

Questions
of Life

How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?

NICKY GUMBEL

13



Alpha

**How Can I
Make the Most
of the Rest
of My Life?**

Booklets taken from Questions of Life:

Is There More to Life Than This?

Who Is Jesus?

Why Did Jesus Die?

How Can We Have Faith?

Why and How Do I Pray?

Why and How Should I Read the Bible?

How Does God Guide Us?

The Holy Spirit

How Can I Resist Evil?

Why and How Should I Tell Others?

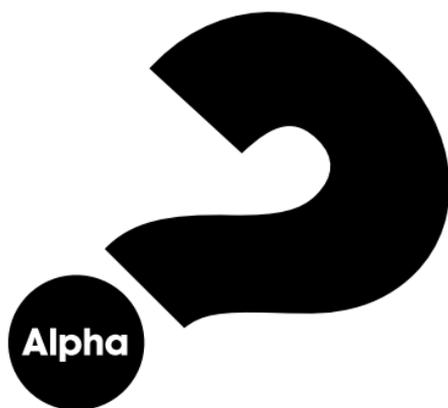
Does God Heal Today?

What About the Church?

How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?

How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?

NICKY GUMBEL



Copyright © Nicky Gumbel 2011

The right of Nicky Gumbel to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 1993

Revised in 2011

This new edition 2016

10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

All rights reserved. No part of this book or any other Alpha publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright holder or the expressly authorised agent thereof. Where an Alpha publication is offered free of charge the fee is waived on condition the publication is used to run or promote Alpha and should not be subject to any subsequent fee or charge. This resource may not be modified or used for any commercial purpose without permission in writing from the copyright holder or the expressly authorised agent thereof.

ISBN: 978 1 909309 67 8

Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version Anglicised. Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 Biblica, formerly International Bible Society. Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, an Hachette UK company. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790.

Scripture quotations marked RSV are from the REVISED STANDARD VERSION of the Bible. Copyright © 1346, 1952 and 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Published by Alpha International
Holy Trinity Brompton
Brompton Road
London SW7 1JA
Email: publications@alpha.org

Illustrated by Charlie Mackesy

Contents

How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?	7
What Should We Do?	8
How Do We Do It?	18
Why Should We Do It?	22
Endnotes	26

How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?

We only get one life. We might wish for more. D. H. Lawrence said, 'If only one could have two lives. The first in which to make one's mistakes... and the second in which to profit by them.'¹ But there are no dress rehearsals for life; we find ourselves on stage straightaway.

Even if we have made mistakes in the past, it is possible with God's help to make something of the future. How can we make the most of the rest of our lives? Paul tells us in Romans 12:1-2 how we can do this:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve

what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

What should we do?

Break with the past

As Christians, we are called to be different from the world around us. Paul writes, 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world' (by which he means the world that has shut God out). Or as J. B. Phillips translates this verse, 'Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould.' This is not easy, there is a pressure to conform. It is very hard to be different.

A young police officer was taking his final exam at Hendon Police College in north London. Here is one of the questions:

You are on patrol in outer London when an explosion occurs in a gas main in a nearby street. On investigation you find that a large hole has been blown in the footpath and there is an overturned van lying nearby. Inside the van there is a strong smell of alcohol. Both occupants – a man and a woman – are injured. You recognise the woman as the wife of your Divisional Inspector, who is at present away in the USA. A passing motorist stops to offer you

assistance and you realise that he is a man who is wanted for armed robbery. Suddenly a man runs out of a nearby house, shouting that his wife is expecting a baby and that the shock of the explosion has made the birth imminent. Another man is crying for help, having been blown into an adjacent canal by the explosion, and he cannot swim.

Bearing in mind the provisions of the Mental Health Act, describe in a few words what actions you would take.

The officer thought for a moment, picked up his pen, and wrote: 'I would take off my uniform and mingle with the crowd.'

We can sympathise with his answer. As a Christian, it is often easier to take off the uniform and 'mingle with the crowd'. But we are called to remain distinctive, to retain our Christian identity, wherever we are and whatever the circumstances.



A Christian is called to be a chrysalis rather than a chameleon. A chrysalis is a pupa which turns into a beautiful butterfly. A chameleon is a lizard with the power to change colour: many can assume shades of green, yellow, cream or dark brown. It is thought to change colour to match its background. Similarly, chameleon Christians merge with their surroundings, happy to be Christians in the company of other Christians, but willing to change their standards in an environment that is not Christian. Legend has it that an experiment was carried out on a chameleon. It was put on a tartan background, could not take the tension, and exploded! Chameleon Christians experience an almost unbearable tension in their lives and, unlike chrysalis Christians, do not reach their full potential.

Christians are not called to fit in with their backgrounds, but to be different. Being different does not mean being odd. We don't have to start wearing weird clothes or speaking in a peculiar religious language. We can be normal! A friendship with God through Jesus Christ should help each of us to become fully human – all that God intended us to be. In this sense, the more like Jesus we become, the more normal we become. When the nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard became a Christian, he declared, 'Now, with God's help, I will become myself.'²



When we follow Christ, we are free to shed patterns and habits that bring us and others down. For example, it means that we should no longer indulge in character assassination behind people's backs. It means that we do not need to spend our time grumbling and complaining (if that is what we were like before). It also means that we are free not to conform to the world's standards of sexual morality. This might all sound very negative; in fact, the opposite is the case. Rather than being backbiters, we should be encouragers, constantly looking to build others up out of love for them. Rather than grumbling and complaining, we should be full of thankfulness and joy. Rather than indulging in sexual immorality, we should be demonstrating the blessing of keeping God's standards.

This latter example is one area where Christians are called to be different, but which many find difficult. In my experience of speaking about the Christian faith there is one subject which arises time and time again – the whole question of sexual morality. Questions most frequently asked in this area are, ‘What about sex outside marriage? Is it wrong? Where does it say so in the Bible? Why is it wrong?’

God’s pattern here, as elsewhere, is so much better than any other. God invented marriage. He also invented sex. He is not, as some seem to think, looking down in astonishment and saying, ‘Oh my goodness, whatever will they think of next?’ C. S. Lewis pointed out that pleasure is God’s idea, not the devil’s. The Bible affirms our sexuality and it celebrates sexual intimacy: in the Song of Songs we see the delight, enjoyment and satisfaction it brings.

The inventor of sex also tells us how it can be enjoyed to the full. The biblical context of sexual intercourse is the lifelong commitment in marriage between one man and one woman. The Christian doctrine is set out in Genesis 2:24 and quoted by Jesus in Mark 10:7 – ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ Marriage involves the public act of leaving parents and making a lifelong commitment. It involves being ‘united’ with one’s partner – the Hebrew word meaning literally ‘glued’ together – not just physically

and biologically, but emotionally, psychologically, spiritually and socially. This is the Christian context of the 'one flesh' union. It is God's plan that children should be brought up in a context of love, and therefore commitment. The biblical doctrine of marriage is the most exciting, thrilling and positive view of marriage that exists, and arguably the most romantic. It sets before us God's perfect plan.

God warns of the danger of going outside the boundaries he has laid down, of ignoring the instructions. There is no such thing as 'casual sex'. Every act of sexual intercourse effects a 'one flesh' union (1 Corinthians 6:13–20). When this union is broken people get hurt. If you glue two pieces of card together and then pull them apart, you can hear the sound of ripping and see that bits of each are left behind on the other. Similarly, becoming one flesh and then being torn apart leaves scars. We leave broken bits of ourselves in broken relationships. All around us we see what happens when God's standards are ignored. We see broken marriages, broken hearts, hurt children, sexual disease and those whose lives are in a mess. On the other hand, in so many Christian marriages where God's standards are kept, we see the blessing that God intended to bestow on the whole area of sex and marriage.

Of course, it is never too late. God's love through Jesus can bring forgiveness, heal scars and restore

wholeness to lives that have been torn apart. Jesus wants to restore wholeness to our lives and to give us a new start.

So, let us not allow the world to squeeze us into its mould. Let us show the world something far, far better.

Make a new start

Paul says we are to 'be transformed' (Romans 12:2). In other words, we are to be like the chrysalis which changes into a beautiful butterfly. Many are fearful of change in their life: two caterpillars sitting on a leaf saw a butterfly passing by. One turned to the other and said, 'You won't catch me going up in one of those!' Such is our fear of leaving behind what we know.

God does not ask us to leave behind anything that is good. But he does ask us to get rid of the rubbish. Until we leave the rubbish behind we cannot enjoy the wonderful things God has for us. There was a woman who lived on the streets and walked round our parish. She would ask for money and react aggressively to those who refused. She walked the streets for years, accompanied by a mass of plastic bags. When she died, I took the funeral. Although I didn't expect anyone to be there, there were in fact several well-dressed people at the service. I discovered afterwards that this woman had inherited a large fortune. She had acquired a luxurious flat and many valuable paintings, but she chose to live on the streets with her plastic bags full

of rubbish. She could not bring herself to leave her lifestyle, and she never enjoyed her inheritance.

As Christians we have inherited far more – all the riches of Christ. In order to enjoy these treasures, we have to leave behind the rubbish in our lives. Paul tells us to ‘hate what is evil’ (v.9). That is what must be left behind.

In the verses that follow (Romans 12:9–21) we get a glimpse of some of those treasures to be enjoyed:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another with mutual affection. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practise hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s

wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not overcome by evil; but overcome evil with good.

Sincere love

The Greek word for 'sincere' means 'without hypocrisy', or literally 'without play acting' or 'without a mask'. Often, relationships in the world are quite superficial. We all put up fronts to protect ourselves. When we see governments doing this, we call it 'spin'. When we do it ourselves, we call it 'image'; we are projecting something. I certainly did this before I was a Christian (and it carried on to some extent afterwards – though it shouldn't have). I said, in effect, 'I don't really like what I am inside, so I will pretend I am somebody different.'

If other people are doing the same then there are two 'fronts' or 'masks' meeting. The real people never meet. This is the opposite of 'sincere love'. Sincere love means taking off our masks and daring to reveal who we are. When we know that God loves us as we are, we are set free to take off our masks. This means that there is a completely new depth and authenticity in our relationships.

Enthusiasm for God

Sometimes people are cynical about enthusiasm, but there is nothing wrong with it. There is a joy and excitement, a 'spiritual fervour' (v.11) that comes from our relationship with God. This initial experience of Christ is meant to last, and not to peter out.

Some people have an amazing initial experience of Christ. Some will not feel anything, and some will experience great difficulties. However, what really matters is where they are in their relationship with God in ten years' time. Similar to a marriage, it's the long-term that is of the most importance. It doesn't matter whether or not you have a great honeymoon. Some do, some don't. I know of one couple who got so sunburnt that they couldn't touch each other for the whole two weeks! I met someone recently who told me that their grandparents went on a barge for their honeymoon. On the first night, the barge sank; they had to bail themselves out and then get a bus home! But they had a wonderful marriage and were happily married for sixty-six years; that's what matters. Paul says, 'Never be lacking in zeal,' but, 'keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord' (Romans 12:11). The longer we have been Christians, the more enthusiastic we should be.

Harmonious relationships

Paul urges Christians to live in harmony with one

another and to be generous (v.13), hospitable (v.13), forgiving (v.14), empathetic (v.15), and to live at peace with everyone (v.18). It is a glorious picture of the Christian family into which God calls us, beckoning us into an atmosphere of love, joy, patience, faithfulness, generosity, hospitality, blessing, rejoicing, harmony, humility and peace; where good is not overcome by evil, but evil is overcome by good. These are some of the treasures in store when we leave behind the rubbish.

How do we do it?

'Present your bodies...'

This requires an act of the will. Paul commands us, in view of everything that God has done for us, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God (Romans 12:1). God wants us to offer all of ourselves and all of our lives.

First, we offer our time. Our time is our most valuable possession and we need to give God all of it. This does not mean we spend all of it in prayer and Bible study, but that we allow his priorities to be established in our lives. It is easy to get our priorities wrong. An advertisement appeared in a newspaper: 'Farmer seeks lady with tractor with view to companionship and possible marriage. Please send picture – of tractor.'

One of the things that happens when we give

everything to God is that people become much more important than possessions. Our priorities must be our relationships, and our number one priority is our relationship with God. Starting the day by reading the Bible and praying always has an impact on the rest of the day. We need to set aside time to be alone with him. We also need to set aside time to be with other Christians – on Sundays and perhaps at some mid-week meeting where we can encourage one another.

Second, we need to offer our ambitions to God, saying to him, ‘Lord, I trust you with my ambitions and hand them over to you.’ He asks us to seek his kingdom and his righteousness as our foremost ambition and then he promises to meet all our other needs (Matthew 6:33). This does not necessarily mean that our former ambitions disappear; they may become secondary to Christ’s ambitions for us. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be successful in our job, provided that our motivation in everything is seeking his kingdom and his righteousness, and that we use what we have for his glory.

Third, we need to offer him our possessions and our money. In the New Testament there is no ban on private property, making money, saving, or even enjoying the good things of life. What is forbidden is a selfish accumulation for ourselves, an unhealthy obsession with material things and putting our trust in riches. What promises security leads to perpetual

insecurity and leads us away from God (Matthew 7:9–24). Generous giving is the appropriate response to the generosity of God and the needs of others around us. It is also the best way to break the hold of materialism in our lives.

Next, we need to give him our ears – do we listen to gossip or do we attune our ears to hearing what God is saying to us through the Bible, through prayer, through books and talks and so on? We offer him our eyes and what we see. Again, some things we look at can harm us through jealousy, lust or some other sin. Other things can lead us closer to God. Rather than criticising the people we meet, we should see them through God's eyes and ask, 'How can I be a blessing to that person?'

Then we need to give him our mouths. The apostle James reminds us what a powerful instrument the tongue is (James 3:1–12). How many people can look back to something said to them at school or by a parent that has had a negative influence on their whole life? Do we use our tongues to deceive, curse, gossip, draw attention to ourselves, or to speak well of others?

Further, we offer him our hands. Do we use our hands in violence or to take for ourselves? Or do we use them to give and to serve?

Finally, we offer him our sexuality – do we use it for our own gratification or do we reserve it for the good

and pleasure of our marriage partner?

We cannot pick and choose. Paul says, 'Present your bodies' – that is every part of us. The extraordinary paradox is that as we give him everything, we find freedom. Living for ourselves is slavery; but 'his service is perfect freedom' (as the *Book of Common Prayer* puts it).

'... as living sacrifices'

There will be a cost to doing all this. It may involve some sacrifice. As the commentator William Barclay put it, 'Jesus came not to make life easy but to make men great.'³ We have to be prepared to go God's way and not ours. We have to be willing to give up anything in our lives which we know is wrong and put things right where restitution is required, and we need to be willing to fly his flag in a world that may be hostile to the Christian faith.

In many parts of the world, being a Christian involves physical persecution. More Christians died for their faith in the twentieth century than in any other. Others are imprisoned and tortured. We, in the free world, are privileged to live in a society where Christians are not persecuted. The criticism and mocking we may receive are hardly worth mentioning compared to the suffering of the early church and the persecuted church today.

Nevertheless, our faith may involve making

sacrifices. For example, I have a friend who was disinherited by his parents when he became a Christian. I know one couple who had to sell their home because they felt that as Christians they must let the Inland Revenue know that over the years they had not been entirely honest in their tax returns.

I had a great friend who was sleeping with his girlfriend before he became a Christian. When he began to look at the Christian faith, he realised that this would have to change if he put his faith in Christ. For many months he wrestled with it. Eventually both he and his girlfriend became Christians and decided that from that moment they would stop sleeping together. For various reasons they were not in a position to get married for another two-and-a-half years. There was a sacrifice involved for them, although they do not see it in that way. God has blessed them richly with a happy marriage and four wonderful children. But at the time there was a cost involved.

Why should we do it?

What God has planned for our future

God loves us and wants the very best for our lives. He wants us to entrust our lives to him so that we can 'test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and

perfect will' (Romans 12:2).

I sometimes think that the chief work of the devil is to give people a false view of God. The Hebrew word for 'Satan' means 'slanderer'. He slanders God, telling us that he is not to be trusted. He tells us God is a spoilsport and that he wants to ruin our lives. Often we believe these lies. We think that if we trust our Father in heaven with our lives he will take away all our enjoyment in life. Imagine a human parent like that. Suppose one of my sons were to come to me and say, 'Daddy, I want to give you my day to spend it however you want.' Of course, I would not say, 'Right, that is what I have been waiting for. You can spend the day locked in the cupboard!'

It is absurd even to consider that God would treat us worse than a human parent. He loves us more than any human parent and wants the very best for our lives. His will for us is *good*. He wants the very best (as every good parent does). It is *pleasing* – it will please him and us in the long run. It is *perfect* – we will not be able to improve on it.

However, sadly it's true that people often feel they *can* improve on it. They think, 'God is a bit out of touch. He hasn't caught up with the modern world and the things that we enjoy. I think I will run my own life and keep God well out of it.' But we can never do a better job than God, and sometimes we end up making an awful mess.

One of my sons was given some homework that

involved making an advertisement for a Roman slave market. It was a school project and he spent most of the weekend doing it. When he had finished the drawing and written all the inscriptions, he wanted to make it look 2,000 years old. The way to do that, he had been told, is to hold the paper over a flame until it goes brown, which gives it the appearance of age. It is quite a tricky job for a nine-year-old, so my wife Pippa offered to help – several times – but could not persuade him. He insisted on doing it himself. The result was that the advertisement was burned to a cinder, accompanied by many tears of frustration and hurt pride.

Some people do not want any help, they will not trust God, and often it ends in tears. But God gives us a second chance. My son did his poster again and this time he trusted Pippa to do the delicate singeing operation. If we will trust God with our lives, then he will show us what his will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

What God has done for us

The little sacrifices he asks us to make are nothing when we compare them with the sacrifice that God made for us. C. T. Studd, the nineteenth-century England cricket captain who gave up wealth and comfort (and cricket!) to serve God in inland China, once said, 'If Jesus Christ be God, and he died for me, nothing is too hard for me to do for him.'⁴ The writer of Hebrews urges us, 'Let us

run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God' (Hebrews 12:1-2, RSV).

As we look at Jesus, God's only Son who 'endured the cross', we see how much God loves us. It is absurd not to trust him. If God loves us so much we can be sure he will not deprive us of anything good. Paul wrote, 'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?' (Romans 8:32). Our motivation for living the Christian life is the love of the Father. Our model in life is the example of the Son. The means by which we can live this life is the power of the Holy Spirit.

How great God is and what a privilege it is to be in a relationship with him, to be loved by him and to serve him all our lives. It is the best, most rewarding, fulfilling, meaningful, satisfying way to live. Indeed it is here we find the answers to the great questions of life.

Endnotes

1. James T. Boulton (ed.), *The Selected Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.396.
2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*, ed. Alastair Hannay (Penguin Classics, 1996), p.295.
3. William Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), p.221.
4. Norman P. Grubb, *C. T. Studd, Cricketer and Pioneer* (CLC, 1985), p.141.

Alpha

Alpha is a practical introduction to the Christian faith, initiated by HTB in London and now being run by thousands of churches, of many denominations, throughout the world. If you are interested in finding out more about the Christian faith and would like details of your nearest Alpha, please visit our website:

alpha.org

or contact:

The Alpha Office,
HTB Brompton Road,
London,
SW7 1JA

Tel: 0845 644 7544

Alpha titles available

Why Jesus? A booklet – given to all participants at the start of Alpha. ‘The clearest, best illustrated and most challenging short presentation of Jesus that I know.’
– Michael Green

Why Christmas? The Christmas version of *Why Jesus?*

Questions of Life Alpha in book form. In fifteen compelling chapters Nicky Gumbel points the way to an authentic Christianity which is exciting and relevant to today’s world.

Searching Issues The seven issues most often raised by participants on Alpha, including, suffering, other religions, science and Christianity, and the Trinity.

A Life Worth Living What happens after Alpha? Based on the book of Philippians, this is an invaluable next step for those who have just completed Alpha, and for anyone eager to put their faith on a firm biblical footing.

The Jesus Lifestyle Studies in the Sermon on the Mount showing how Jesus' teaching flies in the face of a modern lifestyle and presents us with a radical alternative.

30 Days Nicky Gumbel selects thirty passages from the Old and New Testament which can be read over thirty days. It is designed for those on Alpha and others who are interested in beginning to explore the Bible.

*All titles are by Nicky Gumbel,
who is vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton*

About the Author

Nicky Gumbel is the pioneer of Alpha. He read law at Cambridge and theology at Oxford, practised as a barrister and is now vicar of HTB in London. He is the author of many bestselling books about the Christian faith, including *Questions of Life*, *The Jesus Lifestyle*, *Why Jesus?*, *A Life Worth Living*, *Searching Issues* and *30 Days*.

Are Christians called to be odd?
What should I do about mistakes in the past?
How and why should Christianity affect my lifestyle?

In this thought-provoking booklet, Nicky Gumbel tackles the answers to these and other key questions people may be contemplating.

How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life? is taken from the book *Questions of Life* by Nicky Gumbel and is a talk that is given on Alpha.

Nicky Gumbel is the pioneer of Alpha. He read law at Cambridge and theology at Oxford, practised as a barrister and is now vicar of HTB in London.

Follow Nicky @nickygumbel

ISBN 978 1 909309 678



9 781909 309678



© Alpha International 2016
alpha.org
@alphacourse
bibleinoneyear.org
#TryAlpha