

“As I read this book, it was so evident that it comes from a wise and compassionate pastor. We are reminded that we were made for a new world that is coming, that the best is yet to be. The book is hopeful but realistic, challenging but balanced. I am confident that many readers will be encouraged and convicted by this gem of a book.”

Professor Thomas R. Schreiner, Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville; author of “The King In His Beauty”

“In this book, Stephen Witmer lifts up our eyes to see beyond the ‘now’ that presses in on us to what is eternal. More than that, he lifts up our eyes to see the eternal God in the magnificence of his redeeming purposes. What encouragement this brings to the spiritually weary and what challenge it brings to those tempted to fall asleep amid the buzz and plenty of our modern world! This treatment of deep, biblical themes is fresh, pastoral, and stimulating. Highly commended.”

Professor David F. Wells, Distinguished Research Professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; author of “God In The Whirlwind”

“A previous generation sometimes focused so much on the future that they seemed to forget that eternity begins in the here and now. But today’s generation often focuses so much on the present world that we can neglect the coming reality of the new heavens and earth. For this reason, I am thankful for this wise book by Stephen Witmer. He knows how to communicate the biblical story of eternity—both present and future—in a winsome, compelling, and genuinely helpful way. May the Lord stir in all of us restless patience as we lean forward toward eternity with the help of this excellent book.”

Justin Taylor, blogger at Between Two Worlds; co-author of “The Final Days of Jesus”

“What Stephen Witmer has accomplished here is akin to enjoying a coffee with a new friend as he brilliantly and winsomely shares the secret of the universe with you. Full of both passion and clarity, *Eternity Changes Everything* invites us and helps us to share God’s vision for the world and the people in it in view of the glory of Christ’s kingdom.”

Jared Wilson, Pastor of Middletown Springs Community Church, Middletown Springs, Vermont; author of “Gospel Wakefulness”

“Stephen Witmer does us a great service by counseling real impatience and patient endurance in the Christian life between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ. Whatever your circumstances, this book will fill you with longing for Jesus’ return.”

Collin Hansen, Editorial Director at The Gospel Coalition; co-author of “A God-Sized Vision”

“If I knew the future, then surely that would affect every minute of the present. But I do know the future. Christians are going to live day after day in a gloriously renewed creation with our Saviour. Yet this certain future has so little impact on how I live most days—so Christ put Stephen Witmer’s book in front of me. Reading it reminded me of my future and immediately and hugely shifted my outlook on the present. I have already recommended this book and will keep doing so. It is a readable, simple, hopeful and deep book on a crucial topic. It will change our lives, churches and evangelism.”

John Hindley, Pastor of BroadGrace, Norfolk, UK; author of “Serving Without Sinking”

“For a book dealing with the issue of eternity, this is definitely a quick read. What makes it so engaging is that Stephen comes across as so likeable, and has a great illustration on almost every page. A hope-filled, encouraging gem of a book. I loved it.”

Mez McConnell, Senior Pastor of Niddrie Community Church, Edinburgh, Scotland, and Director of 20Schemes; author of “Is There Anybody Out There?”

“*Eternity Changes Everything* shows us how heavenly ideas can come down right into the nooks and crannies of everyday life—parenting, suffering, work, and more. Stephen makes you lean forward to heaven in holy restlessness and enduring patience. Every truth he explains he applies to reality. Here is a writer who pastors, and a pastor who thinks. This is theology that breathes and sings. I can’t wait for more Stephen Witmer!”

Jonathan Dodson, Lead Pastor at City Life Church, Austin, Texas; author of “Gospel-Centered Discipleship”

“For some, the future looms so large that this present world holds no importance. For others, the present is so critical that God’s promised future holds little significance. For Stephen Witmer and his readers, the present and the future are vitally connected. *Eternity Changes Everything* provides necessary perspective and practical guidance for walking the tightrope of the already and not yet. Heartily recommended.”

Stephen T. Um, Senior Minister of Citylife Presbyterian Church, Boston, Massachusetts; author of “Why Cities Matter”

“Hope has fallen on hard times in our cynical, I-want-it-now generation. Even within the church, many are settling for a pathetic best life now, rather than holding out for a life that offers a foretaste of the infinitely better life to come. Witmer is a superb biblical scholar with a pastor’s heart, so on every page there are fresh insights and much-needed spiritual remedies.”

Gordon P. Hugenberger, Senior Minister, Park Street Church, Boston, Massachusetts

Eternity changes everything

How to live now in the light of your future

Stephen Witmer

Eternity changes everything: *How to live now in the light of your future*

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*To my wife Emma, our children Samuel, Annie and Henry,
and our church family at Pepperell Christian Fellowship.
I'm glad to be living with you toward the new creation.*

1. Your future in your present

Vacations are great. It's wonderful to unplug and unwind, relax and recharge away from normal responsibilities. I love going on vacation. Who doesn't?!

But I also love the last couple weeks before the vacation. Even though nothing changes externally—even though my schedule and responsibilities stay the same—it usually feels to me as though my vacation has partially begun already. It's my “pre-vacation vacation”—and it makes a big difference. I tend to be an all-around nicer guy. I'm more relaxed and forgiving toward other people. Tough stuff rolls more easily off my back because, hey, 16 days from now I'll be lying on my back, on a beach, in the sun.

To enjoy my pre-vacation vacation, I just need to know two things about the vacation itself:

- (1) It will be great when I get there.
- (2) Nothing will stop me from getting there.

Obviously, the first point is crucial. If I learn that the reason I got the heavily discounted and non-refundable deal on our hotel is that it sits next door to a landfill, I'll spend my last couple of pre-vacation weeks frantically researching local wind patterns, rather than feeling excited. Or if I decided in a rash moment

that hiking a 100-mile forest trail would be a good challenge for my wife and me—and forgot to consult my wife—I’ll spend the last couple of pre-vacation weeks working up my courage to tell her, rather than feeling excited. (“That’s correct, there are no hot showers on the trail... but, on the bright side, it’s supposed to rain most of the week! Bring soap!”)

And the second point is equally crucial. It doesn’t matter how good my destination is if I may never get there. The remote, South Pacific island paradise that can be reached only by means of that World War II-era, island-hopping airplane with rusty bolts and an inebriated pilot, just started sounding like a paradise that is probably out of reach. I remember as a boy how the thrill of our upcoming family vacation was diminished when we heard a winter storm was blowing in. Excitement about leaving was replaced with worry about getting stuck at home, or halfway there.

Our view of the future—whether it’s our vacation, our career, our health, or anything else—affects how we feel, and how we act, in the present. The future is an unruly thing. It refuses to stay quietly in its place. It’s always lurching into the present—the scary job interview gives us sweaty palms days in advance, or the promise of summer vacation helps us survive the last three weeks of school. We’re constantly experiencing the pain and joy and anxiety and delight and fear of future events before we experience the actual events. It’s the way we’re wired. We are always living toward the future, and the future is always reaching back toward us. It often gets to us (in our thoughts and feelings) before we get to it (in our actual experience).

Our view of our future in this life affects how we live. As we’ll see in this book, that is true also of our future beyond this life.

So, what do you think your future beyond this life is? How sure are you about your answer? Where will you be in two hundred years?

One answer is: *nowhere*. The apostle Paul, writing to one of the first churches in the city of Corinth in Greece, put it bluntly:

If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”
(1 Corinthians 15 v 32)

If our future is nothingness, then let’s grab everything we can now. If we’re heading for non-existence, all that matters is right now, doing what looks and feels and seems to make us happiest. Let’s eat and drink all we can.

That wasn’t Paul’s own attitude, though. In another one of his letters, he wrote:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.
(Philippians 1 v 21)

That’s the other end of the spectrum of views about the future. Paul thinks that what lies beyond death is way better than anything in his present. It is gain, because he will experience even more of Christ than he presently enjoys in this life. Everything we read about Paul in the New Testament shows that this conviction about the future allowed him to happily give up anything now, because he was sure he was heading for everything after death.

I don’t think there’s nothing beyond death, that this is all there is. But neither do I always live with Paul’s unshakeable conviction of a certain, perfect future. In fact, I think most of us live between those two extremes—not so certain there’s nothing beyond death that we never worry about it, but not so certain there’s perfection beyond death that we never worry about now. We worry about what’s coming after death, and whether, if it

is really great, we'll actually be there; and we find ourselves focusing everything on now, even though we have a vague sense that eternity might be more important.

And that suggests that we're not totally sure about where we're heading in our eternal future. We're not confident it's great; and/or we're not confident we'll get there. It shows in the way we think, feel and act today.

So this book is about the *future*. Chapters Two and Three are all about where this world is heading—I hope you'll find them tremendously exciting.

And this book is about *our* future. Chapters Four and Five are about how we can know for sure where we are heading—I hope you'll find them really reassuring.

And, because those chapters are about our future, the rest of the book is about our *present*—about the difference knowing our future makes to how we view our lives, and live our lives, right now. I hope you'll find the second half of this book both thrilling and transforming.

The future matters. Eternity changes everything. Let's go there now.