

## **This World Is Passing Away**

**“Do not become obsessed in the things of this world, for this world in its present form is passing away.” 1 Cor. 7:29-31**

How many of you really believe that?

The Lord of the Universe says, “The time is short! Behold, I am coming soon!”

Do you believe it?

Would it make you feel sad or happy if you knew that the world might end this afternoon?

How about if it was during my sermon? (Don’t answer that.)

Let’s be honest: when you live in the most prosperous society in the history of the world as we do, it’s easy to get attached to what the world has to offer.

A first-century Israelite, living under the constant threat of violence, starvation and disease—or, for that matter, a 16th-century German peasant living a life that was “nasty, brutish and short”—might have looked forward to leaving this world—especially if he had the hope of and going to heaven.

But when your surroundings are comfortable, when you enjoy freedom from war and violence, when you live in a country governed by laws and not by a dictator, when you have access to non-stop entertainment and the freedom to speak, vote and worship as you please—how much better can heaven be?

Have we built heaven on earth right here in Aurora?

From the day the pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock Americans have been fascinated with the idea of creating a perfect society here in America.

17th-century Puritans dreamt of making America the New Zion, a Christian country modeled after Old Testament Israel—the shining city on a hill of which Jesus had spoken.

Three centuries later Theodore Roosevelt spoke of America’s “manifest destiny” to be the leader of nations.

Nowadays we hear of “American exceptionalism.”

The vast majority of our citizens believe that they live in the best country in the world and cite as evidence the fact that more people around the world want to come here than to any other country.

*“You don’t see people risking their lives to emigrate to Russia or China,”* they say.

Mexico doesn’t have a problem with illegal immigrants from America.

But as great as our country is—and I do believe it’s great—it is part of the kingdom of this world—not the kingdom of God.

And not only theology, but history make that clear.

The Puritans who founded America worked tirelessly to carve farms out of forests, raise up churches to worship God, and train their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Their Calvinistic faith was 100% Bible-based and they strove to live their lives by the Ten Commandments.

In the process, they laid the foundation for a society that was dedicated to what came to be known as the “Protestant work ethic.”

But as time wore on, many of our country’s intellectual and political leaders fell under the influence of a philosophical movement in France called the “Enlightenment” or the “Age of Reason.”

It was led by intellectuals like Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume and Montesquieu who based their thinking on the scientific principles of Francis Bacon and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

These Enlightenment luminaries championed reason, liberty, science, progress and the separation of church and state.

Above all they valued intellectual freedom and were strongly opposed to any form of political or religious authority.

They argued that reason was the only reliable path to knowledge rather than faith.

Many of our founding fathers, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were strongly influenced by the values of the Enlightenment.

In the same way that the leaders of the Enlightenment were hostile to the authority of the Church of Rome, some of our country’s leaders found Puritan Christianity confining and oppressive and were attracted to freedom of thought and religious liberty.

Like the Puritans, they still dreamt of creating a perfect society, but they didn't think it would come from worshipping a providential God: they thought it would come from enlightened government constituted by an enlightened electorate.

What the Puritans called a New Zion, our founding fathers called a democratic republic.

They designed a form of government for their embryonic utopia that included a constitution that established the rule of law; a republic with three branches of government to serve as checks and balances on each other; a democracy to prevent the rule of kings or dictators.

They designed a government which was *of the people, by the people, and for the people*.

These were—and remain—noble and effective principles of government whose mettle has been proven over time.

None of them, however, have anything to do with Biblical Christianity.

The *Declaration of Independence* proclaims that God has endowed all people with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

But where does the Bible talk about a divine endowment of liberty or the pursuit of happiness?

Where does the Bible say that we have a right to free speech?

Or freedom of assembly? Or freedom to worship?

And where does the Bible say that we have a right to engage in revolution?

There is not a single passage of Scripture that supports the right of people to revolt against an established government—even if it is unjust and tyrannical.

Quite the contrary, Jesus said *“Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.”*

Yet we glory in the fact that our country was born in revolution. That's what Independence Day is all about.

Now I'm not saying that our government is not based on good and noble ideals.

In fact I think—and I'm pretty sure that the vast majority of Americans think—that it's about the best mankind can do in the way of designing a government.

I'm just saying that the ideas it is based upon are human ideas—not Biblical ideas.

And since they are human ideas, they are not perfect.

As a matter of fact, they have a downside and that downside is becoming more and more apparent over time.

The downside I'm speaking of is ***the misuse of freedom***.

Immediately after the colonial armies defeated the British in the American Revolution, a man by the name of Henry Melchior Muhlenburg, a Lutheran pastor in Pennsylvania who came to be called "the father of Lutheranism in America," wrote the following words in his diary: *"From the success of the colonial armies we may conclude that it was the will of the supreme ruler of heaven and earth that there should be independence....But whether this was God's gracious or his permissive will, only the future will show. True Christian religion still has few roots and assured fruits in America. The pity is that too many do not understand the word independence, and do not want to understand it, because they think that now they are also independent of the Saviour of the world and his laws and are left to themselves."*

How prophetic! What Muhlenburg feared has come to pass: our American obsession with freedom has led many Americans to conclude that they are not only free from political tyranny, but free of God's authority as well. Their logic is simple.

If there is no God, there is no such thing as the Ten Commandments; If there are no Ten Commandments, there is no such thing as sin. If there is no such thing as sin, there's no need for a Savior.

The fruits of this kind of thinking are all around us.

Freed from feeling accountable to divine moral authority, men construct their own moral codes out of their intellects and their imaginations.

They not only claim this freedom for themselves, they press it sharply as a social issue, accusing anyone who disagrees with them of that worst of all sins: intolerance.

Freedom of speech means freedom to spew obscenity and sell pornography under the guise of entertainment or "art."

Freedom to pursue happiness means freedom to seek pleasure, with no moral constraints on what constitutes pleasure.

Freedom of assembly means freedom to shout down opposition or even to riot.

The core beliefs are: 1) history and tradition are useless; 2) Western art is merely the legacy of dead white males; 3) the only thing not to be tolerated is intolerance itself; and 4) the only thing that can liberate the human soul is liberty itself.

Like the Israelites during the period of the Judges, they believe that everyone should be free to do, "...what is right in his own eyes."

What happened to ancient Israel is happening to us.

When God is removed from the equation, a society plummets toward moral and spiritual anarchy and begins to worship created things rather than their Creator.

Paul, *Romans 1*: "...men neither glorified God as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man....Therefore God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts...."

That's what's happening to us and you know how that ended for ancient Israel.

What's the cure? What's the remedy?

Folks, I don't know.

Right now it's hard to imagine the pendulum swinging back the other way.

Biblical Christianity is no longer held in esteem by the general public.

The percentage of the American people who call themselves Christian has dramatically shrunk in the past fifty years.

Church attendance and membership has declined dramatically.

Many who call themselves Christian feel free to ignore the laws of Moses and the Law of Christ.

All we can do—and must do—is pray for revival: for God to awaken consciences, convict people of their sins, lead them to repentance and turn their hearts and minds to Jesus Christ for forgiveness and renewal.

America desperately needs a mighty revival of conscience and faith in Jesus Christ, along with the desire for spiritual and moral reform that faith generates.

Jesus told us that prayer can move mountains and it's up to us to cling to that promise.

And in that vein, I take hope.

Every Thursday morning I lead a Bible study for residents of Hamlet Hills, a nursing home in Chagrin Falls.

Around twelve people attend—all of them in their 70's and 80's.

One time a ninety-five year old woman we hadn't seen before showed up in her wheelchair and said, *"I know you're in the middle of a class but if I joined do you think I could catch up?"*

The thought crossed my mind that while in the past we've always said that our hopes rest with the younger generation, maybe we've come to the point where our hopes actually rest on the old and infirm.

The people that come to our Bible study deal with chronic pain, boredom, loneliness and the fear of illness and injury, yet they are some of the most spiritually optimistic people I know.

They have a tremendous zeal for God's Word and they are delighted to have the opportunity to read and discuss how it applies to their lives.

And when the subject of death and the promise of heaven come up, I see joy and certainty in their faces.

They see the glory that awaits them more clearly than we do because there are far fewer worldly things cluttering up their vision.

And the smiles on their faces reflect the blessings they see ahead.

They pray for their friends and their country and people around the world and don't worry about the stock market or politics because they know that this world is passing away.

Having tired of its glories, they cling to the object of their faith and their hope and their love: Jesus Christ.

May God give us such faith in His promises and such a clear vision of his glory.

And may we constantly pray that He turn the hearts of our countrymen back to Him.

Amen.