

Life after death

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[0:00] Life after death. An old-fashioned, irrelevant, obsolete subject? I think not. I think far from being obsolete in the 21st century, this subject is alive and well.

! We recently had D-Day celebrations, didn't we? Honouring the dead. I asked the question, why do we honour the dead? And presumably, we set such a value on life that even when it is ended, there is still value there. And it somehow matters even though they are dead.

I think there is something going on there. On a more trivial level, ghosts and zombies, not particularly my genre, I am afraid.

The scary dead, look on Netflix, there is quite a few things about ghosts and zombies, so presumably it has some traction with a modern audience. The London Bridge terrorists, the trial taking place recently, what motivated them to do these terrible acts?

Well, they were working, were they not, on the assumption that something worthwhile awaits them after death. That was the motivation, rightly or wrongly, but that was not, it's something that figured in their thinking.

[1:30] We live in a society with a multiplicity of religious beliefs, karma and reincarnation. I'm not an expert on Buddhism, but that's alive and well.

We, here in the West, we live in a secular bubble, where the thought, the commonly held thought of life after death is sort of squeezed, but it never quite goes away, does it?

It never quite goes away. The writer C.S. Lewis envisaged a hardened atheist who was absolutely sure that there was no life after death suddenly being afflicted with huge doubts.

Because atheists can have doubts as well, you know. And not to mention Christians' Christianity as actually an alive and well religion. Perhaps not so much in the UK as it used to be, but across the world there are thousands upon thousands upon thousands, probably millions of Christians all over the world who would regularly celebrate Easter.

Which is, as we all know, the celebration of Jesus' death and bodily resurrection. He came alive after death. So we're going to look this morning a little bit, not I think in very much detail, but a little bit into the take of the book of Revelation on this.

[2:58] Now, if this is your first time here, you don't come very often, let me just say we've been going through the book of Revelation for the past few weeks. So I need to give you a little bit of background information about the book.

It is a bit weird, certainly when you first read it. It contains visions. So there's the lamb upon the throne. The lamb that was slain.

There is a dragon, the enemy. There is a beautiful bride. There is a prostitute who drinks the blood of the martyrs.

There is a lake of fire, which is a destination for human beings, sadly and awfully. There is a holy city, and the holy city is what we've been thinking about this morning in our singing.

And above everything, there is a throne. There is a higher throne, the highest throne upon which God sits and presides over all.

[3:58] And in the book of Revelation, lots of interpreters go off in all sorts of different directions, and I'm going to try not to take us off in lots of different directions. So first of all, it sits weird with visions. The second thing you need to know, it is a letter.

It begins with a form of a letter. Tackling real situations set in the time of the Roman Empire. That's where it originates. And a little map, a little tiny map, which is hardly visible, but anyway, a little map of the Roman Empire, or at least of the Mediterranean.

Sorry, it doesn't work very well, does it? A picture of Domitian, one of the emperors, and I've got a copyright ascription that will pop up in a while.

Emperor worship was one of the features of the Roman Empire, in varying degrees under different emperors. So I've drawn a priest there, inviting people, not to worship the Christian God, but to worship the emperor, or perhaps to worship one of the many other gods that there would have been in society in those days.

The Roman Empire was an empire of military power, and the soldiers carried the sword. And if push came to shove, because worshipping the emperor was such an important feature, if you refused to worship the emperor, you could end up being executed.

[5:28] And in the letter, there is the name of one person who was executed. His name is Antipas, and he's in one of the churches to whom John was writing all those years ago.

He had actually been martyred, and we have one name of this person. The book of Revelation, Revelation in English, in Greek, Apocalypsis, very first word in the book, it doesn't mean the end. People use it to mean the end, but it means unveiling. So what John is saying is, you can see the things going on around you.

You can see the Roman soldiers. You can see the priests inviting you to come and worship at their sacrificial meals. You can certainly see statues of the emperor.

But let me tell you really what's going on. Let me unveil this to you. And he will do that in terms of a sort of heavenly prostitute force personality in view of beasts trying to gobble up Christians or to deceive Christians, and in view of the dragon, the spiritual force behind it all, the enemy of humanity and certainly the enemy of God's people.

[6:51] So that's the dragon. When I did it, it was red, but it's grey now, isn't it? So where have we got to? It's also a prophecy. And it's telling about the future.

It's telling what will happen. And if you were facing martyrdom, if we all in this room would be assumed to be Christians and a van pulled up outside to arrest all Christians, we would really want to know how we stood in that.

And as these people faced martyrdom and being put to death by the authorities for being a Christian, I think a prophecy which says what the future holds would be very, very relevant.

In other words, how to get to the holy city rather than ending up in the lake of fire. Holy city, lake of fire. We choose the holy city. So let's just, I think I'm going to go back to the Roman Empire and just point out some of the features of it.

There's a lot about trade. A lot about, there's the morality of sexual ethics would have been bizarre, I think.

[8:09] Conquest, the power of the sword, multiple gods, emperor worship. Yeah. And what have I got? There's the emperor. There's the, yeah. And of course there would have been people just getting on with their lives.

I don't think everybody would have been martyred. There'd be people thinking, you know, here we are, Roman Empire. Can't do much about that. Just getting on with their lives. But how, you see? How would you just get on with your life if you were forced to worship the emperor as part of your company's mourning ritual or whatever? Anyway, so trying to set the scene a little bit there.

So I've got three things I'd like us to look at. So why does the book talk about life after death? What does it say about life after death? And what does it expect people to do about life after death?

So three points. I'm afraid they're not equal length. Why? Why does it talk about it? What's the relevance? What does it say? What's the content of what's said? And then three, what do you do?

[9:14] What's the action point from this? Okay, that's my plan. Makes sense, doesn't it? Yeah. Thank you, Mark. So why does it talk about life after death?

I've got two answers to this. Number one, because people who were not Christians were dying. Well, everybody dies, don't they? And I take you to the four horsemen of the apocalypse. You will have heard of that.

Everybody's heard of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. And they are riding around, bringing with them, and I forget which exact order it is, war, famine, disease, unrest.

And they are riding through the Roman Empire. And people die. Wars, famines, earthquakes. Just the same now, isn't it?

Just the same now. People die. We live in a world where there is death. In the book of Revelation, it is put as things like locusts.

[10:16] That's going back to the story of Exodus when God sent locusts into Egypt to show them that things were wrong and to warn them to change their minds.

That was why God sent locusts to Egypt. Let my people go, if you remember that story. And here in the Roman Empire, people are dying without turning to the creator God.

And people die. And why? What's going on? And the book would say, you know, this is not just actually inevitable.

And the way things are. There's more to it than that. And the fact that they worship the emperor or whatever, it's not just their choice. Everybody's free to choose. There's more to it than that.

The almighty God, who is a compassionate God, says, this is not right. This is deeply insulting that you should be worshipping the emperor or the god Mars or the goddess Mars or the goddess Venus.

[11:21] That is actually totally at odds with who you are and who I am, says God, and how I've made you. And that is not right at all.

And in order to emphasize the severity of this, the world is allowed to be in this severe condition.

The Lord sends many warning signs of his displeasure so that people will change their minds.

And the Bible word is to repent. And that's why the world is like it is. Because God is saying, repent.

A little bit like on a computer when all the warning signs flash up and say, system overload, fan not working, error 404, blue screen of death.

Something's not right with that machine. And God is saying of this world, you know, something's deeply not right. That's why all these error messages keep coming up. You need to go back to the manufacturer.

And get it, get sorted. Why does it talk about death? Well, there's one reason. Here's the second reason. And this would be more particular to the readers of his book.

[12:32] Because Christian people were dying. They were being killed for being Christians. And there's a Roman soldier. There's poor Antipas. And there are different references to this through the book.

There's something about people who've been beheaded for the testimony to Jesus. Personally, if I was being martyred, I think I would quite like to be beheaded. Because it would be over really quickly.

That's quite a merciful way of being killed. I hope that never becomes relevant. But just various, as you go through the book, there's various things that depict Christians.

And say, these are people who are prepared to shed their blood for the testimony of Jesus. People who are slain for the testimony of Jesus. And as, if I was in one of those churches, I would be having quite a lot of questions.

You know, what's all this about? If I'm being a Christian and it actually doesn't lead to me being happy and healthy and wealthy. But leads me to being beheaded. What sort of God am I serving? What, does this show that this is a God who doesn't care about me?

[13:42] Or can't do anything to help me? What is this show? Is it actually worth it? And of course the letter is going to head on answer those questions.

What happens to these martyrs? And I'll just point out the word martyr means to testify, to be a witness. For example, in a witness in a trial or something. But because them giving their evidence meant they died for it.

It comes to mean somebody who dies for giving evidence. But originally it's somebody who testifies and gives evidence. And what John is going to say to the Christians.

So I'll just give you the answer to this now. Now, he's going to say that Christians experience a two-stage resurrection. And stage one is here.

And he says those who are beheaded with Jesus reign with him through the period leading up to the final end. It's a thousand-year period.

[14:44] So he's got a message for Christians who are beheaded. He says, you'll beheaded. You put your head down on that block. And the next thing you know, you're with me. Seated in heaven and reigning with me.

That's a very comforting thing. Do you not think? A bit like Jesus talking to the thief on the cross.

And saying, he said to Jesus, I've led a really rubbish life.

I'm just getting what I deserve. But will you remember me when you come in your kingdom? A

wonderful thing for him to say. And Jesus says, I tell you today you'll be with me in paradise.

The next thing you know after the noose tightens or the sword descends is you're with me. Reigning in heaven. There's two-stage resurrection.

That's stage one. Souls alive immediately with Christ. And stage two is at the very end of the world. A physical resurrection. Bodies raised on the last day.

[15:50] That's what, in a nutshell, the picture that this gives of life after death. Of a life immediately after death with Jesus Christ as a soul.

And then at the end of the long period, however long it may be, of history, when Jesus makes everything new, a resurrection of the body. That's what it teaches.

And, of course, the evidence for that is Jesus himself rose from the dead. It's not just made up out of nowhere. There. Two. And it also says there are two destinations after death.

The lake of fire. Which is an awful thing. And I don't really want to talk about it. And I'm not going to say very much. But I'm just going to be truthful.

It says there is such a place. It doesn't really bear thinking about it. We did think a bit about it last week. But I'm going to say a little bit more later, but not much.

[16:50] And the other destination, the city, the Golden City, which I do want to talk about this morning. And the city is a wonderful place.

And I would like, if I can, if I could, I would like to paint this picture for you in such an attractive way that you would say, even if this weren't true, I wish that it was.

I'd like to make you, for everybody to think, that is so good. Even if it weren't true, I wish it was. And then I'm going to say it is true. Okay? That's what I'm going to try and do.

So let's, so we looked at why it said. Now what does it say? Christopher read that to us. If you've got a Bible and you don't mind flipping up a few references, please feel free to do that in chapter 21 of the book of Revelation, which is one of the most amazing chapters in the whole of the Bible.

And he says, I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.

[18:08] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

And he who was seated on the throne said, Behold, I am making everything new. And he said, Write this down for these words are trustworthy and true.

And just moving down to verse 9. One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the last plagues came and said to me, Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

The Lamb is Jesus. And he carried me away in the spirit to a mountain great and high and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

[19:05] It shone with the glory of God. Its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great high wall with 12 gates and angels at the gates.

And on the gates were written the names of the 12 tribes of Israel. Three gates on the east. Three on the north. Three on the south. Three on the west.

The wall of the city had 12 foundations. And on them were the names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb. So we'll pick that up in a moment. It's a beautiful city. It's gold.

The streets of heaven are paved with gold. The walls are made of gold. And even if you want to go and measure it, verse 15, you take a measuring rod of gold.

Because how could you possibly use a bit of plastic or aluminium to measure a golden city? So it's a beautiful city. And it's likened to the bride, isn't it?

[20:05] Like a bride dressed for her husband. I think we have a bit of a problem getting our heads around the idea of a city being like a bride.

Next time you see a bride, say, you remind me of Manchester. Something like that. I don't think it would go down well, would it? But here is a bride.

She's a bride and a city. The city of the bride. Excuse me. I think the idea of likening to a bride brings us into the area of something personal, doesn't it?

A bride is a person. What we talk about is a relationship of love between the bride and her husband. A bride is beautiful. And goodness knows how much goes into dresses and cosmetics and all sorts of things.

I don't know. I'm a bloke. I don't know these things. But brides can be spectacularly beautiful, can't they? I think I remember going to one wedding where the groom almost fell over, I think, when he saw this wonderful vision coming towards him.

[21:22] So staggering beauty. And we have the beauty. And the relationship, you remember, is of two very unlike entities here, in the way the Bible puts it.

We have the holy, eternal Son of God, Jesus, and the bride who, let's be true, because it's people like us were once obnoxious, selfish, foul people that he has redeemed and changed and beautified and brought to himself.

So, this beautiful, beautiful story. So, I don't know whether you remember Pride and Prejudice.

Everybody's seen Pride and Prejudice? It's the story of Miss Bennett, isn't it?

Lizzie, Liza, Lizzie Bennett, who was wooed by Colin Firth in the guise of Mr. Darcy. And they get together and they all live happily ever after, of course.

You think of your favourite love story and the Bible's better. The Bible says at heart, this is a wonderful love story where the guy gets his gal and they do live happily ever after.

[22:51] The fairy stories where they say they all lived happily ever after are unrealistic for our world, but the thought of it and the idea of it exists.

And it's here. So, it's a beautiful city. It's a holy city. And that's several times said, isn't it? A holy city. What is holiness? Well, I tried to think of a definition of this.

It's like God's, the essence of God's moral character in its purest, strongest, and most radical form. Sort of God's holiness sort of boiled down into the powerful essence of it.

Now, Mary Curie, the lady scientist, I think beginning of the 20th century, took loads and loads of, did she take coal or something like that?

And refined from it, radium. And so you've got this loads and loads of coal and you end up with radium, this sort of bits of it that glow in the dark and give you cancer, actually.

[23:52] It's terribly, terribly powerful stuff. Well, God's holiness is that of him sort of in its intensest, purest, and actually quite dangerous form.

And here is the holy city, because we're not holy people, but God is holy. And therefore, that makes it sort of a dangerous thing.

You will have noticed this holiness is spelt out in a number of ways. One of the striking ones is in verse 18 and so on.

The wall was made of jasper, the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, second, sapphire, the third, however you pronounce these, chalcedony, fourth, emerald, fifth, sardonic, sixth, carnelian, seventh, chrysolite, eighth, beryl, ninth, topaz, tenth, chrysoprase, eleventh, jacinth, twelfth, amethyst.

Twelve sorts of jewel. And I think I've got a picture of twelve jewels, something like that. Now, so people who know their Bible might tell us where in the Bible you get these twelve jewels.

[25:10] Thank you. Breastplate of whom? The priest. The priest, yeah. Back in the Old Testament, when the priest went into the holy presence of

God, he would be wearing these twelve jewels.

the twelve representing the twelve tribes, but the jewels, I think, showing something beautiful. Only this man who went into the holy place could wear this.

So I'm saying there's something sort of radiant, linked with holiness in the jewels. And another thing which is holy about it, which needs pointing out, perhaps, is the dimensions of it.

So I'm now looking at verse 15. The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be twelve thousand stadia in length and as wide and as high as it is long. So twelve thousand stadia, according to my footnote, is about 1,400 miles. [26:23] So this is a massively impractical specification for a building. 1,400 miles wide, 1,400 miles long, 1,400 miles high.

So it's symbolic, isn't it? It's meant to make you go, wow, like that. And the thing is, it's a cube. It's a golden cube. And for the original readers, they would say, ah, do you know?

I know where there's been a golden cube in the Bible before. I'm sure some of you know where the golden cube came in the Bible before. Anybody like to tell us?

Holy of Holies, did somebody say? In the temple. Yes. The old way of God having his meeting with people on earth was to have a building that he would meet people in.

It was the temple. And the inner compartment of the temple, the most holy place of all, was cubic.

[27:26] And it was lined with gold. And that was the place where God met his prince, the most holy place that you could possibly have. And here it says that the whole city is cubic.

The whole city is like this holy cube. So the whole city becomes the place where God is in his most intense form.

It's not like there is a bit of the city that you have to be very careful of, because that's that little bit is where God is. The whole thing is where God is. So I've done a cube there.

And there's another thing about the holiness of this city. There's a no entry sign for things that are not holy. So you see that rather unnerving list in verse 8 where it says the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the burning lake, the fiery lake of burning sulfur.

They don't get into the city. And again, it says it in end of chapter 21, verse 27, nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

[28:48] So it's a holy city in its nature, in the beauty of it, and in the fact that there's no entry sign outside that other things, unholy things, can't come in.

What else can I tell you? A beautiful city, a holy city. I want to say, of the many things that could be said, it's a sort of creation and creative city. And it says in chapter 21, verse 24, the nations will walk by its light, the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it, and in the next but one verse, it says the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.

So here are the nations. There's somebody Italian, and there's somebody making this up as I go along, Australian, and there's somebody who's African, and somebody who's from Eastern Europe. Anyway, they're all coming into the city. They bring the splendor of the nations in. And I think that's a very interesting description.

So when people enter the city, they don't all become exactly the same. They don't become monochrome. They bring into the city something to do with the fact that they're from different nations.

[30:09] So, at the risk of over-personalizing it, so when Italians go into the city, they bring something Italian.

There's something Italian in heaven that only Italians can bring. Now, what would it be? I'll leave it to you Italians to think of. Is it culinary? Is it some particular food expertise?

I don't know. Is it car design? I don't know. The Italians bring something Italian into it. And the Chinese people bring something particularly Chinese into it.

So I show my ignorance. I think, fireworks? I don't know. Chinese invented gunpowder, didn't they? And I think that the Sri Lankans, what will they bring?

Tea? I'm making it trivial, but it is said there, there is something distinctive about human culture, about what humans have achieved in their distinctive cultural development in the nations that will be brought in there.

[31:19] So, there will, what will the English bring? Gardening? I don't know. Pardon? Roast beef, yes. Tea in the afternoon. Whatever, however that works out in heaven, there will be something that was forged and developed in this world in terms of culture, in terms of art, I don't know, football maybe, that will be brought into the Holy City.

I always think that the German contribution will be Bach's fantastic music. So we'll be able to play that, perhaps be able to play it, sing it. my illustration is, if I can remember it correctly, we went to hear, I think, the Bach B minor mass at St. Bartholomew's Church many years ago one Easter and I remember the program notes or I sort of remember the program notes where it says there's one particular bar in that music where it says and Jesus rose again and the program writer had said this bar of music is the highest cultural achievement of Western music in the whole of history and if that's true and who knows, I reckon that will be in heaven.

I reckon that will be brought into the Holy City. Right, so it's those things and there is also the tree of healing that goes on in the next chapter.

There's a river, the water of life clear as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city, chapter 22. On each side of the city stood the tree of life.

How do you do that? There's one tree but it's on both sides and it bears twelve crops of fruit yielding its fruit every month and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

[33:17] No longer will there be any curse. So the tree of life is there and the healing river is there. There's the river and there's the tree. It's the opposite of curse.

Curse is when the handle of the thing that you're trying to tighten up falls off which is what this did. Curse is when the screws don't tighten up properly on anything.

Ah, how disappointing and upsetting that is and all sorts of things. Those are just trivial examples but our life has got this disappointment. Things spoil. Things frustrate.

things get corrupted. Things aren't how they're meant to be and he says there'll be a river there and there'll be a tree of life which takes away that curse and life will be life but it will be that without curse.

and I'm saying it's a tree that carries creation into sorry it's a it's a it's a city that carries creation into it and that in itself has got creation working as it ought to work.

[34:32] Trees do what they're supposed to do. Rivers bring healing. So I hope I painted a little bit of a picture that you think that sounds really good.

So let me thirdly go on to what does the writer of the book of Revelation expect people to do now about life after death? So are there any action points?

And I want to say that as the Bible looks at it the afterlife is connected to this life. They're not two completely separate things.

There is a connection. There is a moral and spiritual connection between this life and the life to come. And one bit that we looked at last week which I'm going to refer us to is the whole theme of judgment.

That life that we have lived in this life is subject to judgment chapter 20 it says I saw the dead great and small standing before the throne and the books were opened.

[35:40] Another book was opened which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. It says they were end of verse chapter 20 verse 13 each person was judged according to what he had done.

Judgment according to books. those who have done good will rise to live. Those who have done evil will rise to be condemned is what John says about it in his gospel.

The deeds of this life are not lost or irrelevant. They carry over into the life to come. There is a connection between this life and the life to come.

that is a number of things isn't it? It makes sense. I think intuitively we think yeah the things that I have done in this life count for something.

It is also rather scary because you think suppose God actually went through this long list of all the stuff I have done and said and thought I wouldn't be happy with that myself. Let alone what God would think of it.

[36:54] so that's rather scary. But I want to ask it this way what would your deeds connect you to?

Would your deeds connect you to the holy city or somewhere else? In other words in the deeds that you have done were you choosing now in this life I will do this knowing that there is a lamb who was slain or I do this because the emperor says so.

What do your deeds connect you to? Is it to the gods of this world including the god that says there's no god or to the true god?

What does your life connect you to in the world to come? So in two ways there's a warning and there's an invitation. So let me do the warning.

I don't want to push this button very hard because it is a strong button but I will say it does say there's a lake of fire and it does say it won't be empty.

[38:09] I find that a hugely scary prospect but I'm telling you what it says. It also says there will be a time when it's too late to change your mind. Now at this moment we have time.

opportunity. We have the possibility of changing our minds. But that opportunity will come to an end and the text says let him who does wrong continue to do wrong.

Finish. Fixed. But at the moment there's a sort of fluidity. Take the opportunity. opportunity. Take your opportunity to connect your life here with the afterlife that has that glowing beautiful wonderful promise attached to it.

So there's a warning to heed and there's an invitation to accept. There is a lamb who was slain and he was slain to make his bride beautiful.

He was slain. He shed his blood to cleanse us. He shed his blood so that our sins could be paid for.

[39:25] And the book of writing which says all the things that we've done which we're not proud of and we certainly want God to look at carefully. But through Jesus all of that is scrubbed out.

Delete. Delete. Covered. Dealt with. Finished. Gone. As far as the east is from the west that far he removes our transgressions from us.

There's a lamb who was slain and there's an invitation from him. You've still got a chance. The holy city. We haven't closed the doors yet.

It's still open. There's loads of people still to come in. It's put in chapter 22 as a sort of drinking invitation. Him who is thirsty let him come and drink.

And there's an invitation for all of us. Thirst. Do we thirst? Are we dried up? And the lamb upon the throne, the God of heaven says, I can provide living water to irrigate your life, to bring beauty and life into you.

[40:33] Whoever is thirsty let him come. There's an invitation. invitation and the promise to those who accept that we're on our way home.

Let's sing together. 968. 968. 968. 968.