

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Looking forward

Presented by Alan Best

Good morning. In recent weeks I have been preparing for some coming events and it has been thoroughly enjoyable. There is something special about making plans and looking forward to their implementation. Then after a period of expectation, we hope to experience the satisfaction and joy of seeing them fulfilled. In a previous message, we considered some of the things people face when they look back, especially at the start of a new year or on important days such as birthdays or anniversaries. We saw that looking back can be either a positive or a negative experience for a variety of reasons.

And this morning we will discover that this is also true when people look forward. Their sense of anticipation can range from eagerness and delight through to anxiety and dread. I trust that as we spend the next few minutes together we will be encouraged as we look at some of the things God has to say about looking at the future and its impact on how we live each day.

Looking forward to events that we know we will enjoy can be a positive experience that does us good. But there are people whose positive outlook is foolish because in their minds, their lives are thoroughly organised and all they need to do is sit back and enjoy the ride – they believe that success is guaranteed in every aspect of life and their confidence is firmly placed in their own strength, resourcefulness and abilities – the possibility of failure, illness or disaster does not enter their minds, and in their self-reliance, they have no time or place for God. Jesus spoke strongly about the foolishness of this sort of Godless self-reliance. On one occasion He told this parable:

"The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'"

*"This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."
(Luke 12:16-21)*

There are others whose anticipation of the future also causes problems because they are filled with such longing for coming events that they dream endlessly about them – they are unhappy with their present existence, so they wish their lives away in an attempt to escape from the grind of daily life, drifting through days of drudgery until the next highly anticipated event arrives. If we are honest, we might confess that we can all tend towards this sort of behaviour on occasions.

Sadly, there are many people who look forward with a different kind of anticipation. Instead, of eager expectation, they view the future with anxiety and dread. They worry endlessly about things that may or may not happen, expending enormous amounts of nervous energy until they become paralysed by fear. And all of us can also tend towards this sort of behaviour at times.

The tragedy of worrying like this is that the things we worry about rarely happen the way we imagine. Somebody has said, “Today is the tomorrow you worried about yesterday” and that is a truth that we need to grasp. During His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said this about worrying: *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. . . Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”* (Matthew 6:25, 27) And the Apostle Paul gave this great advice to the church in Philippi: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* (Philippians 4:6)

Whether we spend our time day-dreaming and wishing that tomorrow would come quickly, or worrying endlessly about what tomorrow might bring, the result is the same – we fail to enjoy the present day we have been given – we do not live as God intends us to live because both activities rob us of joy and purpose. I am reminded of the movie, ‘Dead Poets Society’ in which the English teacher, Mr. Keating, played by Robin Williams, encouraged his students to pursue their dreams and live lives of purpose as he introduced them to the Latin motto – “Carpe Diem” – seize the day. And we also need to seize every day because God made it and gave it to us – He gives us life and breath.

In Psalm 118, the Psalmist wrote about a day of rejoicing that God had made possible when He delivered the children of Israel through the victory they were celebrating. We read:

*This is the day the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.* (Psalm 118:24)

And that is the spirit in which we should approach each new day because if we have put our faith in Jesus, He has delivered us from the bondage of sin through the victory He achieved on the cross. So instead of dragging ourselves through joyless days, we can live them to the full because Jesus offers us new life that is filled with purpose. When He said *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full* (John 10:10), He was speaking about the gift of eternal life, but in this, He also offers us a new experience of life because He provides us with a depth of satisfaction and guidance that is missing without Him. Of all the people on the planet, Christians should be the ones who grasp life with both hands. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, *Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Of course, while we can give thanks in all circumstances, this does not mean that every circumstance will bring us pleasure – we know that life is not a bed of roses because we all face suffering and temptation. But we do not need to face them alone – we can face them with Jesus, so we can continue to experience deep, abiding peace and joy, even during tough times.

As we think about facing the future and the suffering and temptation it may bring, we remember that Jesus faced these too. When we think about His suffering, our minds go immediately to His arrest, trial, brutal flogging and agonizing death on the cross. When it came to temptation, we think of the time when He was tempted by the Devil in the desert, and in the letter to the Hebrews we are assured that He completely understands the temptations we face, because as we read in chapter four, He was tempted *“in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin.”* (Hebrews 4:15)

As we look forward and think about the suffering that we may face, we can take great comfort from the promises we read in the Bible. For example, God made many promises to care for His chosen people, Israel, such as these through the prophet Isaiah.

*So do not fear, for I am with you ;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)*

As God's children today, when we look towards the future, we can draw great confidence from the knowledge that God does not change and He will care for us too. And Jesus promised to be with us as we live for Him. After the resurrection, when He gave His followers instructions for serving Him, He encouraged them by saying, "*surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" (Matthew 28:20) The Apostle Paul experienced this reality and wrote these assuring words in his letter to the Romans, and we need to take them to heart: *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)*

Just in case we think that the Apostle Paul couldn't possibly have understood the sorts of things we are facing, the Bible reminds us that he suffered greatly for his faith, including beatings, stonings and shipwrecks – but he knew that Jesus was always with him. And when he faced an ongoing personal trial, which he described as a "thorn in the flesh," he received the assurance that he did not face it in his own strength so he wrote: *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Corinthians 12:8-9)

And when we think about the temptation we will face in our future, we can draw confidence from the promise we find in these words from the Apostle Paul: *"God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."* (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Friends, as we look forward, we may be concerned about the prospect of facing suffering and temptation, but we can take hold of these and other promises from the Bible. We can give our struggles to God and trust Him to deal with them. I like the way Ira Stanphill expressed this truth in the words of his gospel song:

*Many things about tomorrow,
I don't seem to understand,
But I know Who holds tomorrow
And I know Who holds my hand.*

I encourage you to place your life in God's care and entrust your future to Him. When we put our faith in Jesus, our looking forward goes beyond the foreseeable future to that time when we go to be with Him forever. For this world is only our temporary dwelling place, as we are reminded in Philippians chapter 3: . . . *our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ . . .* (Philippians 3:20) And Jesus made this wonderful promise:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am". (John 14:1-3).

What a glorious hope and amazing future we have.