

COUNTDOWN TO JUDGMENT

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, September 18, 2016

With every news segment comes the uncomfortable reminder of increasing and spreading violence and hatred in our day. Overlaid with the text of Bible prophecies, many are concerned to understand if we are indeed living in the last of the Last Days. What if our generation is experiencing a countdown to judgment? What are we to do? How are we to live?

The Bible has not left us without answers to these pressing questions. Let's see if we can uncover instructive patterns in the text of Scripture today.

Genesis 5:25 When Methuselah had lived 187 years, he fathered Lamech. ²⁶ Methuselah lived after he fathered Lamech 782 years and had other sons and daughters. ²⁷ Thus all the days of Methuselah were 969 years, and he died.

From the time that Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, because of their sin against God, one thing was common to all human beings: death.

Genesis, chapter 5, outlines the generations since Adam, according to their first born sons, and the death of each patriarch.

Adam lived to the age of 930, and before he died there were nine generations living together! That's father, son, grandson, and six levels of great-grandsons! And each generation also included "other sons and daughters." By my calculation, that's a minimum of 47 family members for Christmas dinner each year!!!

Methuselah was the seventh generation after the first man, Adam, and the one who lived the longest in all of recorded human history—969 years. But the one who stole the show in this lineup was his father, Enoch.

Enoch brought a glimpse of extraordinary hope into the human experience. Instead of seeing his own death, Enoch saw the Lord in an instant, for he was a faithful man.

Genesis 5:23 Enoch lived 365 years, ²⁴ walking in close fellowship with God. Then one day he disappeared, because God took him.

We may attribute his deep faith to his upbringing and his godly heritage (including the influence of his great-great-great-great grandfather, Adam, who was still alive for Enoch's entire life). Yet, something significant happened around the birth of his son, Methuselah, that steered his soul toward God.

Genesis 5:22 *And after he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God.*

This was more than just a walk around the block in the evening; this was a walk that lasted 300 years. And then, God took him. Enoch simply *“was no more.”*

There is not much said in the Bible about Methuselah, Enoch’s son, but we know from this record that his birth altered the course of his father’s walk with God. That is not as uncommon as you might think.

The birth of a child can signal a dramatic turn toward God. Perhaps it is the wonder of the conception and birth of another human being. Perhaps it is the emergence of the tender heart of a parent. Perhaps it is the sense of profound responsibility for another person’s wellbeing. Maybe it is all of those things. Or something even deeper.

Whatever the case may be, the birth of one’s first child or grandchild may sweep a person into a much closer relationship with our Heavenly Father. And that’s a good thing.

Methuselah lived 969 years. At age 187, he fathered Lamech. He also had other sons and daughters. Then Methuselah died, just before the Great Flood.

That was the flood that covered the entire earth and killed every person and creature that lived upon dry land. These small facts seem insignificant until we learn about Methuselah’s name. His name meant: *“when he dies, judgment.”* Suddenly, these small details explode with gigantic meaning.

A small peek into that next story reveals that the earth had become corrupted by sin beyond repair. What had started with a young couple’s willful disobedience grew into a world of wickedness. God, seeing the relentless evil, acted to destroy all the living creatures in a worldwide flood. It was judgment. Ironically, Methuselah died just before it happened. Actually, in the same year that it happened.

The birth of Methuselah was like the beginning of a countdown to God’s wrath. When he died, judgment came. But he lived a long time—longer than any other person. Maybe his life was a countdown to judgment, but it was also an extended overtime period of mercy.

God was giving everyone time to repent from their wicked ways and follow Him. He was warning them that their pursuit of violence would result in death—many deaths, including their own.

God was longsuffering. He warned people for 969 years—the longest any man has lived on the earth. In God’s good patience, he prolonged the life of Methuselah as a period of probation for the world to repent. What great mercy!

And in the midst of that countdown period, two significant events occurred. One was the catching away of Enoch, representative of the catching away of the faithful followers of Christ before divine judgment befalls the earth again. Paul described it plainly in his letter to the church in Thessalonica:

1 Thessalonians 4:15 We tell you this directly from the Lord: We who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet him ahead of those who have died. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves. ¹⁷ Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ So encourage each other with these words.

The rapture of the church (as this “catching away” is often called) is not an afterthought, or a recent idea. Its precedent was established in the seventh generation of the human race. And its motive was established in the heart of our Redeemer from the foundation of the world. We were not created for judgment, but for salvation! *“So encourage each other with these words.”*

The second significant event during that countdown period was the death of Adam—the end of an era. Noah, the grandson of Methuselah, who built the ark that would save his family and the animals of the earth during the Great Flood, was the first generation that did not know Adam personally. His birth marked the beginning of a new era.

1600 years of accumulated sin shrouded the human race—in fact, the whole earth—in thick darkness, for which there would come no dawn. Scoffing, mocking, resistance, and rebellion had become the order of the day. Repentance was not even on the horizon, though Noah and his family lived it and preached it for hundreds of years.

So God prepared His secret weapon—an act of judgment—to reboot the human soul and restart the human race.

As we observe the increasing wickedness and violence of people in our present day, and especially the open hostility toward the ways of God and the people of God, you may wonder, “Could God do it again?” Are we living in the Last Days?

As Peter, Jesus Christ's apostle, began his second letter to fellow Christians, he felt compelled to review what he had learned from the Lord about the Last Days and the coming Day of Judgment. Here's some of what he wrote:

² Peter 3:3 Most importantly, I want to remind you that in the last days scoffers will come, mocking the truth and following their own desires. ⁴ They will say, "What happened to the promise that Jesus is coming again? From before the times of our ancestors, everything has remained the same since the world was first created."

⁵ They deliberately forget that God made the heavens long ago by the word of his command, and he brought the earth out from the water and surrounded it with water. ⁶ Then he used the water to destroy the ancient world with a mighty flood. ⁷ And by the same word, the present heavens and earth have been stored up for fire. They are being kept for the day of judgment, when ungodly people will be destroyed.

⁸ But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. ⁹ The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the very elements themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be found to deserve judgment.

Peter also described an extended countdown to judgment. There is a pattern here for us to see! Though it takes thousands of years, its arrival is certain and it will be sudden and terrible.

Don't fall into the trap of scoffers who mock God's righteous judgment, just because it seems to take too long to come. And don't become indifferent—numbed by the inevitable hype of religious fear tactics. There's a reason for judgment's delay—a wonderful, gracious reason. God is *"being patient for your sake."* He is giving everyone a chance to repent.

When you see others, who seem to be "getting away with" their sins—before you go off half-cocked with bitter vengeance in mind—remember this: God's "delay" of judgment or consequences is not injustice; it is His merciful patience. Judgment will come, but this is a time for repentance and salvation. This is the Day of Salvation. Hear what Jesus said:

John 3:17 God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through Him. ¹⁸ There is no judgment against anyone who believes in Him. But anyone who does not believe in Him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son.

John 12:47 I have come to save the world and not to judge it. ⁴⁸ But all who reject me and my message will be judged on the day of judgment by the truth I have spoken.

And this truth is not only for “those people”; it is also for you and me. In the same way, He suspends our judgment and many of the consequences of our sins. God is patient! God is merciful! God is gracious! He deserves your thanks and your praise.

What should be our attitude and thought about these end-time events? Peter concluded:

2 Peter 3:11 Since everything around us is going to be destroyed like this, what holy and godly lives you should live, ¹² looking forward to the day of God and hurrying it along. On that day, He will set the heavens on fire, and the elements will melt away in the flames. ¹³ But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth He has promised, a world filled with God’s righteousness.

¹⁴ And so, dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to be found living peaceful lives that are pure and blameless in His sight.

¹⁵ And remember, our Lord’s patience gives people time to be saved.

We should be very careful to keep and cultivate the faith of Christ—in our own lives and in one another. We should live as though judgment is surely coming. We should live as though Heaven is real. And we should live with the same heart of patient kindness toward others as God has demonstrated toward us, as Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians 4:5 So don’t make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For He will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due.

Anytime before the Lord returns is too soon for us to pronounce judgment (unless you’re a sitting judge). This is God’s season of grace and mercy. “Be merciful as your Father in Heaven is merciful.”

Here are some reflections I encourage you to think about today:

- 1) The birth and life of Methusaleh affected his father in a significant way. Have you known someone whose life makes you want to grow closer to God? What are you doing today to pursue that goal?
- 2) How does the life of Methusaleh and the unrepentant world around him shed new light for you on God’s good character? What does it teach you about God’s patience? Does it give you more hope?
- 3) What role can warnings play in your life? How can difficulties, even prolonged ones, groom and prepare you for future victories?