

People are capable of being optimistic. You don't have to be a Christian to have a positive attitude about life. You can sing along to pop songs telling you to keep your head up and reminding you that the sun will come out tomorrow. You can look at the glass half full rather than half empty. We naturally have the ability to think this way. But our natural human reason, however optimistic, can only depend on earthly things. Human reason relies on the things of this world and its ability to make sense of it all. If you are going through a rough patch, a sickness, a conflict, or even death itself, your human reason can cope to an extent, think reasonably, and weather the storm. But such positive thinking can only get you so far. When we finally stand at day of judgment, then our reason must end. It can't help us anymore.

This, however, is not how faith works. You see, faith doesn't depend on human reason at all. Faith doesn't depend upon the sun coming up in the morning. It doesn't depend on positive vibes or upbeat attitudes. Faith doesn't rely upon a good prognosis or report. It doesn't depend on your ability to figure out how everything is going to work. Faith relies only upon the redemption of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is why Jesus tells us to keep our heads up. He tells us to lift them to heaven and expect him to come and rescue us from every evil. It's not that faith is irrational and stuck in the clouds, ignoring the reality all around us. No, faith depends on the Son of God who came from heaven down to earth. He came from his high throne to be conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He understands our earthly reality better than our highest reason could grasp it. His heart, mind, and soul were troubled beyond compare when he carried our sickness and our sin to the cross and he rose from the dead. Our faith rests in a real human body, which belongs to God himself. Our faith rests in him who is eternal God from heaven and at the same time perfect man who walked the earth, who spilt his blood, and took away all our sin.

Jesus gives us signs of his coming, and human reason can make some sense out of these signs. Jesus says that there will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. Human reason can study these things, measure their distance, and come to some interesting discoveries and theories through mathematics, physics, and astronomy. Jesus says that nations will be in distress. There is no shortage of books, interviews, and talks on subjects of foreign policy, economics, and other political issues. Jesus says that people will be afraid and in confusion. There are plenty of studies in psychology and a great interest in understanding people's mental health. Jesus talks about the roaring and tossing of the sea. Of course, we often hear about the weather and all the natural disasters that cause all sorts of destruction. People literally faint while thinking about it, insisting that our climate is changing so rapidly to the point of a catastrophic end. Yet, even while they are losing their minds, what do they naturally turn to? They turn to their science, their experts, their good thinkers who can come up with solutions for all their problems.

Human reason can, to some extent, lay hold of these signs of the end. But it is incapable of lifting up your head to see your redemption drawing near.

Sure, human reason can grasp the redemption outwardly to some extent. The evidence of our Lord's life, death, and resurrection is overwhelming. Many eyewitnesses attested to it. It was foretold by the prophets centuries before it happened. Jesus Christ, the

Son of God, was born just as the Scriptures said he would be. He proclaimed the gospel and freedom from sin and condemnation, just as the Scriptures said he would. He raised the dead, healed the sick, the deaf, and the blind, just as the Scriptures said he would. He died for our sins just as the Scriptures said he would. He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and he has called people from all nations to be his own through his precious gospel. No one can honestly refute this. The Holy Spirit is convincing, after all. He lays before the world and all its best reason the overwhelming evidence of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God publicly accomplished our redemption in Christ. He did this, because he cares about our reason. He gave us our reason and our senses. He wants us to grasp the tangible, public testimony of his Son. And yet, for all our reason is able to grasp about the redeeming works of our Lord here on earth, as much as it can acknowledge the historical fact of it all, it can't lift up our heads the way Jesus invites us to lift them up. In other words, as much as human reason can recognize what happened when Jesus came to earth, it cannot trust this redemption. It can't give up its need to figure everything out and simply rely on the blood and righteousness of the Son of God who came down from heaven to make atonement for our sins.

But this is exactly what faith does. Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone who did for all the world atone. Faith holds onto the promise of that redemption. It believes that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won be from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death, that I may be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. Human reason can acknowledge the outward details of this redemption. But only faith can confidently say, "This is most certainly true."

This is because faith is a gift of God. The Holy Spirit has called you by the gospel and enlightened you with the gift of salvation. Your reason can't grasp this. Your strength can't attain this. No amount of you trying to believe it and force it to make sense will help you do so. No, faith comes only from hearing the precious gospel promise of Jesus Christ. And he says to you, lift up your heads. Stand up straight and look forward cheerfully. Because your redemption is drawing near.

We can therefore use our reason. We can use our strength. We can use our ability to grasp and make sense of things. You can go to the doctor when you're sick. You can read history to understand current problems. You can use logic to be persuaded of things. But we can do so with the honest awareness that all of these things will finally fail.

So when you look at the sun, the moon, and the stars, you can study astronomy. But you know that the heavens declare God's glory, and you learn to fear him, knowing that you were not there when he laid the foundations of the earth. You can study weather and politics, understanding that the wind blows where it wills, that God has set an order to things, and that he will bring all people into judgment.

The distress, fear, and fainting Jesus refers to are not uncommon even among us. We also become afraid of what is coming on the earth. We also experience doubts in our sinful flesh. We also hit a point where our reason and strength prove completely helpless and useless. The fear of death has a way of bringing to mind your sin and guilt. It reveals that we are not worthy of anything good. We deserve to be cut off completely from the land of the living. This is what true distress is. There is no room for trying to figure it all out, no time for making sense out of it.

Don't be afraid when this happens. Don't be discouraged or let your heart be burdened with drunkenness, nausea, and worries about this earthly life. Instead, pray. Pray that you will be found worthy to stand before the Son of God. This isn't some desperate, last ditch effort. No, it's what Jesus tells you to do. Jesus tells you to pray. He who says that you will see him coming on the clouds of heaven also invites you to pray that you will be found worthy. If Jesus Christ tells you to pray for this, then you can be certain that God will hear your prayer. You can be certain that his redemption is coming for you. His birth in Bethlehem, his death at Calvary, his resurrection from the tomb, his baptism, his body and blood, and everything he has prepared for you is what your faith holds onto even when all your reason has failed you.

Jesus also points his disciples to the fig tree. You know that summer is near when you see it bearing fruit. It's quite appropriate that we hear this while we are approaching winter. Look outside right now at the fruit trees. They're bare. They look dead. And yet, you know that they will start budding in the spring. Then summer will be just around the corner. But right now, you see them as they are. Right now, you see your life as it is. You don't see your Lord. You don't see his face shining on you. You see water sprinkled on someone's head, but Jesus calls it a new birth by the Holy Spirit. You see bread and wine, but Jesus calls it his body and blood. You see the troubles of this life, the loads of work you still have to do, the fleeting joys and increasing stress of every day. And Jesus says that your redemption is drawing near. So don't be discouraged. Don't be dragged down by your sinful reason, trying to rescue yourself by your own mental toil and reasoning. As the hymn goes,

Ye need not toil nor languish  
Nor ponder day and night  
How in the midst of anguish  
Ye draw Him by your might.  
He comes! He comes, most willing,  
Moved by His love alone.  
Your woes and troubles stilling,  
For all to Him are known.

He whose love surpasses your ability to reason also knows all your woes and troubles. This same Lord says to you, "Lift up your head, because your redemption is drawing near." Amen.