had to decide what to do with his excess - how he could store it all. The solution he came up with to his storage problem was short-sighted - and selfish - in the extreme. If only he'd been wise enough to appreciate the truth of what the Lord Jesus said when he spoke about how it's not in the excess of goods that our life consists (Luke

12:15). Common sense says you can have five Mercedes Benz cars, but you can only enjoy driving one of them at any one time.

The farmer's other mistake was in not realizing just how uncertain life is. To put all your excess goods into storage for your own future enjoyment may be all right provided you know you're going to be around to enjoy them. But if you've stored up massive amounts of excess goods on this earth and your life is suddenly terminated, you not only don't have the opportunity to enjoy the goods on earth, but you can't take them with you, so you lose the lot.

I've already mentioned in this booklet about some documentary footage on the Grand Canyon where people were abseiling over the rim and dangling off the rock sides as they made their way down. The narrator then voiced over this using an expression I've never been able to get out of my mind ever since: he spoke of 'clinging to the edge of eternity'. That's how uncertain life is: at every moment we're clinging to the edge of eternity.

Let's learn from the rich farmer's mistake. It would make much more sense for us as Christians to take any excess of material goods which we don't need, and can't enjoy, and translate them into spiritual capital that can be transferred to the world to come, so that we arrive in eternity not only saved but with a good spiritual foundation for eternity.

But how do we accumulate spiritual

capital? Or in Jesus' words 'lay up treasure in heaven' (Matthew 6:20)? Paul gives the short answer for believers in his letter to Timothy:

*Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed. (1 Timothy 6:17-19)*

I have a friend who says: "There's nothing we can take with us, only people." How much wiser it is then, to invest in the lives of people - to invest for eternity. The apostle Paul spoke of those who would be his joy and crown in a coming day (1 Thessalonians 2:19). They had been among the fruits of his service for the Lord Jesus, people who had responded at his preaching and had, like Paul, come to be the possessors of eternal life.

There's another story Jesus told about a rich man which touches on this aspect of things:

*Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no*

*longer be manager.'*

*"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes.'*

*"And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'*

*"And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.'*

*"And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'*

*"Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'*

*"And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.*

*"And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings." (Luke 16:1-9)*

Again this is recorded by Luke, and - typically - it has the shadow of death over it since it makes mention of the eternal dwellings in the world to come.

But, here's a manager dismissed from his position of employment. In the short interval between being given his notice to quit and actually losing his job, he decides to act to safeguard his future. In itself that's a good lesson: we need to act now so as to safeguard our future.

What he did was: while he still had control of his employer's assets, he decided it would be good to use them in such a way that when he did have to give them all up, he would by then have friends in the world outside who would be kind to him and look after him. So he agreed with all his employer's debtors a reduction in what they owed. Obviously, that seemed like a good way to win friends - people who might return a favour in the future. But what he did was, in fact, unscrupulous - and in no way was the Lord commending that - the Lord wasn't commending the nature of what he did. The only commendable point is that he looked ahead and used whatever resources were at his disposal then in order to make friends for the future. It was for this that the Lord commended him as being wiser than some Christians.

Now, here's the question: is there any way in which we can use our surplus resources to make eternal friendships? If we're already Christians, the answer must surely be "Yes!" Rather than spending our excess on some additional luxury we don't really need, we could donate, we could invest the same amount in

support of mission work bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to some unreached remote tribespeople - or people on our own doorstep for that matter. Will not these people then feel a special gratitude towards us for all eternity?

Of course, we are saved by grace and not by works (Eph.2:8,9). No-one will be in eternity with God on any other basis than by repenting and putting their faith in Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour; and, also, it should be equally clear that everyone in eternity with God is loved; but to be

there without those who are our friends in this way - our joy and crown as Paul said - will be to suffer an eternal loss.

Finally, let me say, if you're not yet sure of belonging to Christ, then you need to consider your need to be rich toward God - rich in faith, the faith which is in his Son, Jesus Christ. If we already are in a personal relationship with Christ, let's make sure our focus is on laying up treasure in heaven rather than down here on earth.

# 6. The danger of not taking the Bible seriously

In chapter 16 of Luke's Gospel, Christ tells another story - not said to be a parable - but it's about a rich man and a beggar. For the beggar, the last few years of life have turned into a nightmare of gnawing hunger and excruciating illness. Death comes as the ultimate in pain relief, and introduces him into a state of joy and comfort.

For the rich man it's the other way round. Life has brought him nothing but luxury. He's idled along in callous self-indulgence and pitiless unbelief. He simply can't bring himself to believe the Bible really means it when it talks about the fate which awaits the unrepentant and unbelieving. But he's to discover too late - as we'll read now - that it was all too real ...

*"Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.*

*"Now the poor man died and was*

*carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.'*

*"But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.'*

*"And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house - for I have five brothers - in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'*

*"But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'*

*"But he said, 'No, father Abraham,*

*but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!'*

*"But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'"* (Luke 16:19-31)

So we read that the beggar died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom - in other words he was received into the company of the believing where he was said to be comforted. The mention of Abraham is important. He's the great example of people of faith in the Bible, the father of all who profess true faith. It's fitting then that he represents the place of comfort to which all who were blessed as a result of their faith went at that time.

Incidentally, when Abraham himself died we read this in the book of Genesis 25:

*This is the sum of the years of Abraham's life which he lived: one hundred and seventy-five years. Then Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah. (Genesis 25:7-9 NKJ)*

The full record here is that Abraham 'breathed his last', was 'gathered to his people', and was 'buried'. It's as though this language reflects our threefold nature as spirit, soul and body. As to his spirit, Abraham breathed his last; as to his soul, he

was gathered to his people, and as to his body, he was buried.

Someone in the south of Ireland recently wrote to ask about what happens at death, so let's take this opportunity to share what we understand the Bible reveals to us. At death, our spirit returns to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:7); our body returns to the earth and to dust (Genesis 3:19); and our soul - if we know Jesus Christ as our personal Saviour - goes to be 'with Christ' (Philippians 1:23).

But what of those - like the rich man in Jesus' story - who die unbelieving and unrepentant? This is a distressing topic which any sensitive person would prefer not to discuss. Having said that, we wouldn't be faithful to God's Word if we tried to evade the issue. So let's consider the implications of what Jesus had to say about the rich man in his story.

Perhaps, we need to point out that Jesus' stories were never fables - they were often parables, but in them the details were true to real life. The circumstantial detail was never fanciful, while the outline of the story taught a spiritual lesson. In fact, as we've said, the story of the rich man and Lazarus is not actually called a parable. If it should be regarded as a parable, it would be the only one to feature a named character, Lazarus. I suggest it's hard not to consider this as an actual person.

Maybe, we also need to say a word

about some aspects of the story, such as the flames. The reason we draw attention to this is that some may tend to dismiss as unreal the truth Jesus was communicating in this way. We don't need to imagine the flames as in every way the same as those from literal coal fires, but that's no reason for rejecting the fact that, at very least, real mental and spiritual anguish is being described here.

Most of the graphic glimpses that the New Testament of the Bible gives us of what lies beyond death, are given to us by that kindest and truest of men, the Lord Jesus Christ. If he has spoken to us in metaphors about things which lie beyond death, then it's because that's the best way for us to grasp the awful reality of these things - and to be warned by them so as to find the way of escape he came to so lovingly provide through his own sacrificial death for all who believe on him.

Please don't be tempted to take the Bible less than seriously on these points - for that's exactly the kind of attitude that characterized the rich man himself, the same rich man who ended up in Hades. I keep referring to him as 'the rich man', but it's an important, if not obvious, point to see that he wasn't sent there because he happened to be rich. He ended up there because of his unbelief. The ending makes that clear when it reveals his 5 brothers

were of the same type of attitude as himself - the type who would not be persuaded even if someone returned from the dead to convince them.

The rich man during his life showed his unbelief in the way he treated the poor beggar, Lazarus. Lazarus was his neighbour who lay at his gate. Now God's instruction in the Bible was that the rich man was to love his neighbour as himself. The rich man had made not the slightest attempt to do that. His failure to do it in any shape or form, shows that he simply didn't take the Bible seriously (whatever he might have professed).

Now, he discovers his mistake too late. Too late for himself, but what about his brothers? He begs Abraham that Lazarus be sent back to warn them:

*"... I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house - for I have five brothers - in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."*

*"But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'*

*"But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!'"*

*"But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Luke 16:27-31)*

No, Abraham assures him, sending Lazarus back to warn his brothers

wouldn't achieve any more than when Lazarus had lain at his own gate day in and day out. Had Lazarus not, in a sense, already been sent to the rich man? As an appeal to his conscience, an appeal to his moral judgement?

Abraham says, 'they have Moses and the Prophets' - in other words they have the Bible, let them read and believe. '[Yes,] ... but ...,' says the rich man in torment, and that 'but' is very revealing. In that single - dismissive - word 'but' he admits knowing full well that he'd ignored the Bible's witness - and so he continues to request some kind of ghostly visitation like Charles Dickens' dreamt up for Ebenezer Scrooge in his book A Christmas Carol. God, however, is not into gimmicks. If our moral judgement is so perverse that it can reject the plain moral warnings of God's Word, the Bible - and consider them as not

being worthy of serious attention - then our hardened condition would be no more responsive to any number of ghostly messengers returning to warn us from the other side.

May I appeal? Please do take the Bible seriously, as God's Word. Have faith in God. Secure your eternal future by turning and believing in Jesus Christ, God's Son.

Well, thank you once again, Doctor Luke, for another dose of plain talking on this most ultimate of all subjects: the subject of death which you've so often brought to our attention throughout your Gospel. Once again, we've been reminded that we are 'clinging to the edge of eternity'. If you would like further help from God's Word, then that's why we're here. Do write in to the address on the back cover of this book.

# 7. Nearness to Christ

A voice-over that spoke of people as 'clinging to the edge of eternity'. That's been in my mind throughout this booklet. It's a phrase relevant to us all. For, everyone living on the face of this planet is only clinging to the edge of eternity. The old Bible word for eternity is 'time out of mind'. It's the great beyond, beyond time, when our days on earth are finished. In the Bible, the apostle James, graphically reminds us that our lives are only a vapour, soon passing away. A limitless eternity beckons in contrast to these few and fleeting years of time. As we move about on the crust of this tiny planet, our very life and existence is just like a fragile foothold on the rock-face of eternity.

Some appear to be blasé: they say, "When you're dead, you're dead." That is, when you die, they say, it's a case of El Finito, nothing more. The Romans once thought that about Spain - that there's was nothing more beyond. They gave to it the inscription 'Ne plus ultra' - no more beyond. But they were wrong! Some face death with great uncertainty, like the dying philosopher who said on his death-bed: "Now for a fearful leap in the dark." Our aim in this booklet has been to show from the Bible how hopeless bravado or fearful uncertainty in the face of

death can be avoided – and how we can be sure of crossing over into eternity with confidence – not in ourselves, but in Christ.

We've been browsing through the one Gospel that was written by a doctor. Luke, we've thought, must often have been obliged to attend the bedside of a dying patient. For a time in his life he might have wondered about death, and what lay beyond, not only for his patients but also for himself. But there came a time in his life when he found the answers in Jesus Christ. Naturally enough, in writing his gospel, he was eager to share the answer he'd found.

The last visitation we have with Doctor Luke takes us to another man on the brink of eternity, waiting to cross over. He's a man with no good works worth mentioning. He's a self-confessed criminal, bandit and murderer, and now here he is - on the very edge of eternity receiving what he himself could only describe as the due reward of his deeds.

What's more, there's simply no possibility he can make amends in the future for what he's done - for this man has no future in this world.

The man in question is the dying thief, one of the two who were crucified next to our Lord. How could such a man as this dying thief ever

hope to depart in peace, as the godly Simeon did, whom we met on our very first visitation with the honourable doctor?

But depart in peace, he did. We'll let Luke talk us through what happened:

*Two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him [that's with Jesus]. When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.*

*And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One."*

*The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!"*

*Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS."*

*One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!"*

*But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our*

*deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."*

*And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!"*

*And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."*

*It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two.*

*And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Having said this, He breathed His last.*

*Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent."*

*And all the crowds who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts. (Luke 23:32-48)*

So there it is. In the last few hours of the dying thief's life, he turned in true repentance and trusted in the Saviour. He went into eternity in complete assurance and peace based on the unbreakable word of Christ: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Luke's message is clear, is it not? Whether you resemble the godly Simeon or a criminal like this thief, you too can be absolutely certain of

your eternal destiny. You can move towards it with confidence, and arrive at last in peace, if in genuine repentance you put your trust solely in the Person, the Work, and the Word of Christ.

Let's linger over these words: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise." All those who in this life enter by faith into a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and then subsequently die, are known in the Bible as 'the dead in Christ', and the Bible teaches that when they die, they go to be with Christ. Those who are in Christ, go to be with Christ.

The apostle Paul uses similar language when writing to the believers at Philippi. He spoke candidly to them of his desire to depart and be with Christ, which he adds 'is very far better' (Philippians 1:23). When writing to his Corinthian church friends, he described the believer's after-death experience as being one of being 'present with the Lord' (2 Corinthians 5:6-8).

Wherever we look, it's interesting to notice that the substance of the departed believer's blessing is described as personal nearness to Christ. This is the emphasis that's to be found in those verses of the Bible which describe what will take place at our Lord's second coming - the bodily resurrection of dead believers and the bodily transformation of living believers. The Lord Jesus himself promises in John's Gospel chapter 14:

*"... I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also."* (John 14:3)

Notice his words: "Where I am ... you may be also." That means personal nearness to Christ in eternity - for those who come to know him now. A clear account of what will happen when Christ returns to take believers to be with himself - in fulfilment of his own promise in John chapter 14 - is found in the apostle Paul's first letter to the Church of God at Thessalonica, in which he says:

*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.*

*For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.* (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17)

Yet another reassurance: 'we shall always be with the Lord'. But please notice this confidence is for those who believe in Jesus' death and

resurrection for them. We say again: whether you resemble the godly Simeon or whether you're a criminal like the dying thief we were thinking about earlier - or anywhere in between - you too can be absolutely certain of your eternal destiny. You can move towards it with confidence, and arrive at last in peace, if in genuine repentance you put your trust solely in the Person, the Work, and the Word of Christ.

That was what the dying thief did. In the last few hours of his life, he turned in true repentance and trusted the Saviour. He went into eternity in complete assurance and peace based on the unbreakable word of Christ: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise."

May I ask: 'Do you have a similar confidence'?

Blaise Pascal was a great mathematician - known as the father

of probability, the mathematics of chance. This text was found on a paper sewn into his coat, a hidden companion which changed coats with him. It read, 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars. Certitude. Certitude. Joy. Feeling. Peace. God of Jesus Christ. My God and thy God. 'Thy God shall be my God.'

Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except God. He is to be found only by the ways taught by the Gospel. Greatness of the soul of man. 'Righteous Father, the world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee.' Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy ... Total submission to Jesus Christ.'

Those were the words found sewn into the coat of Pascal, the founder of the mathematics of chance - but he wasn't leaving his eternal destiny to 'chance' - and neither should you!

All Scripture quotes are taken from the New American Standard Bible, unless otherwise stated.



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