

Living on the Edge

Mark 13:28-37

***There is no if; there's only when.
There's only now; there is no then.
I live my life upon a ledge
And know not when I'll reach the edge.***

***I have no promise, oath or vow
That I'll survive the here and now,
For when the Thief has come at last,
Without a warning, present's past.***

***The mountains melt and steam the sea;
They're no more permanent than me.
How can a house withstand the shock
Of time not built upon the Rock?***

***To sail these seas I need a Star
Eternal as my Savior's scars,
Not winds of truth still sepulchered
But guided by the Living Word.***

Fig trees grew on the Mount of Olives. The early spring air was cool. But the fig's branches were already swollen with budding leaves. That was a sure sign summer was near.

Earlier, Jesus said the temple's magnificent stones would lay in heaps of rubble one day. And Jerusalem would be a smoking ruin.

His disciples wanted to know when that would happen. But their question also included Christ's return.

Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age? Matthew 24:3

Our Lord answered by describing fierce battles and terrible earthquakes, famines and false prophets. He talked about showers of stars and a blackened sun, about persecution and powerful enemies who would defile the temple.

All those events are like these fig trees, the Savior said. They are signs: signs Christ's coming is drawing near.

Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. Verses 28-29

The budding branches of fig trees were never wrong. Each year, they were irrefutable proof the sultry Mediterranean summer was almost upon the hills and valleys of Palestine.

It is the same, our Savior said, with the events He described. They are sure signs what He

predicted will soon take place.

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Verse 30

The disciples really asked not one, but two questions. When will the temple be destroyed and when will the Redeemer return? And the Savior's statement applies to both.

To the Jews, a generation was forty years. And in four short decades, Roman legions would storm the city walls, demolish the temple and destroy Jerusalem.

However, our Lord's promise is also true of His coming. The signs that mark our Redeemer's return won't drag on for centuries.

They will all take place within a single generation. And the entire globe will be lay in ruins and rubble just as Jerusalem did in the wake of Roman legions. That means this is a terminal world.

Rocks and hills, seas and mountains may seem immovable and eternal. But all creation is temporary and will soon pass away.

Years later, that brought an important question to Peter's mind.

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? 2 Peter 3:11 (NIV)

We all live on the very edge of eternity. The question is not if this world and all the starry universe will come to an end. It is not even a matter of when.

The real problem is how we should live on the edge of eternity.

The Word

It was neither casual nor accidental that Christ contrasted this world and His words: the temporary with the everlasting. He had an important lesson in mind.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. Verse 31

We realize the stark truth of that statement long before our hair turns gray and rheumatism gnarls our knuckles. Every building that burns or is torn down calls it to mind. This world and everything in it is incessantly and unceasingly passing away.

When I was a boy, our family reunions were held beneath towering oak trees in the center of a country cemetery. And after the potluck dinner was finished, my aunts and uncles would wander among the stones, reading names and telling stories.

Now I am one of those wanderers. I search the stones and remember names and faces. My aunts and uncles have all passed away. And soon I will join them.

It isn't enough to keep in mind that heaven and earth will pass away when Christ comes. We may not live long enough to see our Savior split the skies at His coming. But we still have to live with the knowledge that we will pass away.

Jesus said no one knows the exact hour He will return to this earth. The Father has reserved that knowledge for Himself.

But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. Verse 32

And that is just as true of our lives. Jesus told a story about a wealthy farmer whose barns overflowed with grain. But while he got rich, he neglected to nurture his soul. Then one night, he was stunned and shocked to find he had lived out his last day on earth.

Death will ambush each of us just as it did that farmer. And we won't be given time to prepare, either. Without any advance notice, we will have to face eternity just as we are.

That farmer violated a principle the Master described in another of His parables. He spoke about two men who built houses. One built his house on the sand. The other built his on a solid rock.

That rich farmer built his life on the shifting sands of this world. And that is always a mistake. We dare not build our lives upon that which will soon cave in and collapse.

The solution is a matter of priorities. What is really important in our lives? That is the question. Are we primarily concerned with real estate and bank accounts: with that which is temporary?

Our Savior said only His Word is unchanging and everlasting. Mountains will melt and run down to the sea like butter one day.

Even stars will blink out and fade away. Only God's Word will never, ever change.

So we dare not build our lives on anything else. Our single reality in life must be what God says in the Bible.

Its standards and values must be ours. And what it says is right and real must be all we dare to trust.

If that wealthy farmer had focused his life on God's Word rather than his barley and his barns, he would have welcomed death. It would have been a long awaited homecoming instead of a terrifying plunge into darkness.

If we are to thrive on the edge of eternity, we must live by God's Holy Word. It speaks to us of a Savior who loved us so much He laid down His life for us. And trusting Him is the only way to build our temporary lives on something eternal and unchangeable.

He is our Rock. Our only Rock.

The Workers

Mark finished these excerpts of Christ's Olivet Discourse with a short parable our Lord told in the last light of a golden dusk.

Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come. It is like a man away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, Verses 33-34

The meaning of the Master's story is obvious. The lord who journeyed to a far country is Christ Himself. And we who trust in Him are the servants.

Our Redeemer warned that His return will be sudden and unexpected. So He couldn't have been speaking about His final coming in power. When the sun goes dark and stars rain down from the heavens, everyone will know Christ is about to come.

Matthew recorded a much more complete account of our Lord's words. And what Jesus said immediately after this short parable makes it clear that He was referring to the day when He will raise the bodies of Christians who have died and catch them away along with believers who are still alive.

For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. Matthew 24:37-41

There will be no warning when our Redeemer returns for His people. So we must be ready every moment of every day. We must live in light of the fact that our Savior could come and catch

us away any moment.

Our Lord also said the master of the house left his estate in the hands of servants. Of course, the house and land in our Savior's story never actually belonged to the servants. They owned nothing. Their lord owned everything.

That is also true of us. And we must never forget it. We might hold the deed to a house and the title to a car. But all we call our own really belongs to our blessed Redeemer.

He even owns our physical bodies. We merely manage our Lord's property while He is gone.

An angel said Jesus would be called Immanuel: God with us. And during His days on earth that is precisely what He was.

He was God with a face to show compassion to the lost and lonely. He had eyes to weep with those who drowned in sorrow. And He had hands to reach out and touch foul lepers and pitiful cripples.

However, when God's Son returned to His Father, He took His physical body with Him. But He still has faces and eyes and hands on earth. He has left those who love and live for Him in His place.

Our faces are His. Our eyes are His. Both our hearts and our hands belong to Him, too. That is why the church is called His body.

So if those who wander dark mazes of depression and despair are ever to see Christ's compassion, they must see it in our faces. If tears are to be shed for people whose world has been shattered by sorrow, they must be wept from our eyes.

If hands are to reach out to lift those who have fallen and heal those who are sick, they must be our hands. We are our Lord's servants. And all we are and all we own are His.

But that is not all our Christ expects of those of us who have chosen to become His servants. The master in our Savior's story also had work for His servants to do.

In the same way, our Lord has assigned specific tasks to each person who belongs to Him. And Paul wrote that Christ has even given us the ability to carry out the commission He has for us. His Spirit plants the seeds of special, spiritual abilities in each believer.

If we are brave enough to embrace it, that is an exciting truth. The eternal God of Heaven has work for each of us to do.

No one has been forgotten on a back shelf. God's plan and purpose include each of us. That means there is a task especially and uniquely designed for you and for me.

But we must respond to our Savior's Spirit. We must listen when His still, small voice speaks deep within our hearts, calling us to our appointed task.

We must listen intently that we might hear His call and know what He would have us to do. Then we must fan the spark of His spiritual gifts into a fire that flames out His light to this dark world.

Finally, we must roll up our sleeves and go to work. Our Redeemer will return suddenly and unexpectedly. And He won't be pleased if we have succumbed to laziness and lethargy.

So we dare not wait. We must do whatever work our Lord sets before us and do it with all our heart. Trusting in His Spirit's power within us, we must labor just as our Lord would if He was still here.

Out of His immeasurable love, our Heavenly Father has chosen to delay His Son's coming. In much the same way, He has also chosen to grant each of us a few more days here on earth. And He has done both for the same reason.

Multitudes around us are still chained in sin, diseased and deadened by the devil's darkness.

And they have no hope but Christ's body here on earth. Believers like you and me.

The Watchers

Each night at the temple, guards stood watch at the doorways that led onto the broad temple courtyard. Through four watches of the night, they were to remain alert, just as the servants were to watch while the lord of the manor was gone.

Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come. It is like a man away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. Therefore, be on the alert--for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning--in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. Verses 33-36

At odd hours of the night, a priest would check up on the temple guards. When they least expected it, the priest would appear to see if the watchmen were alert. In the same way, our Savior will suddenly come to us. And like the priest, He will come to see if we have been watching and working as He commanded.

However, the watchmen in our Savior's story were not only commanded to watch for their lord's return. They were also to protect their master's manor from those who would plunder it. And that is also what Christ has commanded us to do.

The Gospel itself is our Lord's estate. He shed His blood, enduring savage beatings and a brutal death to purchase salvation for us. But there are many who would pollute it with dead works or plunder it with an easy grace that demands neither remorse nor repentance, commitment nor consecration.

That is why our Lord has commanded each of us to protect the salvation He died to purchase. We must make sure no one is allowed to enter His kingdom of grace and glory by any other door than that which He Himself defined.

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber...I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, John 10:1,9

That is why we must be watchful and aware. Thieves and robbers are always around us. They would open the door to salvation with rites and rituals, with morality and good works.

Others would teach that men can hang onto their sin and obtain forgiveness without offering our Lord their hearts and lives.

Each of us who trusts Jesus Christ received salvation from other believers who kept it pure and perfect. They didn't allow anyone to pollute the purity of grace but taught that we are saved by trusting only in Jesus as our crucified Savior and our risen Lord.

Now it is our turn. If generations yet unborn are to receive the glorious salvation our Savior purchased for us, we must keep it pure and perfect.

Each Christian is commanded to be a watchman for our Lord. We are to keep the Gospel pure just as other generations have done.

That is Christ's commandment to believers of every age and era.

What I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert!' Verse 37

Someday soon when we least expect it, our Lord will return. He will come as a thief in the night. And we dare not allow Him to find us sleeping.