

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29–38

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Luke 21:29–38 (NIV)

“He told them this parable, ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.’ Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives, and all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple.”

I’ve titled my message this morning “How to Live at the End of Time.” We all, you know, are living at the end of time. We can see the end of time as that which is experiential or that which is prophetic. Perhaps we’re living at the prophetic end of time. That is, the last generation that is alive when Jesus Himself returns. If we are not living at the prophetic end of time, then we’re living at the experiential end of time, for this is the only time we’ve got. For you and me, this is the last generation. For it is the generation in which we will meet the Lord.

I used to think, when I was younger, that the idea of the experience of death was one that would come as sort of the natural conclusion to a long-lived and well-ordered life. My stereotypic ideal

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

was to live to be an old man of somewhere around one hundred and forty-six years of age; one day, lie down in my king-sized bed and call my children and great-grandchildren and family to my side and speak to them, one by one, and tell them all good-bye, pray with them, then put my head back on the pillow, take a breath and pass away. A kind of romantic view of death. I've discovered that by living at the end of time, in which we all are, for we never know if today will be the last day.

Two of our own church family went to be with the Lord this week—one in his mid-thirties, the other seventy-nine years of age. We do not know the day or the hour. But I've discovered that, as a pastor, death does not happen in my romantic view of being able to say good-bye. It happens to very few people that way. When we die, death comes in two ways. It comes quite suddenly, either through an accident or through a stroke or a heart attack, and there is no time to say good-bye. No time to straighten out any loose ends. Or death comes by a process, called "terminal illness." In the early stages, we're so busy fighting the disease, so busy denying that we are seriously ill or afraid that if we admit that we are seriously ill, we may be injuring our faith to ask God for healing. In the time we have that kind of illness, instead of gathering our family and talking about "what if?" we're talking instead about how the Dodgers are doing or if the Rams are going to win or, will the Angels finally make it this year? Then, when the end comes, it's an I-V. It's heavy medication. It's a comatose state. And we don't have that ability or the time to gather people and say good-bye. Nor straighten out all the loose ends of life. There are very few people who die who have had sufficient time and preparation to gather in all the loose ends. Jesus tells us, in His teaching on the future, that whether it's the end time by means of His coming or whether it's the end time for us by means of our death, we must be awake and watchful, for we do not know when the end will come. Therefore, we must always be on the

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

alert. We must always be ready. We must not live with a sense of gloom, but with a sense of preparedness; that “today may be the day I meet my Maker.”

It is in that kind of context that Jesus is giving us this discourse, this discourse on the Mount of Olives, as it is called, which began in Luke 21:5. We looked at the first part of it last week. It is the first and the only systematic teaching that Jesus gave regarding the future in His earthly ministry. He tells us what the course of the age is going to be like, between His first coming and His second coming. He says to us that, following His leaving the planet earth and prior to His return, there are going to be four generally prevailing conditions. There will be division in religion. There will be conflict among nations. There will be catastrophes in nature. And there will be persecution of His disciples. And He also says to that first generation of believers that they will see Jerusalem trodden down, that the temple buildings will be torn down, and not one stone will be left on another. Then, after these conditions have been fulfilled, He tells us that the Son of Man will come with great power and glory on the clouds of heaven.

Mark’s Gospel, chapter 13, in its recounting of the Olivet Discourse, records Jesus saying that He does not know the day or the hour in which He will return. But He does indicate that the signs will be present, which are the four basic patterns of the course of the age which Jesus, in the Olivet Discourse, likens to pregnancy. The more the pregnancy progresses and the child delivery becomes imminent when delivery is taking place, the labor contractions become increasingly more severe and more closely put together. So it is with the course of the age. There will always be divisions in religion, always conflict among nations, always catastrophes in nature, always persecution toward disciples. But as we near the end, all those things are going to become more accentuated and come at us with far greater rapidity. The Lord says, “When you see all these things happening, it’s like the fig tree and all the trees that are sprouting leaves. You

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

know that the summer is near.” In other words these conditions, these general conditions of the age, are meant to indicate to us that they are going to lead one day into the summer, into the time when Jesus Christ is manifested to us from the heavens.

With that in mind, Jesus, having given us the doctrinal portion of prophetic teaching, goes on to give us the exhortative part, the part which says to us, “In light of now, what you have been told here is how you are to behave.” In Scripture, what we believe is always meant to influence how we behave. So that doctrine goes with life. Jesus is giving a doctrine that relates to the course of the age and His coming. And now, beginning with verse 29 and on through, He comes to the practical application of that doctrine.

But before we can do the practical application, we need to settle our hearts on a little verse that has troubled some people; where Jesus tells us “I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened” (Luke 21:32). You should be aware that there have been a number of interpretations of that verse over the years.

One interpretation was that which was espoused by no less a person than Albert Schweitzer. He went, as a medical doctor and a humanitarian, to Africa to minister to the needs of that continent. Albert Schweitzer was attracted to the ethical and moral ideals of Jesus. He was persuaded that Jesus was the greatest teacher that had ever lived. But Albert Schweitzer himself did not believe that the resurrection had physically taken place or, at best, was not sure of it. In respect to Jesus’ teaching on the future, especially here in Luke 21:32, Schweitzer simply looked at that and said, “Jesus, during His lifetime, expected that the end of the age would come. He expected to die. Then, He expected to be coming back in power and glory to this earth, within the lifetime of the first generation of disciples He called. Jesus was wrong about that.” Schweitzer coined a

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

theological term to describe it, which is called “unrealized eschatology.” “Eschatology” meaning “study of the last things” and “unrealized” simply means it didn’t happen. It was not realized.

So Jesus is like all the other prophets that have come and gone. He took a look down the tunnel of the future and He guessed wrong. So the end of time did not come. And His coming did not occur within the lifetime of the first generation. There are many that hold this view, that this is what Jesus meant.

On the other hand, there are those in the 50s, 60s, 70s and early 80s who have attached, as evangelical Christians, a kind of unique interpretation of this verse, which has not been found in the history of the interpretation of this passage for the twenty centuries the church has existed. Namely, there are those who have come along, and perhaps you have read their books or listened to their tapes, who have said that when Israel was regathered as a nation, in 1948, the times of the Gentiles were completed and, therefore, the generation which Jesus is talking about in verse 32 is not the first generation of disciples—Peter, James, John, Andrew and the like—but it’s the last generation. The last generation that is alive at His coming. This generation will not pass until all things have been fulfilled. Therefore, when Israel was regathered as a nation in ‘48, the countdown of human history was beginning to tick off its final moments. Under this view, a generation is to be regarded biblically as a time period of forty years, since in the wilderness Israel as a generation perished in the wilderness after forty years. Given this scenario, add forty years to 1948, and the end of the age is 1988.

However, if Jesus is to come seven years before the end of the age in a secret coming for His Church called the rapture, then believers must be caught up in 1981. And there were books out in the mid 70s that were saying exactly this. Hints were being dropped from pulpits that by 1981—no later—the Lord would return.

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

We look at that and say, what's basically wrong with that kind of view? How can you prove it wrong? There's only one way to prove it wrong. Time proves it wrong. Some things you just have to wait upon. Those who have the 1948 view, as 1981 passed into human history, did a quick recalculation and discovered they had made a calculational error. So the prophetic timetables were gotten out again, and all the clocks and the charts were hauled out once more. Now, instead of 1948, it became 1967, when Jerusalem was reunified as a city under Israeli occupation. That was when the time of the Gentiles was completed. So you count forty years from 1967 and you come to 2007, when the world would end. And 2000 being the date—no later—in which Christ must return for His Church in the rapture.

I am not normally a person who makes predictions. But I will make a prediction that in the next thirteen years, should Jesus tarry, we will see more books and tapes and teaching that establishes 2000, and no later, as the outside date for the return of the Lord. Because we'd be going into a new millennium. It happened when 1000 became 1001. Back a thousand years ago, there was a millennial crisis, and now coupling together with '67 and 2000, it's just going to be a prophetic wonderland, and there's going to be a lot of profits for the prophets. While I say that humorously, on the serious side, I believe that there are many, many sincere and godly people who, out of conviction that we do live at the end of the age, have promulgated this point of view with no intent at all to profit from it or to any way hinder the body of Christ. It's just that this view is a rather late view and, with my doctrinal framework that I said last week—"If it's new it ain't true"—I have a difficult time espousing something that hasn't been around for 2000 years. There are two other views. I hope I'm not going too long on this, but this is one of the troublesome verses in the New Testament. People look at it and say, "What about this verse?" "This generation shall not pass..." Third view—not Schweitzer's view, not the '48/'67 view. But

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

this would say, we ought to look at the meaning of the word “generation.” It’s a Greek word *genea*, five letters; count the first four letters and it comes across as our English word “gene,” which is the whole idea of a generation, inter-genetic linkage. “This generation shall not pass away.” The word “generation” cannot only be used to describe people living within a certain span of time, but it also can be used to describe people who are living within the context of genetic linkage of race. Therefore, the word can refer to racial stock or a people or a nation group. It is closely linked to a synonym in the Greek language—*genos*. These two words can, at times, be used interchangeably. In fact, the classical Greek writers, non-biblical writers like Herodotus, Homer and Plutarch, all used the word *genea* (which is used here) to describe racial stock rather than a time span of a generation. Therefore, those who hold this position, this interpretation of Scripture, say that what Jesus is really saying is this *genea* this intergenetic linkage, in other words, these people who are Jewish. He’s been talking about the Jewish people in the Olivet Discourse and Jerusalem being surrounded by Gentile armies. These people, the Jewish people as an ethnic group, will never pass away. They’ll never be extinguished. There will never be a holocaust big enough to extinguish the ethnicity and the identity of the Jewish people as a people. That generation, that *genea*, those people who are linked genetically, will never pass away until all these things have happened.

That may very well be what Jesus meant, since Jesus didn’t speak in Greek, but probably gave this message originally in Aramaic. It’s interesting that the underlying Aramaic words are much like the Greek words. They can be interchangeable, referring to generation as a time span or inter-genetic bondedness and linkage as a nation or a racial stock. That may well be what Jesus meant. After all, today, where can you find a Hittite? Where can you find a Gershonite? Where can you find a Philistine? But where can you find a Jew? You can find one out of every four

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

Jews today living in Israel and you can find three out of every four living elsewhere, about half of whom are living in the United States of America. This generation did not pass.

The final view that is possible of this is that Jesus here is talking, not about the Jewish people as a people, but directly to His first generation disciples. Simon and Andrew and James and John. He's saying to them, "You as a generation will not pass until you've seen all these things take place." The key there is the word "things." Jesus explicitly states, in this discourse as recorded in Matthew 13, that He Himself does not know when the Son of Man will return. So since He doesn't know when He is going to return, it doesn't make any sense that He would say, "You're not going to pass away until I come again." In fact, He does not say, "This generation will not pass away until I come again." He says, "This generation will not pass away until all these things are fulfilled." What are the "things"? The things are the four general conditions of the human race—the division in religion, the conflict among nations, the catastrophes in nature, the persecution of His disciples, the destruction of Jerusalem. All that happened in the first generation. So what Jesus is really saying, in this last point of view on particular verse, is that "You, My first generation disciples, are going to see, in your lifetime, all the conditions for My return fulfilled." If this is the proper interpretation, what Jesus is saying, for every generation of the church, is to live in a state of ready, any moment preparedness. That there is no such thing as saying, "The Lord couldn't possibly come today because such and such a sign has not yet been fulfilled." Jesus wants His people to live with a sense of urgency and imminence. The Lord may come at any moment. All these things were fulfilled in the first generation—they had division in religion, they had conflict among nations, they had catastrophes in nature and they certainly had persecution, so it was all fulfilled. And the Lord could come at any moment following that.

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

If you notice, on the fourth point, I raised my voice a little higher than the other three. That's the point that I would hold to. I think it's reasonable and rational and it's not inventive. Beware of inventive and creative interpretations of Scripture. Just stick with the facts.

"Heaven and earth," Jesus says, "will pass away." We noted last week how accurately Jesus called the age. He was not an optimist when it came to human history. He saw human history without God on a declining scale. But He tells us how we are to live at the end of time. We get a composite of how to live when we take the Olivet Discourse as recorded in all three Gospels. We take Matthew 24 and 25, Mark 13, and Luke 21, put them all together and compare them, and we come out with the fact that Jesus basically had and wants to communicate to us three perspectives by which we are to live at the end of time, by which we are to live any day of our life. Three simultaneous perspectives we are to keep in mind:

I. The first perspective is very clear from the discourse. Be prepared.

Be ready to suffer, to undergo reverse, to go through persecution and loss, and maybe even martyrdom. Be prepared to endure. That is His word. He says to His disciples, "You're going to be hated by religious groups. You're going to be hated by governments. You're going to be hated and betrayed by your family. You're going to be hated by all. Be prepared to endure. "That's not a word of perspective that American Christians have been tuned into much, because we generally have a comfortable life. We live in a thermostatically controlled environment, where almost anywhere in Southern California culture we can set our dial to 72 degrees and live in a comfort zone. So this whole idea of endurance and suffering doesn't particularly jump up and grab us. But it grabs the church of Jesus Christ worldwide. It grabs it over the ages and years. In the last two years, six hundred and thirty thousand Christians have been martyred for their faith. A call to endure. Jesus, when He speaks on the Mount of Olives, doesn't just speak to the American

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

church, He has to speak to His worldwide Body, many of whom are in cultural conditions much different than our own.

I think of this story that came out of China from one of our missionaries after the cultural revolution had passed. One of the first things that came out of China, out of the Chinese Christians there—when the Bamboo curtain lifted and some western Christians were able to make contact with the church there—the word coming out of the church there to the American Christians was this: “Is the tribulation over yet?” It makes you look at things a little differently. There was a pastor in China who, with his wife and three boys, was living in a town in Northern China. A day came when he was arrested and immediately deported to another zone in China, to South China, two thousand miles away. When his wife came home that day from her work, she found an eviction notice on the door of the home in which they were living. The children came home and reported that the school administrator told them not to come back. They discovered that, when they went to get food, their identification papers were no longer recognized. They had been declared “non-people” by the Chinese government, which meant that legally they did not exist. The wife gathered her three little boys together and, living sometimes in the open field and sometimes in the shelter of a shack out on a back piece of property, living on the handouts the believing church gave them, of food and clothing, they went on. The husband went down to South China, near the Vietnamese border, where he was put to work in a rice field. A year went by, then two years went by, four years, six years, ten years, fifteen years and finally twenty years. Twenty years of separation. Not a letter, not a contact of any kind between the husband in Southern China and his family in Northern China. They didn’t know if he was alive. He didn’t know if they were alive. What happened to his kids, did they get brainwashed by the government? Were they atheists, if they were living? What happened to his wife? The day came

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

when he became very ill. He became so ill with such a high fever that the commandant of the camp gave orders for him to be released, because he did not want him dying in camp.

Somehow, he was miraculously able to get on a train that was heading back to his home area of China. Weeks later, he came into his home. He recovered sufficiently on the train back that he was able to locate his wife and his children, who were now grown. He discovered that they had continued to serve Christ under the most adverse circumstances. His boys had grown up to be fine young men, all serving the Lord. The cultural revolution was over and he was allowed to become the pastor of the church in his town again.

A missionary friend of mine visited him shortly after this family was reunited. He said to me that he sat in a corner of the house where this family had gathered with the Christians in their community. He sat on the floor, with his back against the wall, and listened to them as they praised the Lord and thanked God together and then they said to him, “We want to sing the song that has sustained us during this time,” the song that was their favorite. It was a song taught to them by the American church, which was translated into Chinese. It is this song: “Great is Thy faithfulness, O God, my Father, morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed Thy hand has provided. Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.” Here was a family who had learned this great thing, which Jesus is calling us to do. To serve Him when the going is tough. And to endure.

The call of the Christian life is a call for heroes. It is not a call for cowards. It is not a call for those who want to live comfortably and respectably. It’s a call that requires heroism. The Christian life is not a religious placebo which inoculates us from life. It is a call to hope and courage. It is not a call to warm water. It is a call to rigorous life. Jesus says, “Follow Me, even if the going is tough. Follow Me.”

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

II. The second perspective that the Lord tells us to have, as we live at the end of time, is a perspective which is totally different from the first. It is as though they are paradoxical things we are meant to hold simultaneously in our heart. That is the perspective: Be prepared to live a normal life span.

You might have seventy years out there. If you're young, maybe the Lord will not return in your lifetime. Maybe the tribulation won't happen in your lifetime, either.

You say, "Where do you get that principle out of the Olivet Discourse?" I go back to Matthew, where Matthew records one of the parables Jesus told on this occasion. Luke has a tendency, at times, to condense, because he's packing so much in. As an editor, with freedom that the Holy Spirit allows him, he has to cut some things. But Matthew includes the story of the parable of the talents. Three people are each given a different sum to work with and to invest—five talents, two talents, one talent. The master who gave them the money goes away. A long time later, he returns and asks them for an accounting. The five-talent and two-talent people have doubled their investment. But the one talent guy was afraid of the future, and he went and hid his money in the backyard. And the Lord cuts him down for doing that.

I've wondered how that story would turn out had Jesus come back the week after He had given the money out. I've wondered if the one talent guy would be the hero of the story. He'd be able to say, "Lord, here it is, right here. I've got all of my assets liquid. Here they are." The five-talent guy would have had to appear before the Lord and said, "Lord, I just tied that up in a three hundred and sixty-day certificate of deposit and I can't get it out." Or, "I just made a real estate investment and it's not going to show profitability until ten years out." I wonder what the Lord would have done. If the Lord had come prematurely, early, He would have known what was in

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

the heart and what would have developed, had He given them time. He would have still rewarded the five and the two-talent guy for planning to live a while and planning for the future.

I think I saw this best when I was a kid on the farm. I saw a chicken killed one day, a hen. To my astonishment, when it was opened up, there was not only today's egg inside of it, but there was tomorrow's egg—all well-developed. Day by day, eggs were in a state of formation. I was amazed. I thought that a chicken did one egg all at once. I had no idea that process was involved and there was literally an egg factory in that chicken, under various stages of development. As I look back through the window of the years and see that egg-laying there, in various stages of formation, I realize that, had the owner not called the chicken's time, those eggs would have been laid on schedule. It was not up to the chicken to decide when it was going to go. It was the owner that decided. And the owner looked and said, "This was a good chicken. It had potentiality. Tomorrow's potential is there."

Far be it for me to compare the Lord's coming to a dead chicken. But I think there's some analogy there. When the Lord returns and He opens us up, maybe He'll come when you're sixteen. When He opens you up, He's going to be looking, He's going to be asking, what were the things that were going on in your life that would have produced the person you would have been at the age of forty or forty-five? Was there something there that was building for the future? Were you making commitments and dedications in your life? Were you making decisions on purity and morality and honesty? Were you saying, "Lord, I'll go where You want me to go?" Was that in your heart? So if He opens you up when you're sixteen, He sees what you would have been when you hit forty-five—an old man like me. Potentiality.

This is important to me, because when I was sixteen and wanted to go into the ministry, I had graduated from high school and I had well-intentioned believers tell me, "George, don't go to

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

school. The Lord's coming any day now. You'll waste your time in school." I said, "I want to go to school. I want to spend four years in college and three years in seminary." I didn't have an answer for them. The only answer I had was, "If Jesus could wait until He was thirty to begin His public ministry, I suppose I can wait until I'm twenty-three." That's the only answer I had. I've realized since then that Jesus' teaching is developmental in nature. He sees life as developmental. There are no quick fixes. There are no quick cures. There is no way to become an overnight phenomenon in the Christian life. It's hard work, it's discipline, it's putting your shoulder to the plow, it's getting to work, it's getting on with life. It's developmental. Jesus says, "Take time to look down the long road to where you're going to be if the Lord will give you twenty years, thirty years, forty years to live for Him and to work for Him. Go! Invest! Develop! Don't expect overnight things to happen that will plummet you into some kind of position of responsibility and leadership. Take time to develop." Especially the young people who are involved in education. Take time to let these be meaningful years in the growth of potentiality in your life.

III. The third thing that Jesus tells us, the perspective to live with at the end of time is to be prepared to go up at any moment.

Any moment, the Lord could come. So not only be prepared to suffer. Not only be prepared to live a normal lifespan. But also hold, within your hand, the prospect that this day may be the day I meet the Lord. And the Lord, in the Olivet Discourse in verses 34–36, tells us that we need to watch for some dangers that would keep us from being aware and alert to His coming. "Be careful," Jesus says. "Be on the watch. Stay alert. Keep awake. On guard. Lest your hearts be weighed down."

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

The same word “weighed down” is used in Mark 14 to describe the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane whose eyes were weighed down. They became heavy. They were weighed down with sleep. They couldn’t stay awake and pray when the Lord wanted them to watch. Now the Lord is saying, “Your eyes may not only be heavy, but your heart may become heavy.” Heavy how? Heavy, weighed down with dissipation.

Dissipation? What is that? I got out my Greek concordance and looked up what “dissipation” was and discovered there is a very vernacular translation for that word. It means “hung over.” You’re out on a drunk and you’re hung over. Your mind is not in control. You’re just hung over, stretched out. Drunkenness.

If Jesus were not talking to Peter, James and John, I might understand these words. But it’s Peter, James and John, Andrew and Matthew, these people. And He’s warning them, “You can become weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness.” I would not expect these words to be used for disciples. But Jesus uses them for disciples. Why? Because in living, part of living is that there is pain in life. Who in this room has not gone through pain? Sometimes, the pain for a disciple can be external persecution, because one is a Christian and there are believers all over the world who have paid the cost because of that. But sometimes, our pain is because of our linkage, not with Christ, but with Adam, with humanity, because there are relational problems, financial failures and psychological pressures and stresses of all kinds. We become weighed down.

So what might we be tempted to do? To seek an easy cop-out. To take a chemical or to take a bottle and to drown ourselves and escape. Why is it that, in this country, we’re having such a drug problem and an alcohol problem? It’s not just because people are experimenting with things. It’s because there’s such a void in human life that we just want to get away from the hum-

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

drum and the nastiness of life and the broken relationships and the sorrow and the abuse that we take. Jesus is saying, “Don’t take that way out.”

It’s interesting to me that Jesus would warn His disciples on drunkenness. I think, for Christians living in our contemporary society, by the way, there’s only one safe way to deal with alcoholic beverages, and I may be of the old school on this. But I think the safest way is to simply say no. I have seen too many Christians get into trouble by a social drink and a glass of wine and watch their lives absolutely unravel. Alcohol becomes a crutch. It seems to me, as I look at Scripture, that the safest position is to drive as far away from the cliff as you possibly can. “Don’t be caught up with dissipation and drunkenness,” Jesus says.

Or the anxieties of life. That same word “anxieties” is used by Jesus earlier in His ministry, in the parable of the sower and the seed, where He talks about the seed that fell among the thorns and the thorns grew up and choked the potentiality of the seed. Because the thorns represent the anxieties of life. A departure from things that are really God’s concerns, to being immersed in our own life problems and life situations and gradually, it chokes out our productivity. Because either anxieties or wealth have choked out our effectiveness for God. Jesus says don’t let this weigh you down.

Or that day will come upon you unexpectedly, like a trap. Jesus is very clearly giving us a warning that it’s possible we may be His disciples, yet begin to live in such a way that we become unprepared and unready to meet Him. The day, instead of being an escape for us, becomes a trap into which we fall.

One thing I’ve learned is that we have to take the doctrine of the last things and make sure that we’re saying the same thing that the doctrine of salvation is saying. That they’re not two different doctrines. Salvation, we’re saved by grace, through faith. Not saved by our works. If

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

we're saved by grace, through faith, this must mean we're not "raptured" by our works either.

But we are caught up to be with the Lord in the air because of our relationship, which has been given to us by His grace, through our faith.

I say that because, emotionally, I lived on one side of the pendulum, which I call the "rapture by works" side of the pendulum. I was sure, for example, as a kid, growing up in the church, that Jesus had timed His second coming to exactly coincide with my first attendance in a movie theater. I was just sure that's the way it was going to happen. I thought the Lord didn't want me to go to heaven. He was going to deliberately rig His coming to find me doing some unacceptable thing. Now, if I understand the gospel at all, it's that Jesus wants us to go to heaven. That's why He came. He dearly loves us and He wants us all to get on board. So my doctrine of the second coming was that I was sure I would be doing something wrong and that would be cement on my feet. I was judging my salvation, not on the basis of my relationship with Christ, through faith by grace. Instead, I was judging it on the basis of my works and my own effort.

The opposite side of that pendulum is the other side, which says, "At one time I gave my life to Jesus Christ and since I gave my life to Jesus, I know I'm not living like a Christian. I know I'm going out and hitting all the singles' bars and getting drunk. I'm not living the moral lifestyle. I can't help it. But I know the Lord still loves me and everything's going to turn out all right." The Lord says, "Beware, lest that day come upon you as a trap." You can become so callused, so indifferent to Christ, you can fall away from Him.

You say, You mean you can fall away from Christ? Why would Jesus have given us the threat if He didn't mean it? Why would He have said, "Lest that day come upon you as a trap"? If it was just empty words. He tells us, as we follow Him, to live in a state of preparedness and readiness,

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

that the dedication that we have to Jesus Christ today should be as strong and as enduring and as heartfelt as it has been in any day of our life.

Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man. The doctrine of the second coming. Wherever you find it in Scripture, it's always such an encouragement to Christians. It's not used as a downer. It's not used as a threat. It's not used as a guilt trip. It's not used as a club. It's used as an encouragement. Hang in there. Endure. And in the end, you'll see that He will prevail and there will be a glorious end for, not only human existence, but for your own life as well. It will all turn out alright. He is the Lord and He is in control.

I hadn't planned on telling this story, but as I was sitting on the platform in the 9:00 service and praying about my message, I remembered an incident in my dad's life that helps me see the second coming in a wonderful personal perspective. My dad was in his late 50s at this particular time in his life. He was without a church. That means that he was a minister, but he didn't, at that point, have a pastorate. A lot of churches, when a person reaches their late 50s, don't want a pastor that age because they're looking for a younger man. Dad had gone for many months without a church. It was, of course, very damaging to his self-esteem. It was very trying financially for the family. He just sunk into the pits.

We have, in our denomination, the Assemblies of God, a wonderful form of pastoral selection, which I have found a term for—to describe it—I call it “Ecclesiological Darwinianism.” Which means, “random selection and survival of the fittest.” It's sort of like the California lottery. There are many churches that select a pastor on the basis of having three people come and preach, and then they vote on one out of the three. It's sort a little bit like going to the horse races. If you're the first one to candidate in a church...you don't ever want to be the first because, by the time

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

three weeks have gone by, the congregation has probably forgotten who you were. So if you're going to candidate with that kind of system, you always want to be last. And you know you're in first place if you're the one you know the people aren't considering very heavily. That's often the rule.

Dad was asked to come to this church and candidate first. So he went. Weeks went by, candidate number two and candidate number three. I watched my dad everyday. He just felt he was through. There was nothing more for him to do. He felt frustrated. He felt like he had a call of God on his life, yet there just seemed to be no place where he could serve. He wasn't trained with any other job-related skills, so there was really nothing. And he was old and not in good health. Late 50s is not necessarily old, but you can be old at that age. I remember that he became ill and went to bed for a couple of days. That was so unlike dad, to lay around in bed. Just sick. I was home that Wednesday night when the church was supposed to be meeting. Dad said, "It's absolutely no use. There won't be a call." At about 9:30 at night, the phone rang, and bless that brother on the other end of the line! He said, "Brother Wood, we just wanted you to know we just had our church meeting and the church would like you to become pastor." Dad cried, he was so overwhelmed. Somebody wanted him again to be a pastor, to be a minister. It was amazing how quick he got well. The next morning, he was in his best dark suit and had his hat on—people of that generation often wore a hat when they were going out—he was ready for life again. It was so thrilling to see that transformation. One moment, he was crushed beyond despair, and the next moment, he was ready to live again.

I somehow think that, in an existential sense, in a relational sense, an experiential sense, that the coming of the Lord is a lot like that. That there are moments in life it gets turned down for us. You may not be there now, but there are people in this audience that are that way. And the Lord

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

is saying that the thing that undergirds all of our human reality, all of our personal reality, is the fact that He's going to make it all right. There's going to come a day when we all get well. When we all put on our Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes, the white of heaven. And all the "why's" will become known. And all the dark threads will be understood. God will come for us in power and great glory. The second coming says there's a day when God's going to make it all right. That gives us hope. It gives us stability in moments of our life when things are not put together and when there are a lot of loose ends, a lot of dangling cords and a lot of hurt in our life. We're experiencing things we wish we didn't have to experience. Jesus is telling us "Stay in there. Be on the alert. Watch. The Son of Man is coming."

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, such a joy to know You. You make such a difference in life. You are the reality upon which we build our life. We thank You for Your wonderful promises to us. There is coming a day in which You will make all things new. There are times, Lord, when we feel so weak and so alone and vulnerable. So we do lift up our eyes to that moment when You come with power and great glory on the clouds of heaven, with all the holy angels, with a cry of loud command, with a trumpet call, with the archangel's announcement, with a sword and scepter, with power. And Lord, just as when we were in the Holy Land and we think of going to Jerusalem, we always think about going up. So in the Christian life, wherever we are on earth, when we think about the New Jerusalem, likewise, we always think about going up. But the conclusion of life is not a looking down, not a going down. It is a going up. Let us go up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. Lift up your heads. "Your redemption draweth nigh." Jesus, Jesus, You said that to us. "Lift up your heads!" So today, in life, where our eyes are cast down and where there is difficulty, You bring us this word of assurance and hope. We're Your people. You're coming for us. You're not

HOW TO LIVE AT THE END OF TIME

Luke 21:29-38

going to abandon us. You're coming for us. There will be a day and age in which all things will be made new. Give us strength to live for You. In between the times—in between this time and that time—give us strength to live for You. Help us in our life to love You so much that we can live the life of heroism and endure. That we can live a normal life span and make it count for You. We can also live today and put our lives in Your control and say, “Lord, if today's the day You come, everything is resolved. There's nobody that I haven't forgiven. There's no debt that I owe that I haven't arranged to pay. But everything's right. Today's the day, Lord. I'm ready.” May that be a confession from our heart and, if we can't say that honestly, then do Your work of repair in our life, that brings us to that moment of release, where we can simply say, “Lord, if today's the day, I'm ready.” Bless Your people, Lord. Thank You for these moments of gathering in Your presence. Through Christ Jesus. Amen.