

Last Sunday of the Church Year

November 24, 2024

Isaiah 51:4-8; Jude 20-25; St. Mark 13:24-27:

## **Let's Make Sure We're Ready**

- I. Here's Why
- II. While We Wait
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Isaiah 51:4-6; Jude 20-25; St. Mark 13:24-27

Dear Friends in Christ,

It's hard to grasp how quickly we've come to the end of another church year. Starting with this day we're just 31 days from Christmas Eve. We can't ignore the words of Jesus concerning "the great tribulation": "and if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short (Mt. 14:22)." That's the way it feels, doesn't it? The days seem to end so quickly!

Well, this day is officially called The Last Sunday of the Church Year. The appointed texts reflect this. The Word of God in our Old Testament lesson says it: "Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment...(Is.51:6)." It's been said here before: We're well on the way. So . . .

## LET'S MAKE SURE WE'RE READY

### I. Here's Why

S.M. Hutchens is a Senior Editor for the journal, Touchstone. In the May/June edition he wrote: "I never thought when I was younger that the great generation of the Last Day could happen so quickly - so much trust I unwittingly had in human institutions including churches - or that the language the Scriptures use describing it would be so literally correct and unfigurative." He then cites the words of 2 Timothy 3:1-5:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable (unforgiving), slanderous, without self control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness but denying its power. Avoid such people (2 Tim.3:1-5).

Can you find anything in those words that doesn't apply to this day? Some will insist that those words have always applied. In Timothy the words imply an extreme intensification. And they fit with those ever so familiar words of Jesus: "...lawlessness will be increased and the love of many will grow cold (Mt.24:12b)."

I was compelled to quote something else Hutchins wrote:

I have heard complaints that we no longer' have a moral baseline to govern our thoughts and behavior. This is *prima facie* (that is, based on a false assumption), for all have a knowledge of God and what he requires, whether or not they suppress it. Confusion springs from the refusal to acknowledge this, which the love of sin engenders (p.5).

The word that causes the most alarm and upset to the arrogant and self-righteous is **sin**, which is biblically defined as lawlessness against God. It brings death for every human. It's what God said to Adam: "...but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat (that's the law), for in the day that you eat it of it (that's the sin) you shall surely die (that's the wage of the sin: death) (Gn.2:17)." Sin has made a grotesque mess of reasoning and thinking, brings existence to its knees and death bed, gives birth to hatred and war, cripples love and commitment, and assigns every human to endless wailing and agony.

This is the way it is, as Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away (Mt.24:35)." And those words include every word of Scripture I have put in front of us, as well as every word of Scripture to follow. *Heaven and earth will pass away*. They will! His Words won't!

## II. While We Wait

While we wait for *The Last Day* our Epistle lesson from Jude calls us to pursue the following:

But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh (vv.20-22).

Though it's not part of our text it is most important to note the beginning of Jude's Epistle: "I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith...For certain people have crept in (that is, into the church everywhere, as has always been the case)...who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (vv.3,4)."

So here comes the part that doesn't set well with much, if not most of the church in America: contend for the faith. This is to strive against opposition. The Christian life is not a life of worldly ease. We contend through growth in the Word. Growth is knowledge and applying that knowledge. Consider a number of the statements Paul makes regarding the whole armor of God: "...take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day...In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God...keep alert with all perseverance (Eph.6:13,16,17,18)."

Again, Jude states, "and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life (20,21)." Commentator Mark Jeske wrote, "Pray with confidence, knowing that the Spirit has given you faith in Christ...that the Spirit intercedes for saints who don't quite know what or how to pray. Pray with confidence, knowing that the Lord processes every request (Mark Jeske, General Epistles, People's Bible Commentary, CPH, St. Louis, p.341)."

All these admonitions far surpass our getting hyped up about what we're going to get out of this world. For that reason, Jude goes on to admonish us to keep ourselves in the love of God; namely the forgiveness of sin and eternal life we have in Christ. He says, "waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life." And with that, "have mercy on those who doubt" because God has been and is merciful to us." We have to keep our focus on the fact that life doesn't end at the last breath. This world isn't it! And we have a task, a purpose. Jude writes, "have mercy on those who doubt...save others by snatching them out of the fire."

## III. We Will Be Gathered to Him

And here's the reason for a sharpened focus on what we have in Christ and our eternal destination; from our Gospel lesson:

But in those days, after the tribulation the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven (Mk.13:24-27).

At the beginning of this sermon I read words of Jesus recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel regarding the shortening of days before Christ's return. Concerning the moment of Christ's return, listen to the reaction of those who will stand naked in their sin before the holiness of God: "...all the tribes of the earth will mourn...(Mt. 24:30)." "Tribes" describes the fact that while humanity is always scrambling for the Tower of Babel; its one world order, without any real need for God, it will remain fragmented and conflicted in various groups of thinking, wants and desires. Tribes.

But listen again, and find strength in Jesus' words from our Gospel lesson: "...they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." That's who we are, the elect; those who believe that Christ Jesus suffered the punishment for our nasty, damning sin and secured eternal life! We believe! And whoever believes has eternal life.

Again and again, through faith in Christ we are members of the elect. As Scriptures say, "...he chose us in him before the foundation of the world (before creation itself - He chose us) to be holy and blameless before him (Eph. 1:4)." And this: "In him we have obtained an inheritance...(Eph. 1:11a)." And Peter impresses upon us that it is "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you (us) who by God's power (not ours or this fallen world's power) - kept in heaven for you who are being guarded through faith for a salvation to be revealed in the last time (I Pt. 1:4,5)."

Okay, so we've heard this plenty of times. Well, think on this every day of your lives in this difficult, dying world. Every day! After all, concerning the evil and corruption of this fallen world that we see and touches our lives, Jesus said "...straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Lk.21:28)." - *The Last Day*.

*Let's Make Sure We're Ready. Amen.*

Pastor Bill Abbott