

Slide 1

Fire and the Judgment

Slide 2 We knew that one day it would come. We knew that nobody could accurately say when this would happen, but all the signs were there, that this summer it would come.

Every year we are aware of the beginning of the bushfire season and hope that we have adequately prepared the area around our home in the little village of Eucumbene Cove on the eastern side of the Kosciuszko National Park. Some of the other home-owners ignore the risk; others are conscientious; ***Slide 3*** but most of us do a bit of clearing and burning off when it is convenient and hope that it is enough.

This last summer, just after Christmas, with the drought affecting most of New South Wales, the captain of our local bushfire brigade called a meeting to advise us. It was easy to see that the local authorities were alarmed at the prospects of fire. We listened to what we should have done in preparation and learned what still might be done in spite of the fire bans. We were warned.

So we went away chastened, realising that we all had left a great deal undone, and that our failure would affect the safety, not only of ourselves but also of those around us. We laid plans to do better, later, and ***Slide 4*** we went on with all our summer activities in the park and on the lake, boating, ***Slide 5*** sailing, fishing. We visited with our neighbours ***Slides 6, 7, 8*** and fed and watched the animals and birds. We knew what needed to be done but we did little of it, putting it off to another time.

One night, a thunderstorm raged over the Snowy Mountains. As we slept, lightning strikes in the National Park started 46 separate fires. ***Slide 9*** We heard it on the news the next morning but we were glad the day was fine and we could get on with what we had planned to do. ***Slide 10*** The fires were a long way away, and nobody seemed very concerned.

Slide 11 Some days the smoke from the fires was thick over the lake, but it was light and white, and the breeze would blow it away, and we went on with our regular activities. People came and went from the Cove, and we talked about what was happening with the fires, but they still seemed remote.

We were busy with other things and it was easy to disregard what was happening until ***Slide 12*** on bright blue days we could see thick plumes of smoke over the hills on the north side of the lake, until we could see other smoke to the west, and the south. Now we got busy and there was more urgency in our preparation.

Next, we noticed men and machinery heading up the road behind our house to clear the firebreaks around the Cove. They even went up into the National Park and worked there, something quite unheard of. ***Slide 13*** The smoky days and the radio reports of the fires were more frequent, but life went on. We were hopeful that the bushfire brigade and the council workmen would be able to keep the fire away.

Slide 14 Then the evening news showed what the fires were doing elsewhere, and the percentage of the National Park that had burned grew from 10% to 20% to 30% and all the fire fighting efforts were not sufficient to stop the fires when the strong hot winds blew from the northwest. **Slide 15** The fires leapt firebreaks and streams; the burning embers were carried kilometres ahead of the fire front. **Slide 16** By the middle of January we knew that in spite of all that had been done, nothing that mere men could do would save the Cove.

Slide 17 The smoke that filled the sky was not white, it was grey and brown and purple. Sometimes the sky would be red or gold with the reflections of the nearer fires. **Slide 18** We made little trips to high points to see whether we could see the approaching flames. At night, across the lake we could see the red glow of the flames as they burned relentlessly toward the water's edge. **Slide 19** When the hot winds blew from the northwest, the fires raced and raged through the treetops; when the winds dropped, the flames crept through the undergrowth. **Slide 20** Every time the defence lines were breached and the fires burned closer and closer.

Slide 21 Now we were vigilant and busy. We laid soaker hoses and our attempts to clear the area around our houses intensified. There were last minute desperate projects – maybe that last metre of raked ground or hosing down the wood heap would make a difference. **Slide 22** We listened to the radio for the latest updates, and we prayed. We prayed for the weary men who were still fighting the fires. **Slide 23** We prayed for rain that would soak the ground and vegetation. We grieved for the loss of plants and trees, birds and animals, and for the lost time when we did nothing.

Slide 24 Finally, on the afternoon of Saturday the 18th of January, the last day before we had to go home to Sydney, **Slide 25** we watched as the wind strengthened and the smoke billowed over the lake blotting out the sun and the water changed colour every moment, **Slide 26** from blue to murky green, to turquoise or bronze. **Slide 27** We hosed down the house and soaked the ground around it. **Slide 28** We packed our cases and waited for the expected evacuation order. About 2.30 the word came to be out within the hour.

Slide 29 The air was thick with a sense of the inevitability of catastrophe. If you had one hour, what would you save? **Slide 30** I discovered that it is not easy to think in such circumstances. We took our regular clothes but not all the winter stuff and ski gear. **Slide 31** We took some of our books and a couple of special paintings. I took my two crocheted rugs because they took a lot of time to make! **Slide 32** We took some food and all the drinking water we had. But the more we packed into the car, the more we realised how much we were leaving behind, until finally we said “enough” and closed the door and went. Afterward, I wondered about what else we should have “saved”.

Slide 33 We were a sad group waiting there at the far end of the dam wall. There were a couple of buses and half a dozen cars. There were a couple of dogs and cats. There were some trailers with boats. Nobody quite knew what to do. **Slide 34** Some people were angry because they wanted to stay and fight to save their homes. Some were irritable. Some were thinking of all that they had left behind and went back to save one or two more precious items. One little boy went fishing and tangled up his line so that his father

shouted at him. Another went around saying, “Nobody can stop the fire – all our houses will be burned up.” There was regret for all the things left undone and bitterness because in the end all the struggle had been for nothing. **Slide 35** Like Lot’s wife, we all turned to watch, to see what was happening to the place that we loved. Happily, with different results!

As we waited there, over the car radio we heard of the firestorm that was engulfing the suburb of Duffy in the Australian Capital Territory, how the wind had driven the flames through the bush and the pine forest and into the houses and gardens. We expected something similar to happen to the Cove. **Slide 36** Instead something wonderful happened. We hardly realised it at first. The nor’wester dropped and at first in gentle puffs and then ever stronger, the longed-for southerly change arrived, blowing up the valley and over the dam wall, forcing the fire back on itself, clearing the smoke. **Slide 37** After 4 hours of waiting we were allowed to go back to our homes, our minds in turmoil, emotionally exhausted. With a mixture of relief at the outcome and irritation about the futile hours spent waiting, we unpacked the car and went inside. **Slide 38** Then we could hear again the dreadful news of the destruction in Canberra, the loss of homes and precious human lives, and be thankful that for us it was different. We could sleep in our beds knowing there were men watching through the night who would warn us if the fire turned again.

The next morning, with smoke heavy in the air, John and I had to decide whether we should leave as we had always planned. At first we thought we were stuck there, as the road between Cooma and Canberra was still closed. Then the road north was re-opened and we had to go at once if we were going at all. Should we bring any of those “treasures” away with us?

We prayed for the safety of all those fighting the fires, for our friends who would remain because this was their permanent place of residence, for an area that is precious to us, for the animals and birds we feed and watch. Finally, we came to an acceptance that if no lives were lost, none of the rest of it mattered – not the house, not the boat or the 4WD, nor the things left inside. We put our trust in God and left it all in His hands.

Now let me start again.

We know that one day it will come. We know that nobody can accurately say when this will happen, but all the signs are there, that very soon Jesus will come.

Every day we are aware of the signs that warn us that the end of the world as we know it is at hand and the Day of Judgment is bearing down upon us. Some are conscientious and ready to meet their Lord; some ignore all warnings and pretend there is no God and no Judgment; but most of us think about it from time to time, do a bit to mend our ways, and hope that it will be enough.

Once in a while we hear a sermon that reminds us that Jesus will return; or an article in the Signs or the Record; or we read a Bible passage or sing a hymn. Sometimes an evangelist will remind us of the urgency, of the need to be ready to meet our Lord. We

all make plans to do better, to study the Bible more, to live more Christ-centred lives, to be better witnesses for Him and to share the faith and knowledge that we have been given.

More than a hundred and fifty years ago, God-fearing men and women searched the Scriptures and believed they knew when Jesus would come and prepared for the day and were disappointed. More than a hundred years ago, the need to take the gospel to every corner of the world was understood: dedicated Seventh-day Adventists, including Ellen White, brought the Sabbath truth and the Third Angel's Message to Australia and every minister employed by the church here was an evangelist urgently preaching the news of Jesus' soon return. Lay members sold literature door to door in their spare time and witnessed to their neighbours day to day. Fifty years ago there were signs of the end of the world, with nation confronting nation and the fear of communism. The expansion of education and knowledge hurried the advance of science – soon television was added to radio as a means of mass communication, travel speeded up with planes instead of ships and trains, men ventured into space and walked on the moon. The miraculous became commonplace and men turned away from God to worship technology and pleasure, and make gods of money and success. Now there are wars and rumours of wars, fear of nuclear oblivion, famines and earthquakes, the deterioration of the environment, plagues sweeping the earth, great scientific knowledge and achievement; families are dysfunctional, society is breaking down and men and women despair and seek answers in drugs and New Age philosophy and strange religions. How blessed we are to have been warned what to expect and to have been told how to prepare ourselves for the last days!

I do not intend to take the analogy too far, but I do want to reflect on some of the lessons I learned from the fire.

Slide 39 First, let's read Luke 12, from verse 49 to 53. Jesus says,
"I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!
But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!
Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather
division.
For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against
three.
Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and
daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-
law against her mother-in-law."

These words must have come as a nasty shock to those who were just learning to see Jesus as the Messiah and who were expecting the Messiah to be a conqueror and king. Fire to the Jews was a symbol of judgment, and here, Jesus is saying that the coming of His Kingdom **is** a time of judgment. Jesus, as He spoke, had His mind fixed on the Cross. He had an awesome and terrible experience to undergo and He could not be easy or relaxed until his mission was completed. He **must** emerge triumphant if His sacrifice was to serve its purpose and save sinful but repentant mankind. He points out that families will be divided and take sides against each other. His coming brought division in that, as William Barclay put it, "The essence of Christianity is that loyalty to Christ has to take precedence over the dearest loyalties of this earth. A man must be prepared to count all things but loss for the excellence of Jesus Christ."

I mentioned Lot's wife earlier in a somewhat facetious way, but the fire of judgment on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah tested her loyalty to God. When what she was leaving became more important to her than obedience to God, she turned to look back, and lost her life in doing it. So there is this lesson to be learned, that when the end comes, there must be no looking back, not for any thing, not for home or friends, not even for family members. It is only our relationship with God, and our willingness to accept Jesus as our Saviour, that will bring us safe through the crisis.

Think of another fire experience from the Old Testament. When Nebuchadnezzar put up his image of gold and demanded that all should fall down and worship it, three men refused to bow and, in punishment, were sent to their deaths – or so it was expected! The men who tied them up and threw them, still dressed in their clothes, into the super-heated fiery furnace died, but the fire burned only the ropes with which they were bound. The three young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, walked and talked with their Lord there in the flames, and emerged not even smelling of smoke. We could think of them as being obedient to God, and we could think of their clothes as being the righteousness of Christ wrapping them around and saving them from fiery death.

Slide 40 Secondly, in verses 54 to 56, Jesus reminds the multitude that they could all read the signs of the sky to predict the weather, *“You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how is it you do not discern this time?”* In a spiritual sense, they either couldn't or wouldn't read the signs of the times to see that the kingdom of God was on the way. Don't we do the same thing all too often? Don't we plan for this world and what we want to achieve here? **Slide 41** We need to remind ourselves that this world is not where we should be laying up our treasure, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; and that we should set our hearts on things eternal rather than earthly because *“where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* Matthew 6:21.

Slide 42 Thirdly, in verses 57 to 59, Jesus says,
*“Yes, and why, even of yourselves, do you not judge what is right?
When you go with your adversary to the magistrate, make every effort along the way to settle with him, lest he drag you to the judge, the judge deliver you to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison.
I tell you, you shall not depart from there till you have paid the very last fraction of a cent.”*

My friends, if we come before the Judge relying on ourselves, on our own actions and the rightness of our lives, we will inevitably be convicted and have to pay the penalty to that last fraction of a cent: **Slide 43** and we know from Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death. If we are wise, we will make our peace with God while there is still time. Because the fire of the Judgment is drawing nearer every day, there is the need for urgent action: not one of us can afford to put off till tomorrow accepting Jesus as our Saviour, for only through Him can we receive God's gift of mercy and eternal life.

While we waited anxiously on the dam wall at Eucumbene, the south west of Canberra was burning, the Mount Stromlo observatory, the nature reserve with its breeding stock of rare animals, the pine forests, and people's homes. Why should our tiny settlement of

39 houses, mostly holiday homes, be spared, and a whole suburb burn? Why should our prayers be answered, and theirs not?

Slide 44 Let me paraphrase verses 2 to 5 of Luke 13: “Jesus answered, Do you think that these residents of Duffy were worse sinners than the rest of Canberra because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

Or those who died when they tried to defend their homes – do you think they were more guilty and sinful than all the others trying to fight the fires? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Jesus was talking then in terms of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, but the lesson applies to us. We cannot blame the suffering of individuals on their sins, because we have all sinned and deserve the same punishment. Whether we have been conscientious or lax in our preparation, unless we repent and put ourselves in God’s hands, we will perish in the fires of the Judgment. **Slide 45** Paul put it this way in Second Thessalonians chapter 1, in verses 7 and 8: The Day of Judgment is “*when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

The end of this world is coming soon. The signs are all there. We have been given what we need to interpret them. We have the knowledge of what will come and we have the way of salvation, through Jesus Christ and His death on the Cross. All we need to do is to put our trust in Him who is not willing that any should perish. When the great Day of Judgment comes, we need to be able to say, as the sons of Korah did in Psalm 46, verses 1 to 3, **Slide 46**

*“God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble,
Therefore we will not fear,
Though the earth be removed,
And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea,
Though its waters roar and be troubled,
Though the mountains shake with its swelling.”*

We will not fear because He will save us. When we fix our eyes upon Jesus, when we reach out to Him, whatever we have done, whatever may come, whether good or evil, He will gather us into His loving arms and make all things work together for our best good. In the fiery furnace we need to be wrapped in His righteousness. We must not turn back to look at what is behind us. We must not grow weary in doing good but hold fast to our faith, for the end is in sight and He will save us.

Slide 47 Paul said to the Thessalonians, “*We constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of His calling, and that by His power, He may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this, so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” 2 Thessalonians 1:11, 12. (NIV)

Benediction:

Now may the Lord of Peace Himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with you all. Amen.