

August, 2002

Dear _____:

I'd like to ask you to take a few moments to think about something most of us don't like to consider too often--death. Contemplating the end of any human life automatically brings to mind the end of our own lives, and if we are to believe the messages that have been given to us every day of our lives--messages of fear and despair, provided by a world that has little to offer in the way of hope--then we can't help but fear death, and do our best to avoid thinking about it.

I'd like you to consider, though, that there is another way to think about death--a way that isn't born of fear, but of hope. People who have no true vision of heaven or true awareness of eternity, who don't really know God, have no hope. While they live here on the earth, this is it--when you're dead, you're dead, and there's nothing more. When you go to a funeral, that's the end of that person's life. But as Christians, we should be aware of a greater knowledge than this. And we realize that there is absolutely no reason to fear physical death.

And so, we have hope.

In I Thessalonians, Chapter 4, verse 13, the Bible says: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

I want you to look at this hope that we have, this assurance that we have of eternal life. And I'd like for you to know that through knowledge of God and through service to his will, that this eternal life is yours--and is as real to you as anything you'll experience in this world, as real and as inevitable as your physical death.

In the book of Luke, chapter 16 verse 19, Jesus tells the story of Lazarus the beggar, who waited at a rich man's gate along with the dogs for the crumbs that might fall from his table. In time, both men died physically--Lazarus being carried by angels into paradise,* and the rich man being condemned to the torments of hell, where he begged for mercy and was denied. Likewise, when he asked that Lazarus be sent back to earth to urge his brothers to repent, he was rebuffed.

Each of these men died physically; their lives on this earth were over, the loved ones they left behind remained in mourning at their funerals, and to those without hope, the story would end there. But Jesus isn't giving us a parable; he's sharing with us a historical fact. And so, for those who will listen, the story continues, and there are several things we can learn from it.

First, what they did on earth led to an eternal decision: Their actions in the physical world led to their differing ultimate outcomes, each eternally set in stone, wherein they were sent either to eternal reward or punishment. Meanwhile, their families remained here on earth, crying and mourning.

We learn here that the man in torment wasn't consigned to some formless void: He knew who he was, and remembered where he came from. He didn't lose understanding of who he was, and he retained compassion for his brothers, hoping that they could be warned in time to save themselves. We know that he didn't forget his brothers, and that he continued to recognize--and to see—Lazarus, above in paradise. This serves as proof that we will in fact remember who we are, and will recognize one another, following our physical deaths; there will be a reunion of us and our loved ones; and we will continue to think about those who have yet to follow us, as they will continue to think of and remember us.

In the book of James, Chapter 2, Verse 26, we read: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without work is dead also." So what IS death, exactly? From a scriptural perspective, dying is like taking a glove off. Upon dying, you shed your physical body, much as removing a glove, an outer shell in the form of a hand, reveals the real, living hand beneath. This abandonment of the physical body is hardly the end of 'us,' of 'who we are.' In order to really understand this, we have to understand who and what "we" truly are as people. The messages we receive in our daily lives reinforce the idea that we are primarily physical selves, and that our intellect, spirit, feelings, and soul are contained within, and limited by, our physical bodies. But this isn't really true.

You—the real you—are not your physical form; nor is that form truly even a part of who you are in essence. You are your soul and your spirit—you are that which survives beyond physical death, thanks to the grace of God.

All of us can be considered to consist of three parts: Our mortal, physical bodies—that is, our temporary physical form; our soul--which would include your mind, will, emotions, intellect, and memory; and your spirit. In the fall of man, all three of those parts were destined for death, since they had become alienated from God. But we learn from scripture that a person must be born again, that the spirit must be born again and the mind renewed in the knowledge of God. This rebirth and renewal allows God to overcome this alienation, to come into our lives, and to reward us with eternal life.

Your physical body has a curse on it--a curse older than the body itself. It got it in the Garden of Eden, and it carries it today. In Genesis 3, v. 17: God says to Adam, "because thou has hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and eaten of the tree of which I commanded thou shalt not eat of it, cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow, thou shalt eat of it all the days of thy life. Thorns and thistles also shall it bear forth of thee, and thou shalt eat of the herbs of the field. And in the sweat of thy face, thou shalt eat bread. Until thou return to the ground, for out of it was thou taken, for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return." Because of this curse, the physical body cannot come into the Kingdom of God.

But that body shall be changed. Of the three parts, soul, spirit, and body, Jesus redeemed all three. Your spirits are redeemed now, as you are born again and you move into Christianity, truly believing in your heart that He is Lord. And as your mind becomes renewed in the knowledge of God, and you begin to walk in that knowledge--as God and His word become truly alive in you, becoming as real and tangible to you as your physical self--your mind and your soul are redeemed as well.

It is a grave misunderstanding to believe that because of the church or denomination you are born into, or because of your parents' faith, you can consider yourself a true Christian entitled to eternal life. The Bible is clear in telling us that before we can be, we must first become—by actively working to acquire the knowledge and heartfelt understanding needed, and making them a central part of our daily lives.

For this to happen, God's Word must be transformed in you from simple accumulated knowledge into a motivating and guiding heartfelt force, an internal compass which provides continual guidance throughout your daily life. The Word must become truly a "guiding light," a north star illuminating the decisions, directions, and actions taken in your Christian walk.

All that remains is the question of your physical being. The truth is this: your body is your body and it's dead--there's nothing you can do about it. You grow and age, and your body is going to continue to die. But there is a resurrection--not of the physical body that we currently know, but of a new body. The Bible says that the dead shall raise and they'll be made alive. And the Bible says that "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump, the trumpets shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible. And we shall be changed, for this corruption must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. "

Jesus redeemed our spirits, and Jesus gave us the ability to renew our souls--but yet our bodies are still dying. You reach a peak, you plateau, and then it's all downhill from there--until you go to heaven. And then later, "at the last trumpet," you receive your new, immortal body.

So, how can we be assured that this will come to pass? By making sure that while we're here, on this earth, in our physical bodies, that we dedicate ourselves to Him and His service.

If you're focused upon eternal rewards, and you understand that eternity is much more than eighty or ninety years, then it's easy to sacrifice your life here in service to God. The real reward, the one which "stores up treasures in heaven" rather than fleeting pleasures here on earth, is in helping your fellow man.

Whatever your calling, whatever God has in his heart for you--if you can be eternally minded and get over being concerned with just what's here in the material world, and comprehend that there is something more, it is easier to reject the pleasures of this world. Life in serving God IS a sacrifice--sacrificing your wants, your will, your desires for His.

1st John, chapter 15 says "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, and the pride of life is not of the Father. The world passes away and the lusts thereof, but he that does the will of God shall abide forever." You have to ask yourself: Do you love the world, or do you love the things of God?

You are in the world, but you don't have to be of the world--difficult though it may be to resist at times. Gratification of the flesh is so immediate today. Life is so instant. It is very difficult to push it away. But the Bible continually warns us that the flesh desires something that is opposite the Kingdom of God. You have to get "eternally minded" in order to really overcome this. Eternal rewards are determined based upon what you do while you're here; based upon the life you lead, you either have eternal life or eternal damnation. When the heart stops, you're done, and the die is cast. But while you're breathing, while your heart is beating, you

have time to serve God. Time to lay aside the flesh. Time to turn your life around; time to do something truly productive. While you're in this body, you have to be focused upon eternity-- upon God and his will.

Those who are new to the church must first absorb, learn, and take it all in. But if you've been in the church for any length of time, it becomes time to give back. Being a Christian isn't a static, unchanging thing: It is a process of growing, so that you can give to others. And this Christian giving is the only thing that means anything.

What is of this world is meaningless. But passing on the knowledge of God, growing in the knowledge of God, and raising your children in this knowledge and sharing this knowledge with others--that is what we are here to do. We are here to serve the creator rather than the creation, and it is time to focus on the real thing. Don't love the things of this world; do the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God.

Every person has grace, and every man and woman has a call that it is their duty to heed. Everyone has something that they are called to by grace, and no one has exactly the same calling. Whether it is teaching at the church, parking cars at the church, visiting the hospital, making food for those who need it--whatever it may be that is your calling, that is how you share God's love. That's where the blessing is--by giving your physical life in His service.

Believe me, the time is short. Let's serve Him.

In His Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sebastian Lucido', written in a cursive style.

Sebastian Lucido

Sponsor: _____

* In Old Testament times, prior to Christ's birth, death, and resurrection, those who died in God's grace were taken to paradise. Following Christ's resurrection, these individuals were taken up by him into heaven, as is the case with those who die and are redeemed today.