

## Jesus And The Third Grader

In the summer of 1984, I accepted the call to pastor a rural Baptist Church in Southern Indiana. Soon thereafter my wife, daughter, two sons, and I loaded all our belongings in a big U-Haul truck and embarked on our pilgrimage from Wyandotte, Michigan. Soon the church began to grow a little and every day seemed to dawn with a new sense of expectancy. From my perspective, all things appeared to be going well. The following March something happened that would change our lives from that day forward.

Early one spring morning our little dog woke me to let her outside. As I went down the hallway I noticed a light on in the bathroom. When I gazed in, to my surprise our eight-year old son, Eric, was lying on the floor sleeping. I fussed at him to get back in his bunk. When I came back through I returned to the bathroom to turn off the light and shockingly noticed some blood on the floor. I glanced back at Eric and he was fast asleep. When I arrived back in the bedroom I woke my wife and informed her of what I had seen. She jumped out of bed and watched him until daylight. Soon after breakfast, she and Eric made a trip into town to visit our physician. A few hours later Rita phoned me from the local hospital and frantically informed me that our physician had admitted our oldest son as a patient. After securing a babysitter for the other two, I made a beeline to be with them. [to conserve space, I must jump ahead a little]

Test after test failed to produce a diagnosis that would empower our physician and pediatrician to treat our helpless son who seemed to be gradually fading away. Later that evening Eric was transported about forty miles away to Children's Hospital in Louisville, Kentucky. While he was being relocated, it was necessary for me to return home to be with the other two children. After finally arriving back at Children's Hospital, I discovered a bunch of the church folks standing around in the hallway. I rushed by them and burst through the doors frantically looking for my son and wife. I was quickly escorted back into the hallway and told to stay there until Dr. so-and-so spoke with me. While waiting I ventured off to the restroom and when I returned the tending physician invited me into a room. A very dear friend accompanied me in, shut the door, and leaned against it. As soon as I was seated she said something that shot through me like a bolt of lightning and still rings very clearly twenty five years later, 'Mr. Luther, Eric is gone!' For the next few seconds I frantically tore into my big friend, exhibiting a type of temporary insanity. Eventually, the physician escorted me down to the next floor to be with my wife. It's bizarre when I think that one minute he appeared to be healthy and eleven hours later he was gone! [I have always believed that a writer could easily assemble a small volume not only describing all the details of hospital events but the following days, months, and few years.]

My objective in sharing the above was to briefly lay the foundation that, by His grace, might permit me to point out a few of the many ways God intervened in order that we might live, retain our sanity, bear witness, be strengthened, and somehow be better equipped for the many trials that lay ahead.

I am positive that very few pastors (thank God!) have found themselves sitting with their wife in a funeral home early on Sunday morning staring at funeral arrangements for their eight-year-old son while their congregation gathers for worship back at the church.

In spite of our tremendous level of mental and emotional anguish, we faced one of most horrendous nightmares that any two parents could face – making our third grader's funeral

arrangements. As we helplessly and ignorantly met with the funeral home director, seemingly out of nowhere came an aunt and uncle. Years before they both were previously married and suffered tremendously as they parted company with their original spouse. Let me assure you that they were truly a God send! Somehow, they filled in the blanks we could not deal with. Aunt Olive even volunteered to pick out Eric's casket, when we could not bear to go upstairs to the display room. Days later the funeral home director informed us that Eric's funeral was one of the largest in the history of the facility. Although the crowd was extremely large and the wonderful guests poured out their hearts, the terrible pain deep within was still there and did not show any signs of leaving anytime soon.

Days later, after the funeral, we were asked to meet with the physician and pediatrician in a hospital conference room to go over the results of the autopsy. My wife and I arrive early and as we sat waiting a thought popped into my mind – our eight year old son had lived, was a Christian for about six months, and now he was gone from us for the rest of our lives! After all, aren't we supposed to go first? Second, I realized with shock that in a few years no one will know he existed! I jumped up, approached the telephone operator, and asked for some paper and a pencil. That's the first and last time I can remember words strangely flowing in the fashion they did early that morning. When I finished I returned the pencil and the remaining sheets of paper to the young lady at the phone and asked her to look over the little tribute. When she returned it she was weeping. She has just confirmed its completion. Eventually the physicians arrived and we learned that Eric had died of pulmonary hemorrhage due to Goodpasture's Syndrome. In 1985, this rare, rapid, and fatal disease was beyond the medical expertise of the time. Many years later, in the late nineties, a kidney specialist friend of mine from U. of M. Medical Hospital informed me that a blood transfusion would have saved his life. Once again, we were reminded that God had spared our first-born son from tremendous suffering!

What happened to the tribute I had written to Eric? After leaving the hospital we went to the local newspaper and had it printed verbatim as you see before you. This is a small copy of the original 4 x 8.



***Gone Home***

Hello,  
My name is Eric Luther. I am eight years old and lived at Depauw, Indiana. I no longer live there now. This last Saturday, March 16, I went to my new home in Heaven.

Here is why Dad is helping me to write to you. I know Jesus as my Saviour and I want you to know Him too. My Dad will talk to you if you want. He is the pastor at Milltown Baptist Church. His phone number is 633-4202.

I was born June 18, 1976. Jesus saved me in Michigan on August 26, 1984 and Dad baptized me at Milltown, October 21, 1984.

My Sister, Sherry, Brother, Joshua and Mom and Dad, Dr. and Mrs. Roger Luther, are doing OK.

I need to go now. There are many things to see and do here. I sure hope to see all of you soon.

ERIC

Little did I know that this small local newspaper had a circulation of 21,000. Over the next few months, we received approximately 2,200 hundred dollars in the mail, much of which was given anonymously. Although warmly received, I was afraid that my original intention had been completely misunderstood! As time progressed, though, I learned that God had used the simple article to bring a number of folks, especially children, to the Lord. While conducting a revival meeting about fifty miles north, a lady I had never met came up to me after the service, opened her Bible, and there it was – glued in the front. She had been using Eric's tribute as a witnessing tool to her grandchildren! Even after death, the little fellow still served on the mission field!

When Eric's schoolteacher cleaned out his desk she found it stuffed with evangelistic pamphlets. I had no idea he had taken the free literature from my office!

In his short tenure as a third grade student, Eric had touched the lives of his classmates so strongly that it was necessary for his teacher to gather the entire class in a circle on the floor, go over his life, and then tell them about Jesus – friends, we’re talking public school! Yep, you guessed it. She was a strong Christian, too. Chalk up another lesson for dad. Never underestimate the power of a child – especially one carrying the testimony of redemption and being led by his Savior!

Although we may have more questions unanswered than answered in life, God has taught me that when I wake up enough to look for His plan more than mine, He often blesses me with a touch of insight more than words can express!

Before we look into some areas from a theological perspective, please permit me to share a couple more excerpts from my journey.

Soon after Eric’s funeral I recalled the day he told me of his salvation experience. The historical event happened after a Sunday morning service. Prior to moving to Southern Indiana, we had been attending a large church in Ecorse, Michigan. After arriving back home, Eric came into the bedroom and announced, “Dad I need to tell you something.” After he delivered the news bulletin, I asked him to tell me the details. “Well there is not much to tell”, He replied. I later learned that little boy had been talking with him in children’s church and after the service took him aside into a room and fulfilled his mission when he witnessed our son, praying and receiving Christ.

After Eric’s death, although months had passed, I wanted to locate the little boy, thank him, and challenge him never to stop. I contacted the church and a few weeks later, they returned my call. The senior pastor informed me that he met with the youth pastor and as many of the children, as they could assemble who were present that day. All remember seeing Eric and his friend talking and the youth pastor even watched through a window as the boys entered a room. Strangely, no one knew the identity of the other boy and, if that were not enough, all the witnesses said that it was the first and last time anyone saw him! Think what you will. We have to believe he was on assignment from God! What an honor and privilege to serve the only true God who can see off into eternity and yet come into our lives when invited!

Eventually the time came for a headstone. Understanding that most stones eventually



blend in with the rest, I feared that Eric’s would join the number. After wrestling with several ideas, my wife and I decided on what you see. At first, I had kind of a concept war with the artist at the facility in Indianapolis. When he returned his life size sketch he had wings on my son. I returned the original back to him and informed the young man that although my son was sweet he was no angel. In round two he had removed the wings but this time he had him facing out to those passing by. Finally, in round three I won by informing the young artist to make it as I had originally sketched because the verses place emphasis upon the trumpet, sounds, and rising in the proper direction, and I’m confident that those who rise will have no thought of gazing around as they blast off toward Jesus! If only he had read the

verses he would have discovered that if this event happens in his parent's lifetime, Eric will instantly return from Heaven, be given a glorified body and be back with Jesus before mom and dad even lift off the ground! Titus (2:13) calls this profound truth our "**blessed hope.**" Peter (1 Pe.1:3) says, all in Christ have a "**Lively hope.**" Perhaps Jeremiah (17:7) says it best, "**Blessed [is] the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is.**" Joy and comfort, even in the face of death, is always available for a child of God. After all, our salvation is only as good as the one who gives it! Oh yes, not only is God forever and perfect, He does things right the first time around!

Please permit me to address three frequent questions that surface over the years whenever the story of Eric is shared. Although you may not be wrestling with the following, I assure you that someone nearby is!

**(1) What about the death of Children?**

There is only one authoritative source for this question. It is God's Word. The text is II Sam.12:7-23. Instead of being with his army, for some unknown reason David was back in Jerusalem. From his vantage point David gazed upon the beautiful young Bathsheba as she bathed. Eventually lust gave way to fulfillment.

As the war progressed with David's army even a greater one grew back home. When Bathsheba announced of her pregnancy to David he devised a scheme to rid himself of dealing with her husband and facing open shame as king. Little did he realize this only compounded matters between him and God. God sent the prophet Nathan to expose David's sin and to pronounce God's immediate future upon him because of it. Part of God's plan was for the baby not to survive. [Stay with me now!] Soon after the child's birth, the infant became seriously ill and David started fasting on the child's behalf. On the seventh day the child finally died. The servants went in to tell David but were afraid of his possible reaction. After learning that the child had died David arose, cleaned himself, worshipped, and sat down to food. His actions confounded those around. Listen as David responded, "**And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell [whether] GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me. (2Sam.12:22-23)"**

Rest assured that not only is death a one-way door but God has special provision for innocent children. Their destination is not some type of baby limbo but rather it is the same place as the rest of the redeemed. In many ways, the work of the Holy Spirit was vastly different in the Old Testament from that in the New Testament. Although time will not permit us to examine this in detail, please remember that one function of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament is that of permanently sealing the redeemed. However, in the Old Testament we observe that the Holy Spirit came upon people to accomplish things (like delivering a message) and then departed. The only Old Testament exception to this is with David. David was completely aware of this and I believe that it is one reason we find it mentioned in David's lament about this entire mess in Psalm 51. Note carefully verse eleven. Did God kill the baby? Hang in there. We'll indirectly address this in our next section.

**(2) What about the future ?**

Seems as if it were yesterday that I found myself standing in the back of the funeral home during the first night of Eric's viewing. A friend approached, expressed his sympathy, and then introduced his girlfriend. She said, "I'm sorry about your son." I thanked her and knowing that

she was a devout Jehovah's Witness should have prepared me for what came out next, "You never know, maybe you will see him again someday." I fired back, "Let me assure that if I did not have the assurance I would see Eric again, the funeral home director would need to roll another casket out here for his daddy!" She gracefully disappeared into the crowd. Later that night I felt bad for using the wrong tone of voice. After all, she meant well. Nevertheless, my foundational convictions are as strong today, if not stronger, then they were that evening. You see – Eric's name was in the book!

Even Moses, thousands of years ago, had a tremendous theological understanding of such a book. Listen to what he expresses to God after realizing Israel's terrible sin. "...Oh, **this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. 32 Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written. 33 And the LORD said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book." (Ex.32:31-33)" From this we note several important things in regards to the book. The book exists, it's written by God, and those who sin, even once, have their name removed by God.**

Another reference is found in a Psalm of David that he eventually dedicated to the chief leader of music during times of worship. Hear as David praises God from the depths of his heart, "For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them (Psa.139:13-16)." David knew quite well that God had recorded the details of his physical development in a book long before his birth.

As we move to the New Testament, clues about this book add to its splendor! "And I entreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellow labourers, whose names are in the book of life (Phil.4:3)." Paul considered those who served with him as having their names in, what Moses referred to as "thy book", he now calls "the book of life".

Without a doubt, the icing on this subject is discovered in the last New Testament book. "He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels (Rev.3:5)." Now we must add to our little growing doctrine the eternal truth that God promises never to remove the name of anyone who overcomes. What is needed to become an overcomer and how does one go about overcoming? The answer – "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1Jn.5:4-5) The object that needs to be overcome is our sinful condition and the way we come over to God's side is by accepting The Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. In Revelation 13:8 we note, "And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." A time is rapidly approaching unlike any before. During this era, all, with the exception of those in this book, now referred to as belonging to the "Lamb", will be forced by earthly powers to worship a satanically possessed false messiah. Since "all" on the earth will be required to worship him and those in the "book" will not, we must conclude that the latter will be far beyond all earthly searches. In Revelation 17:8 we find reference being made to this "book" in events during this great tribulation period. "The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life

from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.” It is here we note that not only will this member of the satanic trinity be cast in “perdition” but also all those on the earth do not have their names recorded in “the book of life” and will be amazed at his disappearance.

Although there is no general judgment described in Scripture, every soul, who has or will tread upon this earth, will at one point pass by the creator and face judgment! In the following passage we read about the great white throne judgment. “**And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is [the book] of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. (Rev.20:11-14)**” The text reveals a number of things but please follow along as I point out only a few. At this judgment only the unredeemed will be present, God’s record “books” will be present, “the book of life” will be there, all passing by will be judged out of the “books” not “the book of life”, and all present will have the same destination. Without question, God keeps perfect records and pronounces perfect judgments!

Revelation has two final references. “**And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither [whatsoever] worketh abomination, or [maketh] a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life. (Rev. 21:27)**” “**And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and [from] the things which are written in this book.(Rev. 22:19)**”

Now let us bring all of this together. God has a book called “the book of life.” Scripture leads us to believe that at birth every soul has their name recorded by God in this book. At some point, a child’s indwelling sinful nature comes alive and causes that soul to rebel against God. When this rebellion occurs so does sin and with sin comes the erasing of that person’s name from God’s book. From that unknown point onward, that same soul needs God’s redemption in order to have his name placed back into God’s family register.

Without any question, the Bible clearly teaches that prior to salvation one must acknowledge their sins, repent, and trust the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. On the other hand, children who die in a state of innocence have not sinned, therefore, they cannot, and need not, be redeemed. Once a sinning soul is redeemed, or bought back, God reenters that soul back into His book and assures the recipient that, not only will he never be removed again but also that He was granted eternal citizenship in His city with Him, His entire family, and all the celestial beings! Only those in God’s book have God’s gift!

In reality, our third grader did not belong to us. He belonged to Jesus. Rich, poor, young, old, if we are redeemed, we belong to him with all the rights and privileges thereof. “**For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (1Cor.6:20)**” When it comes time for us to cross over into eternity he has even removed the pain of death.

“**O death, where [is] thy sting?... (1Cor.15:55b)**” Although Eric was not innocent, he had trusted in Jesus as his personal Savior and his name was recorded in God’s book – just like mom and dad!

When Jesus comes for me, be it at death or in the rapture, God’s Word has assured me that I will see him again! That is my future!

**(3)** What have I learned? To list all that I have learned from Eric's death would be impossible. Although some of what you will shortly read may have been new lessons, much was a strong reaffirmation.

- a)** I do not have to have all questions answered in order to go on.
- b)** At first, we seemed to be stuck in a perpetual state of shock. Within about two weeks most of our friends and relatives, although deeply touched, returned to their lives while ours remained shattered. The pain was very real and seemed to be permanent. There is no quick fix or fast avenue to get away from the pain.
- c)** I discovered that it was very hard for me to take counsel from someone who said, "I know what you're going through", when in reality I knew differently.
- d)** Close friends are essential and they will be there when needed. Many may never attempt to say much but their presence is a priceless commodity!
- e)** I learned the value of striving to never isolate myself from what was left of our family. All family members deal with the same thing in different ways. As a rule of thumb, when we give of ourselves we receive from others. This is difficult because grief desires for us to pull away and focus upon our personal wounds. To succumb to this can be devastating!
- f)** If you need counseling – get it. Having the assistance of a trained professional can be priceless. These folks can assist us in discovering resources and resolving issues.
- g)** Guilt is a terrible thing to live with. The tendency of parking and permanently focusing on the death seemed to be the natural thing to do. Just the thought of doing otherwise made me feel like I was betraying Eric and pushing him out of my life. Eventually I realized that this was absurd. Even though I could never forget Eric, I still had responsibilities as a husband, father, and scores of other things. Time moved on and so must I.
- h)** I never got over Eric's death, rather, I learned to adjust accordingly and go on.
- i)** We were just Eric's parents and, as such, he was an individual over whom we were mere temporal stewards.
- j)** I regret not spending more time with Eric as he grew. For years prior to his death I had spent most of my time either working, in school, or both. After he died, I realized how little I really knew the little blond-haired, blue-eyed son of mine.
- k)** You can never say you lost someone if you know where he or she is.
- l)** Since Eric's death, all of life's battles have never seemed as frightful and as difficult as they were prior to his departure. Surviving the biggest of battles supply faith, courage, strength, and experience for all the rest.
- m)** Since hindsight is better than foresight, I have noticed that God has greatly used time to our advantage. The wounds of grief crave time to heal.

- n) Most things in life come and go but no one can steal nor destroy your memories. Find some way to use them for God's glory and watch what happens!
- o) Last but greatest of all is the fact that God has made the journey with us. **"...God [is] our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. (Psa. 46:1)"** His Spirit, His Word, and His people, especially my wife, make up the primary ingredients that keep me going – even to this day!

*If you desire additional study material that deals with death, travel to my website ([www.rogerluther.com](http://www.rogerluther.com)), click on archives, click on entries from July 2009, and read or download the two articles (Thanatology part #2 and Thanatology part #1).*



*compiled by Dr. R. L. Luther 3-18-10*