

# Encourage each other

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[ 0 : 00 ] We do pray, Father, that even as I speak now and preach this message, that you would be the one who would give it power by your spirit, that you would make your word alive to us, that you would grow us in Christ, that we would be growing up in our faith and growing up in our love and our dependence on you.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. When I was a young adult, and I hate to say it's a little while ago, but when I was a young adult, late teenager, the big issues in the world or the Western world for people like us, the things that we lived with a certain level of fear about, were things like nuclear Armageddon.

It was still 1977 when I came to Christ, the Cold War was still happening. The Berlin Wall hadn't come down at the end of that age.

And throughout high school, you know, some of the nuclear weapons were still being tested, some of the really large ones around the world as the big nations, the superpowers, rattled their sabres. And in the Christian circles that I mixed in, it was really common for people to be talking about when the world was going to end and when Jesus was going to return.

[ 1 : 21 ] And it wasn't just in one or two churches, it was in many churches. And there were a lot of books that were written coming out of the United States. A guy called Hal Lindsay that was read in lots of churches wrote books like *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which had a particular view about how the end of the world would come about, how it would happen, when it would be.

And I think people were anticipating that it was likely to be in our own lifetime. I suspect that some of the big issues which dominate the thinking of young adults when we think about cataclysmic-type issues right now are issues like climate change and what it might do to the world, what the world into the future is going to be like to live in.

I think our perspective on the end of time varies according to where we live. So at the moment we're living in a place and a point of time in history where we're fairly privileged, where we live with a fair amount of wealth, where we are able to access goods from nearly any place on the surface of the earth, where our TV is dominated by things like food programs and the next fancy meal that we can eat.

I saw a wonderful new cookbook from, was it Donahay or was it Nigella the other day? Absolute treat, drooling looking at it, but knowing I can't eat those things if I'm going to keep slimming down. But it's good to think about it. But I wonder whether when we live in significant comfort, if we're not really anticipating the things of God in terms of the return of Christ and what that might mean for us.

[ 3 : 04 ] The very last prayer at the end of the Bible, the very last words of the Bible are, *Come Lord Jesus*. And if you're like me, like a week or two before I got married, that's not a prayer I wanted to pray.

It was like, oh, come Lord Jesus, but not yet, because I still want to experience what it's like to be married. Somebody told me a story like that this morning. But if I was living in southern Sudan or south Sudan where Darian Klentsos has just visited with some other people from Sydney or the Central African Republic where Christians have been killed at the hands of Muslim tribes in recent days, 300 people.

They're having days of mourning right now for 300 people that have been killed in the last few weeks. If I was a member of one of those families and experiencing the seriousness of the suffering which they are going through at this point of time, then it might be a very easy thing for me to pray, *Come Lord Jesus*.

*Come Lord Jesus*. Rescue us from this terrible mess. Save us from this time of trial. So when I was growing up, everybody had a bit to say about Christ's coming.

I was told when I was at theological college that there were American leaders in the Reagan years who were linked to the administration. This is back in the 1980s. And they believed that God had given them the ability to push the nuclear button and trigger a nuclear war.

[ 4 : 45 ] And in their mind they could do that because they could see such circumstances precipitating the return of Christ with this nuclear Armageddon. They're helping God along by making things happen for him.

That's the mentality. At the same time, early 1980s, around the corner from Coorong in West Dride, there was a church that met upstairs in one of the buildings there.

And they made a name for themselves around Sydney because for a period of 12 or 18 months they drove around in vans which proclaimed the return of Christ and the specific date when it was going to occur. And you could go to one of those, their church, and you could be sure that their minister was serious about what he was saying.

He wasn't trying to lead people astray. But he had a group of people gathered around him who were dead set certain it was a matter of faith that this date, I forget what it was, Christ was going to return.

And as it drew near and the night arrived, the Sydney media were onto it and they were gathered outside and the television networks were broadcasting throughout the evening. Not because they were expecting Jesus to return, they were expecting it to fall on their face.

[ 5 : 52 ] And that's what happened. Though the night wore on, Jesus didn't return, it got later and later, it got into the early hours of the morning and finally people started to come out of the building and go home looking very disillusioned because they had had this strong faith that Jesus was about to do something, that God was about to do something in our midst.

And it didn't happen. We experienced the bazaar. A Catholic community down the south coast of New South Wales. There was a bloke called William Cam who was known as the Little Pebble. Well, the Little Pebble went to prison in 2006 convicted of repeated child sexual abuse. He led this Catholic community which was anticipating the return of Christ, the end of the world.

There's a whole heap of quotes I could read to you but let me just read one. He said, Many people believe a nuclear war might never happen but within the framework of the year 2000 to 2004, during the Third World War, China will attack Japan, Asia and Russia will come to the aid of Europe and it is to be noted that Russia will attack the United States from or through Alaska via Cuba.

It hasn't happened. In 1925, a group of people in Sydney from the Theosophical Society spent £10,000, which was a huge sum of money.

[ 7 : 23 ] I wish I'd turned it into today's language but I haven't, to build an amphitheatre down at Balmoral Beach, a Grand Pavilion, which I don't think is there anymore but it was called the Star Amphitheatre and they were expecting the second coming of Jesus Christ and they built it in that place because they were going to sit there in the stands and welcome his arrival as he walked on the water through Sydney Heads.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I keep this. I treasure this book. I treasure it because it's rubbish but I treasure it.

It's written by a man called John Cable. In 1981, when I've been a Christian for years, John Cable, Deputy Principal at Frenchess Forest High School, not far away, wrote this book called Stir Up Your Mind, The Trumpet Will Sound and he resigned his job in the school to dedicate himself for the next 12 months of living for Christ and proclaiming to people that Jesus is going to return in 1982 because he's been into the scriptures and he is convinced by the scriptures, especially the passages in Daniel, that this is when these things are going to happen.

If you sat in his church, you'd probably think he was a good bloke, a sincere Christian, but what do we need to be able to say about these things?

What is wrong with them, all of them? The polite word is rubbish.

[ 9 : 10 ] I've got a better word and I don't think I can use it. It's rubbish. It's rubbish. We ran this in our small group the other night and it's interesting because even within our small group, we could say it was rubbish and we knew why it was rubbish because there's a whole lot of scriptures that you can go to where Jesus says no one knows the day or the hour and we'll go there in a minute.

But even as we sat in our small group, I think within our group, we would be persuaded by someone who was amongst us, who seemed like a nice person, who seemed to know their Bible and who seemed to be able to unfold things for us.

And it's protective of the people of God for us to know the scriptures and it's sometimes alright for us to say to one another, that's rubbish. I don't mean in an ungodly way, but there's some things that we can believe that actually cause a lot of harm and this is one of them.

This is rubbish. Now in a sense, speculation about the return of Jesus began with Jesus himself. He caused it. Days before his death, he said to his friends, I hope he'd laugh with me if I said that in his presence, which is in his presence because his spirit's here, but days before his death, he said to his friends, John 14 verse 2, in my father's house are many rooms, if it were not so, I would have told you.

And I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

[10:46] So what's he saying? He's saying, I'm going, I'm coming back, I will get you and I will take you to be where I am. Jesus spoke very definite words to his friends and his followers and at the end of chapter 14, he said again, do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid you heard me say that I'm going away and I'm coming back to you.

If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the father for the father is greater than I and I have told you now before it happens so that when it does happen, you will believe.

Forty days later, Jesus speaks his last words in the sight of his disciples in Acts chapter one, maybe 50 days later and he says to them, it is not for you to know the times or the dates the father has set by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

And after he had said this, he was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their side. And they were looking intently up into the sky as he was going when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.

Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus that has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way that you have seen him go into heaven.

[12:15] So the disciples have been asking about the future and Jesus is pretty blunt. He doesn't say rubbish like this, but he says, that's my father's business. They want to know about the future?

That's my father's business. That's for him to know and he will act when he is ready. But in the meantime, he will empower you by the Spirit of God to be his witnesses to the world.

Now we're going to pick up this idea over the next couple of weeks. The curtain is coming down on Jesus' first visit. He was here for a time. He went away and while he is away, we haven't been left alone.

God has sent his Spirit upon believers so that we can still function as his witnesses into all the world. Now there's a few ideas which are tucked in here.

It comes out of Acts chapter 1. We live between the two comings of God into his world. He defines history. We live between his first coming and his second coming.

[13:18] The last 2,000 years are not just dark ages and middle ages and renaissance and reformation and industrial revolution and now the information age.

The 20th century was not merely marked by two world wars. We are defined by something even greater. We live between the first and the second coming of Jesus Christ into the world.

And so God who stepped into our world almost unnoticed as a baby in Bethlehem will come again and be noticed by everyone.

So the second coming isn't going to be a hidden coming. It's going to be a seen coming and it will be noticed by everybody at the same time. In Acts chapter 1 he goes up into the clouds while the disciples they're craning their necks and wondering what's going on and Revelation chapter 1 verse 7 look, he describes his return.

Look, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him even those who pierced him and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him and so shall it be.

[14:24] Amen. So history is about God's purposes and Jesus' clear statement of intent to his disciples is that they will be his witnesses to all the world.

That's our mission. It's the defining purpose of God's church. God has empowered us by his spirit to communicate by our lives and by our words the love of God and the kingship of Christ to the world. It's a great privilege. So when we think about who we are as a church Christ's intentions for us must be first and foremost in our thinking and that is as much as we come together to strengthen each

other in a gathering like this tonight he wants us out there in the world declaring the true things about Christ to the people that we know and he doesn't just want us declaring it he gives us the power to be able to influence men and women and boys and girls who are out there around us. Now it's true 2,000 years later affluent north shore of Sydney and Jesus coming just seems a little bit slow and maybe even a little bit quaint.

People had an expectation of him coming back in their lifetime. They'd heard the angel say why do you stand here looking into the sky this same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way that you have seen him go into heaven.

[16:13] Other people had heard Jesus say that he would return. A number of places in the New Testament express expectations differently. In Luke chapter 17 Jesus says just as it was in the days of Noah so also it will be in the days of the Son of Man.

People were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage up until the day that Noah entered the ark and then the flood came and destroyed them all. So Jesus is sort of saying well life goes on the world turns people get hitched and sometimes unhitched Noah built his ark something that took a hundred years until the judgment came and plenty of people must have been there shaking their heads at this strange man building this strange vessel in the desert. Ridiculous. Jesus' first coming was a long time ago it seems remote and it seems distant and maybe a little foolish to believe in it.

Second coming. But his followers thought differently. They expected his imminent return they were living life expecting Jesus to come back very very soon.

and so it became a very serious problem for them when fellow believers died before Jesus returned. And you come to this passage in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 and Paul is writing a pastoral response to a very real world problem.

[18:00] Our brothers and sisters have died Jesus hasn't come back what's their status where are they with the Lord? And he says brothers and sisters we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep or to grieve like the rest of people who have no hope.

We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word we tell you that we who are still alive who are left until the coming of the Lord will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God and the dead in Christ will rise first and after that we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so we will be with the Lord forever.

Therefore encourage each other with these words. He's saying to them don't worry they won't miss out death won't cheat you out of the joy of God's Christ's return Christ will bring his people with them.

Death does not defeat the purposes of God. Christians believe very distinctive things about life after death.

[19:23] We believe in the resurrection of all people. people. We don't believe in reincarnation one cycle of life to another one creature to another.

We don't believe in annihilation back to dust with no further consequences. We believe in the resurrection of all people to face the judgment of God and ultimate responsibility accountability. We believe in the justice of God which does not allow us to escape responsibility. We believe in the mercy of God in the Lord Jesus Christ which allows us to stand safe at the judgment.

When we recite the Apostles Creed we did a little while ago we say that we believe in the resurrection of the dead. And so for the Christian person the return of the Lord Jesus Christ is full of hope.

Faith in him will be vindicated when we see him face to face. Believers who have died the most horrible deaths through the ages will stand before the resurrected Christ with their own magnificently resurrected bodies.

[20:43] Every one of our friends and relatives will stand before the Lord Jesus and acknowledge him as king. it's a really interesting thought because most of us have friends and associates and relatives that we would be really pleased to meet again and then there's a few others that we think oh no not them.

that brings me to what I think is the most important question for us and it's about us. How will you experience the second coming of the Lord Jesus?

It's a question for me too. What will his coming mean to me and to you? The early Christians proclaimed Jesus as God's judge of all people.

The Apostle Peter said in Acts chapter 10 he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Philippians chapter 2 has this magnificent song of Jesus' kingship.

[ 22 : 04 ] God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

So the resurrection isn't just for believers, it is for unbelievers as well. Every person will bow before Jesus Christ and will acknowledge his kingship.

His reality and his truth will be absolutely inescapable. We won't be able to stand there debating with Dawkins on that day about whether he's real or not. We will be confronted by a very inconvenient reality.

Revelation chapter 20 describes the judgment of all people. I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it and earth and sky fled from his presence and there was no place for them.

And I saw the dead great and small standing before the throne. The books were opened and another book was opened which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

[ 23 : 30 ] The sea gave up the dead that were in it and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them and each person was judged according to what he had done.

And then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Death is not a way of escape for anyone because there is a second death. I heard a lovely talk that life here is pretty difficult for believers sometimes.

In fact, for all people at one time or another. A friend of mine, Jonathan Dykes, was doing a mission down the south coast of New South Wales and he interacted with a couple of blokes and this one bloke in particular said he has quite a difficult time in his workplace.

He really is persecuted because he's a Christian. His boss just gives him a terribly hard time. And Jonathan said, so how long has that been going on? And the guy said, 35 years.

[ 24 : 49 ] And he said, I had another friend, he worked with me for 25, but he went somewhere else after 25, he couldn't handle it anymore. But this world, and I don't know if it's school for you or uni for you or back into your family, whatever it is, is not a pretty place to live.

And it's not just for Christians, it's for people who aren't Christians as well. The difficulties of life come upon us all in different measures and at different times. But the return of Jesus will see a great reversal of fortunes.

Those who have trusted and believed in him will be vindicated for the whole world to see. We will have been the knowers who plugged away at building the rescue ship while everyone else thought that we were fools.

We will be safe. But in the meantime, we are the people of God that he has sent into the world to tell people about Christ and to live for Christ. All of us will experience the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's going to be in one of two ways. He will come back while we are still alive in the way that the whole world will see. Or we will experience being raised from the dead after our death and brought alive into the presence of Christ.

[ 26 : 20 ] And that day will be either joyous beyond expression or devastating in the most appalling way. We will be people of faith welcoming the Saviour whom we have trusted and hoped for and who has written our names in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Or we will be amongst those who despised and rejected the wonderful rescuer that God has sent, who has come once and who will certainly come again.

And the wonderful thing about the return of Christ being slow is that those who have not yet believed him still have time to turn and to come into his safe presence.

There's still time for friends and workmates and school friends and relatives to respond to the wonderful invitation of the Son of God to come to him and to find forgiveness and rescue. So those of us who do know Christ, we are still under orders. We are not alone. He has given us his spirit and he has sent us as his witnesses into this vast world.

[ 27 : 42 ] It's almost like he's put on rescue uniform. You know, he's given us orange overalls and he's sent us out with a message which can make people absolutely safe when Jesus returns, which he certainly will.

Amen.