



Preparing to Live

Josh 24:1-3a, 14-25; Am 5:18-24; Mt 25:1-13; 1Th 4:13-18

What do we live for? A recent Religious Herald article says Americans spent more on initial sales of the new version of the Grand Theft Auto video game than the entire annual budget of the International Mission Board—this in an economy that has turned sour. Baptists contribute less per capita to missions than during the Great Depression. That tells us something about our priorities. When all is said and done, the Great Commission does not much to us. God's purposes are not so important to us. We would rather live for the temporal pursuits of entertainment and leisure, than preparing to live for eternity with God. We need to prepare ourselves to live for eternity, rather than for the moment.

Yesterday's Fall Festival was a success. It was not so much the money that we raised, but the contact we established through it with families in the community. I talked with three different families who shared an interest in returning here for worship. The event opened doors for us. It was a lot of work. Someone stated that it would have been simpler for everyone to just make out a check for \$70.00 and be done with it! That would indeed be easier. It would be simpler and less work for us to become financially responsible as a church. Too many do not contribute their share to church finances, forcing others to take up the slack. That is only the surface issue, however. The underlying issue is how we invest our time, energy, and resources for eternity. What is the goal for which we are preparing to live?

Some live as if life on earth is all there is. They claim to be Christians. They claim membership in a church. They may even hold positions in a church. Their lives, however, display that they are living for here and now, or a few years down the road. They refuse to invest their lives in preparation for eternity with God.

Joshua led the people out of the wilderness after Moses' death. They seemed ready to finally begin to serve *Yahweh* as they began settling the land of God's promise to Abraham. Joshua's farewell address, however, is all too sobering. He called them to put away their idols. They needed to worship *Yahweh* and *Yahweh* alone. This was not before the battle of Jericho. This was not before the victories over the other cities of Canaan. They had already renewed the covenant with God after Ai. At the end of Joshua's lifetime, however, the people still worshipped idols alongside their lip service to *Yahweh*.

You see, they didn't really want to live for *Yahweh*. They just wanted *Yahweh* to protect them and serve their needs and desires. They were much more comfortable with the lesser gods of their idols than with living under the will of *Yahweh*, who was completely beyond their control. Worship for them meant finding a way to use God for their own purposes, rather than learning to live for God's.

You don't really want God's will. That was Joshua's word to the people. That was Amos' perspective, as well. Amos warned the nation centuries later that while they wanted to carry on with rites and rituals, they were keeping God's justice at bay. They did not really want to live according to God's righteousness and its demands. They proclaimed excitement over the idea of the coming Day of the Lord, but did not live in an appropriate manner to welcome God in their midst. Worshipping God in truth would cause too much change in their routines. It would interfere with their lives and plans.

The people in Amos' day were acting much like the bridesmaids of Jesus' parable. Amos' day was long after the reigns of David and Solomon. The Temple of Solomon still stood in Jerusalem, but

the people did little more than give lip service to worshipping *Yahweh*. They looked to the blessings of being the people of *Yahweh*, but they did not live accordingly. Justice was missing. Righteousness was a front for self-centered, unrighteous living. While they cried out in longing hope for the coming Day of *Yahweh*, their daily lives were unprepared for God's visitation. They served God in name, but were not living in preparation for true worship in God's full presence.

Paul spoke a message of comfort about the *parousia*, the appearing of Christ in glory. His presentation is not necessarily what we normally picture. He speaks of believers rising to meet Christ in the clouds and air to be in the full presence of Christ Jesus forever. Is that what we want? Paul does not speak of a location. Rather, he speaks of eternity in terms of living in full fellowship with Christ Jesus. As long as we are living in preparation for that, Paul's words are indeed good news of comfort. If we are living in preparation for lesser ideals, however, Paul's words sound more like Amos' biting critique.

This week has seen an historic election come to a close. I have been reminded along the way of our national history as it has impacted racial tensions throughout this land. We have seen some respond in fear regarding the nomination and election of a Black man to the presidency. We have read reports of some elitist White supremacy groups attempting to assassinate Barack Obama. The fears behind such racially motivated attacks tell us more about those individuals making such plans than about the object of their fear. It points to the fact that for generations we have overlooked Amos' demands to we allow justice and righteousness roll like never-ending streams of water. It is the fear that when the tables are turned we may be treated with the same injustices we have allowed to continue far too long. It is a fear of retribution.

Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream. Years before I was born, he announced that dream from the nation's capital. It wasn't just a dream. It was a promise of a new future where equality, justice, and righteousness might live for all, not just for those in power. On the other hand, it was not just a dream. It was a reality for which King and many others yearned. It was a dream that motivated the actions of others across the years since to work toward the justice, equality, and righteousness of which King dreamt. This week's election results grant a powerful message to all who have strived for racial equality over the decades. It is not that we have arrived at our destination. It is that the dream is indeed possible.

Many have worked feverishly to arrive at the position where we currently stand as a nation. The hope this election has given to so many is beyond my comprehension. We have made history. We have stated that at least in theory it is possible to envision racial equality. Even so, we are called to something even greater. We are called to work not for an election which can be overturned by our courts or a new election a few years down the road. We are called to live and work for that justice and righteousness that impact eternity.

You see, we all want to go to heaven. That is simply "the right answer." Somehow, we are missing what heaven is about. It is equality before God. It is living for justice, righteousness, mercy, and grace in the very presence of Almighty God for all eternity. If this is how we plan to spend eternity, we must begin living in preparation for it now. We must put aside all our other gods, those claims for our loyalty and dedication. We must present our all in service to God. As those who worked for this historical point in our nation, we must our lives in dedicated preparation for our dream becoming reality. Are we ready to prepare for living in eternity with God? It will change our lives drastically.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*