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Point 6: The Impact of the End of the Present

POINT 6 VIEWED FROM POINT 5

As we come to look at Point 6—the Second Coming of Jesus—the first thing we must realize is that we can only do so from our position at Point 5. We cannot live in the future; if we try to, we become unreal in the present. Equally, we must not make our present living so permanent that we lose the perspective provided by the imminence of the final day. That would be to settle down like the Pharisees of the New Testament and stop watching for the change of scene God says will come.

All living at Point 5 is done under the shadow of the great Day of the Lord. It could come at any time. This ‘eschatological’, or ‘last times’, preoccupation (from the Greek word *eschata*, ‘last things’) dominated the instructions Jesus gave His disciples about how to live in the last days.

Jesus focused on both His imminent going and His certain return. His command was: ‘Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come’ (Mt 24:42).

The unknown time of the Master’s return becomes an incentive for the servants who are waiting for him (Lk 12:35–

40). They are to be wide awake and ready, up and dressed with their lamps alight. The coming of the Son of Man will be unexpected, like the coming of a thief in the night.

To say we are on stage at Point 5 means we are playing out the second last scene of God's drama. The last scene will begin with the great re-entry of the main Actor. This has tremendous consequences for us. To play our parts faithfully, we must be seriously engrossed in the action on stage; but we must also be tingling with expectation for the grand final entry in which He will wind everything up. We are always on the lookout for His arrival.

Trying to live fully in the present moment while being distracted by an imminent future event is very difficult. We can easily slip into unfaithful ways of living which are really attempts to resolve this tension. Let's look at two common errors: being so preoccupied with waiting that we fail to work, and being so preoccupied with working that we never effectively wait.

WAITING INSTEAD OF WORKING

The first mistake is to become so preoccupied with the impending event that we are unable to profitably use the time we have now. People who fall into this trap are like travellers in the transit lounge of an airport: having got off one plane and waiting for another, they find it hard to do anything productive in between. They tend to merely 'kill time', and their life slips by in idle magazine reading as they watch the call-board which will announce their flight.

This sometimes happens to Christians who become 'expert' in reading 'the signs of the times' (the developments and events which will precede the Lord's coming). Almost all their energies are expended in 'being ready'. But this 'being ready' really means they attempt to forecast when He will arrive—a kind of readiness quite contrary to what Jesus taught.

Others are so future-minded they never really live 'in the world'. They do not treat remaining on earth as a genuine call

from God. Essentially, they are horrified by the world, and cope by 'spiritualizing' life.

This horror arises from a spiritual self-centredness. The transit lounge of the world becomes a stinking airport to them: 'We must get out quickly—let's hope the plane comes soon.' They are concerned only about where they are heading; they are not concerned with obeying the Master's will now. This, too, is contrary to the readiness Jesus recommended. He wanted His disciples to make excellent use of their abilities and time, which they hold in trust for their Master (Lk 19:11–27).

The New Testament constantly emphasizes that we need to 'make the most of every opportunity' (Eph 5:16; Col 4:5). The Christian life is urgent because of the position we occupy at Point 5: there is not much time left! This does not mean we are racing against the clock; we are not concerned with either the amount of time left or the amount of work done. We are not called to live a quantitative lifestyle. Rather, it is the *quality* of the present moment which is affected by not knowing when Jesus will come—its intensity and significance.

ACTION

- 1 Carefully read through 1 Thessalonians 4:13—5:23.
- 2 Ask the Lord to search you about your attitude to these prophesied future events. Are you simply 'waiting' without doing much else? Repent of this and ask Him to balance you here.
- 3 Are you fearful about these future events? There are many people who teach about the end times in which we live. I am not saying that all this teaching is wrong—but test the *effect* it has in your own life and that of those around you. Does it lead you to fear? If so, repent of this fear, ask God's forgiveness for it and ask Him to balance you here also.
- 4 The main Actor will make His re-entry at the time the

Father fixes, so be quite sure your focus is not on the amount of time we have left. Rather, focus on the One coming. He could arrive at any moment, and the Christian's urgency arises from the intense nature of living under this realization. Align your thinking with this perspective, and critically evaluate your reason for being urgent.

WORKING INSTEAD OF WAITING

The second way of escaping the tension between present and future is to work so hard now that we fail to wait for the coming event. Here the child of God emulates the rebel. Jesús says there is a kind of man who is so concerned to fill his barns on earth that he does not realize God may render all his efforts useless at any moment (Lk 12:16–21). Similarly, the Christian can be so preoccupied with working in this world that he effectively ceases to 'wait'.

It is not that Jesus does not want us to work in the world. He insists that servants who are up and dressed and ready when the Master comes are blessed (Lk 12:35–40). The problem arises when we work hard because we think we have to achieve something. This is a question of *motivation*. It is not that work for God is fruitless or that we should have no interest in its goal. It is that when we work like servants who anticipate the Master at any time, achievement is not our motive. Instead, two ideas are uppermost in our minds: first, the work is really for Him, and second, He could come at any time to check it out. When this motivation is foremost in our thinking, our working is always Christ-centred at any given moment. This helps us in doing our work faithfully, moment-by-moment.

ACTION

Do not try to cram more into a day than you can. The Second Coming does not call us to be neurotic about time and work, but to be expectantly excited about Jesus' arrival.

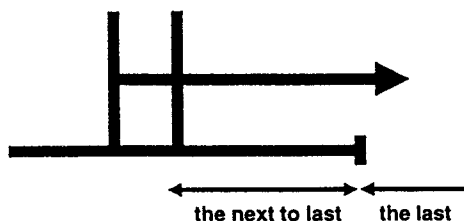
The real sadness of much Christian life today—and the place we need constantly to repent—is that we have got tired of waiting. In fact, we have been tempted to doubt that Point 6 is ever going to happen at all.

Where the church loses the Point 6 perspective, its practical living is called totally into question. If Christ is not coming back, then we are not ‘remaining’ and ‘waiting’ children; we are aimless and deserted orphans. The battle then would last for ever. There would be no righteousness established on earth and no redemption of the body. We would have hoped in vain.

Much of the Western world has ceased to wait. Consequently, it has increasingly turned in on itself to find the meaning of its own achievement. This is the great dilemma of all who do not know the freedom of life involved in waiting for the Lord’s appearing.

ACTION

Realizing they have fallen into doubt about Jesus’ return may be the key to a vital Christian life for some readers. If you have made this mistake, repent of it, study the teaching of the Scriptures and begin to wait again.



So we must simultaneously guard against two attitudes. On the one hand, we do not become so engrossed in the coming Last Day that we cease to be ‘remainers’ who live seriously in the world. On the other hand, we do not become so bogged

down in the next-to-last-time (Point 5) that we build as if it will last for ever.

We are truly wayfarers; we are on our way to the Last Day. But we are currently in the transit lounge. We work hard in our world, not because of a neurotic drive to achieve, but because we want to be faithful in this place where our coming King has called us to remain.

EVERY MOMENT COMES ALIVE

We are not yet actually confronted by the events of Point 6, but already its reality is felt in every moment of our lives. It has a sharpening effect on the present. It drives us to capture every moment for God as a moment when the Master could come and when we would want Him to find us faithfully 'remaining'.

This means we do not live for the future as if it were more important than the present. For example, we do not grieve for a young person who has died along the lines of: 'He was so young. He never had time to achieve anything.' Compared with a life of three score years and ten, such a sentiment has some significance. But for life at Point 5 it has little weight, because whatever time we have here is always only a moment; we can bank on no more. Indeed, we should not want more, if our sole aim is to remain until the Lord appears.

ACTION

The longing for more time to 'do' may be a clear pointer that we are not really waiting for Him, but have made an idol of our achievement. Remember that if your life comes to a halt or the Lord appears (whichever it may be), the only question that will be asked is whether you have been faithful, not what you have achieved.

This teaching is particularly pungent for those preparing for something, perhaps training for a career. Students are great 'future livers'—they are always living for the time they graduate, the time they get a job, the time they are useful, the time

they can *really live*! What Point 6 shows students is that life is to be 'really lived' now, moment-by-moment. The lecture theatre is a 'present' place of fruitfulness, and we must not use it as an excuse to withdraw from what the living God requires.

MAKING PLANS

Moment-by-moment living does not mean that planning is an ungodly activity. But it certainly has its dangers and temptations. In James 4:13-17, some common errors are exposed.

Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

James here pictures the typical trader, planning tomorrow's move in another economic venture. Such a man, he says, is operating on a false assumption: that he will necessarily be here tomorrow. He does not know this, and in his boast that he *will* be, made without reference to his dependence on God, he sins. James asks, 'What is your life?' and answers his own question, 'You are a mist.' Life is transitory, and therefore James insists there are no grounds for planning other than trust in God that He will make continued existence possible. Our times are in His hands.

For Christians this is true in a dual sense. We must do our planning conscious that tomorrow we may die; but we are also conscious that tomorrow the Lord may come. If we cannot be sure we will be here, it is equally certain we cannot be sure He will not be!

Planning, therefore, is an activity which throws the tension

of Point 5 into sharp relief. It has a legitimate basis in the consistency with which God upholds the world; as such, it is an exercise of trust in the Creator. But the Creator is also the Saviour who is coming to gather His own and judge the world. And He says His coming could be at any time.

To plan as a creature means to willingly submit our plans to the Master, and to do so on the understanding that, in the event of a clash in plans, the Master's have priority. This was always so, of course; but now, at Point 5, we have an added tension. A significant part of the Master's plan has been declared in advance—but the timing is secret.

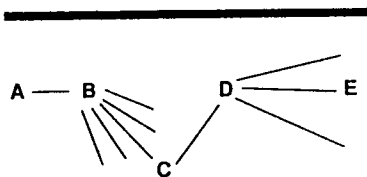
Notice that Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24 is given for the comfort of the disciples, so that they can *recognize* when things happen around them and so not fear. The teaching was not given so that we could predict when it would happen. This is a matter which even Jesus (voluntarily) did not know, but left in the Father's hands.

FAITHFUL LIVING MOMENT-BY-MOMENT

Consider a man who once came to see me. He had travelled a long way and arrived in my study with a woman on his arm and a small child holding his hand.

After some time, he said, 'Three years ago, I made up my mind to marry. I had been a Christian only five weeks, but I believed God would guide me so I stuck a pin in a telephone book, rang up the number and subsequently married the girl. Here we all are. Do you think what I did was right?'

As is my custom (which by now you may expect!), I drew a diagram in response. It looked like this:



I explained that any person's life consists of decisions made at particular moments in that life (A B C D E in the diagram). Sometimes we have many alternatives open to us (as at B); sometimes only a few.

Let's suppose we are at E looking back on A, just as my visitor was looking back on an earlier decision he had made. Several things can be said.

First, the knowledge of God we have gained by moving through A B C D E is considerable. Every Christian grows—and such growth involves change. This means the person at E is a changed person, and this must be taken into account when A is assessed from E. Even more importantly, they do not stand at A any more. They have a new place of obedience at E.

From knowledge accumulated on the journey from A to E, it may be possible to say, 'If I stood at A again, I would not now do what I did then.' All of us can say that about various points in our past. But in evaluating my action at A in the light of E, I must remember two things: first, that A is not my present place; and second, that when I was at A it was under different circumstances, with different knowledge than I have now.

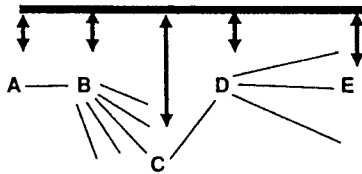
Second, it is important to realize that my action at A is not the only thing I can evaluate. I can also evaluate the *principles* I used at A for discovering what I should do. Were those principles based on a true understanding of God's Word? That is a different question from the rightness or otherwise of my actions. (The principles my visitor used were highly suspect, to say the least).

And there yet another question I can ask: Was I faithful to God on the basis of what I knew at A? Did I maintain a trusting attitude to God at A and a firm belief that He would not let me down? In my visitor's case, the answer is probably that he did. But we must be careful here, for sincere trust in God must go hand in hand with correct data about God. If our theology goes wrong, our living will too.

So what did I say to the man who chose a wife from the

phone book? Insofar as he believed God would not let him down, he was correct in his perception about God's nature. However, in his *method* he betrayed ignorance of other principles for deciding whom to marry, to say nothing of abdicating from his duty to 'decide' (a facet of Christian living we will say more about in Chapter 15).

I did not leave him there, however, for there is one more question that can be asked, a question that makes the difference between despair and hope: Was God faithful to me at A? The answer to that—and not just about A but about the whole journey from A to E—must be 'Yes'. God is always faithful. The top line in my diagram represents this continual presence of the unchanging God with me. And wherever I find myself along the line of my journey, my call is to relate faithfully to Him.



This stresses again what we have argued throughout this book: that the Christian life is to be relationally understood. Its basic questions are always:

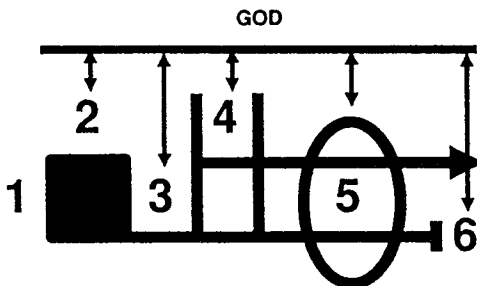
- Who is God?
- What does He generally require?
- Who am I?
- Where am I in history?
- What does He require of me here?

- How can I faithfully do it?

Looking back on my life, then, I always discover God has been faithful to me. But my past testifies only to His graciousness; it never argues that, because He met me at a particular point, I must have been right in what I believed. God's faithful response to my trust in Him says little about the correctness of my theology.

This means that, though I may tell you how something happened with me, it does not follow you should necessarily do as I did. Rather, you should give God thanks that He was gracious to me, then go on to critically evaluate what I believed and did in the light of the Bible. All pragmatic theology which slavishly copies what others have done makes a mistake here. People think that because something 'worked' it must have been biblically sound. That mentality can even lead to the conclusion that we should 'sin that grace may abound' (Rom 6:1, RSV)! No; we are never to trade off the graciousness of our Lord against failure to ask and then listen to Him, or to do our own homework and our own deciding.

This has significance for the main theme of this book. The Bible is a book of statements about God's acts in the past; but even here we must realize that 'faithful' living requires different things at different points in our six-point diagram, because the circumstances at each point vary. The only Person who is the same yesterday, today and for ever is God.



This is why we are not to simply copy the characters of the

Bible. They lived at particular times and what they did then is not necessarily what we should do now. It is not instructive to ask, 'What is there in David's life I should copy?' (Will it be the Bathsheba incident? How will I select?) The question should be, 'What is there in David's living before God which tells me what God is like?' That's what I need to know, because I serve the same God now that David served in His day.

A knowledge of God, and a knowledge of our present moment, are the two things we need for faithful living.

ACTION

1 To be faithful simply means to trust God now, in the moment we are in, with the knowledge we have.

2 Resist the accusations of the enemy that, by taking a decision on what is subsequently shown to be wrong or insufficient data, you can miss the plan of God. (We say more about this in Chapter 15.)

Before the next chapter: Read Romans 12 and 14.