

DISPELLING FEAR, FINDING PEACE,  
AND PREPARING *for the* END OF YOUR LIFE



FINISH



LINE



FOREWORD BY JONI EARECKSON TADA

ROBERT WOLGEMUTH

FINISH

LINE

Copyright-Protected Material  
Property of Zondervan Books  
Do Not Reproduce or Distribute



# FINISH



# LINE



DISPELLING FEAR, FINDING PEACE,  
AND PREPARING *for the* END OF YOUR LIFE

ROBERT WOLGEMUTH

 **ZONDERVAN**  
BOOKS

ZONDERVAN BOOKS

*Finish Line*

Copyright © 2023 by Robert Wolgemuth

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

Zondervan titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email [SpecialMarkets@Zondervan.com](mailto:SpecialMarkets@Zondervan.com).

ISBN 978-0-310-36492-4 (audio)

---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wolgemuth, Robert D., author.

Title: *Finish line* : dispelling fear, finding peace, and preparing for the end of your life / Robert Wolgemuth.

Description: Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 2023. | Summary: "Finish Line by acclaimed author and speaker Robert Wolgemuth is a spiritual and practical guide to approaching the end of your life not with confusion but with clarity, inspiring you to live well now, not with fear but with anticipation and joy"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022032490 (print) | LCCN 2022032491 (ebook) | ISBN 9780310364894 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780310364917 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Death—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Death—Psychological aspects. | BISAC: RELIGION / Christian Living / Personal Growth | FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS / Life Stages / Later Years

Classification: LCC BT825 .W65 2023 (print) | LCC BT825 (ebook) | DDC 236/.1—dc23/eng/20221123

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022032490>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022032491>

---

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.Zondervan.com](http://www.Zondervan.com). The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Other Bible versions quoted from in this book are listed on page 221, which hereby becomes a part of this copyright page.

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

This book is written as a source of information only. The information contained in this book should by no means be considered a substitute for the advice, decisions, or judgment of the reader's professional, medical, or financial advisors. All efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this book as of the date published. The author and the publisher expressly disclaim responsibility for any adverse effects arising from the use or application of the information contained herein.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates.

Cover design: *Studio Gearbox*

Cover illustrations: *Marish / Shutterstock*

Interior design: *Sara Colley*

*Printed in the United States of America*

*To Nancy—  
thank you for saying “I do” to a man  
ten years chronologically closer to  
his finish line than you are,  
loving him well, and embracing the undeniable  
challenges this would mean. You are God’s  
gift of grace in human loveliness.*

Copyright-Protected Material  
Property of Zondervan Books  
Do Not Reproduce or Distribute



## CONTENTS

<i>Foreword: Before You Begin by Joni Eareckson Tada</i> . . . .	ix
<i>Preface: Seeds Planted</i> . . . . .	xiii

Introduction: Breaking the Tape . . . . .	1
1. Dead. Not Dead . . . . .	9
2. Spoiler Alert . . . Heaven Can Be Yours . . . . .	26
3. Finish Line Lines . . . . .	42
4. Two Finish Line Guys in the Bible . . . . .	54
5. Temple Care . . . . .	75
6. Nuts and Bolts . . . . .	88
7. Saying Grace . . . . .	108
8. Who Will Be Your Pallbearers? . . . . .	133
9. No More Secrets . . . . .	151
10. Dying . . . . .	167
Epilogue: Ready . . . . .	195

<i>And That's Not All</i> . . . . .	209
<i>With Gratitude</i> . . . . .	213
<i>Bibliography</i> . . . . .	219





## FOREWORD

# BEFORE YOU BEGIN

So, Joni, do you ever wonder what it'll be like, crossing from this life into the next?"

I'm asked that a lot. Look, I'm a quadriplegic who's lived in a wheelchair for more than fifty-five years. I'm straining with head back, arms wide, and pumping everything I've got into that photo finish at the tape. Do I wonder what that moment will be like? You bet I do.

What I am about to say is not really biblical, but here's how I like to picture it. I see myself bursting across the finish line and—like a marathoner—collapsing on hands and knees. I sink my hands into the sands of that celestial shore, heaving, sweating, and gasping. "I made it . . . I made it . . . I can't believe I made it!" Then I roll over on my back and lie still with eyes closed, letting the restful sound of the gentle waves and the wind wash over me.

In the quiet, I feel the presence of Someone standing above me, Someone in whose cool shadow I feel bathed and blessed. I open my eyes and see . . . Jesus. His head is eclipsing

the sun. He smiles down at me and offers His hand, as would any friend. I take it happily, and in one swift motion He pulls me up.

“Welcome home, sweetheart,” He whispers as he looks admiringly at me with unimaginably kind eyes. Then he pulls me close and pat-pats my back like Daddy used to do. “It’s been hard and long, but you’re safe now,” He says, patting me some more. At this point, I am sobbing until He holds me an arm’s length away. I blink twice, for he almost looks like my Daddy, or maybe my Brother. Or Lover. Or King.

“You made me look so *good* back there on earth,” He says.

My immediate reaction? Drop to my knees and kiss His feet. But the dream dissipates. The reality of what will then actually happen takes over. And although the details are cloaked in mystery, the Bible describes a glorious dénouement with angels and rewards; the devil and his hordes—all of them—destroyed; death gone; Christ’s name vindicated as He is crowned the undisputed King of the universe. The Bible says we will reign alongside Him, spreading His kingdom of love, light, and beauty throughout the endless cosmos. Our song of suffering will be over, and forever we will sing of Jesus’ sufferings and how his excruciatingly tender love won for us so great a salvation.

In a crude nutshell, that’s what happens on the other side of the finish line. In light of all this, I ask you, *Don’t you want to make the most of life in the home stretch?*

My friend Robert Wolgemuth sure does. We are close friends, and for the decades I’ve known him, I’ve never seen this man fritter away his time, treasure, or talents. He

understands that life is an unspeakably precious gift, and as such, he stewards carefully the twenty-four-hour slices of time with which he has been blessed. Robert is my kind of brother in Christ—he’s feeling his stride on his last lap, drawing on his second wind, and investing heavily in what lies beyond the tape at the finish.

My friend has spent years thinking about eternal ROIs and how everything a Christian does here on earth has a direct bearing on their capacity for joy, worship, and service in Heaven. Earth is Robert’s minor league warm-up for the major leagues up there. And because he is such a great manager of life’s gifts, he’s my choice to author a book called *Finish Line*.

And he’s covered *everything*. Just run your finger down the topics in the table of contents and you’ll agree that Robert is a man who can show you how to put your house in order. Consider him your “close of life” coach, providing tips and tools that cover just about every question you might have about finishing the race of life well. My friend is a great writer and has made his chapters inspiring, easy to grasp, and practical.

But Robert has also written *Finish Line* as a challenge. He esteems you, his reader, as a Philippians 3:12 kind of believer who genuinely wants to press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of you:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

## FINISH LINE

The volume you hold in your hands is your playbook, helping you strive toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called you heavenward.

So if you're wondering how to flesh out these words from Philippians in a practical way—especially if you're in the home stretch, as the apostle Paul was—Robert can show you. Find a comfortable chair and a pen and highlighter and let him cheer you on from the sidelines as you press on toward the finish line. Your finish line.

You don't want to miss *anything* on the other side of that finish line tape.

JONI EARECKSON TADA,  
Joni and Friends International Disability Center,  
Agoura, California



## PREFACE

# SEEDS PLANTED

*Whether you stand or walk on the moving sidewalk at  
the airport, you're eventually going to get to the end.*

ME . . . A TRAVELER

The Orlando funeral service was finished. Almost two hours of memories, tears, tributes, hymn singing, laughter, and a gospel message were in the books. It was time to show a video I had spontaneously shot one morning from the balcony of our home.<sup>1</sup>

Everyone watched the screen as a woman—Bobbie—walked from left to right. Striding on a neighborhood street, her stature was upright and confident, even though she was only a few weeks away from her death. The people in the audience could hear her singing.

---

1. I shot this with my phone early one morning. Bobbie did not know I was recording it. My friend and film producer David Nixon put it together for us.

## FINISH LINE

*When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word,  
What a glory He sheds on our way!  
While we do His good will, He abides with us still,  
And with all who will trust and obey.<sup>2</sup>*

At the close of the video, the screen went black and these words appeared in white letters:

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” (John 12:24)<sup>3</sup>

A sweet reverence filled the air. Just a moment of quiet, then Dr. David Swanson, my pastor, asked the congregation to stand. The funeral director and his associate walked down the middle aisle toward the coffin that had been centered in the nave, gently pivoted, and wheeled it out of the sanctuary. Dr. Swanson then invited the family, seated in the first several pews, to exit. We all followed the casket, walking almost as though we were trailing, parade-like behind the woman in the video.



Years have passed since my late wife’s funeral, and yet the power of this service will stay with my family and me until we follow her out that door in our own caskets.

---

2. John H. Sammis, “Trust and Obey” (1887). Public domain.

3. You can watch this video on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODn0TFgdTL8&t=2s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODn0TFgdTL8&t=2s).

Bobbie and I were married in 1970, almost forty-five years before this day. This wasn't the script I would have written. Or hoped for. But it was what it was.

So back to the Scripture verse that appeared on the screen after Bobbie's video. What are the "many seeds" produced from the death of that single seed falling to the ground and dying? It was Jesus who spoke these words just days prior to His own death on a cross. He was speaking to people who knew about seeds. Many made their living as farmers. They knew well that you can take seeds and put them in large pits or silos,<sup>4</sup> even in a decorative bowl on the table where you can admire them. But in order for seeds to do their work, they must be planted in the ground. When this happens, the chemicals in the earth strip the outer coating of the seed, giving the material inside a chance to grow into a plant, someday producing a harvest. And that harvest brings forth myriad more seeds.

Actually, the church on that day was filled with the yield of Bobbie's life. Her children, extended family, friends, neighbors, women in her Bible study, members of our church, and thousands watching by livestream. Bobbie's life was a bold testimony for Christ. As painful as it was for us, her death multiplied that witness around the world.

If Jesus—again the One who first spoke these words—had not died, we would not know Him. The power of His Holy Spirit would not be available to us. Our lives would not be what they are if the Kernel of Wheat hadn't fallen to the ground and died.

---

4. See "The History and Evolution of Grain Storage," LCDM, December 31, 2020, <https://lcdmcorp.com/grain-flow-101/evolution-grain-storage>.

## FINISH LINE

The same is true of Bobbie's death. This is a hard reality. And a picture of God's redeeming grace.

## BOBBIE KNEW

Two months before she died, Bobbie told two of her friends that she "hopes Robert marries Nancy Leigh DeMoss." But she didn't mention it to me. Honestly, I'm glad she didn't tell me. That might have felt like an assignment. But when I discovered this after Nancy and I were dating, it was a sweet confirmation.

Bobbie's and my "till death do us part" spoken at our wedding in 1970 provided a script for something brand-new forty-five years later.

Bobbie had met Nancy in 2003 when my literary agency represented her as an author. These two women discovered a shared love for God's Word and classic hymns. In spite of the geographic distance between them, their friendship became strong, full of mutual respect. Nancy watched the livestream of Bobbie's funeral in November 2014, even broadcasting an audio portion of it on her daily radio program, *Revive Our Hearts*.

The reason I'm talking about these things right here at the beginning of this book is that someday folks will be counting the "many seeds" . . . and the harvest . . . that will be produced when I "fall to the ground and die." At least I hope they will. You may be reading these words after that happens, and if you'd care to look into it, you may discover,

by God's grace, some of those seeds. And the fruit. I'm truly trusting there's some good stuff.

This is both sobering and comforting for me. As it should be for you. So I have a question I'm hoping I have your permission to ask: When you die and your "kernel of wheat" falls to the ground and dies, what will your harvest look like? In this book, we're going to talk about that.

Many years ago, a good friend told me that a book is nothing if not a long letter from one person to another. Or an unhurried, one-on-one conversation seated across from each other at a small table in a coffee shop. My hope is that the adventure of reading this book will be like you and me having that conversation. Just us. It's that long letter, that extended conversation.

There are no platforms. No microphones or sound systems. There's only us . . . you and me. As I'm writing, I'm doing my best to lean in. To watch your face. To answer questions you may have as you read. To be clear. And honest. And kind.

At this point, since we're getting acquainted, it's important to me that you know I'm coming from the perspective of someone who is a Christ follower. And given the nature of the book's subject matter, I'm going to assume you're good with this. My hope is that if you're not, the pages that follow will draw you closer to knowing Jesus as your Savior. Nothing could be more important, especially as you approach the "finish line" of your life.

I have one overriding prayer as you begin reading—that our walking through these pages together will result in more

## FINISH LINE

wonderful yield from your “kernel of wheat” than there would have been without this experience. If that happens, our time will have been well worth it.

Welcome.

ROBERT WOLGEMUTH

Niles, Michigan

Copyright-Protected Material  
Property of Zondervan Books  
Do Not Reproduce or Distribute



## INTRODUCTION

# BREAKING THE TAPE

*The tape: a long, thin piece of material that is stretched across the finish line of a race to be broken by the first one across the line.*

MERRIAM-WEBSTER

*May the Lord keep you faithful in the race . . . all the way to the finish line.*

NANCY DEMOSS WOLGEMUTH<sup>1</sup>

**I**t was the first time I had seen a dead body.

I must have been ten or eleven years old. My family had taken our annual pilgrimage to Winona Lake, Indiana, where my dad was attending Youth for Christ's annual

---

1. Nancy often concludes handwritten notes to friends with these words. She's been doing this for years.

conference. He was, for most of his adult life, an executive in this ministry.

The little town in North Central Indiana featured a world-famous conference center—which is why we were there—and a lake. It was here I learned to swim, though not by my own choosing.

Standing on the long pier that jutted out from the shore across the surface of the water, my oldest brother determined that this would be a good time to teach me to swim. Notice, I did not say, “to teach me *how* to swim.” He simply pushed me into the water that was well over my head, figuring that the desperate moment of sheer terror would do all the necessary instructing. Thankfully—for my children, grandchildren, and great-grandson—he was right. Through the trauma of the event, and the gurgling and sputtering that ensued, I floated to the surface and swam.

Around that time, I witnessed an event at the lake that involved a married student who was attending Bethel Theological Seminary nearby. It was his last day on earth. What I remember was his panicked wife yelling for help from a pier not far from my swimming lesson and men dashing to the spot where he failed to surface and then pulling his body from the water a few minutes later. I ran to get a closer look.

This was before most people had heard of CPR or would have had any idea what those three letters meant. So they laid him faceup on the pier, and I stood there at a safe distance, gazing at his body. His wife was frantic, but no one was trying to revive him. We heard the sound of sirens headed our way. Straining to see everything, I looked at the

graying frame of the twentysomething man who had just a few minutes before been like the rest of us at the lake that day, splashing around with his friends. I was close enough to see that his eyes were open. This sight haunted me for a long time.

Over the past sixty years or so, I've seen my share of corpses—mostly in funeral homes where the bodies have been properly outfitted, coiffed, and painted to camouflage the actual color and original shapes of their sunken faces.

Even though I have previously written about the moment that Bobbie, my wife of almost forty-five years, died,<sup>2</sup> I want to take a few minutes here to speak of it in more detail. In fact, it was this memory that inspired me to write the book you now hold.

My daughters, Missy and Julie, were sitting with me next to Bobbie's rented hospital bed plunked down in the middle of our living room in October 2014. Enid, our faithful hospice nurse, was also there. She had come by the house only fifteen or so minutes earlier. Enid had taken Bobbie's blood pressure. It was very low. She then tried to take Bobbie's pulse with her thumb on the backside of her wrist. At first, Enid told us it was faint. Then she told us there was none. Incredibly, we knew this because Bobbie had asked her.

"You don't feel a pulse, do you?" Bobbie queried.

"No, Miss Bobbie. I don't."

Bobbie asked for the head end of her hospital bed to be lowered so the whole thing would be flat. Then she reached out, took me by the shirt with both hands, drew my face

---

2. Robert Wolgemuth, *Like the Shepherd: Leading Your Marriage with Love and Grace* (Washington, DC: Salem, 2017).

within a couple inches of hers, and said, “I love you so much,” as clearly as she had said it nearly five decades before when we fell in love. She closed her eyes and died.

“Is she dead?” Missy asked the nurse, her understandable panic not camouflaged.

“Yes,” Enid said evenly after putting her hand on Bobbie’s listless chest, holding it there for less than a minute. “She’s not breathing.”

Although there were plenty of tears later, my memory of this moment is that Missy, Julie, and I were too overwhelmed to do or say much at all. After thirty months of walking alongside this brave woman in her cancer journey, I can’t say we were surprised by the inevitable. But the heaviness that smothered us when we realized Bobbie was gone is almost too sacred to try to describe.

I reached out to Bobbie’s face and gently closed her eyelids.

Then I sat for a few minutes next to the hospital bed, watching as Bobbie’s body slowly turned gray. Then cool to the touch.

Thirty minutes after my phone call to summon them, two body-bag-toting men from the funeral home arrived with a wheeled stretcher. My daughters and I stepped out of the living room while they slipped my wife’s fragile form onto the stretcher. When they let us know they were ready, we joined them and what was once my vibrant wife in the foyer of our home. They had zipped up the bag, leaving only Bobbie’s face visible. The men graciously stepped away.

Missy, Julie, and I took each other’s hands and stood in a circle around the gurney carrying my late wife. Their late

mother. We sang a song we had sung—oh, maybe a thousand times—when one of us was headed out of town or returning to college, or when a gathering at our house was breaking up. Bobbie had learned this song at River Valley Ranch in Manchester, Maryland, when she was a young girl: “Goodbye, our God is watching o’er you, Goodbye, His mercies go before you, Goodbye, and we’ll be praying for you, So goodbye, may God bless you.”<sup>3</sup>

When we finished singing, I offered a short “thank you” prayer for this woman’s life and love and faith and beauty. I leaned over and softly kissed her cold forehead. Missy and Julie said their goodbyes. I nodded to the two men, who on that cue finished zipping the rubber cocoon over Bobbie’s face and wheeled it out the front door to their van.

We have sung that song only once since that afternoon—almost two weeks later when our voices rang out as Bobbie’s casket was being lowered into a yawning hole in the ground. But not since. It feels almost too holy to repeat under any other circumstances.

When we were married in 1970, Bobbie was just twenty years old, I was a much older twenty-two. Even though the “till death” phrase was part of our traditional wedding vows, it was the last thing on our minds.

For the ensuing four and a half decades, many times Bobbie told me she wanted to be “the first to die.” I always demurred. Who wants to talk about death when the majority of your life stands before you? Not me.

But now I was facing the reality of Bobbie’s wish. She

---

3. Wendell P. Loveless, “Goodbye” (Wheaton, IL: Hope Publishing, 1938).

was dead. I was a widower. Missy and Julie were launching the remainder of their young lives motherless.

Like so many around the globe each year, cancer was what captured her at sixty-four. The journey this disease took us on began with a visit to a woman's oncology clinic in 2012 at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Orlando, where we were living. When Bobbie, Julie, and I stepped off the elevator on the second floor, the waiting room was peppered with women. Some were reading a book, studying their smartphones, or quietly chatting with their husbands sitting close by. Others were alone, doing nothing. Almost all were bald. A few had their naked heads covered with a scarf or a knitted yarn beanie.

I wish I could adequately describe what I felt that day, but I cannot. The right words are beyond reach. That visit to the second floor marked the beginning of a thirty-month journey that ended that chilly October 2014 day when we sang the "Goodbye" song. Bobbie had been nothing short of a warrior. I tried to be too.

What I'd like to say right here at the beginning of a book about the end of life is that the experience of walking through death's door with my wife all but eliminated my fear of the same. Mostly, this was because of Bobbie's remarkable attitude about the inevitability of her demise after being diagnosed with Stage IV ovarian cancer.

Bobbie, with the certainty of her own death, showed me how to live without shaking her fist at the God in whom she trusted. In spite of what she actually went through, with me by her side, there was no complaining.

When I've told people that Bobbie didn't protest, even

during the horrendous effects of a chemotherapy followed by a clinical trial that literally made her feel like she was freezing to death, even in the heat of a Florida summer, their quizzical looks make clear they're wondering if I'm exaggerating. Even a little. I'm not. She did not whimper or complain, even hunched over the toilet throwing up the meager nutrition in her stomach. She'd finish vomiting. Struggle to her feet. And smile. Oh, and thank me for being there for her.

It's with the living example of my wife dying that I determined to embrace what I'll share with you in the pages that follow. With the historical perspective of the death of biblical patriarchs and some clues as to how you can prepare for your own death, I'm hoping the chapters that follow will encourage you and give you some specific ideas as you prepare for this day. I'm glad you've joined me on the adventure of writing a book about death. My death. Your death.

Thank you for the privilege of walking—or running . . . or crawling—through the contours of this. You and me.

Together to the finish line.





ONE

# DEAD. NOT DEAD.

*I hate death. I hate it intensely.*

RAY ORTLUND, TWEET, JUNE 2022

The original title of this, the opening chapter of a book on a serious subject was, “Yucky. Not Yucky.” My editor wisely suggested something more grown-up-sounding. I’m good with adult words. However, having raised two daughters all the way from silliness to full maturity, clearly the word *yucky* was a favorite. The target of this word could have ranged from small sticky place on the kitchen counter to something much more serious. Like mortality.

The opening two chapters in the first book in the Bible paint a pristine picture of all things good. In some cases . . . *very* good. But when we arrive at chapter 3, the landscape changes. And everything in this Genesis chapter shows us what bad looks like. In some cases, *very* bad.

And one of those terrible things that resulted from Adam and Eve's disobedience was death. Until that moment, nothing or no one died. Then a decree went out that eventually everything would perish: "For you are dust, and you will return to dust" (Genesis 3:19 CSB).

Like, which part of this diagnosis don't we understand?

And the most sobering part of this God-spoken directive is that the word *you* isn't just delivered to Adam. The pronoun is plural. Thousands of years later, you and I are included. The people we have loved, the people we love now, and the people we will love tomorrow are in there. And the process of dying begins the moment we suck in our first big swallow of air as tiny newborns. Like an hourglass that's been flipped over, the sand above begins trickling below through the pinch in the middle. There's no turning that thing right side up. We're on a one-way trajectory.

And beyond the Garden of Eden and throughout the Bible and all of recorded history, there's plenty more that has been written about death.

For example, the man Job, from the depths of his own despair affirmed this to be true.

Anyone born of woman  
is short of days and full of trouble.  
He blossoms like a flower, then withers;  
he flees like a shadow and does not last.

(Job 14:1–2 CSB)

A flower that "does not last." A brilliant and descriptive metaphor for death.

Even the most beloved psalm written by David assumes life's end. He doesn't open this subject in the Shepherd's Psalm with "just in case" or "maybe"; rather he begins the death phrase with the conjunction "even though," like there's no choice in the matter. Because there isn't.

Even though I walk  
through the darkest valley . . . (Psalm 23:4)

So because of the shortsightedness of Adam and Eve's disobedience, and the consequence, the Bible includes the stories of men and women dying. From these accounts you and I can learn a few important things. Here are some examples.

## THE MURDER OF THE BIBLE'S SECOND SON

The verses immediately following the eating of the forbidden fruit tell of the birth of two boys—first Cain, then Abel.

Imagine the joy the parents of these men must have experienced at their births. And like every mother and dad throughout the remainder of recorded history with more than one child, Adam and Eve likely wondered, *How is it possible that these boys came from the same parents? They could not be more different from each other.*

If you're the parent of more than one kid, you've had this conversation with your mate, right?

Apparently, it was too much of a difference for Cain to bear.

## FINISH LINE

“Cain said to his blow-dried, always-do-everything-right brother Abel, ‘Let’s go out to the field.’ And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him” (Genesis 4:8, Robert’s paraphrase).

God’s sentence of death directed to Adam’s sinful decision struck first in his own family. It doesn’t matter how long it was before Cain murdered his little brother, the sting must have been awful . . . for their dad and mom.

Remember that it had been many years since Adam and Eve had disobeyed God. We know this since there had been time for Cain and Abel to be conceived, born, and grow up. And don’t you know that when their mother and father first learned of their son’s murder, their minds must have careened back to God’s declaration of the thing called death. And this, as a result of their own disobedience. Now death was paying a visit to their family. No small thing to be sure.

As you know, the whole idea of this book is that you and I are going to die. Someday we will cross that line. The event will be complete. The finish line will be our death.

It’s a certainty.

Or is it?

## A QUICK ROUND TRIP

When Jesus walked this earth, there were times when He went nose-to-nose with the Genesis 3 narrative about the sentence of death and literally brought departed people back to life. If this was the first time you’ve ever heard of this, what I just wrote would have sounded incredulous. Even impossible.

But you've likely heard there was a Man who lived and had the power to call dead people back. And according to the gospel accounts, Jesus did this three times. Just three times—not counting His own resurrection.

The first such miracle involved the only son of a widow. Take a second and let that sink in. Here was a lone woman who had lost her husband and her only child. Jesus and His disciples were visiting the town of Nain and happened upon a funeral procession. No one needed to tell Jesus about the circumstances. No one showed Him the press clipping that included the obituary. Jesus knew. Scripture says that Jesus saw the mother and had compassion on her and said, “Don’t cry” (Luke 7:13).

Jesus approached the bier and did something no self-respecting Rabbi would ever do.<sup>1</sup> He touched the corpse and said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” Immediately, “the dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother” (Luke 7:14–15).

The biblical account tells us that Jesus left the scene and got on to the next thing on His schedule. But can you imagine what the next few hours must have been like for the young man’s mother? Dead son. Because of Jesus, not dead son.

The second account, found in Mark 5:21–43, is also a familiar one. This story has to do with a man named Jairus, the father of a daughter, which is probably why I’m so attracted to it.

---

1. “The prohibition of Kohen defilement to the dead is the commandment to a Jewish priest (*kohen*) not to come in direct contact with, or be in the same enclosed roofed space as a dead human body” (Wikipedia contributors, “Prohibition of Kohen Defilement by the Dead,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prohibition\\_of\\_Kohen\\_defilement\\_by\\_the\\_dead](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prohibition_of_Kohen_defilement_by_the_dead), accessed August 10, 2022).

Another reason to love this story is the way Jairus, a decorated Jew, humbly fell at Jesus' feet, pleading on behalf of his twelve-year-old girl. For priests or Pharisees who may have been there, seeing a holy Israelite on the ground in front of an unschooled teacher like Jesus would have been scandalous. But Jairus didn't care what anyone thought. This was a nothing-to-lose split second.

Once Jesus arrived at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Jairus, He entered the youngster's room with her mother and father, Peter, James, and John. Given the likelihood of the size of the room, a crowded space, to be sure. And as He had done with the other dead body, Jesus broke protocol and took her hand. The tenderness of this scene overwhelms me. And like the man's corpse on the cart, the young girl immediately sat up. Dead daughter. Because of Jesus, not dead daughter.

And maybe the most famous Bible story of a dead person coming to life, doesn't include any touching at all. This time Jesus just spoke, as He had at the very beginning—at creation in Genesis—turning death into life.<sup>2</sup>

## THE BETHANY CAPER

As you'll discover adventuring your way through the pages ahead, if there ever was a death-to-life head-scratcher, this is it.

First, a little backstory . . .

Jesus and His disciples were ministering in an area across

---

2. The Bible on Jesus and creation: John 1:3, 10; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2.

the Jordan known as Bethabara. A messenger arrived with the news that their friend Lazarus, Mary and Martha's brother, was sick. Deathly sick. The three lived in Bethany, a full fifteen to twenty miles away from where Jesus was. Without the availability of high-tech communication, there was no way to let Jesus know about His friend immediately. Instead, it likely took the courier a full day to deliver the news.

That means by the time Jesus heard the news, Lazarus was likely already dead. And I believe the next forty-eight hours proves it. And Jesus—being God also—knew.

Think about it. The messenger arrived in Jesus' presence, doubled over in exhaustion, his sides aching. His twenty-mile run—just six miles short of a marathon—had wiped him out. He made this journey as a gift to Mary and Martha, Jesus' dear friends. And through heaves and gasps, the runner told the Savior that His buddy Lazarus was sick. Really sick.

Jesus' blink response sounds rude. Really rude. "This sickness will not end in death" (John 11:4).

I'm more than a little scandalized just thinking about how this must have sounded. It's as though Jesus, having received the news, yawned.

Was He being discourteous? Did He make a mistake by not dropping everything and hurrying to Bethany? Was this an oversight? A blip on an ordinarily seamlessly planned itinerary? Or was this a perfect scenario for a message His friends would have never embraced if Lazarus hadn't caught this terminal disease? And died. In fact, might this just be a perfect place setting for a dinner party that will feed the world?

Lazarus is dead. Then he's not dead.

So watch this. Carefully. Then decide for yourself.

Lazarus, a resident of the little settlement of Bethany, contracts a deadly virus. Or gets sick another way. He may have fallen off a stepladder . . . more about that in a minute. We aren't told. His sisters Mary and Martha summon the fastest runner in town and beg him to find Jesus. Somehow this guy hears that the Teacher is in a town some twenty miles away. He turns and runs as fast as he can on the shortest route, due north.

Since the terrain features rocks and potholes and hills, nothing like a track or a paved roadway, it takes him a day to arrive. Before the volunteer is able to deliver his message, Lazarus dies. Not having any idea that this grueling race is a waste of his time, the courier tells Jesus that Mary and Martha's brother is sick.

Knowing that Lazarus had already breathed his last, Jesus' response upon receiving the message from the fatigued athlete is more than curious. Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it" (John 11:4).

Let me paint the picture: The ancient equivalent to Jim Ryun runs twenty miles; he's now in Jesus' presence, leaning forward with his hands on his knees; "Jim" gasps out his assigned dispatch and tells Jesus that His friend is about to die. Jesus smacks him down and argues with the message. "Lazarus is *not* dying; I'll go and see for myself. In two days, God's glory is about to be revealed. And here's the kicker: the glory will be unwrapped by way of Me."

If you and I were to be able to watch a YouTube video of this exchange, we'd see that there was no marching band. No fanfare or confetti. No platform, bright lights, worship

bands, or microphones. But this is one of the most consequential moments in the history of the world. What Jesus says in the face of what should have been tragic news became the most important newflash. Ever. It's my reason for taking a few hours to sit with you and talk about death.

I'll get back to the narrative in a minute, but let me jump ahead and give you the punch line:

You and I are going to die; it's for sure. Today we don't know how. We only know the "that."

As you read these words, the fact of your eventual death may be highly disturbing. I get that. In fact, I've always lived with a sense of caution—fear of dying—in nearly everything I do. You may be different, throwing yourself into life, tossing discretion to the wind. Skydiving, rock climbing, high-speed motorcycles may be a part of the fabric of your world. That's good. Not me.

My besetting fear is heights . . . *acrophobia*.

Since in so many cases falling equals dying, what if instead of anxiety about heights, my paralyzing phobia was death? What if the thought of dying freaked me out? Not surprisingly, there's a name for this too: *thanatophobia*.

Google this word, and you'll get a boatload of articles about this debilitating fear.

So one way or another, you and I are going to die.

However, and stay with me here, you and I are *not* going to die—that's also for sure.

In other words, if we put our faith in Jesus Christ and embrace the good news of the gospel for ourselves before this inevitable death, we will live forever. That's God's promise.

Got it? Good.

Confused? Let me explain.

This story may sound like a simple, familiar scenario. A man named Lazarus gets sick. Man dies. Jesus tries to come to

---

YOU AND I ARE NOT GOING TO DIE. IN OTHER WORDS, IF WE PUT OUR FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST AND EMBRACE THE GOOD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL FOR OURSELVES BEFORE THIS INEVITABLE DEATH, WE WILL LIVE FOREVER. THAT'S GOD'S PROMISE.

---

the rescue but too late. I thought this was the world's greatest Friend. The Savior. The One who always answers. That's true, but people die every day. In spite of the prayers of friends and family, they die. Funerals are held and people say nice things about the departed, including the belief that Jesus still cares.

So did Lazarus die so people would learn a lesson about "the brevity of life" and "the inevitability of death"? Or was there a larger mission?

Jesus had the power to turn ordinary water into fine wine. To feed thousands. To drive out demons. To heal the sick. But I guess with Lazarus, not this time: "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days" (John 11:5–6).

Wait. What?

Jesus received the desperate news about this friend and decided to do . . . nothing. For two days.

This is more than curious. In fact, to add to the weirdness, Thomas, the disciple not known among his colleagues as Mr. Positivity, predictably reminds Jesus that the last time He was near this town, the loudmouths tried to stone Him.

Instead of giving him a straight answer, Jesus' response to Thomas feels like what it would be like to have your car break down on a lonely country road and AAA ends up sending a theologian instead of a mechanic. Not exactly what Thomas was hoping for.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus hears that Lazarus is really sick. But instead of hiking up His robe and hurrying over to Bethany to help, Jesus talks about daylight and stumbling in the night. Here's exactly what He said: "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light" (John 11:9–10).

To add to the confusion about what He said, once Jesus had been faced with the opportunity to do something about His terminal friend, He *immediately* waits for forty-eight hours. When confronted with a real crisis, He speaks what sounded like a non sequitur, waxing theoretical. Or at least that may be what His disciples concluded in that moment.

Can you picture the quizzical look on these men's faces? Is the same perplexing look on your face as you read this? Me too.

However, Jesus was up to something. He always is.

Go back to verse 5 in our story. It reminds us that Jesus loved Mary and Martha. And He goes about proving it by letting their brother die. Seriously? Yes. For if Lazarus hadn't perished, the lesson would not have been taught. Or believed.

As we've seen from the exchange in the Garden of Eden, death became the certain penalty for sin. It was the result of

---

3. This helpful analogy is not mine. It belongs to Alistair Begg.

choosing darkness instead of light. God's punishment for the first couple was turning the lights off. That's the bad news. But the good news is that without the night, there's no joy in the sunrise. You don't even notice a burning candle in the daylight. But at night, that flaming candle can keep you from brushing your teeth with antiseptic cream instead of toothpaste or falling down the stairs. The light that shines in the pitch-darkness shows you where you are. And who you are. It changes everything. When Jesus referred to Himself as the Light of the world, this is what He was talking about.

## THE TALK WITH MARTHA

Fast-forward a couple days. Jesus waits His forty-eight hours and then makes the one-day journey to Bethany.

The Lazarus odyssey lasts exactly four days. Right before Lazarus dies, a runner volunteers to go tell Jesus that he's sick. This hasty hike takes *a day*. Jesus gets the message and waits for *two days*. There's *three*. Then He walks back to Bethany to see these things for Himself. That's another day, which brings us to *four days*.

What I'd love is for you and me to carefully review the conversation Jesus had with Martha when He arrived in Bethany.

The news that Jesus is in the neighborhood—maybe by way of another fast runner—reaches their home, and it's Martha who comes out. Scripture says that Mary stays inside. Maybe too grief-stricken about her brother's death. Sullen and maybe even angry that Jesus hasn't come to their rescue.

I guess it's not strange that instead of falling apart emotionally, Martha cuts to the chase: "'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died'" (John 11:21).

Fair thing to say.

This is where the focus tightens on the "light and dark" thing Jesus mentioned to His disciples back in Bethabara. In fact, it's the reason for—and the message of—this book. Death is the promise. It's the reality of darkness that makes light that much sweeter.

It's the very reason Jesus said to His disciples, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe" (John 11:14–15).

The certainty of our death forces us to look more carefully at our lives. If I didn't know that death would bring me face-to-face with a holy God who will judge me appropriately, I might not be as eager to prepare.

---

THE CERTAINTY  
OF OUR DEATH  
FORCES US TO LOOK  
MORE CAREFULLY  
AT OUR LIVES.

---

## WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT JESUS?

Go with me to the chat between Jesus and Martha. Lazarus has expired, hanging out in a tomb for four days. Martha is understandably grieving. And maybe a little upset that Jesus, who could have done something to help her ailing brother, doesn't seem as troubled. In fact, He hasn't even bothered to come to be with her and Mary.

Then Jesus says to her evenly, “Your brother will rise again” (John 11:23).

Martha is confused, wondering about the actual timing of her brother’s resurrection. But for the moment, this doesn’t matter. What she cares about is that she misses her sibling and wants him back now. But in that moment Jesus did what

He had done two days ago when He first heard about Lazarus’s failing health. He did nothing.

---

YOU HAVE NOT  
WASTED YOUR  
LIFE—YOUR  
TRAGEDIES, YOUR  
TRIUMPHS, YOUR  
FAILURES, YOUR  
JOYS. YOU CAN  
TRUST JESUS.

---

As you know, in 2014, I buried my wife. The sound you could hear as her casket was being lowered into the ground was the gruesome tearing of flesh. Mine. And my daughters and grandkids. Extended family and many dear friends standing close by. There was more pain than you could know.

From the time I was a small boy, I heard people telling other people in my situation with a very sick loved one to “just rest in Jesus.” Or “trust Jesus.” Or “lean on Jesus.” The day after Bobbie’s burial, I went back to the cemetery. There was a mountain of freshly cut flowers, now beginning to wither and die, piled up on the spot.

“So what are you going to do now, Robert?” I actually heard myself saying quietly. The recording in my head replayed what I have said a thousand times in my lifetime and heard plenty of times since Bobbie got sick. “Take it to Jesus.”

If I were to slip on the hat of a cynical man, I could ask the question you see above: “What’s so great about Jesus?”

I’ve spent a lifetime teaching the Bible and having the

privilege of authoring a bunch of books that tell the gospel story one way or another. My dream early this morning and the past few hours as I pounded away on my keyboard with these words was to be able to ask this question: “What’s so great about Jesus?”

And here’s the answer:

Not long after the hard conversation with Martha, Jesus said to His disciples something about the reason there really is something “so great” about Him.

“My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?” (John 14:2)

In other words, once you’ve finished your life, once you’ve pounded out the words of your story on your laptop, and are ready to cross over, you can rest easy. You have not wasted your life—your tragedies, your triumphs, your failures, your joys. You can trust Jesus.

He will be there. His promises are sure. You can count on Him. Between now and then, He can keep writing your story regardless of how many years you have.

## A PRETEND VISIT WITH MARY, MARTHA, LAZARUS . . . YOU AND ME

The story of Lazarus’s death was toward the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry. That means that it wasn’t long until He went to the cross and died, was buried, and then rose from the grave.

Let's pretend that after Jesus reappeared to His disciples and visibly ascended to Heaven, you and I make a lunch appointment with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. It's just the five of us.

In this setting, we're able to ask about the time when Lazarus got really sick. We ask Mary and Martha what it was like to have to wait four days before their friend Jesus showed up to help them. We may even have some fun asking Lazarus about the experience of being dead—if he remembers—and what that was like.

Our favorite part may be asking Lazarus how it felt to wake up to the sound of Jesus' voice and his name to "come out," struggling to stand to his feet and then step into the sunlight, and what freedom felt like when his friends obeyed Jesus and unwrapped the grave clothes so he could walk free.

But my most important question would be aimed at Martha. I would ask her to recall the one-on-one when Jesus finally came walking up to their house. Lazarus was still in the grave and questions came pouring out of her mouth . . . and her broken soul.

I would ask Martha to tell me what she thought when Jesus said to her: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25–26).

What a question Jesus asks. Do we believe, in the way Jesus told Martha, that you and I will never die? Do I?

The events of the past several weeks had been filled with anxiety for Martha and Mary . . . and Lazarus. With questions of life. And healing. And death. Yucky death.

As we're preparing to finish our lunch together, someone, I'm not sure who, makes a statement we won't ever forget. It's what I'd like to say to you, my reading friend, right here at the beginning of our conversation.

You are going to die. I am going to die. Unlike Lazarus, our visit to our graves will not be four days long.

But if Jesus is your Savior, if you invite Him to be there at your tomb, your death will last a lot shorter than four days. Your corpse is going into the ground to await the resurrection. Your soul/spirit is going immediately into the Lord's presence.

I'm remembering something I read a long time ago. It's a quote from the simple shoe and boot salesman turned bold preacher Dwight L. Moody:

Someday you will read in the papers that D. L. Moody of East Northfield, is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now.<sup>4</sup>

You and I are going to die.

You and I are not going to die.

You get this now, don't you?

---

4. William R. Moody, *The Life of Dwight L. Moody* (New York: Revell, 1900), 554–55.