

## How To Face Fearful Days

*But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened. (Matthew 24:19-22)*

A friend who has two tiny new grandchildren, knowing I have a new one as well and another on the way, asked me what to say to her daughters about this passage. Her question brought to mind a time—years ago when my own babies were arriving—when I too wondered about those words of Christ. It wasn't an easy thing to think about then, and it's certainly no easier today.

My response to her, and to all of us who are growing more and more uneasy as our world disintegrates around us, can be summed up in three words: **perspective, promises** and **priorities**.

After decades of meditating on the Scriptures, I have come to understand that God's perspective on our lives is in certain important ways different than many of us assume it to be. I've also come to realize that the wonderful "positive" promises we cling to are not the only promises He made. And finally, I believe our current apprehensions are God's gracious gifts to prompt us to seriously evaluate our priorities in light of both His perspective and His promises.

If we carefully consider the foundations of our American cultural ethic, one of the things we most take for granted is that we have "inalienable rights" to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Even for those who would discard the Creator who is said to have granted these to us, there is still a deeply held assumption that we are justified in seeking them for ourselves through whatever means we can find.

But a careful and honest study of Scripture brings a different picture into view. To be sure, life is one of God's most astonishing gifts to us. But it's simply that: a gift. He owes us nothing. Every day we live, each breath we draw, is because His grace has been extended to us in that moment.

Consider this passage in Luke 13.

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

There are essentially two ways to die. One is at the hands of someone who would take our life, and the other is through non-intentional means such as physical infirmity, accident, or natural disaster. But as Jesus points out quite simply, we all perish. In fact, it's precisely because of our sin nature that we die (remember God's promise to Adam concerning that fruit?).

However, He immediately followed these words with an interesting parable which I believe is directly connected.

A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, "Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?" But he answered and said to him, "Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down."

Do you see? What Jesus is saying is that our attitude toward our continued life needs to be one of realizing His undeserved grace. The fig tree did not deserve to live and would not have, had it not been for the intervention of the persevering gardener.

When a person's life ends before old age, we sometimes have a tendency to feel resentment. It may not be spoken or even acknowledged, but because of our underlying belief that the person had a "right to life," we then see a sort of injustice in its being "cut short."

This does not of course endorse murder or make it lawful, nor does it mean we should not seek to protect others, particularly the helpless. But when forces beyond our control put others' lives or even our own in peril, our more proper response is to turn to God and petition Him for the extension of that life, even as the keeper of the vineyard did.

But when we are granted that extension, we must also realize that the added days or years belong to Him, not to us. Our lives are His, to be lived for His benefit, even as the fig tree was the property of and existed for the benefit of its owner. When we grasp this shift in perspective, I believe some of our fears will be lightened.

The other component of perspective that can be missing from our hearts is the realization that our earthly existence is not heaven. In centering our attention and energy on maximizing our own "pursuit of happiness," we essentially are trying to build heaven into this life. There are two obvious problems with this effort.

First, simply, it can't be done. The heaven our hearts long for is not attainable here and now. We do indeed get glimpses of it, for our world is not entirely separated from it. But even as we clutch those things and try to make them permanent, we quickly realize we can't. Yet rather than considering that our energies might be misdirected, most of us only ramp up our efforts to find that rainbow's end in some other person or activity or diversion or dream.

And in the process we miss our true purpose here on earth, which is our second problem. You see, God has designed our joy and fulfillment during this life to be found not in our self-seeking, but in our self-emptying. The way we actually experience heaven on earth is not by grasping for it, but by allowing His Spirit to flow through us for the benefit of His Kingdom.

If you think about it, when we enter into eternity we will no longer have the privilege of ministering to those in need—because there will be no need! But during our time on earth—however long our

sovereign God grants us to live—we have the astonishing opportunity to represent Him and to do things that are eternally valuable. What's more, as many of us have discovered, it is in these points of service that we find happiness in ways that are beyond comparing with the temporal pleasures we thought we desired.

Let's turn now to the matter of promises. Anyone who has been authentically born into the Kingdom soon becomes aware of the wonderful Scriptures which speak of God's love, His faithfulness, His power, His mercy, and His willingness to be involved in all aspects of our lives. The Bible becomes a bountiful table spread with rich promises that nourish our minds and hearts. And all this is very, very good.

Nevertheless, as we mature in our faith we come to realize that the larger portion of the Bible concerns itself with the darkness of our fallen world. I would guess that perhaps three-fourths of the verses in the Bible reflect in some fashion the brokenness of our world and God's displeasure in our sin.

An example of this proportion can be found near the end of Deuteronomy. In chapter 28, the first 14 verses speak of God's blessings to Israel if they will only continue to walk in obedience to His law. But the next 54 verses spell out in great detail the consequences God would impose on them should they choose not to obey.

What we need to remember is that both of these passages contain *promises*. Our God is faithful to keep His word, but His word is not always pleasant. It is for this reason that our contemporary habit of only paying attention to the blessings He offers indicates our unwillingness to view both the Bible and our lives with the full perspective from which God views them.

From another angle, the Scriptures also reveal the reality that we are living in enemy territory. Sometimes our enemy is hostile, and we run to God for protection. But other times he is deceptively alluring, and we are ensnared not by his chains but by his charm.

It's for this reason that a certain type of promise also found in Scripture is very important: the promise of persecution. A good summary is found in the words of Christ in Luke 6:20-26.

Blessed are you poor,  
For yours is the kingdom of God.  
Blessed are you who hunger now,  
For you shall be filled.  
Blessed are you who weep now,  
For you shall laugh.  
Blessed are you when men hate you,  
And when they exclude you,  
And revile you, and cast out your name as evil,  
For the Son of Man's sake.  
Rejoice in that day and leap for joy!  
For indeed your reward is great in heaven,  
For in like manner their fathers did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich,  
For you have received your consolation.  
Woe to you who are full,  
For you shall hunger.  
Woe to you who laugh now,  
For you shall mourn and weep.  
Woe to you when all men speak well of you,  
For so did their fathers to the false prophets.

How upside down this is from our cultural assumptions! But as we ponder this view of truth and incorporate it into our worldview, the prospect of hardships and suffering will have far less power over us because we can see them as the evidence of God's favor and blessing.

And as we embrace this shift in our perspective and apply the full range of His promises to our circumstances, we will be able to align our priorities with those of the Kingdom and our King. Paul expressed this well in Colossians 3:1-4.

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

It's pretty straightforward: our minds determine our priorities. We might think we put God first in our lives, but the real proof of what is first is found in what we seek and what we set our minds on. If you could take a running tally of your thoughts over the course of a day, what would it reveal? What is it you seek? What is your mind taking in?

An image I often use is that of a hurricane. The world is swirling madly around us and intentionally desires to sweep us into its current. But there a place right in the middle of the madness where all is calm and we can actually see the sun. Our full efforts, therefore, must be dedicated to staying in that eye of the storm where God is our priority and our delight.

Part of this process involves leaning on His promises for protection and provision, which are plentiful and valid. But one thing I've learned is that He does not give tomorrow's grace for today's worries. As we learn to find His sufficiency in the hour we're actually living, it becomes easier to trust Him with the next hours of our lives.

So let's come back to the question of our little ones. God has chosen to bring them into this world in this season of history, and His choices are always good. But His goodness is ultimately directed not so much to their comfort or even their security as it is to His own glory as He accomplishes His eternal purposes on earth.

Thus my counsel to young mothers, and to all of us who live in this day, would be to find joy in the moments we are given, grateful that God has given us these children, as well as our homes, our

possessions, even things like our abilities and our health. But we even more than our joy in these, we must bring ourselves to the place where He is our greater joy

And in this realization we are able to willingly offer all He has given us back to Him. He is the owner of our gardens, our “fig trees,” and we are but His caretakers. If He grants us years to care for that which He entrusts to us, then let us care for those things diligently. But our diligence is not for us or even for our children, but always that from and through them fruit might be borne for Him.

If we are truly able to embrace this perspective, these promises, this priority, then the greatest gift we can give our children is to pass these things along to them as well. With days of great tribulation fast approaching, there is no time for games, for entertainments, for pamperings and pleasures that have nothing of the Kingdom in them. We do our children and our God no favors by pretending otherwise.

But it is out of the great crucibles of history, of our current days, and of our future, that God’s final glory will be revealed and our greatest happiness will be realized. As His chosen children, we will soon come to know a far more authentic life, a far greater liberty, and the infinite unfathomable joy for which we and our children have truly been created.

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