

# What Is Your Eternal Worth Before God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our God and Father, as we on this Advent Sunday look at the scriptures for this season, we ask that you will help us to understand the times in which we live and the circumstances of our lives in this present moment of history and the purposes of your kingdom in our midst.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Just as I begin, I want to tell you that this is the service for the Advent carol service, which begins at 7.15 tonight, and I hope you will all come.

On the back of it, and perhaps in your newsletter, you will have received a schedule of activities for the whole of Advent in which we will have a service each day, a different service each day through the week, and we invite you to come and make your own preparation for Christmas by the use of these services, and they're listed on the back of the bulletin for tonight.

The third thing, which I've mentioned, and that is the Advent booklet, which has been prepared for the families of the parish, and it's an excellent piece of work, and I hope that each family will have one by picking it up in the hall after church at the coffee hour.

Following the service today, in the chapel over there, there will be a service of the laying on of hands, and that's because there's lots of people whose circumstances, lots of people in this congregation, whose circumstances are such that they need and perhaps desire that their Christian brothers and sisters pray for them in the particular stress of their own situation.

[ 2 : 09 ] And so it's a time of special and focused prayer in which individuals who desire that prayer will come and kneel at the communion rail, and hands will be laid on them, and they will be prayed for.

I think myself probably one who needs to be prayed for as much as any. But so will you be, we've told you this, and I hope you'll be preparing yourself through this sermon to consider coming for that time of special prayer and the laying on of hands after the service.

The Barnabas group who meet together to pray for members of the congregation regularly, they will, they're sponsoring this service in a way, and they'll be there to join with us in praying.

Now I want you to look at the text for today, which is taken from Luke chapter 21, and it's a very powerful passage of scripture.

There will be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars and upon the earth distress of nations. In perplexity, the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear, with foreboding of what is coming on the world.

[ 3 : 27 ] The powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your head because your redemption is drawing near.

Then the lovely parable of the fig tree. Look at the fig tree and all the trees. As soon as they come out and leaf, you see for yourself and know that the summer is already near.

So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all has taken place.

Heaven and earth will. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. And then a lovely paragraph, which seems appropriate.

Jesus says to his disciples, Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life. And that day come upon you suddenly like a snare, for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth.

[ 4 : 50 ] But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place and to stand before the Son of Man.

I think there is tied up in the life of each person, each one of you, the whole drama of creation and redemption that you can find in the circumstances of your own individual life, the whole reality of

God's purpose from the beginning of creation until, as this passage says, until we stand before the Son of Man.

That drama is part of who you are as a person. Now, you know the book, *The Lives of a Cell*, where he takes one cell and gives to it a whole sort of personality.

So I think that if you take every individual person on this earth, you have in that person the whole drama of God's redemptive purpose.

And what we need to do is to realize this. Now, it's difficult to realize for two reasons. And I quote Bishop Leslie Newbigin in a book that he's written called *Foolishness to the Greeks*.

[ 6 : 24 ] And he says that there is in our world, I mean, there's a lot of people who think that there is in our world an inherent power within history that leads towards perfection.

In other words, that right among us, there is something that is driving us towards perfection, towards a perfect commonwealth of free and happy people.

He says this philosophy is largely the product of liberal Protestant thinking so that it's totally infiltrated the church. And the church tends to subscribe to this and they see the destiny of humankind being worked out in our world and they want the church to get on board and to go along with it.

It's, could I perhaps characterize it by saying, while Christians have prayed for a long time, thy kingdom come, they've prayed this kneeling before their God and Father, we are now learning to say to God as we go about our business, never mind, we'll build it ourselves.

And that's the view of our world which I think is very prevalent. The other view, Newbigin says, is Marxism.

[ 7 : 52 ] He says it's more biblical in its approach. Talks about a classless society on the other side of a final Armageddon in which the messianic proletariat will destroy the kingdom of evil.

Well, we all perhaps are familiar with that concept and I don't know whether it's breaking down now with the changes in China and Russia, but for a long time we've heard a great deal about the world revolution and the idea of a perfect society, of a classless society coming out at the other end.

Newbigin says both these ideologies marginalize the significance of an individual human being. Ultimately, individuals don't count.

They're of no consideration. Their lives are given for the cause and there is no ultimate significance to human existence.

So that when you turn to the passage that we have this morning, you recognize that there's something very different in what Christ is saying.

[ 9 : 09 ] In this passage, he teaches to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. He talks about the whole cycle of nature being disrupted. Signs in the sun, moon, and stars, nations in perplexity, sea, the sea which is the visible power and symbol of death, roaring with a terrible sound, people fainting with fear and foreboding of what is coming.

Fear unites people in a kind of way. It's a terrible and awesome motivator. The powers of heaven will be shaken and the whole established order will break down.

Sounds like a summary of the national. But that kind of, well, the thing is, I think we hear, I mean, I think we're in a peculiar position spiritually by hearing the national each night and having no idea of what it means or where it's leading or where it fits into history.

It's just so many news facts that we learn to accommodate ourselves to and we don't know what to do with them. We don't know how to interpret them. We don't know how to understand them.

You don't know whether to pray or to pour yourself another drink. It's a very difficult thing to do and we're constantly exposed to that and don't know how to live with it.

[ 10 : 43 ] Well, Christ says these things are going to come. And then he goes on to say to the disciples of Christ, look up and raise your head for your redemption is drawing near.

In other words, the kingdom which we can't create either by revolution or by the innate goodness of humanity finally coming to the place of perfection, that that kingdom, which is not going to come from our side, will come from the fulfillment of God's purpose, which God has begun to reveal in the person of Jesus Christ, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the community of the church, that that's what is happening.

And that's why you're to look up because your redemption is drawing near. And what redemption means is that Satan has made a takeover bid for this world and God's redemption is that he's going to buy it back so that it will belong to him and his authority will be restored and the power of evil will

be broken and the kingdom will come as something which God confers upon us rather than something which we achieve.

Well, he says to lift up your heads. For your redemption is drawing near. Then he goes on to the lovely parable of the fig tree. And it's a parable for Advent because apparently the fig tree is a tree which, more than any other tree, when it's lost its leaves and its fruit, looks completely and totally dead.

The kind of tree that you have to wait till spring comes to see if it's still alive. And I think it may be a picture of the church in our day.

[ 12 : 47 ] We look at it and it looks as though it's dead. And yet, Jesus' word to us is to wait because he says that as you wait and you watch this happening, you will, as soon as the leaf comes out, you will see for yourselves and know that summer is nearly here.

And he said, when you see the purposes of God in a sense like a fig tree, which everybody thought had died, which no longer had any life in it, and then the time comes for which the people of God have waited and longed and that fig tree begins to sprout.

And then, Jesus says, you will know that the kingdom is near. In the meantime, the affliction is very real.

I read in Christianity Today just a sentence which helped me with understanding this, and it said, it quoted someone as saying, you can live either with the truth or in repose, but you can't have both. And the truth is what I think Christ is revealing to us about the circumstances of our life. Signs in sun, moon and stars, perplexity, men's hearts failing them.

[ 14 : 23 ] That's the condition in which we have to live and in which we have to wait and in which we have to lift up our heads because redemption is drawing near.

Well, there is one way of opting out of this whole process, and Christ points that out to his disciples. And it says, Christ says that what you can do is take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life.

And I, you know, I have this poem which I use from time to time to illustrate this little point of dissipation which says, booze, man, booze is the stuff to drink for fellows whom it hurts to think. But men by times are sober and think by fits and starts, and when they think they fasten their hands upon their hearts. Christ is saying that, I think, that you can opt out of it by becoming so involved in the world and so refusing to see the signs, so refusing to acknowledge that the kingdoms of our ideologies are doomed to failure and that the only kingdom that's going to come is the kingdom which God himself is going to bring and the promise of which he has given to us in Jesus Christ.

[ 16 : 05 ] The kind of careless ignorance of these things leads, Jesus says, to suddenly being caught by a reality which you can no longer avoid like a rabbit caught in a snare.

That you live your life in dissipation and drunkenness and the cares of this life and you care for nothing but yourself and then suddenly reality confronts you and you're caught as in a trap.

Well, what he's saying here then, I think, is that Jesus wants us to see our world as one in which every person is an eternal reality.

No one is to be marginalized. No one is to be disregarded. There is no one in whom and for whom the work of redemption does not include them.

the purpose of our life really is to discover to our own very great surprise our eternal worth before God.

[ 17 : 28 ] That's the thing you need to discover about yourself and that's the thing you need to discover about other people, your eternal worth before God. Nelson Mandela and Pick Botha both have eternal worth before God.

That the masses of India and the billions in China and people where it just boggles our minds but that in human persons there is the reality of eternal worth and that is the purpose of God and that is the purpose of God which we need to come to terms with.

Machine guns and bombs do not express the worth of human persons. Votes and human rights and caring hospitals and good schools and enough food those are things that do recognize the infinite or eternal worth of every individual and that and that every person who's born into this world should come to recognize that this is a transit point from which God is developing or working out his eternal purpose.

And the passage ends with saying this watch at all times praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place and to stand before the Son of Man.

that the whole of history is aiming towards the coming of the Son of Man. And our job is not to enjoy what we have but to anticipate what we've been promised.

[ 19 : 18 ] And we've been promised that the Son of Man will come in clouds with great glory and that we have to live in faith in the fulfillment of that promise and relate to one another in the acknowledgement that God according to his promise will fulfill that and indeed the Son of Man will come and in that day we will stand before him.

Watch and pray for strength that you may stand before the Son of Man because that's the reason for which you have been created and in the reason for God God's redemptive purpose towards you. And as we begin this Advent season I'm just concerned that all of us should seek God's will and purpose in our life in a much deeper way than we have.

we tend to be so superficial and we tend to live in a way which doesn't acknowledge the truth of God's redemptive purpose in Christ and we don't communicate it to one another.

And I think to our world we look as though all the life has gone out of us but there is life there and there is a kingdom promise and we are to live watching and waiting for the coming of that kingdom and the coming of the Son of Man and the whole of our life is not oriented in terms of what has been but is oriented in terms of what will be because of the promises of God towards us in Christ.

[ 21 : 14 ] Amen.