

How to Have a Rich Future

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 & Mark 13:24-37
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
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1 Corinthians 1:3-9 (NIV)

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ For in him you have been enriched in every way — in all your speaking and in all your knowledge — ⁶ because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. ⁷ Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

Mark 13:24-37 (NIV)

²⁴ “But in those days, following that distress, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; ²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

²⁶ “At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

²⁸ “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁰ I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³² “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

³⁵ “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back — whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

How to Have a Rich Future

We have officially begun that wonderful season of waiting and watching known as Advent. Small children are, of course, waiting for Christmas Eve and the coming of jolly old St. Nicholas.

I heard of one little boy who climbed onto Santa's lap. Santa asked the usual question: "And what would you like for Christmas?" The child stared at him open-mouthed — horrified. Then he gasped, "Didn't you get my Snapchat?"

Well, let's hope Santa consults his Snapchat account while he's deciding which toys he will be bringing this Christmas. We adults, hopefully, will be awaiting the celebration of God's greatest gift to humanity — the gift of God's Son.

The next few weeks will be a time of exhausting activity — buying presents, attending parties, mailing Christmas cards, etc. One woman, telling about the busy holiday season at her house, said that she and her husband, Richard, had a truly hectic season. Running out of time, she went to a stationery shop and asked them to print their signature on their Christmas cards, so they wouldn't have to take the time to sign each one.

Soon they started getting cards from friends. The cards were signed things like "The Modest Morrisons," "The Clever Clarks," and "The Successful Smiths." She asked herself, "What's going on here?" Then it hit her. She had mailed out a hundred cards neatly imprinted with the words, "Happy Holidays from the Rich Armstrongs."

Well, you and I are rich this Advent and Christmas season, whether we are named Richard or not, if our hearts are filled with the peace, love and joy represented by Bethlehem's babe. However, without the Christ child's presence this will simply be another hectic holiday.

Waiting is always difficult. Waiting for Santa is difficult for boys and girls, and going through the busy Advent season is a lesson in patience for adults as well. There is so much to do.

Someone has said you can tell a lot about a person by the way he or she handles three things: a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas tree lights. Some of you know what that person was talking about.

The season of Advent, of course, has a twin focus. One focus is preparing to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. The other is preparing for that day when Christ will return and bring in His kingdom in all its fullness and glory.

In our lesson for the day Jesus is talking about the latter of these two grand events — that day when Christ will return to judge the earth. Listen carefully to His words:

"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back — whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

Those are mysterious and somewhat disturbing words, but let’s begin here: “About that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father . . .”

Every once in a while someone will come along who claims to know when the day of the Lord’s coming, the end of everything as we know it, will be. Don’t listen to him — or her.

NO TEACHING OF OUR LORD IS CLEARER THAN THIS ONE: NOBODY KNOWS WHEN THAT DAY WILL BE. NOBODY BUT GOD KNOWS WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS.

Some of you will remember when radio preacher Harold Camping predicted that the world would come to an end on the 21st of May, 2011. Camping’s radio ministry, which was carried on 150 radio stations nationwide, spent more than \$3 million dollars to spread the word on more than 5,000 billboards throughout our land that the Rapture was coming on May 21, 2011, when believers would be swept up to glory. Some of the donations which made this media blitz possible came from Camping’s followers — some of whom quit their jobs, sold all their possessions, even left their wives and children, and spent all their savings to get this message out.

When the Rapture did not materialize, Camping revised his prophecy, saying he had been off by five months. But, to his credit, after the cataclysmic event did not take place in October either, Camping acknowledged his apocalyptic prophecy had been wrong. Humbly he posted a letter on his ministry’s website telling his followers he had no evidence the world would end anytime soon and that he was not interested in considering future dates.

All this poor man had to do was read the teachings of Jesus. “About that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Don’t listen to any crackpot who tells you they have figured out the time and date when Christ will return. Nobody but God knows.

FOR THAT MATTER, NONE OF US CAN KNOW FOR CERTAIN WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS FOR US INDIVIDUALLY.

Beware of the fortune cookie that tells you that romance, prosperity and good health will soon be yours. There’s no way to accurately predict what the future holds for any of us. To think otherwise is absolute foolishness.

The Sunday supplement magazine, USA Weekend, ran a story a few years ago titled “*Fear: What Americans Are Afraid of Today*.” In a scientific poll, the magazine uncovered the things Americans fear most: -54% of us are either afraid or very afraid of being in a car crash. -53% are afraid or very afraid of having cancer. -50% are afraid or very afraid of inadequate Social Security. -49% are afraid or very afraid of not having enough money for retirement. -35% are afraid or very afraid of getting Alzheimer’s.

Most of these are occurrences that no one can anticipate. Some of you have heard about home genetic testing devices that can tell you whether you are in danger of having things like Alzheimer's. Yet scientists are aware of people who have the genetic markers for Alzheimer's who never exhibit this condition. Why worry yourself for nothing? None of us is guaranteed a worry-free passage through this world.

THE BEST WE CAN DO IS TO BE PREPARED FOR WHATEVER MAY COME OUR WAY.

“But about that day or hour no one knows,” says the Master, “not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come....”

“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back — whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping . . .”

Of course Jesus is speaking to His followers about His return. And He is telling them to be vigilant, be alert, be prepared for His coming. And, of course that is good advice. “Do not let Him find you sleeping . . .”

A book came out a few years ago that would make a perfect gift for someone on your Christmas list — particularly if that person is a perpetual worrier. It's titled *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. The *Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook* is a how-to guide on surviving the most bizarre and dangerous situations imaginable.

What do you do, for example, if you happen to wander into quicksand? This book will tell you. What do you do if you happen to get cornered by a swarm of killer bees, or need to escape from a burning building? This book has the answers. The authors interviewed experts like emergency medics and wildlife specialists to come up with their step-by-step instructions.

One grateful book buyer wrote that he bought the book for his girlfriend. He thought she'd get a kick out of it. Boy, was he right! The girlfriend's house caught on fire. She escaped by kicking down a door — following the instructions step-by-step in *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*.

There's no way to know what worst-case scenario we might confront someday. The best we can do is to be prepared. I recently read that the unofficial creed of the Department of Homeland Security's war on terrorism is this: “Be vigilant, be watchful, be prepared.”

“Be vigilant in matters of security,” say those in charge of our security, “whether at an airport, a government institution or in the back sorting room of the post office. Be watchful for signs of terrorism: a back-pack left unattended, a strange request for chemicals at a fertilizer plant, a white powder in the mail or unusual behavior by a neighbor down the street. Be prepared to call the police or FBI. Be

prepared to evacuate a building. Be prepared to take defensive measures when your life or the lives of others is threatened. Be vigilant, be watchful, be prepared.”

That sounds somewhat like Jesus’ words to His followers. “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back . . .” In terms of our personal lives, that is about all we can do to protect ourselves or those we love: keep watch and stay prepared.

Unfortunately, even the best preparation can prove inadequate. As the poet Robert Burns once said, “The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry. . . .”, and he was right. There are very few sure things in life.

THE ONLY BULLET-PROOF INVESTMENT THAT YOU CAN MAKE IN THIS WORLD IS TO PUT YOUR TRUST IN GOD.

Only God will never forsake us. Only God will be there for us and give us the strength to endure. This is to say that after we’ve done all we can do to prepare ourselves externally, we need to prepare ourselves internally by spending time in God’s presence. By spending time daily in God’s presence and in living as God would have us live, we develop a trust relationship that makes it possible for us to endure even the most horrible worst-case scenario.

Christian sociologist Peter Berger in his book, *A Rumor of Angels*, uses an example of a child waking up in the night. She has been frightened by a bad dream. Her parent goes to comfort her and says, “It’s all right.”

Berger asks us to consider what is happening in this situation. Is the parent lying when he or she says, “It’s all right?” After all, in a world with cancer and concentration camps, it all looks very far from “all right” in any straight forward sense.

Yet Berger claims that the reassurance the parent utters is not a deception, but a true insight that is vital for the child to receive as it grows into maturity. “In other words, there is a profound human conviction that ultimately all will be well, a belief that is a sign of the stirring of a deep hope within us.”

In other words, we are confident that all will be well because God is in control. As long as God is in control, God’s children have nothing to fear.

It’s like a delightful story told by Irish writer Patrick Taylor in his book, *An Irish Country Christmas*. It is about a woman named Eileen whose eldest son is running a high fever. It’s Christmas, and she has no money to provide her son with proper medical care let alone prepare a Christmas meal for her other kids. She finally decides to take her son to Dr. O’Reilly, a doctor in her village. O’Reilly is moved by her dire situation and decides to help her by arranging a raffle to raise money for Eileen and her family. To get the job done, O’Reilly calls on a friend named Donal, a well-known conman.

An anonymous donor has bought a ticket — number 4444 — for Eileen in hopes that she will win the drawing. The night of the drawing Donal fills a hat with the raffle tickets, and the mayor is called upon to pick the winning ticket. He shovels his hand through to the bottom of the hat, eventually picking a ticket. On revealing the winning ticket, it reads “4444.”

Eileen and her sons leap for joy. They have won. The crowd cheers loudly, sharing Eileen’s joy. Eileen’s winnings are sizable — enough to prepare a nice meal for her family as well as take care of her sickly son.

Soon after the drawing had ended, O’Reilly walks up to Donal and asks, “How did you do it?” Donal gives a whimsical smile and brings out all the stubs from the hat. Every one of the tickets had 4444 printed on it. So, the Mayor did not pick the winning ticket by chance; no matter which one he had chosen, it would have been a winner.

Regardless of what may come, the only thing we need to know about the future is that a loving God is in control. There may be dark hours — there may be surprises, both positive and negative — but we will never be forsaken. God is in control. “But about that day or hour no one knows,” says the Master. Obviously that’s true. But we do know how it all turns out. Those who are in Christ win.

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