

LIVING IN THE PRESENT TENSE

Matthew 24:3-8, 32-35

³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

⁴ Jesus answered: “Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁵ For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and will deceive many. ⁶ You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁷ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are the beginning of birth pains.

²⁵ See, I have told you ahead of time.

²⁶ “So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the wilderness,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. ²⁷ For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.

²⁹ “Immediately after the distress of those days

“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’

³⁰ “Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

³² “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ³³ Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁴ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

MESSAGE:

In the 24th chapter of the *Gospel of Matthew*, we are told that Jesus’ disciples came to him privately and asked him to describe the signs which would indicate that the endtimes were near. Jesus gave them a list of signs that included an increase in deceitfulness, wars, famines, earthquakes, the persecution of Christians, the increase of wickedness,

people falling away from their faith, love growing cold, and the rise of false prophets. All these calamities would signify that the endtimes had begun and that the Son of Man would soon return to take all those who had placed their faith in Him to heaven, while the rest of creation would be abandoned to destruction—the inevitable consequence of unrequited sin. Jesus emphasized, however, that He was not letting his disciples know about these signs so that they could have the “inside scoop” on when he would return. First of all, he called the signs “the beginning of birth pains,” and everybody knows that when labor begins, there is no way of knowing how long it will last. Second, he said, *“I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.”* (Matt. 24:34) In other words, “Don’t wait for the signs to appear to make yourself ready; look around you—they’ve already begun! So be alert: my return could come at any time.” Finally, he informed them that not even He knew the time of his return. He said, *“No one knows about that day or hour—not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.... Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come... The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”* (Matt. 24:36, 44) As C. S. Lewis once said, *“God likes to surprise us!”*

Jesus’ purpose in describing these signs is not to give us a way to predict the exact time of His return but to urge us to prepare ourselves and be ready at all times for Him to come. We must be in a continual state of “condition red alert.” *“Learn this lesson from the fig tree,”* he says. *“As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out—you know that summer is near—right at the door.”*

The signs have been given! The judge is at the gate! The time is now! That’s why much of the language of the Scriptures is in the present tense. The *Old Testament* prophets frequently used the present or even the past tense to describe future events as if they had already taken place. Regarding the coming of the future Messiah, Isaiah wrote: *“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.”* *“For unto us a child is born, a son is given.”* And concerning his future crucifixion, he wrote: *“He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities.”* Here the prophet is speaking of events that would not take place for over 700 years as if they had already transpired, because in the prophet’s mind, they were a *fait accompli*, an accomplished reality. God has said it will be so and so it will be because God knows all things and God cannot lie. Therefore, in the prophet’s mind, it is as if they had already happened because there is no doubt that they would happen.

God is the eternal present tense! That is the real meaning of his name: “Yahweh” means “I am.” This is not merely the affirmation of his existence, but an assertion of his ongoing activity in the here and now. It is better translated, *“I eternally and actively AM!”* As Jesus put it, *“My father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”* (John 5:17)

Think of it this way: you and I are locked in time and space, but God is not. Time and space have no control over God! He created them both and he is contained by neither. He created energy but he is not subject to the laws of thermodynamics. He created time, but he is not governed by seasons and days and years. When we talk about God being omnipotent, we mean that He created and controls all visible powers. When we talk about God being eternal, we mean that he created and controls time itself. He views them all from the same fixed and eternal perspective and so for Him all things are NOW! There is a wonderful word in the Greek language, the language of the *New Testament*, which expresses this idea: the word is *καιρος* (*kaivos*). *Καιρος* means “a welcome time,” or “a

fruitful time” or “the season of the Lord’s favor.” And in God’s kingdom, *καιρος* is NOW: a welcome, fruitful, eternal NOW! Living in the Kingdom of God is living in an eternal *today*. It means living in the present tense, and if you can get your mind wrapped around this idea, it can bring wonderful blessings to your Christian life.

First, living in the present tense helps us see that the Kingdom of God is not only a future kingdom that we enter when we leave this world; the Kingdom of God is *καιρος*—ours by faith right now. This IS my father’s world. The earth IS the Lord’s, and everything in it. Paul says that the new creation is being born right now. Listen to how he describes it in the *Book of Romans*: “*The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God—for all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*” God has appointed us as midwives to oversee the glorious work He is doing in each and every one of us and in creation itself—right now. The Kingdom of God, as both Jesus and John the Baptizer proclaimed, is at hand!

Second, living in the present tense helps us get rid of our anxiety. The word *anxiety*—like its German counterpart, *angst*—refers to that continual uneasiness or apprehension we carry around with us concerning how things are going to turn out. It draws its power over us from what in grammar is called the “future subjunctive”—the “what if’s” that can so easily come to dominate our thinking. “*What if such and such were to happen? What if such in such doesn’t happen? What if, what if, what if....*” Life becomes a process of always waiting for the other shoe to drop. The devil uses anxiety to attack our faith by urging us to doubt the goodness of what God has in mind for us. “*I know you’ve cared for me in the past, God, but I’m not so sure how things are going to turn out THIS time...*” Well, just stop and consider, folks: if God has handled the past, and he is handling the present, don’t you think he can handle the future? After all, when everything is said and done, the future is nothing more than a succession of nows, and God is the God of all “nows.” Jesus put it this way: “*...do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear...Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?...But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these will be given to you as well.*” Or, as Paul wrote to the Philippians: “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*” God doesn’t promise to give us exactly what we want or what we pray for; he promises to give us what we need. If our problem is anxiety then what we need is peace. And God promises to give peace to all those who seek it through His Son.

Third, living in the present tense helps reduce pain and suffering. C. S. Lewis once observed that it is amazing how much suffering we can bear if we keep our minds focused on the present and resist the temptation to anticipate or worry about future suffering. And having been an infantry soldier who fought in the trenches of Europe during the First World War, Lewis knew something about pain and suffering. One of Satan’s favorite tricks, he said, is to convince us that we can alleviate our present suffering by focusing on the future, when the very opposite is true. The pain of the present moment is usually bearable; the prospect of it’s continuing unabated into the future is not.

Fourth, living in the present tense keeps us on our toes: ready and watchful for the Lord’s return. It helps us replace our desire for things of this world with eager anticipation of the next. The authors of the *New Testament* were filled with eager anticipation. You can

sense it in Paul's and Peter's and John's letters: they expected the Lord to return at any moment and they lived that way. It enabled them—as it will enable us—to pray the last and best prayer of the Bible: *“Come, Lord Jesus.”* (Rev. 22:20)

Finally, living in the present tense encourages us to be witnesses. As we begin to shed the terrible weight of the subjunctive future, of “what if?” living, the cruel cross of anxiety slips from our shoulders and we begin to rejoice in the present assurance of God's grace which continually comes to us NOW. Perhaps no other dimension of living in the present tense is as important for us as this is, for as we trust God to give us words and actions which testify to the power of His great redemptive love in our lives, our own faith is strengthened and new faith is created in the hearts and minds of our neighbors. By telling others about the joys of living under God's present grace, we fulfill our calling to be salt and light in the world. There's an old saying that has been attributed to a Native American tribe which goes: “Ours is not to see what lies in the distant future, but to do what lies clearly at hand.” As believers, what lies clearly at hand for us is to rejoice in God's present grace and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In plain terms, living in the present tense is simply living by faith. It is living with the solid knowledge that God is in control of all things, that God has promised good to us, and that God cannot lie. It is seeing the future through prophet's eyes: what God has promised, he has already done.

Amen.