Well, good morning. It’s good to be with all you guys. Did you guys have a good summer? It’s always great to come back off of the time that you allow my family and me to take away to spend with my kids and to really invest into them and my wife and to be able to study, and pray, and plan. It’s very productive. So I really appreciate that time away.

And I just want to take a quick minute to express my appreciation and gratitude for Jake, and Matt, and Derrick. Didn’t those guys just do an awesome job this last month? I love all three of those guys like I would my own brother. Love talking shop with them. Love talking preaching. And it’s so cool that I get their sermon emailed to me in the week, and read through it, and then get the app and listen to them just going, “Aw man those guys are killing it.”

You ever gone to the gym and worked out with somebody and they push you? That’s how I feel with those guys. I would watch and think, “Oh, man that’s awesome. They did 10 reps, I’m going to come back and do 15!” Just this whole kind of excitement and enthusiasm – I want you to know that around here we’re just going to develop preachers and teachers of God’s word. And regardless of the personality in the pulpit, God’s word will be lifted up and Jesus is the Hero. And so, just appreciate those guys teaching.

Let me tell you, first of all, if you are new here I want to welcome you. I know that every summer can be a time of transition for a lot of people. And so, it seems like during the summer I always get an average of one email a week from somebody in our church saying, “Hey, we’ve got to move to another state. The job is relocating us. Can you recommend a church in California, in North Dakota, in Florida, in Kansas?” That’s tough. But I always try to give those recommendations. Love getting those emails, actually, because I know that moving is a fact of life. But the fact that it’s on our people’s minds that they’ve got to find a good church is always encouraging to me. So, I’m always happy to do that.

But, I also know that people relocate here and maybe that’s you. Maybe you’re new here and you loved your old home, and you loved your old church, and you loved your old pastor, but you’re in Indiana here. So, here you are and maybe you’re struggling right now. So, I just want to welcome you. Glad you’re here. Come introduce yourself to me sometime. Love to get a chance to meet you. Consider signing up for First Step or the Discovery class – would love to get to know you there.

Let me give you a little bit of an overview of where we’re headed as a church this fall. Beginning September the 9th, we’re going to start a 16 part series of messages through the Book of Revelation, even the scary parts. Even the parts where you feel maybe John, who God used to record the Revelation, maybe stumbled onto some psychedelic mushrooms on the Isle of Pathos. We’re going to go their together. It’s been interesting to share that information with many of you. I’ll bump into you at the store somewhere, in the hallway, and you ask, “Hey, what are we studying next?” And I tell you and I always get the eyebrow raise, “Really? When’s that start again? I want to come watch that train wreck.” And, maybe you’ve never really sat through some teaching through Revelation – it’s often avoided, unfortunately.
Did you know that the Book of Revelation is the only book in the Bible that offers its readers and its hearers a blessing just for reading it and hearing it? Chapter 1, verse 3 states that clearly. I know that the Book of Revelation has a lot of mystery around it. It’s been badly interpreted at times. People go to great liberties and make it very, very confusing. It is very complex, but it has a simple message. The message is to the church that exists in a culture that either threatens to seduce the church or to persecute it. And it greatly applies to us. I really do believe – I’ve been praying about this one for about a year – it’s taken me about two years to muster up the courage. So, you can be lifting me up in prayer. It’s taken about three months just to gather resources that are reputable and I’ll try to be posting those online so that way if you’re interested in picking up two or three of those you can. I’d encourage you to invite friends and family. Some of you have said, “Well, isn’t this going to scare people away – especially if they are not believers?” And, I will tell you I think this could be a really powerful series in the life of our church. It’s so far above my head – God’s going to have to show up, the Spirit’s going to have to speak, and I’m just anticipating God to do great things.

But today, we’re beginning a five-part series of messages called AFTERLIFE. And this is not Revelation, although it certainly ties into it and is a precursor to it. If you would – would you please meet me in your Bible in Hebrews chapter 9 verses 27 to 28. Hebrews chapter 9 verses 27 and 28. Today’s message is only based upon two verses of Scripture but that, by no means, means that this is going to be a short sermon. I have not preached in five weeks, people. I ready to blow. So, before we go there let me just invite us to the throne of God in prayer.

Father, we come to You right now and it’s really an honor to be here where we hope to seek Your presence and to experience it. God, I know that there is somebody here who walked in today hurting and confused, maybe feeling indifferent. God, I pray that You would open up eyes that are closed, ears that are closed off to hear you, hearts that can’t feel you and God, I pray that in these next few moments You would help me to preach with the urgency that this content demands, but the grace that it requires. And we ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Now the subject of the afterlife is a pretty hot topic in our culture today. I think it always has been. People really seem to gravitate to it. Our culture in movies, in books, on television is always talking about the afterlife in some form. I think that’s because, as the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us, God has planted eternity into the heart of men. So, whether we want to acknowledge that that’s from the Spirit of God or not, we just gravitate toward that subject.

But the problem, if we’re not careful, even in the church, what we think we know about life after death can be more heavily influenced by pop-culture than what the Bible explicitly teaches. And so we owe it to ourselves to work through this and say, “Okay, what does the Bible say and what does the Bible not say? What is a myth and what can we know for sure?” So you might write this down. What you believe about death and the afterlife, death and eternity, will determine how you currently live. What you believe, what you think about that impacts the decisions you make, the way you spend money, the way you spend your time and energy maybe more than you even think.

For example, if you’re an atheist you just believe that nothing happens. That there is no God, there is no heaven or hell, there is no existence after this physical body goes away. You had your time in the sun, you had your moment, and now you’re just pushing up daisies. If you believe that, then it definitely impacts the decisions that you make today.
There are some who believe in something called purgatory – maybe you’ve heard that term before. It’s this idea that once we die, we go to this place of temporary punishment. And so, it’s like a boot camp of sorts. We go there and we work hard, and we’re punished, and we pay off our sins – all the bad that we’ve done in this life so that we get to pass into heaven or some sort of eternal bliss. Believing that will definitely impact the way you live this life. For starters, if you believe that there’s really no urgency to do anything with Jesus. There’s no need to respond to God in any way because you can just deal with it later. It’s kind of like racking up a high credit card bill – you just pay it off later.

Every major world religion teaches that there is some sort of higher power, some sort of god – whoever or wherever that god might be. And he’s kind of keeping track of your actions. And so, if you’ve done good things in this life then you’ll get heaven, if you’ve done bad things then you get hell.

Some people believe in something called reincarnation, this idea that if you do enough good things in the life then you’ll come back in the next life as a higher life form. If you do too many bad things you’ll come back in the next life as a cockroach or a mosquito.

There are many that believe that when we die we just all become angels. Ever heard that? Believe that? It’s this idea that we die and we get our wings, or we get a halo, we bounce around from cloud to cloud playing a harp. I certainly hope that’s not the case. I don’t even like the harp. I apologize to all the harpists in our church. Do we all become angels when we die? Do my loved ones, when they die, come back in this life and I just can’t see them but they are serving as my guardian angel? That’s certainly a nice thought but it’s really not supported in Scripture.

Some people believe in something called humanism. It’s this idea that you do whatever makes you happy, just don’t hurt anybody and then it will all work itself out in the end.

I want you to listen though, the Bible is not fuzzy on the afterlife and more importantly, what our response should be in this life. The Bible speaks to the subject of the afterlife frequently, but the terminology that it uses for it is the word eternal. So if you’re reading through the Bible and you read a passage that mentions eternal life, that’s what the Bible is talking about. It’s talking about the afterlife – what happens to our existence after this physical body gives out, goes away, goes into the ground.

So, here’s just a sampling in John 3:36. It says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.”

Romans 21 says, “As sin reigned in death …” in other words, sin brought about death, “… grace might also reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

II Corinthians 4:16-18 says, “So we do not lose heart …” any of you losing heart today, any of you on your last spiritual leg – somewhat disappointed in what’s happening in your life? God understands that. He says don’t lose heart, “… though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us …” in other words there’s a reason for some of the affliction some of the difficulties you’re facing. It’s preparing us for “… an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison …” you can’t even begin to compare it, “… as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

I John 2:25 says, “And this is the promise that He made to us …” it’s a promise, “… eternal life.”
So the Bible is very clear here that you, and I, along with everyone else who has ever existed across time and history, we will continue to exist once this physical body gives out. And there’s a lot of mystery shrouded around this. The pitfall we have to avoid is pretending like we know more than what we really do. That can happen. We don’t want superimpose some things; we don’t want to try to describe heaven with such vivid detail as if we’ve been there because we haven’t. And yet, with that said, there are some things – the most important things that we can know. Scripture gives us what God wants us to know about the subject and, if we’re not careful, we will allow what we hear in pop-culture to influence what we believe about this rather than some of these very specific things that Scripture teaches.

So, if you’re taking notes here are some handles, some things you can grab a hold of as we work our way through this. They will start general and then they will get more specific. Here’s the first one. Physical life is moving past us quickly. This year, approximately 2.2 million people are going to die, 6,263 every day, 261 every hour, 4.35 people every minute, roughly about 30 – 40 since I started this message have stepped into eternity. Some of the people in this room, just like last year, and the year before; some expected due to old age, some unexpected due to a disease or an accident, are going into eternity. It’s approaching and life is moving past us faster than we think it is.

James brings out this point in his book, chapter 4 verse 14 of James. We’ve looked at this verse before. He says to us, “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.” So, apparently James first career as a motivational speaker just didn’t pan out for him, “Thanks, James, for the pick-me-up.” It’s sobering. I realize that. But it is true. Life’s moving pretty quickly and I know as a younger person that’s somewhat difficult for us to fully appreciate. I think, though, somewhere around 25, 30, 35 years old this begins to dawn on us. We begin to get some time under our belts and we realize how quickly time is moving.

Did you know that the average life expectancy today for men is 75, for ladies it’s 80? And, the oldest person in recorded history made it to 122 years – this lady right here. Her name’s Jeanne Calment. She spent her entire life in France. She outlived her daughter and her grandson – can you imagine that? Going and visiting your grandchildren when they are in the nursing home. She lived a long time – 122 years. She passed away, though, on August the 4th, 1997. She moved the chains on what has become known as the maximum life expectancy. What that means, is how long can we possibly live? Well, the furthest person in recent recorded history – 122 years. I don’t know about you, I don’t know if I want to live that long. That’s about as far as we can expect to make it. The point, though, is that whether you make it to 122 or you make it to 22, it’s still going to move pretty quickly. Life moves past us pretty quickly. Death is not picky – and some of you know this, don’t you? Death comes for the old and the young. It comes for the sick and the healthy.

Just this summer, I heard about somebody that I know who is a worship pastor down at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky – one of our sister churches – maybe some of you heard this news. Young guy, my age – 36 years old, small kids at home – just passed away suddenly. I remember getting that email that day – it was just a bit of a shock. You just expect to have all this time to deal with stuff – and life moves quickly. Which leads us to the next truth.

Physical death is certain. So, scientific studies are conclusive here. One out of one people die. The mortality rate is at 100%. I don’t think that’s going to drop anytime soon. Nobody escapes it. We come to our passage today, Hebrews 9 verse 27 says, “And just as it is appointed for man to die once ...” So we may try to ignore it, postpone it, minimize it but it’s coming quickly and it is certain.
Now some of you may be saying, “Alright, Aaron. Do we really need the Bible to know those two things? I think I could surmise that from just life experience. I don’t need the Bible to tell me that truth.” Do you realize the reason why the Bible tells us that? I think really two reasons – first, it’s something we can all be guilty of. I know I’ve been guilty of it – we can spend more time and energy planning and preparing to go on vacation than we do planning and preparing for eternity. We’ll spend all kinds of time researching – I don’t know how many of you are, when you go on vacation, a detailed planner – the whole day – 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 at night everything is planned out. You’re usually married to somebody who is not. So you conflict on vacation – all this planning. Scripture points this out to say, “Hey. You do all this planning for something that is so temporary – it’s just a mist – but very little planning for that which is eternal.” I think that’s the reason why the Bible hits on this sobering truth.

The other reason is the reality of sin. We need to understand that death is not just the result of natural processes. It’s not just the circle of life. The Bible is clear that the reason why we even have a timeline – a life expectancy – the reason why our outer selves are wasting away is because of the curse of sin. Romans chapter 6 verse 23 says, “For the wages of sin ...” in other words the payment of sin, “... is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So, we’ve all been born into and with a sin nature that separates us from a holy God.

So, death is certain and it’s coming quickly. It doesn’t matter how much sun screen you put on, how many veggies you eat, how many miles you run every day. You guys feeling pretty good about yourselves? That’s why I’m here. I had to come off of break to prop you up. I promise it will get more cheery.

Here’s the next one. Physical death is final. It will get cheery – not yet. Physical death is final. And I want you to know that when my life and your life come to a conclusion, whenever and however that might occur – it’s final. There are no do overs, encores, or come backs. And I think this hits you whenever you lose somebody really close to you for the first time.

Many of you who have been around here for a while know that this last spring my grandfather, who I was pretty close with, passed away suddenly from Pancreatic Cancer. He was diagnosed with it and within about two months he was gone. And, this last week, back in Joplin, I went over to my grandmother’s house for the first time since the day of his funeral. They built that house in the ‘60s, I grew up going over there all of the time, and I don’t think I’ve ever been over there without him there. So it was very odd, to say the least, to go over for dinner and not see him there.

I went out to the garage and it was dirty. That’s the first time I’ve ever seen my grandfather’s truck dirty because it’s just been sitting there. And he would wash it every couple of days, he would spit clean it, the thing just always looked immaculate.

I go out to the garage and it was dirty. That’s the first time I’ve ever seen my grandfather’s truck dirty because it’s just been sitting there. And so, I went inside and asked my grandmother if I could go start it up, make sure the battery is okay, and take it for a wash. So, I go out started it up and took it out. I’ve just got to tell you – that was a more emotional experience for than what I was anticipating. I’m driving down the road in his truck, I’ve gone on road trips with him in that truck, we’ve had conversations in
that truck, I looked down on the console – there were things that he had put in there just before his death that nobody had touched. Every now and then, I’d catch his scent. And the whole time I’m going through the wash, I just kept expecting to hear his voice. I just kept expecting to feel his hand on my shoulder and it never happened. And for many of us, that finality threatens to crush us. Doesn’t it? That grief, that reality of whether we are ever going to see them again?

You might write this down. Brevity and finality leave no room for complacency. Brevity and finality leave no room for complacency. Don’t put this off. Don’t say, “Well it’s coming one day, I’ll deal with it later. It will come a lot faster than we think.” For many of us, that finality threatens to crush us. Doesn’t it? That grief, that reality of whether we are ever going to see them again?

You might write this down. Brevity and finality leave no room for complacency. Brevity and finality leave no room for complacency. Don’t put this off. Don’t say, “Well it’s coming one day, I’ll deal with it later. It will come a lot faster than we think. And yet, I want you to know this – that even though the end of my grandfather’s physical body as I knew it is in the ground – it is not the end of his existence. Scripture is very clear that death will not have the final word. In Isaiah chapter 25 verse 8 it says, “He will swallow up death forever ...” just love that image – it’s not defeat death, it’s swallow it – absorb it, “… and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces ...” Any of you shed a few tears lately? Any of you shed a few tears in this life? Scripture promises that there will be a day when your Heavenly Father will wipe those tears off your face. Do you know where else that is stated in Scripture? The Book of Revelation which we will get to this year.

I love when Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians in chapter 15 verse 54. I Corinthians he says this, “When the perishable ...” that’s us now, “… puts on the imperishable ...” that us as we will be, “… and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’” I just love that. He’s talking trash to death, “Come on death. Hit me with your best shot.” He’s taunting death so to speak. So death may be the end of this physical body, death may be the end of your loved one as you knew them, but I want you to be reassured – it is not the end of them. Which leads to the next truth.

Upon death, the soul and the body separate. Now Jesus makes reference to this in His teaching in Matthew chapter 10. So, you might write that passage down and look it up later. James talks about this in Chapter 2 verse 26. But the passage I want to throw up on the screen is what Paul says in II Corinthians 5 verses 1 through 2. Listen to his words. He says, “For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God ...” so pop quiz here, what’s more stable a tent or a building? Yeah, the building. Some of you said tent so praying for you. “… a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.”

So the analogy that he is using here to help us understand this is that he says, “Your physical body is like a tent.” Now, how many of you are campers? How many of you enjoy camping. A number of you – very sick individuals. We’ll pray for you. Now, we like to pick fun at people that like to camp. I get it. I understand you make a lot of good memories that way that I make with my kids in a hotel. So – love to camp. Now, what’s the very nature of a tent? You go away to camp – it’s always temporary. Right? You go, you set up camp knowing that in not too long you’re going tear camp down and go home. You set up the tent knowing that it’s going to be a temporary residency for a few nights. How crazy would it be if we tried to put indoor plumping in our tent? How crazy would it be if the guys tried to carry along the 60 inch LCD to put in the tent – might try it. You don’t do that because the very nature of a tent is that it’s temporary. Now we get that. It’s common sense.

And yet, so many of us don’t apply that to our lives now. We treat this tent as if it’s an eternal thing. This life and our joy here is all there ever is. And Paul says no. This is a tent. We know that it is passing away. We know that there will be a building, there will be a house. So this is teaching us something that we all
intrinsically know. We just often forget that this body is not the real you. And some of us should be so grateful for that. I know I am. I look in the mirror — that’s not the real me. I’m a Brad Pitt on the inside. This is a shell, this is an outer covering, it’s imperfect, it’s temporary, it’s broken. It is not the real you. So the body may die, but the soul lives on. And Scripture teaches that if you’ve responded to Jesus in this life, then when the physical body passes away the real you is present with the Lord.

Now that doesn’t necessarily mean that we all just become a bunch of ethereal spirits bouncing around from cloud to cloud, but Scripture teaches that there will be a bodily resurrection one day. There will be a new body; there will be a new heaven, a new earth which I take to be very physical places. We’ll get into that in the coming weeks. So one day, when your physical body dies, you will be as alive as you ever have been. In fact, you’ll even be more alive, because the curse of sin no longer has an effect.

One time Jesus said to a hurt woman in John chapter 11 verse 25. He said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die …” I love this. This happens all the time in Scripture. Jesus says something – he’s letting us overhear it and then it’s almost as if He turns and then He says, “Do you believe this?” That’s the point in the text where the reader is then challenged. The reader is then convicted. Jesus says, “What will you do with this? Do you believe this?”

The next thing we need to know is that upon death our soul, once it separates from the body, goes to a specific, conscious existence. And this is where a lot of people have many questions and this is where pop-culture can muddy the waters a little bit. I have done a lot of funerals over the years and hands down the number one question I get from friends and family on the day of the funeral is, “Where are they now? What are they doing? Can they see me? Are they happy?” I get those questions all the time. The most gut-wrenching funeral I ever did was for a two month old baby and her mother came up to me and she asked, “Will she grow up in heaven?” What do you say about that? We’re all grasping for answers, we’re searching – and this is where we have to be very careful about being influenced by pop-culture in ways that may not be consistent with Scripture.

Paul addresses this in I Thessalonians 4. He says, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” So, Paul says he wants us to have some information that we can trust so that way we can have hope. We’ll grieve. There’s a difference between grief and hopelessness. I want you to understand the two. Certainly on the day of the funeral of your loved ones you should grieve, but don’t be hopeless. It’s different. Paul says, “I don’t want you to be hopeless, I want you to be informed.”

Now Paul is using the euphuism here – fallen asleep to describe death. The Bible uses fallen asleep to describe death maybe a half-a-dozen to a dozen times or so and people will hear that and read that literally and so that’s what’s come to be known as soul sleep. This idea that when we die our body goes into the ground and your soul just goes to sleep and isn’t aware of anything and then one day at the end of the world or when Jesus comes back then you wake up from your soul sleep and say, “Oh, that went so fast.” You ever fallen asleep right after dinner, you’re so tired and you wake up the next morning thinking, “Where did the time go?” That’s kind of what this teaches. Jehovah’s Witnesses take it a step further and say upon death your body goes into the ground but your soul is annihilated. That you don’t exist at all, later you’ll be recreated. Neither one is taught or affirmed in Scripture. It’s important for us to understand when you see the words “fallen asleep” in Scripture it’s euphuism for death.
Have you ever taken a small child to a funeral and they see the body in the casket, what’s the usually one of the questions that that child asks? “Why are they asleep?” Isn’t that’s such a beautifully innocent question.

I remember when my step great-grandfather passed away, I was little. I don’t even know how old I was. But do have vague memories of the funeral. I remember leaning over to my mom and saying, “Why’s he sleeping?” That’s just the automatic question on their mind. Just that innocence, that’s what they see. The Bible uses that to describe death.

Not only that, but Scripture teaches that those who responded to Jesus in this life, when they die, they go to be present with the Lord. What did Jesus say to the thief on the cross when he responded to him in faith? What was the first word out of Jesus’ mouth? Today. “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus didn’t say, “You need to go take a nap first and then you can meet me in paradise.” He said today. It’s instant.

Paul goes on in the remainder of that passage to say that those who are alive when Jesus returns as well as those who have previously passed away will rise to meet with Christ and be with Him forever. So where are they? Well, if they have responded to Jesus – they’re with the Lord. And that’s better than here. That’s a pretty good place. They are joyful, they are present with the Lord, it’s paradise. And yet, we also need to make the distinction that it is heaven as it presently is. We also know that it’s not heaven as it one day will be in the sense that Scripture says that one day there will be a bodily resurrection, a new heaven, a new earth, a new Jerusalem will come down here. God wants to recreate. We get that out of Revelation 21 verse 1. John’s describing the return of Christ the coming of heaven. He says, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven had passed away ...”

In the afterlife, you and I will face judgment. Look at our passage again. Hebrews 9 verse 27 says, “And just as it appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.” So, upon the death of this physical body, everybody experiences judgment. Now, it is not a very fun thing to be judged by my other human beings. And it is sobering and horrifying to think about being judged by the Living God. But, this should not be lopped into one category. Various Bible scholars debate the order and how all of this will go down, but for the sake of all practical purposes, Scripture mentions three different types of judgment in the afterlife.

So write this down. Here’s the first one, very simply, very plainly – the judgment of faith. It’s the idea that when we die we are judged, not by our works, we’re judged by our faith. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2 is very explicit about this. It says, “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” I don’t know about you, but if that was the game, and if I could do enough things to get into heaven – it would always lead to pride for me. Would it not you? Scripture says that’s off the table so that way we can’t boast, it’s not found in us, “… For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” So we are saved by works, just not our own – Jesus’ work on a cross, for us, on our behalf. The judgment of faith. I’ve told you this before. If you get to heaven and you totally draw a blank, there’s only one thing you’ve got to know. Jesus. Jesus – just say it. You’re there. So, the judgment of faith.

But there’s another type of judgment that’s mentioned in Scripture, it’s called the great white throne judgment. This is a place where you do not want to be. This is a judgment that appears to be reserved for unbelievers. Listen as John describes this in chapter 20 verses 11 and 12 of Revelation, “Then I saw a
great white throne and Him who was seated on it. From His presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books ...” in the plural, “... were opened. Then another book ...” in the singular, “... was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.”

Now on down in verse 15 it says, “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” So you come to this judgment and apparently what happens here is these books in the plural that have recorded – which why it takes more thank – every thought, every action, every motive, every deed, while done in this body, in this world opened up before God. I don’t know about you, but I am not very thrilled about that. Because, I know every thought, every word, every action, every deed I’ve done and I’m not proud of much of it. Not only that, but there are a lot of things that I’ve done throughout my 36 years that have been displeasing to the Lord that I’ve just forgotten – just the passing of time – I just forgot about it.

The books won’t let you forget. It’s like right there. It’s all recorded. Out in front. I thought about this though in my study this last week. I thought, “Okay, well if there are books and books recorded of all my thoughts, words, deeds, and actions there have to be a few good things thrown in there, right? I rescued a puppy from the shelter, I helped the old lady across the street, I helped my friend move. That should be worth something. Hell on earth – you get heaven for that. Right? So there have to be a few good things thrown in there and there will be. I think there will be. I think there will be good things thrown in there but here’s the point of the books. The books say all your good thoughts, words, actions, and deeds are still not enough. You’re going to have an accountant go through the stuff, come back, take his glasses off and just say two words, “Inefficient funds.”

A lot of people think that it’s the books – I’ve got to keep track of the books. And I’ll be good. And the Bible says there’s only one book that matters and it’s the book of life, it’s not as complicated as you want to make it. The question is, is your name in it? And so, it’s not like what have you done that’s recorded in there – it’s just your name and Jesus is stamped over it. There’s only one way that you’re getting in there and that’s through the name of Jesus Christ.

Lastly, there’s the judgment of works. And this is sometimes referred to, oftentimes referred to the judgment seat of Christ. And, at this judgment, our works are judged – so our works will be judged, we’re not getting past that, our works will be judged not for salvation but for rewards. I want to be very clear on this. Sometimes we get this confused. Our works are going to be judged not to determine our eternal destiny but to determine if we are getting any hardware. So this is like, “What neighborhood in heaven am I going to live in? Am I going to be in the Caribbean of heaven or am I going to be in the New Jersey of heaven – that’s a bad analogy because all of heave is going to be awesome, but we’ve got to bring it down to understand what this is.

This is the judgment of reward here and Romans chapter 14 versus 10 through 12 says, “… For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God ...” there is no escaping this, “... for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.” Just an accounting. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” II Corinthians 5:10, “... so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” I want to say this again; this is not for salvation this is for reward.
Now, it’s really interesting that we are studying this during the Olympics. How many of you are watching the Olympics now – all week long? I’m an Olympics junkie. I was up last night watching them. I just always get inspired by the stories that come out, the world records that are broken. You know the Greek word for judge is the word bema – everybody say bema. It’s a great word, I like that word. You know what it means? It just means to step up. How many of you have been watching the medal ceremonies afterward? What do the athletes do to receive their medal? They step up onto the platform.

This picture here is of judgment – but not judgment for condemnation – judgment for reward. It’s this idea that all Christians – those who follow Jesus, claim Him in their life on that day they step up so to speak – I don’t know how it’s going to look – but it’s this idea that we step up before the Lord, and God – it’s not a medal the Bible says – it’s a crown that He places on our heads. We’ve talked about this before, God places this crown on your head and He looks you in the eye – and I long to hear these words from God – well done good and faithful servant.

Now, for the first time ever as I was studying this this last week, I thought to myself, “Why a crown?” I think that that’s largely lost on our culture. How many of you are saving up your money for a crown? It’s like my son, he’s all into different things every now and then, but he’s never come to me and said, “Dad, I think I’m saving up for a crown.” Not very many of us treasure a crown. I can get a crown at Burger King. How about a car? How about something that’s more infinitely of value to me. So, I think the unfortunate thing is that we hear this and it doesn’t quicken our hearts. What am I going to do with a crown? Why a crown? It’s because He’s the King and it’s His kingdom. And it’s not the crown; it’s what the crown represents. Do you know that there are five crowns of reward that are mentioned in Scripture that Christians will receive on that Day – I think there is possibly a lot more – but there are five that Scripture speaks of – I think it only mentions five so that we don’t get too infatuated with the reward. There are five that are mentioned. Let me briefly go through them with you. This is our application for today.

The first one is this, the Imperishable of the Incorruptible Crown. And that just simply means the crown for those of you who are striving to grow in Christ. A reward for you that while you were here you didn’t just receive salvation but you said, “I want to grow. I want to become more like Jesus on this earth. I want to be wedded with grace and truth.” That crown is found in I Corinthians 9:25, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things …” like I said it’s perfect that the Olympics are right now and you see this, “… They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.”

There are many of you in this church that are going to get this crown. You are just hungering for the Lord. I see it. You take passages seriously. You want to wean off the spiritual milk and you want to eat spiritual meat. And you want to grow up in your salvation. Some of you, if we were to open up your Bibles we’d see that they are littered with notes and highlights. You work your way through books like chicken wings at a Super Bowl party. You’re all about the growth, not growth to puff up – the Bible certainly warns us of that – knowledge to puff up and separate us from the world – knowledge devoid of love and grace is just a resounding gong in the ears of God. That’s not what we are talking about. We’re talking about growth – not to benefit me but growth to benefit the kingdom – to reach out in love to others. Many of you are going to get that crown. There are some of you who encourage me so much. While I was on study break, you’d email me asking what book of the Bible we are going to study next so you could start reading it now. That’s awesome.
There are a few people in our church who go to both the 9 o’clock and the 11 o’clock. I know that because I see you. And I ask myself, “Why are you in here. This is the same thing.” And I’ve asked a couple of you and you say, “Well, I just get so much more the second time around.” I love you man – give me a hug! It’s the idea, that hungering for growth. And the question for all of us is, “Are you growing?” Not asking how much knowledge you have in your head. I’m just asking, “Are you taking steps of growth?” Some of you say, “Well, Aaron. I’m not a reader.” Not asking you to be a reader, I’m asking you to be a grower. There’s a difference.

Here’s the second crown that Scripture mentions, the Crown of Righteousness. It’s this idea that this world is not my home. This crown is reserved for those who just long for heaven and long to be in the presence of the Lord. This crown is mentioned in II Timothy 4 verse 8, “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that Day ...” notice that day is capitalized, “… and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.” I really think my wife’s going to get this crown. Earthly treasures are not that important to her, I think she has a spiritual gift of faith. There are things at times that get me all bent out of shape and she says, “Why are you so bent out of shape? Buck up.” I just love that and she longs to be in the presence of the Lord.

Some of you are there. Some of you are widows; you are widowers who miss your spouse. You long to be reunited with them, but here’s the beautiful thing about it. As much as you long to be with them again – you long for Jesus more. And the question for all of us is, “Where do your thoughts gravitate, what’s the most important thing to you?” Are you distracted with temporary things that take your sights off of the eternal?

Number three is the Crown of Rejoicing. And this is just those of you who very naturally lead others to Jesus. I’m not talking about making people religious. I’m talking about just inviting them to church. I’m talking about genuinely showing them and teaching about the love, and grace, and truth of Jesus Christ. I Thessalonians 2 verse 19 says, “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.” And some of you are so gifted at this. I’m just envious. You’re constantly developing relationships with un-churched neighbors, and friends, and coworkers. And you do it not in a way that’s obnoxious or beating them over the head, you do it very naturally.

I’ve got some friends in the church; they’ve scheduled it out months in advance. On this Sunday we’re inviting this neighbor to church and afterwards we’re going to have lunch with them. They book it out – they’ve got a system. Booking it out. Man – these guys are a machine, because this is serious and they have a love for people, and they want to lift up the name of Jesus. The question for all of us, regardless of our gifting in this, is this, “Is our compassion for lost, hurting, broken people growing or is it decreasing? And are we doing everything we can to show them Jesus?”

Number four is the Crown of Glory. This is those who are faithful and eagerly shepherding others. We see this crown in I Peter 5 verse 4. Peter is giving instructions to the elders to shepherd the flock well, the flock just means the church, and he says there, “And when the chief Shepherd appears ...” who’s the chief Shepherd? It’s Jesus. “… when the chief Shepherd appears ...” then all of you are out of a job, that’s what that means, “… the chief Shepherd appears then you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” Well done.
So, why is it important that a church has shepherds? Well, I’m still a young man but I’ve been doing this a long enough to know that whenever we as a church start taking ground for the kingdom of God, Satan and his henchmen get real active. And around 10 years ago, whatever church I was a part of, when things started to really go and we were growing, and we were moving, and things were exciting I’d really be tempted to become puffed up with pride — “Wow, look what God’s doing through us.” Now, when things start to move and the kingdom of God starts to advance through our church, I brace myself. I’m in my office on my knees asking, “Where are we going to get hit next?” Sheep get picked off. Especially those who like to linger outside the fence line. And so it’s addictions, it’s pride, it’s gossip, it’s slander, it’s divisions, it’s destroyed marriages – it always seems to come out of left field.

And so, the church is to be salt which preserves and light which reveals the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That’s why we’re still here. That’s why all of man’s efforts to botch this up haven’t killed it yet, because it’s a preserving agent in the world. And so God says to protect that flock we need shepherds, imperfect individuals who will just watch over the flock. So, you’ve got the chief Shepherd who is Jesus, you’ve got over shepherds which are the elders, then you’ve got under shepherds which are many. And I’m so grateful for the under shepherds in our church. You may be some of the most decorated in heaven, because you don’t do it for the title, or for the recognition, or for the reward, you’ve checked your ego at the door, you don’t come just to be fed, but to nurture and feed others. You’re watching the flock. And I may never know it. And our eldership may never know it. Jesus sees it and one day He will crown you with a crown of glory and say, “Well done.”

Number five is the Crown of Life. And this is those who endure trials, hardships, difficulty, even death for the sake of Christ. James chapter 1 verse 12 mentions this. It says, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him.” So this is the whole idea that trials are coming and they are here. So, it’s not easy to be a follower of Christ. And, maybe it shouldn’t be. And right now there are more Christians who are being persecuted and murdered for the name of Jesus than at any other time in history. Right now, just in remote countries on the other side of the world – the media doesn’t cover a lot of it but you can find out though. There are a couple of reputable websites that discuss this. It’s coming.

We see it in America today. The culture in America is less patient, more irritated with those who take a stand for Christ. Sometimes for good reason, sometimes as Christians we don’t represent Christ very well. I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about the faith that you have in Christ. Scripture says in the end days the culture will call good bad and bad good. And those who stand for the name of Jesus will be taken. Did you also know that Scripture says in the last days there will be many of those who call themselves Christians who will walk? They will bail. And the reason is because it will get tough. It throws Seeker Church out the window. Throw the cushioned seat you’re sitting on right now out the window. And some will say, “Man, that’s not what I signed up for. I thought this was going to give me my best life now.” And Jesus says it may require your life now, and your walk. Those who persevere to the end will receive the crown of life.

Listen, the bottom line here is that God judges our works, and motives done in the body, and for many of you this is going to be a great time of celebration. You’re going to be handsomely rewarded by God Himself – you didn’t do it for the reward, you did it for Jesus. But, you will be rewarded none the less. For others of you, I’m afraid this will be a time of great regret. Because you are going to wish, even though you are saved, you’ll wish you had done more. It will be revealed to you fully. You’ll wish you’d
done more. Wish you would have served more, wish you would have given more, loved more, worshiped more – not to earn salvation but to please the King of the kingdom.

In I Corinthians chapter 3 verse 13 it says, “… each one’s work will become manifest …” that word manifest just means known. Each one’s work will be known, “… for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done …” so it’s this great analogy of your building materials, and what we have been building with will be set on fire and burn away and whatever is eternal there will be lasting. It says, “If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” What does that mean? It just means that those who prayed a prayer, received Jesus, got dunked – they received salvation but then they didn’t really do anything with it, they didn’t let God’s love transform their life, or shape their life. And so on that Day they’ll get into heaven with no hardware. They’ll get into heaven but only as one who escapes the flames. Some of you – I’m just afraid you’re going to be stunned, because you’ve not really done anything but just receive Christ. And Scripture says do something with it.

Lastly, I just want to say this. For some of you here today – and you know who you are – in Jesus, you can have hope for one minute after death. Some of you, I know, are asking, “Aaron, are you trying to scare me? Are you trying to freak me out a little bit?” No. I have sat under teaching that’s fear based – it does not stick. It’s not the Gospel. You shouldn’t want to go to heaven because you are afraid. When have you ever made a decision out of fear that was lasting? My answer to that would be no, I don’t want you to make a decision out of fear at all. Some of you would really like to believe all of this, you’d like to accept all this, but you don’t think you believe. And that’s fair. That’s fair.

But did you know that belief is an exercise of the will? It usually has very little to do with evidence. It usually has very little to do with you cognitively working out every objection and getting a solid answer in your mind. We’d like to believe that’s what we do, but I don’t think that’s consistent. I think that there are areas of our lives in which we believe something – not because we’ve received all the evidence for it – we just want to believe it. It just sounds good to believe. And that’s okay. I’m just saying, be consistent. Don’t hold the claims of faith to the scrutiny that you’re not willing to hold up in other areas of your life. Maybe today, you are just in this position to say – maybe this is the first time you feel the Spirit of God in this room working on your heart and you just need to say, “God, would You help me? Would you open my eyes to something I haven’t been able to see before? Would you help me to hear something I haven’t heard before? Would you open my heart to feel something I’ve never felt before?” That’s all I’m asking.

The number one analogy, we’ve talked about this before, for those who come to know Christ and grow in Christ is that it is not a sprint, and it’s not a leap, some of you have heard that term “leap of faith.” I have distaste for that term. It’s not a leap, it’s not a skip, it’s not a brisk walk, it’s just a regular walk. I think Scripture is intentional when it does that because God knows that some of us don’t have the strength to do anything else but to just take a step. Some of us don’t have the faith to do anything else but just take a step. That’s all that God is asking us today.

The message is for all of us, believers and unbelievers, those of us who have grown stale in our faith, those of us who have no faith – to take this seriously. And so we come to our very last verse in Hebrews 9. It’s taken me 54 minutes and five seconds to get here, “… so Christ, having been offered once to bear
the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him.”

So, I want you to close your eyes, if you would, not because God only hears your prayers when your eyes are closed, but because it helps for focus and for privacy. And I want you to know today that there’s going to come a day, probably quicker than you think, when your body is going to be in the ground but you will still be very much alive. And, in that moment, your destiny will be irrevocably fixed and eternally unchangeable. And that’s why this moment is so important. I want you to deal with this today, no excuses, no regrets, no apathy. I want you to respond to Jesus in this moment. I want you to walk out of here today with the assurance that you’ll be escorted into the presence of the Lord one minute after death. So, let me pray this prayer and wherever you are in your spiritual walk, I want you to claim this prayer if you could today.

Lord God, we come to You this morning and Father I know that there are individuals here today who, they believe in You despite the fact that there have been many things happen to them that have discouraged that belief. God, I pray for those who are hurting today, those who feel distanced from You, those who maybe let down their guard, got involved in a church somewhere and just got the spiritual wind kicked out of them and so they’re here, they don’t really necessarily want to be known, but they come to You and God, I pray that you would minister to their heart right now. I pray that those smoldering embers would not fully go out but that you would reignite then with your Spirit. God, I pray that You would be with those, maybe the best word that they could use to describe, are apathetic, hit a plateau, they’re not really sure – they’ve hit a wall in their relationship with You and they have no idea how to get around it. I pray that You would remove that. And maybe we’ve been trying to lift it in our own strength and we need to come. God, I pray for that person here right now who came in here today with a smirk on their face and hesitancy in their heart and objections in their mind that this is just a farce, it’s a power play from some distant deity in an unknown, fairytale universe and that for the first time Your Spirit would penetrate their wounded and hurting heart, that they would finally get it. Lord God, on behalf of everyone here, would You please meet us in this place. Give us faith, give us the ability to take a step and know that the ground beneath our feet will stay solid. Help us to fall more in love with You and Your word, because those are the things that will sustain us. And so we ask this right now in the name of Jesus.

Keep your eyes closed for just a moment if you would. If there is any part of you that claimed that prayer I’d ask you in the coming weeks and months to make yourself known. You can pray with us down front, you can email the staff. We’ll be doing a baptism service here in a few weeks. Maybe that would be a time for you to go public. But make it known. We’d love just to come around you, and encourage you, and pray with you, and lift you up in this walk of faith as you begin to trust the Lord.

Right now the guys are come out and lead us in one song of response. And, I don’t want you to focus on whether you like this song or not like this song. I want you to listen to the words and ascribe them to the glory of God because that’s what it’s for as the team leads us in this song of response before we’re dismissed today.

I Can Only Imagine