

Understanding the Bible #11 – Hope

Based on *The Bible: A Story That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton

Bible Reading

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:3-9

Recap

And so, we arrive at the final session of our journey through some key Bible themes.

We've looked at how the Bible teaches us that God created the universe, including the planet we live on and humans, us, in his image, to live in relationship with him. And how humans disobeyed God, damaging their relationship with him.

And we saw how God chooses a group of humans to be his ambassadors on earth (Israel) and how he rescues them from slavery and gives them a land of their own. And how this is a regular theme in

the Bible, God releasing his people from captivity, ultimately realised in Jesus releasing humanity from the captivity of sin.

The we came to the theme of Exile, how God judged his people for not keeping to the terms of the agreement they had made with him by allowing them to be conquered by foreign nations and taken away, exiled, from the land he had given them. We saw how this is a Bible theme, and how so many people today live in a situation where they experience exile, whether that be that they are physically removed from their homeland, and/or the realisation that they don't seem to 'belong' in this world.

And then we looked at the idea of Messiah, how following Israel's return from exile they had longed for someone who would restore their fortunes and make them a great nation again. How God, through the prophets, gave promises that he would one day provide a solution to mankind's rebellion against him, which was marvellously fulfilled in Jesus's life, death and resurrection.

And then we looked at how God's gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost transformed a small group of Jesus' disciples into an empowered community, a community that Northolt Park Baptist Church is a part of 2000 years on, with over 2 billion other Christians across the globe.

Christianity in the 'west' is not thriving right now, Northolt Park is not alone in having empty seats. But in other parts of the world the Christian church is growing at an impressive rate, in parts of South America, Africa and China, the message of Christianity is being welcomed by millions of people each year.

And one of the reasons for this is the subject of today's concluding talk. The message of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, brings to the world one of the greatest of God's gifts... hope.

Hope is a word that tends to be used as a synonym for 'wishful thinking'.

“I hope it doesn’t rain today.”

“I hope our team wins.”

“I hope you feel better soon.”

It is often used in situations where something seems uncertain, where we know the outcome we are *hoping* for may not happen.

In the writings of the New Testament, the word hope has a much bolder, stronger meaning than this. As part of the reading this morning declares...

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1:3-5

Here Peter speaks of hope as a certainty, a *living* hope that has been gained through Jesus’ resurrection, an inheritance kept for us by God himself, it can never perish, spoil or fade.

And this dramatically changes a Christian’s outlook on life.

First, if you are a Christian, you already have one foot in the future. Christians are ‘amphibious’ creatures. We live in two environments. The now, and the not yet. Jesus in his life, death, resurrection and ascension followed by the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, means that the new age of God’s reign on earth that the Old Testament prophets spoke of has already begun.

Like someone tackling a previously unclimbed mountain, Jesus has gone before us, pioneering the route and providing us with anchors and belay points along the way. And he has conquered the mountain. Now the rest of the team (us) can follow in his footsteps.

And to continue the climbing metaphor, we may get tired, slip, or even fall, but Jesus promises he will always be there to catch us, and the Holy Spirit is there to guide and strengthen us.

And this is a truth that has been tried and tested over 2,000 years by billions of people, and found to be true. It is my testimony, time and time again... I may not always understand what is going on, but when I lean in to Jesus and ask for his help, he is there, he is able to give hope even when there doesn't seem to be any hope.

Also, the resurrection of Jesus guarantees history's final outcome. When God raised Jesus from the dead, he fulfilled his promise to defeat all of life's great enemies, including sickness, sin, evil, Satan and death itself.

Jesus died under the weight of all the world's disobedience against God, he accepted it as his, and neutralised it. His resurrection proves that sin and death have been defeated. This is the Christian hope.

The last book of the Bible, Revelation, is attributed to a man called John, who was on the island of Patmos, a tiny island off the western coast of Turkey, in the middle or late first Century.

The Greek word for 'revelation' is 'apokalypsis', from where we get the English word 'apocalypse'. The word has become associated with war and destruction, usually heralding the end of the world, but the word actually means 'unveiling' or 'disclosure'.

The book of Revelation is intended to be like opening curtains on the windows of history, allowing us a glimpse of what is going to occur.

The book is largely composed of visions that John experiences. The visions are often vivid, terrifying and confusing, and theologians continue to debate how the order and sequence of visions is related to the events to which they relate.

What we do know is that they address two questions...

What **is** taking place in heaven right now? (Present)

What **will** take place when Jesus returns? (Future)

We're going to focus on the visions of what will be fulfilled on Jesus's return, however the whole book of Revelation explores two important Christian truths.

Firstly, Jesus is king.

Revelation was written at a time when Christians were being persecuted for their faith, being thrown in prison and even torn apart by lions and bears in Roman amphitheatres. It was a grim time for the young church, and many would have been wondering why God was allowing this to happen.

While the author of Revelation is praying, he receives a series of visions that reveal that Jesus is in control of the situation. In the first one, John comes face to face with the risen Jesus, dressed in a royal robe, glowing brightly with eyes like blazing fire. Revelation 1:17-18 reads...

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.'

Revelation 1:17-18

This is as relevant to us as it was to the first century Christians. When we look around us, it is easy to believe that things are out of control. War, poverty, inequality and civil unrest seem to be all we hear about. But the message of Revelation is that despite this, God is still in charge, remember the phrase that occurs many times in the Bible, 'Do not be afraid'.

The book of Revelation uses a wide range of symbolism to convey the fact that there is much more to this world than the one we can see. The weird, confusing and sometimes terrifying visions that John does

his best to describe are letting us know that we are involved in a massive battle, and it's a battle that Jesus has already won.

As the saying goes,

We may not know what the future holds, but we know the one who holds the future.

The final chapters of the book of Revelation describe a good and triumphant God bringing this world's history to a conclusion.

These include:

- The destruction of evil.
- The return of Jesus Christ.
- A final judgement day.

And for those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ, this is good news. This is the Christian hope. One day God will put things right, but to do this, he has to destroy the things that are wrong. Revelation 18 is a lament about the destruction of Babylon, a city that in the Bible represents all that is wrong with human endeavour... from the tower of Babel, to the Babylonian empire that took God's people into exile, it represented material affluence, sexual perversion, obscene inequality and an assumed invincibility. It doesn't require a huge leap of imagination to see how similar Babylon is to many 'empires' today... what Revelation says about Babylon and Rome, also applies to the UK. Babylon and Rome are no more... this present world is not a permanent one... if we invest all our energies in this world, we will end up disappointed. As Jesus said, seek first the kingdom of God.

Revelation 19 describes the population of heaven celebrating the final triumph of God over his enemies. Heaven's veil is rolled back to reveal King Jesus accompanied by the armies of heaven. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he didn't fly into outer space, he returned to a completely different dimension that the Bible calls the 'heavenly

realm'. He is currently not visible to us, but that does not mean he is remote from us. We have access to him through prayer, the Bible, worship and communion.

Revelation 20 is a dark and terrifying chapter. It is about the final judgement. It is a very unfashionable idea, and yet we live in an era that is obsessed with human rights and justice. From human trafficking to racial abuse, from global warming to the millions living in poverty, the internet is clogged with people seeking justice. However, very few of the people sending angry tweets see themselves as being part of the problem.

We want accountability. But we're outraged when we're told that we might be the ones who are accountable, that '#metoo' might mean, erm... ME TOO! We all need to take a deep look at ourselves and whether we match up to God's standards of justice and love.

Revelation 20 tells us that on the final day everyone will be judged based on how they lived their lives by a perfect, all-seeing, all-knowing judge. If that doesn't make you squirm, then you are a much better person than me!

But there is hope. And that hope is Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross, he took on himself the judgement that was rightly ours. In John 5, Jesus explained it this way...

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

John 5:24-25

God is perfectly just. One day he will judge and destroy evil. That is the Christian hope. The marvellous thing is that Jesus has made it possible for humans to be considered perfect by God. Through faith in

Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, we can stand before the perfect God and *not be judged*.

But what happens after the judgement?

Firstly, and most importantly, Revelation does not finish with a vision of us floating up to heaven. 1 Thessalonians does talk about us 'rising up to meet him in the air', but both Revelation and 1 Thessalonians say that it is the Lord who comes down from heaven to meet us.

Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them... He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

Revelation 21:1-4 (abbreviated)

This is a glorious passage, both on a cosmic and a personal level. It is God's promise to transform the world we live in, purged of everything that stands against his love and perfection.

This renewed earth will not be a merely 'spiritual' place where disembodied souls float about in perfect peace, it will be recognisable to us. We are going to live the way God always wanted us to live, in a place that is unimaginably wonderful.

And, unlike Eden, this new creation will be perfect forever, with no risk of corruption. A place of everlasting peace, everlasting shalom.

We have no way of knowing what this is going to be like. For some kind of idea, search YouTube for videos of people born colour blind putting on corrective glasses and seeing the world in full colour for the first time. Or deaf people with implants that mean they hear music for the first time. The reactions are priceless, as people experience a completely new dimension of experience for the first time.

And this new world will be even more real than the world we live in now. And to those who say 'won't eternity get boring', remember that although we will be transformed, we will remain finite. God is infinite, we will never run out of new things to explore and discover about him.

I could go on speculating about what it is going to be like, but the truth is we don't know, and probably can't know, it is going to be so different from the life we experience now.

But we know it is going to be amazing, because Jesus promised it would be amazing.

And that makes living in the world a lot more bearable. It gives us real hope on a day-by-day basis. Life is not always easy. For much of history it has been a lot less easy... and there are so many people who have things a lot worse than we do.

Recently I read Amy Carmichael's biography. She was a missionary who worked rescuing children from poverty and exploitation in India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There is scarcely a page where someone doesn't die of what is now a curable disease, or where hostile people try to thwart the work she is doing. But she had hope, hope that Jesus was with her at all times, comforting and helping her.

Jesus does not promise us easy lives. But he does promise us his presence, now and forever. That should liberate us from becoming self-pitying and self-centred. If what we believe is true, we will one day live in God's presence for eternity. And Jesus promises us that he will be with us every step of our journey towards that time.

That is good news, it is THE good news.

Amen.