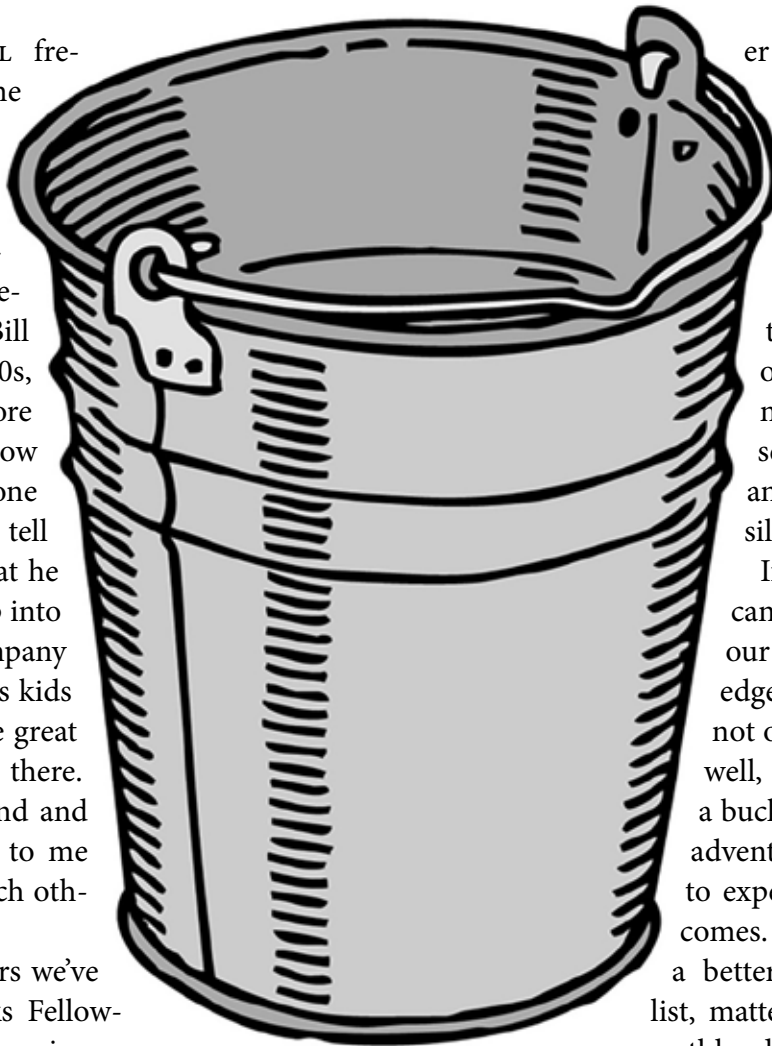


LIVING TOWARD WHAT'S
MOST IMPORTANT

A BETTER BUCKET LIST

MY FRIEND BILL frequently asked me about heaven. “What will it be like?” he wanted to know. It was the right question asked by someone who was ready. Bill was deep into his 80s, and he had long before filled his bucket. Now he figured he had one job left, which was to tell everyone he could that he loved them. He’d drop into the offices of the company he’d turned over to his kids just to say those three great words to everyone there. And he’d take my hand and whisper those words to me every time we saw each other.

Bill, like many others we’ve worked with in Links Fellowships through the years, is now with Jesus. It’s what happens in a ministry that sees a lot of the “old-



er demographic.” Friends die. Disease and age do their thing, always winning in the end. And in their winning, we lose. We must grow accustomed to the absence of one we held dear. We must grieve, entering a season marked by tears and remembering and silence.

If there is anything that can soften the edges of our grief, it is the knowledge that our friend has not only lived well but died well, too. Anyone can have a bucket list—that catalog of adventures he or she wants to experience before the end comes. But only a few write a better bucket list. On this list, matters of the soul outrun earthly desires like a five-star meal in New York City, snorkeling in blue Bahaman waters, or

BY JEFF HOPPER

a dream round at Pebble Beach. Others make their way to the top of our priorities, including rich and important conversations with them. And God is honored in the things we say and do.

With these three emphases in mind, I've leaned on two colleagues to help us think through the ways we can walk toward dying with excellence. Let me introduce them.

After careers in professional golf and business sales, Randy Wolff moved into ministry, first as the director of a retreat center in Colorado. There, he and his wife Carol formed deep and lasting relationships with men and women who were given (and took!) time to think about what's most important in life. Eventually, Randy connected with Links Players where, from his home near Dallas, he served for more than 10 years as a director of Links Fellowships in Texas and beyond. In that time, he has walked friends into life with Christ and then into eternity with him. On the day Randy sent me his ideas for this article, he got up from his email and went to the funeral of a friend. "Thank you," Randy wrote that day, "for getting me focused again on what is important."

Marty Jacobus also spent many years in business leadership before "retiring" into ministry, where he first worked with Fellowship of Christian Athletes, then came on board with Links Players. He currently serves as the region director in the California desert. In 2010, Mar-

ty lost his wife Jenny to cancer. Two years later he remarried to Barbara, who similarly had lost her husband to cancer. Together, with the unexchangeable understanding of experience, they have ministered to many people in life and in death, always emphasizing the resurrection that Jesus offers us all.

MATTERS OF THE SOUL

IF WE WERE TO EMPHASIZE a singular item on one's better bucket list, it would be to get right with God. That may sound as old-fashioned as saying, "Get ready to meet your Maker," but the idea remains. If there is an afterlife and the life we are living is only a fast-paced precursor, we need to take the time to consider two key questions: Who is this God who offers me eternity, and how do I get to him? Securing the answers to these questions must be at the top of our better bucket list.

In his little letter near the back of your Bible, the apostle James wrote these words: "Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."¹ This does not mean we cannot accomplish some significant things in our lives. In fact, that's the very thing we're talking about now. What James' words do accentuate is the fleeting nature of earthly existence. People still die instantly in our time. This should give us all pause to consider our standing with God as soon as we can. But many of

us procrastinate. We figure we'll have time to get ready for death when the end is near. So for now we call the shots. Surprisingly, while God does not promise this slow lead-up, he is OK with it.

Jesus told a story about late-comers. We call it the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.² It's the story that gave us the expression "the eleventh hour." In the parable, a landowner hires laborers to work for the day in his field. He hires some first thing, but when he goes back to the marketplace three hours later, he finds more available workers. He hires them, too. He does the same at the sixth hour and the ninth. Then one more time, at the eleventh hour, he makes his last hires of the day. But here's the big surprise: In the end, he pays them all the same. Oh yes, the early workers were not happy! But the landowner, who is the representation of God in the story, says to them, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" God is willing to reward even those who worked least of all; God offers eternity even to those who wait until their deathbed to come to him.

Today, you may be far from death or quite near to it. This does not change the questions: *Who is this God who offers me eternity, and how do I get to him?* Scripture teaches us that the same God who made the world is the one who offers us eternity. In fact, this was his plan at creation. He wanted his peo-

We begin a better bucket list by 'getting right with God,' which means, according to Scripture, that we acknowledge our sin and God's holiness and how we cannot get to God on our own.



ple to live eternally. But when Adam and Eve, that first man and woman with whom God established direct relationship, disobeyed God and thereby destroyed their holy, unmarred alliance with him, the severance was deeply consequential. Everyone who followed would likewise set themselves against God in thoughts, motives, words, and actions. Our sinful nature and our sinners' actions separate us from the holiness of God. In fact, they make us dead to him.³ And no dead person can revive himself. Yet along comes Jesus, telling parables that offer the hope of eternity. How can this be?

It can be because of Jesus himself, who said, "I and the Father (God) are one."⁴ The apostle John, who spent close years with Jesus, opened his Gospel by announcing, "In the beginning was the Word (Jesus), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."⁵ Later the apostle Paul wrote, "The Son (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."⁶ Jesus, was God incarnate, God in the flesh. And he had come to fulfill the most tragic of all prophecies—to die bearing our sins, that we may be declared righteous before God in spite of our disqualifying sin. He went to the cross and shed his blood for

our sakes. It's stunning, really. So much so that Paul wrote to the Romans, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."⁷ God intervened on our behalf out of love for us.

So if God made me and God loves me and God offers me eternity, how do I take hold of it? An eternal relationship with Jesus begins by faith: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."⁸ This may seem too simple. It is and it isn't, because true faith is never just lip service. Consider more of Paul's words to the Romans: "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved."⁹

Your belief in Christ, weak as it may seem to you or to those around you, must be just one thing: sincere. This is what we find to be true of the thief on the cross, who genuinely expressed belief in Jesus and was told by the Savior, "Today you will be

with me in paradise."¹⁰

Every person is far more than their body. Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers by writing to them that "though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day."¹¹ A few lines later, he added: "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands."¹² We begin a better bucket list by "getting right with God," which means, according to Scripture, that we acknowledge our sin and God's holiness and how we cannot get to God on our own. Instead, we must trust that the work of Jesus alone bridges the gap between us and God. When we do that from our true heart, we believe in Jesus and are glad to tell others what he has done for us.

Perhaps you have already "made your peace" with God. Your eternity is secure in Christ. There is still soul work you can do. Marty Jacobus sees several practices that can be amped up in one's last stretch. "I want to spend more time alone worshipping, reading the Bible, thanking God for so many things, and preparing my mind for the winding down of life in this body. And I want to spend much more time

praying, asking how God would want me to spend my last days on this earth. Then listen and try to finish well.”

ABOUT OTHERS

THE SECOND DISTINCTION of a better bucket list is that it prioritizes others. With a traditional bucket list, much of the emphasis can be to please oneself. *I want to go here, do this, see that.* Even when it comes to visiting other people, it is usually for my sake, not theirs. Instead, when we have others in mind, we can create a healthy list under this heading alone.

At the top of that list would be one more chance at *sharing what Jesus has done for you*. “This could be the greatest opportunity for evangelism and pointing others to what is important,” Randy Wolff tells us. “Your loved ones will want to hear what you have to say and see your joy. Don’t hold back or be timid. Tell them: ‘For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.’”

This isn’t only about family. Marty puts it this way: “Make a list of friends that do not know Jesus as Lord and Savior. Call or write them. Share the truth in a loving way.”

Next on your list would be *other vital conversations about relationship*. Randy says we need to have these discussions with “those with whom we have had a difficult time and left so much unsaid. Forgive them and ask for their forgiveness. Especially family. I have seen this work for the glory of God. It happened

with me and the man who had such an impact on my salvation.”

We also need to have *vital conversations about death*. This may be the hardest part of a better bucket list (as hard as parachuting out of an airplane!). In fact, you may be tempted to exclude this item from your list because you’re worried that it will be too hard for others. But they will have to deal with your death one way or the other. If you can help them by telling them your wishes for care and dying, and for your service and burial, you will bless them more than you might know. Of course, if you have ever had to deal with a death where these things were not properly done, you understand.

Marty says his better bucket list would include: “Make sure ‘my affairs’ were in order so it will be as easy as it can be for my wife and family in that area after I die.” And Randy adds, “Plan your funeral with your spouse and/or family. This makes so much sense to do this when you are able. God is in the details. The funeral will honor God first and foremost. It will help the spouse in the transition with all the details to follow.”

There are practical considerations in preparing for death with others in mind. As a five-year cancer patient as of this writing, I have had many opportunities to consider what needs to be done before I leave my own “tent.” We are not collectors in our household; we park two cars in our two-car garage and we don’t have a storage unit offsite.

But I have a fairly large collection of tools and any number of books and golf mementos that will be of no interest to my wife and children. I’ve been working to thin these things out. Why should they have to sort through them? Also, in today’s tech-saturated environment, I need to make sure that at least one other person has access to my passwords. We’ve all heard the nightmare stories of families whose work at closing a loved one’s estate is thwarted by the absence of such access.

Then there are those final days, when you may not be able to express your desires to others. Marty says “I would hope to die at home, surrounded by my wife and kids, worshipping while we wait.” There’s nothing remarkable in that request, but it’s something your family needs to know ahead of the fact, so they can make the proper preparations. We want to help others help us, not demanding, but bringing them into our circle of understanding.

Next on your list may be *special times with others*. These are for both your sake and others’. I recently talked with a friend whose diagnosis is final. It will not be too long until she is with Jesus. What she is loving most at this time are visits with children and grandchildren. They talk some about death, but the talk is dominated by life—hers and theirs. What do they remember about special things they have done together through the years? What has she shown them? What do they plan in their lives going for-

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ward? Where does Jesus fit into the pictures of their future? It has been said that quality time is the byproduct of quantity time. If you haven't captured enough time with family through the years (or recently), see if you can increase that from now to the end.

Randy and Marty offer some great ideas for spending time with others:

- If you have kids, grandkids, siblings, or parents, spend some time with each individually and some all together. (Marty)
- Thank the ones who have greatly impacted you in your faith journey. Call and/or visit these my men and women who are on your Mt. Rushmore of Faith. Encourage them. (Randy)
- Spend time with good friends, perhaps playing some golf or fishing, paying closer attention to your surroundings and enjoying the moment. (Marty)

Finally, as Marty alludes to, there are experiences and projects that can bring you together with the ones you love, both before and after your death. Marty says he would "enjoy some din-

ners. Some with just my wife, some with my family, and some with my friends. Good food, good wine, good conversation, communion together at the end of the evenings." And Randy tells of a legacy project he would work on: "I would spend time getting Bibles, writings, mementos, and photos of family together to make sure these things would be saved. I would designate who would get what. I would add a special note to each. No matter what thing I give to each one, my prayer would be that it might be treasured by my children's children, or to the ones who would be receptive."

HONORING GOD

A YEAR AGO, we lost a dear friend of Links Players, one of our founders, Tom Flory. Tom was a graduate of the US Naval Academy, an avid and accomplished golfer, a mission-minded traveler, a devoted husband, and a gospel-first man through and through. In the days before his passing, Tom said, "I am apprehended with overwhelming gratitude for God using someone like me." Here was a man who knew and was known by his Savior, and right to the end he recognized that it was God who had ordered his life.

When you commit to a better bucket list, your choices will honor God because you have taken time to consider how he has made every difference in your life and how you will spend eternity with him. My friend Bill often asked about heaven because he knew he was going to be there with Jesus. His love for his Savior made him keenly interested in where he was headed next, in the same way that travelers read ahead about the place they will visit. In this way, the excitement builds, and God is honored because we are showing how much we want to be with him.

This does not mean that we are suddenly "so heavenly minded" that we are "no earthly good." The apostle Paul wrote that "to live is Christ, to die is gain."¹³ While there is perfection on the other side of the proverbial river, excellence is possible here, right to the end.

Marty plans to "write letters to each person in my family, reiterating my life's story, my faith in Jesus, and something special about our relationship." Such a thoughtful act, undertaken because we recognize that our time on earth is growing shorter, expresses what the Savior means to us, while at the same time bringing thanks and encouragement

to our loved ones. In Scripture, we see a Jesus Creed, as author Scot McKnight has called it: Love God and love others. Doing either or both of these things, we honor the Lord.

Of course, if you have been walking with Jesus for some time, your whole life should be one that honors God. You have made mistakes, even sinning willfully, and you will likely do so right up to the day you die. But the Holy Spirit has been reforming you since the day you were born again in Christ. The Spirit ignites and stokes our love for our Savior, resulting in a daily commitment to loving others in the way he has loved you. As this happens, others recognize differences in you. They see that your heart has changed and your words and actions with it. If your life has revered God in this way, the final miles in your life's journey will do the same. And indeed, because your eyes are lit up by the hope of glory ahead, you may revere God all the more.

LAST WORDS

THROUGH THE YEARS, I have had many conversations with Randy Wolff. Because Randy is close friends with Dr. David Cook, the author of the beloved golf novel, *Golf's Sacred Journey: Seven Days at the Links of Utopia*, Randy openly talks of David's encouragement to consider what will be written on our gravestones. In a limited space, an engraver may etch several words that capture who we are or what was important to us. Achievements or titles

are gratifying, but they have little eternal worth. Far more important are the things that have been written on the tablets of our hearts—and the hearts of those we will leave behind.

If our loved ones remember us for what we have accomplished, or even for the nice things we have done with and for them, they will have fond memories of the past. But if they remember us for the faith we expressed and the faith we lived, they will have opportunity to build their own eternal future on the basis of our example. You may be praying even now for a spouse, child, grandchild, or dear friend to respond to Jesus with a belief that brings salvation. It is possible you will pray this prayer until the day you die. But it is a prayer that can be answered even after you are gone. When you build relationships with others and your faith is at the forefront, your loved ones will be able to look back not only on what your life produced but on what God produced in your life, and such a memory may finally bring them to faith.

One of my favorite friends in golf and in ministry is Tim Philpot, a man who has lived a full life in legal and ministerial endeavors, as an attorney, a judge, and an evangelist. When Tim dives into a conversation with someone he doesn't know so well, he will often present his new acquaintance with an intriguing question: *What will you be doing one hundred years from now?* You see, whether your

20 or 50 or 80 years old, you'll be in the same place a hundred years from now, and that place is *not here*. It's a question that simultaneously causes someone to consider both their present and their eternal future. A better bucket list does the same thing. It asks us what we can do today to prepare us for the eternal tomorrow—whenever that comes. You can't start too early, really. But you can start too late. Maybe it's time to break out a sheet of paper and your favorite pen and get to writing your list today.

NOTES

¹ James 4:14 (All Scripture is quoted 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 The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™)

² You will find this parable in Matthew 20:1-16.

³ See Ephesians 2:1-2.

⁴ John 10:30

⁵ John 1:1

⁶ Colossians 1:15

⁷ Romans 5:7-8

⁸ Acts 16:31

⁹ Romans 10:9-10

¹⁰ Luke 23:43

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 4:16

¹² 2 Corinthians 5:1

¹³ Philippians 1:21

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