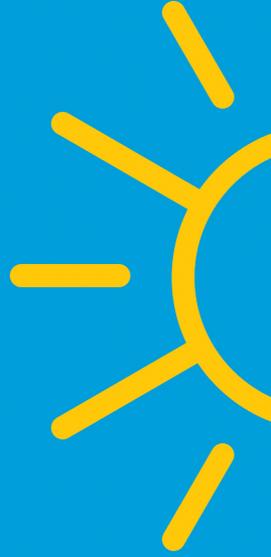


Jared Mellinger



A Bright Tomorrow

HOW TO FACE THE
FUTURE WITHOUT FEAR



“Through Jesus, Christians have a ‘God of hope’ (Rom. 15:13). But we are so prone to allowing circumstances, trials, disappointments, failures, heart-aches, and worries to cloud the sun of our unconquerable hope. This little book radiates hope, shining with the assurance of our Heavenly Father, ‘Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off’ (Prov. 23:18). I initially read *A Bright Tomorrow* because I was asked to do so in view of possibly writing an endorsement. Now that I’ve written it, I intend to read the book again because it encouraged me so much the first time.”

Donald S. Whitney, Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Associate Dean at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY; author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, *Praying the Bible*, and *Family Worship*

“I interact with a lot of people who have faced the devastation of losing a child. When your worst fears have become your reality, some wrestling with whether or not you can genuinely trust God moving forward and what that should look like is inevitable. I’ve wanted a book that I could give to people who ask me what to do with the very real fears they have about the future. And now I have it. *A Bright Tomorrow* offers readers a sound, scripture-saturated, concise, and winsome invitation to trust God with everything.”

Nancy Guthrie, Author of *Hearing Jesus Speak Into Your Sorrow*

“This isn’t pastoral hyperbole—I absolutely love Jared Mellinger’s new book, *A Bright Tomorrow*. As those in union with Christ, we are hard-wired for hope, whether or not we have yet to see, experience, and enjoy this wiring and hope. God will bring to completion the good work he has begun, not only in us as his beloved daughters and sons, but also in his entire creation. This is our hope. This is our living, heart-transforming, all-creation renewing, mission-engaging hope. With art and heart, Jared not only throws the curtains wide open on the glories of our all-things-new future, he also demonstrates the present power of remembering God’s future into our present moment.”

Scotty Ward Smith, Pastor Emeritus, Christ Community Church, Franklin, TN; Teacher in Residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, TN

“This book will help you to see. When your yesterday or today has been bleak, the road ahead looks only dark. Jared has brought together much of what Scripture says about tomorrow in a way that you will have courage to forge ahead with hope. Read it slowly.”

Ed Welch, Bestselling author; faculty member at CCEF

“I am grateful for Jared’s book and Aggie’s story where ‘Grace Reigns’ even where shadows fall and the sorrows rain. Such profound confidence in the past, present and future promises of God that cannot fail is gospel triumph.”

Bryan Chapell, Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church

“This is a beautiful book torn out of a father’s own anguished heart. Reading these words it was clear, ‘not only is it important to Jared that his readers hear this and believe it, but it is most important to the writer himself.’ We all have fears about the future and sometimes those fears can be acute, even paralyzing. Reading Jared’s book was soothing medicine that helped set my mind on things that are unseen but real and enduring. Give this book to someone you care about who is anxious about the future.”

Rankin Wilbourne, Pastor of Pacific Crossroads Church, Los Angeles, CA; author of *Union with Christ*

“We live in a scary world. Fear of an unseen, menacing future often troubles our hearts and robs us of joy. Jared Mellinger’s *A Bright Tomorrow* demonstrates from God’s Word that everyone who trusts Jesus has a Protector who is almighty, always faithful, overwhelmingly loving, and ever present. And Pastor Mellinger speaks from experience: for their own family, the Mellingers are embracing the hope that comes from God’s rock-solid promises.”

Dennis E. Johnson, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“We occupy a time where fear is the dominant chord: fear the future, fear death, fear pain. Mellinger’s book abounds in practical and biblical wisdom pointing us to the bright future we have in Christ. God has promised us an inheritance, goodness, mercy, and resurrected life. This is a timely word and a book that needs a wide reading. Christians can be eternal optimists because we already know the end of the story.”

Patrick Schreiner, Professor of New Testament at Western Seminary

A Bright Tomorrow

How to Face the Future Without Fear

Jared Mellinger



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DEDICATION

For Aggie the Brave:

Bringer of joy,

Fighter of cancer,

Daughter of mine.

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Introduction

THE FUTURE OF every Christian is incredibly bright, and the way to live a fruitful life in the present is to embrace all that God has spoken about that bright future. We are like travelers, whose view of the path ahead profoundly shapes our experience of life's journey. When our thoughts of the future are ill-informed or full of doubt, it drains our joy and peace. But when our thoughts are biblically informed and full of faith, we flourish.

I've written this book to help those of us who are troubled by the days to come. The future is dark at times, and courage does not come naturally for any of us. Changes are daunting, uncertainties are frightening, old age and death are concerning.

And yet, 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17 says that God our Father has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope through grace. You are so greatly loved by the Father, and he is so generous in his grace, that *eternal comfort* and *good hope* have been secured for you.

The goal of this book is to push back fear and unbelief and to awaken our souls to the boundless comfort and hope we have in Jesus Christ.

At the same time, this book is not just for those who look to the future and are troubled. It is also for those who don't tend to think much about the future. Even those who are not given to over-concern about the days to come need to discover the

blessings that come to us as we live in the good of our future in Christ.

All Christians need to think rightly about the future. Christ sustains us, satisfies us, and changes us by the power of a forward-looking hope.

The main idea driving this book is that the best way to counter future-oriented fear is to remember what God promises regarding our future. The problem for most of us is that we spend more time dwelling on the things we *don't* know about our future than the things we *do* know about it. We must learn to remember our future as God has revealed it in his Word. The things we know about the days to come ought to shape the way we view the things we don't know.

This Is Your Future

What do we know about the days to come? We know that God gives more grace (James 4:8). For every changing circumstance you face, there will be new mercy from the unchanging God of grace. His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22–23). That includes your day tomorrow.

We know that our good Father has given us great and precious promises (2 Peter 1:4), and not one word of all the good promises the Lord has made to us has ever failed (Joshua 21:45). We go through life leaning (even collapsing, when we have no strength) on the promises of God.

We know that goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. He will hold you fast and no one will snatch you from his hand.

We know that in Christ, the future has invaded the present. The Bible uses the language of *firstfruits* to signify that the single end-time harvest has begun. The resurrection of Christ from the dead is the beginning of the great harvest that includes our resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). When Christ rose from the

dead and ascended into heaven, we who are united to Christ were raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6). Now our lives are hidden with him, and we eagerly await the day when Christ appears and we appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:3–4).

We know that whatever trials we face, God will be with us to guide and preserve us. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you” (Isaiah 43:2).

We know that all our days are in the sovereign hand of a good and mighty God. Even when we forget our bright future, he does not. “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). We can be confident about the future, not because we know everything the future holds, but because we know the One who holds it.

We know that the day is coming, and will soon be here, when we together will hear the loud voice of the One seated on the throne, declaring that the dwelling place of God is with man and that he is making all things new (Revelation 21:3–5).

Encountering the God of Hope

It’s true that some biblical reminders of the future function as warnings and wake-up calls for Christians: “The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded” (1 Peter 4:7); “Let us keep awake and be sober” (1 Thessalonians 5:6); “Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Matthew 24:42).

But that is not Scripture’s dominant theme regarding our future in Christ. Biblical reminders about the future aim more at comfort and courage than they do at caution or correction. The message of “Be ready!” is loud, but the message of “Be full of hope!” is even louder.

Our future is more glorious than we know. This bright future is what we discover and apply throughout this book.

Chapter 1 explores the difficulty of facing the future with confidence. In chapter 2 we look at how Jesus helps us overcome the fear of the future. The following chapters present the key biblical categories that equip us to face the future: future grace (chapter 3), hope (chapter 4), and the promises of God (chapter 5). Chapter 6 celebrates the security we have in knowing that nothing can separate us from God's love.

The second half of the book connects the confidence we have in Christ to specific areas of life: future trials (chapter 7), parental fears (chapter 8), cultural decline (chapter 9), aging (chapter 10), and dying (chapter 11). Chapter 12 concludes with our ultimate hope that the Lord Jesus Christ will make all things new.

Because of the indestructible confidence we have in Christ, we are learning, by the grace of God, to face the future without fear and to anticipate a bright tomorrow. As Christians, we rest in the truth that there is no better future imaginable than the future that has already been secured for us in the gospel of grace. And God has given us his Spirit and his Word to reveal the riches of this future to us.

Eternal comfort? It's yours. Good hope? Yours.

My prayer for you is captured in Romans 15:13: "May the God of hope" use this book to "fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

Chapter 1

A Bright Tomorrow

The difficulty of facing the future with confidence

THERE WAS A day in the autumn of 2008 when my wife, Meghan, walked into our bedroom with a smile and handed a few index cards to me. She had drawn pictures on them in a style that intentionally mimicked the art of a five-year-old. We've learned that there is a lot of joy and beauty to be found in childish-looking art, so sometimes we create our own.

The first index card said "A new job!" at the top, and had a picture of a stickman preaching behind a pulpit. The stickman, I gathered, was me. I had been a pastoral intern at Covenant Fellowship Church in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania, and, after leading the singles ministry for a short time, I was asked to be the senior pastor. I was twenty-eight years old, which meant there wasn't anything especially *senior* about me other than the title. Yet in just a few months I would be stepping into a ministry position that involved leading a staff of experienced pastors and a church that was larger than what I was most familiar with. It was exciting. And daunting.

No matter what job you have, stepping into a new role or facing a difficult task tends to raise questions about the future: *What if I fail or burn out? What if I am ineffective? What if the company falls apart or I am laid off? When will I transition out of this role, and what will that be like? What if this responsibility crushes me in the meantime?*

Martyn Lloyd-Jones has a chapter on fear of the future in his book *Spiritual Depression*. He says that when the future dominates and oppresses us, it is often because we know the importance of our assignment and we know our own weakness and inadequacy for the task.¹

Days of Blessing

The next index card Meghan gave me said “A new home!” at the top. There was a drawing of the house we would soon be moving into, which in this particular rendering happened to look exactly like every other home a child would draw, complete with enormous flowers the size of people and a sun shining from a corner of the sky.

At the time, we were a family of five, living in a small two-bedroom townhome in West Chester, Pennsylvania. We were one of the only growing families in those townhomes. Meghan and I slept in one bedroom, our two boys slept in the other bedroom, and our little girl slept in a Pack ‘n Play that barely fit in our small bathroom. I remember neighbors looking at us with amusement as our family piled in and out of our minivan in what always felt to me like an elaborate circus act.

The new job had allowed us to buy our first home, and we found a place near the church. A new home is a great blessing, and yet buying a home usually involves wrestling with a number of questions about the future: *How secure is our income? Will God provide for us? How steady is the economy? What if the house is structurally unsound and collapses on us? What if our experience is like that old Tom Hanks movie, The Money Pit, where they buy a house that looks good but the plumbing is messed up, the stairs collapse, the electrical system goes up in flames, and the bathtub falls through the floor?*

The final index card is where I learned the most exciting news: “A new baby!” On the card, Meghan had drawn a picture of a family with four kids. In addition to the other changes in

life, we now had the indescribable joy of another child joining the family.

Children have a unique way of bringing our anxieties about the future to the surface: *Will our child be healthy and develop normally? Will my mistakes as a parent ruin my children? Will he or she walk with the Lord? What kind of world will my children grow up in, given the moral challenges and political changes our culture is facing?*

We stood together in our room that day, knowing that we were in the middle of a happy whirlwind of change. An unknown future was teeming with excitement, blessings, uncertainties, and challenges.

Meghan gave me a hug and kissed me. It was one of those vivid moments in life, recorded in my memory on vintage home video, with Daniel Stern's voice from *The Wonder Years* narrating the moment.

That autumn of 2008 was a time of blessing for me, and the road ahead was bright.

When Trials Come

When I first started writing about looking to the days ahead with courage and the good news of our future in Christ, I hadn't faced any severe trials in life. I was most familiar with the challenges that "happy changes" can bring.

But then, shortly after I began writing, our family faced the greatest trial we have known when our two-year-old daughter, the youngest of our six kids, was diagnosed with cancer.

That experience changed me, and it has inevitably shaped this book.

The summer of 2016 marked ten years of service for me as a pastor. That June, I began a sabbatical. I spent the first few days of the sabbatical studying for this book. The introduction and the chapter summaries had been completed, the publisher approved my proposal, and I was eager to use the first part of my sabbatical

to study the believer's future in Christ and why all Christians should face the future with confidence.

I spent one day studying the promises of God. I spent another day studying the return of Christ and the resurrection of the body. I spent a full day studying Romans 8.

During that week, we noticed that our daughter was having health challenges. Her name is Agatha; we call her Aggie. Aggie's breathing was labored, and she had several swollen lymph nodes on her neck and one on the side of her chest.

The next morning, I was planning on traveling with my wife, Meghan. The two of us were getting away to a beach house for a few days, to reflect on and celebrate the previous ten years of life and ministry. We decided late Saturday night to take Aggie to the hospital, just to make sure that everything was okay.

I called Marty Machowski, who is a good friend, fellow pastor, talented author, and my small group leader. For your kids, Marty writes books; for my kids, he writes books *and* does emergency babysitting. When Marty arrived to watch our kids, Meghan and I left for the hospital with Aggie.

I threw in my bag the two books I had been reading that day. (Some people go places without taking books with them, but that seems to me to be a terrible way to live.) One was a valuable book called *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ*, by Todd Billings, who at the age of thirty-nine was diagnosed with a rare form of incurable cancer. I was learning from him the role of lament in the Christian life, and how to face the future with confidence amid severe suffering.

The other was a great little book by Ray Ortlund on Romans 8, called *Supernatural Living for Natural People*. One of the things I had read in that book is this sentence:

A strong confidence in God's loving intentions and enveloping care fortifies us to face whatever life throws at us.²

Little did I know what life would throw at me that same day.

Only a few hours after I'd read that sentence, we were in the hospital with Aggie. They laid her on her back and she was unable to breathe. They immediately transferred her to the PICU (Pediatric Intensive Care Unit), where they provide the highest level of care for sick children.

It was a long night with no sleep and many tears, as we prayed for Aggie's life to be preserved. We were shocked and heartbroken when they told us that Aggie has a type of cancer called T-cell lymphoblastic lymphoma. For the next three weeks, Meghan and I lived in the hospital. Currently, Aggie continues on a two-year treatment plan with chemotherapy and regular hospital appointments.

This book is not an autobiography, but I have written it in the midst of a very personal fight to face my own future with confidence. I often fall short of the hope and courage I ought to have as a Christian. I've written down in these chapters the truths I need to be reminded of again and again.

Yet I Will Be Confident

Whatever our circumstances, God has promised that we have an ever-present help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Left to ourselves, our hearts would be ruled by fear. But God has not given us a spirit of fear. He gives us, as the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" says, "strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow."

Jesus Christ empowers us to face the future with confidence.

In Psalm 27:3, the psalmist declares, "Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, *yet I will be confident*" (italics mine).

When we look to the future, we see armies encamped against us. We see our own sin, we see a world opposed to God, we see creation groaning under the effects of the fall, and we see the Devil himself stalking us. We hear the sounds of war. And we feel weak. We know that sickness, difficulties, and death await us. We

question our spiritual strength and doubt our security. The future seems to spiral out of control.

In these moments, Christ comes to us and helps us lift our weary heads. *“Yet I will be confident.”* This is the Christian’s battle cry: *Yet I will be confident!* “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not!’” (Isaiah 35:3–4).

The reason for our confidence is given in Psalm 27:1: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

You are not without light in the darkness.

You are not without hope.

Christ is the stronghold of your life.

As our stronghold, Christ does not come to make our lives easy but to defend us against fear. Our fretful anticipation of trouble is often more troubling than the trouble itself. Therefore, our need is not so much to be delivered from the presence of trials as it is to be delivered from our fears of the future.

Godly Optimism

Those who are in Christ have every reason to be optimistic about the future. Hope dominates our outlook. We laugh at the days to come. We look at everything that could possibly come our way in life and consider ourselves more than conquerors.

The Bible promotes optimism, but it is a certain kind of optimism. Ours is not the secular optimism of positive thinking, but the godly optimism of Christian hope. This optimism is marked by realism and mixed with grief. We are sorrowful yet always rejoicing (2 Corinthians 6:10). We know that in this world we will have trouble, but we take heart to know the One who has overcome the world (John 16:33). Weeping may last for the night, but joy comes with the morning (Psalm 30:5).

Natural optimism is simply a matter of temperament, and is neither a virtue nor a requirement for the Christian. The

temperamental optimist does not have an advantage over the temperamental pessimist in the Christian life or in the exercise of Christian hope. True hope thrives in the darkness. It is through tears of lament that we see the beauty of our hope most clearly.

This book presents the message of Christian optimism, with the voice of confidence in Christ, grounded in his finished work in the past and in the promise of future grace.

Randy Alcorn says, “Because of the certainty of Christ’s atoning sacrifice and his promises, biblical realism is optimism.”³

At church, we have recently been singing a hymn by Mary Bowley Peters called “All Will Be Well.” It has been a great encouragement as I seek to look ahead with confidence.

We expect a bright tomorrow,
all will be well.
Faith can sing through days of sorrow,
“All is well.”
On our Father’s love relying,
Jesus every need supplying,
In our living, in our dying,
all must be well.⁴

Yes, in light of the character and promises of God in Christ, all *must* be well! The bright tomorrow is coming! Our future is better than we can comprehend. Tomorrow is bursting with joy.

Tomorrow Is a Happy Thing

Cornelis Venema, in his excellent book, *The Promise of the Future*, reassures Christians:

The future does not loom darkly on the horizon as something to be feared. It is something eagerly expected and anticipated, something which the believer is convinced is bright with the promise of the completion and perfection of God’s saving work.⁵

Likewise, Charles Spurgeon says,

A Christian can look forward to tomorrow with joy. Tomorrow is a happy thing. It is one stage nearer glory, one step nearer heaven, one more mile sailed across life's dangerous sea, one mile closer to home. Tomorrow is a fresh lamp of the fulfilled promise that God has placed in His firmament. Use it as a guiding star or as a light to cheer your path. Tomorrow the Christian may rejoice. You may say that today is black, but I say that tomorrow is coming. You will mount on its wings and flee. You will leave sorrow behind. Be of good cheer, fellow Christian, tomorrow can have nothing negative for you.⁶

Tomorrow is a happy thing. You don't know everything about your future, but you know the most important parts.

- God will be with you.
- Christ will pray for you.
- The Holy Spirit will empower you.
- God will supply all your needs.
- The Lord will protect you.
- The love of God will keep you.
- All things will work for your good.
- The defeat of sin and death is sure.
- You will see Christ face to face.
- You will worship the Lamb who was slain.
- Your body will be resurrected.
- Your sorrows will be no more.
- You will be with loved ones in Christ.
- You will be richly rewarded.
- Christ will make all things new.

We can't let this biblical vision of the future grow blurry.

I have this problem in life where sometimes my glasses get terribly dirty and I don't even know it. Then, after a few weeks, I remember to clean my glasses, or I clean them because someone tells me they can barely see my eyes. Suddenly the whole world is new. Everything is clear.

That's what hope is like. Hope wipes away the cloudiness of our fears and gives us a clear outlook on changing circumstances, present sorrows, parenting challenges, aging, cultural decline, politics, economic uncertainty, death, and the future of all things.

As we embrace our future in Christ, it shapes our lives and our character in the present.

I need this book as much as anyone. I want to grow in being able to look to the future with an unflinching boldness. And I want to help other Christians experience this joy-filled hope as well.

How do we face the future with confidence in Christ? It starts by hearing Jesus speak to our fears.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read Psalm 27. What are some of the truths that helped the psalmist face the future without fear?
2. What does fear of the future look like in your life? Take time to pray that God would embolden you and deliver you from fear of the future.