

My Days Pass Away Like Smoke (Victorian Bushfires Sermon)

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[0 : 00] Please be seated and let's pray. God, in our grief, in our suffering, in our amazement, speak your word to our hearts.

Challenge us and comfort us. For your glory we pray. Amen. Amen. We're supposed to love a sunburnt country with all its beauty and its terror.

I'm not quite so sure about a fireburnt country, an incinerated wasteland, with possibly over 300 dead, 7,000 homeless, 1,800 homes destroyed, nearly half a million hectares, and countless buckets of tears and numberless broken hearts.

And of course for us this is all the more numbing because it's so close. We get stunned and numbed by catastrophes elsewhere in the world, but this is on our doorstep.

And we know people who've lost their lives. I and a number here have known people of friends, acquaintances, who lost their lives last weekend.

[1 : 27] Many here have family or friends who've lost their houses and properties. And many here I know have friends or families who are involved in firefighting or other relief type work.

And we grieve and we're in shock and we're rather stunned. It doesn't take long for the finger to begin to point blame, because humans love playing the blame game.

So the greenies are blamed by Jermaine Greer and other people. Not allowed to chop down so many trees, they claim, and that's the problem. The government's to blame.

It's always a good scapegoat, whichever government it is. The faulty policies about whether you stay or go, and whether forced evacuation may be possible. The red tape that delays various procedures to improve warning systems.

The emergency services can cop some blame for inadequate preparation and resources, perhaps. Of course, the arsonists, for some of the fires at least, cop the finger and the blame.

[2 : 34] And of course, there's climate change as well, as though that's part of the blame. So we blame the government on carbon emissions and so on, although it seems that we don't often point the finger to ourselves, because in the end, we're the ones who expend much of the carbon.

And we can understand apportioning blame and trying to find a scapegoat. We do the same with the drought situation in our country the last few years. And I think part of the reason for that is that we don't like our security being shaken.

So when it is, we find that we need somehow to blame somebody, something else. A major response this week has been, never again, never again, which is a noble ideal, but somewhat futile aim, it seems to me.

Never again. So we will build fireproof houses in all the dangerous areas, as though that will guarantee safety. We ensure better warning systems, so that nobody is caught unawares.

The whole aim of that is to diminish risk. Indeed, ultimately, to eliminate risk, so that people, even in wooded areas, might live a risk-less life, safe, secure, knowing that no threat will ever unsettle them.

[3 : 58] That seems to be part of what we're trying to do as humanity. It's one of humanity's goals, I think, ever since leaving the Garden of Eden. That somehow we build a society that is safe, secure, immune from any natural or other disaster.

Tower of Babel is an early example of that, in the early pages of the Bible. A futile one, of course. And all the way from the Tower of Babel, way back then, to modern times, to the seekers, for example, we shall not be moved, is part of our human motto.

To have a riskless, insured, assured, secured life. But in the end, it's impossible.

It's a vain worldview to try and achieve that, or think that it's realistic. Maybe no building could have withstood some of the force of that fire. Maybe no warning system would be adequate, given its ferocity and speed last Saturday.

But of course, it's not just fires that we're dealing with. There are floods and earthquakes and cyclones and tsunamis and so on. And maybe there's no place on Earth that is absolutely safe and secure from some form of disaster, catastrophe, accident, or whatever.

[5 : 21] You see, ultimately, on Earth, we're not safe. Life is risky. And we cannot eliminate risk. At any level.

At the human disaster level. At the level of evil intruding into our society, into our lives. At the level of health or other sorts of trauma.

Most people who live long enough on Earth live through some trauma because life is risky. It's a fallen world that is aching and full of risk in all sorts of different ways.

And in the end, all our human efforts to eliminate risk will, I think, be futile. Not that it's bad to try and diminish risk, to have insurance, to be safe in a relative way.

But I think our human goals go beyond that in a way that I think is futile. We've seen the randomness of this disaster.

[6 : 24] So one building is spared and another not. Every year, our clergy conferences at the Cumberland in Marysville, no more, destroyed.

Very, very nice place. Over the road from it is a grotty motel. And when, if you book too late for a clergy conference, that's where you had to be accommodated. Everyone books early because no one like that motel's still standing.

It's random. One person survives and another person, metres away, lives. The randomness suggests to people there can't be a God behind all this.

And we've seen some of that supposition, discussion, debate and argument in letters to the editors and on the radio and so on in the last week. Some people regard the randomness of this and other tragedies and natural disasters as saying, there is no God.

God is absent because of this disaster, because of its randomness. Good and bad alike suffer.

Death without discrimination. So therefore, God is not loving, he's not providential and or he's not sovereign, is the conclusion that many people are drawing from all of this.

[7 : 42] And it's a very common humanistic conclusion in the end. But alternatively, some argue, well this is evidence of God.

That God is punishing this state because of its abortion law last year. terribly, that was what one Christian pastor, Danny Nalia, of ironically named Catch the Fire Ministries, stated during the week. The Bible makes clear that God is a God who does bring judgment and punishment. But to make that connection, I believe to be atrocious, it leads people to say, well what have they deserved if they're the victims of this?

Why are they worse than us? Maybe we're better in some way than those who've died. Well Jesus taught about some of these issues and his teaching about it challenges our thinking, I think, and helps us try to see a bigger picture where God is both loving and sovereign and yet disasters still occur.

Jesus had been teaching about judgment, warning that it was imminent. the day of judgment was long expected for the Jews to whom Jesus was teaching from their Old Testament scriptures.

[9 : 05] And he was warning that people should interpret the signs to understand the days in which we live. And that, I think, is the challenge to us this week. At that very time, there was some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

Some people tell Jesus about this event. Maybe he knew about it. We're not sure exactly when it occurred, but sometime in the recent history, Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, which included Jerusalem, had murdered or had massacred some Jewish worshippers in the very temple precincts.

An atrocious act. Pilate, we know from history, was an appalling character and not at all sympathetic to Jews. And we see just glimpses of that later in the New Testament when Jesus is on trial.

This was an evil act perpetrated by an evil man. The implication for the people of asking Jesus is, well, how do we interpret this act?

Are those Galileans who were massacred, are they somehow being judged by God and therefore we are better? Is that how we interpret that event, that disaster?

[10:22] And Jesus' reply attacks the implicit thinking behind their question. He says to them in verse 2 of Luke 13, do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?

the way Jesus asked that question implies very clearly the answer, no. They weren't worse. The calamity, the disaster that befell them from an evil hand does not specifically mean they are judged for their sin and those who are spared are somehow regarded as righteous.

Not at all. In this Jesus is agreeing in effect with the argument of the book of Job. Job is a righteous man who suffers. That is suffering, catastrophe, is not necessarily God pointing the finger at an individual who suffers, dies or is a victim.

But then Jesus turns the question back at them. He's implying that they are perhaps a bit self-righteous, a bit smug, that they have been spared, that we're better than they are.

And he says to them in verse 3, no, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. In that verse, Jesus, I think, is coming to the heart of teaching us how do we respond to disasters and catastrophes, big or small, near or far.

[12:05] it's warning us to repent. You see, every calamity is a warning to us to repent.

Every fire, every flood, every cyclone, every tsunami, every storm, every accident is a call to us to interpret the signs repent because this world is coming to an end.

The judge is coming back. And Jesus is saying, in effect, this is an opportunity for you, a chance for you to get right with God now.

It's not because God thinks they are worse than you and therefore you can sit back comfortably in your self-righteousness. not at all. But rather, the same destiny might occur to you unless you are right with God.

So get right with God. He goes on and says, in verse 3, unless you repent, you'll all perish as they did. And then gives them a different example.

[13:17] The first one they gave him was an example perpetrated by evil, Pilate massacring Jews in the temple. but now a natural one, probably. What about those 18 who were killed when the Tower of Siloam fell on them?

Now, we don't know exactly when that event occurred. Siloam was a suburb on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Jesus had healed at the Pool of Siloam earlier. Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?

No. But unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. So whether the disaster is perpetrated by evil or comes by an accident of a building collapse, maybe a deficient building, maybe just a natural disaster, in effect, the cause is not as crucial as how we respond to the event.

Unless you repent, he says, you will all perish just as they did. how different from our world's view that is.

We often glorify those who died as heroes and innocent. We consider that they did not deserve to die. And yet, Jesus here and the Bible in general in effect turns that in reverse.

[14:45] Death is what we all deserve. Death is what we all deserve because none of us is perfect. None of us is righteous in our own merit before God.

All of us fail to love God with all our heart, love God and our neighbour as ourself, rather. All of us fail. And all of us ultimately deserve to die.

That's what Jesus is saying here. It's a harsh word in a way. Migrate with our thinking. But Jesus' words are true. And our world thinks that it has got the right to live, that no one deserves to die.

Not that that diminishes the tragedy of the past week, not at all. But this change of worldview will align us with God's view of us and will force us to recognise where we should stand with God.

God. All of us deserve to die, is what Jesus is saying. It's God's word to us all the way through the scriptures. But the good news is that if we're right with God, though this life is passing away, though it's full of risks and decay, there is indeed a glorious future for those who trust in God and are forgiven for their sins.

[16:14] Last week, the Premier John Brumby warned us quite clearly in an astonishingly prescient warning that Saturday would be one of the worst days in Melbourne's history, at least for weather and of course for tragedy now, we see.

And he warned people, don't go out if you don't have to, stay at home, cancel events, because it was going to be so bad. many people didn't heed the warnings, many people still travelled to places maybe that were unsafe, maybe unknowingly, maybe unwittingly, maybe foolishly.

Many people didn't execute fire plans, though many did, and they didn't save many people either. In the same way, Jesus is warning us here, there are many who fail to heed God's warnings, that the catastrophes, the fallen nature of our world, it's aching and groaning, it's earthquakes and floods and fires and so on, which come round year by year by year, is all part of God warning us, this is not all there is, there is more to come, and yet the warnings are not heeded.

So Jesus goes on then to tell a story, a parable, he says in verse six, a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

So he said to the gardener, see here, for three years I've come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still I find none. By this stage a fig tree ought to have borne fruit. So cut it down.

[17:49] Why should it be wasting the soil, he says. That's not an unreasonable thing. This tree wasn't doing what it should do, it's fruitless.

The gardener pleaded for another year. Sir, let it alone for one more year until I dig around it and put manure on out. If it bears fruit next year, well and good.

But if not, you can cut it down. Now, Jesus is not teaching here the horticultural importance of manure or anything like that. It's a spiritual lesson. Several times in the Old Testament, a fig tree is sort of symbolic for Israel and that's what's going on here.

And the fruitlessness of them is encapsulated in their rejection of Jesus himself. But Jesus here is also teaching God's patience. repentance. He's warned people just now, if you do not repent, you'll perish like them.

But he's now saying God in his grace has given a glimpse more of time. Time is running out. The judgment day is coming.

[18:53] The tree will be chopped down. But there's one more chance. Jesus is saying that the time for repenting is now. don't presume upon that grace of God because the time is short and Jesus is coming back.

The challenge of the fires that we've endured, that we can still smell today, is a worldview challenge. What do I trust in? Who do I trust in?

Can I trust in anything, in fact? And our world likes to think we should trust in humanity. humanity. We've seen people argue that this week. Oh, there's no God.

How can there be a God when there are fires like this? But what we have seen people say is my faith in humanity is restored. Look at all these gifts and clothes and the money that's pouring in.

And we could say, yes, this has brought out the best of humanity. Generosity and selflessness. Strange acts in some way. Man drives all the way from Orbos to King Lake to deliver flowers.

[20:01] I heard on the radio yesterday. But good acts, generous acts, for many that might instill faith in humanity. But is that well placed?

What about the humanity that is represented in the evil of arson? The humanity that's represented in the looting of houses because their inhabitants have fled?

Or the profiteering, charging exorbitant amounts to bury horses, for example? The evil of people who steal tins to collect bushfire relief?

See, it's not as though humanity is basically good, which is what our world likes to think. As Solzhenitsyn once well said, the line between good and evil passes directly through each human heart.

You see, you and I, we're a mix of good and evil. Maybe we're more good than evil, but in the end, we're not perfect. Faith in humanity is a flawed faith, a very dangerous and risky faith.

[21:15] faith. Because we know in our heart of hearts we let other people down. We know in our heart of hearts that others, even people we trust well, sometimes let us down. Humanity is not absolutely trustworthy.

But what about trusting in God? Maybe this week has made that more problematic for some of us in our thinking. Who would want to trust in a God that is so vindictive to punish Victoria because of an abortion law in this way?

The abortion law is atrocious, but I'm not sure that this is a direct act of God in its response. No, it seems to me that we can trust, we can still trust, and indeed with confidence we can trust, a God who is both sovereign and loving.

A God who is grieving and suffering and yet loving and providential. We can trust in a sovereign God over this terrifying world, a world that is subject to decay, as Paul says in Romans 8, a world that we see disaster upon disaster, a flawed world, a world of fires and floods, of tsunamis and cyclones.

You see, God never promises us a life on earth free from tragedy. He never promises us an easy life free of pain and suffering on earth. That's not the nature of this fallen world.

[22 : 47] It is actually temporary, not permanent. It's passing by. Our world view, if we're to align our world view to God's, is that this is just a short period of history, this earth.

God promises a new earth and a new heaven, which will be perfect, but not this one. God is sovereign. This is a place of suffering, a place of decay.

This is the place for getting right with God. God is sovereign. The fires, the floods, the storms, the earthquakes, the tsunamis and so on are in his hands.

Otherwise he'd not be God. But the big picture is that he's looking forward to a new earth and a new heaven. He's showing us, you see, that we are not kings, that we are not gods, that we are not without risk living on this earth.

That's how humans want to live, as though we are the gods and we're in control. But of course we're not. We're not in control of fire or wind or sun or rain.

[23 : 59] We're actually weak and at risk before their might. But God then is not just remote. God is also a grieving, suffering God.

He reaches out to us with compassion. He's a God who longs for our turning to him in faith and trust and repentance. A God who walks with us through fire and flood, who doesn't take those things away but walks with us through them.

A God who holds our hand in the valley of the shadow of death. But as someone and with some fairness said during the week, what's the point of a God who's just with us in our suffering? In answer to the question, where is God?

If he's God, there's got to be more than that. And of course they're right. But there is more than that. It's not simply that God is just walking in the midst of suffering with us. I mean, what's the point of a pat on the back or someone just holding our hand?

In the end, it's a fairly weak gesture. But there's much more than that for God. And that's where it all holds together.

[25 : 11] You see, God knows the pain and desolation of death. His son, tragically young, dying, perpetrated by an evil act, dying on a cross.

So when this God invites us to cast our cares on him, knowing he cares for us, we also know that he sympathises with us and understands our weaknesses. But more than that, there has to still be more than that.

Because God's suffering is not fruitless and his compassion to us is not ineffective. You see, the suffering son on the cross ultimately conquered death and evil.

The son's death makes possible a place without crying or pain. The son's resurrection from the dead gives us hope that this is not all there is.

There is a new heaven and a new earth without tears and crying and suffering and pain, without evil or without death, that is coming. And it's made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

[26 : 23] Jesus. And that same Jesus who died and rose is coming back again. Yes, to judge as he warned here in Luke 13. And so warning us to be right with him before that time.

But coming back as well to take his people to the new heaven and the new earth, to the perfect place. Where not only will the place be perfect, but because of the power of his death, those who go there who trust him, will themselves finally be perfected, ready for it.

That means that God's compassion is substantial. God's compassion and comfort in the midst of our grief on earth has a real and substantial hope about it.

He can change the situation, not reverse the fires, but he's promising us something that is perfect and glorious and true because of his son's death and resurrection.

Back in the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah, he looked forward to Jesus' day in these words. The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, to provide for those who mourn in Zion and to give them a garland instead of ashes.

[28 : 04] Instead of ashes, a garland. That is the promise of resurrection life, that Jesus' death and resurrection make possible.

God is sovereign and loving. Moreover, a God who is providential.

He doesn't promise to provide here and now a life free of tragedy, free of grief, free of problems or disaster. Not at all. Never does. Indeed, for those who follow him, he actually promises an even harder life because of the added dimension of opposition to faith in Jesus.

But God does promise grace sufficient for the day. That in trusting in Jesus and seeing the big picture of what God is on about, we can look forward with confidence and hope.

It doesn't take away the immediacy of the problems, the tragedies and the grief, but it gives us real hope. The only real hope there is of the perfect new heaven and earth that God is bringing because of Jesus Christ.

[29 : 16] God also promises to provide good out of every evil situation. Indeed, out of every situation. And so in the midst of the disaster of this week, we ought to be praying that God keeps that promise and brings good, whatever that good may be.

And ultimately, that people may be right with God for Jesus' return. That's the God of the Bible. A God who's not overthrown by the disaster of the last week.

A God who is sovereign, who is grieving and suffering. But more than that, a God who is loving and providential. And those things are substantial, true and real because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That's why that psalm is so important. The psalmist cries out in Psalm 102 that we heard read for us just before. Hear my prayer, O Lord, let my cry come to you.

Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress, for my days pass away like smoke and my bones burn like a furnace. Here's a person in deep distress crying out to God.

[30 : 35] So how can that person do that? Well, even in the midst of their distress, recognizing that their days pass away like smoke, their bones are burning. He goes on to say later in that Psalm, verse 12, for example, but you, O Lord, are enthroned forever.

Your name endures to all generations. Verse 15, the nations will fear the name of the Lord as all the kings of the earth your glory. So verse 17, he will regard the prayer of the destitute and will not despise their prayer.

Here is someone in the midst of deep distress, using imagery of fire and burning and ashes, in fact, in verse nine, who is yet praying to a sovereign God, acknowledging that that God is sovereign and will hear prayer.

prayer. But then he goes on, not only to pray to him, but in the midst of distress, to praise him. Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord.

And verse 22, verse 21, so that the name of the Lord may be declared in Zion, his praise in Jerusalem, when peoples gather together and kingdoms to worship the Lord.

[31 : 57] You see, despite the distress, the terror that the psalmist went through, that we've gone through, there is no reason not to keep praising and worshipping the Lord and praying to him.

He acknowledges in the last part of that psalm that the only thing that is secure and substantial is God. Verse 25, long ago you laid the foundations of the earth and the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish. And we've seen evidence of that this week. But you endure. They will wear out like a garment. You change them like clothing.

They pass away. But you, O God, are the same. And your years have no end. The children of your servants shall live secure. Their offspring shall be established in your presence.

That's where security lies. Not in trying to establish a riskless society on earth. It's futile. We live, and always will, in the midst of risk.

[33 : 04] But true security, for generations to come, for eternity to come, lies with God and God alone.

As you may know, the Anglican church in King Lake was destroyed last weekend. It's part of the archdeaconry for which I'm an archdeacon. And in time to come, we will need to turn to rebuild it.

On Wednesday, our bishop, Stephen Hale, and the primate of the Anglican Church of Australia, the Archbishop of Brisbane, visited Whittlesey and King Lake. And there, in the ashes of this burnt out church, and a little burnt sign saying the King Lake Anglican Church or something to that effect, there was lying a prayer book in the ashes, charred around the edges and burned, apparently.

Just in the gentle breeze, one page sort of fluttered and moved a little. And Stephen told me that it was open at this page with this prayer. Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son, Jesus Christ came among us in great humility, so that on the last day, when he shall come again in glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal. Through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. Let's just take a minute of silence as we reflect and offer to God our own prayers, and then we'll continue.

[34 : 56] Thank you.