

# Living Life Backwards

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Preacher: James Ross

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Amen. So, this morning, we're thinking about this idea that we introduced a couple of weeks ago of living life backwards. The idea that when we have a future goal or a future destination, it gives motivation, it gives direction for today. By way of illustration, many years ago, myself and a friend went inter-railing. In the days before, mobile phones are really much of the way of internet technology. We had a friend who was working in Munich for a summer, and so we set off knowing that in five days, we had arranged a time mid-Saturday afternoon to meet on this particular street in Munich. And so, we spent five days of poring over train timetables, zigzagging our way through Central Europe, planning our routes, at every stage thinking about that final destination, every decision influenced by meeting our friend on Saturday afternoon.

The purpose of Revelation 8 to 11, and we didn't read it all. If you have time, you can read it at your leisure, is to remind us of the great end goal of history, God's end goal. Chapter 11, verse 15, when the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever. We are reminded of the reality of eternal judgment and of eternal reward. And knowing this to be true, it would direct our lives today that we would live life backwards so that either if we're Christians, we would keep following the path of Christians, we would keep following the path of Jesus, or if you're here today and you're not a Christian, that you would change direction, you would repent and believe so that you would be walking in the way of Jesus. That together we'd all live life backwards, seeing clearly where history is heading, seeing where we are heading, so that we would trust King Jesus and his path for our lives. Okay, so we've got a lot to cover, and we'll try and do it briefly, and I hope with God's help clearly. Here's the first thing I want us to see. We are to live life backwards because of eternity. So we're going to begin at the end of our reading, and we start there on purpose, because here we see Jesus presenting again eternal hope for his suffering church, first century church struggling badly, 21st century church we often feel the same. Think about what we are presented with here.

In verse 15, when the announcement comes, the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah. We're being told, here is the end of struggle and the beginning of the final, eternal kingdom of God. What's happening in the world today, it's the testimony of the Bible, it's the experience of our lives, is that we live through spiritual battle. We see growing hostility to Christianity, and there is difficulty all around. But in the end, according to God's great plan, there is the rule of God, there is the glory of God that spreads through all the world, and so all those in heaven are praising God. So it's the end of struggle and the beginning of the final reign. Verse 17, we're reminded of the end of history and the beginning of eternity.

I don't know if you noticed as we were reading the title given to God, we give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the one who is and who was. Right at the beginning of the book of Revelation, we're given the title, but it's different. Revelation 1 verse 4, grace and peace to you from him who is and who was and who is to come. Verse 8, I am the Alpha and the Omega who is and who was and who is to come. Why is there no more the God who is to come? Because this is anticipating the day when future hope, our future hope, then becomes present reality. When there's nothing more of God's plan to be revealed, when there's God in his glory is with his people. When he has, according to verse 17, he's taken his great power. When he has once and for all defeated evil and all the forces of darkness, and he has begun to reign. When he answers our prayer, your kingdom come. So, it's the end of history and the beginning of eternity. And it's also the end of waiting and the beginning of eternal reward. Just to hear the promised hope for God's people in this announcement in verse 18, it says, the time has come for rewarding your servants. Remember that hope that Jesus presents in one of his parables to those who are faithful in following, that there will be that great welcome, well done, good and faithful servant. Enter your master's happiness. Here we have it in a different form in the book of Revelation. And then in verse 19, you get this image of God's temple in heaven being opened, and there's the ark of his covenant. And remember, the temple and the ark, they're a symbol to us of God being present with his people. Of God being present with his people to bless his people by being with us. And there is a day coming, the Bible is saying here, when our waiting and our longing is over, and the people of God take full possession of our eternal reward. And so, Jesus' vision here, it connects our future home with our future hope in a really wonderful way. God and his people together forever comes up so often in Revelation.

Again, I had a friend who, a number of years ago, ran a marathon that was very mountainous, very arduous, up in the west coast, in the Highlands. And he said the last few miles, what kept him going was thinking about a nice warm shower and a seat by the fire, and for his mom to cook him a really nice big meal. He was kept going because of the hope and the promise of home. And that's the way God designs our faith to operate. That the hope for God's people of an eternal homecoming is to fuel our Christian hope today. That the promise that God and the Lord Jesus Christ will reign over this earth, and this earth will be renewed. That heaven will come down to earth. That we look forward to seeing the face of Jesus.

[ 7 : 48 ] That our hope is not vague, but it's tied to the person of our Savior. That it's not vague, but it's tied to our true home. It's the great promise. So that in light of our future goal, our home, believers are to live with faith and perseverance today, knowing our true citizenship is in heaven, and we wait for a returning Savior, for when our hope will become sight. And Jesus' vision here at the end of this section does another thing for us. It also makes absolutely clear that Christ's victory is connected with the church's victory. The victory of Jesus is ours. Revelation, we've seen it and will continue to see it, is full of the reality of Christian suffering. It was really hard to be a follower of Jesus in the first century.

People were getting thrown in prison. People were getting killed for their faith. People were rejecting Jesus and rejecting the people of Jesus. And that's still the story around the world. This week, in Parliament, Open Doors were delivering their annual report to the government about the 50 places in the world where it's hardest to be a Christian, where there is intense persecution.

The world watch list that comes out every year. There are many people today joining in the prayer of the saints of Revelation. How long, O Lord, till we see justice for all that we have suffered.

Christians today are still victimized and marginalized and wronged as the world does its worst in its opposition to God and His people. But there is hope. There is reason to press on in faith because of the victory of Jesus. Notice the contrast in verse 18. The nations were angry. This is the reality.

People act in fierce opposition to God. But it says, your wrath, God's wrath, has come. There is a justice that will come. And because that justice will be done, peace will reign.

[10:15] For the people of God, there will one day be a freedom from all that is sinful and all that is awful. For us to enjoy our eternal reward and our eternal home, our God must deal with everything that threatens and opposes and opposes. And that will come on the day Christ returns as King and Judge.

And so we're invited to live life backwards in light of the certainty of eternity. The second thing that we need to see is that we are invited in this section to live life backwards in order to check the path that we find ourselves on.

This is chapters 8 and 9. Kind of takes us to the two ways to live idea. Have you ever had this experience on a journey? I imagine I'm not on my own. You find yourself heading to somewhere you're not exactly sure where you're going. And so you set off, you have to pick a road, you start off on that road, and after a while you think, I'm pretty sure I'm not heading in the right direction. I'm pretty sure this is not going to take me to where I want to go. But I'm just going to keep going anyway.

Because that seems easier than turning and changing direction. And maybe you don't have a map. And maybe you just like to persevere and blind optimism. Now that's okay if you're heading on a holiday destination or if you're traveling around the city. It's an inconvenience, sometimes a major inconvenience. But the Bible would say and Jesus would say to us, it's not okay when we think about our eternal destination. Chapters 8 and 9, we've heard some of the imagery. It contains vivid, honestly terrifying images. And they come to us from Jesus to help us to think. What is the future destination that I want? And what is the path that I am on right now?

Where is my life leading? The clear focus in the book of Revelation is to say to us, Christ Jesus came once. He came to this earth in all humility. He came to die on the cross. He came to establish the kingdom of God through His death and resurrection. But this Jesus will come again in glory to finally and forever set up His eternal kingdom to bring both eternal judgment and salvation.

[12:51] For some people, the return of Jesus will be a cause of eternal joy. We'll join the song of the angels. But others will join in that awful cry of Revelation 6, asking the mountains and the hills, fall on us so that we can escape the wrath of God. Jesus in the gospel says there's two ways to live.

We can either accept Him or we can reject Him. We heard Him talk about the narrow way that leads to life and the broad way that leads to destruction. The Jesus who spoke those words is the same Jesus who gave us this vision. Jesus who so many admire as the most loving person who ever lived is the Jesus who used very graphic language to speak to us of the realities of judgment and of hell, of weeping and gnashing and utter darkness and eternal fire. Why? Well, we hear in Revelation 8 and 9, six trumpet blasts of judgment.

Visions and symbols that sound a loving warning from King Jesus. An opportunity for us to recognize that judgment will come and it will be terrible.

So that we might decide if we're not followers of Jesus to perform a spiritual U-turn in order to trust Him as Savior. So we heard the first four trumpets that speak to us graphically of judgment that will come on those who reject God. And we know it's about those who reject God because the vision draws on the language of the book of Exodus. The book of Exodus has these plagues that fall on the land of Egypt that's held Israel, God's people, as slaves. It's a judgment that comes on Pharaoh because Pharaoh was strutting around saying, I'm God, I'm a son of the God. I don't need to listen to the Lord God. So he rejected God and His Word and His messengers and His people.

It was a judgment on the false gods of Egypt, showing they were powerless to save. And the book of Exodus was full of judgment also on those who refused to turn to the one true and living God. One of the amazing things in the book of Exodus is that some of the Egyptians become part of the people of God because they see how powerful and how good God is. Others didn't.

[ 15 : 40 ] And so the book of Revelation draws from the judgments of the book of Exodus, but helps us to see that it's even more intense. So you get, for example, in verse 7, you know, there's a plague in Exodus or the plague of hail, but now it's hail and it's fire and it's mixed with blood. In verse 8, we hear about the ocean, a third of an ocean turning to blood. In the book of Exodus, it was the river Nile that turned to the blood. Judgment is becoming more intense and it's inviting us to see God alone rules, God alone judges, and to reject Jesus as Lord and as King is to be walking on a path that leads to disaster. God is on His throne. The whole earth belongs to God so that to run to Him is to run to the one who gives life and who is life, but to run from Him is ultimately to know darkness and destruction and death.

We also heard in verse 13 of chapter 8, an eagle giving a warning that worse was still to come, and the trumpet blasts 5 and 6 announce a judgment where death and destruction are unleashed, and where we are presented with creatures from our very worst nightmares, making the creatures from, you know, fantasy novels or movies like Lord of the Rings seem tame by comparison.

Trumpet 5, as an example, has these creatures coming up from the abyss, coming from the very pit of hell, and in verse 3 it says, out of the smoke locusts came down on the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. So, there are these creatures that are like locusts and that they bring destruction, but they're like scorpions. We're told they get scorpions' tails, so they bring agony and torture. In verse 7 we discover the locusts look like horses prepared for battle, so they're about to come on an attacking charge. They got teeth like lions, they're fierce, they're iron-plated, there's no defense against them, and we're told in verse 11 their king goes by the name of the destroyer. These are awful creatures bringing awful, terrible judgment.

And then in trumpet 6 we meet a great cavalry of horses and riders sent out to bring death and destruction. Verse 16, the number of the mounted troops was twice 10,000 times 10,000. That's symbolic language, but if we do the math, I think it's 20 million. The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this. Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke, and sulfur. And as if that wasn't terrifying enough, the power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails were like snakes.

Having heads with which they inflict injury. So you've got horses that are like lions that are breathing fire, which have got tails, which are like snakes, which are stinging poison.

[ 19 : 43 ] Here is the devil. Here is evil doing its destructive work. Of course, this is symbol and its image, but its symbol and image pointing to true and terrible reality.

Telling us something we already know, that evil is terrible. The pages of history littered with terrible, horrible things. But we also know something of evil within our own hearts, and we know the terrible pain that we can cause to others. Evil is terrible whenever we turn on the news or we check out our media. We see it everywhere across the globe and in our own country.

Evil is terrible when we meet it up close and personal. And as we recognize how terrible and evil sin and destruction is, we find within our hearts that desire, that need for justice. If there is to be hope, there must be justice. Evil is terrible. We're also reminded in these two chapters that sin is terrible. There's this awful, shocking, sad thing at the end of chapter 9, verse 20.

The rest of mankind, these are the ones who don't belong to Jesus, who were not killed by these plagues, still did not repent of the work of their hands. They did not stop worshiping demons and idols, nor did they repent of their murder, magic arts, sexual immorality or theft.

Sin is addictive. And here we find people keep on worshiping what is literally what will actually kill them. Some of us, we know the power of addiction all too well.

[ 22 : 01 ] We're presented with this awful reality that the true God, the glorious God, the God who is awesome, is rejected. The relationship with Him is broken, that instead, idols continue to be chosen. Immorality continues to be chosen as people reject the loving warning.

The section reminds us also that judgment is terrible. And remember that these awful images, terrible pictures are pictures given to us by Jesus.

And these visions line up with what we learn in the Gospels. And it explains why Jesus came, that Jesus came on a loving rescue mission. Jesus came to save us from judgment.

To save sinners from hell by dying on the cross in our place for our sins, so that by faith, we might have heaven.

And as we encounter something of the horror of God's judgment, we remember too in the Gospel that Jesus will take the horror of God's judgment that Jesus will take the horror of God's judgment onto Himself.

[ 23 : 31 ] Jesus will resolutely, with faith and obedience, face the horrors of the cross, bearing sin, entering into profound darkness, experiencing God's wrath, so that you and I, simply by trusting in Jesus and turning from sin, we would never have to.

As we pause for a moment to reflect, maybe today, as you think about the way your life is going, you know, I'm on the wrong path. I'm far away from God. I haven't come to Jesus for forgiveness.

Maybe right now your spiritual sat-nav is going off telling you it's time to perform that U-turn. How do we do that? Well, we first have to hear the warning. We have to hear the reality. Remember, Jesus isn't trying to give us nightmares. He's not trying to frighten us. He is, though, confronting us with future reality to make us respond today with a sense of urgency, urgency, so that we would recognize how awful our sin is, that we'd want to leave it behind, to ask Jesus to forgive us, that we would trust Him, that our whole direction of life would be different, that we would hear the wonderful promise that there is in Jesus. So, within these judgment sections, there's also promise. So, in chapter 9 and verse 4, these awful creatures that come from the pit. In verse 4 of chapter 9, they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. Or to put it the other way, those who are sealed by God are saved. Those who belong to God will not experience judgment from God.

To trust in Jesus today is to be safe for all eternity. We discovered that some refuse to change their ways. But then at the end of chapter 11, verse 13, in the midst of another awful scene of judgment, let me read 11, 13. At that very hour, there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. 7,000 people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. To give glory to the God of heaven means that these people have seen the reality of judgment, and they've turned from their sin, they've put their trust in Jesus, they believe, and they're now worshiping.

And so there is this reminder, it is never too late to turn and to give glory to God, that today can be a day of salvation for anybody who turns to trust to believe.

[ 26 : 45 ] that you and I, by faith in Jesus, we can have this promise that is offered, the promise of an eternal home, a world of perfect love and peace and joy and happiness and glory that lasts forever.

So we must live life backwards, to think about our destination, to check which path that we are on. Now for many of us here today, of course, we're Christians. And we understand that following that narrow road, that does include suffering, and it does include setback, and it does include struggle, just like the church of John's day was experiencing. Maybe sometimes we find ourselves asking, how is it that life has got harder now that I'm following Jesus? And our need is also to live life backwards, to keep our eternal destination in view. To remind ourselves, with chapter 11, verse 18, that there is a day coming for awarding the servants of God, the prophets, and your people who revere your name, both great and small. There's a wonderful promise in there, isn't there, that all of God's people share in God's reward. Those prophets who spoke for God, who wrote down bits of the Bible, the greats, but also the small, share the same reward. Eternal life in God's kingdom of joy for those who write the books that we read and appreciate, but also for those small Christians who serve as good neighbors, for the famous preachers who influence many, and for the faithful Christian parents who witness and influence their children, for those who lead great prayer movements, and those Christians who join week by week the tiny prayer meeting. There is reward for great, for small, for all in Jesus.

And that leads us briefly to the one last thing to say, and this is especially for those of us who belong to Jesus. Thirdly, we live life backwards to motivate our mission. Just to go back to my old school interrail journey in the days before the internet when life got much easier. We had to plot and plan. Sometimes that journey, we ended up with discomfort. In northern Germany, I remember sleeping in effectively a plastic tube in a farmer's field. That was all we could find. Sometimes we had to switch roots, but always, always, always, always with that goal in mind. That weekend in Munich with our friends.

And it was worth all the discomfort. In Revelation chapter 8 to 11, we have this wonderful future goal promise. The eternal kingdom of God. When he will rule with absolute power and perfect love. When his glory will fully and finally fill the whole earth. When all that is sad and evil is gone forever. When the Lord Jesus lives with his people. It's a beautiful kingdom vision. It's not the last time we'll hear it. To inspire us, to encourage us, to mobilize us for life today until Christ returns.

Let me leave us with three actions that we find in our text. Action one, the church is called to pray.

[ 30 : 49 ] At the start of chapter 8, just before the seventh seal is opened, there's that silence in heaven for about half an hour. It's this great scene of hush.

It's as heaven itself is on its tiptoes, waiting to see how God's plans will continue to unfold on the earth. And remarkably, part of the way that God is going to work out his plan is in response to the prayers of his people.

That he includes the prayers of the church in his purposes. That's why we're told in verse 3 about this angel who had the golden censer who stood at the altar, and he was given much incense with the prayers of all God's people, and the smoke of the incense together with the prayers of God's people goes up to God, and then the judgment is announced.

We heard in chapter 6 God's people praying how long? Well, here's the answer to their prayer. So we pray as a church, because prayer is one of God's ways to achieve his kingdom purposes.

So we pray the Lord's Prayer. Your kingdom come, your will be done. We pray that as longing. Come, Lord Jesus.

[ 32 : 14 ] But we also pray it as mission. On our knees for others. Looking to invite people to discover Jesus for themselves.

Praying for opportunities to share our faith. So we pray. Second action is that we witness.

So chapters 10 and 11 up to verse 14 are two scenes about witnessing. Very briefly in chapter 10, we find John is commissioned by an angel to take this scroll, this scroll that again continues to reveal God's plan, and he has to eat the scroll.

And the scroll, these words are bittersweet. There is a bitterness because it's a sad thing. To recognize the reality of God's judgment.

To recognize that as much as God's people call people to trust in Jesus, some people will say no. That's a bitter and a hard thing.

[ 33 : 25 ] But there's a sweetness to this message because the sweetness of John's message is a message of Christ's victory. And of the certainty of God's kingdom and end time salvation.

And then in chapter 11, so that scene kind of takes some of its cues from Ezekiel. Chapter 11, we meet two witnesses from the book of Zechariah.

And these witnesses, they face desperate persecution. And the world thinks that they've killed the witnesses of God. And there's great rejoicing.

We've got rid of witness for God on the earth. But, in verse 11, these witnesses that seem to have been killed, after three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet.

And then in verse 12, they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, Come up here. The witness of God's people, yes, it faces opposition and hostility, but it will never be extinguished.

[ 34 : 29 ] And those witnesses will one day be called home to eternal glory. But until then, we bear witness to Jesus. Christians' witness in the context of warfare has never, and it will never be easy to stand for Jesus.

The cost is always high. Christian witness is, at the same time, worship. It's our privilege, and it's our joy to testify to the glory of God and Christ and His salvation, and to remind ourselves that Christian witness is worth it.

Beyond those struggles that we have, beyond those difficulties that we have, there is joy. And we know it. You know that joy that we have whenever we see someone come to faith, because we witness and the church witness, there's joy beyond struggle.

And in a much greater way, there's the future eternal joy of being with the Savior that we've borne witness to when our faith becomes sign. So we pray, and we witness, and finally we wait with hope.

Because there is a day coming when that final trumpet will sound, when the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah, when the people of God will wake up to a reality beyond our wildest imagination, a reality that will make every tear, every trial, every trouble absolutely worth it.

[ 36 : 08 ] And so we live life backwards, careful about the path that we are traveling on. Am I following the narrow way today? Am I keeping Christ the King and His victory in focus?

And we do so praying with hope, witnessing with urgency, and waiting with expectation. Let's pray together.

Father God, we thank you that while sometimes your word is hard, hard to understand, hard for us to hear, we thank you that it's also true, and we thank you that it's always shot through with wonderful hope of salvation.

We pray that you would cause each one of us to have our hope fixed on Jesus today. That our home, our true home, would be eternity in heaven, and that that final destination would set our course today.

For those of us who are your people, make us a praying people, and a witnessing people, and help us to wait with hope, praying your kingdom come, and your will be done.

[ 37 : 26 ] For Jesus' name's sake we pray. Amen. Now let's finish with a great hymn that reminds us of the feast.