

Children Will Die

Luke 9:23-25

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“What good is this year’s schooling going to be for my children when they die?” That is the question we should be asking at the start of a new school year. How well is their learning, the goals we set, and the achievements we applaud fitting them for eternity? Jesus said that gaining the world but losing the soul is foolishness. Will we, will our children, rejoice or regret when this year’s schooling is recalled in eternity?

Your children are going to die.

We hope and pray that our children will die in old age. But unless Jesus returns first, it is certain they will die. “What a morbid way to start an exciting new school year!” you may protest.

Yet if we take Jesus at his word, that is exactly how we should start a new school year. “What good is it,” he asked, “for a man [or a child] to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?” (Luke 9:25) The most important goal for your child this year is not gaining but keeping: not gaining the world, but keeping the soul.

Eternity is the great hope of Christians. The other side of death for all who trust in Christ is eternal life. No more suffering. Joy in the presence of God forever. Perfect life, perfect environment, perfect work, perfect everything!

We live every day in the light of this wonderful hope. We never get lost in the world’s ambitions, values and transience. Or do we? We live today in such awareness of eternity if, and only if, we see things as they truly are.

So how does school fit in eternity?

Or in other words, what good will this year’s schooling be when your child dies?

Success used to be the aim of most schooling, but now happiness is more common. Children need to be happy. Why? Not that I think they should be unhappy, or that we should make their lives a misery. Not at all! But why should self-centred happiness be the standard by which school is measured?

How does present pleasure fit with the certainty of future death? It doesn’t. Present pleasure is its own reward: there is nothing left for the future. (Matthew 6:2,5,16)

Thankfully there are still many parents and children who will sacrifice present pleasure for the future. Yet if the future is linked with the common goal of “success” are they any better off?

Aiming for success can be self-centredness in a different shape. Present happiness is deferred for greater happiness later in life, but such a reward is still terminated with death. Eternal life does not consist of success or the abundance of possessions. (Luke 12:15)

In the early school years success is usually measured by doing school work well. Why? What reason do we give children for working hard and succeeding?

As children get older, success means getting good qualifications. Why? So they can succeed at university. Why? So they can succeed in a good career. Why? So they can succeed in the world before they die. To such a person God himself says, “You fool!” (Luke 12:20)

“The end of learning,” said the great Christian writer and poet John Milton, “is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, imitate him, to be like him.”¹

¹ John Milton (1608–1674). *Tractate on Education*

What good is maths in teaching children about God? How does English or Social Studies or History or Art teach children about God, let alone helping them be like him? We can see how family Bible reading, church, and Sunday School help children learn about God and how to love him. But school?

Here is another certainty: if that is our response we have not learnt one of the most fundamental truths found in the Bible. For everything that can be learnt at school is about God. Everything that can be done at school is meant to be done for God's glory. Every moment at school has to pass the death test.

The Psalmist declares that "the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge." (Psalm 19:1) That means that mathematics shows the glory of a God who holds the universe together with order and patterns and predictability. It means that History tells the story of God's work in the affairs of men, even when they don't see it. (Daniel 4:34-37) It means that Science is the study of God remembering his promises to sustain creation in its magnificent spectacle despite the erosion of sin. (Genesis 8:22) It means every part of the curriculum is created by him and for him and in him is held together. (Colossians 1:16,17)

Whatever posturing or sincerity is seen in school, whatever affirmation or denial takes place in the classroom, whatever faith or faithlessness is expressed in the curriculum, the reality is that everything children study is about God, is for God, and is in God's eternity.

When we speak of eternity as only future, we miss the point and mislead our children. The hope of a redeemed future sustains our present struggles: but that future has begun. Death does not start the future. Death changes our bodies and our location, but not who we are. Death confirms unchangeably the eternal relationship we presently have with God. Eternity has begun.

So while children need an eternal perspective in the classroom, that perspective includes serving God right now. Right now everything needs to be done for God's glory. Schooling is not only about training and preparation for the future. God wants faith right now. He wants worship right now. He wants to be honoured in everything being done right now. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

That is what should motivate excellence in children's school work. It is what should motivate excellence in all of us. To see everything as revealing God's glory makes learning a delight: "Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them." (Psalm 111:2) To be students with minds transformed by an eternal perspective is to be different, to be "unconformed". (Romans 12:2) Being students in eternity now means sacrificial study now as an act of worship now (Romans 12:1) even while preparing for service and sacrifice later.

What is the death test? It has two parts. Firstly, will what your children do and learn and achieve at school this year still be good for them when they die? (1 Corinthians 3:12-15) Secondly, will they study as those who, denying themselves, taking up Christ's cross of death daily, follow him? (Luke 9:23-25)

Will it be true of your children at school this year, "To live is Christ, to die is gain"? (Philippians 1:21)