

YOUR PAIN CAN BE YOUR VICTORY!



Part III

Knowing the End From The Beginning

What if tomorrow's newspaper arrived on your doorstep today? That was the thesis of a television program carried on CBS for a few years. A Chicago man was shocked one morning when a strange cat turned up at his door with a copy of the next day's headlines. It happened on a weekly basis on TV's *Early Edition*.

From his experiences, the show's reluctant hero discovered that he was being given a unique responsibility. So he risked being thought a fool by others to help them avoid tragedy. He could see the end of events in which others were thoughtlessly absorbed, so he treated those events differently — and tried to get the other actors to see things from his perspective. It was only make-believe. It was just television drama.

But there is One who knows the end of all things from the beginning. Eight centuries before Christ's birth, a prophet wrote these words from and about Israel's God:

“Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Isaiah. 46:9-10).

God doesn't rig outcomes. Yet because of His perspective as a God outside our space-time limitations, He knows not only the sovereign purposes He will accomplish but the free choices we will make and their outcomes. So He tells us enough of the future to keep our present oriented to truth, holiness and eternity.

That same prophet, Isaiah, challenged the priests and prophets of the false gods of the nations around Israel with this:

“Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were, so that we may consider them and know their final outcome. Or declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods. Do something, whether good or bad, so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear. But you are less than nothing and your works are utterly worthless; he who chooses you is detestable” (Isaiah. 41:22-24).

Scriptures such as these have value for those who are apologists for the Christian faith. The ability to foretell future events correctly and without fail is an argument both for the uniqueness of the single book that contains such prophecies, the Bible and the existence of an Eternal and Omniscient Being as its ultimate author. But in this message, I am not speaking so much as an apologist as simply a disciple. If we are loved

by, redeemed by and destined for the fellowship of the God who knows the end of all things from the beginning, doesn't that imply some things not only about our confidence in the 'future' but also about how we should be using our time in the meanwhile?

Christian Discipleship

The point of this final lesson is to underscore the confident perspective Christ's disciples are allowed to have through faith. Because we have the early- edition headlines of The End, we should live each day in confident anticipation. Because we are going to transition or die differently on the basis of our redemption by Christ's blood, we should be living differently until that time comes.

Doesn't it make sense to you that a proper perspective on life would make a difference in how you view what is happening to you today? Isn't it possible that you would have more patience with setbacks and suffering if you kept the promised end of all things in view? Don't you think you could be more patient with your own faults — as well as those of others — if you could rest assured that you are going to surmount satan's attacks? After all, you are a World Overcomer for goodness sake!

Several years ago, Gary Thomas wrote this in *Christianity Today*:

Thinking about eternity helps us retrieve [perspective]. I'm reminded of this every year when I figure my taxes. During the year, I rejoice at the paychecks and extra income, and sometimes I flinch when I write out the tithe and offering. I do my best to be a joyful giver, but I confess it is not always easy, especially when there are other perceived needs and wants.

At the end of the year, however, all of that changes. As I'm figuring my tax liability, I wince at every source of income and rejoice with every tithe and offering check--more income means more tax, but every offering and tithe means less tax. Everything is turned upside down, or perhaps, more appropriately, right-side up.

I suspect judgment day will be like that.

Yes! He's right. He has to be right. Come to think of it, there are several things of this sort with which we can identify. Why would a woman be eager to get pregnant? Doesn't she know the next nine months will have to be lived with more thought to that life growing inside her than to her own? Hasn't anybody told her that childbirth is painful and life-threatening? Why, you can't talk that way to a woman who wants to be a mother. She's willing to embrace all the peril for the prospect of holding a baby in her arms.

Why would a kid who likes sports, enjoys movies, and wants to travel commit to eight or ten years of schooling in the very prime of her life? She wants to be a physician. So the sacrifices that will have to be made along the route to that goal are embraced and endured for the sake of the outcome.

How do you deal with a birth defect, fight drug addiction, or live a celibate life as a single person in a sex-saturated society? Why should you keep your stressful and often- unsatisfying marriage together? Why be honest when others in your business or company are cutting corners, lying to customers? For that matter, why live a Christ- surrendered life when you want to be as selfish and self-centered as everybody else seems to be on most days? When it's hard to hold onto your faith? When you get some bad breaks? Try Paul's answer for size:

"Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me, 'My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.'

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take my limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size — abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become" (II Corinthians 12:7b-10, The Message).

Conclusion

The writings in I John is directed to Christians living not only in a world-culture but also an emerging church-culture that told them they didn't have to live surrendered, Christ-honoring, pure lives. They were being told to throw restraint to the wind and live as degenerate pleasure-seekers. Gnostic heretics had reinterpreted the Gospel so as to argue that breaking God's moral laws didn't really matter.

I John 2:18 warns against these Anti-Christ false teachers. He pleaded with them to reject the "higher knowledge" of the Gnostics in favor of the Holy Spirit anointing they had received at the beginning, to live with the announced return of Jesus in view and to live pure lives on the basis of their expectation.

His message to them was the same as mine is to you today: Are you struggling? Do you still feel the stirring of your base, sinful nature? Have you failed miserably and embarrassingly? Are your weak virtues like candle flames in a strong wind?

Then remember. Remember this: You are now — today — God's child, and He has made you some precious promises. I don't know how He will get you through, but I know He will. I don't know how much more of the refining process you still have ahead, but I know He will not abandon you. And it will have been worth anything in the meanwhile to have hung on.

When you are tempted to judge God's faithful love by your sad circumstances, don't! Like Joseph in Pharaoh's dungeon, your situation may only be the dark hours before dawn. Like the Israelites under Pharaoh's lash, it may be the final trial before a mighty rescue. Like Paul's thorn in the flesh, it may be your invitation to experience God's grace at a deeper level. Or, like some of those people who are referenced in the second part of the reading from Hebrews 11, the resolution of your trial today may not come until you are released from this world.

Faith says that God — not humankind — belongs at the center. He is perfect; we are not. He leads; we follow. We confess; He forgives. We trust Him in the wilderness; He vindicates our faith when we reach the Promised Land.

The **great mystery of faith** is not that we should have it and live by it but that God would invite us to trust Him, give us adequate grounding for making such a choice and so richly

reward a faith that is incomplete and flawed at its best. If you are at the edge of the sea and know your enemy is in hot pursuit, what better alternative do you have than to take the step of faith that commits you to follow His lead today? Listen for that 'still small voice'; I assure you it's there.