

When you look at beginner's guides, you discover one thing pretty quickly: Most deal with very complicated topics. For example:

- + *The Beginner's Guide to Conversion Rate Optimization.*
- + *The Beginner's Guide to Scrum and Agile Project Management.*
- + *A Beginner's Guide to Constructing the Universe.*

Suppose God was using this last one when light was created and the stars flung into space?

Anyway, now another beginner's guide has come out that deals with a stage of life that we all hope to live long enough to face: old age. Michael Kinsley, a political columnist, has written a book called *Old Age: A Beginner's Guide*. In it, he advises people to seek "long years of good health, not long years of simply breathing in and out." Kinsley speaks from experience. Although he is only 65, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease when he was just 43 years old. "Having Parkinson's is very much like growing old," he observes. He feels as though he has reached old age several decades before he should have.

So what has he discovered? For starters, old age is not a place where achievements and acquisitions matter much. He asks the question, "You'd happily trade them for more time with the grandchildren, wouldn't you?" Next, he has found that longevity is not so great if you outlive your mental capacities. "The real game is cognition," he writes. "Who can keep their marbles the longest?"

Each of us has to make some important choices about where we will put our time and energy as we age. In the end, our relationships with God and with the people around us are going to matter much more than achievements and acquisitions. "Even the most successful people die eventually," Kinsley writes, "and they spend more time dead than alive."

Because we all are going to die eventually, we need a *Beginner's Guide to Eternal Life*. Yes, this is a complicated topic, at least as difficult to comprehend as conversion rate optimization. Fortunately, the apostle Paul gives us a beginner's guide in his letter to the Romans.

So what does Paul tell us? First, he says, "Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life" (v. 13). Paul is convinced that Jesus has broken the power of sin in human life, so evil should not be our authority. Instead, Paul asks us to see God as our master, and to present ourselves to him. We have each been brought from death to life by the resurrection of Jesus, so we are now free to trust in him and do God's work in the world.

Nobel Prize-winning songwriter Bob Dylan wrote, "You're gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody." His point is that we all have masters in this world, and we can choose the one we want to serve. But each of us has to serve somebody. Because of this, the first step in Paul's guidebook is to "present yourselves to God" (v. 13). There are two considerations here.

"Presenting yourself to God" assumes that you recognize that God has a claim on your life. God's the boss, the Ultimate Lord of the Universe, and there's no One-Greater-Than. This also assumes that having made yourself available, having submitted your request form, your resume, you are ready to receive your marching orders. When we present ourselves to God, our bags should be packed. We should be ready.

*If we cannot live with God as our Director, Boss, Lord and Supreme Ruler and serve God during our temporal lifetimes, we're going to be miserable throughout our eternal lives -- which last, like, forever!*

Next, since you have been set free from sin, "become slaves of righteousness" (v. 18). This is a tough step for us to take, because we have an understandably negative view of slavery. We don't want any of our fellow human beings to be enslaved, and we ourselves don't want to be slaves of drugs or alcohol or any other destructive power. So why does Paul recommend that we become slaves of righteousness?

As far as Paul is concerned, we are all enslaved to *something* -- whether it's a *good* something or a *bad* something. It's also possible that it is not completely one or the other, right? It's not as though you are always enslaved to do bad things. And we can't always be "slaves" to what's right. It's just not how it works for us.

But we can *attempt to do the right thing when the choice is clear*. Each of us has to make important choices about where we will put our time and our energy. As we age, we can focus on achievements and acquisitions, or on our relationships with God and with the people around us. These are critical choices, because even the most successful people die eventually.

Sometimes, the choice is easy. One choice is right, the other wrong; one is healthy, the other is not; one leads to destruction, the other to eternal life. For Paul, the choice is between being a slave "of sin, which leads to death," or a slave "of obedience, which leads to righteousness" (v. 16). This means, in simple language, that we must try, with the help of God, to set our course toward the right thing, toward goodness and kindness.

It's like when you get in the car and head for a strange location. You punch in the GPS coordinates and then, with the help of GPS, you do the best you can. Will you make a wrong turn anyway? Perhaps. But, chances are you're going to get where you want to go with a minimum of issues. A pilot gets into the cockpit and checks the flight plan. Pilots cannot fly without one. They have many navigational tools at their disposal. So do we. Let's do the right thing. It's a key to preparing for eternity.

The very cool thing for people who make themselves available to God and who do the right thing is that eternal life is *comped*. Totally free. And it is an upgrade that's not given on the basis of merit or anything like that. You don't have to use points or air miles to experience it. Eternal life! First class!

Paul's guidebook tells us that if we are "freed from sin and enslaved to God," then the "end is eternal life" (v. 22). This everlasting life with God comes to us as a free gift from God, and is not based on our acquisitions and achievements. All we have to do is accept it.

So what will this eternal life feel like? Paul doesn't give us much detail. He does say that "the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:52). And the Bible says that God will be with us, wiping every tear from our eyes. "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4).

Augustine, the fourth-century bishop of Hippo, said, that "we shall rest and we shall see; we shall see and we shall know; we shall know and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise; behold our end which is no end." So, about all we can say with certainty is that everlasting life will be an experience of rest, love, praise and closeness to God.

Is the subject complicated? Certainly. Debates about the exact timing of the day of resurrection have been under way for centuries. But in terms of personal preparation, Paul's beginner's guide is clear:

+ *Let God know you're available.*

+ *Do the right thing.*

+ *Access to eternal life is comped.*

These are three realities that anyone facing the end of life, whether old or young or somewhere in between, might consider. Even the most successful of us will die, and spend more time dead than alive. We can begin our preparations today, with Paul's Beginner's Guide to Eternal Life. What are we waiting for – the Second Coming?

*Pastor Keith*