

New Year's Eve 2023

At the end of the church year we always take time to meditate on the end of the world. On the last day, Judgement Day, Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead. He will come at a time when we don't expect it. He will reveal who had faith, whose lamp was burning with oil, who was with his church looking to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. And he will reveal those who didn't have faith, whose lamps had no oil, who either rejected the fellowship of the church altogether or praised God with their lips while their hearts were far from him. Jesus will reveal who was righteous and who wasn't, who had faith and who didn't, whose works were carried out in God and whose works served their own desires. And Jesus tells us to be ready for this. At the end of the church year, we spent a lot of time on this topic.

And that was quite appropriate. It is good for us to consider the coming of our Lord Jesus. So here we are on New Year's Eve, and the theme fits just as well. Just as the end of the church year should remind us of the end of all times, so should the end of the calendar year remind us of the same things. Be ready. Don't get distracted. As Jesus says, "Be ready for action with belts fastened and lamps burning, like men waiting for their master when he comes back from a wedding, so that they can open the door for him the moment he comes and knocks."

We should be ready. But we should especially focus on how we can be certain that we will be ready when Jesus comes. That certainty is found in what Jesus himself has done. On this eighth night of Christmas, we continue to ponder the great mystery of our Savior's birth. He came at the fullness of time. He came according to the plan and purpose of his Father. The Son of God was chosen to be your Savior. And you should be just as certain that you have been chosen to inherit what he has won for you. How do you know that you will be ready when Jesus comes back? You don't know this by looking in yourself. You don't know this by looking at other people and weighing out the possibilities. Plenty of Christians fall away, are not ready when they die, and they face condemnation. Many people will fall away and not be ready when Jesus comes. Of course, this should give us pause. It should give us warning and cause us to consider the gravity of God's judgment. But again, our certainty that we will be ready when Jesus comes back is not found in how much we think about whether we will be ready.

How do you know you will be ready? How do you know you will be in the faith? How do you know you will have your lamp burning? Because this is what God promises to you. As Jesus says in John chapter 10:

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one." (John 10:27-30)

What is the response to God's promise? It isn't a bargain. It isn't a contract. It isn't a mathematical equation or some type of riddle to be decoded. We don't try to figure it out, argue with it, test it, or make it make sense. No, the only response to God's promise is faith.

God promises that no one will snatch you out of his hands. You know this promise in his Son who was born for you, died for you, and rose from the dead and ascended into heaven where he pleads for you. Do people fall away? Yes. Will there be those who once believed in Jesus but no longer trust in Jesus on the last day? Yes. Should this make our old, sinful nature fearful? Yes. But when it comes to your certainty that you personally will be greeted by Christ the Judge as your merciful Savior who has come to take you to himself forever, you have full certainty in God's promise.

It is because of God's promise in Christ Jesus that you should be convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, nothing now nor in the future, no powers, nothing above or below, nor any other creature can ever separate you from the love God has for you in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You can know that Jesus is your Savior, because he became a real human being, sharing your own human nature. You can know that Jesus is your Savior, because he took the place of every sinner. He bore the sin of the whole world. He rose from the dead, declaring all sinners righteous and reconciled with God. You can therefore know that your baptism is true, that the body and blood of Jesus you eat and drink with your mouth were given and shed for you, and that God has determined that you would be saved.

Yes, it's true that people will fall away. There are people for whom Jesus died, those who have been reconciled to God, who once believed and enjoyed the comfort of eternal life in Jesus Christ, and they will fall away. But again, faith doesn't deal with mathematics or statistics. If you weigh out your chances, you might say that you have a fifty-fifty shot at making it to heaven and being counted as one whom God chose for eternal life. Rather, you might say that you have more like a 25% chance. After all, Jesus talks about the Sower who went out to sow, and only one of the four kinds of soil continued to bear fruit into maturity. But if you are trying to find your certainty in this way, then in reality you have zero chance. This isn't how God's promise works. God's promise creates faith, and faith clings only to Christ. It sees only Christ. It possesses only Christ. Faith holds onto what Jesus did in the manger, on the cross, bursting out of the empty tomb, and pleading for you at the Father's right hand.

Years ago, my brother Mark and I were talking to some people about sin and falling away. We both argued that there are certain sins that show that people have lost their faith. If someone is committing murder, adultery, stealing, and living in this sin, then this is proof that his faith is dead. One of the guys we were talking to responded by saying that he was a lot more certain of his salvation before his conversation with us. Mark responded by saying, "That wasn't certainty! That was carnal security!" Your certainty is not in the notion that you can live like an unbeliever and still get to heaven. Your certainty is not in the idea that your sins can't cause you to fall away. No, your certainty is only in Christ. Your comfort when you consider the last day is only in him who became flesh, suffered and died for you, and promises you eternal life solely on the basis of what he has done for you. If you try to find your comfort and security in anything else, then it is false.

And this is why we experience a conflict within ourselves whenever we truly think about Christ's return and whether we will be saved. Because if we are honest about our own lives,

then we must conclude that we could never stand without his continual grace and blessing. It is only in his promise. It is God's promise joined to your baptism into Christ. It is his promise stained with his own blood and united to his body given up for you. It is his promise declared to you in his gospel, which alone is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.

Those whom God knew and chose from before the foundations of the world are those whom he declares righteous by the blood of his Son. This alone is how you know you are saved. It is by God's declaration that you are righteous for Christ's sake. This is what your faith receives and clings to. You don't say, "Well, Jesus died for all people, and not all people stay in the faith. So how do I know?" No, your faith doesn't ask such questions. Your faith simply clings to God's promise.

So as we begin a new year, as we look back at the year that is now drawing to an end, we may look back at many blessings. And we should certainly do this. God has provided for us, and he continues to do so. We should also consider our failings, our sins, our bad habits, our sadness. What makes us think that we can have confidence in the future? What convinces us of this? It is that, despite our failings, sins, and bad habits, God remains on our side. Even in our sadness, God is for us. So who can be against us? How can we say this with such certainty? What are we boasting in? Do we boast in what we have accomplished or in the goals we hope to meet in the coming year? No, we boast in what Christ has done. If God is for us, who can be against us? If he didn't spare his own Son but gave him up into death for us all, then certainly he will give us everything we need. This promise of our salvation in Christ gives us confidence to face the days ahead, looking forward to the day when Jesus comes to take us home.

Dear friends, if you spend your time trying to justify for yourself and prove to yourself why you will finally get into heaven, then you will only end up standing accused and despairing of God's mercy. But when your faith is fixed on Christ, then you know there is no condemnation. This is what faith does. It rests in Christ and his promise. It doesn't look to any other possibilities. It doesn't speak of any other justification. No, it looks only to God who justifies. He is the God who declares the ungodly righteous. Faith looks to Christ who bore all condemnation in his death and was raised from the dead, sits at God's right hand, and intercedes for us. And this is why you can be certain of what is ahead, confident that suffering, hardships, sorrow, hunger, persecution, or anything else will not be able to separate you from God's love in Christ Jesus your Lord. Let us pray:

Jesus, guard and guide your members,
fill them with your boundless grace,
hear their prayers in ev'ry place.
Fan to life faith's glowing embers;
grant all Christians far and near,
holy peace, a glad new year.
Joy, O joy, beyond all gladness!
Christ has done away with sadness!
Hence, all sorrow and repining,
for the Sun of grace is shining! Amen.

