

J.D.
Greear



foreword by David Platt

What
are you
going
to do
with
your
life?

Lord, blow . . . I join thousands in praying that at this very moment, which Satan means for hindering the mission of the King to the nations, God will turn it all for strategic advance. May God use this book to enable thousands to see that God is on the move in our generation. And may the Lord madden the evil one by turning his tactical ripples against the kingdom into a tidal wave of Great Commission completion.

John Piper, founder, desiringGod.org,
author of *Desiring God* and *Don't Waste Your Life*

In *What Are You Going to Do with Your Life?*, Pastor J. D. reminds us that there is nothing more vital or fulfilling than pursuing the purpose and plan Jesus has for each one of us. God has invited us to be his co-laborers in this world in a myriad of different ways. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to disciple making, but there is one call for all disciples of Jesus. We have the opportunity to live out an adventure that will make our lives count for eternity, to settle for anything less would be tragic. If you really want to change the world, this book is for you.

Christine Caine, founder A21 and Propel Women

Inspirational. The day Dr. John Piper gave his talk at Passion OneDay 2000 was a transformational moment like few others I have experienced. Since that day, many have been challenged and convinced to live their lives for what matters most. My friend, Pastor J. D. Greear, has expounded upon that idea and is calling today's generation to leverage their lives for the glory, the fame, and the renown of our God. I am confident that *What Are You*

Going to Do with Your Life? will be a book many of us will never forget.

—Louie Giglio, pastor of Passion City Church, founder of Passion Conferences, and author of *Not Forsaken*

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To Dave Turner and Wes Smith, who not only champion this message but have trained hundreds of others to live it out. It seems like everywhere in the world I go, I meet someone who is there because of your influence.

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Foreword

Correctly answering the question on the cover of this book is critical to whether or not your life is going to count in this world. I make this statement without hesitation or reservation, and every word in this statement matters.

By “whether or not your life is going to count in this world,” I mean to say that your life may not count in this world. At least not for what matters. In my Bible reading just a few days ago, I read the story of the rich man who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus, “looking at him, loved him and said to him, ‘You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’” In that moment, this man had a choice. Was his life going to count for what matters: care for the poor, treasure in heaven, and a life of following Jesus? Or was his life going to count for what doesn’t matter: riches for himself, treasures on earth, and a life of forsaking Jesus? He chose the latter, and he squandered his life.

It's possible for you or I to squander our lives in the same way, for we have the same choice. We can love those in need or ignore those in need. We can live for treasures on earth or treasures in heaven. We can forsake or follow Jesus.

*That last phrase—"to forsake or follow Jesus"—is the crux of the choice we have, and it's why I say "correctly answering the question on the cover of this book is critical." Many people, when they read the question, "What are you going to do with your life?" think, *There's no correct answer to that question. The course of my life is specific to me and up to me to determine.**

But that's not true if you're a follower of Jesus. To be a Christian means that you have surrendered the right to determine the course of your life. Now to be clear, that's not the common picture of Christianity, at least not in America. To be a Christian in America means you go through certain religious rituals and call yourself a Christian, all while living however you want to live.

But that's not a Christian according to Christ. Based upon his Word, to be a Christian means you have died to yourself, your ideas, and your dreams for your life. To be a Christian according to Christ means that you have lost your life as you knew it, and you have found new life in him, which means you now live with his ideas and his dreams for your life.

Moreover, Jesus has made those ideas and dreams clearly known for your life, and they are not specific to you. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. Make disciples of all the nations. Spend your life spreading the gospel of God for the glory of God. For the

follower of Jesus, these plans are unequivocally and unquestionably what Jesus has designed for your life.

Now obviously Jesus' plans for all of us will play out differently in each of our lives. We are all called and gifted differently, and that's not accidental. However, the trajectory of our lives is fundamentally the same, whether we are gifted as entrepreneurs, painters, or pastors. For every follower of Jesus, his commandments, commission, and cause will (and must) dictate every decision we make in life, from who we marry to where we go to school to what career path we take to where we live to how we retire (or not).

That's what this book is about. It's about asking the question on the cover of this book and answering that question not according to our ways in this world, but according to God's truth in his Word. It's about helping every follower of Jesus, from the student to the senior adult and everyone in between, realize that our lives are a mist, and we all only have a little bit of time left. In light of this reality, this book is about helping you and me make the mist we have on this earth count for what matters most in eternity.

David Platt

“What we do in life echoes in eternity.”
—MAXIMUS DECIMUS MERIDIUS, *GLADIATOR*

Don't Waste Your Life

Early in the afternoon on May 20, 2000, in a large field on a farm outside Memphis, Tennessee, a preacher in his mid-fifties, dressed in his signature herringbone sport coat and black tie, took his place behind a lectern to address a crowd of more than 40,000 college students.

The air was chilly, the wind brisk, and a light rain had begun to fall. The crowd of students was restless. They had already sat through a packed slate of morning sessions. To escape the damp, students held their rain jackets over their heads. Several used the moment to get up and go for a walk or go back to their tents.

Not an auspicious beginning for a generation-defining moment.

The speaker, understandably, looked a little flustered. He was trying to shield the temperamental mic from the whipping wind with one hand and hold down his notes with the other. And just a few minutes into his sermon, a gust of wind blew half of his notes off of the lectern and into the crowd.

The message was not going well. The man quietly prayed: *“Father in heaven, you know how inadequate I feel at this moment. And so I ask for a very special anointing and help from you.”*

He took a deep breath, and then, leaning down on the lectern, pinning his remaining notes down with his arm, said:

“Three weeks ago we got word at our church that Ruby Eliason and Laura Edwards had both been killed in Cameroon,” he began. “Ruby was over eighty. Single all her life, she poured it out for one great thing: to make Jesus Christ known among the unreached, the poor, and the sick. Laura was a widow, a medical doctor, pushing eighty years old, and serving at Ruby’s side in Cameroon. The brakes failed, the car went over the cliff, and they were both killed instantly. And I asked my people: Was that a tragedy?”

Students responded, “No!”

“No,” the preacher echoed. “That is a glory. I’ll tell you what a tragedy is.”

He then pulled out a page from *Reader’s Digest* and read,

“Bob and Penny took . . . early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30-foot trawler, play softball, and collect shells.”

He continued:

“The American Dream: come to the end of your life—*your one and only life*—and let the last great work before you give an account to your Creator be, ‘I collected shells. See my shells.’ *That* is a tragedy. People today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. And I get forty minutes to plead with you: don’t buy it. *Don’t waste your life.*”¹

Don’t waste your life.

John Piper was the preacher, and this sermon became known as his “seashell sermon.” Students began passing it on to others. Eventually, it seemed, my whole generation of Christian students had heard it.

Sarah Zylstra, writing for The Gospel Coalition, notes that a staggering amount of today’s leaders point back to that message as a pivotal moment in their lives. David Platt said the message fundamentally redefined how he looked at life. Matt Carter, lead pastor of Sagemont Church, Houston, Texas, said: “I was in the crowd. That sermon ended all my dreams of retirement.”² Trevin Wax, senior vice president of Theology and Communications at LifeWay Christian Resources, talks about being wrecked by Piper’s powerful illustration of a “wasted” life in retirement.³ Marian Jordan Ellis, now a popular Bible teacher and author, was then a brand-new Christian. She said, “[Piper’s poem] literally rang in my ears for 15 years.”⁴

As for me, I had just returned from serving for two years as a missionary in Southeast Asia. I was trying to figure out what God wanted with the rest of my life. I could feel the allures of comfort, stability, and the American Dream calling my name. Piper's message hit my heart like a lightning bolt.

Don't waste your life.

The phrase still haunts me.

The idea is simple: Eternity is real. The gospel is true. People's souls matter. Your life counts. Don't waste it.

In 2003, the message made it to print with the book *Don't Waste Your Life*. To date, that book has sold more than 600,000 copies.⁵

Asking the Wrong Question?

I was a junior in college when I realized that, though I had been a Christian for several years, I'd never asked God the one question he wanted me to ask about my life. I'd been asking him *if* he wanted to use me to make an impact for his kingdom. The question should not have been *if*, only where and how.

My pastor had challenged me to read through the book of Romans seven times that year. I was on my last time through when Romans 2:12 seemed to lift off the page:

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. (ESV)

That verse means that even those who haven't heard the gospel are still under God's judgment because each of us has a "law"

written on our hearts, a law that we all, without exception, have disobeyed. Our only hope for salvation is a special act of grace, which God gives through the message about Christ.

It's not that I hadn't understood that before, but that morning its meaning poured over my heart like a flood. The lostness of the world pressed in on my heart with an intensity I thought might crush me. I sat in silence for several moments. Tears came. I felt like I couldn't speak. Finally, I whispered, "Lord, if you will let me go and tell them, I'll go. Will you let me go?"

In that moment, it seemed like the Spirit of God whispered to me, "Now, at last, you're asking the *right* question."

You see, up until that moment my attitude had been, "If God wants something from me in his kingdom, he'll let me know." And barring some special instruction, I assumed his expectation of me was to find some career that suited me, do it well, go to church, tithe, and stay out of trouble.

That morning I realized that the lostness of the world and urgency of the gospel demand a different response. A vision came into my mind. I was walking alongside a set of railroad tracks when I noticed a small child stranded on them. In the distance, I could hear a freight train headed right toward him. I knew that in such a moment, I wouldn't calmly get down on my knees and say, "Oh God, if you want me to do something, just let me know," and then wait for some special instruction from heaven. I would know God's will in that moment without even asking: *save the child*.

Here's the reality: people in the world without Jesus are headed toward a tragedy every bit as real and ten billion times more devastating than a child stranded on railroad tracks. God

has told us it is his will that none of them should perish, and in order for that to happen, they *must* hear the gospel. “The Lord is . . . not willing,” Peter said, “that any should perish but all [would] come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9 NKJV).

We talk about “finding the will of God.” In reality, it’s never been lost! It’s spelled out right there in that verse. God wants every person alive to hear the gospel, and he uses his church to make that happen.

That morning I got a glimpse of the lostness of the world and could only cry out, like the prophet Isaiah had so many years before me, “Here I am. Send me” (Isa. 6:8). *Every* Christian who catches a glimpse of the lostness of the world and the greatness of God’s offer of salvation should respond that way.

The right question, you see, is not *if* God has called you to his mission, only *where*.

As we’ll discuss later in this book, calling is not a sacred privilege reserved for a select few, conveyed through some mystical manifestation. The call to leverage your life for the Great Commission was *included* in the call to follow Jesus: “Follow me,” he told them, “and I will make you fish for people” (Matt. 4:19).

So you can stop waiting on a mystical moment, a wet fleece, or a quiver in your liver. You’re called.

You don’t need to wait on a voice. He’s given you a verse.

A Restless Generation

It has been two decades since Piper issued that fateful challenge. I write this book because it’s time for a new generation of

Christians to hear it—and to say to God, “Here I am, send me.” To consider what Jesus’ promises about the gospel and his warnings about eternity mean for how we order our lives.

This generation is a restless one. You have been the beneficiaries of greater technological advance and wealth acquisition than any generation in history, but still you know something’s not right.

Quarterback Tom Brady may have summed it up best. After winning his third Super Bowl, he was asked by Steve Kroft in an interview on *60 Minutes*: “[This] whole upward trajectory—what have you learned about yourself? . . .”

Brady answered,

“ . . . Why do I have three Super Bowl rings, and still think there’s something greater out there for me? I mean maybe a lot of people would say, ‘Hey man, this is what it is.’ I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think: God, it’s gotta be more than this. . . . And what else is there for me?”

Kroft asked, “What’s the answer?”

Brady smiled for a moment, then the smile faded. “I wish I knew,” he said. “I wish I knew.”⁶

Another of our generation’s greatest philosophical minds, comedian Jim Carrey, said the same: “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it’s not the answer.”⁷

Many look for a global cause to give their lives to, thinking the fulfilled life is one that empowers the poor or saves the planet. Phrases like “social consciousness” and “tolerance” now describe a well-lived life or well-managed corporation. We want to eradicate poverty. Extend human rights. End global warming. Save the planet from plastic straws.

I read recently that college graduates rate helping others and providing aid to those in need among their top post-college aspirations. One study found “living with purpose” to be the number one thing high school students want out of life—above money, fame, and even a happy marriage. Another survey asked twentysomethings, “What would make for a dream job?” I expected the top answer to be about money, or maybe influence and fame. And yes, money was on there—but it only came in at 24 percent. The top answer (nearly double that of money) was, “Feeling passionate about my work.”⁸

Translation: “I want to live for something that matters.”

We want our lives to *count*. If we are asked, “What are you going to do with your life?” we want to be able to answer in a way that shows our life has some significance.

That is a yearning put into us by God. And many of those causes are good and worthy ones.

But for the Christian, there is one cause that should outweigh them all.

If what Jesus said was true, what determines a person’s eternal future is whether or not they know him.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”
(John 14:6)

The gospel declares that Jesus died so that people from every nation, every culture, and every language on earth could know his salvation and find in him the joy of living. He has offered his salvation to all who will receive it in him. The apostle John says:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name. (John 1:12 NKJV)

But in order to receive him, they have to hear about him. Paul explains:

How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? (Rom. 10:14–15)

I know for many of us this raises a lot of questions—questions that we’ll get to later in this book. But for now, just know that for someone who takes the Bible seriously, the gospel is the most important cause of all.

As John Piper says, relieving any type of suffering is a good and worthy goal. But the worst kind of suffering—the kind that deserves our most earnest attention—is *eternal* suffering.

Suffering in this world is terrible and limited, but suffering in the next world is terrible and eternal. And love sees it that way. Love does not shut its eyes to this world or that world. Love reckons with the reality of suffering here, and the worse reality of suffering there.⁹

If the Bible is true, then a life that matters must take the realities of eternal suffering into account.

“All This I’ve Done for You. What Have You Done for Me?”

I am guessing that you’ve never heard of Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf. And I’m guessing that if you have, you probably won’t name any of your kids after him. If you already did, put down this book right now and go apologize to them.

But, if you live in the Western world, he’s a more important part of your Christian heritage than you may realize. Born into a noble family in Dresden, Germany, in 1700, “Count” Zinzendorf grew up with the expectation that he would take over his family’s wealthy estate. Being a “count” in those days meant that you basically did very little and got lots of money for it. His life was destined to be one of leisure, pleasure, and prestige. A life of seashells.

In 1720, as the young count toured an art museum in Dusseldorf, he was gripped by Domenico Feti’s painting, *Ecce Homo* (“Behold the man!”), which depicts Jesus just moments before the crucifixion. Beaten, bloodied, wearing a crown of

thorns. Inscribed below Jesus are the words: *“All this I have done for you. What have you done for me?”*¹⁰

In a moment similar to what I experienced reading Romans 2, God gripped Count Zinzendorf’s heart with the brevity of life, the reality of lostness, and the urgency of the gospel. In that moment, Count Z knew that he could no longer pursue a life of leisure.

He began leveraging his estate as a staging ground for God’s mission, donating his resources to sponsor mission ventures all over the globe. Hundreds of young twentysomethings came from around Germany to be trained in the gospel and sent out on mission. They called themselves “Moravians,” named for the place from which many of them originated.

One night in 1727 Zinzendorf’s small gospel community prayed through the night, asking God to use their movement to reshape the world with the gospel. They literally never stopped. And I mean that. Morning came, and they began to pray in shifts, around the clock. That night birthed what has been called the “hundred-year prayer meeting,” a round-the-clock prayer chain that continued for more than a century.

From that prayer movement God raised up a generation to plant churches and establish gospel communities from Greenland to Guyana, from Jamaica to Cape Town, and from New York to North Carolina.

This movement did not consist of only vocational pastors, either. So-called “ordinary” believers caught the vision. Moravians formed for-profit trading companies that enabled them to carry the gospel into difficult places. As we’ll see later in this book, business can take the gospel to places that “mission

trips” can never get to. In fact, historians say the most successful and enduring of the Moravian mission works were those established by the trading companies, not the mission boards.¹¹

A few Moravians even moved to the place where I would one day grow up—Winston-Salem, North Carolina—to establish a gospel community there. Their gospel impact would shape the community I grew up in. My home church was located less than a mile from the Moravian gospel outpost they established in 1753.

Zinzendorf penned words that defined the movement:

I have but one passion—it is He, it is He alone.
The world is the field and the field is the world;
and henceforth that country shall be my home
where I can be most used in winning souls for
Christ. . . *I desire only to preach the gospel, die,
and be forgotten.*¹²

Forgotten in time, maybe. But with lives still echoing in eternity.

Only One Life to Live, 'Twill Soon Be Past

Years later, another unlikely man would be gripped by the same vision that captivated Zinzendorf. His name was C. T. Studd, and he was England’s most famous cricketer. (For Americans, we may not think of “cricket champ” as a terribly impressive achievement. But in the nineteenth century, cricket was the world’s most popular sport, and Studd was its LeBron

James. And for the record, if you are going to be a professional athlete, you can't get much better of a name than "Studd.")

At the height of his career, when he was the star of England's national team, Studd couldn't shake the thought that his life was yielding little eternal value. So he did the unthinkable: he resigned the team and left to spread the gospel in China, India, and eventually the Belgian Congo, where he died. Imagine LeBron James holding a press conference this afternoon and announcing that he was "taking his talents to Siberia" because people there need to hear about Jesus.

Naturally, people all over the world asked Studd why he would do such a thing. His response:

If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then
no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for
Him.¹³

Can't you hear in that the echo of Zinzendorf's words? Studd later wrote a poem that encapsulated his new outlook on life, a poem that John Piper would reference on that chilly May afternoon in Memphis before 40,000 American college students:

I grew up in a home where my father spent
himself as an evangelist to bring the gospel of
Jesus Christ to the lost. He had one consuming
vision: preach the gospel. There was a plaque in
our kitchen for all my growing up years. Now
it hangs in our living room. I have looked at
almost daily for about forty-eight years.¹⁴

The line from Studd's poem?

*"Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done
for Christ will last."*¹⁵

Alas, I'm not a college student anymore. Life has moved fast. Sometimes I can't fathom where the time went, how quickly life has gone by. Like a roll of toilet paper, every revolution seems to go faster. Not the most elegant example, I know. But I feel like just yesterday I was enrolling myself as a student in college. Today, I have a daughter preparing to do so. Soon enough, her daughter will be. And then it will all be over.

This life will soon be past. What have I done for Christ that will last?

Will I look back with regret at how I used my life? Will I feel like I wasted it?

One day your life will draw to a close, too. It's a morbid thought, I know, but you really need to think about it. Because that day may be today, or it may come ten, fifty, or even eighty years from now. But it's coming. (Last time I checked, the death rate in America is holding steady at 100 percent.)

When that day comes, will you regret what you did with your life?

What will you take with you into eternity? A nice house? A solid investment portfolio? A few worthless Super Bowl rings? Seashells?

How many of those things that occupy so much of your energy, time, and focus will you actually keep forever?

One hundred years from now, how will you wish you had used your life? How about 10,000 years from now? Wisdom begins by viewing your life from the end and acting in a way *now* that you know *then* you'll be glad you did.

Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last.

Jim Elliot, missionary to Ecuador, who would be martyred there only three years after he arrived, said it best: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."¹⁶

In this book, I want to convince you to give up those things you cannot keep in order to gain those things you cannot lose, too.

I want to encourage you to reckon with what you really believe about Jesus, his promises, and eternity. I want to challenge you to re-examine your life in light of them. And I want to plead with you to not waste your life.

If you are a college student, I want to challenge you to make decisions about where you are going and what you plan to do with eternity in view.

If you are nearing retirement, I want to encourage you to make this next chapter of your life count—to not waste it picking up seashells or touring golf resorts. Do you really want to spend the last fifteen years of your life before you meet Jesus *on vacation*? How will you explain to him that you used the most unencumbered chapter of your life in leisure, living for yourself?

And if you are somewhere in between, I want to challenge you to consider how you might leverage your career and your

resources for the gospel now, and to make plans for how you can do so in even greater ways in the future.

I am writing this book because we need another generation who desires only to preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten. To consider the question that so haunted Zinzendorf: *“All this I have done for you. What have you done for me?”*

Ask yourself: *Where would I be had Jesus not come for me? Had he chosen to stay in heaven and enjoy the privileges of the throne?* The sobering answer: *exactly the same place people all over the world are without you.* The gospel has to be heard to be believed. As Martin Luther said, it wouldn't matter if Jesus died one thousand times if nobody ever heard about it.

Life is too short, eternity is too long, and the stakes too high to waste your years.

*Only one life, yes only one,
Now let me say, “Thy will be done”;

And when at last I'll hear the call,
I know I'll say “'twas worth it all”;

Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.¹⁷*

One thing I am sure of: If you are reading this book, God has a role for you in his kingdom.

Life is short. Eternity is forever. We only get a brief moment in time to use the former to transform the latter.

Don't waste it.

God has a plan
to make your life
count for eternity.
Stop wasting it.



In this book, J.D.
Greear considers
Jesus' radical
call to give your
life away to the
greatest cause
of all. To view
your life from
the perspective
of eternity.



It's time to put
your "yes" on the
table and let God
put it on the map.

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