

Help at the 11th hour!

Andrew Matthews has written a great little book called Being Happy. He writes: “ Have you ever noticed in life that things can look really bleak just before a dramatic turn for the better? *He says “Don’t be fooled. The 11th hour is usually an imposter...”*

At the time of the second World War, Winston Churchill became Prime minister at what has been described as Britain’s darkest hour. He said: “I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial... I thought I knew a good deal about it all, I was sure I should not fail.”

Churchill came to power at the 11th hour and against great odds led the free world back to sanity from an abyss. Britain’s 11th hour was not the 12th. Eventually, due to the sacrifices of so many, the Allies prevailed. We remember that today with deep gratitude as we remember the Knox veterans who returned to rebuild society after the war on behalf of those who made the supreme sacrifice.

There was once a great famine in Samaria, and the King of Syria chose to lay a siege outside the walls of the city. His strategy was to starve them out.

Inside the city things were desperate. Food became impossibly expensive with 5 pieces of silver needed to buy a measure of corn. They were slaughtering donkeys and horses for food. It got so bad that children were killed and eaten.

Like Palestine today, the situation was entirely desperate. What was once valuable, became worthless- like the woman on the Titanic who rushed back to her stateroom, not for her priceless jewels but for a couple of oranges for the lifeboats...

At this terrible moment of darkness, Elisha the prophet made an absolutely ridiculous prophecy. He said “Tomorrow a measure of flower shall be sold for a shekel.” In other words, corn is going to be sold at the old rate at the city gate.

And one of the Kings trusted advisors, uses one of the few pieces of recorded sarcasm in the Bible and says “Behold if the Lord would make windows in heaven, might this thing be?” In our terms “Do pigs fly?”

At this 11th hour of desperation, in this case at twilight, some lepers developed Churchillian courage. They got together. Their reasoning was flawless. They said, “Why are we sitting here in the Ghetto? We are only going to die anyway. So why not give the Syrian camp a try? All they can do is kill us anyway, and they just might save us alive.” So with all that was left of their courage they trotted off- a strange little band...

Meanwhile the Syrians had abandoned camp. They had heard noise- a noise of chariots, noise of horses, a noise of a great army and they figured that the jig was up! They reasoned that Israel’s allies has come upon them! So they ran for their lives, leaving everything behind including lots of food!

What a scene the lepers were to behold! Stuff strewn everywhere, stacks of provisions and food! They stuffed themselves, they looted and then their consciences struck them and they said, “We do not do well. This is a day of good tidings. If we tarry until the morning light some mischief will come upon us.”

So, they went back to the city to tell the king that the siege has been abandoned. Of course they were not believed! Must be a trick of some kind! **How can there be dawn after so much darkness?** But they eventually go outside the city and find things exactly as the lepers had said. And in the same day, in the city gate, a measure of fine flour was sold for a shekel. What happened here?

The 11th hour principle, that they had not considered, had clicked in.

There is another illustration of the 11th hour principle in the psalms: “They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters. These see the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep.”

What was the problem for the sailors?

A storm blew up. It got darker first, then the winds came. Then the waves got taller and taller.

“Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he brought them out of their distresses.” To their amazement the sea got calmer and they made harbor.

Darkest before the dawn- the 11th hour principle.

St Paul took a voyage on the Mediterranean and that sea can be treacherous. Today it is the most dangerous sea for migrants in the world.

When St Paul set out, after prayer to God, he had special knowledge given him. They were going to be shipwrecked, but all would be saved. So, he predicted this to the centurion and the ship's master.

Did they believe him? No! He was a prisoner for goodness sake- a fanatic on his way to Rome. But then the storm comes up and it gets very dark and Scripture says: “Then fearing lest we should have fallen on rocks they cast 4 anchors out of the stern and wished for the day.”

Have you ever done that? Hung on in the darkest moments of your life with 4 anchors to the stern?

When dawn came, St Paul urged everyone to eat, for they were going to have to swim for their very lives!

Suddenly out of the mist of night, land appears! There is a creek that runs into the sea with a beach. They hoist the mainsail and get stuck at a place where two seas meet. The stern of the ship is pounded in cross waves and starts to break up, miraculously providing pieces of wood for the non swimmers to hang onto. And some on boards and some on broken pieces of the ship, the swimmers make the beach and when all are counted, 276, the entire boatload is safe!

Darkest before dawn, the 11th hour principle.

Andrew Matthews says: “Once we recognize the 11th hour for what it is, life loses a lot of its trauma. The universe seems to test us to see if we are serious about attaining our goal. Then if we are and hang on a just bit longer...bingo!

He says that once we figure out the 11th hour principle we can actually look into the future and tell ourselves: ***So everything is going wrong! This could mean that everything I have been striving for is just around the corner.***

And this is not Polyana!

But let me inject a Biblical note of caution here.

The 11th hour is not the 12th hour!

Once I was with a family who had just been told that their child was going to die; that the disease the child had was incurable and would just get worse. They experienced the 12th hour. There was no hope for a cure! Hard! So Hard!

The 12th hour is the experience of Jesus on Good Friday and when the darkness comes it is at noon, the 12th hour and the darkness covers the land. I am sure that those parents felt as Jesus did when he asked the question: “God why have You forsaken me? Why have you forsaken us? And there was no immediate answer...

But, according to the Biblical record, three days later we glimpse briefly what happens to us when we die. We get an insight into the next life in the resurrection of Jesus. It was only a short window, but it was enough to found a church and the Post Easter Jesus can still be experienced today in our personal lives, 2 thousand years later through prayer guidance and comfort. That is our faith. The resurrection in recorded history means that life goes on past the 12th hour. That was the hope for those devastated parents and that little boy...

A lot of things are not what they appear.

Two thousand years ago Caesar Augustus, in the dark days of his power over the land where Jesus was born, didn't much care for the little country of Palestine. A birth of a child in Palestine would have been a yawn for him.

But in this very dark time of world history, the Light of the World was born.

Who would have been considered significant then? Mighty Caesar or this child born of a peasant woman?

How often things are not what they seem to be!

A child whom Augustus would never have heard of, has been on the lips of billions for the last two thousand years, giving people hope in their darkest moments.

Caesar's plan was to tax the parents of Jesus along with everyone else. He was the kind of guy who found Rome built of brick and who left it in marble. But God's response to Caesar's taxation was to take Jesus parents to Bethlehem, there to fulfill a prophecy made about seven hundred and thirty years before Caesar Augustus: "But Thou Bethlehem Ephrata, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth...whose goings have been from old, from Everlasting. He shall be great to the ends of the earth and he shall be a man of peace."

The darkness before dawn; the taxation that forced this man Joseph and this woman Mary to return to their ancestral home; the difficulty of travel with a pregnancy on the road, a birth in a manger- actually gave to the world **The Light of the Ages. There has been no one like Him before or since.**

In your personal life have you cottoned on yet to the 11th hour principle?

When you ask yourself, "Why am I here? or "why is this happening to me," ask yourself a third question: "Is there a lesson here?"

It is my experience that when we have learned a lesson, we will often be tested. When the lesson is learned, the test will be easily passed. We need to remember that the lessons keep repeating themselves until we learn them...That's Life!

It seems to me that this 11th hour principle then, could be all about testing. Are we serious about attaining our goal? Serious achievement

always seems to require persistence and grit! At the 11th hour will you persist? Will I?

In the 11th hour it is far easier to quit than carry on! As Barack Obama once said: “It is far harder to prevent a war than to start one.”

Appeasement was the lesson that led to the darkest hour. Did we learn that lesson?

Sometimes, for self-preservation, to quit is the smartest move, particularly when the ship is sinking, for example. **But that is not what I am talking about. I’m talking about a quitting pattern that you might be following every time the 11th hour rolls up for you.**

Faith is not tested when the sun shines and everything is going fine. It’s when it is dark and the darkness and negativity are unrelenting. That is when faith shines!

How do we get through these tough times? By believing the truth of this mighty verse: “All things work together for good to those who love God.” I have come to believe that this is the principle that upholds the entire universe! It’s also what lies behind the 11th hour principle. It also can take us through the 12th hour, our own death and the death of those we love!

There was a famous opera singer in New York. Her middle child, a very beautiful little girl, blonde, blue eyed, stared out at the world with inscrutable eyes. She was completely unresponsive. After 8 years of silence with the experts saying that nothing could be done, the child lived in what appeared to be a chemical or physical prison. She was uncontrollable on her wild days.

The mother asked a woman called Frances, who was an expert at working with retarded children, whether she would try with Dorothy to get through to her and teach her something...anything that would make her life better.

Frances agreed to take the child on for a month.

She spent hours with Dorothy day after day and when the silence grew unbearable, she would sing old hymns to her from her own childhood.

The child seemed to respond to the rhythm and walked around in time to the music.

At school Dorothy simply stared straight ahead and the teacher told Frances: "She is unreachable." The full-time nurse in Dorothy's home said the same. The nurse thought that it was a shame that this child was allowed to sit at table with the others. She should be kept away!

The only thing that Dorothy ever did was draw wavy lines. Nobody knew why...

Would Frances ever be able to reach this child?

It is darkest before dawn. Was it time to give up or persist? Was it the 11th hour or the 12th?

One day Frances sat down at the opera singer's grand piano, in that gracious New York living room. Dorothy came and sat down beside her. Frances started out with Fenwick Holmes songs called Songs of the Silence. She started to sing and play when half way through one song, another pure child's voice, suddenly joined hers. Dorothy was singing-word for word, with perfect pitch! She was singing far better than the average 8 year old!

Frances heard someone sobbing. She turned to see Dorothy's mother in the doorway, tears streaming down her cheeks, unable to do anything other than hold out her arms to her child...

After that, things began to change for Dorothy. From song to speech her bottled up tensions disappeared and her wildness left her.

The full-time nurse could not adjust to the change and she quit! (Good news sometimes really scares people!)

Frances who had originally come for this 8-year-old for a month, left when she was 13 years old. Dorothy was utterly transformed. She at 13 years was poised, self sufficient and capable. Frances, when Dorothy had enough words, asked her what the wavy lines meant.

"That's what the wind looks like," said Dorothy.

Frances hung in there long after the experts had quit because she believed that where there is life there is hope. That is always true in the 11th hour!

Are you discouraged today? Are you at your wits end? Have you lost a loved one, or your job, or your best friend, or are you distressed because someone has hurt you, or your finances are on the rocks? Are you reeling around like a drunk on deck? Do you believe that your depression will never lift and that you are always going to be discouraged like this? Have you thought that the 11th hour is the 12th and have you given up?

In 2024 please try and figure out where you are on the clock.

The 12th hour is for finality and for death. The answer to the 12th hour was given 2,000 years ago and it founded this church and it is this: The Resurrection means that even in the face of the finality of death, there is hope! Life goes on beyond the grave. We will see our lost loved ones again. We will meet those who made the supreme sacrifice for us and our children.

Why? Because the world and our own complexity is too vast to have no purpose beyond this life! Nothing is ever lost. All things work together for good.

If you or your relatives are experiencing the 12th hour cling to this verse: “All things work together for good, to those who love God.”

But! If you are in the 11th hour, the hour of testing, remember these words: “They cried to the Lord in their trouble and he brought them out of their distresses. He made the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof were still. Then they were glad because they were quiet, so he brought them unto their desired haven.”

When Jesus was on the lake with his disciples, they shook him awake at the 11th hour, believing that they were all going to drown. And he stood up in the boat and said “Peace be still!” and there was a great calm.

Jesus experienced both hours.

His name Emmanuel- means God **with** us. And he left us one mighty promise- the last words he said here on the earth:

“Behold I am **with** you even unto the end of the world.” What could be better than that?

For, because our Great Companion is The Master of both hours, the darkness has no choice but to yield to the dawn! Amen.