

THE UNCERTAINTY OF TOMORROW

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 19, 1958 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

Many people seem to live most of their lives in the past. Ordinarily these are elderly people who, in their conversations, turn to events and to people of the long ago. Sometimes we become a bit critical of those who live in the past. It is not a good sign for a person to think primarily of the things of the long ago. It is refreshing to find elderly people who are still aware of and concerned about the present. Some time ago I had a stimulating experience of this kind when I visited with Dr. J. S. Ward, who was then approaching the age of ninety. He had many questions to ask about people whom he had never met, but of whom he had heard. He asked about the present condition of the church and of several of the Christian colleges. He was far more interested in listening than in talking. The past did not have much place in our conversation that day. In spite of examples like this there is a real danger, especially for those who are older, of living too exclusively in the past.

We who are younger need to realize that for us there is another kind of danger. We are likely to make the opposite mistake, for we are likely to live in the future. When you visit in someone's home, it is not uncommon to hear him say, "Oh, I wish you could come to see us next month, because we are planning to fix the place up." Then, he describes how they are going to paint the outside and redecorate the interior. Or perhaps he says, "We are going to panel a room upstairs." Or "We are going to fix up the basement." There is always something in the future. When we ride in another's car he is likely to say, "Oh, I am embarrassed that you have to ride in this dirty old car; I am going to have it washed tomorrow." Even when we go fishing we are told, "They'll be biting next month. If you could only come back then." Those of us in middle life and in younger years may be making an even graver mistake than those elderly people who live in the past. We have a tendency to live too much in the future.

Preparing To Live

It is a wonderful thing to see a younger person or a middle-aged person who lives in the present. There are many of us who make the mistake of spending our lives preparing to live. Actually we do not get around to really living. In our early years we go off to school, and they tell us, "You are preparing to live." We learn how to read; we learn how to work arithmetic problems and all the rest; we are learning how to live. We go to high school and then to college and still we are preparing for life. Suddenly in our early twenties we are handed a diploma and are pushed out from school with the unspoken imperative, "Now, go live." Most of us looking back, realize that some of the most meaningful years of our lives were those that were spent in school. We were living from the moment we were born. While we may have been preparing in a certain sense for adult life we were living all the while. It is a happy man who realizes that life is with him every minute of every day and who lives it to the full.

A few days ago as I left this building to drive home, I chose to go out Hillsboro Road. Spring had just arrived; it was warm and beautiful. I do not know why, but I realized how many times I had passed this way without seeing it. You wait a moment for the signal at Woodlawn; you turn down the gradual curve under the railroad bridge; then you drive on out over the hills. It is some of God's most beautiful country. That day I decided that I would look at it as if I had never seen it before and as if I would never see it again. It took on new beauty. Everything I saw had some special attractiveness about it. I resolved, "I am going to live life that way. I am going to live it as if I never lived it before, and as if I might never live it again." There is nothing morbid in that idea; I just resolved that I am going to enjoy life while I live it.

Many of us make the mistake of living for tomorrow to such an extent that we miss the now, the only part of life that we really have. This is more tragic because tomorrow is uncertain. In the 27th chapter of Proverbs the opening verses says, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what the day may bring forth." There is a passage in James, however, which suggests the uncertainty of tomorrow better than any other scripture I know, "Come now, ye that say, Today or tomorrow, we will go into the city, and spend a year there, and trade, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. What is your life? For ye are as a vapor that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." Like a puff of steam rising from some locomotive. You see it a few miles in the distance, white against the blue of the sky, but before the sound can travel at its slower rate to your car, that puff of white steam has vanished in the morning air. "Ye are as a vapor that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall both live and do this or that." (James 4:13-15).

Deo Volente

This is a great sentence. Can you recall receiving , a letter near the end of which were the words, "We plan to see you soon. A.V.?" Do you know the meaning of those letters? They are Latin and stand for the phrase "Deo volente," which means "The Lord willing." We will do this or that, the Lord willing. We who so confidently know what we will be doing the second week of July, or the middle of next year, need always to understand that it is A.V.--if God wills. "For ye know not what shall be on the morrow."

As we think about tomorrow we think about this uncertainty. There comes a twinge of fear. Anything that is uncertain may have fear in it. There is just a touch of wishing that it were not so uncertain, but then we stop and think a moment and we are glad that tomorrow is uncertain. Suppose we knew what was going to happen in all of the tomorrows. It would be like reading the last chapter of a novel before we read the first and the middle chapters. To know how our lives will turn and where we will live and what will happen to us would take much of the zest out of living. I am glad that God reveals it a page at a time--a day at a time. Even more, if we knew the problems that were going to come, in many instances there would be a life-long agony. Think what it would be like to anticipate for twenty-five years a sudden accident on the highway and afterward a life handicapped by blindness or deformity. Think what it would be like to anticipate for forty years dying of cancer. Think what it would be like to anticipate other problems that may come. It is better that we know just a day at a time, God's way. God gives us the strength to live today and that is all we should ask. The problems of today become fresh and new, and we tackle them with new force and energy. We master them by God's help and so will it be tomorrow.

One Certainty

In this uncertainty of tomorrow there is at least one certainty. It is that one of these tomorrows death will claim each one of us. Death is inevitable. We have said this a thousand times, yet death still comes unexpectedly. It was Isaiah who said, "All flesh is grass ... the grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the word of our God shall stand forever." (Isa. 40:6, 8). In writing to a group of Christians the apostle Peter addressed them as "sojourners and pilgrims." In I Peter 2:3, he says, "Beloved, I beseech you as sojourners and pilgrims, to abstain from fleshly lusts." We are sojourners, for we are only temporarily here. In the second letter that Peter wrote, there is in the first chapter a verse in which he says, "The putting off of my tabernacle cometh swiftly." (II Peter 1:14). Of course, he referred to his body as his tabernacle.

In II Peter also there is a passage in chapter three which describes the end of time. "The day of the Lord will come as a thief; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing that these things are thus all to be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy living and godliness?" (II Peter 3:10-11). The uncertainty of tomorrow says nothing as distinctly as it says that we must be ready.

Would it be indelicate for me to say that it is like a mother who has carried a baby for almost the full term. She does not know whether it will be this week or next, but she is wise if she has her bag packed for the trip to the hospital. So, you and I are wise in the midst of this hurrying to make a living, if we have our things in order and are ready to go. From Matthew's 24th chapter we read a few lines, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no one, not even the angels of heaven, neither the Son, but the Father only. And as were the days of Noah, so shall be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and they knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall be the coming of the Son of Man. Then shall two men be in the field; one is taken, and one is left: two women shall be grinding at the mill; one is taken, and one is left. Watch therefore: for ye know not on what day our Lord cometh." (Matt. 24:35-42).

Ready and Working

In the uncertain tomorrow nothing is more certain than that we must be ready at every hour because the end of life, the coming of our Lord, will come when men least expect it. We need to lead calm, pure lives. There is never a time to think, "I know this is not right, this act or this relationship, but I am going to do it for a few months, then I am going to wash up. I'll get clean again." It is a foolish man who reasons so, because he is banking on tomorrows that he may not have. The only wise way is to live today just as purely as we would live it if we knew today was the last day of all. But not only does it mean that we need to live pure, clean lives, this inevitability of death also means that we need to be busy, doing whatever we intend to do for the Lord. The last verse of the passage in James which we read a few moments ago, which begins, "Come now, ye that say today or tomorrow we will go into the city, and spend a year ... whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow," ends with the words, "To him therefore that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." To bank on tomorrow, on the good deeds that we intend to do, is to delay perhaps eternally, the doing of the good things that we need to do.

In memory I hold dear Brother Robert S. King. Some of you knew him back in the thirties. I used to see him stand before a congregation, as one of its elders, and hear him say, not elegantly, but forcefully, "It is not what you do with a million, if riches should e'er be your lot, but what you are doing today with the dollar and a quarter you've got." That may not be good poetry but it is good old Anglo-Saxon English. There is so little time and so much work to be done. For each one of us individually, and for this congregation, there is so much to be done and so little time in which to do it. Opportunities come, but opportunities also go. Today is the day of salvation; today is the day when we can work. Tomorrow may never come,

Conclusion

Some of us put off becoming Christians too long. Intending to, we do not quite do it. Then tragically, a great many discover that it is too late. I plead with you, if you are not a Christian, to become one now. There is no moment like now. You have the faculties of

mind, the physical ability, the encouragement of friends, and a life-time of service ahead of you in the name of Christ. Someday you will look back like the apostle Paul to say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing." (II Timothy 4:6-8).