

ISAIAH 40:6-8

THE BREATH OF GOD

A voice says, “Cry!”
And I said, “What shall I cry?”
All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.¹

Though he battled tuberculosis throughout his life, the Anglican rector, Henry Lyte, was nevertheless a man strong in spirit and faith. Without benefit of the powerful, almost miraculous medications that are readily available to those suffering from tuberculosis in this day, the dread disease progressed and his health deteriorated, until at last he was forced to seek a warmer climate in Italy.

On September 4, 1847 the good rector’s final sermon was preached to the parishioners gathered at Lower Brixham, England. It is recorded that the pastor nearly had to crawl to the pulpit before delivering that final message to his congregation. From the pulpit, he proclaimed, “It is my desire to induce you to prepare for the solemn hour which must come to all, by a timely appreciation and dependence on the death of Christ.”

Shortly before that final sermon, Lyte was inspired to write a hymn that has blessed the people of God—whatever their communion—in the decades since.² I cannot help but wonder if the hymn writer thought of the verses of our text when he wrote these words:

Abide with me—fast falls the eventide.
The darkness deepens—Lord, with me abide;
when other helpers fail and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, O abide with me!

Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;
earth’s joys grow dim; its glories pass away;
change and decay in all around I see—
O Thou who changest not, abide with me!

I need Thy presence ev’ry passing hour—
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter’s pow’r?
Who like Thyself my guide and stay can be?
Thru cloud and sunshine, O abide with me.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Kenneth W. Osbeck, **Amazing Grace: 355 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions** (Kregel, Grand Rapids, MI 1990) 130

Hold Thou Thy word before my closing eyes.
Shine thru the gloom and point me to the skies;
heav'n's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee—
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.³

Though our world is defined by change and decay, this text assures us that there is certainty for all who hold firmly to the eternal Word of the Lord. We who follow the Risen Son of God know that we may rest secure in the knowledge that our times are in His hand and that we are safe from death that marks this dying world. The Advent Season must become for all who know their God a time of preparation for what is surely coming. To be certain, we rejoice in the knowledge of His first advent, but it is the anticipation of His return to receive us to Himself that causes us to exult in Him and in His mercy.

THE DEATH OF OUR CULTURE — This could be the last Christmas celebrated in this Church Age, this Age of Grace. The shadows are lengthening; the sun is setting on Christian civilisation in the west. Culture as we have known it is experiencing a cataclysmic upheaval. Wickedness is in the ascendancy; righteousness stands far away and truth has stumbled in the public squares [see ISAIAH 59:14]. If the outline of history as provided in the opening chapters of the Apocalypse is correct, then it seems apparent that we are entering, if not already present in, the final dispensation—the Laodicean era.

Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary, standing at a window in the Foreign Office, watching the lamps being lit as dusk approached, famously remarked, “The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our time.” The occasion for that dark statement was Germany’s declaration of war against France on August 3rd, 1914.⁴

Some two decades later, on the cusp of yet another world war, Winston Churchill pleaded with the people of the United States of America, unequivocally stating, “The lights are going out.” The occasion for that speech was the growing restrictions on free speech and an increase in assaults against Jews perpetuated by Germany.⁵

A similar alarm must be sounded today as the lights are going out in the west. Despite denials from self-serving politicians, and a multiplication of agnostics and atheists together with religious sympathisers who live as though God was not a factor in our continued existence, the western world was founded on the Faith of Christ the Lord. When the Faith is marginalised, whether through direct assault or through neglect, the lights will indeed be extinguished.

Despite a current recession that threatens the extravagant lifestyle to which we have grown accustomed, this is nevertheless an era marked by unprecedented luxury and ease. Modern Canadians enjoy lives that would have been unimaginable to earlier generations, a lifestyle that was utterly unknown to our fathers. Consequently, the culture of convenience and comfort in which we now live has surely dulled the spiritual perspicuity of professed followers of the Lamb. We modern Christians enjoy an entertaining sermon, though we are uncertain about being challenged from the pulpit. Should the preacher call us to repentance—a return to righteousness, like inhabitants of some hot, sleepy Southwestern village roused from our midday siesta, we murmur, “Mañana! Mañana!” to any call for action.

³ Henry F. Lyte, 1793-1847, “Abide with me,”

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Grey,_1st_Viscount_Grey_of_Fallodon

⁵ Winston Churchill, “The Lights are Going Out,” Radio Address Broadcast to the USA October 16, 1938, <http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1910>

We are witnessing an all-out assault against the Faith, and few believers seem alarmed. Charged with being salt and light in the midst of a decaying, darkened world, Christians have grown quiescent and their light no longer penetrates the dark shadows. The Master's warning may well apply to this generation. Jesus warned, "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer fit for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet" [MATTHEW 5:13].

We Christians are being intimidated into silence, and the greatest weapon muting our voice—greater even than fear of disapproval—is an inordinate desire to be liked by the world. We have ignored the warning Jesus issued to those who would follow Him: "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets" [LUKE 6:26].

Each day brings more disturbing reports of attack and assault against the Faith; and these incidents are never more vigorously prosecuted than during the Advent Season. It is as though the idea that someone would worship the Son of God drives otherwise gentle people into a frenzied rage. Perhaps we should not be surprised at this anger.

You will recall that the Master Himself warned His disciples, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also" [JOHN 15:18-23].

Each year during the Advent Season, we witness an increase in the number of attacks against Christian symbolism such as nativity scenes, prayer at public events and crosses erected to honour war dead. We have grown used to the ongoing spectacle of "holiday trees" which are somehow less offensive than Christmas trees, feigned outrage at Christmas parades as one or two individuals manage to set a new agenda for communities and even entire nations. Now, even playing Christmas carols is deemed offensive.⁶ One complaint was enough to ensure that no Christmas Carols were played because it excluded other religions and even atheists!

Even entertainment and the arts are enlisted in the ongoing effort to denigrate the Faith. Crucifixes are dunked in urine or filmed with ants crawling over them, and called art. "Paintings" intended to represent Mary, the mother of our Lord, are daubed with elephant dung. This, too, is called art. Anyone objecting to such desecration of holy concepts is charged with censorship and mercilessly attacked as attempting to impose their religious beliefs on others. Somehow, the media seems never to notice that the anti-religious crowd is attempting to impose its view on entire communities.

Cartoon characters representing the Son of God are presented as foul-mouthed and morally filthy,⁷ and wicked people dare the righteous to object. Religious leaders are publicly insulted and ridiculed by comediennes who are actually ignorant of what is humorous; this is done because the religious leaders dare call for righteousness and morality, or because they oppose the mad dash to desecrate all that is holy.

⁶ Todd Starnes, "Christmas Carol Complaints Silence S. Illinois University's Clock Tower," Fox News, December 10, 2010, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/12/10/christmas-carol-complaints-silence-s-illinois-universitys-clock-tower/?test=latestnews>

⁷ E.g., http://familyguy.wikia.com/wiki/Jesus_Christ and http://southpark.wikia.com/wiki/Jesus_Christ

This past summer, federal Judge Vaughn Walker overturned California's Proposition 8 that sought to define marriage. In his ruling, against all evidence to the contrary, Judge Walker said "...beliefs that gay and lesbian relationships are sinful or inferior to heterosexual relationships harm gays and lesbians."⁸ In his judgement, he censured multiple religious groups, including the Southern Baptist Convention and the Roman Catholic Church, for holding to biblical morality in the face of growing opposition to what is good and noble and holy.

More recently, Apple killed the iPhone app designed to assist those wishing to sign the Manhattan Declaration because, according to their press release, that particular application "offended large groups of people."⁹ In keeping with what has become a standard, those offended appear to have been advocates for same-sex marriage and homosexual and lesbian activists.

Turning from battling racial inequities, the Southern Poverty Law Center, in its 2010 Winter Report, lists as "hate groups" a number of Christian organisations, such as the American Family Association, Coral Ridge Ministries, Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, Liberty Counsel, the National Organization for Marriage and The Manhattan Declaration. These Christian groups are lumped in with the Klu Klux Klan and a multiplicity of racially identified gangs and neo-Nazi groups because they advocate marriage as being between one man and one woman.¹⁰ This can only be seen as a frontal assault against righteousness and anything that speaks of goodness in our world today.

While the world trembles at the thought of offending Muslim sensibilities by questioning the validity of the Koran, few are fearful of offending Holy God. However, a day is pending when the Living God will say to a world enraged against Him and His Christ, "Enough!" Perhaps you will recall the prophecy we have received as the Second Psalm, which begins with these words:

"Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,
'Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.'

"He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
'As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.'"

[PSALM 2:1-6]

⁸ See "Selected quotes from the California marriage amendment decision," Alliance Defense Fund, <http://www.alliancedefensefund.org/Home/ADFContent?cid=5362>

⁹ See, e.g., Richard Land, "Apple Censors Manhattan Declaration iPhone App," December 6, 2010, <http://www.bpnews.net/BPFirstPerson.asp?ID=34213>; Michael Foust, "Apple's removal of Christian app draws ire," December 3, 2010, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=34201>

¹⁰ E.g., Mark Potok, "Gays Remain Minority Most Targeted by Hate Crimes," SPLC Winter Report, 2010, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2010/winter/under-attack-gays-remain-minority-mos>

Experiencing a tectonic shift in societal foundations and in the face of increasing pressure to forsake the Faith of Christ the Lord, either the people of God will conform to this dying world, or they will align themselves with the eternal Word of the True and Living God. The evidence appears to be that many professing Christians are responding to the transformation of this present culture by retreating into a sort of modern monasticism—a self-imposed silence as they confine their religion to the privacy of a church building on a Sunday morning. At all other times the professed saints of the Most High God seem to go out of their way to avoid disturbing neighbours or colleagues at work by avoiding righteousness. In short, it appears that the saints are more identified with this dying world than with the unseen world promised to the redeemed. It is as though we believe that this world holds the key to purpose for our life and service. Christmas is a subtle reminder that “the world is passing away along with its desires.” It is also a reminder that “whoever does the will of God abides forever” [1 JOHN 2:17].

I love to buy flowers for my wife. I have noticed, though, that even though she keeps the flowers cool and places salts in the water, and does everything possible to keep them looking as though they were freshly cut, they soon wither and die. Candidly, even potted plants wither and die if I tend to them. Flowers, no matter how beautiful, fade. The colour drains, the stems wither and the petals fall. Dried flowers may serve as a reminder of past beauty, but they are nevertheless dead; the lifeless aspect is apparent to all who see them.

So it is with mankind that each of us has a date with death should Christ tarry.

“Man who is born of a woman
is few of days and full of trouble,
He comes out like a flower and withers;
he flees like a shadow and continues not.”

[JOB 14:1, 2]

All the vaunted scientific advances of this present culture, which is now in ascendancy, are destined for dust. All the creature comforts on which we have grown dependent must pass into oblivion. All who commit themselves to living for this present world—all who identify fully with this world—are attaching themselves to that which shall not long last. I sincerely urge all who seek to honour Christ to weigh their days, choosing to follow hard after the Lord.

The Apostle to the Gentiles cautioned believers to avoid becoming entangled in the affairs of this dying age when he urged Timothy, “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” [2 TIMOTHY 2:3, 4]. This call to endure hardship was a theme in this final missive to the pastor of the congregation in Ephesus. In the opening verses, Paul had written, “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share in suffering for the Gospel by the power of God [2 TIMOTHY 1:8]. And in the closing verses, Paul again urged the younger minister, “Always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry” [2 TIMOTHY 4:5].

With the Psalmist, may we learn to pray:

“O LORD, make me know my end
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting I am!

Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.
Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Selah
Surely a man goes about as a shadow!
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!"

[PSALM 39:4-6]

I urge each fellow believer to recognise the brevity of our days and to commit himself or herself to that which is eternal, to that which alone is of everlasting worth. Let each of us determine to invest our life in that which yields eternal rewards, rather than living for this dying age. Again, may each believer learn to pray, as did the Psalmist:

"Teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom."

[PSALM 90:12]

The Apostle Paul warned believers, "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil" [EPHESIANS 5:15, 16]. Unquestionably, preaching such as has been presented in this message will prove offensive to many of the professed saints of God. Tragically, such individuals have so compromised their lives and their witness that they have become incapable of pursuing righteousness. I have too frequently heard the whine of professed saints of the True and Living God as they demand "easy sermons" that do not offend and that make them feel good about themselves.

I am very well aware that the words I am about to cite are immediately applied to the awful days of the Great Tribulation, but I cannot help but wonder whether there is a secondary application to this terminal generation living in the Age of Grace when the Master warned, "Because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold" [MATTHEW 24:12]. Tragically, the divine censure delivered by Isaiah could well apply to many of the professed believers among the churches of this day:

"These are rebellious people –
they are lying children,
children unwilling to obey the LORD's law.
They say to the visionaries, 'See no more visions!'
and to the seers, 'Don't relate messages to us about what is right!
Tell us nice things,
relate deceptive messages.
Turn aside from the way,
stray off the path.
Remove from our presence the Holy One of Israel.'"

[ISAIAH 30:9-11 NET BIBLE]ⁱ

Let me read that passage from another translation so you understand the situation faced by the preacher who dares preach the Word of God, confronting wickedness.

“This is a rebel generation,
a people who lie,
A people unwilling to listen
to anything GOD tells them.
They tell their spiritual leaders,
‘Don’t bother us with irrelevancies.’
They tell their preachers,
‘Don’t waste our time on impracticalities.
Tell us what makes us feel better.
Don’t bore us with obsolete religion.
That stuff means nothing to us.
Quit hounding us with The Holy of Israel.”

[ISAIAH 30:9-11 THE MESSAGE]ⁱⁱ

We modern Christians have imbibed deeply of the sweet elixir brewed by this dying world, and thus our spiritual senses have become dulled. Too many of our fellow saints are no longer able to discern between right and wrong, having drunk the maddening liquor; thus, we are in rebellion against the Living God. What is especially tragic about this situation is that we are unaware of our condition, and in our rage, we lash out at God’s spokesmen.

THE BEGINNING OF LIFE AS GOD INTENDED — However, the message is not totally dark; God is still on the eternal throne and He still rules over the affairs of man. Indeed, all flesh will perish. That should not distress us, however. We are comforted by the knowledge that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:50]. Moreover, we are confident that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” [2 PETER 3:10]. However, we who belong to Christ the Lord live in anticipation of “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” [2 PETER 3:13].

If we are living solely for this present world, we will be disappointed. This is the import of Peter’s words to the believers of the Diaspora. “Since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements melt down that day—but we’ll hardly notice. We’ll be looking the other way, ready for the promised new heavens and the promised new earth, all landscaped with righteousness” [2 PETER 3:11-13 THE MESSAGE].ⁱⁱⁱ

You may recall a parable Jesus told in response to a man who implored Him to compel a brother to divide an inheritance. When the unnamed man pleaded with Him, Jesus responded, “‘Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?’ And he said to them, ‘Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.’ And he told them a parable, saying, ‘The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, “What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?” And he said, “I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But God said to him, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God”’ [LUKE 12:14-21].

Surely, when the Apostle says, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:19], he encourages us to lift our eyes to what is promised. Rather than living only for immediate gratification, we who are believers in the Risen Son of God are called to prepare for ourselves a rich entrance into heaven itself. We will benefit from learning what is meant by the Master’s instruction when He says, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” [MATTHEW 6:19-21]. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also! Indeed!

Israel was facing judgement as result of their rebellion against the LORD their God. The king had just handed to the Babylonians the inducement to invade by showing them all the treasures of the land. These pagan invaders would soon take possession of the land, deporting even the people of the nation into slavery. It was at just that moment when God sent His messenger to comfort His people. And the comfort that was delivered was to call all who feared the LORD God to take a long look. There would be hardship—discipline that had been long delayed—but God was still on the throne. Moreover, He is a just and righteous Judge. Therefore, the people would not perish.

Just so, the people of God will not perish from the earth until He has fulfilled His purpose for them. The Lord is assuredly coming to judge the earth, just as it is written:

“Say among the nations, ‘The LORD reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity.’

“Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the LORD, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness.”

[PSALM 96:10-13]

All who now long for righteousness shall reveal the truthfulness of our God, who has promised:

“The upright see it and are glad,
and all wickedness shuts its mouth.”

[PSALM 107:42]

THE CERTAINTY OF THE PROMISE — Can we be certain that God will judge in righteousness? Can we know for a certainty that wickedness shall be removed from the earth and that righteousness shall reign? The certainty of what is promised is God Himself and His Word. This Word is the stable island in a tumultuous sea of uncertainty. Behind this Word is the True and Living God who gave it. The promises of God are certain; and the Word we have received is the assurance we need to pursue the will of God.

We have a stable foundation on which to build our life. The same Spirit of God that ensures destruction of all that is associated with this fallen world is the same Spirit that assures us of the love of the Father and ensures that we have a place in His eternal home. The Word of God instructs us and assures us. Do you remember the words the Master spoke? “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away” [MARK 13:31]. This was spoken in the context of His return to receive His people to Himself and to judge the wicked.

Those who oppose righteousness shall soon perish, for they are as grass before the Spirit of the Lord. Those who compromise with wickedness shall soon perish, for they, also, are as grass before the Spirit of the Lord. We who are believers must likewise set aside the flesh, for this flesh has no permanence here. Rather, we look for something better. I take great comfort in the promise of God, who through His servant Isaiah has promised:

“Behold, I create new heavens
and a new earth,
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in that which I create.”

[ISAIAH 65:17, 18a]

The birth of the Son of God is evidence of the divine promise. The first Advent of God’s Anointed One served to awaken hope in all who long for righteousness. This was the message of the angels to the shepherds that received the glad announcement of His birth:

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!”

[LUKE 2:14]

Christ was born to present His life as a sacrifice because of sinful man, and so He shall come again to put down all unrighteousness and to bring salvation to those who await His return. I quote the words frequently, for they bring great hope to all who look for His return. God has promised, “Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him” [HEBREWS 9:27, 28]. Christmas is a reminder, not only that God has given His Son as a sacrifice for our sin, but that we who believe are being fitted for a better world in which righteousness reigns.

We have a great comfort as believers in the Son of God, for we “have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God; for

“All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers
and the flower falls,
but the Word of the Lord remains forever.”

“And this Word is the Good News that was preached to you” [1 PETER 1:23-25].

This is my question to all who hear the message this day: On what have you based your hope? Is your hope in this dying world? Does the evidence of your life reveal that you are living for that which must surely pass away? Or is your hope founded on the Word of the Living God? Do you live in confidence that Christ reigns, and that His righteousness shall prevail? Or do you trust in that which must ultimately fail? Have you not heard the divine charge against us?

“Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save,
or his ear dull, that it cannot hear;
but your iniquities have made a separation
between you and your God,
and your sins have hidden his face from you
so that he does not hear.”

[ISAIAH 59:1, 2]

The divine invitation to all who are outside the precincts of grace is to believe the promise of God, receiving the forgiveness of sin and the life that is offered in Christ the Lord. He died because of your sin, and rose to life that He might declare you right with the Father. Therefore, the promise of God stands: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Master,’ believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. It is with the heart that one believes and is declared right with God, and with the mouth that one confesses and is set free.” The divine promise is strengthened through citing the ancient prophet as we are told that, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].^{iv}

I pray that you are a Christian. I pray that you live boldly for that which is eternal. I pray that you stand firm against compromise with the best thoughts of this dying age that has set itself in opposition to the Living God. I pray that you live boldly, graciously and truthfully as a follower of the Risen Saviour. Amen.

ⁱ **The NET Bible First Edition** (Biblical Studies Press, 1996-2006)

ⁱⁱ Eugene H. Peterson, **The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language** (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 2002)

ⁱⁱⁱ Peterson, *ibid.*

^{iv} Author’s free translation