

Fire

Last Things

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Bible Text: Revelation 14:8-13; 1 Peter 1:6-9
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Our Scripture lesson today, as we return to “Last Things” having taken a two-week break, is taken from Revelation chapter 14, beginning at verse 8, that’s page 1,928.

8 A second angel followed and said, ‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.’ 9 A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, 10 he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.’ 12 This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus. 13 Then I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.’

The word of the Lord. [“Thanks be to God.”]

May we pray.

Lord, please help me to communicate clearly and concisely the meaning of your word and its application for us. In Jesus’ mighty name, amen.

We are returning today to our theme on “Last Things” and that means we’re focusing still in the book of Revelation, so I picked it back up, and as we think about the meaning of the book of Revelation, we see some truths that are rather profound.

On the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, in the year 586 BC, the Babylonians burned down the temple of God in Jerusalem. Some 656 years later, on the ninth day of Av, in the year AD 70, the Romans burned down the temple of God. And it’s a rather profound thing when we think about it.

I’ve mentioned before in my very meager coin collection, that I have a silver coin minted from the temple of Jerusalem when it was burned down in 70 AD by the Romans. Very strange. And that silver coin has on one side a menorah and a woman weeping and it says under it in Latin “Judea weeping” (I made a mistake: This silver coin is embossed with a weeping Jewish woman on the left and a captive Jewish man on the right, with a palm tree in the middle, not a menorah. The inscription is *IUDAEA CAPTA*, meaning “Judaea [has been] conquered”/ “conquered Judaea.”).

You see, what happened is when the temple was burned, the Romans stole all the gold and all the silver, and that’s how they afforded to build the Colosseum in Rome. And so, again, I have this little silver coin, “Judea weeping,” minted from the silver of the Jewish temple destroyed on the ninth day of Av, the same day of the same month in the Jewish calendar that the Babylonians had destroyed the city in 586 before Christ.

Now, what that tells us is this, that the book of Revelation has a relevance to the events that climaxed in AD 70 because fire came on that city. And if you read Josephus’ account of the destruction of the city

Josephus was a Jewish General who commanded the armies of the Galilee, and he realized very early in that civil war against Rome, “We can’t win.” And Josephus, being a rational man and not a fool, believed that resistance against evil that is going to cost you your life is suicide, and suicide is a sin. Never forget that.

I’ve buried people who’ve committed suicide. Suicide is a sin. It’s a terribly selfish act. But do I believe that suicide keeps you out of heaven? Of course

not. People can get very down in the dumps, and when they're down in the dumps, they do crazy things.

I remember preaching twice the same funeral sermon, and it was out of Psalm 73, and that is as people look at life, and they see all of the bad things that happen that don't make sense, and they say to themselves, "I've just wasted my life in vain. I don't know what to do."

And the psalmist says that he was that way until he went into the sanctuary of God, and it's only in the sanctuary of God that life makes sense.

Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.

All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.

If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children.

When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.

(Psalm 73:13-17, 21-22)

Really, honest to goodness, that's the truth. It's kind of like the book of Ecclesiastes, which is written to tell us about life under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18-20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:18; 6:1, 12; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5), that is, without reference to the transcendent God who's in control of everything. And so Ecclesiastes is a very realistic book. It's a great book for people who don't really know the Lord because it really sums up the vanity of vanities of life under the sun. And Psalm 73 is that way, too, and when a person gets bitter, when a person gets angry—and remember that bitterness and anger are always ultimately pointing at God, "You are the one behind this," as long as they stay out of the sanctuary, that is out of the place of worship, then life makes no sense.

Life is incredibly sad and disappointing, and people who have committed suicide, including a relative of mine, including a friend who was a wonderful, wonderful woman.

She was on television, and she was married to a man that ran for attorney general of Louisiana, and she got mad at God. I'll never forget it. She got mad at God, and she began to do things that indicated she was clearly suicidal.

I've always been glad that I punted on that case of counseling and personally drove her and her husband to a psychiatrist. But one day she simply climbed up on a chair in her garage, threw a rope over the beam, and hung herself. Wow! I did her funeral, too, from Psalm 73, and I'll never forget that because the man that preceded me in the pulpit that day—it was done in a Baptist church in central Louisiana—talked about her noble action, and I thought to myself, “I cannot believe you're saying this.”

People like to whitewash suicide. They like to make it out that the person was acting in a good way, and I thought, “I can't believe you said it.” And so instead of being a little less direct, I became extremely direct, and I said: “Make no mistake about it, what she did was an incredibly selfish act because she was mad at God. and that's why she took her own life.”

But then I spoke these words of assurance. I had confidence that Margaret was in heaven with Jesus because it's very possible for a Christian to get mad at God and stop worshiping the Lord.

You pick up your Bible in the morning. You start to read it, and it's nothing there, it's nothing for you. You open your mouth to sing, and though your mouth may sing a beautiful song, your heart isn't in it. And the longer you hold on to unforgiveness, the longer you're going to be tormented over and over and over again (Matthew 18:32-35).

Margaret went to heaven. I have no doubt she is in heaven now. Maybe she's even praying for me now as I remember her, because the saints in heaven pray for those on earth (Revelation 6:9-11). But she got mad, mad at God, deeply bitter, and so she hung herself, and I was able to say when you let go of the bitterness, that's when you enter the sanctuary.

The sanctuary is the place of God's presence, and you can be in church and not in the sanctuary. You can be opening your Bible in the morning for your quiet time and not be in the sanctuary. But when we come into the sanctuary, God releases us from our bitterness and our hurt, and life begins to make sense again, and that is a profound truth.

And so what happens is that this has a relevance to the first century of the Christian Era, and that is what happened to Jerusalem on the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av. Six hundred, fifty-six (656) years after the Babylonians had destroyed the Jewish temple, the Romans destroyed it, and they burned it. It was amazing what happened.

The fire got out of control as the city burned, and then what was amazing is that the aqueduct that had been built to supply water for all of the sacrifices in the temple, because the temple was a pretty messy place because they sacrificed animals there every day and so they had a great water supply.

When the temple caught on fire and finally the water was released—what happens to a rock that is super-heated and all of a sudden ice-cold water hits it? It explodes, and that’s what happened to the temple.

One reason why Jesus’ words were literally fulfilled that he spoke 40 years before the temple was destroyed, he said, “You see all these beautiful stones, buildings?” He said, “Not one stone will be left standing on another” (Matthew 24:1-2).

And today, in Jerusalem, this very day, the Wailing Wall is not part of the temple. The Wailing Wall was what Herod the Great began in 19 BC in his remodeling program to build as a support for the Jewish temple. The Jewish temple was totally destroyed when the cold water hit those super-heated rocks, and they exploded more than like sticks of dynamite would, and it just blew the temple apart, and the Romans went in, and they got all that gold and all that silver, and that’s how I have a little silver coin.

And so this is something as we read here about the fury of God, looking at verse 9, Revelation 14:9:

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. (Revelation 14:9-10)

And he speaks there again of fire. But that doesn’t exhaust it, and that’s one of the things we’ve learned as we’ve made our way through the book of Revelation; though these things may have an initial fulfillment in the first

century, what's recorded here ultimately still awaits us, and you can see that. And he speaks here now in verse 10 and verse 11 of the final state of humanity without Christ. I'll just read the words again. He says in verse 10:

He, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name. (Revelation 14:10-11)

And so this is a truth that, while initially being fulfilled in the first century, ultimately is fulfilled at the time of the return of Christ and that is the fate of all unsaved dead. And yet that's comfort for us in verse 12:

This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus. Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.' (Revelation 14:12-13)

Notice the contrast, believers rest from their labor. Contrast that with unbelievers who have no rest day or night. No rest day or night in the second sentence of verse 11, "There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image or for anyone who receives the mark of his name."

I've preached on that before. We'll probably address it again down the road, and that's the future. But let's think about fire for a moment. Let's think about fire. Look with me, if you will, back to the left to 1 Peter chapter 1. 1 Peter chapter 1, and let's think about the theme of fire as we think about it as a theme for this coming year.

1 Peter chapter 1 and page 1,887, page 1,887, and actually at the bottom of the page, verse 6.

6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which

perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:6-9)

Think about this for a moment. This is a theme for 2024, fire.

As 2023 had the theme of an enigma, a mystery, and yet a mystery that for many people caused them to cry out in fear because of the terrible things that were coming on them (Luke 21:25-26), and for others who cried out at the dying of the light

(<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=11231830154395>), so 2024 will be marked by fire. And let me say to you, what that means is this, this is good news. You say, “What? How can this be good news? How can 2024 being marked by fire be good news?”

Because look what he just said, he said about suffering grief and he speaks in verse 7, here’s the theme, “These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

What is the theme of God for your life and mine in 2024? It is to be like Jesus. It is to be like Jesus. It is to be like the Lord Jesus.

Romans 8:28 and 29, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who are called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

What’s good? Winning the lottery? Waiting in line if you’re in Louisiana for those rob-the-poor things they have, all these tickets for the lottery? I stand in line to get gas and people are thinking, “Oh my big chance is coming now.” Oh no, it’s a tax on the poor. “This is my big...”

What’s the good? What if you won the Powerball or whatever? What if you won, is that good? Will your money make you happy? Some of the most miserable people I’ve ever known were rich people.

I remember an extremely wealthy woman who died, who was a member of my church, and I went to see her in ICU in Rapids Regional Hospital, and she had a large private suite. And as I went in to pray for her, her first name was Florence, and I asked, "Miss Florence, let me pray for you."

And she said, "Oh, Bob, I'm very afraid." She said, "You know, somebody could come in here, and they could put a cloth over my nose, and knock me out, and put me on a gurney, cover me with a sheet, and wheel me out of here, and kidnap me, and nobody would know until I was gone!"

And I thought to myself, "Wow, I don't worry about that." You know, like Porgy and Bess, "I got no rug on the floor, that's okay with me. They can steal the rug from the floor, that's okay with me."

The very rich very often are very terrified people who live in constant fear somebody's going to take what they've got, and that fear keeps them awake at night.

And this is the amazing thing about rich people: the richer you get, the more you want. I was at the funeral of a man one day, and the chaplain had gone to see him, and the chaplain got to speak at his funeral, and he said, "Mr. So-and-so," he said, "what can I do for you?"

His dying words were, "Make me more money." Wow! Money never satisfies. Gold never satisfies. Silver never satisfies. What satisfies is the Lord Jesus Christ.

People will let you down. Jesus never will. There's a friend that sticketh closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24), that's the Lord Jesus Christ. God's goal for your life in 2024 is that your gold: that precious faith that you have in Christ which is the most precious thing in all the world, because without faith we have no hope. Without faith in Christ we have no hope in eternity. But that precious faith that is a gift of God, God is the one who gives faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Pray for loved ones to receive the gift of repentance and faith.

That precious gift of faith, which is so valuable, God wants to refine it in your life. He wants to burn out of you and out of me everything that dishonors him because I'm going to tell you, in the year that lies ahead,

Christians who love Jesus lives will shine more radiantly and be more evocative of praise and joy to other people, as people witness your life and mine experiencing joy, even in the midst of suffering and trial, because those trials do what? As he says here, even ...

Though you have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials (verse 7, 1 Peter 1:7, these) have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

I don't know about you, but what I want, as I look forward to 2024 and suffering and trials that will happen because those happen to us throughout life. But the trials and suffering we'll experience in 2024, they're going to produce in you and me a glory and a joy beyond all measure.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. (1 Peter 1:6-8)

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. (1 Peter 4:12-14)

I am a happy man because I know whom I have believed and have persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed to him against that day (2 Timothy 1:12). And I know this, come what may, no matter whether it's a principality or a power, things present, things to come (Romans 8:38), that my life is going to be a good and a happy life because God is for me, and if God is for you, who can be against you? He who did not spare his own Son but delivered him up freely for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things? (Romans 8:31-32)

And when people say bad things about you, you know what, and I'm reminded of a gift from Nancy's sister of Charles Spurgeon preaching that we had on top of our mantle, Spurgeon said, "You know, no matter what bad things somebody says about you, know this, you're worse than whatever they say you are."

But this is the great truth because God's for you. This is the truth: who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It's God who declares righteous. Who is he who condemns? Christ Jesus who died is interceding for us at the right hand of God (Romans 8:32-35).

Dear ones, I am looking forward to 2024 as a year when God is going to purge the bad things that are still inside me.

"Really, Preacher, you still have bad things in you?"

Yes, I do, and if you don't think that's true of you, you're just a fool.

We all have something inside of us that needs to get purged out, and God's way of purging is through the trials that are ordained by a sovereign God to work together to make you and me more like Jesus.

I don't know about you, but I want to smell like Jesus. Have you ever been in a restaurant where they had barbecue cooking, and it's on your clothes, particularly like this black camel's hair coat—it really picks up stuff.

But I want the smell of Jesus to be on me so much that when somebody encounters me, they think, [sniff] "What's that smell? It smells like Jesus." Wow! I want people to think about Jesus when they encounter me. I want that to be true of me, more and more and more, and that's what I want for you because to the degree that we are conformed to his image, to that degree we will be happy people.

There is no happiness in this world outside of the Lord Jesus Christ. I commend him to you.

And if you're watching today on the internet, I commend the Lord Jesus Christ to you. You know, 2024 is going to be for you, if you are a real Christian, a year when you experience God's grace as you forgive other

people who've hurt you, God's grace as you find contentment and joy in knowing Jesus and knowing him more and making him known.

But if you don't know Jesus, I have sadly to say to you 2024 is going to be a hellish year. It's going to be a year in which the fire that's designed to purify your heart to be more like Jesus is only going to have the effect of hardening you, just like the cornbread we cooked yesterday that got burned on one side that had to be cut, the burnt piece off.

The fire that purges the believer and makes him more like Jesus and gives him more joy, that fire burns, and that is very repulsive because nobody wants to eat burned to a crisp on one side, cornbread.

And may you know the Lord Jesus Christ who will free you and bless you if you come to him now.

In Jesus' name, may we pray.

Lord, we pray as we experience the fire in 2024 that we would have joy knowing that the refining of our faith, which is more valuable than gold, will result in praise and honor and glory, and Lord, the joy unspeakable that we will know more and more and more as we're conformed to the life and heart of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.