

# A Very Unusual Year

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good afternoon, everyone. It is lovely to be back among you. I think the last time I was here, we ended up in quite a long lockdown after I left.
- So you'd be forgiven for checking that the other three members of the horsemen of the apocalypse aren't carted out in the car park. If you have Bibles, you could turn to Galatians chapter 4.
- And it's a very, very short reading this afternoon. I keep wanting to say this morning, but it's this afternoon. It's Galatians chapter 4.
- And just reading from verse 4 for a few verses. The Apostle Paul writes this to the church. He says, But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.
- [ 1 : 1 1 ] And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father. So you are no longer a slave, but a son. And if a son, then an heir through God.
- Amen. And we trust that the Lord will bless the reading of his word to us. We're going to look to the screen now and watch a brief video featuring John and Linda McKinnon from Calderwood as they answer a few questions as part of our Advent series.
- The first king of Britain was a Scottish king.
- Who was he? And what year did he become king of Britain? Okay, now this was Cal that posed this question. And thankfully, it is a question that I do know the answer to because I've always had a love of Scottish history and I've always enjoyed reading about Scottish history.
- So the first king of Britain was King James VI of Scotland, who was also known as King James I of the United Kingdoms.
- [ 2 : 3 3 ] In actual fact, he was king of Scotland. And then in 1603, there was the Union of the Crowns. And so he became King James VI and King James I. And he reigned for 22 years.
- But of course, we actually probably know King James better as being the person who sponsored the Bible or the authorised version of the Bible. And so when we talk about the old King James version or the authorised version, it was the same king, the first king of Britain.
- 1603, when he became king of the United Kingdoms, he was the one that sponsored that particular verse of the Bible. What do you think about the calendar being hinged on the coming of King Jesus?
- When I think about calendar, I think of the calendar that we receive each year from Katrina.
- She makes us a calendar of these three beautiful children. And it helps me to look back over the year because it's pictures from the year before of the blessing that we've had over the year with the children and the family.

[ 3 : 46 ] It also helps us record what we'll be doing over the next year. And when I think about the calendar turning on the birth of Jesus, it just fills me with joy to think that God sent Jesus into the world for each and every one of us.

And as the years go by, that he is still the one who loves and cares for each one of us and that he is with us no matter the circumstances we find ourselves in.

This year has been a very unusual year. What has God been saying to you through it? Hi, everyone. Yeah, 2020 has been a very unusual year and difficult year in so many ways.

But it's also been a year of great blessing for ourselves. We have been blessed with two wonderful grandchildren, one in March and one in October, little Sophia and Addison.

And I think they've helped me keep perspective over this year when it could have been so easy to be down and struggling. Just the blessing of a new birth in the midst of very strange, strange and difficult times.

[ 5 : 08 ] And the one verse that has come to me all through this is Psalm 118, verse 24. This is the day that the Lord has made.

We will rejoice and be glad in it. And each and every day I've held that verse really close to myself and just try to think on that, not think too far ahead, too far behind and just take each day as it comes and try to count my blessings in that day.

Sometimes that's been easier and sometimes it's been more difficult. But that has definitely been the verse that God has withheld me with over this past year. Well, as you can imagine, there are probably many, many things that I could say about the year 2020.

That wouldn't come as a surprise. But Linda's actually said something very powerful, very beautiful there. And I don't want to say too much on top of that other than to say that we shouldn't be surprised when we find ourselves facing hardship, facing trial, facing tribulation.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said that in this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world. And I think one of the things that God's been saying to us is that we need to learn what it is more to trust Him, more what it is just to exercise faith in Him, to be unafraid of anything that comes in our way.

[ 6 : 25 ] But the only thing we ought to do is to fear God and to love, honour and serve Him. And so for me, it's been about staying rooted in the Word of God. It's about keeping the Gospel at the centre.

It's about making Jesus known because He and He alone is the only answer. The Lord bless you as we turn from 2020 into 2021. Bye just now.

God bless. Bye. I wonder this afternoon as we sit here on the last Sunday of the year, one week away from a new year, next Sunday will be 2021, and I wonder what do you think this year will be remembered for?

And perhaps we think there's a fairly obvious answer to that, but I wonder if it may depend a little bit sometimes on our circumstances what this year will be remembered for.

If you were a fan of Liverpool Football Club, then this year you might be remembered for your first league win in quite some time.

[ 7 : 38 ] Or perhaps if you lived in Australia, if you think back to the start of the year, we've almost forgotten, perhaps this will be the year you remember for the bushfires.

Or if you were a basketball fan, this was the year where one of its superstars was sadly killed along with his daughter in a helicopter crash. Or even if you lived in Central America, this may be the year where you recall that they ran out of names for all the hurricanes that came crashing through the Caribbean and into those countries.

It may depend on just where you are for what we remember this year for. But of course, we know throughout our history there are certain years which stick in our memory or we know them from history.

1314, shout out, anyone know? It was the Battle of Bannockburn. 1945, end of the Second World War. 1517, the Reformation.

Okay, when Martin Luther got his hammer and nail out. This one's a slightly offbeat. 1972. You have to be a TV fan to get this one, I think.

[ 9 : 09 ]     1972 was the year the A-Team broke out of a maximum security facility. I was a massive A-Team fan as a child so that date is in my head.

Of course, 2001, which is probably better known as 9-11. Of course, remember when the trade towers were tragically blown up.

I think for most of us living in Scotland, this has been a strange year. It's been a difficult year. Some may consider it the worst year ever.

I think personally I have found this last nine months pretty hard. For my family, it's been particularly large amounts of upheaval, face redundancy, cancer, we've lost a couple of friends.

On top of the general loss of liberty and the isolation and what sometimes felt like rather draconian rules, it's been hard.

[ 10 : 13 ]     And it's quite easy probably for all of us to think, well, the world is spinning out of control. people. And it can be difficult to see meaning and purpose in the last nine months.

And so we come to the end of the year and we get our calendars. given this one today, so thank you very much.

And we come, we turn to October and we're counting down the last few days of 2020 and for many people, many people are looking forward to 2021.

A number of people said to me, oh, I just can't wait for 2021 to come. And as Cal, Cal was preaching this morning and Cal said this, well, really, 2021 is less than a week away.

What difference is a week really going to make to our circumstances right now? Probably not a lot.

[ 11 : 20 ]     You know, we'll still be, God willing, back next Sunday with 20 and we will all be in between now and then we will be at home and we might get out to the shop for emergencies, they're essential goods only and maybe a wee walk and that is about it.

So, pinning our hopes on 2021, I'm going to say from the start is it's probably not worth putting your hopes in at this stage. But, we are at the end of the calendar year and it's traditionally the time when we stop and we reflect and we ponder what's happened and look for what can we learn, what lessons can we make and perhaps we've made some or thought of some New Year's resolutions and perhaps we've remembered the resolutions we made last year which lasted to about the 5th of January and maybe we can resurrect those again.

or maybe we are just going to take some time to look back and think, well, what has the Lord been saying to us?

Has God been speaking? And I think when we were coming up with a series for Advent, it was a few months, a month ago and I think there was probably a degree of optimism.

We were looking forward to five days of liberty around Christmas. Vaccine had just come out and is still being rolled out and I think some of that optimism has probably been slightly taken away in the last week or so.

[ 13 : 04 ] And therefore it can be quite hard to learn lessons when you're in the midst of the trial. I certainly find that. I've been talking to Cal this week as we've been preparing on a similar theme.

And there's some things I'm going to say today and the first person I am preaching these to is me. Because some of the things that the Lord has put in my heart are things which I am struggling to learn.

There's things which we need the Holy Spirit with us today and into the coming year to burn these things into us, to teach us.

Because it is hard when you're in the midst of something to see what is going on, what is actually happening. But we trust and we trust that God is at work.

And can I say I am greatly encouraged when I look out. coming year because what is happening here and in Calderwood this morning and down in Kilmarnock and in other places is an unusual activity.

[ 14 : 14 ] We are a minority. Because we are churches who have chosen when possible to still gather. And that is a wonderful thing.

Now there are other churches for whatever reason they have opted not to do so. But we have taken the opportunity to gather together, to encourage one another.

Just by being here you are an encouragement to me, encouragement to the leaders here and to one another. And so please do take every opportunity when it arises to do this because it is wonderful just to see you all.

And also coming here this morning gave me an opportunity to get out of East Kilbride, which is always a bonus. So our theme for this morning is an unusual year.

And like we say we're thinking about calendars for a moment. And this year was 2020, next year is 2021. And when our calendars are published, they're actually missing some information.

[ 15 : 23 ] Because this year is AD. 2020. And next year will be AD 2021. And I know you will all be recalling the Latin that you learned at school.

AD is Anno Domini, which means the year of our Lord, 2020. This is God's year.

Next year is God's year. Now a little history lesson. for you this morning. This afternoon. So the idea of renaming the calendar AD 2020 or whatever it was going to be at the time was invented by a Roman monk called Dionysius about 1500 years ago.

Prior to that, the calendar was dated according to whoever was on the throne. Whoever was the emperor of the time. We actually see this in Isaiah chapter 6 because the date is referenced as the year that King Uzziah died or in other places to talk about in the reign of the ninth year of Hezekiah or whoever it happens to be.

But in Dionysius' time, the calendar was based around the reign of the emperor Diocletian. Diocletian was a bad egg.

[ 16 : 52 ] He was responsible for a terrible persecution of Christianity, perhaps probably the worst persecution of Christianity by any of the Roman emperors.

He passed four major edicts. The first one was a ban on churches' gathering. They lost their buildings and any possessions they had. Secondly, he arrested all the bishops and all the priests.

They actually ran out of room in the jails so they had to release the criminals so they could get more of the bishops and the priests. The third thing he said was, if you were in jail you could be set free if you were prepared to offer sacrifices to the gods.

Finally, this is the worst, he ordered that there should be a public sacrifice. Everyone was to gather in the square and offer a public sacrifice to the gods and if you refused to do this then you were to be executed.

So perhaps you can see why Dionysius wanted to change the calendar. I think the point Dionysius is making is this, who is really in charge?

[ 18 : 07 ] Is it Diocletian's year or is it the year of our Lord? Everything hinges on the birth of Christ. That is the key event in history, the incarnation. God becomes flesh and dwells among us.

And Paul writes in Galatians 4, but when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law.

you see? And he also says this in Ephesians 1, 9 to 10, he says, making known to us the mystery of his will according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven, and things on earth.

So we have that little phrase twice used in the fullness of time. And what does it mean? It means this, our God reigns.

[ 19 : 23 ] He is sovereign. He is transcendent. He exists outside of space and time. He knows the end from the beginning. And with God, nothing is left to chance.

Events happen when he says so. And know this, God is never late. But he's also never early.

It's when the fullness of time has come. At the right time in history, God sends his son into the world. And because he is the one who controls all things and knows all things and orders all things, then everything has a purpose.

purpose. He has a plan. What's unite all things in heaven and things on earth. And you know, the great thing for Christians is this.

God has revealed his grand plan to us. We know where history is going. It's here. You can read about it. We know where it's going.

[ 20 : 43 ] And where we struggle, I think, sometimes is with the finer details. Details of trying to find purpose and events in the here and now.

And when we struggle with those, as many of us have, I suspect, in the last nine months or so, what we can reflect on is, well, what do we know?

What do we actually know with certainty? And one verse which is often a comfort to us is this. Romans 8 28 says, And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

And that word, all, is such an important word because it means all. It means everything, any circumstance, any experience, regardless of whether we can see it, what the purpose is, is working for our good.

And we know, I think most of us have been around long enough to know that painful experiences can be beneficial. A few of us probably enjoy getting injections, but we know that the pain of an injection is worth it because it may offer us immunity.

[ 22 : 16 ] Most of us here, all of us probably bar one, probably remember getting the BCG, the one for tuberculosis, they don't do it anymore.

And some of us will have the wee scar on our arm or some of us were lucky and we had immunity already. But that was worthwhile. It was momentary pain.

Or we may remember the discipline of a parent which was unpleasant at the time yet ultimately for our good.

And you see for us often we don't really know what our good is, do we? We can be so short sighted, so temporal in some ways so childish.

I see with my own children sometimes and we say no you can't have a box of chocolates for breakfast. Christmas day would be the exception to that.

[ 23 : 22 ] But why not? Because they don't realise it would be bad for them to eat a box of chocolates for breakfast. breakfast. And as adults, if we're being honest, there are times when there are things that we want and things that we would like, but actually if we were given them they would not be any benefit to us, they would be negative.

But God who is a good God sees the big picture and he knows what is ultimately for your good and for my good.

good. Because here's the thing, God's idea of good is way better than my idea of good or your idea of good. Because he sees everything.

He knows what he wants you to become. And he is conforming you, he's changing you, he's moulding you into the likeness of his son, which is our ultimate good.

Now unfortunately we live in a society where God is now largely unrecognised. And even in our calendars we've sought to strip away anything to do with religion or anything to do with Jesus.

[ 24 : 42 ] We now talk about instead of AD we talk about CE, common era or BCE before common era whereas we would talk about BC as before Christ.

Now what hasn't changed is that whether you're using BC or AD or BCE or CE everything still hinges on the birth of Jesus.

That hasn't changed but when you remove God from the equation it starts to change our mindset.

set. In the past the blame for plagues we can call COVID a modern plague would have been firmly placed at God's door because that's what they did in the Bible.

You know plagues well this is clearly from God. God has sent this to us he's clearly teaching us something. Our society now is so pagan that it didn't even blame God for COVID.

[ 25 : 53 ] Rather COVID is kind of mother nature's way of communicating to us whoever mother nature is. I've never met her. Because when you remove God you remove meaning and purpose.

everything becomes about random chance biology. There is no meaning there is no purpose there is no reason all we can do is to try and survive.

The historian Neil Oliver said this in the UK and the rest of the West we have created a reality in which staying alive is everything because there is nothing else.

See that is the sadness of a world in which has rejected God. Because when you reject God it's not just God you lose because you lose everything and we're left simply down to survival.

people. But has God been speaking through all this? Through everything that's happened in 2020?

[ 27 : 11 ] Well I think we can say yes he has. See throughout scripture we see that a loving God uses events even things like plagues in order to communicate to the world or to get the world to stop sit up and pay attention.

You know he spoke to the Egyptians through the plagues and exodus and while most of the Egyptians ignored it some of them actually recognized that there was a God a powerful God at work and they left along with the Israelites when they were allowed out of Egypt.

He warned his disobedient people. He spoke to them by sending snakes in Numbers 21 to get their attention as a judgment and he spoke to his rebellious people by warning them and then sending them into exile.

Why? Always because he wanted to draw them back to himself God is seeking to draw people to himself and he will use whatever circumstances are necessary to make that happen.

C.S. Lewis says this he says pain insists upon being attended to. It's very hard to ignore pain. He says God whispers to us in our pleasures speaks in our conscience but shouts in our pains.

[ 28 : 51 ] It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. As one commentator suggested the last nine months have felt a little bit like we've been sent to our room and told not to come out until our attitude improves.

I don't know if that's ever happened to anybody here but that's what it feels like. we've been grounded. So God speaks but here's the question do we have ears to hear what God is saying or will it just be noise?

In John 12 Jesus is speaking and he says now is my soul troubled and what shall I say? Father save me from this hour but for this purpose I have come to this Father glorify your name.

Then a voice came from heaven I have glorified it and I will glorify it again. The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered others said an angel had spoken.

What will it be? For us? Is it just going to be dismissed as thunder? Or are we going to hear what the Lord is saying to us this year?

[ 30 : 26 ] What if the trials of this life are God's mercies in disguise as the song says? Will we see them and realise what God is saying so there's a few things which come to mind that the Lord is possibly saying to us this year.

The first one is this perspective. Perspective. I think the past nine months have been a time when we in the West have become very centred on ourselves.

if we observe what we see in our media, if we even think about our own conversations, we've become obsessed with an illness which thankfully yet sadly has killed a relatively small number of people in Scotland, I think about four and a half thousand at the last count.

It has caused a lot of disruption to our lives. But if we try and put that into some kind of context, in Uganda, a country which I love, I visited it many years ago, ten and a half thousand people will die from malaria this year.

Another five thousand will die from tuberculosis and approximately five hundred will die per week from HIV. death is a reality for them.

[ 32 : 06 ] Or perhaps we think about the church in China which is under intense pressure. Perhaps 2020 many of them will be the year they remember their pastor being arrested or they remember their church being closed down.

Or what about the thousands of Christians who have been killed in Nigeria what will 2020 be remembered for by them? See what the last nine months should do is it should give us a little bit of perspective and a little bit of a flavour of the challenges that our brothers and sisters around the world face.

But it should also remind us that we shouldn't get too comfortable in this kingdom because we don't belong to this kingdom.

We belong to another kingdom a kingdom that is not of this world. And we in the west and we should be grateful for this but at the same time it has made us quite comfortable I think we have been largely shielded from major trials and tribulations for the last 75 years.

It's been a period of immense prosperity long life since the turn of the last war and perhaps we have become comfortable whereas we need to remember this is not this is not home heaven is home kingdom of Jesus where he is king that's our home so not getting too comfortable here Paul writes in Colossians 1 13 14 he has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son so I think we need to lift our eyes off ourselves and our ever changing circumstances and realize that we are part of a different kingdom a kingdom which cannot be shaken a kingdom which cannot be moved and as we wait for the consummation of the kingdom sorry of that kingdom it means we can face whatever challenges and tribulations that come our way with rock solid confidence rather than being tossed around by the circumstances like a small boat on the ocean we have a we have a solid base on which we can stand second thing

[ 35 : 02 ] I think we can learn is this the reality of mortality I think for most of our society in the last nine months have been rather abruptly confronted I think with their own mortality and it's a sad reality that death has been placed front and centre and we are reminded on a daily basis in the media it's like headline every day how many people have died and as Christians how we respond to that is so key to our witness it's fundamentally key see we should hate death death is an enemy death is an intruder it should not have any place in our world I get irked when people talk about but death is just natural no it's not yes in our fallen world it feels yes people born they live and then they die but that natural is how things were supposed to be death is unnatural and we know it when we lose a loved one it feels wrong it was not the way it was supposed to be it was never intended it's an alien invader but it does remind us that our world is broken and fallen but we as

Christians need to know this death is no longer something to be feared because of the resurrection power of Christ death has been defeated and it no longer holds any power over us Paul writes again in 1 Corinthians 15 he says in a moment in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet for the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed for this perishable body must put on the imperishable and this mortal body must put on immortality but when the perishable puts on the imperishable and the mortal puts on immortality then shall come to pass the saying that is written death is swallowed up in victory oh death where is your victory oh death where is your sting you see lives lives which are lived without fear of death will stand out in our world because of the contrast and here's the contrast

Moses writing in leuiticus these are gods speaking writing god's words god talking about judgment which is going to come on the people if they abandon him and god says and none pursues see I think when societies turn away from god fear can be a judgment from god and rather than rightly fearing god as we should we begin to fear the loss of material things and god can give societies over to their fears and fear is ultimately destructive because we let's think about it we don't make our best decisions when we're scared we become irrational prone to panic and the contrast can be seen in the early church during a plague

Rodney Stark he's a church historian writing about the growth of the early church as he tries to get a handle on how did the church grow and he talks about when the plagues hit the big cities in the Roman Empire those who could afford it those with villas out in the countryside they they got on their horses and they left it was an exodus of the wealthy and they essentially went into lockdown out in their villas they had all their food they had all their servants and they were quite happy to essentially lie by the pool and wait for it all to end but the Christians didn't leave the Christians stayed in the city and the plague that they were dealing with was really serious it killed many many people but for the people who were there perhaps the first person they would have seen when they regained consciousness if they recovered from the plague was a



Christian who'd stayed behind to care for them to mop their brow to clean their bodies then to feed them as they recovered and many Christians died while doing this so as people got better and they looked around and thought why are we alive and they were alive because the Christians showed love and courage in the face of death to care for people and many people having seen the love of Christ in action turned to Jesus and the church exploded in the cities the Christians stood out they displayed the power of the resurrection in their own life and that's a challenge for us to not give in to the fear but to hear the truth and let the power of the resurrection be seen in our lives and as we move around our communities and our families thirdly the illusion of control

[ 41 : 30 ] I think a year ago most of us probably felt we were reasonably in control of our lives for good or ill we probably felt that the government and our institutions had some sort of handle on what was going on and within a matter of weeks that illusion was shattered and that's quite disconcerting for us we in the west with all our wealth and technology and consumer power have been undone by a virus our confidence and our trust in the government has been shattered and our idols those things that we'd been putting our trust and our confidence in have failed things that we thought were dead certs are no longer so certain but listen to what the psalmist says he says in psalm 146 he says put not your trust in princes and a son of man in whom there was no salvation when his breath departs he returns to the earth on that very day his plans perish but rather blessed is he whose help is in the

God of Jacob whose hope is in the Lord his God let's not put too much or any of our confidence in rulers of this world they only have power because God's given them power you know Pilate talking to Jesus says I've got authority Jesus puts him in his place says no you don't your authority is given so we don't put our confidence in our rulers but we put our hope in God the one whose year this is still finally there is light in the darkness John says the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it the light of Christ shines as bright today as it did 2000 years ago this is still the year of our

Lord the darkness the forces of evil and destruction which are at work in our world have not yet and will not overcome it I think for many 2021 is going to be almost as dark or as dark as 2020 I believe and we need to be ready for this there is a tsunami of brokenness heading our way as unemployment soars family struggle mental health issues and we need to be ready as the church because who are we Jesus says to us you are the light of the world a city on a hill cannot be hidden nor do people put light on a lamp and put it under a basket but on a stand and it gives light to the whole house he says in the same way let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven you see the light shines in the darkness but the light shines through us the hope of the gospel shines through us in 2021 and as people around us grope in the darkness trying to figure out which way is up and trying to work out how they're going to cope and where is the meaning and where is the purpose and where is the hope in the midst of all this then we are the ones the church who should be shining and like a lighthouse we both warn and we draw people in we offer them sanctuary we offer hope promise we offer them salvation and life and all its fullness because they will see that they look at us and they see a people who are not scared and they see a people who have confidence in God and not in man and they see a people who are seeking to live in fullness who step out to care for the needy in a selfless way that is the power of the gospel in action and that is our challenge

I hope a challenge for us for for 2021 now we this might I'm not suggesting that we are going to be ready to roll with that next Sunday but as 2021 rolls out in front of us look for the opportunities to be the light in the darkness let's pray heavenly father we come before you as the all sufficient one as a God who holds all things together a God of order a God who plans and organises our world and the events in our world for the good of your people and to draw those whom you have called to yourself so father we ask that you would help us to live lives which are worthy of our call to live lives which are courageous lives which shine like the stars in the heavens father would you work in us and through us by your spirit and teach us all that you would have us learn in your name we pray amen one whoa you