
Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y S E V E N

ENERGIZER

beyond **ESCAPISM**

One of the long-standing criticisms of religion—and perhaps of Christianity in particular—is a tendency for this kind of faith to draw believers away from life here and now toward a longing for a better life in the hereafter, however that may be defined. The criticism is that the focus on another realm of life becomes a form of holy escapism and renders the believer of less benefit to the world and society in which they now live. In this line of thinking, the promise of the “sweet bye and bye”—to borrow from the traditional hymn—tends to dull the believer’s sensibilities to the joys and sorrows of living now.

Often believers have left themselves open to such criticism, even at times cultivating, preaching and practising these kinds of attitudes. There are many stories of sincere believers who, have been overwhelmed by the quest for holiness or the imminent end of the world, have withdrawn themselves from all active life to ensure their perfection or readiness.

Promises that change today

Perhaps Christianity is most open to such disparagement because of the Bible's strong focus on the promise of the second coming of Jesus and the hope of eternity in a perfectly recreated world. And, it must be said, there is an important element of escape in this promise.

In this worldview, our world is a fallen, broken and tragic place—and it would be absurd not to have some longing for a world made new. As we have already heard from Paul, all of creation “groans” for re-creation and “not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23). So an element of what might be criticized as escapism seems appropriate for those who embrace these promises. There is nothing wrong or misplaced in longing for the time when God will set the world right, will bring

an end to injustice, pain and sorrow, and will replace the current fear-filled disorder with His glorious and righteous kingdom.

In His sermon on the end of the world, Jesus spent the first half of his discourse—as we have it recorded in Matthew 24 and 25—detailing the need for escape, even getting to the point of saying that “if those days had not been cut short, no-one would survive” (Matthew 24:22). But this is more in the nature of an introduction to His explanation of the significance of these promises of God. To focus solely—or even primarily—on the “escape” aspect of the Christian hope for the future is incomplete for both the Christian and the critic.

Even in Matthew 24, Jesus repeats the injunction to live alertly in light of the promise of His return and He expands this in the second half of the sermon in Matthew 25, with three stories focused on how the believer should live while “waiting” for Jesus. It quickly

becomes clear that this waiting is not passive or escapist; rather it demands active engagement with life, others, and the world around us.

The first story is that of the ten bridesmaids or the wise and foolish virgins (see Matthew 25:1-13). This parable focuses on the need to build spiritual resources and resilience in our lives today, fitting us for life now and ultimately to be ready to celebrate and live with God when the world is recreated. But the focus is on the present duty in light of the potential delay of the return of the “bridegroom.”

Jesus' second story is the parable of the three servants, otherwise known as the parable of the talents (see Matthew 25:14-30). Three men are given different sums of money—representing the material resources and opportunities we are all given in different measures—and left to work with those on behalf of their master until he returns. Upon his return, they are to account for the use they have

made of what they were given. Two of the servants do well, but the other is too afraid to make use of his gift, leaving him open to the rebuke of his master and his being cast out of the household. Again the focus of the story is the time between the master leaving and his return, making the best use of the resources and opportunities we have.

The third story is commonly referred to as the parable of the sheep and the goats but has nothing to do with sorting or counting livestock (see Matthew 25:31-46). In short, this parable urges that how we live now, how we treat each other, and how we treat the less fortunate among us is important. This is the climax of Jesus' sermon. At the beginning of Matthew 24, Jesus' followers asked Him, "How will we know when the world is about to end and that You will return as promised?"—to which Jesus ultimately replies, "What matters most is how you live and how you treat people in the meantime."

Rather than being tempted to self-centred escapism, the promise of the Second Coming and a recreated world must be a call to a different way of living, serving and relating to those around us. Jesus' promises "fill the present with hope and this with energy. Because the future fills the present with meaning and purpose, we give ourselves to the needs of others, even to the reshaping of society. The Christian hope has vast social consequences. . . . We look back to see what the promises were; we look forward to see them fulfilled; we act now in the light of what is yet to be" (Peter Jensen, *The Future of Jesus*).

Living in the light of hope

The reality is that what we believe about the future has important implications on how we live now. Belying the caricature of the otherworldly believer focused only on a vague eternal bliss to come, a healthy reliance on the promises of God about His

future for our world should be the catalyst for energetic engagement, the spark for a life that is rich and deep and makes a difference to others.

By definition, Adventists—people who await this coming and this kingdom—are people of hope. But this hope is not about a distant spot of light. Almost counter-intuitively, hope is more about today than tomorrow. While hope looks to the future, a proper understanding of hope lights and transforms the present. With such hope, we begin to live now as we expect to in the future, and we begin working to make a difference now in ways that fit with how we expect the world will be one day

And this impulse is undeniably practical. Because we believe God's righteous intention will eventually become the ultimate reality for humanity, it makes sense for us to practise this way of living now and order our lives in such a way as to try to give reality to it. It is also something God's people will choose to do as those who

desire to live in the ways of God now.

Knowing that what happens to “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40, 45) matters to God, means it matters to those who are His people. And because we know that the political, economic, cultural and social power structures that perpetuate injustice in all its forms will be overthrown, we live in ways that by virtue of how we serve, how we forgive and how we love stands in striking and critical contrast to much of the world around us. By our lives, witness, presence and influence, we seek to undo the evil in our world. We know these forces and systems—and our participation in and benefit from them—are only ever temporary and, no matter how overwhelming they might seem, will not have the final word.

Undeniably, there is an element of escape in Jesus’ promises to come again. In a world with so much pain and sadness, it is appropriate to look forward to a better place

and a better way. According to the promises of God, that will come—but it is yet to come.

More importantly today, these promises change how we see today and energise how we respond. The promises of God call us to engagement with our world, doing what we can to confront the wrongs we see around us, heal the hurts in our human brothers and sisters, care for the world, celebrate the goodness we discover and share the hope that these promises give us.

As faltering and small as our efforts might be, we work with God to begin to recreate the world as—one day—He will ultimately and gloriously recreate it. When Jesus said, “I am going away and I am coming back to you” (John 14:28), He was also saying to His followers, “Live like it is true today—and that will make a difference.”

The hope of Judgment

But perhaps to really appreciate this impact of the promises of God and to be energised to living faithfully in such a way as to make a difference, we need to try to see the world as God sees it. When judgment is described in the Bible, most emphasis is placed on the goodness and the hope of God’s judgment. In Reflections on the Psalms, C S Lewis observes that the biblical writings of the Psalms and the Prophets “are full of the longing for judgment, and regard the announcement that ‘judgment’ is coming as good news.” This is the voice of the oppressed and the forgotten, crying out for the wrongs to be set right and for their complaints to be heard.

It is also a plea that someone should be taking note of the wrongs done in our world—and a reminder that Someone is. While suffering, oppression and tragedy are hard enough to bear in their own right, the injury or insult is harder still if it seems likely they are meaningless or unnoticed. The possible weightlessness of sorrow is heavier than its initial burden. A world without record or

consequences is the ultimate in cruel absurdity.

This is the essential argument of the Bible's Book of Ecclesiastes, a book that hardly fits with many attempts at neat formulations of faith. The philosopher's cry of "Meaningless! Meaningless!" echoes through the pages of this ancient wisdom literature, as item by item the various aspects of life as we know it are discounted as not worth the effort. Work, wealth, wisdom and pleasure are all dismissed as meaningless. Even the difference between good and evil is observed as often counting for little: "There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless" (Ecclesiastes 8:14).

But at the end of his diatribe, the philosopher takes a sudden turn. In the midst of his myriad of meaninglessness, he says, hold on a minute,

God is going to judge so everything is not meaningless; in fact, now everything and everyone matters. Therefore, "fear God and keep His commandments"—meaning love and honour God, and learn to do right and seek goodness (see Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14).

The hope of judgment comes down to what we believe about the core nature of God, life and the world in which we live. The Bible urges that we live in a world created and loved by God but which has gone wrong and in which God is working toward His plan for re-creation, pre-eminently through the life and death of Jesus. As we understand the story of our world, humanity has gone wrong and so many people are caught in the brokenness that has come with the victories of evil. So God's judgment is a key part of His setting our world right. For those on the receiving end of so many of the world's wrongs that is good news. And we only fail to appreciate this hope as we fail to hear the voices and see with the eyes

of those who are marginalised, brutalised and exploited.

But not only does this perspective give us a new appreciation of the hope of judgment, this hope then changes our view of others. "People who believe that God will turn the world upside down—people like Mary with her Magnificat, pulling down the mighty from their thrones and exalting the humble and meek [see Luke 1:46-55]—are not going to be backward in getting on with some world-changing in the present" (N T Wright, *Surprised By Hope*). As we look forward to God's promise to judge the world and join our lives with His mission to set our world right ultimately and forever, the hope of judgment begins to change the world today, even if now only by glimpses and in seemingly small ways.

To begin to see the world from God's viewpoint is the biggest perspective shift. As David James Duncan concludes in his afterword to the 20th anniversary edition of *The*

River Why, this kind of faith and our understanding of God's purposes in our world should be the foundation of how we live our lives: "And knowing justice is inescapable, and not in human hands, I want to ask, finally, Why judge? Why hate or rage? Why not just serve, wherever and however and for as long and as gratefully as we can, step by step, heart to heart, move by intricate move?"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Why do you think Christians are sometimes criticized for being less concerned about what happens around them? Do you think this is a fair criticism?**
- 2. How would you explain the way that your belief in Jesus' second coming motivates you to serve others today?**
- 3. In what ways are the promises of God's judgment good news? Or do they sound to you more like a threat?**

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