

The “Now” of the End

Text 7:1-7,11

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The phrase, “The End of History,” in the English language, can be understood in two ways: You can understand the phrase, “The End of History,” as some future, distant point in time, the point in time furthest out into the future. The End of History can speak of the terminus of history, the last act, the last event. That can be understood as the end of history.

But, you can also understand the phrase, “The End of History,” in terms of history's goal, its meaning, its purpose. In that sense, it has nothing to do with future, terminus, last event; it has to do only with the present moment: the meaning and the goal of history in the present moment. And to use “The End of History” in that sense, is to recognize that the end of history is present to every moment of history. The goal and the meaning of history is present to this moment; it is present to every moment. Eternity. God is immediately present to every moment on the timeline. And so, in that sense, the end of history doesn't talk about something that is way out there in the future; it talks about the present moment before the face of God, the inner secrets, the core of history, its meaning, its purpose, its goal. The end of history is always present to every moment of history, and every present moment is filled with all of the potentiality and all of the possibility of history's purpose and meaning and goal.

This present moment is the moment in which God deals with us. Sometimes we wish we lived in some other period of time. There's a little chorus the children sing about Jesus taking children on his knee and blessing them and saying, “Oh I wish that I had been there then.” Well, it's not really so. There were all kinds of people that were there then who didn't see Jesus, that didn't see in Jesus the revelation of God. You could be present to Jesus physically and be miles away. And maybe you think it would be neat to be at the end of history, to be there for the final curtain. Well, maybe or maybe not. We can contemplate the end of the historical process. Scientists tell us maybe the whole thing will burn up and become a cinder, or maybe it will just grow cold and become an ice cube. We don't know how; we don't know when.

Now, there are a lot of people who talk about that last, furthest-out moment of history as though it were really important and the Bible had something to say about it, but it doesn't. History will wind down somehow or other, but you and I don't care. The Bible doesn't really have much to say about it; it doesn't matter. Here we are in the midst of time and the thing that's important for us to say is that we came from somewhere and so we talk about God as Creator, and there was a beginning point. Nobody was there. Nobody had a camcorder to catch it all. What we see are symbols and images and stories; we simply were here and believe that it began and so we believe that all of it came from God and so we talk about The Beginning, and we're here and we're on the way and so we talk about The End, and we believe that God was in the beginning, God will be in the end. But, as far as the beginning and the end is concerned, that's really all we can say. God was there; God will be there: God in the Beginning, God in the End. That's enough!

Now, that's not where the Church has stopped. The Church in much of its tradition has loved to speculate about the events of the end and all that kind of stuff – I think distorting what is in the scripture with the images of the parables that are there about the end. But God doesn't really want us to bother about that out there. God is always concerned about this present moment. *The Now of the End*; that is, the present moment in terms of the ultimate purpose of history. That's really the only thing we have to be concerned about.

I was coming out of a funeral home a month or three ago and as I walked out the door, there was a pastor (I knew he was a pastor because he had a great big floppy Bible) and he was there fleecing his flock, a couple of people. And as I walked by, I heard him say, "And that's the reason why I believe the Lord's going to come very soon." And I had to smile. I said to Nancy, you know, pastors have been fleecing their flock that way for 2,000 years. How can you hold your breath for 2,000 years? How can you look in the sky or look at the history and say, "Well, obviously these are the last times. Obviously you see the signs all about you. Obviously Jesus is coming very soon."?

Friends, if you turn on your radio today you will find that everywhere on the dial is going to be all shot to heaven, and you are going to find pastors who will be telling you, "Repent and send in your offering, because the Lord is coming soon."

Now, there's going to be one set of pastors who are really living on the end who are going to be right. But, it won't be their fault. That's an accident. Somebody's got to be there in the end. But, as far as the Bible is concerned, we don't know when the end is going to be, and the Bible doesn't even care about it. The only thing that the address of scripture to us is concerned about is now. Now is the day of salvation. Now is the acceptable time. We don't know, we say there will be an end because there was a beginning and there is a present, and so there will be an end, but if we want to get serious with God, then it is the now of the end that God is really concerned about. It is this present moment. This present moment, God is

present to our history. This present moment, eternity impinges on our time. This moment is freighted with eternity and that's the only moment we ever have to worry about.

And so Paul went about preaching the Gospel, saying to people, "Receive the grace of God. Be ye reconciled to God, for the end is come." Now, Paul in this letter was dealing with his own ministry, which was under attack. He said, "You know I sort of sense this old body decaying and wasting away, but I am being renewed every day." And then he goes on to say in that fifth chapter which we often read at funerals, "And we know that if this earthly tabernacle is destroyed, we have a building with God not made with hands," and oftentimes at funerals the application is that the physical body dies and that the spirit goes to be with Jesus. And then way out there somewhere there's supposed to be some kind of future resurrection. I really think we have to think that through. Paul is not talking about if this body dies, I have a building with God not made with hands. Paul is saying, "I don't want to die. This old body is decaying and getting crotchety. What I would really like is to have this old body clothed upon by my resurrected body, because I know that if this old body be destroyed, I've got a building." We have a building, not we *will* have a building; we have a building now in heaven: the Body of Christ. Paul is so obsessed with his present, personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ that he sees death as an incidental passage, simply a moment in time. We have this thing already and I can't wait until I come into the full experience of it, he says. Oh, right now I grunt and groan and I decay and I'm full of anguish and pain, but he says the thing that God has made me for is that other thing. In fact, he says, I would rather leave this present burden, this ambiguous existence and come fully into the experience of my God.

Now, Paul kind of thought the end of history and the end of history were the same. He sort of thought that history at its terminus and history in its purpose were almost happening synonymously. Paul expected to wake up one morning and to have a rift in the sky and to see Jesus coming. Paul was praying for it. Paul was wrong. I mean, he was at least 2,000 years off. But he thought so. That didn't really matter. We can see in his writings in the New Testament he begins to make adjustment, because, well, even Paul couldn't hold his breath, you know, for even a dozen years. And so he began to see that maybe he was going to die. He didn't really want to die. He wanted to go zippo, but maybe he was going to die. That would be all right, too. It was kind of incidental because those who die fall asleep in Jesus and he will bring them with him and so forth. He had that all worked out. He didn't know when the terminus point was, but what he did understand was what the purpose of it all was. And the reason he was so turned on was the fact that, as far as he was concerned, it was over, there wasn't anything more to do.

Do you ever wonder why the New Testament keeps talking about the last days, these last days? Well, in terms of the terminus, it was wrong. But, in terms of whatever had to happen in order for history to realize its purpose, it was

absolutely right. There wasn't anything more to do. What did he understand had been done? Well, he says we understand that if one died for all, then all are dead. And he died for all, he says. Jesus died for all. And so he says if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away; all things have become new. "It's a whole new world, folks. It's now. It's present. I am living in a whole new world, a whole new creation. Death? Well, death, if death need be. But, death can't even touch me. If anyone is in Christ, it's a new creation. Old things have passed away, all things have become new because God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, but not imputing their trespasses to them. God made him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. It's all over. It's done. Salvation is accomplished. Salvation is finished. Salvation is complete. There's nothing more to do. And so, come Lord Jesus!" So Paul thought. He was so convinced of the completion, the finished work of Jesus Christ for our salvation, of the issuing in of a whole new world, of the beginning of a whole new age, of the presence of the New Kingdom, that he was just marking time. Come, Lord Jesus. Any old day, now. Any old day, now. Where in the world are you? Well, maybe I've got to adjust my sights, but there's nothing more to do, it's all over.

So, he says, who am I (in terms of his ministry now)? Why, he says, I'm just an ambassador for Christ, God working through me, pleading with you. I plead with you on God's behalf. Be reconciled to God. Why shouldn't you be reconciled to God? You should be reconciled to God. You should be friends with God. You should be friendly with God because God has become friendly with you in Jesus Christ. It's all over; it's all done. You want to carry your little knapsack of guilt around? What do you do that for? It's over. You want to carry a few sins around on your back? What do you do that for? It's over! Not imputing their sins to them. God made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be the righteousness of God in him. Be ye reconciled, for it's all over. It's all ready. It's all finished. So, as an ambassador of Christ, God beseeches you through me, turn to God Who has turned to you. Say Yes to God, Who has said Yes to you. Why? Why would you receive the grace of God in vain? Why would you frustrate the grace of God? Don't you see what has happened? Don't you see what God did when the word became flesh and dwelt among us? Don't you see how Jesus walked our way, bore our sins, buried it in the depths of the sea so it's remembered no more and opened up heaven? Be ye reconciled to God. Come, come! What are you waiting for? Why do you hesitate? Aren't you good enough? Can't you make it? Won't you be able to hold on? It's not up to you anyway. It's all of grace. It's all of God. Come, come. Now is the day of salvation. Now is the acceptable time. That's all the Bible knows. Wonderful, good news.

Paul does two things because of the finished nature of our redemption. He says, for one thing, I try to live in a pleasing way to God. He says, for one thing, I try whether in this present existence or when I come fully into God's presence, to be acceptable to Him. Paul is serious about the life he leads. There's a kind of moral earnestness about the Apostle because he says we're all going to appear before the

judgment seat of Christ. Now, you say, why'd you drag that in? You had all that good news going. Why'd you drag that in? Well, I'm sorry, but Paul did. He said we'll all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. You say, well, if he doesn't impute our trespasses to us, if he's removed our guilt, if he's forgiven us and graced us, what's this judgment seat business? Well, it's certainly not judgment in the sense of condemnation. We certainly don't have to wonder what the verdict is. The verdict has been given. You're not guilty. But, that doesn't mean that life isn't a serious affair. It doesn't mean we come to Jesus and cover up the past and get rid of it as though we can get away without becoming fully transparent in the presence of God. There will be a moment when I will own my story. Not the story I would tell you if I could tell you my story. The story as I've lived it. You'll all be there. Look him in the face. That's who you are, eh? That's who I am. No secrets hid. No dark corners unexposed. That's who I am. We'll appear before the judgment seat of Christ. And that's really a kind of liberating thought, when you think about it. Because Christ is the judge. No new revelation for him. He's removed it. But we'll own it. And the very fact of that transparency before Jesus Christ says to us now, today maybe we need to clean up our act. It's serious business. Living a Christian life.

The second thing Paul does is he goes everywhere trumpeting the good news. Be reconciled. Be reconciled. God has said Yes. And God can't say anymore. There's nothing more for God to do. All done. Over. Accomplished. Free. Come! Receive it. Embrace it. Now. Now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation. It's the only moment you'll ever have, good friends, don't worry about the future. Don't ask me about the cartoons in the book of Revelation. Don't ask me about the thousand-year reign or the rupture or the rapture, however you call it. Don't ask me about any of that stuff. The only moment, the only concern, the only biblical imperative is now, now, now, now. Get ready to meet your Lord, Who is full of grace. Now is the day of salvation, and God is as close and immediate to this moment as at any moment you'll ever know. So, come. Be ye reconciled. Throw away your alienation and your estrangement and just let yourself be loved. Say Yes. Say Yes. Say Yes to God through Jesus Christ, through whom God said Yes to us.