

The Best is Yet to Come!

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[0 : 00] Okay, so this morning I'm going to look at mainly Revelation, the passage we read, but also I'm going to look at Isaiah, chapter 65, because it's the same theme that both of them have.

There's a couple of, a few interesting things that I read or heard this week or thought about, which are really completely unrelated to the sermon, but I thought I'd share them with you anyway.

The best is, I really caught a really great phrase from one of the guys that does the Bible in a year, Daily Verses, and did one this week, and said, don't strive to be educated in the Bible, that is, don't strive to be educated in the Bible beyond the level of your obedience.

I thought that was such a great thing. He said, you know, we can strive for all kinds of knowledge and depth and insight, but sometimes it can be just for the sake of it.

He says, don't strive to be educated beyond what we're obeying, because true education, true knowledge of God, true wisdom is putting into practice what we know.

[1 : 08] It's not learning new things and then putting them in our back pocket for some future time to think about. It's all about knowing and obeying the Lord. I thought that was very significant.

And yesterday I was reading from John's Gospel, the end of the Gospel, and I was amazed again that when Jesus rose from the dead, the disciples were told the disciples didn't understand the resurrection of the dead from Scripture.

John 20, verse 9, they didn't understand the resurrection. They'd been with Jesus for three years, he taught them in very clear terms that the resurrection would happen.

They had the Old Testament which prophesied and spoke of it, and yet they didn't understand because they needed the Holy Spirit in their lives. And really that by way of introduction is what I want to say, that we need the Holy Spirit constantly to keep on understanding, to take our understanding and apply it in our lives and to know it and to be aware of what God is teaching us.

The third thing again is just about the speed and passage of time. This morning I put my 32nd diary, year diary, up on the top shelf.

[2 : 24] 32nd diary, time is passing quickly. I remember putting the first diary up and thinking, well, I've lasted six months, and now it's 32 years.

Time passes quickly. You young people here, you don't think about that for a moment. You think the world is ahead of you and you'll live forever, but we're getting older by the day and it's hard to believe that there's 32 worse of diary up there and not much in them.

But in Christ we recognize and we know that His job is rescue and realignment of our lives, don't we? And it's always good to be returning to the Lord and enthroning the Lord in our lives, sanctifying His nature and His character.

And worship is what we do, not just as our here, although that is precious in itself, but our lives as worship. Everything we give and everything we are, we give to Him and we refocus our lives to Him on the new year.

We resolve anew, I think. We all do it. Whether we keep that or not, usually as sin or saved by grace, we have one step forward, a couple of steps back, and a few steps forward again.

[3 : 44] But it's good always, isn't it, to be refreshed and renewed and encouraged as we live in the shadows. As we live in the shadowlands. That C.S. Lewis film was on this week and it was good just to dip into that again, the shadowlands reminding us of what is yet to come.

So there's this brilliant hope, isn't there, an amazing perspective that should always touch us in our lives and in our worship.

We should always, not just have the perspective of a new year, but we should always have this perspective, I think, of eternity. And worship should speak into that. And actually, not just our lives, but I think our times together, our worship together on the Lord's Day, when we come as a

community with a focused desire to worship God, that should really point us towards heaven. I hope it does. I wonder sometimes about our worship, what it does, whether it changes anything in our lives. But it should, I hope, it should point us towards heaven. It should make us think about the community of believers, the weight of glory, and the fact that what we do now is kind of rubbish compared with what lies ahead for us. [5 : 01] And so I just want to think about what is in this passage about what lies ahead for us in the new heavens and the new earth. There's this great reality of unimaginable newness that we can look forward to.

And I saw the new heavens and the new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. I think that is a great opening phrase and a remarkable phrase. In Ephesians chapter 3 and verse 20, we remind ourselves in Paul's prayer that to him who is able to do far abundantly more than all we can ask or think according to the power that's within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations, forever and ever. And there's this sense in which what God is doing and what God will do and what God is pointing towards in our lives now and in our worship and in the future is this incredible new experience and new reality that we look forward to.

We will breathe the atmosphere of divine love and divine friendship in a fullness that we just can't imagine just now. We find it so difficult just now, so hard.

[6 : 21] We find relationship with him so difficult and yet what is promised is beyond our knowledge, is beyond our imagination, beyond our understanding. No wordsmith can ever do it credit.

No preacher can do it credit. Indeed, not even the inspired writers of Scripture could do it justice but could only point to the unimaginable reality that lies ahead for Christians and new existence and new heavens and a new earth.

The old heavens and the old earth that we're living in today will have passed away. And we know from Scripture here and elsewhere that there is a continuity to remind us of who we are and what we call earth.

It's still a new heavens. It's still the earth, new though they are and different though they are. I wonder if it will be like there will be a familiarity like *deja vu* when we get there.

A bit like when it clicked with the disciples when they saw the resurrected Savior. Not didn't know him at first but eventually it hit them. A life as we have it now but with inexpressible freshness which will blow away any of the previous understandings or images that we may have gained in this life.

[7 : 40] Even the best experiences, the happiest, the most thrilling, the most inviting and inspiring experiences will fade into insignificance.

As we live in this new heavens and this new earth eternally worshiping the glory of God and the glory of what He's provided for us.

There's a couple of things here that we're reminded of as to what is core in this new heavens and new earth. It is really an intimate, what matters most is an intimate relationship with God.

We speak about the physicality of the new heavens and the new earth and that's great, that's important, very significant. It's not fluffy clouds and harps but it is this intimate relationship with God. We're told there in verse 1 that there's this newness and the sea was no more. This is poetic imagery that a lot of fishermen and a lot of sailors are very saddened by when they read this but I don't think it's speaking, it speaks earlier on in Revelation of the Sea of Glass.

[8 : 53] It's pictorial language because the sea, when it says there's no more sea, it reminds us of what sea was to the readers of the Bible and particularly the Jewish people who were afraid of the sea and who thought the sea spoke of separation and division which of course it does.

And it says that in this new heavens and this new earth, that previous separation between God and His awesome throne is not there. In the Old Testament the sea was very much a symbol of fear and chaos and division.

And that's often what we experience now, isn't it, fear and division and separation. That's one of the standout experiences of life, separation.

We've experienced a lot over these last 18 months to two years. But also spiritual separation, isn't it? We find ourselves struggling with God, drawing away from God, distant from God, not understanding God.

And we have this barrier, this barrier of sea is gone, is gone forever between God and His people. There's this amazing introduction to a relationship of holy and reverential love that we can't really imagine at the moment.

[10 : 08] It will be so good. But as in the Old Testament which we'll come to here in the Revelation of John that is given by God, God gives Him kind of pictures that we can understand.

So He gives us intimate pictures. The first is of a bride and groom on their wedding day really, which is as I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, behold, the dwelling place of God is with man, He will dwell with them and be with His people and God Himself will be with them as their God.

And it's just, it's bouncing back into the kind of vows that are taken on that day, that vows of being together, that vows of being close, that vows of exclusivity and faithfulness together in a human relationship.

And He says that's just the very beginnings of a picture of what I mean, that trying to take what might be the very best experience of relationship in life and saying it's nothing, absolutely nothing compared to what lies ahead in the intimacy and the fulfillment of the relationship with God.

And whether you are married or single or in a great marriage or a terrible marriage, all of it will fade into insignificance as we look forward to a different, fuller, fulfilling, energizing, rewarding, intimate, emotional, relational, compatible relationship beyond our wildest dreams in God.

[11 : 43] It is almost impossible to imagine in this life when we think about our lives now and the physicality of our lives and the human relationships and that we can gain something so much greater in our relationship with God which seems hard at the moment.

But we will be living in the light and we'll be living beyond our wildest dreams and entering into trinitarian fellowship through the perfect and dwelling of God's Spirit in us beyond anything that we experience now or even Adam and Eve knew in the beginning.

It is a greater, stronger, better, more glorious relationship. So we've got that image of the bride adorned for her husband, but we also have another intimate image that is given to us here of wiping away every tear.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more. Neither shall they be mourning nor crying or pain or any more. For the former things have passed away. It's in that the most remarkable verse almost in the Bible.

They have this sovereign King of kings, this revelation of what lies ahead, this Alpha and Omega, it's beginning and the end, this crucified God, this amazing, infinite being and He uses the picture of wiping away every tear.

[13 : 04] It's a beautiful, glorious, close, intimate picture that highlights that there is no more sea and that the relationship between us and our God is one we can only believe by faith but can't truly grasp because it's so remarkable.

It's the picture of a close friend, isn't it? If you ever wiped away the tear of a close friend. That's an intimate thing to do. You wouldn't do that really to a stranger.

It's a parental thing to do. You remember, all of us remember our mums or dads doing that, don't we? We remember that healing swipe of the tear being wiped away.

We remember these things. That's an intimate act. It's a close act. It's an act that says, it's okay. Things are different now. I'm here.

And we will be in the light where He has wiped away all the darkness. No night, no shadows. And the image there is almost like He's wiping away all the things He goes on to list.

[14 : 17] You know, He wipes away death and mourning and crying and pain. We can't begin to imagine that.

We can't imagine a life without these things. We can't imagine a day without these things. No shah. All the things that makes your life and mind tough as we enter into 2022.

All the things you long for not to experience. All the things that aren't on your wish list or your bucket list or your New Year resolution.

All of these things, He says, the sadness, the pain, illness, the tears of guilt, the loss of loved ones, decrepitude, death, separations, endings, isolations.

All that tarnishes and spoils and blocks even the best of days. And when there's a best of days that's completely shadow free, there's still the night, isn't there?

[15 : 21] And He says, all that will be gone. All the blockers, all the spoilers, all the things that cause us not to worship and make worship so difficult for us will be gone.

All the barriers gone. You can't imagine that, can you? I can't imagine it. I can't imagine a day free of these things. And yet this is what we're told is trustworthy and true.

Trustworthy and true. Pot of John was to write these things down. God says to him, write them down, write them down so that St. Columbus will hear that on January the 1st, 2022.

They need to hear it. They need to be encouraged. They need to be... But write it down. Write it down for the original hearers. Write it down for all the people through history.

Write it down. So he's got this great picture of wiping away tears. And as part... Part of that is as part of that intimate relationship with God, which we see and we acknowledge in this passage, but it's part of being a community together, not just me and God.

[16 : 27] It's just that intimate, just me and God. But it's me and God in a community of believers as part of a worshiping, serving society in New Jerusalem. And I saw the New Heavens and the New Earth, and then it goes on to speak about the New Jerusalem, the city of God.

Again, just speaking of the redeemed, speaking of the people of God, their biblical imagery of all of us together. All of us, all of us together, replete together in heavenly worship, involving the kind of experiences that are beyond our understanding.

And that's the glory of what we believe. And that's why community is so important. It's because we are saved to be a community and we work out grace in community.

And we welcome unbelievers into community, into this New Jerusalem as they will accept Jesus by faith. And that's our longing and that's our desire. And that's why it's so important and it's all impossible.

It's why we pray. It's why we come together. It's why we don't grumble and complain or seek forgiveness when we do, because we're all sinners saved by grace and yet we're all working towards this great society that we will enjoy forever.

[17 : 52] And I want to go back, if I may, for a few minutes to Isaiah 65, which I think in Old Testament imagery, as it's revealed to an Old Testament people, speaks more about this kind of community that is part of the New Heavens and the New Earth.

It's a heavenly society that we're looking forward to. We're not going to be in heaven, as I said before, kind of some inactive sort of passive worship of something.

We're not going to be crossed-legged like Buddhas on clouds, plucking on harps. It's not that kind of reality that we look forward to. It's something much more tangible, something much more real.

And it will be worshipful, loving service of God. I think there will be within the New Heavens and the New Earth, there will be strong relationships.

We've got this picture, and it's quite a contentious picture, I have to say, in some circles, which talks in verse 20 of Isaiah 65, no more shall there be an infant who lives but a few days or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.

[19 : 14] What does that mean? What's that speaking about? It's saying that people die in heaven, that the young children grow old and the old people die, but that can't be the case, surely, because it's a metaphor or it's an image, and it's in an Old Testament political form.

We know that Isaiah 25 verse 8 says that death is swallowed up forever, and we know from the rest of Scripture that there's no death in glory, there's no death in the New Heavens and the New Earth, there's no getting old, there's no dying young.

But what it's taking, again, it's taking earthly pictures that we understand and saying in this new... And even eternal life wasn't that clear, clearly defined in many places in the Old Testament, it unfolds as it were.

It's a progressive revelation in Scripture, but it's the idea of permanence. It's the idea that it would be outrageous for a baby to die young or an old man to die before a hundred.

It's just this whole idea that life goes on, that all the tragedies of this life, of lives being taken early, of people saying dying before their time.

[20 : 25] How often do we hear that? Are they dying before their time? Dying before they were old, not seeing old age. All of these things will not be a part of it, death will not be a part of it, sin will not be a part of it.

It's just using the pictures of... that would be understood by people that in this New Heavens and this New Earth will be great relationships that are permanent, no jealousies, no immaturity, no rivalry, ageless perfection, innocence, and a kind of permanent childhood as part of the family of the living God, childlike, not childish.

We worship in that relationship of being together, whatever that looks like, and it's beyond that understanding, isn't it? Because it's not going to just be in these strong relationships, but I think it's also going to be in somehow in building homes.

Isaiah 65 verse 21 says that they shall build houses and have them, they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. Whatever that is envisaging, it's talking about, isn't it?

It's talking about a place that we'll belong, a place where we'll be at a home, a place where we will work to enjoy and there'll be no thorns and thistles and nothing from the old creation to destroy that for us.

[21 : 48] It'll be society and community securely working together in our heavenly home, no coveting or stealing, worshiping God as the provider and the enabler, building homes, strong relationships, fruitful labour, we shall eat their fruit, they shall not build another inhabit, they shall not plant another eat for the days of a tree shall be like the days of a people shall be.

All of that curse that makes going to work tomorrow, maybe not tomorrow, Monday, or the following week if you're fortunate enough to have another week of idle slobs, then that's going to be a great thing.

You're not going to dread working, it's not going to be unfruitful, nobody is going to take a claim for what you have done, there'll be this tremendous sharing and blessing and freedom and joy fulfilling beyond what Adam and Eve were entrusted with in stewarding the earth, beyond that in relationship with God.

And it will be done I believe in harmony with nature. The wolf and the lion and the lamb shall graze together, the lion shall eat straw like the fox.

The curse will be no more, whatever that means. We have a dog worshipping with us today and maybe there'll be dogs in glory, not the same dogs maybe because they don't have souls, but there may be new dogs in heaven.

[23 : 25] There may be new animals, there will be a new creation and sweet cooperation between the ground and all living creatures that has been lost since the curse of Genesis chapter 3, harmony, pleasurable work, no tension, no abuse, no waste, nothing but joy in a relationship with the material world.

So we remind ourselves today of that intimate relationship with God that we find hard to grasp now that you may feel this morning as cold as ice spiritually.

You may feel God is a million miles away from you. It doesn't change anything in terms of who He is and His promises to you as a believer and His willingness to always be there with arms open to you. And it will not always be like that, either in this world or in the world to come as you keep turning to Him and keep looking back to Him.

And our worship together, please pray about it. Pray before you come, pray during it, pray after it. Ask God to apply the word and the singing and the praise and the prayers and all that we do into our lives, remembering that we are in a community project together in worship, seeking to... seeking, can you believe it, to be a little bit of heaven in a world of shadows?

[25 : 02] That's what we strive to be, not just in our public worship but in our lives, our community lives to get a little bit of loving God perfectly and loving one another perfectly, however hard and challenging that as we've got the Holy Spirit to enable us.

And just to conclude with something that you should never do and any preachers here will know this is, introduce a new point in their conclusion. But I'm going to anyway, is that there's a symphony of praise in all of our lives as Christians and particularly in the life that we are going to enjoy in heaven. In Revelation 19 verse 6, that's great. I seemed, I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude like the roar of many waters like the sound of mighty peals of thunder crying out, hallelujah for the Lord our God, the almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exalt and give Him the glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come and the bride has made herself ready. That's great, isn't it? That is the theme of our lives is this symphony of praise together both as we sing but also as we live our lives.

And I just can't imagine what it will be like on that day. Thunders, sweet, cacophony and chorus of the redeemed. How did we'll add our voice to it?

[26 : 25] Are we trembling quiet voice will be added to that amazing cacophony of sound, a multitude that no one can number. You know, if you've ever been, if you've ever been to a great concert or a, you know, a 60, 70, 80, 100,000 people football match or whatever it might be, it can be awe inspiring noise, even just that tiny number, but millions upon millions upon millions praising.

We out of this world, if we can use that phrase. So our worship is to, we seek to reflect that praise, those who lead the praise as we sing, even with even with masks and one day the masks of God, no masks in glory.

In our conversation, in our discipleship, in our mission, in our lives, may we reflect a little bit of heaven. And that is really significant, I think, moving into 2022, which is the world we live in, and the world you live in particularly, is confused, is dark, it's foundationless.

People are struggling, people are lost, humanly speaking, let alone spiritually. And what an opportunity we have to rise above our circumstances and share with them Jesus Christ and reflect the hope that we have in Him.

Let's pray and think about that. Heavenly Father, reminders of who you are, reminders of your great glory, it's so difficult to even put into words what Scripture teaches about heaven, because it seems so beyond our ability to imagine.

[28 : 15] But help us to grasp it by faith, by the gift of faith that you promise, to live in the power of your Spirit, to love in a way that is radically Christ-like, very different from what our natural human sin, sin-stained love is like.

Help us to love Christ as first and foremost, and love one another and treat each other as better than ourselves in a world where we are, we are our hearts and what we hear around us, screams at us to be self-centred and self-motivated and self-inspired and self-worshipping.

Help us to be different, we pray, and help us to reach out with the gospel with such courage and freshness, even with fear and trembling, but may we do so in the knowledge of the hope of the gospel that is ours, that we are not, what we are asking not to keep to ourselves but to share with others.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.