



THE
GOOD LIFE
IN THE
LAST DAYS

MAKING CHOICES WHEN
THE TIME IS SHORT

MIKEY LYNCH

FOREWORD BY STEVE TIMMIS

Do you feel the tension between living the good life and dying to self?

You know Jesus calls you to take up your cross and follow him, sacrificing yourself to serve in his vital gospel mission.

But you also know the heart of the gospel message is grace and freedom, and enjoying God's abundant generosity.

Quite possibly you also know the horror stories of some burned out Christians, as well as the frustrating stories of those who just don't seem at all switched on to the mission.

In *The Good Life in the Last Days* Mikey Lynch helps you:

- zoom in and take a close look at the hard sayings of Jesus and the apostles
- zoom out to look at the full counsel of God
- discover a joyful wisdom (beyond simplistic clichés) that shows you how to live the good life in the last days.

“This is Mikey’s first book. I very much hope it won’t be his last. It is accessible and profound. Light and perceptive. My prayer is that the Lord will use this book both as a challenging call to sacrifice in the last days, and a deep, refreshing drink of the cool, sparkling water of the freedom that is ours in Christ.” – Steve Timmis, CEO, Acts 29

Mikey Lynch is the Campus Director of the University Fellowship of Christians at the University of Tasmania, Hobart, where he focuses on preaching to unchurched university students and graduates. But he doesn't feel at all guilty about spending time inline skating.



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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

The Good Life in the Last Days

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Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

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ISBN 978 1 925424 25 6

Cover design and typesetting by Lankshear Design.

For Nikki

We were writing this book with our lives
before I began writing it with my keyboard.
Your wisdom and compassion have helped me
learn these things; your patience and
forgiveness have borne with me as I am a
slow learner.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Nikki, Xavier, Esther and Toby for their support and love during the whole process.

Luke Isham and Joe Towns for the persistent and enthusiastic encouragement that gave me the confidence boost to have a go at writing a book.

Nikki Lynch, Dan Godden, Renae Godden, Paul Grimmond, Cathie Heard, Luke Isham, Rory Shiner and Dani Treweek for taking the time to read my draft and give insightful feedback.

AFES for granting me a sabbatical to actually get the book written and the AFES Hobart staff and student leadership for cheerfully and capably carrying on in my absence.

Simon and Rebecca for their generous hospitality in giving the Lynch family a writer's retreat.

Matthias Media for accepting this proposal from a first-time author and giving such good vibes alongside great constructive editorial input from Tony Payne and Samantha Dunn.

To the people and communities that have shaped my mind and life, including: David Jones, Pete and Anne Woodcock, Phil Dowe and Jo Kelder in my early years as a

Christian at St John's Presbyterian; my home church for the past 18 years, Crossroads Presbyterian; The Vision 100 Network of Tasmanian churches; the students and alumni of AFES Hobart; the Geneva Push board, staff and church planters; and, of course, my mum and dad for their love and wisdom in raising me.

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FOREWORD

A question which has exercised me over the past few years is how do we, as the people God has chosen not only to reveal his glory to, but also to display his glory through, “*proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness and into his marvellous light*”? God’s word is crystal clear that we have been blessed to be a blessing. We have been mandated to carry the good news of all he has done for us in Christ and all that he has for us in Christ to the ends of the earth before he returns to make all things new. But just how do we *do* it? In the everyday circumstances of life, the highs, the lows and the mundane, how do we live as the people we *are* in Christ and as communities of light in the midst of communities of darkness?

It is a self-evident truth that the expectations of our culture shape our discipleship. It seems to me that the pressure on this generation is even more intense than when I was in my prime. Our culture tells us to expect happiness and fulfilment, so we shy away from sacrifice. Our culture tells us that this world is all there is, so we desperately scramble after every satisfying experience we think we need in the here and now. Such idolatry leads to a church that is

weakened by distraction, wooed by pleasure and seduced by the mythical allure of autonomy. It leads to a church that is not only ineffective, but also joyless. Like CS Lewis's famous illustration of the ignorant child who turns down a seaside holiday in order to make mud-pies in the slum, we are also far too easily pleased.

In this penetrating book, Mikey offers a biblically informed corrective to our bleak tendency to bow to prevailing assumptions. It calls out the sin of idolatry for sure, but it also brightly communicates the joy and satisfaction that comes with loving God and delighting in God's love—satisfaction that increases and endures. It tackles the paradoxical nature of God's word—on one hand, sacrifice, on the other, enjoyment of his many gifts. It identifies unbiblical extremes and embraces godly zeal.

It is also particularly insightful in the way it combats intensity. Yes—we are disciples of the Servant King and we are called to follow him in sacrifice and suffering. Yes—we are called to make all sorts of decisions with gospel-focussed intentionality, from the career we select to the hobby we pursue. Yes—we say 'no' to good things in life for the better good of following Christ's commission and proclaiming his name. But in the midst of these choices and sacrifices... we laugh. We joke with colleagues. We relish a piece of warm toast with salted butter. We talk late into the night. We share our home with friends. We wrestle with our kids and grandkids. We enjoy our marriages.

Life is complicated. But rather than bemoan that truth, Mikey encourages us to revel in it. God has created this diverse world. The fact that there are always multiple options is not a curse—rather, it provides the blessed humiliation of

acknowledging that we cannot do it all. The fact that when we say ‘yes’ to one thing we are saying ‘no’ to something else need not be a burden—rather, it provides the deep-breath inducing peace of recognizing our creatureliness.

This is Mikey’s first book. I very much hope it won’t be his last. It is accessible and profound. Light and perceptive. My prayer is that the Lord will use this book both as a challenging call to sacrifice in the last days, and a deep, refreshing drink of the cool, sparkling water of the freedom that is ours in Christ.

Steve Timmis
CEO, Acts 29

PREFACE: WHY READ THIS BOOK?

It's hard to live the Christian life. You have to continually put to death your sinful nature and turn aside from a comfortable life in this world. You have to live in a way that is different than your neighbours, because you are living in the light of eternity. But the Christian life can be hard for us in ways it doesn't need to be, because we can distort the teaching of Scripture so that it smothers us. Christians can get extremely tangled up and discouraged by their idea of what it should mean for them to live the 'full-on Christian life'. A lot of energy goes into worrying about whether we are being zealous enough, or making sure that others are being zealous enough. It seems to me that this worry creates more friction than it does action. This book seeks to show a way forward.

Have you tried to zealously serve the Lord and hit the wall? Do you feel like a bruised reed? Maybe it's hard to listen to sermons about the call to lay down your life for the gospel, because it feels so unliveable now. But perhaps your vision of

what the Christian life must look like has gone beyond what the Bible is actually teaching? Perhaps there is a better way to think about zeal and sacrifice?

Are you living the sacrificial Christian life and wondering why so few are keeping up? Those of us who are strong and sacrificial need to be careful that we don't expect more of our fellow Christians than God does. Who knows? There might be a season of life where we will need to expect less of ourselves, as well.

Do you regularly give spiritual advice to others? We who are preachers, teachers and friends, need to know what the Bible commands every Christian to do, what it encourages us to do and what it gives us freedom to choose. If we are not careful, our well-intentioned exhortations and advice can slide into legalism.

Do you have the sneaking suspicion that you are not a Real Christian? Many of us can feel confused and deflated about our lives, because we fear that we have sold out. We have made decisions to live a sensible and sustainable life, but how do we know if this is simply worldly compromise?

Probably you are a mix of several of these put together. Whoever you are, I want to help you better understand that the complexity of the world is God's design, and that each Christian is given freedom to obey God according to their particular situation. I am convinced that when you see things this way, you can discover a joyful wisdom that guides you as you sacrificially serve the Lord. In this book, I zoom in to the hard sayings of Jesus and the apostles to understand what they actually mean and zoom out to consider the full counsel of God on how we live the good life in the last days: how we make choices when the time is short.

INTRODUCTION

Ruining your life for the greater good

We can do some of the worst things in the name of the greatest causes. With a genuine desire to live for God and to love a lost world we can hurt those closest to us. Who hasn't met someone who has become hostile to Christianity after growing up in a ministry or missionary family? They felt like their parents loved the congregation more than them. Who hasn't known a faithful, hardworking Christian who reached the point of burnout and never returned to their former zeal? Sadly, the more that worldly ministry ambition and other sinful desires get added to the mix, the more damage is done.

And yet the Lord Jesus calls us:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.” (Mark 8:34-35)

In the first season of *The West Wing* we watch the breakdown of the marriage of the White House Chief of Staff, Leo

McGarry. After several broken promises Leo comes home late on the night of his wedding anniversary to find his wife, Jenny, standing in the hallway, her bags packed:

Jenny: I can't do this any more. This is crazy. I don't want to live like this. I just can't.

Leo: I'm sorry about the anniversary. I just...

Jenny: It's not the anniversary. It's everything. The whole thing.

Leo: This is the most important thing I'll ever do. I have to do it well.

Jenny: It's not more important than your marriage.

Leo: It is more important than my marriage. Right now. These few years while I'm doing this, yes, it is more important than my marriage.¹

"It is more important than my marriage." That seems an outrageous statement! Of course she should leave him! How could he think, let alone say, such a thing? Yet isn't it tragically true that this exact conversation happens in Christian ministry homes? Although, rather than leaving, a wife may well stay in miserable silence, committed as she is to marriage for life.

But wait. Let's think about this for a second. Technically speaking, is Leo wrong? In the big scheme of things, surely being Chief of Staff to the President of the United States of

¹ Lawrence O'Connell Jnr and Patrick Caddell, 'Five Votes Down', *West Wing Transcripts*, episode 1. 4, 13 October 1999 (viewed 1 November 2017): www.westwingtranscripts.com/search.php?flag=getTranscript&id=4

America is actually more important than a single marriage? So much good can be effected for so many millions of people through a noble and competent government. Is Leo right—is this more important than his marriage?

How much more for those doing Christian things? For the apostle Paul exhorts us, “. . .the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not” (1 Cor 7:29). Isn’t the eternal good of salvation for others greater than the temporary good of marital happiness? I recoil strongly at the extreme wording of a passage like this—for I really love my wife and want to care for her well—but is it saying something hard but true? It’s difficult, isn’t it?

If you’ve ever read Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*, you would recognize the same kind of thing in the character of Mrs Jellyby—so absorbed in her good deeds for the good natives of Borrioboola-Gha that her children go about in rags. We hear stories from the history books and anecdotes from our own friends and acquaintances, of overworked and emotionally absent men and women, sold out for the cause of their career, their politics, their charity, their ministry.

We rightly dread being that guy. Sermons and Christian marriage seminars might even warn against being that girl. And yet doesn’t Jesus say, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26)? How do we put these two things together? After all, Christians are not utilitarians—just because something is hard and painful and costly doesn’t mean it’s wrong. Just because something may have negative consequences doesn’t mean it’s wrong.

From zealous to wise; from radical to sustainable

A pretty common experience for a young convert is to start their Christian life with a period of intense zeal; to be passionate, sacrificial, extreme, unbalanced, reckless. But over time they realize that this can't be sustained. They realize that some of this intensity was naïve and idealistic. And so they begin to slow down and balance out. And perhaps this is a right and realistic approach. The cause of Christian mission is not simply the emergency response to a short-term crisis—it's a long-term relief effort. It's more like long-term chemo than emergency surgery.

And this is good and right, theologically speaking. The New Testament doesn't paint a simple picture of reckless, radical mayhem. Much of 1 Timothy and Titus stand out in this regard. Written towards the end of the apostolic period, these ministry letters give guidance on how to ensure the long-term stability of the church and the gospel mission. Consider for example 1 Timothy 2:1-2:

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

“Peaceful, quiet lives.” That sounds a lot less exciting and urgent—positively boring, even. And this is not even restricted to the later books of the New Testament, as though things were cooling off and slowing down at that point in history. Consider this section from 1 Thessalonians, one of the earliest letters in the New Testament:

...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. (1 Thess 4:11-12)

The same passionate, zealous, sacrificial apostle Paul who wrote “the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not” (1 Cor 7:29), also urged his disciples to “settle down” and lead “quiet lives”. The picture of a godly life is a bit more complex than we might first think.

What about the book of Acts? Surely there we find the rapid and radical expansion of the church as the word of the Lord grows and many are added to their number? Yes and no. Often we miss the timescale of the narrative, because the story itself is so exciting. Let me give you just two examples from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. First, in Galatians 1:15-18 we learn that somewhere in Acts 9, soon after Paul’s conversion, a period of three years elapses during which time he goes to Arabia and Damascus. Second, in Galatians 2:1 we discover that between Acts 9-11 (or possibly chapter 15) another 14 years elapses. The story of Acts is still wonderful, but it is not as fast-paced as we might think.

It seems to me that some of our zeal comes not so much from direct scriptural warrant as from imaginative thought experiments used by preachers as inspirations, as they describe burning houses, miracle vaccines or shipwrecks. Even the intense contemplation of the state of the lost can be a more dominant emphasis in sermons and missionary appeals than in the balance of Scripture. “If we *really* believed in the truths of the gospel, what would we do?” we are asked.

But we don't need to *imagine* what we would do. Rather we need to listen to what God instructs us to do in his word. As John Dickson describes:

The problem is: God's Word does not quite put it that way, and attempts to argue otherwise usually involve stretching biblical passages beyond their plain meaning... as with many other issues, a worthy goal does not grant permission to handle the Scriptures poorly. We are involved in *God's* mission; we must allow his Word to shape our involvement.²

There are also important theological truths that inform the choices we make in our lives and our ministries. For example, we need to remember that our redeemer is also our creator; that our Saviour took on a fully human nature in his incarnation and rose again in a resurrected human body. And because of this, the gospel hope is not simply a 'saved soul' but a resurrected and glorified body in the new creation. Christian spirituality is not opposed to life in this world or the pleasures to be had here. It is neither gnostic³ or ascetic.⁴ Our spirituality delights in God the Father and all his words and works: his character, his good creation, his laws and promises, his righteous judgement, his work of salvation and the fulfilment of all things when Christ returns.

2 John Dickson, *Promoting the Gospel: A Practical Guide to the Biblical Art of Sharing Your Faith*, Blue Bottle Books, Sydney South, 2005, p. 15.

3 The name for a collection of 2nd-century beliefs that say the physical world is evil and secret saving knowledge gives us spiritual salvation from it.

4 Religious practices that seek to attain godliness through denying physical pleasure.

And this brings a whole bunch of competing values and duties. We are called to delight in the Lord, commanded to fulfil our duties as image-bearers of God in his world, as loving neighbours, dutiful citizens and tender, caring family members. Remember Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees for setting aside the word of God about honouring your parents, for the sake of their Corban traditions?

Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honour your father and mother', and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God', they are not to 'honour their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition." (Matt 15:3-6)

Zeal shouldn't come at the expense of love. Our intensity and urgency can mean that we treat people poorly: we are pushy with those we minister to and inconsiderate of those closest to us. But this is not how we are to live, on the contrary, we must fulfil the Great Commission in a way that still obeys the Greatest Commandments. We must beware of seeking to be devoted to God in a way that neglects our friends and family. The same Paul who wrote "the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not" also wrote "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... in this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies" (Eph 5:25, 28) and "urge the younger women to love their husbands and children... so that no-one will

malign the word of God” (Titus 2:4-5). There is much to be said for a biblically obedient concern not to ruin our lives for the glory of God. Our missionary zeal ought to be informed by godly wisdom and loving care. And yet is it possible to over-correct?

What place, then, for sacrifice?

The stories we hear of neglect and burnout can lead us to over-react against sacrifice. Even our own personal experience can lead us to become wary of radical zeal. We can become ever so careful about ‘work-life balance’ and so keenly attentive to the needs of our family that we resist any decision or commitment that might have a negative effect upon the health or happiness of ourselves or our family. And in doing so we end up effectively ripping bits out of our Bible:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”
(Mark 8:34-35)

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26)

The time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not;

those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. (1 Cor 7:29-31)

These verses have to mean *something*. Our decisions, commitments and lifestyles must surely look different if we are to follow God's word in these areas.

In this book I want to show that there is a *right* way to sacrifice. It need not be a brute choice between selfish, work-life preciousness on the one hand and a neglectful, destructive sacrifice on the other. There is a way of putting these things together that, even if it's not simple or comfortable, is nevertheless *good and loving*. A way of living the Christian life that even if it's not always exciting nor necessarily painful, is nevertheless *lived in the light of the reality* of Christ's saving work.

Far from having to strike some kind of balance or compromise between living in God's good creation and sacrificing for the gospel in these last days, I want to show that *sacrificing for the gospel is how to live well in God's good-but-fallen-creation in these last days*.

And far from being stuck depending on guilt or intuition to guide us, it is *spiritual reflection upon ourselves and our circumstances that helps us make decisions within the broad boundaries of Christian freedom*: there are a variety of ways to express this sacrificial calling.

ABOUT MIKEY LYNCH

Mikey graduated from the University of Tasmania with a Bachelor of Arts in 2002. In 2000 he became one of the founding leaders of Crossroads Presbyterian Church where he was the lead pastor for seven years from 2003.

Mikey now works as the Campus Director of the University Fellowship of Christians, University of Tasmania, Hobart. Mikey is the chairman of The Vision 100 Network (Tasmania) and a founding director of Geneva Push (national)—both church planting networks. He is also a chaplain at Jane Franklin Hall.

Mikey's ministry has focused on preaching to unchurched university students and graduates. He is also passionate about identifying and developing future Christian leaders. Mikey is married to Nikki and is the father of Xavier, Esther and Toby. He loves cooking, fishing, reading and has recently taken up rollerblading again.