

Jesus!
“Living in Light of Eternity” (Luke 12:35-59)

Take a first look.

I. I WAS CALLED UPON to help with a funeral service several years ago for a Mrs. Josephine Maxwell who had died at the age of 98. The service was held at the funeral chapel in Cle Elum, but the family was from all over the place: Issaquah, Arizona and beyond. Mrs. Maxwell had been living in a nursing home in Issaquah for the past 6 years. I agreed to help with it because the funeral home asked, and because others in the immediate vicinity were not available. It was a very meaningful service, even though I did lead it. The memories that the family shared with me prior to the service were very special. Many others at the service shared how this lady’s life had shaped theirs, whether as mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, aunt, or even hospital patient. She was a well-to-do woman, but everyone told about her character, not her money. I was again reminded that what really matters in life are the relationships that we have, not what we have amassed for ourselves, and the *manner* in which we live, not the amount of resources God has placed at our disposal.

One of the things that her daughter told me was that she had prayed on her knees every day until she became unable to do so, when Alzheimer’s Disease and age began to erode her mind and body. It seems to me that this woman learned to live in the light of eternity.

II. WE MUST LEARN TO DO THE SAME. Each of us may not see 98 years of life and all the changes in the world that Mrs. Maxwell saw during the twentieth century, but no matter how long we live, we are not permanent here. *We are “just passing through,” and we have a limited opportunity to prepare for the life to come.* In light of this, *how shall we then live* (to borrow a phrase from the prophet Ezekiel and a book by the late Francis Schaeffer)? Jesus shows us.

Take a closer look at Luke 12:35-59 (beginning with 35-40).

I. IN LIGHT OF ETERNITY, CHRISTIANS SHOULD BE AWAKE AND WATCHFUL. 12:35-40

1. *Jesus told the Parable of the Groom’s Servant to illustrate the need to be awake and watchful.* His first words to his disciples [this teaching is addressed to us as disciples of Christ, see v. 22] were these: “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning.” The comparison is to “men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet.” The servants waiting for their master have no idea how long the banquet will last, and so they have no idea when their master will arrive. Thus, they must be ready early and stay ready until he arrives. Jesus says, “It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes” (v. 37).

2. *The promise was clear: those who are ready for His coming will even be served by Him.* Here is a dramatic reversal of what you might expect. Servants are waiting to serve, not to be served by their master. Surely this twist to the expected dynamics of the story caught the attention of Jesus’ disciples. “What, you mean that when the master returns, *he* will serve *them*; he will “have *them* recline at the table and will come and wait on *them*”? Yes, this is just what Jesus said.

3. *Those who were not ready would be surprised.* Jesus made the application clear, “The Son of Man [meaning Himself] will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

A—Let us test our readiness today, my friends. If Jesus broke through this cloak of darkness tonight, would we be “dressed ready for service” and would the lamp of our walk with Christ be burning brightly?

I—How do we want to be interrupted by what we might call The Great Interruption? What kind of attitudes would we like Jesus to find in our hearts when He suddenly and unexpectedly breaks through the sky? What kind of plans would we like to be making at that very moment? What kind of actions would we like Him to break off with His presence? What lines of thinking would we like Him to suspend by the announcement, “the Master has returned”?

In a masterful essay entitled “The World’s Last Night,” C. S. Lewis defends the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ from both the theological and practical objections that were current in his time over ½ a century ago, but which also persist in our time. He denies that we can maintain some notion of steady human progress, based either on our own personal experience or on a review of world history. He calls this notion of gradual and inevitable human progress a *myth* that has no basis in fact.

He then calls us to consider our place in the world like those of characters in a play who are trying to guess the plot on our first reading of the script. He asks, “But how can the characters in a play guess the plot? We are not the playwright, we are not the producer, we are not even the audience. We are on the stage. To play well the scenes in which we are ‘on’ concerns us much more than to guess about the scenes that follow it.”

And he illustrates further: “In *King Lear* (III:vii) there is a man who is such a minor character that Shakespeare has not given him even a name: he is merely ‘First Servant.’ All the characters around him—Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund—have fine long-term plans. They think they know how the story is going to end, and they are quite wrong. The servant has no such delusions. He has no notion how the play is going to go. But he understands the present scene. He sees an abomination (the blinding of old Gloucester) taking place. He will not stand it. His sword is out and pointed at his master’s breast in a moment: then Regan stabs him dead from behind. That is his whole part: eight lines all told. But if it were real life and not a play, that is the part it would be best to have acted.”¹

Why is this so? Because to be a servant means to leave the outcome to the Master! We must trust that God will indeed bring all things to their proper conclusion, that He will interrupt what should be interrupted from His vantage point over all creation. We should be faithful with our present small part in the grand drama of human life and leave the plot to the Playwright.

II. IN LIGHT OF ETERNITY, CHRISTIANS SHOULD PRACTICE A STEWARDSHIP OF ALL OF LIFE. 12:41-48

1. Peter set up this passage of teaching with His question, “Lord are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?” Indeed, is this a parable of warning or a parable of instruction. It appears that Jesus’ answer would be, “Both.”

2. Jesus responded with the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Managers. In some sense, the disciples of Jesus were compared to the “managers” or “stewards” who have been given the trust of feeding the rest of His servants at the proper time. Of course, the steward, the head servant could become caught up with eating and drinking and getting drunk and prove false and unfaithful to the task. That servant has only judgment and ruin ahead.

The faithful servant, on the other hand, has reward and greater responsibility ahead.

3. His summary teaching came in v. 48: “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.” This is the justice of opportunity. The greater our opportunity, our inherited circumstances and possessions and context and gifts, the greater our responsibility and accountability before God. Jesus notes that both the reward and the punishment will be just, will fit the response that was made to the opportunity that was given.

A—The response from us should not be fear or dread. Rather, we should be spurred on to serve faithfully

¹ C. S. Lewis, “The World’s Last Night,” in *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovonovich, 1952 [and more], pp. 104-05.

and well our Lord Jesus Christ, regardless of the choices of even our fellow-servants (by which I mean, other Christians).

—We have been given the privilege of carrying our part of the load. We must trust God to help others carry theirs and not take it upon ourselves and rob them of their opportunity for growth. Take this dad’s approach, for example.

Though skeptical of his teenage son’s newfound determination to build bulging muscles, one father followed his teenager to the store’s weight-lifting department, where they admired a set of weights.

“Please, Dad,” pleaded the teen, “I promise I’ll use ‘em every day.”

“I don’t know, Michael. It’s really a commitment on your part,” the father said.

“Please, Dad?”

“They’re not cheap either,” the father said.

“I’ll use ‘em, Dad, I promise. You’ll see.”

Finally won over, the father paid for the equipment and headed for the door. After a few steps, he heard his son behind him say, “What! You mean I have to carry them to the car?”²

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.”

III. IN LIGHT OF ETERNITY, CHRISTIANS SHOULD EXPECT CONFLICT WITH THOSE WHO LIVE ONLY FOR TODAY. 12:49-53

1. *Jesus yearned to complete His mission, knowing what lay ahead.* He had a “fire” to be kindled and a “baptism” to be baptized with. What could He have meant with such analogies?

Fire was a figure of speech used in different ways by the New Testament speakers and writers. Here it comes in a context speaking of the return of Christ, a coming that will be marked by judgment. It is a fire of judgment that He came to bring on the earth. But this is a judgment transformed by mercy.

The baptism he came to face was doubtless the suffering of the cross. He yearned for the cross, not yearning for the suffering, but for the salvation which that suffering would make possible for the whole world, including all of us here today. This is why Christian baptism reminds us of the suffering and death of Christ. Because He died for our sins, we don’t have to face punishment for them ourselves.

So in these two metaphors: fire and baptism, Jesus presented both the holiness and the love of God. These virtues in the character of God meet at the cross of Christ.

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He is holy, and so He calls the world to account for its unholiness; but He is love, so He Himself plunges into the suffering and death required to fulfill His holy justice.

2. *Jesus foretold that division would be the result of His coming, even between family members.* The cross is a dividing point, not only in human history but also in human relationships. Jesus asks (v. 51), “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?” He says, “No, I tell you, but division.” We are faced with an interpretive clarification here. The infinitive translated “to bring” can be understood to mean either purpose or result.

If we take that infinitive to mean *purpose*, then Jesus is saying that His intention in coming was to bring division.

² *Pastor Tim’s Clean Laugh List*; submitted by Mark Moring, managing editor of *Campus Life*.

If we take it to mean *result*, then Jesus is saying that His intention in coming was to bring salvation, but that the result of this salvation would be division from those who rejected it. We should take this as a result-phrase, not a purpose-phrase. Jesus' desire, His goal, was to bring peace to the heart and peace in human relationships, both of which are the fruit of His salvation. But He knew well enough that many would reject His salvation, with the result that they would become at odds with those who belong to and follow Christ.

A—Our intention as followers of Christ should never be to cause division. But, if following Christ faithfully divides us from those who willfully reject Him, then we should not be surprised. Jesus was not.

I—Historically, this is what Martin Luther had to do when put on trial for believing and propagating the idea that we are justified by faith in Christ alone, without the mediation of the Pope or the Church. The first day of his historic trial found him halting and mumbling, hardly able in that august circumstance of human power to get his words out. To everyone's surprise, he asked for more time. The second day, he had found the courage given by the Holy Spirit, and he spoke powerful words that echo through the centuries.

Luther was asked, "Do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?" Luther answered, 'Since Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.'"³

This is a statement that could be made by any of Jesus' followers. Our intention is not to be at odds with others, but this will be the result when they are at odds with Christ's claim upon their lives.

IV. IN LIGHT OF ETERNITY, CHRISTIANS SHOULD MAKE PEACE WHEREVER POSSIBLE. 12:54-59

1. *Jesus chided the crowd for being able to interpret the signs of the weather but not that "present time."* Here is where living in light of eternity becomes the pressing theme of this whole passage. The people could tell when it was going to rain or when it was going to be hot, but they had very little spiritual discernment. They did not realize just Who it was Who was speaking to them.

2. *He challenged everyone to make peace, even with those involved with civil court cases, as far as was possible.* Here is the why we must take the phrase "to bring ... division" as a result-phrase rather than a purpose-phrase. Jesus really desires us to be at peace within ourselves and with all others as far as possible. So, He urged His listeners to be builders of bridges rather than builders of walls. It may take the same amount of brick and mortar either way, but the result is coming together rather than being driven apart.

A—Are we builders of walls or builders of bridges?

I—Paul commands his Christian readers in Rome, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18, NIV), and then he concludes that little section of his teaching with this: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21, NIV). In short, build bridges from your side of the divide, even if the person across the way doesn't.

We can be divided over almost anything, can't we? We must refuse to allow the things that have little value in the light of the Eternal to keep us apart.

Comedian Emo Philips used to tell this story:

In conversation with a person I had recently met, I asked, "Are you Protestant or Catholic?"

³ Roland Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Beacon Press, 1952), pp. 60-61.

My new acquaintance replied, "Protestant."

I said, "Me too! What franchise?"

He answered, "Baptist."

"Me too!" I said. "Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?"

"Northern Baptist," he replied.

"Me too!" I shouted.

We continued to go back and forth. Finally I asked, "Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879 or Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?"

He replied, "Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912."

I said, "Die, heretic!"⁴

There is the spirit of the builder of walls rather than the builder of bridges, always looking for something different to criticize and to reject about someone else, rather than enjoying the differences both of background and personality that makes the body of Christ so wonderfully rich in character (and *characters!*).

Take it home.

I. The poet and preacher of the late 16th- through early 17th-centuries John Donne asked, "What if this present were the world's last night?"

1. Are we ready?

2. How can we be ready? Know Christ and serve Him. Be living the life He has called us to live, allowing His Spirit to make us, step by step, what we have been intended to be from the first point of creation.

II. How will we be interrupted when Christ does come, if indeed He should choose to come in our lifetimes?

C. S. Lewis, from the essay "The World's Last Night," which I mentioned before: "For what comes is Judgment: happy are those whom it finds labouring in their vocations, whether they were merely going out to feed the pigs or laying good plans to deliver humanity a hundred years hence from some great evil. The curtain has indeed now fallen. Those pigs will never in fact be fed, the great campaign ... will never in fact proceed to victory. No matter; you were at your post when the Inspection came."⁵

"What if this present were the world's last night?"

⁴ *New Republic. Fresh Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching* (Baker), from the editors of *Leadership*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-12.