

don't waste your life

g i f t e d i t i o n



john piper

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Don't Waste Your Life

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Preface

For Christians and Non-Christians

The Bible says, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). I have written this book to help you taste those words as sweet instead of bitter or boring.

You are in one of two groups: Either you are a Christian, or God is now calling you to be one. You would not have picked up this book if God were not at work in your life.

If you are a Christian, you are not your own. Christ has bought you at the price of his own death. You now belong doubly to God: He made you, and he bought you. That means your life is not your own. It is God’s. Therefore, the Bible says, “Glorify God in your body.” God made you for this. He bought you for this. This is the meaning of your life.

If you are not yet a Christian, that is what Jesus Christ offers: doubly belonging to God, and being able to do what you were made for. That may not sound exciting. Glorifying God may mean nothing to you. That’s why I tell my story in the first two chapters, called “Created for Joy.” It was not always plain to me that pursuing God’s glory would be virtually the same as pursuing my joy. Now I see that millions of people waste their lives because they think these paths are two and not one.

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There is a warning. The path of God-exalting joy will cost you your life. Jesus said, "Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." In other words, it is better to lose your life than to waste it. If you live gladly to make others glad in God, your life will be hard, your risks will be high, and your joy will be full. This is not a book about how to avoid a wounded life, but how to avoid a *wasted* life. Some of you will die in the service of Christ. That will not be a tragedy. Treasuring life above Christ is a tragedy.

Please know that I am praying for you, whether you are a student dreaming something radical for your life, or whether you are retired and hoping not to waste the final years. If you wonder what I am praying, read Chapter 10. That is my prayer.

For now, I thank God for you. My joy grows with every soul that seeks the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Remember, you have one life. That's all. You were made for God. Don't waste it.

March 31, 2003
John Piper

My Search for a Single Passion to Live By



My father was an evangelist. In fact he still is, even though he doesn't travel now. When I was a boy, there were rare occasions when my mother and sister and I traveled with him and heard him preach. I trembled to hear my father preach. In spite of the predictable opening humor, the whole thing struck me as absolutely blood-earnest. There was a certain squint to his eye and a tightening of his lips when the avalanche of biblical texts came to a climax in application.

"I've Wasted It, I've Wasted It"

Oh, how he would plead! Children, teenagers, young singles, young married people, the middle-aged, old people—he would press the warnings and the wooings of Christ into the heart of each person. He had stories, so many stories, for each age group—stories of glorious conversions, and stories of horrific refusals to believe followed by tragic deaths. Seldom could those stories come without tears.

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For me as a boy, one of the most gripping illustrations my fiery father used was the story of a man converted in old age. The church had prayed for this man for decades. He was hard and resistant. But this time, for some reason, he showed up when my father was preaching. At the end of the service, during a hymn, to everyone's amazement he came and took my father's hand. They sat down together on the front pew of the church as the people were dismissed. God opened his heart to the Gospel of Christ, and he was saved from his sins and given eternal life. But that did not stop him from sobbing and saying, as the tears ran down his wrinkled face—and what an impact it made on me to hear my father say this through his own tears—"I've wasted it! I've wasted it!"

This was the story that gripped me more than all the stories of young people who died in car wrecks before they were converted—the story of an old man weeping that he had wasted his life. In those early years God awakened in me a fear and a passion not to waste my life. The thought of coming to my old age and saying through tears, "I've wasted it! I've wasted it!" was a fearful and horrible thought to me.

"Only One Life, 'Twill Soon Be Past"

Another riveting force in my young life—small at first, but oh so powerful over time—was a plaque that hung in our kitchen over the sink. We moved into that house when I was six. So I suppose I looked at the words on that plaque almost every day for twelve years, till I went away to college at age eighteen. It was a simple piece of glass painted black on the back with a gray link chain snug around it for a border and for hanging. On the front, in old English script, painted in white, were the words:

*Only one life,
'Twill soon be past;*

*Only what's done
for Christ will last.*

To the left, beside these words, was a painted green hill with two trees and a brown path that disappeared over the hill. How many times, as a little boy, and then as a teenager with pimples and longings and anxieties, I looked at that brown path (my life) and wondered what would be over that hill. The message was clear. You get one pass at life. That's all. Only one. And the lasting measure of that life is Jesus Christ. I am fifty-seven as I write, and that very plaque hangs today on the wall by our front door. I see it every time I leave home.

What would it mean to waste my life? That was a burning question. Or, more positively, what would it mean to live well—not to waste life, but to . . . ? How to finish that sentence was *the* question. I was not even sure how to put the question into words, let alone what the answer might be. What was the opposite of not wasting my life? “To be successful in a career”? Or “to be maximally happy”? Or “to accomplish something great”? Or “to find the deepest meaning and significance”? Or “to help as many people as possible”? Or “to serve Christ to the full”? Or “to glorify God in all I do”? Or was there a point, a purpose, a focus, an essence to life that would fulfill every one of those dreams?

“The Lost Years”

I had forgotten how weighty this question was for me until I looked through my files from those early years. Just when I was about to leave my South Carolina home in 1964, never to return as a resident, Wade Hampton High School published a simple literary magazine of poems and stories. Near the back, with the byline Johnny Piper, was a poem. I will spare you. It was not a good poem. Jane, the editor, was merciful. What matters to me now was the title and first four lines. It was called “The Lost

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Years.” Beside it was a sketch of an old man in a rocking chair. The poem began:

*Long I sought for the earth's hidden meaning;
Long as a youth was my search in vain.
Now as I approach my last years waning,
My search I must begin again.*

Across the forty years that separate me from that poem I can hear the fearful refrain, “I’ve wasted it! I’ve wasted it!” Somehow there had been awakened in me a passion for the essence and the main point of life. The ethical question “whether something is permissible” faded in relation to the question, “what is the main thing, the essential thing?” The thought of building a life around minimal morality or minimal significance—a life defined by the question, “What is permissible?”—felt almost disgusting to me. I didn’t want a minimal life. I didn’t want to live on the outskirts of reality. I wanted to understand the main thing about life and pursue it.

Existentialism Was the Air We Breathed

The passion not to miss the *essence* of life, not to waste it, intensified in college—the tumultuous late sixties. There were strong reasons for this, reasons that go well beyond the inner turmoil of one boy coming of age. “Essence” was under assault almost everywhere. Existentialism was the air we breathed. And the meaning of existentialism was that “existence precedes essence.” That is, first you exist and then, by existing, you create your essence. You make your essence by freely choosing to be what you will be. There is no essence outside you to pursue or conform to. Call it “God” or “Meaning” or “Purpose”—it is not there until you create it by your own courageous existence. (If you furrow your brow and think, “This sounds strangely like our own day

and what we call postmodernism,” don’t be surprised. There is nothing new under the sun. There are only endless repackagings.)

I recall sitting in a darkened theater watching the theatrical offspring of existentialism, the “theater of the absurd.” The play was Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir and Estragon meet under a tree and converse as they wait for Godot. He never comes. Near the end of the play a boy tells them Godot will not be coming. They decide to leave but never move. They go nowhere. The curtain falls, and God[ot] never comes.

That was Beckett’s view of people like me—waiting, seeking, hoping to find the *Essence* of things, instead of creating my own essence with my free and unbridled existence. Nowhere—that’s where you’re going, he implied, if you pursue some transcendent Point or Purpose or Focus or Essence.

“The Nowhere Man”

The Beatles released their album *Rubber Soul* in December 1965 and sang out their existentialism with compelling power for my generation. Perhaps it was clearest in John Lennon’s “Nowhere Man.”

*He’s a real nowhere man
Sitting in his nowhere land
Making all his nowhere plans
For nobody
Doesn’t have a point of view
Knows not where he’s going to
Isn’t he a bit like you and me?*

These were heady days, especially for college students. And, thankfully, God was not silent. Not everybody gave way to the lure of the absurd and the enticement of heroic emptiness. Not everyone caved in to the summons of Albert Camus and Jean-

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Paul Sartre. Even voices without root in the Truth knew that there must be something more—something outside ourselves, something bigger and greater and more worth living for than what we saw in the mirror.

The Answer, the Answer Was Blowin' in the Wind

Bob Dylan was scratching out songs with oblique messages of hope that exploded on the scene precisely because they hinted at a Reality that would not keep us waiting forever. Things would change. Sooner or later the slow would be fast and the first would be last. And it would not be because we were existential masters of our absurd fate. It would come to us. That is what we all felt in the song, “The Times They Are A-Changin’.”

*The line it is drawn,
The curse it is cast,
The slow one now
Will later be fast.
As the present now
Will later be past,
The order is
Rapidly fadin’.
And the first one now
Will later be last,
For the times they are a-changin’.*

It must have riled the existentialists to hear Dylan, perhaps without even knowing it, sweep away their everything-goes relativism with the audacious double “*The answer . . . The answer*” in the smash hit, “Blowin’ in the Wind.”

*How many times must a man look up
Before he can see the sky?*

My Search for a Single Passion to Live By

*Yes, 'n' how many ears must
one man have
Before he can hear people cry?
Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take
till he knows
That too many people have died?
The answer, my friend,
is blowin' in the wind,
The answer is blowin' in the wind.*

How many times can a man look up and not see the sky? There is a sky up there to be seen. You may look up ten thousand times and say you don't see it. But that has absolutely no effect on its objective existence. It is there. And one day you will see it. How many times must you look up before you see it? There is an answer. *The answer, The answer, my friend*, is not yours to invent or create. It will be decided for you. It is outside you. It is real and objective and firm. One day you will hear it. You don't create it. You don't define it. It comes to you, and sooner or later you conform to it—or bow to it.

That is what I heard in Dylan's song, and everything in me said, Yes! There is an Answer with a capital A. To miss it would mean a wasted life. To find it would mean having a unifying Answer to all my questions.

The little brown path over the green hill on our kitchen plaque was winding its way—all through the sixties—among the sweet snares of intellectual folly. Oh, how courageous my generation seemed when they stepped off the path and put their foot in the trap! Some could even muster the moxie to boast, "I have chosen the way of freedom. I have created my own existence. I have shaken loose the old laws. Look how my leg is severed!"

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The Man with Long Hair and Knickers

But God was graciously posting compelling warnings along the way. In the fall of 1965 Francis Schaeffer delivered a week of lectures at Wheaton College that in 1968 became the book, *The God Who Is There*.¹ The title shows the stunning simplicity of the thesis. God is there. Not *in here*, defined and shaped by my own desires. God is *out there*. Objective. Absolute Reality (which Schaeffer pronounced something like “Reawity”). All that looks like reality to us is dependent on God. There is creation and Creator, nothing more. And creation gets all its meaning and purpose from God.

Here was an absolutely compelling road sign. Stay on the road of objective truth. This will be the way to avoid wasting your life. Stay on the road that your fiery evangelist father was on. Don't forsake the plaque on your kitchen wall. Here was weighty intellectual confirmation that life would be wasted in the grasslands of existentialism. Stay on the road. There is Truth. There is a Point and Purpose and Essence to it all. Keep searching. You will find it.

I suppose there is no point lamenting that one must spend his college years learning the obvious—that there is Truth, that there is objective being and objective value. Like a fish going to school to learn that there is water, or a bird that there is air, or a worm that there is dirt. But it seems that, for the last two hundred years or so, this has been the main point of good education. And its opposite is the essence of bad education. So I don't lament the years I spent learning the obvious.

The Man Who Taught Me to See

Indeed, I thank God for professors and writers who devoted tremendous creative energies to render credible the existence of trees and water and souls and love and God. C. S. Lewis, who

died the same day as John F. Kennedy in 1963 and who taught English at Oxford, walked up over the horizon of my little brown path in 1964 with such blazing brightness that it is hard to overstate the impact he had on my life.

Someone introduced me to Lewis my freshman year with the book, *Mere Christianity*.² For the next five or six years I was almost never without a Lewis book near at hand. I think that without his influence I would not have lived my life with as much joy or usefulness as I have. There are reasons for this.

He has made me wary of chronological snobbery. That is, he showed me that newness is no virtue and oldness is no vice. Truth and beauty and goodness are not determined by when they exist. Nothing is inferior for being old, and nothing is valuable for being modern. This has freed me from the tyranny of novelty and opened for me the wisdom of the ages. To this day I get most of my soul-food from centuries ago. I thank God for Lewis's compelling demonstration of the obvious.

He demonstrated for me and convinced me that rigorous, precise, penetrating logic is not opposed to deep, soul-stirring feeling and vivid, lively—even playful—imagination. He was a “romantic rationalist.” He combined things that almost everybody today assumes are mutually exclusive: rationalism and poetry, cool logic and warm feeling, disciplined prose and free imagination. In shattering these old stereotypes, he freed me to think hard and to write poetry, to argue for the resurrection and compose hymns to Christ, to smash an argument and hug a friend, to demand a definition and use a metaphor.

Lewis gave me an intense sense of the “realness” of things. The preciousness of this is hard to communicate. To wake up in the morning and be aware of the firmness of the mattress, the warmth of the sun's rays, the sound of the clock ticking, the sheer being of things (“quiddity” as he calls it³). He helped me become alive to life. He helped me see what is there in the world—things

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that, if we didn't have, we would pay a million dollars to have, but having them, ignore. He made me more alive to beauty. He put my soul on notice that there are daily wonders that will waken worship if I open my eyes. He shook my dozing soul and threw the cold water of reality in my face, so that life and God and heaven and hell broke into my world with glory and horror.

He exposed the sophisticated intellectual opposition to objective being and objective value for the naked folly that it was. The philosophical king of my generation had no clothes on, and the writer of children's books from Oxford had the courage to say so.

You can't go on "seeing through" things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to "see through" first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To "see through" all things is the same as not to see.⁴

Oh, how much more could be said about the world as C. S. Lewis saw it and the way he spoke. He has his flaws, some of them serious. But I will never cease to thank God for this remarkable man who came onto my path at the perfect moment.

A Fiancée Is a Stubbornly Objective Fact

There was another force that solidified my unwavering belief in the unbending existence of objective reality. Her name was Noël Henry. I fell in love with her in the summer of 1966. Way too soon probably. But it has turned out okay; I still love her. Nothing sobers a wandering philosophical imagination like the thought of having a wife and children to support.

We were married in December 1968. It is a good thing to do one's thinking in relation to real people. From that moment on, every thought has been a thought in relationship. Nothing is merely an idea, but an idea that bears on my wife, then later, on my five children. I thank God for the parable of Christ and the church that I have been obliged to live these thirty-five years. There are lessons in life—the unwasted life—that I would probably never have learned without this relationship (just as there are lessons in lifelong singleness that will probably be learned no other way).

I Bless You, Mono, for My Life

In the fall of 1966 God was closing in with an ever narrowing path for my life. When he made his next decisive move, Noël wondered where I had gone. The fall semester had started, and I did not show up in classes or in chapel. Finally she found me, flat on my back with mononucleosis in the health center, where I lay for three weeks. The life plan that I was so sure of four months earlier unraveled in my fevered hands.

In May I had felt a joyful confidence that my life would be most useful as a medical doctor. I loved biology; I loved the idea of healing people. I loved knowing, at last, what I was doing in college. So I quickly took general chemistry in summer school so I could catch up and take organic chemistry that fall.

Now with mono, I had missed three weeks of organic chemistry. There was no catching up. But even more important, Harold John Ockenga, then pastor of Park Street Church in Boston, was preaching in chapel each morning during the spiritual emphasis week. I was listening on WETN, the college radio station. Never had I heard exposition of the Scriptures like this. Suddenly all the glorious objectivity of Reality centered for me on the Word of God. I lay there feeling as if I had awakened from a dream, and knew, now that I was awake, what I was to do.

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Noël came to visit, and I said, “What would you think if I didn’t pursue a medical career but instead went to seminary?” As with every other time I’ve asked that kind of question through the years, the answer was, “If that’s where God leads you, that’s where I’ll go.” From that moment on I have never doubted that my calling in life is to be a minister of the Word of God.

Notes

- 1 Schaeffer’s prophetic work remains incredibly relevant to our age. I’d encourage every one of my readers to read at least one work by Schaeffer. A good place to begin with the “best of the best” is *The Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: The God Who Is There, Escape from Reason, and He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990).
- 2 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952).
- 3 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), 199.
- 4 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 91.