



## **Are You Preparing for Heaven? *Should You Prepare for Heaven?***

Perhaps my favorite player in all of sports is Stephen Curry of the Golden State Warriors. There are a number of reasons why I say that. He is extremely likeable as a person...at least as much as I have seen and heard about him. His quietly flamboyant style of basketball is mesmerizing for me. He is a hard worker, generous in his praise of others, and fun to watch. He is a winner who makes his teammates better players. He is openly a believer in Christ and his lifestyle reflects his faith. Although Charles Barkley famously insisted that he was not a role-model, Curry clearly is. Curry has fun playing basketball and it shows. That joy rubs off on me when I watch him play and I feel better about myself in a strange way when the game is over, win or lose. Do I really know Steph Curry though? Can I be certain he really is a good guy, someone who walks with God and practices his Christian faith on a daily basis? Does watching Steph Curry on TV qualify me as a friend of his or even more than that, a character witness who can vouch for his goodness on and off the court? Do I know Stephen Curry?

Many people claim to know Christ but do they really? Is their relationship with Him such that they would qualify as good friends? What evidence is there that you really do know Jesus and have built over time a real closeness to Him? John the Apostle, who could say He knew Jesus well makes an intriguing statement. **This is how we know that we know him: if we keep his commands. The one who says, "I have come to know him," and yet doesn't keep his commands, is a liar; and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word, truly in him the love of God is made complete. This is how we know we are in him: The one who says he remains in him should walk just as he walked.** (1 John 2: 3-6 CSB) This teaching is often misunderstood. John is not telling you how to be certain you have eternal life. Sometimes we have to return to our roots theologically to make sure we are clear on salvation. Eternal life is given to us when we put our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. **For God loved the world in this way. He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.** (John 3: 16 CSB) And in Romans we have this. **If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** (Romans 10: 9 CSB) And a bit later in the chapter you are told, **For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.** (Romans 10: 13 CSB) Eternal life comes to you by calling upon Jesus for salvation. It is that simple and truly in every way a gift. Of course in the book of Ephesians, that point is underscored. **For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—** (Ephesians 2: 8 CSB)

John is not explaining how you can be certain you have eternal life. John's wording is precise. He does not say, "This is how we know that we have eternal life." He is making it clear how you can be sure you actually know Christ. Do you really have much of a relationship with Him or not? John says there is a way to find out if you do. I recently saw an interesting article. It listed eight lifestyle choices in order of importance to increase your length of life. I thought it was fascinating because several of them are consistent with living a normal Christian life. 1. Exercise. 2. Don't become addicted to opioids. 3. Never use tobacco. 4. Manage stress. 5. Eat a plant based diet. 6. Avoid binge drinking. 7. Get a good night's sleep. 8. Be surrounded by positive social relationships. So, it would seem that you will live longer and maybe even better if you practice some, if not all of these lifestyle choices. Have you considered the possibility that if you make one particular lifestyle choice, it will do something for your eternal life? Consider the statement of John about knowing Christ. **But whoever keeps his word, truly in him the love of God is made complete.**

Let's consider two individuals who faced the same traumatic experience. Both were widows. Let me read a statement made by each. One told her mother-in-law who was the other widow, **"Don't urge me to leave**

**you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.** (Ruth 1: 16 NIV) The second widow told her friends, **"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."** (Ruth 1: 20-21 NIV) Each was devastated by loss. One turned towards God in her grief, the other away from Him. Which widow would you say has the closer relationship to the Lord? Who had more joy in her life? Who would you rather be? The point is that intimacy with God is not the same for everyone, even among believers. Judas Iscariot is called in Scripture a disciple of Jesus, but would you say He had the same level of friendship with Him as John the Apostle or Peter or even Thomas? Of course not. John tells us there are levels of relationship with God and it is based on one particular lifestyle choice.

Consider the precise wording John uses. **The one who says, "I have come to know him," and yet doesn't keep his commands, is a liar; and the truth is not in him.** (1 John 2: 4 CSB) The Greek word translated "come to know" is a particular verb that speaks of intimate knowledge, personal knowledge. It is the term sometimes used in Greek literature to speak of sexual intimacy. It is much more than the awareness of things, of having heard of something. It is not the kind of knowing you get when you read about Paris in Wikipedia. It is the knowledge you develop when you go to Paris, spend time with Parisians and eat at an outdoor Parisian café. It is not the knowledge I have of President Biden. It is more like the knowledge I have of my wife Mary Jo. Personal knowledge of God, John tells you, is not possible if you do not obey His commands. Your friendship with Christ is built on obedience and no other way. Each time you do what the Lord tells you to do, a closer level of intimacy with Jesus develops for you, and you know Him in a new and lasting way. Intimacy with God, knowing Him fully comes through one lifestyle choice, doing what He tells you to do.

Oswald Chambers often made this statement. "The general history of Christianity is that it has been tried and abandoned because it is found to be difficult; but wherever it has been tried and honourably gone on with, it has never failed." Why is it that most people, even Christians do not know Jesus very well, if at all and as a result don't enjoy Him? It is because they find the commands of God too hard to keep. Whether it is sexual immorality, selfishness or greed stymieing their obedience, the majority of people never really know Jesus at all because they don't want to do what He says to do. Jesus in several ways said that if you invest in God's Kingdom here and now, you will enjoy forever, and many times over, rewards you gain for obeying Him here. Let me take you back to our original set of verses. **The one who says, "I have come to know him," and yet doesn't keep his commands, is a liar; and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word, truly in him the love of God is made complete.** Catch these two points. First, what is translated "I have come to know him" describes a level of intimacy that begins at a specific moment and the impact of it continues forever. In this case the person claiming this happened is lying to himself because it did not happen for the simple reason he did not keep a command of God. The implication is, and this is critical to see, that knowledge of God, or intimacy with Him occurs each time you do what God says to do. You get to know Him in a new way and the impact of that knowledge upon your life lasts forever. The second point is a bit simpler. Your love for God develops when you keep God's word. You will take with you the level of intimacy you have developed with Jesus into eternity. And the only way you gain that love and closeness to Him is by doing what He tells you to do.

Eternal life starts the moment you put your trust in Jesus for your salvation. The quality of that eternal life depends on how you choose to live. Picture your life this way. A general developed leprosy and the nature of that disease is that it just gets worse, a living hell. He was told by God through the prophet Elisha to dip himself in the muddy Jordan River and he would be healed. The general at first refused because it seemed beneath him but then he was convinced to do it. He came out of the water completely free of leprosy. The best thing you can do for yourself is obey Jesus Christ regardless of how tough or silly it seems. You are by your obedience increasing your intimacy with God and investing in your joy that you will take into eternity.