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BRING OUT THE CANDLES

1 John 2:18-27

There is a movement that has been emerging in various parts of the world recently. It was initially sparked by a book that came out in 2006 written by South African philosopher David Benatar. The book was titled *Better Never To Have Been: The Harm Of Coming Into Existence*. The movement is the “I wish I’d never been born” movement. Yes, there are increasing numbers of people who claim they wish they had never lived at all. I’m a little more familiar with the much more popular “I wish you’d never been born” movement. But I have never wished I had never been born. Yet this is now a real thing for some people. In February an Indian man named Raphael Samuel announced he was suing his parents for giving birth to him. He said, “It was not our decision to be born. Human existence is totally pointless.” In his book, Benatar wrote, “Life is a procession of frustrations and irritations.” He quoted Sophocles, who said, “Never to have been born is best.” Benatar claimed that having children is “intrinsically cruel and irresponsible.” He went on to say, “While good people go to great lengths to spare their children from suffering, few of them seem to notice that the one and only guaranteed way to prevent all the suffering of their children is not to bring those children into existence in the first place.”

How bad does life have to be to get a person to a place where they wish they’d never been born at all? That’s a grim place to be. But then Ecclesiastes 4:2-3 says, “I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.” The writer of Ecclesiastes said a lot of puzzling things. But the key to those verses is the phrase “under the sun.” He frequently used that phrase to represent how life is if you remove God from the equation. Under the sun living, in that case, ends up being empty and hopeless and, as Benatar said, full of frustration. For many, that is how life is. It ends tragically for all of us. And that loss is devastating for those who remain. And unfortunately for the overwhelming majority of us life doesn’t go the way we had hoped and dreamed. Most of us live with a large dose of disappointment. Along the way we see enough hurt and evil to last several lifetimes. That’s why every now and then you’ll see a bumper sticker on a car that says, “Life is hard. Then you die.”

In 1 John the apostle had a lot to say about how to have full life, not a life that is empty, gloomy, hopeless and frustrating. We will see important elements for experiencing a full, vital life as we look at 1 John 2:18-27.

WATCH OUT FOR ANTICHRIST

Verse 18 sounds exciting. “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.” All right, the last hour, antichrist, now we’re going to get into the really cool stuff in the Bible. We’re going to be talking about prophecy and the end times, Antichrist and Armageddon, the exciting stuff. We’re going to be looking at all the signs that tell us surely we are almost there, right?

I don’t know why, but all that stuff about signs of the end, about antichrist, and one world government and the sign of the beast, is titillating. People perk up when someone starts talking about it. There are entire ministries that do nothing but focus on that stuff. They capture attention by trying to match up their interpretation of passages from the Bible with current events. And, of course, we can always speculate about who the antichrist is.

I generally don’t go in much for that kind of thing. However, I confess that I’ve been thinking about this in the past few weeks, and made an astounding discovery. Is the Antichrist out there right now? I assigned numbers to letters, 1 to A, 2 to B and so on through the 26 letters of the alphabet. Then I tried using those numbers on various well known people. I didn’t get anywhere. One I tried was Vladimir Putin, but I got nothing. Then I tried it on his whole name, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, still got nothing. Then it hit me. He’s Russian! I should be using the Cryllic alphabet, which has 33 letters. Unfortunately, again it went nowhere.

However, that idea of using a different alphabet made me think. I thought about ASCII codes. ASCII stands for American Standard Code For Information Interchange. Computers only understand numbers so this code was created to represent letters as numbers. Perfect. I figured since ASCII codes are for computers I should look for a computer person. So I started with the letters Bill. The codes for those letters are 66, 73, 76, 76. Then I looked up the codes for Gates. The codes were 71, 65, 84, 69, 83. Bill Gates, a very computer oriented name. Add all those numbers and you get…663. Oh, well, that doesn’t mean anything. Ah, but wait. Bill Gates is actually Bill Gates the third. Add 3 to that number and what do you have? 666! Coincidence? I think not.

If you’ve used a computer there has likely been a moment when you were sure that Bill Gates is indeed the Antichrist, but I went through that exercise to illustrate how ludicrous things get when people start speculating about who the antichrist is. And that is true about most of the wild, tortured interpretations of scripture and speculation about the end times, no matter how compelling it feels at times.

There are some things that we should notice that will bring our end times fever way down. The first and most obvious is that John said, “this is the last hour,” and he wrote that 2000 years ago. Well that is for sure an awfully long hour, don’t you think? We all know that Einstein’s theory claims that time is relative. I have found that to be true. Some time ago I had a medical procedure done in which a doctor sent a medical scope up inside my body to look at my bladder. He claimed it took less than 10 minutes. That absolutely cannot be true, because it felt like it took several years.

Yes, but the last hour continuing for 2000 years? That’s stretching relativity beyond the breaking point. This has caused some people to assert that John was just wrong. They say he expected Jesus to come back in his lifetime, but he was mistaken. After 2000 years many say that obviously Jesus is never coming back. Seems like more than long enough to wait. If you have an agreement to meet someone at a designated time, and they don’t show up, you might wait for them, but for how long? A half hour? An hour? After 2 hours for sure you’re going to give up. They’re not coming. I’m pretty sure if you waited 2000 years you’d figure that individual was never coming.

When Laurie and I first moved here we met a man who was working on a nuclear fusion project. Nuclear fusion theoretically holds promise for being a clean energy source that is nearly inexhaustible. Back then I asked my friend how long it would take to have a functioning, energy producing machine. He estimated it would be 25 years. That was 40 years ago. Last year I read an article about nuclear fusion and in it one expert was quoted as estimating it will take…25 years! Don’t you begin to doubt if it’s ever going to happen? If they keep saying “25 more years” eventually people are going to conclude it’s never going to happen.

How are we to understand this? Was John just wrong? We need to understand what John meant by “the last hour.” He wasn’t saying Jesus was coming in the next couple of years. He meant we are in the last phase of God’s plan for human history. God’s plan has involved several phases. There was a phase where he created the universe, and a phase where he interacted with humans face to face. There was a phase where God called one man and created from him a people he would use ultimately to rescue the human race. There was a phase where God gave that people laws to follow and prophets to call them to that law. There was a phase where God physically entered history in the person of Jesus Christ. Now there is a phase where the whole plan has been revealed, where God’s Spirit is given to people, and now we wait for the time when God will wrap up the whole thing.

We have been in that last phase, the last hour, since the day of Pentecost a few weeks after Jesus left the building. Our good neighbor Mark recently took his family on a vacation trip to Zion and Bryce Canyon in Utah. He told us about an excursion they went on where they rode horses down a trail into the canyon. He said the trail was fairly wide, but his horse didn’t walk down the middle of it. For some reason, the horse liked to walk right on the edge of the trail. He said it was a bit unnerving, because there was a steep drop hundreds of feet down into the canyon. But the horse stayed right on the edge the whole time, close enough that at times he caused dirt and rocks to go tumbling down that steep drop.

Back at the end of the 19th century there was a British preacher named J. H. Newman who preached a sermon titled “Waiting For Christ.” In it he said the course of history, “runs not towards the end, but along it, and on the brink of it; and is at all times near that great event…Christ then is ever at our doors.” We are in the last hour means that like Mark and his horse going right along the edge of that path, we are going along the edge of the return of Christ to this earth. It could happen at any moment. There are no more phases to God’s plan for human history. The next thing to happen is that the events of his return begin to occur. That event is right there, so close we could almost touch it. Nothing needs to happen before it breaks into history.

When you hear people proclaiming that they see signs that we are in the last days, remember that those signs have been there throughout the entirety of this last phase of history. There have been signs of the last days for 2000 years. I have, fortunately, not heard many people speculating how the current pandemic fits in their particular prophetic scheme, but I have heard one or two. This truly has been a terrible time. Often we say it is unprecedented. It is unprecedented in our lifetimes, but not in history. My brother, Jerry, recently told me about a book he has been reading that is an English translation of a book written in Russian a hundred years ago. In the book the woman writer told of her travels in Russia in 1919. This was during the height of the Spanish flu pandemic. She related how she expected she might get the flu and it would cause pulmonary problems. She described how if she traveled to some areas she would have to be quarantined for 14 days. Maybe she planned to go to Hawaii. Does any of that sound familiar? A hundred years later we are going through something very similar. Before we freak out about this pandemic and decide it surely must be a sign of the end times, we need to think about what things were like in 1919. The world had just been through the biggest, most deadly war in all of history up to that point, and right on its heels came a virus pandemic that was considerably more deadly than the one we are in right now. Some 1.15 million have died from Covid worldwide. That’s bad. But the Spanish flu killed 50 million! World population was a quarter of what it is now, so that was a massive impact. It undoubtedly must have felt to many like a sign that the world was coming to an end. Was it? No, it wasn’t. There have been various “signs” like that for 2000 years, reminding us that we are in the last hour, but we have been for a very long time. We have no real idea how much longer it will be. Jesus said no one can know the day of his coming, and he meant it. So let’s not try to figure out that which Jesus said we cannot know.

Well how about the antichrist? And what does John mean when he says that even now many antichrists have come? We do know that in the group of events called the Day of the Lord that will bring history to an end, there is a key player called the Antichrist. We know that person will come. But did you notice John didn’t tell his readers to look for that person, and he had nothing at all to say about identifying him? There is a grammatical point here that can help us. To us the prefix “anti” means “against.” Those who are anti war are against war, those who are anti abortion are against abortion, for instance. But the Greek word anti was a bit different. In the Greek lexicon the first meaning listed for it is “instead of” or “in place of.” That means the Antichrist is “in place of Christ.” We tend to focus on the militant hostility of the person and see the Antichrist as an enemy who attacks God’s people. There is an element of that, but the first characteristic of the Antichrist is he is “in place of Christ.” He tries to take the place of Christ. That’s why John says that many antichrists are already in the world. There are countless people offering something in place of Christ. Every religion, every philosophy other than faith in Christ, offers something instead of Christ as the center of life and the hope of the world.

John says that there were people who had seemed to be followers of Christ. But now they were offering this new false teaching. They had become little antichrists, because they were espousing something in the place of Christ as key to life. John explained, “they went out from us because they did not really belong to us.” In other words, they were never really followers of Jesus in the first place. They dabbled for a while in this new idea of the gospel, but they never really bought into it. So now they have moved on to something else.

The message here is that for us to really live we need to understand that we are living in the last hour. That doesn’t mean we need to freak out and fear that every latest technology has the potential for being the mark of the beast, or worrying about people’s efforts to create one world government or see signs that Jesus is about to come back. We don’t have to worry about who the Antichrist is. Just know that in this last phase of history there will be many antichrists in the world as there are right now, and when the Antichrist does arrive on the scene it won’t require any guesswork to identify him. It will be obvious. So to properly live now just know that the coming of Christ is very near, and it could happen at any moment. We should live always in light of this reality, on the edge of his coming. It is our hope, and our call to live every moment with passion and with enthusiasm and with love for God.

YOU HAVE AN ANOINTING

Verse 20 begins with the word “but.” This indicates a contrast with what went before. John was talking about those “antichrists,” people asserting something in place of Christ, who once had seemed to be a part of the church, but now clearly were not. John says to his readers, you are not like them. You are a big contrast to them, for you are the real thing. The way John put it is, “You have an anointing from the Holy One.” This idea of an anointing seems important in this section. The word appears 4 times in these verses, suggesting it is a big deal.

We have an anointing? What does that mean? That’s a very religious term. I tend to think of some of the more emotional type Christians who talk about someone have a special “anointing” from God. Are you ready to receive it? A person once told me that I had a special “anointing” from God. It made me a bit uncomfortable because I didn’t feel especially “anointed.” There was a time in my life when I was anointed and was very much aware of it. One of the quirks of my amazing wife is she has always liked to provoke reactions. When we were first married one of the ways she like to do that was when I was taking a nice hot shower she would sneak into the bathroom and dump cold water on me. She would anoint me with cold water. I was always very much aware of that anointing. However, I’m pretty sure that doesn’t have anything to do with the anointing John had in mind.

What is an anointing? In ancient times kings were often anointed when they began their reign. The anointing conferred on them the position of king, giving them the right and authority to reign. It was viewed as giving them power. In the Bible an anointing was symbolic of 3 things. It symbolized a bestowal of God’s favor or his Spirit on a person, a designation of a place or a role to play in God’s plan, and preparation for carrying out that role by empowering. Isaiah 61:1, a verse Jesus claimed for himself when he launched his ministry, Isaiah says, “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.” Isaiah, and later Christ, were anointed by the Father. The Spirit of the Lord was given to them to carry out the role the Father gave, and the Spirit empowered them to do it.

It is common today that Christians who talk about an anointing refer to something especially dramatic or even miraculous. This creates some confusion. When I read John saying I have an anointing from God my reaction tends to be, “sure doesn’t seem like it to me.” Most of us don’t feel like we are SPIRITUAL MAN, wearing a cape and a big red S on our shirt, or maybe ANOINTED MAN, empowered to do battle with the forces of evil. But please notice how John said this anointing from God was manifested in his readers. “All of you know the truth.” In contrast to those who went out from them because they were never of them, those who were now espousing something in place of Christ, John’s readers were anointed so they did know the truth about Jesus.

Without an anointing from God people are not going to believe in Jesus and stay true to him. There are people who think anybody who believes what you believe is gullible and confused. They think are more intelligent and they have no regard whatsoever for your faith. When you think about it, it’s true that what we believe is a bit on the preposterous side. There’s a Powerful Being who has existed eternally and who is responsible for bringing the universe into existence. And this Being is so concerned with life on our planet that he came to live on it for a time to rescue the people who live here, and he now engages with its inhabitants. Do you know how vast the universe is? Just our galaxy has 100 billion stars in it, and that number may be as high as 400 billion. Do you know how vast those numbers are? Let’s take the conservative 100 billion as our number. Imagine that you are tasked with spending $100 billion. Yes, I know, our government seems to be able to do that in a few days. But you personally assigned to go on a spending spree. You are required to spend $20 a second, and to keep doing that 24 hours a day until you have spent all $100 billion. Sounds like a dream to Laurie. How long would that take? If you only had $100, at $20 per second you’d spend it all in 5 seconds. If you had $1000, you’d spend it in 50 seconds. If you had $100,000, you’d burn through that in a mere 1 hour, 23 minutes. To spend $1 million would take 578 days. To spend $100 billion would take 1585...centuries! That’s an inconceivably vast number. That’s just the minimum number of stars in our galaxy. There are galaxies that contain more than a trillion stars! And here’s where it gets really outrageous. There are 150 billion galaxies in the universe. The universe is so vast that we can’t even begin to get our minds around it. And out of all that, the one who made it all is obsessed with this one planet? Who can believe that? On this planet there are more than 7 billion humans. And supposedly this Creator cares about you?

Oh wait, you’ve never seen or heard this infinitely vast and powerful Maker? Don’t you think that’s rather absurd? It sounds totally outrageous. Yet that is what believers in Jesus Christ believe. Now it’s possible that they are unusually self focused and gullible so this idea seems reasonable to them. But many of them are highly intelligent people, the farthest thing from gullible. I hope that I am reasonably intelligent. I don’t believe the earth is flat or the stars revolve around the earth. I don’t believe that diseases like Covid are caused by foul atmospheres or spirits. I don’t fall prey to the many conspiracy theories that we are inundated with on a constant basis. I also believe I am clear eyed about the fact that I am most certainly not the center of the entire universe. Yet I believe this news that the creator of a universe so infinitely vast it boggles my mind, actually entered history on this planet to rescue human beings, and that he actually knows me, loves me, cares about me. I’m certainly not smarter than everybody else, so in the end I have to agree that John is correct. I believe in Jesus and continue believing in him because I have an anointing from the Holy One. According to what John says in this passage the main evidence of an anointing from God is that we believe and keep believing the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So, yes, I have an anointing from God, and so do you.

This has some huge implications for how we live. It means that God is with me. I’m never alone. God has poured out his Spirit on me, whether it feels like it or not, it is true. It means that God has a purpose for my life. He has anointed me, designated me for a task, a role in his great plan. This is true for you as well. Our lives have meaning because we have been given something significant, eternally important, to do. Our son in law, Michael, as of next month will be in an unusual place. Due to the devastation of the airline industry caused by Covid, he will be designated by Delta as unassigned. That means he is not assigned to and current on any airplane. He will be a pilot who has no plane to fly. He will still get paid. But he is in this weird place where his job is to have no job. For a pilot who loves flying it is an uncomfortable place to be. It might be fine for a while, but for the long term it is frustrating and hard.

Many of us feel sort of like we are unassigned in life. That is a confusing, frustrating and difficult way to live. But in Christ, you have an anointing, and that means you have been assigned a role to play, a job to do, a mission to carry out. It may not seem that momentous to us, but we have to admit we don’t see the bigger picture. We do not know what God is going to do with our little part.

Laurie and I really like to eat outside on the warm evenings we were having recently. One particular evening our meal was cut short by a persistent bee who wanted to join the party. It would not leave us alone. Later I thought it must be hard to be a bee. No one is glad when you show up. They try mightily to get you to go away. They might even quit just to get away from you. That’s rather hurtful, don’t you think? A poor bee just flies around doing his thing, being a bee, and people treat him like he carries corona virus or something. Maybe it would help if they wore tiny masks. A bee has no idea how crucial he is. Did you see the article today about the murder hornet nest they found in Washington? The problem with those hornets is they kill bees. And bees are crucial to our environment. But they don’t know that. They don’t do their part because they know how crucial they are. They just do what God has created them to do, and that’s pretty much the way it is for us. My little part of God’s plan we might think is minuscule and meaningless. But it is not. God says it is huge.

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist in Europe who was arrested by the Nazis and put into a concentration camp. Everything that he loved and everything he lived for was taken from him. In the horror of that death camp he had to find a new purpose for living. He survived and wrote a book titled *Man’s Search For Meaning*. In it he wrote, “There is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions, as the knowledge that there is meaning to one’s life. He who has a ‘why’ to live for can bear almost any ‘how.’” That was not philosophical speculation. It was truth that came out of the worst conditions people have ever perpetrated. The point here is that our anointing from God means we have a role he wants us to play, a unique role that no one else can fill. And that role has eternal meaning, so our lives are filled with meaning.

Having an anointing means God has empowered us. We don’t need to somehow conjure up some superhuman strength. We just look to God to give us the strength for each day, and know that he will give us the strength and the resources to do whatever he has planned for us. The Spirit of Jesus is in you. You may not always feel like it, but he is there. If he were not you would not believe. So ask him to strengthen you each day.

This anointing also means that, as verse 25 says, he will give us what he has promised us, eternal life. So we have hope. We have just been given another reminder of how crucial hope is. Because Jesus Christ conquered death, there is eternal life. That is the hope that we all need. We will only truly be free to live when we know that we have an answer for death, and in Christ we do.

REMAIN IN JESUS

The word “remain” appears 3 times in verses 24-27 and the word “continue” shows up in verse 28. This is a major emphasis in this passage. You have an anointing from God which enables you to believe in Jesus. So remain in that truth. Continue believing in him.

Verse 27 has some words that have confused some people. “As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you.” There are people who say, “I have an anointing from God. I have the Holy Spirit, so I don’t need anyone to teach me. God teaches me directly.” That does kind of sound like what John said in that verse, so does that mean we don’t need anyone to teach us anything?

This creates a seeming contradiction with some other passages of Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 12:28 Paul wrote, “God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers.” If all of us who have the Spirit of God don’t need anyone to teach us, why would God give the church teachers? The same thing shows up in Ephesians 4:11-12, “Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” Why would Christ give the church teachers if we didn’t need them? On a similar point, why did John write this letter? He wrote it to teach his readers, who had the anointing from God. If they didn’t need anyone to teach them, why was he trying to teach them?

The confusion from this verse comes because we ignore its context. Remember the historical context. There were people, some of them formerly part of the church, who were telling these believers that they did not have the correct knowledge. They claimed there was special, higher knowledge of God that they possessed and these Christians did not. John was saying, “You don’t need them to teach you anything. You don’t need to listen to them. God has revealed the truth to you. So all you need to do is remain in it.

APPLICATION

What do we see in this passage that can help us live the full life?STAND FIRM

God has enabled you to believe. Never forget that. Down deep, you know that it is all true, that God is there, that Jesus died and rose from the dead for you, that you are forgiven and loved because of what he has done. Keep trusting in that truth, knowing that God is with you.

LIVE IN YOUR ANOINTING

Remember that God has given you an anointing, which includes an eternally significant part to play in God’s plan for history, and his Spirit in you to enable you and strengthen you to carry out your part. In other words, know that even in the most routine of days, even when you can’t see it and what you do might seem pointless, your every action has meaning. Having that meaning fills our days with purpose and passion, and to be full a life must have purpose and passion.

LIVE ON THE EDGE OF HIS COMING

A life without hope will be no life at all. But we have hope because Jesus has won the victory for us. That hope is the most precious thing you could ever possess. Remember that we are going right along the edge of Jesus’ return. It could happen at any time. So live every day doing your duty, ready to stand before him at any moment.

When John F. Kennedy was running for President, he often closed his speeches with a story about a man named Abraham Davenport, who was in the Connecticut Council, later known as the State Senate, the upper house of the state legislature. One day in 1780 the weather became strangely and ominously dark. The House of Representatives decided to adjourn, and there were rumors that maybe the day of Judgment had come. When some suggested the council should also adjourn Davenport said, “The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, then there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, then I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish candles to be brought.” That’s very sound thinking. The Day of the Lord is coming. If it is not about to happen, then there is no cause for alarm. If it is about to happen, then we should choose to be found doing our duty. So bring out the candles and let’s get on with doing our duty, carrying out our mission, today.