

“The Sky Is Falling!?”

Introduction: If you glanced at the sermon title when arriving this morning, and it led you to think about the names Henny Penny, Cocky Lockey, Ducky Lucky, and Turkey Lurkey, then you are probably familiar with an old folk tale that you either had read to you by your parents, or have read to your own children. Versions of the tale actually go back 25 centuries. In general, it’s about a chicken, Henny Penny, who comes to believe that the world is coming to an end when, while sitting under a tree, an acorn falls and hits her on the head. “The sky is falling, the sky is falling,” she begins to shout, and runs off to tell the king. On her way, she meets and shares the disastrous news with a number of her animal friends. “The sky is falling” has become an idiom in the English language for those who mistakenly come to believe that disaster is imminent.

I bring this tale to mind because there are many today, especially among Christians in the West, who believe, because of the dramatically changing, cultural, religious, and moral landscape in which we now live, a landscape that often makes us quite uncomfortable, that “the sky is falling!”

But the thing is that this feeling is nothing new. In actuality fact, it has seemed like the sky has been falling for over three thousand years. For instance, somewhere around 1,000 B. C., Psalm 11 (Call to Worship), was penned by David, and there we see that some people thought the sky was falling: “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (v. 3). And early in the first century A.D., when Paul penned his letter to the church in Philippi, the sky didn’t look so sturdy either as he identified the generation in which the church lived as “warped and crooked” (2:15).

The point is, God’s people, beginning with Israel and continuing on as the church, have always been called to live counter-culturally, whether it’s the year 50, or 1950, or 2015. In fact, if we are living authentically Christian lives, we should never find ourselves living comfortably within our culture. So, when it seems as if the sky is falling, that’s actually not the time to run away to the mountains. Instead, as Paul instructs, it’s the time to shine among our culture like stars in the (falling) sky. So let’s just reflect on this phrase as we prepare to share at the Lord’s Table. What’s it mean to be a shining star, and how do we become one?

I. What’s a Shining Star?

A. The phrase comes in part from the prophet Daniel, who, in chapter 12, is talking about the resurrection age to come. Those who are faithful will rise to eternal life, and they will “shine like the brightness of the heavens . . . like the stars for ever and ever” (Da. 12:3). And Paul does, in part, reference the future when he talks about wanting to “boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain” (v. 16). He wants to be able to look back and see that all of the work that he did with his people helped them to shine, to meet Jesus and receive the gift of eternal life.

B. But there is a present component to this shining as well, which is really Paul’s focus here. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, Paul, in effect, pictures the future breaking into the present, and so he says that the call of the church is not only to shine with the glory of eternal life in the future but to shine with that glory here and now. The Genesis creation account might have been in Paul’s mind here in which the stars were not just to shine for their own sake but for the purpose of bring light to the earth (cf. 1:16-17). A shining star, in other words, holds out the life that is truly life to a generation that really needs to not only hear it, but to see it lived out.

C. In this generation, it seems to me that living this out means figuring out how to offer the very radical ethic of grace, of undeserved favor. As one blogger (Carey Nieuwhof) has put it, “If you want to keep being ineffective at reaching the unchurched, keep judging them. People don’t line up to be judged, but they might line up to be loved.” Like our Israelite ancestors, God has rescued us by grace so that we might extend that grace to others. We’re not to run for the hills

but to shine as a light for the nations around us (Isa. 42:6), to be an outpost of the kingdom of God, a thing of beauty in the midst of the darkness and crookedness that we find all around.

Illustration: It's like the first building to be renovated in a project of urban renewal. While the rest of the neighborhood might still be run down, look ugly, and remain virtually uninhabitable, the first building to be redone becomes a kind of sign, a beacon of what eventually be done for the entire neighborhood. Life will again be experienced there, and it will be beautiful

II. How do we become one?

A. So how do we become such a star, such that the light of Christ shines through us? Paul doesn't leave us in the dark: Continue to work on your renovation, he says. "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose." Here we have one of those statements that wonderfully, and challengingly, draws together the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of humans. As Paul, writing from a Roman prison, wrote a bit earlier in this letter: "I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance" (1:19). God, by the Holy Spirit, would work along with and alongside the people's prayers to accomplish his good purposes. While we don't know exactly how this happens, both ingredients are part of the equation.

B. Importantly, Paul is not saying, "Work hard to acquire your salvation because God has done his part and now it's up to you." Nor is he saying, "Let go and let God," or "The Lord helps those who help themselves" (a phrase many think is somewhere in the Bible but is not!). What he is saying is that our salvation has been given to us as a gift—it's the result of sheer grace, God's undeserved favor—but that it's not a gift that's somehow static, that we just stare at without opening up and exploring, but that it's a gift into which, with utmost seriousness ("fear and trembling") we are to grow and mature. The goal of which is to become more and more like Jesus, and the more we become like Jesus the more we'll shine like stars that reveal him to those still living in darkness, no matter how much the sky might seem to be falling.

C. If that sounds overwhelming, it is, and it would be, if it was something God expected us to do on our own. But his promise is to work with us and in us, in order to carry on the good work he began in us (1:6).

Illustration: I think back to my youth when, on Saturday mornings, I would wake up not to a morning of watching cartoons on television, like many of my friends, but to a list of chores my father had put together. Somehow he understood the home in which we lived to be a gift to be worked out and worked on, by all who enjoyed living there! Fortunately, he didn't expect me to work on that list of chores all by myself; we actually did them together, and as we did so, not only did the house improve but so did our relationship, and I grew as well in responsibility and skill..

In like fashion, this renovation project, this new self or new creation that is the redeemed human person is God's delight to work on with us so that we grow up in our salvation and fulfill the good purposes of God of shining his light into our world.

So as we go to the cross this morning, let us go with the words that Paul penned to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me" (2:20). The cross, in other words, is only the beginning of the great adventure that is our Christian life. Through it, and by his Spirit, Jesus takes up residence within us and continues to work out with us the gift God has given us, for our sake, the sake of others, and ultimately for his glory. When the foundations are being destroyed, when the sky seems to be falling, it's time not to run, but to shine like the stars in the (falling) sky.