

Jesus is Coming Soon!

150 years ago last month was the deadliest wildfire ever recorded. Some 2000 people died in the famous Peshtigo Fire that burned 1.2 million acres. The years 1870 and 1871 were especially dry. By the fall of 1871, crops were nothing but kindling. On October 8, it was unusually warm in Peshtigo and there was an unusually cold front pushing from the west. Winds reached 100 mph, as strong as some hurricanes. It was probably a lightning strike that started the blaze far west of Peshtigo. By the time it reached Peshtigo, witnesses described it as a tornado of fire. It was so hot that crops and houses burst into flame without even being lit. People caught by the fire were essentially vaporized. Only a few charred bones could be found, if anything.

What happened 150 years ago in Peshtigo, WI, is probably a good description of Judgment Day. The Apostle Peter said (2 Peter 3:10), “**the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.**” Some people would say that the greatest problem facing the world today is global warming. We would say the greatest problem facing the world is global fire that will take place on the last day. In the last chapter of the Old Testament, God said (:1), “**Surely the day is coming: it will burn like a furnace.**” Many people do not believe that there is a God who is going to come to judge people, but that does not change the fact that such a day is coming. God says so, and God’s Word is always true.

God continued in verse 1, “**All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire.**” For as horrific as the Peshtigo fire was, it only lasted a day. The fire of God’s judgment will burn forever. It will never go out. The arrogant are those who have a sense of self-importance to the point of defying any authority. They are the kind of people who say, “I don’t care what the Bible says. You can’t judge me. It’s my life and I’ll do whatever I want.” Evildoers are those who purposefully rebel against God and his laws. They live by the mantra, “If it feels good, do it. I like it so it must be OK.” In 1 Corinthians 6, the Apostle Paul listed the sins of sexually immorality, adultery, stealing, being greedy, getting drunk, slandering and swindling and says that such people, “**will not inherit the kingdom of God.**”

The idea of suffering the agony of being burned without ever any relief is horrifying. Yet that is what the Bible teaches. One of my professors explained it this way: On Judgment Day, God will give people what they really wanted. If people did not want to be with Jesus when they were on this earth, then on Judgment Day, God will give them their wish. They will be apart from him forever. God does not excuse sin. He punishes it. May the reality and the severity of Judgment Day spur us on to share our faith as often as we can.

There are two words in verse 1, though, that gives me pause. Our Lord said, “**ALL the arrogant and EVERY evildoer.**” When we look at those who are ruining their lives, it is so easy to think that we are better than they are, as if our sins are not as bad as their sins. We look down at those who do not come to church or who have done some really bad things. And as soon as such thoughts enter our minds, we have become arrogant. Nor have we been perfect examples for other church members or our relatives, neighbors, co-workers and classmates. As we began our worship, each one of us confessed, “I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good.” So, we, also, are arrogant and evildoers. We, also, can expect to be burned up in the fires of Judgment Day.

One of my friends grew up in Peshtigo, WI. He told me how some of his ancestors survived the great fire by rushing down a deep ravine to a river. In fact, almost everyone who survived that fire survived because they ran to the Peshtigo River. Just making it to the river, however, was not enough. The fiery air was so hot that it would blister their skin. All night long, they had to keep splashing water on themselves all night long. One of the survivors wrote how he kept telling people to “run to the river.”

If we are going to survive the eternal fire of Judgment Day, we, also, need to run to the river – not the Peshtigo River, but the Jordan River. It was in the Jordan River that Jesus was baptized. When Jesus was baptized he officially and publicly became the substitute for sinners. He did everything that each human being should do, but could not. Jesus kept every commandment perfectly. Although he was true God, he did boast about it. He lived a humble life and was never greedy. He was not arrogant. He never cursed or swore falsely, never lied, never got drunk, never stole, never took advantage of others, never lusted or did anything immoral. He took that perfection into the Jordan River when he was baptized so that when you were baptized, he could trade with you. Your sin became his sin. His perfection became your perfection. Jesus became guilty and you became innocent. Jesus was treated as an arrogant

evildoer and you are considered to be holy and pure. Jesus experienced hell when he was forsaken by God as he hung on the cross. But because Jesus was forsaken by God, God will never forsake you. It's mind boggling, isn't it? We know we are guilty sinners. We know we deserve fiery judgment. But because you are connected to Jesus in baptism, you are holy and pure, just as if you had never sinned. Yes, run to the river. Return to your baptism every day. A friend told me that every morning, before he goes off to work, he splashes a little water on his face as a tangible reminder that he is a baptized child of God. Every day, as you recall that you are sinful, run to your baptism and rejoice that you have been made holy.

Jesus died for the sins of everyone in the whole world. If someone, however, rejects Jesus, then he's left holding onto his own sins. And those who are holding on to their sins will be burned up in the Judgment. Again, may the reality and the severity of Judgment Day spur us on to share our faith as often as we can.

In Malachi 4:2, our Lord continued, **“But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.”** The word for “revere” is also translated as worship, or fear, or awesome respect. People who revere God's name are believers – those who have faith. The “sun of righteousness” is a reference to Jesus and his blessings. And the “wings” of the sun are just another way of describing sun rays that emanate from the sun. Last week a friend told me that she got up early and drove to watch the sunrise over Lake Michigan. Sunrises over a calm Lake Michigan are especially awesome when there has been a storm the night before. Such a sunrise gives you a tremendous sense of calm and peace. It's the start of a new and beautiful day. You can sense the majesty and love of God. How much more awesome it is when Jesus and his blessings shine on us.

We sometimes need that picture of a beautiful sunrise because there is not always such peace and calm in our daily lives.

- The relentless drive to try to get enough money so you and your family can survive...
- The craziness of our culture where there does not seem to be any standard of morality...
- The on-going threat of disease and health problems...
- The frustration that wears us down when things do not go the way we hoped...
- The impossible demands placed on us by our boss and others...

- The emotional and physical pain that so many of us deal with every day...
 - The uncertainty and insecurity that haunts us...
 - The mistakes that nag at us...
 - The ominous specter of our own impending death...
- can leave all of us feeling nervous and anxious and stressed out. Look to the future. Jesus is coming. And when he comes, he will make all things new. He will restore to us the beauty and perfection that was in the Garden of Eden before sin ruined it all. A new day is coming. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the first rays of a new and beautiful day that will last forever.

My friends, you will not just survive Judgment Day. You will thrive. Your God says that (4:2), **“you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.”** My uncle had a small farm in northern Michigan. I was once able to visit there in the middle of winter. There had just been a huge snow storm and the barn doors separating the calves from the barnyard had been snowed shut. I helped my cousins clear away the snow and open the doors. I'll never forget how those calves reacted. They ran into the barnyard and kept kicking and jumping. You could tell that they were thrilled. It was an amazing thing for this city boy to see. Or, maybe think of children after the last day of the school year running outside with joy to celebrate the start of summer. That is the joy and excitement that you will have forever in heaven. In heaven you will never run out of energy or time. You will throw away your walkers and canes. No more hearing aides or glasses. No more medicine or doctors appointments. You will stand tall and straight and strong. You will run and jump and dance. I know that you do not always feel that way now, but a new day is coming.

Because of Jesus, you do not need to worry about Judgment Day. You are God's own child. You can look forward to Judgment Day when everything that is wrong with this world and with you will be made right. Don't get discouraged when things are not going that great in the world or in your life. You can look forward to the dawning of a new day and a new life in heaven. Don't get discouraged because Jesus is coming soon. Amen.