



The Last Night on Earth

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One of the most dramatic verses in the Bible has been translated by Dr. Moffett in these words: "Evil on evil says the Lord, the Eternal ... it is coming, the hour is striking, and striking at you, the hour and the end. Your doom has come." Ezekiel 7:5-7.

Based on this startling text, our attention is drawn to the most solemn message ever heard by human ears. It is a warning to each person alive on this planet today, because every individual must pass through their last night on earth. What will it be like to begin living that final 24 hours of time?

Perhaps you've heard about the city of Pompeii which nestled in the shadow of Mt. Vesuvius in old Italy long ago. In A.D. 79 that mountain simply exploded with volcanic fury and millions of tons of molten lava came pouring down upon Pompeii to completely inundate it, wiping out all its inhabitants. A friend of mine has walked over the hardened ash and pumice which still covers the excavated ruins of that ancient city. He described the contorted postures of the victims whose forms have been perfectly preserved by molding the space occupied by their decayed bodies.

I've often thought, "If the stones of the street could speak, what a story they would have to tell about that last night on earth for Pompeii." The whole thing seems to come up before me as I think about it right now. The experience of an entire city full of people, overtaken without warning and thrust into eternity, whether they were ready or not. What will it be like when you and I face that same experience? Will it find us clinging to the same old sins that many of them were obviously committing as they were swept away by the sudden deluge of death?

Doubtless, many in Pompeii heard that initial explosion and had time to look up to see the terrifying wall of lava just before it engulfed them. We know nothing about their thoughts, but the graphic physical positions of their bodies reveal that sin had become a science, and few, if any, were thinking of death or the hereafter.

I wonder what Paul must have felt when he preached his gospel of grace to the inhabitants of Pompeii. Surely in his ranging over the chief cities of the Roman Empire he would have visited that center of vice and evil repute. But it is highly unlikely that the apostle received any favorable hearing from the dwellers in that seaport sin-city. Perhaps they expelled him out of hand, and Paul had to shake the dust from his feet as he departed.

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It was from Pompeii that General Titus had drawn many of his soldiers for his infamous assault on Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Perhaps it was one of the citizens of Pompeii who threw the flaming torch which burned the magnificent temple to its foundations.

But now those veterans of foreign wars have returned to their home place to live out their years of retirement in unrestrained indulgence. Slowly the cup of iniquity fills to the very brim, and on a night of unusual revelry and drunkenness, the angel of death flies low over the streets of Pompeii. It is not hard to imagine how the final call of God was extended to every man, woman, and child on that last night. Before the angel of mercy folded its wings, the Holy Spirit pleaded at the door of each heart. Long after the music and dancing had ended, people tossed on their beds, wrestling with the powerful convictions of conscience, but one by one, those tender impressions were suppressed and denied. The voice of the Spirit was drowned out by the fleshly clamor for more excitement and sin. The fate of Pompeii was sealed.

Lingering Over the Call

The Bible gives us another striking illustration of the last night on earth in the book of Genesis. A city was to be wiped out of existence because of its total abandonment to the perversions of iniquity. On the eve of its destruction, Lot made a final visit to his daughters and their Sodomite husbands who had made their home in the midst of the doomed city. But his urgent pleas were ridiculed as groundless fears. The Bible records that "he seemed as one that mocked unto his sons in law." Genesis 19:14. They actually laughed at the old man as he wept over their unconcern. How different it would have been had they known that it was indeed a judgment message from God. Eagerly they would have responded and hastened out of Sodom had they truly believed that it was their last night on earth.

But they didn't know, and they didn't believe. Most of us will never recognize when that fatal moment approaches in our own lives. Many are snatched by sudden accident and death without a second's notice, much less a 24-hour alert. But suppose you did know that you had exactly two months, or two weeks, or two days. I've heard people say, "Oh, if I had that knowledge ahead of time, I could easily give up all my bad habits and make my decision to follow Christ fully." Of course, but the truth is that none of us are privy to that information, and for many who are reading these lines, that last night is much nearer than we can think or imagine.

How very clever Satan is in exploiting this personal area of the unknown in each one of us. He well recognizes that procrastination is his most effective weapon in causing people to be lost. The longer the decision is postponed, the easier it is to wait a little longer, until finally the putting off process turns into a lethal addiction. The will waxes weaker and weaker as delay saps the initiative and makes it less and less likely that the individual will act before it is too late.

The Bible has some very sobering things to say about this subject of lingering over the call of God. When Paul reasoned with Felix about righteousness and judgment, we are told that the governor trembled and promised to call for Paul when he had a more "convenient season." That better time never came, and as far as we know, Felix went down into a Christless grave at the end of his life. King Agrippa was also deeply convicted as he listened to Paul's testimony about Christ. He cried out, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." Acts 26:28. What a tragedy that, with all the trembling and conviction, neither of those Roman rulers actually moved to obey what they knew to be right. "Almost" is not enough.

It is sometimes the case that individuals are faced with choices that must be made within a few minutes which will affect the entire future direction of their lives. In these rare instances (and perhaps they are not as rare as we think) that golden moment of opportunity flashes into focus, remains only a few precious moments, and then disappears forever. It seems patently true that Felix and Agrippa faced the

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most significant and favorable opportunity to choose life over death, and they blew it. They waited too long, and their conviction faded and disappeared.

Men and women do the same thing today. They wait for more convenient circumstances - a different job, retirement, or financial security. They make promises to themselves and others that they will surrender to Christ and obey the truth just as soon as the time is right. Somebody else - Satan - hears those promises and he immediately begins to manipulate events that will make that right moment impossible. Those people keep waiting and waiting and waiting, and many of them will be waiting when the water turns to blood and probation's door has closed on the human race. No wonder the Bible declares that "Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." 2 Corinthians 6:2.

When the flood came and the door of the ark closed, it did not matter how near or how far a person happened to be at that moment. Those who were one foot out-side that door were just as lost as those who were miles away. After 120 years of pleading, the Spirit of God was withdrawn from the earth, the hand of God closed the door, and the fate of a world was fixed and settled. Does that have anything to do with what is happening to the progeny of those eight ark survivors today? Indeed, it does. Because Jesus said, "As the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." Matthew 24:37.

Christ was referring to the end-time in which we now live. He said, "So shall it be." Are there similarities with the antediluvian culture and lifestyle? We are told that "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Genesis 6:5. Does that appraisal of man before the flood match the perverted picture of Noah's modern descendants?

For the answer to that question consult your morning newspaper and the local TV guide. Iniquity is rampant. Crime is out of control. Terrorists strike in unexpected places. No one would question that evil imagination marks the present age with its harvest of violence and lawlessness.

Is there also evidence that the Holy Spirit is striving with human hearts and confronting multitudes with their final invitation of mercy? As an evangelist, I can bear witness that there is a present raging controversy revolving around every living soul. Some who are reading these words are on the verge of making a decision that can mean life or death, and you need to go ahead with God. At the same time, Satan plays upon your ungrounded fears to try to hold you back from an all-out commitment. You are being tempted, like Felix, to wait for a more convenient season, but such will never come. To linger now is to become a part of the vast majority who were destroyed in the flood and who represent those who will be unprepared when Jesus comes again.

The Red Sea Place

Think for a moment what would have happened at the Red Sea if the people had hesitated to go forward at the command of God! Suppose the leaders had pressed for a committee meeting to discuss the radical option of marching the entire encampment into an apparent death trap. The truth is that there was only time for action. Delay of any kind would have brought the pursuing Egyptian army upon them, and they would have been on their way back to the land of bondage in chains.

What does this experience have to teach us? It has much to say to those who have recently broken free from the slavery of sin. This parallels the escape from Egypt. And the Red Sea experience symbolizes baptism for the newborn Christian. How do we know that? In 1 Corinthians 10:2, we read that "they were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea." God set before them that golden opportunity which we talked about earlier and which may appear only once in a lifetime. The decision made within the next five minutes would settle their destiny for years to come. This was it. Either trust God and obey His command to step into that restless sea, or run the risk of capture by the enemy.

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Have you come to that Red Sea place in your life? I've observed thousands struggle with that step of total surrender in baptism. It signifies a complete yielding of the entire life and a willingness to move forward in obedience - regardless of the consequences. It is not an easy decision to make. I know one lady whose baptism was set three different times, and she failed to show up at any of them. Her faith was not strong enough to take that final step which would place her wholly in the family of God. You can imagine the result of her procrastination. She was finally overtaken by the enemy, drawn back into smoking, and was soon back in total bondage of the flesh.

I'm just glad that somebody at the head of the line had strong faith when Moses gave the orders to go forward into the sea, and just as surely as the waters parted under their feet, so will the forbidding circumstances disappear as God's people today move forward in obedience to Him. It is interesting to note that the next move was up to the people in the days of Moses, and the same is true for those who have departed from spiritual bondage. God cannot and will not make the decision for us, but as soon as we take the first step in obedience, He fills us with the power to overcome every obstacle.

Some might object that I am pressing too hard upon those who are lingering in the twilight zone of indecision. You may get offended by my strong urging for you to act quickly to follow Jesus. But please remember that I am addressing those who may be living their last night on earth. I do not believe it is possible to obey God too quickly, and somehow I don't think anyone will ever chide me in heaven because I made the call to them clear, concise, and urgent. I'm very much in earnest about it because I have seen the results of waiting too long.

I could fill this book with emotional stories of those who postponed surrender until their hearts were cold and unresponsive. Further, I could give names and places where nightly attendees of the crusade meetings were taken in a moment by sudden accident or death. Time after time I have made calls for decision, not realizing that there were people in the audience listening to their last invitation to be saved.

Why So Few?

But why is it that such a comparative few respond to those calls for surrender? Why should anyone need to be begged to enter the glorious salvation of our Lord? I want to answer those questions in such a way that you will never forget it. Even Jesus confirmed that only a few would be willing to follow the narrow road to heaven. Most would choose the broad road of death where the great majority would be traveling.

Then we have that shocking statement by the Master to which we have already referred: "As the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." Matthew 24:37. How many were saved in those days from the global disaster? Only eight had the faith in God's word to be shut in that monstrosity of a boat. They were the only survivors. Will there be any kind of proportionate number spared "in the days of the Son of man"? All agree that this is talking about the end of the world and the coming of Jesus.

I've heard the statement, "Oh, if I had lived in those days, I would have gone into the ark with faithful Noah." How easy it is to say what we would have done under certain conditions of the past. Others have talked about the noble martyrs who died for their faith during the Dark Ages and have stated with great assurance that they would have gladly laid down their lives for the truth's sake also.

Now it may be true that some would have died for their faith, but few have any conception of what it meant to stand for Christ during those terrible days. Those brave men and women who were burned at the stake, thrown to the wild animals, or tortured in medieval dungeons could have saved their lives by a simple motion of the hand. In most cases they were offered amnesty and immediate freedom if they

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signaled their willingness to renounce their faith. So the choice was very clear as they watched the dry faggots being heaped around them. They could suffocate in the midst of the punishing smoke and flame or else walk back into the comfort of home and family. Untold millions chose the heroic but horrible living death rather than deny their Saviour.

How many Christians of your acquaintance have that kind of self-sacrificing faith and love? Which ones would have followed the martyrs to the stake or the arena? Some might, had they lived in those days. But of one thing we can be certain: Only those who would rather die right now than to break God's holy law would have proved loyal to Him during those years of severe persecution.

Unfortunately, we live in an easy, permissive age where self-denial is decidedly out of fashion. Truth has become very negotiable in the relaxed ecumenical climate of contemporary religion. Pluralism has become so acceptable that membership applicants are given a wide range of what they may believe or not believe. Very few, if any, issues of doctrine are considered important enough to even contend for, much less die for. There are notable exceptions, of course, but these are often found outside the comfortable contours of the so-called Christian West.

The Man Who Gave All

For example, every time I listen to people make excuses for not going all the way with Jesus, I think of Saddiq. It was on December 25, 1955, that I responded to the furious pounding on my door in Lahore, Pakistan. A typically dressed Moslem villager rushed past me into the house, crying out: "Baptize me quickly! Baptize me now!" After calming down somewhat, the man began to pour forth an amazing story. His name was Saddiq and he lived in the tribal areas of the Khyber Pass near the Afghan border where there was little or no government control. Moslem law was invested in each man who possessed a knife, an ax, or a gun.

Saddiq had a good job and a wonderful family, and he was also a faithful Moslem who prayed five times a day toward Mecca. But recently he had started listening to an evangelist friend of mine who was holding a tent meeting in the area. Every evening on the way home from work Saddiq would stand outside in the shadows absorbing the thrilling truths of the gospel. He dared not go inside for fear of being killed as an infidel, and when the altar calls were made, Saddiq could only commit himself in his heart to follow Jesus.

Later, he confided to his wife that he was going to become a Christian. The following day he returned from work to find his house empty. His father-in-law had taken everything and everyone from the home. He was never to see his wife and children again. A few days later, he was fired from his job, as relatives intervened against him. Then, he was waylaid by members of his own family and beaten almost to death. Fleeing for his life, Saddiq had come to the teeming city of Lahore and sought out someone who could help him finish the journey from Islam to Christianity. I was happy to oblige. We filled the baptistry and buried that courageous man with his Lord on that Christmas afternoon.

I saw the scars on Saddiq's body as he came up out of the water - marks of devotion and sacrifice that he will carry for the rest of his life. He will also be a refugee and fugitive from the wrath of his own relatives for as long as he lives. Anyone who finds him will count it a duty to kill him.

I think often of Saddiq when I'm holding an evangelistic series, and most of the audience have been convicted by the same truths that my brother Saddiq learned outside the tent so long ago. But all do not respond in the same way he did. None of them face the lifelong loss of children, the constant threat of death, or the extreme physical persecution that will follow Saddiq the rest of his days on earth. A few, though, are being tested by the possible loss of a few dollars and perhaps even a few friends. They hold back and complain of the hardship and sacrifice involved in making the decision for baptism. The truth is

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that we don't know what real self-denial and sacrifice are. Unless we are ready to give our lives for the truth's sake, we are not worthy of the kingdom of heaven.

Sometimes we hear fervent saints declare, "If I had lived in the days of Jesus, I would have been one of His followers." But do we know what was involved in such an open alignment with Jesus of Nazareth? Regardless of their status, people were cast out of the synagogue immediately. This meant they were boycotted in their business, disinherited from their families, and considered to be dead by all their friends. Would some indeed have made that choice if they had lived in Palestine 2,000 years ago? Yes, but only the ones who would rather die than sin in their current situation would have stepped out to follow the lowly Nazarene then.

And would it be the same for the days of Noah? We've already learned that only eight were willing to risk the censure and ridicule of being a member of Noah's boat church. How many modern saints would have dared take a public stand for the outrageous project of building a huge ship on the side of a dry hill? Probably no other religious group in world history has endured more negative publicity than Noah and his family.

Noah's Last Sermon

It has always been fascinating to me that Noah probably hired helpers to construct the ark, and they perished later on because they rejected the very means of salvation in which they invested much of their lives. And these were the people who had the greatest reason for believing that a flood was coming. Day after day, they listened to the earnest message of the old patriarch as he pleaded with relatives and friends to avail themselves of this way of escape. The Bible calls Noah "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5) which indicates that he might have spent more time calling for decisions than driving nails into the ark.

How can we explain the amazing resistance to the powerful, Spirit-filled appeals of Noah and his sons? It seems almost a classic example of majority influence. The dread of being different has driven many sincere people to reject, out of hand, the appeal of conscience and sound judgment. It happened in Noah's day, and it still happens today. Prejudice and emotion, once aroused, has a greater influence on decision than all the logical truth in the world. None of the antediluvians could deny the persuasive evidence of those animals marching two by two and seven by seven into the completed ark, but the jeering multitude reminded them of the cost of non-conformity. They dared not be different and show any support for the unpopular little group of religious standouts.

I've tried to imagine the dynamics of that last appeal Noah made to the crowd of curious onlookers. The sounds of construction have ceased, and the tools have been put out of sight. The animals are all safely on board, and Noah's family has finished transferring all their possessions into the massive. Of all the sermons which have ever been preached in the history of man, this is the one I would have preferred to hear. The drama of this moment was captured by our Lord Jesus when He said, "As the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be."

Another last call - another final sermon, if you please - will be given to the doomed inhabitants of this equally wicked age. This time the destruction will not be by water but by fire. Yet, there is a terrible parallel between the urgent message of Noah and that of the faithful who will give the loud warning cry that the world is about to be destroyed again.

Jesus described the indifference with which that message will be received. "They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all." Luke 17:27. What a commentary on the paralyzing effect of sin! People continue, business as usual, while the last moments of probation slip away.

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Has any other preacher operated under the emotional stress that constrained Noah that day? He was fully aware that in a few moments the door behind him would close forever on any hope of salvation for the human race. Only the words of this final sermon could make a difference for any living soul. The Scriptures indicate that Christ by the Holy Spirit was preaching through Noah to the spirits of those sin-bound people (1 Peter 3:18-20).

I'm sure there were tears in Noah's voice and on his cheeks as he pleaded with them to join him in the ark. Many in the audience were lifelong neighbors, and perhaps Noah even called them by name as he pressed his appeal for decision. A solemn conviction held the crowd motion-less as the old man paused to wipe his eyes. Then, there was a restless stirring as some began to edge forward as though they would join the little group, but they were instantly drawn back by the hands of relatives or friends.

I cannot enter fully into Noah's feelings as he turned to join his family in the ark for the last time, but I have a strong kinship with him in that lonely last call he extended to the crowd. I've felt it every time I close a crusade and give the final invitation. I always personally know individuals in that audience who are fighting the Spirit of God. They believe the truth, tremble with conviction, and are almost persuaded to come forward. That's the way it must have been with Noah as he turned to beseech just one more time. But finally he had to bring the meeting to a close and walk, weeping, through the open door. And suddenly that door began to move on its hinges, and within seconds it had swung shut with a solid thud.

There were nervous cries from some as the door closed, and then, a babble of excited conversation. "My, have you ever heard anything like that in your life?" one voice came out above the others. "Do you think he really could be correct about a flood?" asked another. But, then, there was sharp dissent, and some were pointing to the cloudless sky to loudly affirm what had been heard repeatedly since the ark project began, "It never has rained, and these people are wild fanatics to believe such foolishness."

For two or three days apprehension continued to grip the community, especially as they passed the tightly closed ark each morning on their way to work. But by mid-week it seemed obvious to all that Noah's prediction had been totally wrong, and even those who had been stirred deeply with conviction were embarrassed by their former concern. To cover their chagrin, some of them began to make mocking comments to anyone who would listen. By the seventh day not one sympathetic sentiment was to be found favoring the cloistered family.

And then it happened! Clouds seemed to appear out of nowhere, and drops of rain began to spatter against the hungry earth. Screams and cries rent the air as men, women, and children fled toward any shelter available. But then the water was pouring in torrents from the heavens, and out of huge cavernous cracks in the ground. Those who were able to struggle to higher levels were quickly overwhelmed and dragged to their deaths, while the great cypress ark floated gently and safely on the rising waves.

"As it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be in the days of the Son of man." A few faithful ones, counted as fools and fanatics, but courageous enough to follow unpopular truth and proclaim a special warning that the end is near, will be saved. Have you heard it? Do you grasp the lesson our Lord was teaching in the Noah sermon? "As it was ... so shall it be." No ifs or ands or buts - "So *shall* it be." The last night on earth will come for everyone when the heavens split wide open, and the glorious retinue of angels provide a dazzling freeway of splendor for the King of kings and Lord of lords. It will be unexpected, and it will be too late for those who waited till the door of mercy closed.

Gambling For Time

Just as the probation of the antediluvian world ended seven days before the flood, so the probation of the planet will close seven plagues before Jesus appears. During those desolating, end-time seven last

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plagues, the Bible says no one can enter the temple in heaven (Revelation 15:8). There will be no intercessor for the human race. The great edict will have gone forth, "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still ... and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly." Revelation 22: 11, 12.

Millions are waiting in the vain hope that some special event will signal that they can quickly make the necessary preparation to meet the returning Lord. Like Felix, they intend to take advantage of that "more convenient season." And while they linger, their hearts grow harder and their wills more indecisive. They lose the precious ability to judge their own need, or discern the panoramic signs of the end.

During the excavation of the ruins of Pompeii, they found the skeleton remains of a woman who was apparently running from the fiery river of lava that was pouring down the side of Mt. Vesuvius. Clutched in her bony, skeletal hands were two jeweled earrings. It was not hard to figure out exactly what had transpired in the experience of that woman. It was obvious that she had been alerted to the approaching destruction and had dashed back in the house to save the baubles in her hands. But the delay made it im-possible to outrun the stream of death, and she was overtaken and buried under the lava.

Let me ask you a question. What was wrong with that woman? Where did she make her big mistake? The answer is easy. *She thought she had more time than she really had.* That is the same mistake that the majority of human beings are making today as the holocaust of destruction approaches. There is not an unbaptized, uncommitted individual in the world who is not making that mistake. They want to be saved and intend to do it some-day, but they calculate that there is still plenty of time.

Are you one who has been postponing the day of decision, that unreserved surrender of your will? Please let me address you for a moment. There is a small chance that you may be right and that you will have another opportunity - *but it is only a chance!* There is another chance that you are dead wrong. You are gambling over the salvation of your soul. You are playing a deadly game of Russian roulette over eternal life. Every day that passes, the stakes go higher and higher, and your chances of winning become less and less. The cards are stacked against you. Why gamble that you will have another chance in the future? You don't have to gamble. You have a chance right now.

The door of the ark is still open, and it's only a step inside. Why not settle the uncertainty this very moment? Surrender your will and say Yes to the loving Saviour, who longs to give you His peace and assurance.