

Fearless: Fear of Global Calamity Sunday, 6/13/21

Last week we faced the fear that God either isn't real or is off watching us from a distance as a casual observer, no longer present and intervening in the lives of ordinary people. We discovered that God is neither fictional nor watching us from a distance, but is ultimately real and present to us, first in the person of Jesus, and now in the person of the Holy Spirit.

This week, we'll face our fear of global calamity, disasters that engulf our planet and destroy our way of life and our illusions of being in control.

If you want some cheap entertainment, go to Wikipedia and look up "Doomsday Scenarios".¹ I couldn't believe the number of ways that people have imagined the end of the world might come! How many of these have you heard of? How many of them keep you up at night? Eruption of super volcanoes; Hostile alien invaders; Collision of the earth with objects from space, like asteroids or rogue planets; Gamma ray bursts that kill all life; Near-earth super novae; Artificial intelligence takeovers; Cyberwarfare; Nuclear winter; Zombie apocalypse; Solar flares; Overpopulation; Biological warfare or plague; Global warming and rising oceans; The loss of oceanic oxygenation; Anarchy and the collapse of society; Extinction of species and the destruction of ecological niches. The list goes on and on.

Max Lucado imagines a modern pharmaceutical advertisement for life, that might go something like this: "[H]uman life has been known, in most cases, to result in death. Some individuals have reported experiences with lethal viruses, chemical agents, and or bloodthirsty terrorists. Birth can also result in fatal encounters with tsunamis, inebriated pilots, road rage, famine, [or] nuclear disaster... Side effects of living include super viruses, heart disease, and final exams. Human life is not recommended for anyone who cannot share a planet with evil despots ..."²

After the last year, it doesn't take much imagination at all to envision a global pandemic rising to the level of a doomsday scenario. Imagine something that's more contagious than COVID-19 but with the fatality of Ebola. In fact, for some segments of the world without the same access to vaccination and other healthcare resources that we have in

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Doomsday_scenarios

² Max Lucado. *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear*, pp 151-152. Thomas Nelson (2009).

the United States (India, for example), the current pandemic is ravaging victims so quickly and broadly that bodies are being abandoned in public places for lack of firewood to cremate them.

The coronavirus isn't the end to life as we know it, at least not for most of us, but it's been a fresh reminder of how something as small as a virus, that mutates in a distant part of the planet, can bring the lives and economies of the entire world under its sway. And in what is perhaps the most terrifying part of the experience of the last year, despite all this being clearly foreseen, we lacked either the will or ability to prevent it. The world is indeed a scary place, and the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us all of how fragile life can be.

Fortunately, Jesus knew all about our suffering, not only by having experienced suffering himself, but also by knowing that the created order will experience birth pains and come to a climactic conclusion, at which time everything will be recreated. We heard his description of those times in our first reading from Matthew 24. It's not nearly as imaginative as the list of doomsday scenarios on Wikipedia, but let's go over the details.

Jesus warns us that there will be false Messiahs, those who claim to be the fulfilment of Christ's second coming.³ Would you believe that Wikipedia also has a list of would-be Messiahs, listing almost 50 known Christ-pretenders since the 18th century alone?⁴ By that criterion, we would seem to be living in the End Times, and have been for at least the last several hundred years.

Jesus warns us of wars, famines, and earthquakes.⁵ Check, check, and check, right? Name a single year that there hasn't been war, famine, and earthquake somewhere on this planet?

Jesus next warns us that Christians will be hated, arrested, persecuted, and killed, and that many Christians will fall away from the faith and each other because of this persecution.⁶ Most of us have not yet been put to the test by serious persecution for our faith, but we've at least heard of others who have, at other times and in other places. Have you

³ Matthew 24:5.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_claimed_to_be_Jesus

⁵ Matthew 24: 6-7.

⁶ Matthew 24:9-10

asked yourself how you might respond given a choice between your faith and this life?

Next Jesus warns that many will be deceived, sin will run rampant, and the love of many will grow cold.⁷ Hasn't that been the human story over at least the last two thousand years? Everything about this text seems to portray a grim end that's not only coming, but is in effect actively arriving.

But don't miss the punch line, because Jesus puts it all in perspective in the very last verse. "But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and then the end will come."⁸ Do you see it? Nothing can prevent the Good News from having the last word. Not false Messiahs; not wars, famines, or earthquakes; not apostate Christians. No amount of suffering can prevent God's will from prevailing in the end. The Good News will be shared with everyone, and only then will the end come. The road might get a little bumpy, but God's team wins in the end. This end-times description in Matthew isn't so much a scary bedtime story as it is a pep talk for anyone who's suffering under the tyranny of their fears. Hold strong to your faith to the end, and you will be saved and creation will be restored.

Let's look at another end-times prophecy, this one from the Revelation given to John. It's a vision not of suffering, but of a glorious healing of all that's broken. I'm reading selected portions of chapters 21 and 22, in the New Living Translation. [{Read Revelation 21:1-7, 22-25; 22: 1-5 NLT}](#)

Remember that the visions given in the Bible are just that- visions. They tend to have a dream-like quality, with plenty of symbols present that aren't necessarily intended to be taken literally. I've said previously that John saw the new heaven and earth as a new Garden of Eden, fully restored from the blemish of sin. And the new Eden is essentially the same thing that Jesus called the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven- the perfect fulfillment of God's will and the ultimate closeness of God with God's people. This vision of a new Eden is intended to offer us comfort, an assurance that if we're not sure today that we belong to God, then in the life to come there will be absolutely no room left for

⁷ Matthew 24:11-12

⁸ Matthew 24:13-14

ambiguity. By faith, we are beloved children of God today and for all of eternity, and that eternity will not be one of suffering, but of blessing and eternal life. No amount of suffering in this life can prevent that good future, not even your most pessimistic doomsday scenario.

This isn't exactly the picture painted in Revelation 22, but there's something about this stream that I photographed on the way to Whistler Mountain in Canada that made me think of the river of the water of life. Maybe it was all the bright, living greenery on both sides of the stream, or the way the crystal-clear mountain water moved with such energy over the rocks on the bed of the stream.

I don't know about you, but I am not only thirsty, but I'm longing for a full submersion in the river of the water of life. I don't care how cold it is, I'm ready to take the plunge! It's been a difficult time for everyone as we've slogged through this pandemic, and we're tired. We have brain fog. And vaccines or no, there continues to be so much strife and brokenness in our lives and in the world around us that it can overwhelm us and lead us to conclude that hope is either a thing of the past or a thing for foolish people.

The river of life and the eternal light of God in the New Creation remind us that hope is not a thing of the past. Perhaps our problem has been that we've simply put our hope in the wrong things. Anything or any person other than Jesus is bound to disappoint you. But you can count on Jesus. Faith in the living Christ is what brings meaning to each day and offers the hope of restoration and reconciliation of all that is broken. We already know how the story ends, and it ends with good news. Because of Jesus, you can be certain that your future is not only a good one, but a perfect one, marked by the blessing of living more abundantly in God's presence than we can even imagine.

We've visited so many fears over the last two months. Perhaps I didn't talk about the one that keeps you up at night. Perhaps the fear that really rocks your world will turn out to be a new one that nobody sees coming until it turns your life upside down. Ultimately, it doesn't matter, because at the end of this life and the beginning of eternity, it's the light of God and the River of Life that will fill our days and capture our complete attention. Some of our fears in this life have a reasonable basis in fact, many of them borrow unnecessarily from our overly active imaginations and our penchant for borrowing trouble from tomorrow. But none of our fears will stand the true test of time, when Jesus returns and makes

everything new again. Hold to that hope in faith, and not even the gates of Hell can prevail against you.

Please take some time now to reflect on the warmth and power of the eternal light of God.



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