

Urgency in light of eternity

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[0 : 0 0] So this morning, we're thinking about urgency in light of eternity. I imagine urgency is something we understand and maybe we experience often. You realize the deadline is coming, so you pull the all-nighter to get the paper ready. Your team is two goals down, so the coach throws on the extra striker to try and get those goals back. The pain becomes severe, and you go to the phone to try and get the emergency appointment. Or the phone calls and a family member needs your help, and so you drop everything that you're doing to go. We understand urgency has a trigger, and it leads to a determined course of action. Today, we're thinking about a particular kind of urgency. Urgency because of a particular trigger. The trigger we're presented with is the reality of eternity. The return of Jesus, the reality of these two eternal destinies, and Jesus' urgent call comes to us over and over, be ready. Turn away from sin, turn to God, believe and trust in Jesus as Savior. But let's also add into this theme of urgency the phrase that we're perhaps familiar with, the tyranny of the urgent. You know that idea, you're working on something long-term, you've got a goal, but then something else comes, and it's immediate, and it's pressing, and it calls for response, and often it distracts us from what's truly important. Often, don't we find that it's the now that takes priority over the future. We often suffer, I think, from the tyranny of the urgent, and that can happen to us spiritually as well. We're so busy, focused on what's happening right now in my life, what are these immediate circumstances that we don't often think about the future. We don't often think about eternity. And so, you'll maybe have this experience. So, we have our Christianity Explored course starting in a couple of weeks, and maybe you'll give someone this card that says, what's the best news you've ever heard, and you want them to hear about Jesus. And maybe the response of, well, I'm kind of busy. If I get some other stuff sorted out, then maybe I'll think about the religious stuff. I was really struck by two things this week. First, by a great question.

If you knew you only had one week to live, what would you do? It's a great question because it drags us to those issues that we don't like to think about, of life and death, of eternity, of purpose.

It's a great question for us to reflect on. And I was also invited to discover a great prayer, by a man called Jonathan Edwards, as he prayed that God would stamp eternity on his eyeballs.

Imagine being able to live conscious for yourself and for the people around that we all live in light of eternity. So, we're going to think about Revelation chapters 14 to 16, to understand that Jesus wants to give us gospel urgency in light of eternity. So, we're going to hear about the eternal gospel, and we're going to reflect some more on eternal judgment, and we're going to hear the promise of eternal rest and reward. So, chapter 14, verse 6 and 7, there is urgency because of the eternal gospel. So, we're introduced to our messenger here in verse 6. I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth. So, here is a message that comes from heaven, comes from God, that God wants all to hear loud and clear, and it's the message that's called the eternal gospel. The gospel means good news. And there's a particular way in which this message comes as good news comes from God is writing for the people that John is writing for, for

Christians who are suffering under the cruel, evil Roman Empire. And there's an encouragement that's designed to go to the church all around the world to come to us today. It's the good news and the encouragement of salvation. We heard it actually last week in chapter 13 in verse 8. We were introduced to those whose names have been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. And that phrase reminds us that God had an eternal plan to save people who would walk away from Him, and that would involve Him sending His perfect Son, Jesus, to live in our place, to die for our sins as a sacrifice, and then to rise again with the promise that if we trust in Jesus, we are eternally secure and we are eternally loved. There's wonderful comfort in the eternal gospel. But there's also another element of comfort for these suffering Christians that there is one day an end of suffering. One day every evil empire will fall. One day all that is evil and unjust will come to an end will not be part of the story of God's world and for God's people.

[5 : 40] When God comes, when Jesus comes at the end, that's gospel, because it's the end of suffering. But it's also important that we recognize that this eternal gospel, sent all around the world, comes as a word of warning. And we're going to hear it through these chapters. For those who choose to stand against God, for those who turn their back on God, for those who worship power or pleasure or idols instead of turning to the Lord Jesus. And this is a message God wants the world to hear.

I don't know how many of us tuned in or saw even the highlights of the Auschwitz memorial that was on this week. Very moving, very harrowing. And there was a number of different messages being delivered by survivors, being delivered by dignitaries and members of government and royalty. Important messages.

The world needs to resist intolerance. The world needs to love, learn to practice kindness. The world must never forget what humanity at its worst is capable of. The world needs to find a moral center. And all of these are true. But Jesus says, you know what, there's an even bigger message that the world needs to hear. And in a word, that word is repent. People need to hear of the need to turn towards God, to stop walking away from God. Verse 7 is very much in the repentance theme.

As the angel says in a loud voice, fear God and give Him glory because the hour of His judgment has come. Worship Him. This is being addressed to people who are loyal to a different system and to a different set of gods who are standing opposed to God, who are giving worship to Jesus. And the message comes, you need to turn and turn to Jesus. It actually draws on images from the Old Testament. Maybe some of you will know the book of Daniel. And there's that king of Assyria called Nebuchadnezzar. And he's a very proud emperor. He sets up this giant statue. And he calls the world to worship. And he says, if you don't worship, you'll be killed. That same king, Nebuchadnezzar, would later be strolling around his city on his royal palace saying, look at all these wonderful things that I have done and I have made. And God judges him. And God humbles him. And God brings him to a place where he recognizes, I must fear God.

I must bow before God. The true God is the one who deserves all glory. And you know, the angel delivers this eternal gospel in the same tone. He says, the hour has come. There's a real urgency. Maybe you've been in the airport and you hear that sort of final boarding call, last chance to get on the plane.

[8 : 56] Jesus is saying, here is a day of opportunity to believe in Jesus before his return. Fear God and give him glory, the angel says. Recognize the greatness and the goodness of God and of his son, the Lord Jesus. Give him first place in your life. Worship the creator, the angel says. Recognize that you and I, we are made for this. Created by God to know and enjoy life with God. Our times are in God's hand.

All of history is in God's hands. And we are invited, called to enjoy relationship with him. And so at the beginning of our text, Jesus headlines the eternal gospel to get our attention. You know, you turn on a news website, you see breaking news in bold. Or you're watching the telly and occasionally it happens, you were breaking from our usual coverage to bring this important news story.

It's as if Jesus is saying to us, trying to break through our walls and say, there is nothing bigger than this, nothing bigger for the whole world than this. Saying to us, there is this urgent need to respond to Jesus and the gospel because who or what we worship, it affects our eternal destiny.

And Jesus is announcing to us that he is coming back. And we will all stand in judgment. He will stand in judgment over all of us. And that Jesus is the only way to forgiveness and true life and restored relationship. His death and resurrection stands as proof of that. And so today becomes an urgent moment of decision. If you're not a Christian here today, maybe you're at that point where you sense this is true.

This is a repent and believe moment. If you need more, please pick up a gospel, take one of the Bibles, come along to Christianity Explored, ask a friend because the gospel news is urgent. But there's also an urgency for those of us who are Christians. And the urgency becomes for us the need to share the gospel. I was thinking this week about the story of C.T. Studd. Back in the 19th century, he was an English test cricketer, became a Christian, left behind sort of sporting fame to go and share Jesus in different places. He went to China, he went to India, he went to the Congo where he would die. He wrote a poem, only one life, it will soon be passed. Only what's done for Christ will last. And he famously said this as he was explaining his desire to go and share in some of the hardest places in the world. He said, some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell. I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell. C.T. Studd got it and he lived it. The good news of the gospel, the urgency of the gospel. For those of us who are Christians, God is always calling us to go and to proclaim.

[12:13] Maybe he'll call us across the world, or maybe he'll just call us across the classroom, across the coffee shop, to do that. So, let's be praying together that we would have that sense of urgency of the eternal gospel in our hearts that would move us to share it, to proclaim. So, there's urgency because of the eternal gospel, but then secondly, there is urgency because of eternal judgment. This is a theme that revelation that Jesus takes us to over and over. I want us to think just for a moment about something that we're very familiar with. I'm going to call it the rebound effect. You know, if you, for example, kick a ball against a wall, it rebounds and it bounces back. Or if you're in the gym and you punch a reflex ball, it bounces and it comes back. And both of those can be painful if you get things wrong.

But that's nothing compared to the rebound effect that's described in God's Word. The rebound effect of evil and sin and wickedness. The tendency for it to recoil on us. The God who is holy has built a law of moral cause and effect into the universe. And when we choose to go against the design of our good creator, when a person, a nation, a society chooses evil and injustice and hate, it is a self-destructive choice. It rebounds back. We hear this kind of language in the Psalms. David will say things like, they laid a trap for me, those evil people who are opposing God's King, but they got caught in it themselves. Rebound effect. When we see and experience social breakdown, the horrors of evil regimes, the terrible things that people do to each other. When we consider the judgment images that we have been seeing and we do see in the book of Revelation, they are showing to us what happens when God's holy rule is rejected. And they are an expression for us of the holy God's hatred of sin. And it reminds us that the God of justice will never, can never simply sweep sin under the rug, but there must be a judgment.

And in chapters 14, 15, and 16, we're reminded that if a people will not turn from sin, will not repent and come back to God, the effect will ultimately be eternal judgment.

And so again, Jesus, as it were, sounds an alarm for us. Like those, remember back in 2004, that was the horrendous tsunami that hit, was it Indonesia? Back in 2004. And after that, people put in early warning systems so that when those floods are coming, people can run.

There are within our chapters five pictures of judgment that come to us like that early warning system. Judgment is real and judgment will come, so we need to run from it, run to Jesus and to be ready.

[15 : 44] Let me just outline them for us to get a sense of it. In chapter 14 and verse 8, here's the first judgment picture. It's the picture of a fallen city. The angel says fallen, fallen is Babylon the great.

Babylon was a symbol in the Bible of pride and of pleasure and of a people and a place turned against God. It was in the Old Testament, the Tower of Babel, then the Babylonian Empire, and then that was a name given to the Roman Empire. And Babylon, we're told here, has made the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries, leading the nations to madness. The passion for adultery, both physical, sexual immorality, but also spiritual, addicted to this idea of turning away from God to try and find true worship and true life elsewhere. And to follow the values of this city, Jesus says, to choose to live for self, human pride, human power, a passion for pleasures, means to be heading like this city for an eternal fall.

The second picture involves a cup of wrath. Chapter 14, verse 9 to 11, if anyone worships the beast, they will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath.

There was the cup of pleasure, now it's changed. The cup of God's fury, the cup of God's wrath, not diluted, but full strength. Who has to drink this? Those who identify with the beast. Remember, the beast, anti-God, opposed to God's people, trying to destroy Jesus. When we give our loyalty, our love, our worship to other things and other people that are not Jesus, there is this warning that you'll drink the bitter cup of judgment to the dredge. In chapter 14, verse 14 to 16, there is a harvesting image, and the harvesting image has to do with judgment. And notice this, who's the one with the sickle? Seated on the cloud was one like a son of man with a crown of gold in his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. So we know in pop culture, there's the grim reaper and he holds a sickle, and that's kind of the popular idea of death. But here we're reminded, the one with ultimate authority over death is Jesus himself. The one who will judge is Jesus. And Jesus said this kind of thing in his parables, he had a parable of the wheat and the weeds. The wheat is planted and grows, but so do weeds. The question comes, should we try and pull up the weeds now? No, let's wait till harvest time, and we'll separate. Harvest into the barn, the worthless weeds into the fire.

Jesus says here, without turning to him, without repentance, when judgment comes, bringing in a harvest for destruction. It gets more intense with the fourth image, the trampling of the grapes, verses 17 to 20. You know that traditional process, if you're wanting to crush some grapes to make some wine, you'd get a big old wine press, and you'd put all the grapes in the bottom, and somebody would be in there with their bare feet, and they'd trample it all down and squeeze out the grapes. Well, that picture then becomes a picture of God's judgment of squeezing. It happens outside the city. This is reality for people who are separate from God experiencing the judgment of God. And then time doesn't permit reading about the seven bowls of God's wrath that are poured out. We read about them in chapter 15. In chapter 16, you can read them at home. These bowls get poured out. So, we've seen two cycles of seven judgments. We've heard about seven seals, and we've heard seven trumpets, and we've seen things getting more intense. With the seven seals, 25% of the earth were impacted. With the seven trumpets, 33% of the earth was impacted. And now, chapter 16, verse 1, go pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth. All the earth, those who stand in opposition to God, judgment comes. Again, in chapter 16, it's very like the story of the

[20 : 23] Exodus. The judgments sound like the judgments that come on Pharaoh and those who oppose God in the Old Testament. But there's also a separation. God's people are safe from the judgment. There's a progression that happens. You have some judgments. The first four judgments fall on the earth, and then the next three are more closely connected to the beast and the whole empire, and there's a spiritual battle, and there's ultimate destruction. The seven bowls remind us that our God is holy, that Jesus is not afraid to tell us that God is a God who hates sin. And so, he speaks of the reality of eternal defeat, of eternal wrath that comes on those who reject him. And we need to remember, don't we, that these visions, they come from Jesus, they come from Jesus. We said this last week, there is no one more loving than Jesus. And he is the Son of God from heaven. He knows what he is talking about. He speaks with authority.

And again, he speaks with urgency, that we would heed his loving warning. There are all kinds of triggers that we know how to respond to. The deadline comes. It gets us moving to write, to act. Physical pain leads us to the surgery in the hospital. The voicemail that we pick up moves us towards our family.

If you're not a Christian here today, ask God to show you the eternal urgency of trusting in Jesus, that God would draw you to himself, move you to put faith in Jesus, to receive his patience and his mercy.

But there's also, as well as there being an urgency to heed Jesus' warning, there's also an urgency to hear and to keep hearing the gospel. Because we need to understand that Jesus doesn't just, as it were, pull the fire alarm. You know, you see a fire, you pull the alarm, and it sounds a warning for everybody. Jesus doesn't just do that. We know that Jesus in the gospel enters, as it were, the burning building on a rescue mission at great cost to himself.

So we have heard that God's judgment is awful, and it is. But we also hear in the gospel that God's own Son took that judgment for his own. That Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath on the cross, so that we can drink from the cup of salvation. Jesus was the one killed outside of the city, as if he were an unclean thing, so that we can be brought home to live with our God.

[23 : 32] Jesus on the cross was crushed under the weight of God's righteous wrath, so that you and I can live in the overflow of his wonderful grace and blessing. Jesus came to be our Savior and our substitute. He takes our hell to give us his heaven.

One last thing to say, and it's by way of promise, there is urgency because of the promised rest and reward. One thing that becomes abundantly clear in the book of Revelation is that Jesus will always be honest with us. The Bible is always honest with us. Jesus said to his followers just before going to the cross, in this world you will have trouble. And Jesus knows that following him will be tough.

Jesus said to his disciples, listen, they hated me, they will also hate you. Jesus knows that walking his road is a road of self-denial and sacrifice. He used the image of carrying our cross. And Jesus, of course, carried his cross to die for us. We thought about last week the fact that the spiritual battle is real. For a Christian that is this war within us, this battle against sin, we have external temptations. Jesus calls in Revelation 14 verse 12 for a certain type of character.

This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God. Seven times in Revelation, Jesus calls his church to patiently endure. Made me think of the athlete getting up in the dark, to go on their run, pounding, perhaps through the wind and the rain, mile by lonely windswept mile.

They keep on going one foot in front of another. Patient endurance. Patient endurance for a Christian, what does it look like? Verse 12, it looks like keeping God's commands. That means as the people of God, we live with obedience, even if all the people around us aren't. That means we live with obedience when it suits us and when everything within us screams that we want to do anything but keep God's commands. It means we pursue obedience when it's easy and the people around us are doing the same. And we pursue obedience when it's hard because the battle against sin is raging and the people around us are pulling us in a different direction. That's patient endurance.

[26 : 43] Verse 12, patient endurance also involves keeping faithful to Jesus. It's staying loyal to Jesus and giving our hearts to Him every day in all of life. When other people are giving their hearts to their pleasures or their careers or to now. It's a love for Jesus that trusts Him, that says, your ways are good. That understands and we know that He is the shepherd who keeps, who leads, who brings us home. Patient endurance, to borrow from a title of a book written by Dale Ralph Davis, is slogging along in the paths of the righteous. Slogging along in the paths of the righteous. That's not glamorous, but it's everyday godliness. And that's what we're called to, patient endurance.

And we do so, and we're able to do so, because we've got wonderful promises. Jesus is honest, it's hard. But He's also honest and says, here's why it's absolutely worth it. The same Jesus who said, in this world you will have trouble, also said to His disciples, in the same breath, but take heart, I have overcome the world. And here, He says, yes, it's hard, patient endurance, but He speaks blessing.

Verse 13, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. He's talking there about those, and we've met them in Revelation, those who are martyred, killed for their faith. But also, He says, everybody is blessed who keeps patiently following Jesus until they die and go to glory. There's blessing. Now, how are believers blessed? How are Jesus' followers blessed? Verse 13, yes, says the Spirit, they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them. Two things, two promises. One, the promise of eternal rest. Rest in the Bible is this wonderful gift, this wonderful picture held out of life as it's meant to be. A life marked by peace and joy, because it pictures life with God. And here is eternal rest. All the battles are over, the suffering and the sorrow is over, and blessing and life with God is ours.

We see this life of blessing in the Garden of Eden before sin comes. Here were God's people, and they lived in God's place. They gladly lived under His rule, and they enjoyed every day His blessing.

When Jesus returns, that rest comes completely and eternally in the new creation, eternal joy forever.

[29 : 41] There's the promise of eternal rest, and there is also the promise of eternal reward. He says, their deeds will follow them. So, to go back to that poem with the first line from C.T. Studd, only one life will soon be passed. Only what's done for Christ will last. It's a reminder that Jesus notices, and Jesus rewards what His people do for Him. He told us that. And He said, even the cup of water offered in Jesus' name will surely receive a reward. When we welcome a stranger and show kindness, when we give of ourselves for the sake of our neighbor. When we take the time to share Jesus and share our faith with someone. When we give our life for the cause of Jesus. The Bible says, Jesus says, it all matters.

All of our life is a chance, becomes a chance to give God glory. And Jesus notices and Jesus rewards.

Remember, we're not saved by our good deeds. We're saved by Jesus' death on the cross. We're saved by grace. We're saved by putting our faith in Jesus. But we are saved for these good deeds. And Jesus here reminds us, as we patiently endure, if we continue to keep obeying and keep showing faithful loyalty, then there is this wonderful prospect of being welcomed into His presence. Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter your Master's happiness. So, Jesus' message to us today is this. There is urgency because there is eternity. In the gospel, we discover Jesus has come down to live among us.

And He died in our place for our sin. And then He rose again. And then He returned to glory. And He has won an eternal victory. He has completed His rescue mission. And He supplies grace so that we can live for Him. And He is strong and make sure that all His people are brought safely home.

And that home is an eternal home. And the one who gets us there is our eternal Savior, who brings us the eternal gospel. So, we need to keep Jesus before us, to look to His sacrifice, to remember His love, to hold on to His promises, to enjoy His presence. That's why, as Christians, we'll share the Lord's Supper in a few moments. And we keep the return of Jesus before us.

[32 : 43] That we have that clear view of what is truly urgent and essential for our lives, and for the lives of those around us. And we pray that God would stamp eternity on our eyeballs, so that we would come to Jesus to find eternal life. And we would go for Jesus, to share the message of eternal life with the world. Let me pray for us.