



crazy love

OVERWHELMED
BY A RELENTLESS
GOD

FRANCIS CHAN
with danae yankoski

↓↑ CHAPTER TWO

you might not finish this chapter

You could die before you finish reading this chapter. I could die while you're reading it. Today. At any moment.

But it's easy to think about today as just another day. An average day where you go about life concerned with your to-do list, preoccupied by appointments, focused on family, thinking about your desires and needs.

On the average day, we live caught up in ourselves. On the average day, we don't consider God very much. On the average day, we forget that our life truly is a vapor.

But there is nothing normal about today. Just think about everything that must function properly just for you to survive. For example, your kidneys. The only people who really think about their kidneys are

people whose kidneys don't work correctly. The majority of us take for granted our kidneys, liver, lungs, and other internal organs that we're dependent upon to continue living.

What about driving down the road at sixty-five miles per hour, only a few feet away from cars going the opposite direction at the same speed? Someone would only have to jerk his or her arm and you would be dead. I don't think that's morbid; I think it's reality.

It's crazy that we think today is just a normal day to do whatever we want with. To those of us who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money," James writes, "Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:13–14).

When you think about it, that's a little disconcerting. But even after reading those verses, do you really believe you could vanish at any minute? That perhaps today you will die? Or do you instead feel somehow invincible?

Frederick Buechner writes, "Intellectually we all know that we will die, but we do not really know it in the sense that the knowledge becomes a part of us. We do not really know it in the sense of living as though it were true. On the contrary, we tend to live as though our lives would go on forever."³

Justified Stress?

I had never experienced heart problems until a couple of years ago when I began to have heart palpitations. Over time they became more frequent, and this worried me.

I finally told my wife. In case something happened to me, I didn't want it to come as a complete shock. She suggested I go to the doctor, but I resisted because I'm stubborn and that's what I do.

You see, when I was honest I knew what the problem was. I was immersed in and overcome by stress. It was the Christmas season, and I had to take care of and think about a lot of things.

But on Christmas Eve the issue intensified so much that I told my wife I would go to the emergency room after the church service. During the service, however, I surrendered all of my worries and stress to God. My symptoms slowly went away, and I never went to the doctor.

I used to believe that in this world there are two kinds of people: natural worriers and naturally joyful people. I couldn't really help it that I was the worrying kind. I'm a problem solver, so I have to focus on things that need fixing. God can see that my intensity and anxiety are ministry related. I worry because I take His work seriously.

Right?

But then there's that perplexing command: "*Rejoice in the Lord always*. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4). You'll notice that it doesn't end with "... unless you're doing something extremely important." No, it's a command for all of us, and it follows with the charge, "Do not be anxious about anything" (v. 6).

That came as a pretty staggering realization. But what I realized next was even more staggering.

When I am consumed by my problems—stressed out about *my* life, *my* family, and *my* job—I actually convey the belief that I think the circumstances are more important than God's command to always rejoice. In other words, that I have a "right" to disobey God because of the magnitude of my responsibilities.

Worry implies that we don't quite trust that God is big enough, powerful enough, or loving enough to take care of what's happening in our lives.

Stress says that the things we are involved in are important enough to merit our impatience, our lack of grace toward others, or our tight grip of control.

Basically, these two behaviors communicate that it's okay to sin and not trust God because the stuff in my life is somehow exceptional. Both worry and stress reek of arrogance. They declare our tendency to forget that we've been forgiven, that our lives here are brief, that we are headed to a place where we won't be lonely, afraid, or hurt ever again, and that in the context of God's strength, our problems are small, indeed.

Why are we so quick to forget God? Who do we think we are?

I find myself relearning this lesson often. Even though I glimpse God's holiness, I am still dumb enough to forget that life is all about God and not about me at all.

It goes sort of like this....

Suppose you are an extra in an upcoming movie. You will probably scrutinize that one scene where hundreds of people are milling around, just waiting for that two-fifths of a second when you can see the back of your head. Maybe your mom and your closest friend get excited about that two-fifths of a second with you ... *maybe*. But no one else will realize it is you. Even if you tell them, they won't care.

Let's take it a step further. What if you rent out the theater on opening night and invite all your friends and family to come see the new movie about you? People will say, "You're an idiot! How could you think this movie is about you?"

Many Christians are even more delusional than the person I've been

describing. So many of us think and live like the movie of life is all about us.

Now consider the movie of life....

God creates the world. (Were you alive then? Was *God* talking to you when He proclaimed “It is good” about all He had just made?)

Then people rebel against *God* (who, if you haven’t realized it yet, is the main character in this movie), and *God* floods the earth to rid it of the mess people made of it.

Several generations later, *God* singles out a ninety-nine-year-old man called Abram and makes him the father of a nation (did you have anything to do with this?).

Later, along come Joseph and Moses and many other ordinary and inadequate people that the movie is also not about. *God* is the one who picks them and directs them and works miracles through them.

In the next scene, *God* sends judges and prophets to His nation because the people can’t seem to give Him the one thing He asks of them (obedience).

And then, the climax: The Son of *God* is born among the people whom *God* still somehow loves. While in this world, the Son teaches His followers what true love looks like. Then the Son of *God* dies and is resurrected and goes back up to be with *God*.

And even though the movie isn’t quite finished yet, we know what the last scene holds. It’s the scene I already described in chapter 1: the throne room of *God*. Here every being worships *God* who sits on the throne, for He alone is worthy to be praised.

From start to finish, this movie is obviously about God. He is the main character. *How is it possible that we live as though it is about us?* Our scenes in the movie, our brief lives, fall somewhere between the

time Jesus ascends into heaven (Acts) and when we will all worship God on His throne in heaven (Revelation).

We have only our two-fifths-of-a-second-long scene to live. I don't know about you, but I want my two-fifths of a second to be about my making much of God. First Corinthians 10:31 says, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." That is what each of our two-fifths of a second is about.

So what does that mean for you?

Frankly, you need to get over yourself. It might sound harsh, but that's seriously what it means.

Maybe life's pretty good for you right now. God has given you this good stuff so that you can show the world a person who enjoys blessings, but who is still totally obsessed with God.

Or maybe life is tough right now, and everything feels like a struggle. God has allowed hard things in your life so you can show the world that your God is great and that knowing Him brings peace and joy, even when life is hard. Like the psalmist who wrote, "I saw the prosperity of the wicked.... Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure.... When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me *till I entered the sanctuary of God*" (Ps. 73:3, 13, 16–17). It is easy to become disillusioned with the circumstances of our lives compared to others'. But in the presence of God, He gives us a deeper peace and joy that transcends it all.

To be brutally honest, it doesn't really matter what place you find yourself in right now. Your part is to bring Him glory—whether eating a sandwich on a lunch break, drinking coffee at 12:04 a.m. so you can stay awake to study, or watching your four-month-old take a nap.

The point of your life is to point to Him. Whatever you are doing,

God wants to be glorified, because this whole thing is His. It is His movie, His world, His gift.

Thank God We Are Weak

So even though *God* has given us this life—this brief scene in His movie—we still forget we're not in control.

I was reminded of life's fragility by the birth of my fourth child and only son. All of a sudden our little girls wanted to carry their new baby brother around. My wife and I constantly told them to be careful because he's fragile. It got me wondering when he would no longer be fragile. When he's two? Eight? In junior high? College? Married? Once he has kids?

Isn't life always fragile? It is never under control. Even as I sat holding my son, I realized that I couldn't control whether he would love God.

Ultimately, I have just as little control over my own life and what will happen to me. Isn't the easiest thing at this point to start living in a guarded, safe, controlled way? To stop taking risks and to be ruled by our fears of what could happen?

Turning inward is one way to respond; the other is to acknowledge our lack of control and reach out for God's help.

If life were stable, I'd never need God's help. Since it's not, I reach out for Him regularly. I am thankful for the unknowns and that I don't have control, because it makes me run to God.

Just to put into perspective the brevity of our lives:

Throughout time, somewhere between forty-five billion and one

hundred twenty-five billion people have lived on this earth.⁴ That's 125,000,000,000. In about fifty years (give or take a couple of decades), no one will remember you. Everyone you know will be dead. Certainly no one will care what job you had, what car you drove, what school you attended, or what clothes you wore. This can be terrifying or reassuring, or maybe a mix of both.

Are You Ready?

As a pastor, I'm often called upon when life "vanishes like a mist." One of the most powerful examples I've seen of this was Stan Gerlach, a successful businessman who was well known in the community. Stan was giving a eulogy at a memorial service when he decided to share the gospel. At the end of his message, Stan told the mourners, "You never know when God is going to take your life. At that moment, there's nothing you can do about it. Are you ready?" Then Stan sat down, fell over, and died. His wife and sons tried to resuscitate him, but there was nothing they could do—just as Stan had said a few minutes earlier.

I'll never forget receiving that phone call and heading over to the Gerlach house. Stan's wife, Suzy, was just arriving home. She hugged me and cried. One of her sons, John, stepped out of the car weeping. He asked me, "Did you hear the story? Did you hear? I'm so proud of him. My dad died doing what he loved doing most. He was telling people about Jesus."

I was asked to share a word with everyone gathered. There were children, grandchildren, neighbors, and friends. I opened my Bible

to Matthew 10:32–33: “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.”

I asked everyone to imagine what it must have felt like for Stan. One moment, he was at a memorial service saying to a crowd, “This is who Jesus is!” The next, he was before God hearing Jesus say, “This is who Stan Gerlach is!” One second he was confessing Jesus; a second later, Jesus was confessing him!

It happens that quickly. And it could happen to any of us. In the words of Stan Gerlach, “Are you ready?”



Brooke Bronkowski was a beautiful fourteen-year-old girl who was in love with Jesus. When she was in junior high, she started a Bible study on her campus. She spent her babysitting money on Bibles so she could give them out to her unsaved friends. Youth pastors who heard about this brought her boxes of Bibles to give away.

Brooke wrote the following essay when she was about twelve; it will give you an idea of the kind of girl she was.

“SINCE I HAVE MY LIFE BEFORE ME”

By Brooke Bronkowski

I'll live my life to the fullest. I'll be happy. I'll brighten up. I will be more joyful than I have ever been. I will be kind to others. I will loosen up. I will tell others about Christ. I will go on adventures and change the world. I will be bold and not change who I really am. I will have no troubles but instead help others with their troubles.

You see, I'll be one of those people who live to be history makers at a young age. Oh, I'll have moments, good and bad, but I will wipe away the bad and only remember the good. In fact that's all I remember, just good moments, nothing in between, just living my life to the fullest. I'll be one of those people who go somewhere with a mission, an awesome plan, a world-changing plan, and nothing will hold me back. I'll set an example for others, I will pray for direction.

I have my life before me. I will give others the joy I have and God will give me more joy. I will do everything God tells me to do. I will follow the footsteps of God. I will do my best!!!

During her freshman year in high school, Brooke was in a car accident while driving to the movies. Her life on earth ended when she was just fourteen, but her impact didn't. Nearly fifteen hundred people attended Brooke's memorial service. People from her public high school read poems she had written about her love for God. Everyone spoke of her example and her joy.

I shared the gospel and invited those who wanted to know Jesus to come up and give their lives to Him. There must have been at least two hundred students on their knees at the front of the church praying for salvation. Ushers gave a Bible to each of them. They were Bibles that Brooke had kept in her garage, hoping to give out to all of her unsaved friends. In one day, Brooke led more people to the Lord than most ever will.

In her brief fourteen years on earth, Brooke was faithful to Christ. Her short life was not wasted. The words from her essay seem prophetic: *“You see, I’ll be one of those people who live to be history makers at a young age.”*

We’ve all been shocked to hear about or watch someone we know pass on from this life. Even as you read this, faces and names are probably coming to mind. It’s good to think about those people in your life, and also to think about death. As the author of Ecclesiastes wrote, “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart” (7:2). Stories of people who died after living godly lives are stories with happy endings.

Sadly, many people die while living selfishly. Their funerals are filled by individuals who stretch the truth in order to create a semblance of a meaningful life. Nobody would dare say an unkind word at the funeral; there is an unspoken obligation to come up with something nice to say about the person who died. But sometimes we secretly think the same thing: *He really wasn’t that great of a person.*

The truth is, some people waste their lives. This isn’t meant to bash those who are gone, but rather to warn those who are alive.

I can pretty much guarantee you that your funeral will be nice.

They all are. The fact is, at that point, you won't care. A. W. Tozer once said, "A man by his sin may waste himself, which is to waste that which on earth is most like God. This is man's greatest tragedy and God's heaviest grief."

When we face the holy God, "nice" isn't what we will be concerned with, and it definitely isn't what He will be thinking about. Any compliments you received on earth will be gone; all that will be left for you is truth. The church in Sardis had a great reputation, but it didn't matter. Jesus said to them, "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev. 3:1). All that matters is the reality of who we are before God.

His work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

—1 Corinthians 3:13–15

Perhaps that sounds harsh, but harsh words and the loving truth often go hand in hand.

I think it's easy to hear a story like Brooke's and just move on, without acknowledging that it could just as easily be you or me or my wife or your brother whose life ends suddenly. You could be the next person in your family to die. I could be the next person at my church to die.

We have to *realize* it. We have to believe it enough that it changes how we live.

A friend of mine has a particularly wise perspective on this subject. He was asked if he weren't spending too much of his time serving and giving too much away. His gentle but honest response was, "I wonder if you'll say that after we're dead."

Friends, we need to stop living selfish lives, forgetful of our God. Our lives here are short, often unexpectedly so, and we can all stand to be reminded of it from time to time. That's why I wrote this chapter, to help us remember that in the movie of life, nothing matters except our King and God.

Don't let yourself forget. Soak it in and keep remembering that it is true. He is everything.

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