

Heaven and Hell Christianity

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Date: 28 October 2018

Preacher: Philip Wells

[0:00] So let's ask this question that what Christianity is all about. There's an old-fashioned answer. And the old-fashioned answer is Christianity is about going to heaven and avoiding going to hell.

! And that answer has received lots of criticism. People would say it's the promise of going to heaven is rather pie in the sky.

And not to do with the real world now. And they'd also say that the threat of hell is a crude medieval threat. And they would say that if you accept that, you're motivated by the self-interest of fear.

And it is certainly true that it furnishes a very good reason for being a Christian. Because avoiding hell, I think, is a very good thing to try to do, don't you?

Who in their right mind would want to go to hell? And of course, a Christian believing this would have immense reason to be grateful to God every single day, whether it was raining or shining, because God has saved them from hell.

[1:18] And there's a motivation, obviously, of self-interested pleasure. Who would not want to go to a place of joy and delight?

And for a Christian, there was a certain amazement that God, not that I've deserved this, but that God should want me to enjoy his joy in heaven.

What an amazing thing. That would cheer the darkest day, wouldn't it? To think, God has in store. He really wants me to have the joy of heaven. But that version of Christianity is a difficult one to believe for many reasons.

But I think one reason is that in the West here, we seem so secure. Hell seems so far off. Any thought of, you know, the big disturbance that we're worried about is being overcharged on Amazon or something like that.

You know, that's almost the... This is a caricature, of course. But we're not disturbed by bombs and destruction. We find it hard to think of anything so catastrophic as hell.

[2:36] And we seem to have so much already. Here in the West, we are surrounded, relatively speaking, by ease, luxury, health, wealth.

And it seems rather difficult for us to believe that heaven could offer any much improvement, really. So it's hard to believe. And so there is a modern, first world, alternative answer.

What's Christianity about? Well, it's about me having peace and personal satisfaction now. And this has all sorts of effects on our outlook on the Christian life. It affects what we think church ought to do.

It ought to help me to have peace and personal satisfaction. And it becomes something which we consume. And the Christian message becomes God loves you. Full stop.

That's all that the Christian message reduces to. So there's nothing about hell in that. There's nothing about that's where I might have gone if. There's nothing about being a sinner and being saved from wrath.

[3:35] And it changes the Christian message from one about forgiveness and sin and repentance and holiness to something rather different.

And sorry, my writing's gone a bit small there, hasn't it? It becomes Christianity light, L-I-T-E. Do people have light things these days? Do we have things that are light, L-I-T-E?

There used to be things that are light, sort of reduced versions. And Christianity light makes lightweight Christians. And I have to say that the spiritual atmosphere that we're all breathing will tend to reduce our Christianity to Christianity light.

So let's go back to that first old-fashioned answer. Christianity has at its heart something about going to heaven and avoiding going to hell. That first answer could be tweaked and improved.

But it's a lot closer to the truth than the second one is. And our passage this morning will take us in the direction of that first answer. And Jesus certainly took people in the direction of that first answer. [4:43] So we're going to look together at the passage which Ruth so kindly read to us. Isaiah 34 and 35. Please will you find it in your Bible. Chapter 34 is a chapter in which a garden gets turned into a desert.

Chapter 35, sorry, chapter 34 is a chapter of future fearful judgment in which a garden gets turned into a desert. Chapter 35 is a chapter of future hope in which a desert gets turned into a garden. Chapter 34 addresses the nations. Come near you nations. And it's focused actually on one particular nation, Edom, which you'll find in verse 6.

And it has these horrific ingredients of anger, slaughter, sacrifice, retribution, emptiness, permanently.

And chapter 35 is about God's people, the redeemed of the Lord and their fruitfulness and healing and safe and joyful homecoming, permanently having joy and new life.

[5:57] And those are those two chapters. So that's what we're going to look at this morning. And if you're not used to coming to church, you might think, well, this is very strange.

They're reading from an ancient text written in a far off country about things that are just ancient history and nothing much to do with us today in the world of Twitter and Facebook and Alexa and Netflix.

Nothing to do with that at all. Well, the Bible actually sees this passage as being relevant in a number of ways. So I can tell you that the writer of the last book of the Bible, Book of Revelation, picks from this and he talks about the sky being rolled up like a scroll as something that's still yet to happen.

And he talks about the great day of the wrath of the one who sits upon the throne and of the Lamb and who can stand it. And he looks forward to that something still to happen.

So this chapter is still pending. It's still open before us. What it says about God's future wrath is abundantly relevant. John references this chapter when he looks forward to the world to come in its glory.

[7:19] And he says, as we were singing, there's no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away. And he's quoting from, at least partly, from this chapter.

Sorrow and sighing will flee away. So what it says about the goodness of the world to come is still abundantly relevant. The writer to the Hebrews, writing to Christians in the early part of the Christian church, quotes this passage, the bit about strengthen the feeble hands and steady the knees that gives way.

He says, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees, make level paths for your feet. And he seems to think that what was addressed to the redeemed in chapter 35 in front of us was relevant to his Christians under the pressures that they were under then.

And therefore, I would say, relevant to us now. And in particular, Jesus, our Savior, refers to this passage when he's asked, are you the one to come or should we look for another?

In other words, is this it? Is what you're doing the fulfillment of all the strands and threads of prophecy? And Jesus says, well, look around. The blind receive their sight.

[8:42] The lame walk. Those who have leprosy are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. And good news is preached to the poor. And he's quoting partly from this and other texts as well, but partly from this and saying, this is being fulfilled.

I am the key to this. It is happening in front of your very eyes. That's what he said when John the Baptist asked him. The day of Jesus' ministry is the key day of fulfillment of these verses breaking into space and time.

So it's relevant. So let's look, first of all, at the judgment on the nations, chapter 34. Then we'll look at the salvation for the redeemed in chapter 35.

So the nations. Chapter 34, verse 1 says, Come near you nations and listen. Pay attention, you peoples. Let the earth hear and all that is in it, the world and all that comes out of it.

The Lord is angry with all nations. His wrath is upon all their armies. He will totally destroy them. He will give them up to slaughter. So who is he referring to, these nations?

[9:56] Well, in the context, the nations are all the nations of the world except his own people, ancient Israel. And the nations that he would have had in mind as Isaiah as he wrote it would have been nations such as Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Moab, Edom, Tyre.

And these are nations that are in our history books, but they would have been very contemporary for the writer. But really the text isn't just limited to those nations.

This international judgment from God is something that has not yet happened and it will encompass all nations. So all the nations that we now have will be included.

So the European Union will be included. The Middle East will be included. China will be included. Africa will be included. The USA will be included.

Latin America will be included. The Pacific nations will be included. All nations will come under God's judgment. And when Jesus speaks about this matter, he puts himself in exactly the driving seat of judgment.

[11:16] When he says, when the Son of Man comes, referring to himself, he will sit on his throne and all nations will be gathered before him.

And he will judge them, separating them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. So all the nations that have ever been and ever will be will be assembled before Jesus Christ, who will judge every single one and every single member of every single nation.

So if you come along this morning and you thought, well, Christianity is just a European religion, then I have to say that although culturally that there may be some truth in that, no nation is excluded from the judgment of the God of the Bible.

No nation is excluded. And it is an article of faith for Christians that Jesus Christ, who is our Savior, will come to judge, the old version says, the quick and the dead, quick meaning living.

That's who Jesus is. He's the one who will judge the living and the dead. Judgment on the nations. So one day all of us will meet him, either as Savior or as judge.

[12:48] So let's ask a few questions about judgment. This judgment on the nations. So we jump straight into the chapter, but you might like to ask, well, what have they done to deserve this?

Why does it come in so quickly God will judge these nations? Let me give you an answer to that question. The nations, you could almost summarize it like this, that it is characteristic of the nations that they don't let God be God.

Now, let's expand on that. They have perversely and proudly made their own gods and along with that despised the people of the true God.

So there's several angles on this. But let's take the one of the perversely and proudly making their own gods. So many years later, when the Apostle Paul goes to the nation of the Greeks, he explains to them, in the midst of all their temples and gods and idols, he says to them, God made the world and everything in it.

He gives all people life and breath and everything else. He is not far from each one of us. We should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by man's design and skill.

[14:20] God commands all men everywhere to repent. And he's summarizing the typical sin of the nations to make up their own version of what God is like, to make up their own version of what's behind the universe, to make up their own version of what life's all about.

And chapter 34 in front of us goes straight to judgment. But Paul says, actually, there's something else first.

There's an opportunity in the gospel of Jesus Christ for people of all nations to repent, to turn back to the God of the Bible.

If we go back to the time that Isaiah was written, it was said of Assyria, I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart.

For he says, by the strength of my hand I have done this. You might like to see parallels with the thinking of our civilizations now.

[15:31] Proud, not humble before God, not saying thank you for all that you give us, that sort of airbrushing any thought of God out of consciousness, out of discussion.

Listen to Radio 4, that's exactly what happens all the time. I will punish that thinking for willful pride that says, by the strength of my hand I've done this.

You know, our world has achieved huge amounts, hasn't it? If you look back just a generation, or a couple of generations in terms of health care, in terms of technology, in terms of standard of living, in terms of infant mortality, huge progress has been made.

We have so much. But, the thinking says, by the strength of my hand I've done this.

God has given us so much, and yet we're so ungrateful. of Babylon, it was said in those days, and this is what Babylon said, I will ascend to heaven, I will raise my throne above the stars of God, I will make myself like the Most High.

[16:56] This self-deification, making ourselves into God. And about Edom, well, Edom is the nation mentioned in this chapter, and I must say, maybe you could correct me, but I can't see anything particularly abominable about Edom.

They're just another nation, that thinks the way the nations do, and acts the way the nations are. You could almost put in there, England, or whatever nationality you are, Switzerland, Singapore, the nations under the judgment of God.

So, let's now ask, what is there, what is, so that was why are they being judged. So, what is the nature of this judgment? And I'm going to give you four answers, I hope, fairly quickly.

It's total cosmic destruction, it's a matter of sacrifice, they're turned back into formless emptiness, and all this happens permanently. Let's go through the text, where it says, what will happen, is, anger, verse 2, the Lord is angry with all nations, his wrath is upon the armies, he will totally destroy them, and it uses words like, slaughter, he will give them up to slaughter, their slain will be thrown out, their dead bodies will send up a stench, the mountains will be soaked with their blood.

So, it's a gruesome, awful picture, and as I said at the beginning, it's so difficult for us to contemplate this, because it's so far from our experience.

[18:35] The only people who will have an inkling of this, will be ex-veterans, who've been in a war zone, who are probably suffering, as we speak, from post-traumatic stress disorder, at the awfulness of the things they've seen.

not only on a human level, but it goes on to say, all the stars of the heavens will be dissolved, and the sky rolled up like a scroll, the starry host will fall, like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.

So, he seems to envisage, not just involving human individuals, but the whole cosmos, in this massive winding up of the world, in moral judgment.

And that's the vision that the Bible has, of the end of the world. Dr. Is it Brian Cox? Who's the one who does Infinite Monkey Cage?

Brian Cox. He would say, that's not how the world will end. He'll say, the world will end because, the second law of thermodynamics, means that, as millions and millions of years go on, the world will just wind down, and there's an inescapable cooling of the universe, and that's what lies ahead of us.

[19:52] And the Bible says, with respect, you're wrong. That's not how the world will end. The world will end, not because of some internal winding down of a clock, but the world will end by this, it's almost like a military operation, isn't it, of awful magnitude, undertaken by a moral person who made everything, and all the people in it.

Because this world is not an impersonal clock winding down, it's an environment for people whom God will judge, and he'll wind the whole thing up that way. Another description of this judgment is of an enormous blood sacrifice.

So verse 5 says, my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens, it distends in judgment on Eden, the people I have totally destroyed, and there's a special word used there, which I think I'll come back to in a moment.

The sword of the Lord is bathed in blood, it is covered with fat, the blood of lambs and goats, fat from the kidneys of rams, for the Lord has a sacrifice in Bosra, a great slaughter in Eden, and the

wild oxen will fall with them, the bull calves and the great bulls, the land will be drenched with blood, the dust will be soaked with fat, for the Lord has a day of vengeance.

So it uses, again, this gruesome language, which, you know, the nearest thing that most of us ever get to fat and kidneys is something in the freezing department in Sainsbury's.

[21:37] This is sort of gruesome butchery, isn't it? And it uses this language, this is sort of sacrificial language, this is the language of taking an animal and cutting it up, killing it, using its blood, cutting up the various parts of it in various pieces of sacrifice, and then offering that whole animal to God.

So he talks about swords and blood, sacrificial animals, lambs, goats, rams, maybe there's a link between the animals and people, maybe the wild oxen are the leaders of these nations, I don't know.

But it's all in its sacrificial language, and if you're at all squeamish, you'd like me to get on to the next point. But I'm not going to go quite yet.

Fat, kidneys, blood, and let's come back to this word, verse 5, the people I have totally destroyed. There's a word here, which means marked out as totally handed over to the Lord.

In Hebrew it's herem. And this total handing over to the Lord can, I think, possibly mean a sort of total discipleship, totally belonging to the Lord in a willing way, or totally belonging to the Lord, such that without any reservation or exception, that thing, person, is burnt up completely.

[23:13] So Jericho was herem. It was, do you remember the story of Jericho? It was going to be devoted to the Lord, and nothing in that city was to be taken out for human use.

There was no sense, it's 90% given to the Lord, 10% you can take and take back home with you. And do you remember what a huge problem they got when Achan said, oh, there's a little bit there, I'll take that home, put that, and hide that.

And that just was disastrous. So this, this nation is herem. It's totally given over to the Lord for destruction.

And I think you could make a case, and I, again, I'm open to correction on this, but, that, the Christian Christian is envisaged as being totally given over to the Lord when we offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

That's how we're to live, totally given over to the Lord. That's what Christians are urged to become. It's always a fight, there's always bits that we want to take back again, but, we're to be totally given over to the Lord.

[24:23] The alternative is, given to the Lord in this sacrificial manner. This animal was burnt up completely. None of it was taken, eaten, or used.

And one way or another, God thinks all his creatures ought to be given over to him totally. That's, that's what they ought to be.

And we've, pick up some words about how things ought to be. Vengeance, upholding a cause, retribution.

And, there is a point here that, that, the nation is judged by being given over to the Lord as if a sacrifice.

And, that will happen. The only alternative is if somebody else steps in and says, rather than you being totally burnt up as a sacrifice, I'll be totally burnt up as a sacrifice instead.

[25:37] And of course, that's exactly what Jesus did when he died on the cross. The reason that none of us who believe in him will find ourselves made into that gruesome sacrifice is that, that's exactly what Jesus did when he took our place on the cross.

He was sacrificed for us. He was, uh, impaled, offered, um, burnt up, if you like, uh, suffering the full weight and fire of God's wrath on sin in himself.

And that's what gives us hope, isn't it? That he suffered that for us so I won't be burnt up like this. That's what we all need, isn't it?

We all need Jesus to be the substitute for us. If he is not that and we have to bear that ourselves, that would just be unthinkable and unspeakable and awful.

So I want to ask you to make sure that you enter that relationship with Jesus whereby he says, I've got you on this, I've got your back because I did that for you.

[27:03] What is their judgment? Well, it's formless emptiness. We see in verse 10 unending fire. It will, the, her land will become blazing pitch, it will be, not be quenched night and day, its smoke will rise forever from generation to generation, it will lie desolate, no one will ever pass through it again, the desert owl and screech owl will possess it, the great owl and the raven will nest there, God will stretch out over Edom, the measuring line of chaos, the plumb line of destruction.

So, the only things that inhabit this city now are these animals, these owls and ravens, I think unclean animals, not, not cuddly animals, but the opposite of cuddly, whatever that is, uncuddly. And, at the end of verse 10 it says, the measuring line of chaos and the plumb line of destruction. These are two words, tohu and bohu, tohu and bohu, which are there in the beginning of Genesis, the world was formless and empty, tohu and bohu, and God sends this, which was formerly a busy, functioning nation, to become tohu and bohu, to become formless and empty, sort of creation unravels.

And it becomes an environment only fit for the subhuman, these animals. And it talks about the nobles having nothing there to call a kingdom, verse 12, thorns overrun her satissals, nettles and brambles her strongholds, she'll become a haunt for jackals, a home for owls, desert creatures will meet with hyenas, wild goats will cry to each other, night creatures will find repose, find for themselves places of rest, the owl will nest there and lay eggs, she will hatch them and care for them, the falcons will gather each with its mate, and God's written it down, look in the scroll of the Lord, none of these will be missing, none will lack their mate, and he's decided that's the way it's going to be, and it's turned back to formless and emptiness.

And in the book of Revelation, this is picked up as being still valid, fallen is Babylon the great, says the Apostle John, she has become a home for demons, a haunt for every evil spirit, and every unclean and detestable bird.

[29:42] And it puts before us this thought, and I don't put it further more than a thought, but have you seen pictures of Chernobyl after the nuclear disaster, and you see those houses that are empty, children's pictures up on the wall, hanging loose, and everything decaying, and nobody there except rats and vermin and so on.

That's the picture he gives here, of a world under God's final judgment. You get the same thing in occupied Nicosia, across the borderline, where there was a Turkish invasion, and there are some houses that have just been left empty.

You can almost imagine the washing still on the washing line now in tatters, because it's just been left like that. That's the picture that seems to me to be giving us, of that part of the human project which was totally godless, left abandoned, and humiliated.

I don't know, an eternal tribute to the folly of human pride? I don't know, that's a thought, but I think it's a thought that comes from the text. So it's these things, total cosmic destruction made into an enormous blood sacrifice, turned back into formless emptiness, and all this permanently.

And it emphasizes permanent, doesn't it? It says, verse 10, the fire is not quenched night and day, its smoke will rise forever.

[31:19] That's not like most fires. Most fires get put out because they run out of fuel. That's understood, and this is saying, that's understood, but it doesn't work like this this time, because the smoke rises forever.

From generation to generation it will lie desolate. No one will ever pass through it again. And it says the same thing, verse 17, he allots their portions, his hand distributes them by measure, they will possess it forever and ever and dwell there from generation to generation.

generation. So it's a perpetual thing. Jesus said the same thing. Jesus said this is the stakes that we are living life for. It is an eternal thing.

When the king sits on his throne and separates the sheep from the goats, he says to those who are not his, go away into eternal punishment, into eternal punishment.

I know that's a horrible thought. I find it a horrible thought anyway. But it is the thought of the Bible. And it's not my job to improve on the Bible.

[32:38] God knows what he's doing and what he's doing is right. A sin against an eternal God deserves an eternal punishment. And that's what it says. An eternal, unending, permanent judgment.

Now let me just talk about professional negligence. So I know Martin's had issues with conveyancing lawyers. In which the question, did this professional person say, what he or she ought to have said?

Did he or she give the advice they ought to have given? And preachers too can be subject to the charge of professional negligence.

Did the preacher tell people that there was an eternal hell to avoid? If the preacher didn't do that, why not?

If the preacher didn't do that, they are, I would hate to be that person on the day of judgment. Why didn't you warn people?

[33:53] You just let them go their own way. You never warned them. They look to you for guidance, but you never warned them. Professional negligence. I don't want to be professionally negligent this morning. I want to be perfectly clear.

There is a hell, as it's described here in these vivid ways. There is a hell to avoid. Please don't go there.

Please don't think this is just something to ignore. Please don't think Christianity is not particularly relevant to you, because this is the relevance of it.

I don't want you to go to hell. I don't want any of my family to go to hell. I don't want any of my neighbours to go to hell. I don't want anybody to go to hell. I certainly don't want people sitting here to go to hell.

So here is the warning. That's the place to avoid. And the way to avoid it is through Jesus Christ, who himself suffered hell on the cross, so that we shouldn't have to.

[35:02] That's what Christianity is. And what a motivation to pray for our families, to pray for our neighbours, what a motivation to speak, to make sure we're not professionally negligent in bringing up our children.

Dad, you never told me. Mum, you never told me. What an awful situation that would be. And to pray for opportunities.

We don't have to be disrespectful and I don't know what the word would be. Our fellow human beings are human beings and we're to engage with them as such.

And as God gives us opportunity to reason with them, to speak with them, to convey to them. Secondly, salvation.

Let's look in chapter 35. So let's ask the initial question, what have these people done to deserve salvation? And the answer is they haven't done anything to deserve it.

[36:21] These people in chapter 35 are God's people, are his people, and he has claimed them as his people, and he has redeemed them as his people, as we shall see.

There are a number of key words used in the way God acts on behalf of his people. So, excuse me, 34 verse 8, 34 verse 8 had talked about a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, and a day to uphold Zion's cause.

So those things all go together. Retribution is not the same thing as, vengeance is not the same thing as being vengeful. Vengeance, if you're vengeful, that means if somebody goes into your lane when you're driving in the car, and you see their car in the car park, you scrape alongside their car with a key, and spoil their paintwork, that's vengeful, that's being nasty.

Vengeance is when evil gets exactly what it deserves. And any judge who doesn't give evil exactly what it deserves is corrupt, unless there's some very good reason and God is the God who gives people exactly what they deserve.

We'll come back to the cause of Zion in a minute. If we come to chapter 35, verse 4, please notice the encouragement there, which says, be strong, do not fear, behold, your God will come, he will come with vengeance, with divine retribution, he will come to save you.

[38:16] And that seems rather strange to us, doesn't it? So we might say, that's the best comfort in these verses, is it? That God is who I'm supposed to look to for comfort, is going to come with vengeance and

divine retribution, salvation, and he's going to save me.

I don't feel at all comforted by that, you might think. So let me, let's stop on that verse for a moment, for God's people.

And let's look up John 1, John 1, 9. So I'm going to stop while everybody either finds it on their phone or looks it up in the Bible in front of them because it's so important.

And the question is, how can a God who gives exactly what people deserve and comes towards us, how can we get any comfort from that?

And here is 1 John 1, verse 9, which says, 1 John 1, verse 9.

[39:38] 1 John 1, verse 9. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Now that's the verse of comfort. That's how we get forgiven. If we confess our sins, so that we don't cover them up before God, we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins.

How can God be just and forgive our sins? Because we've sinned. And the answer, of course, is sins. That it's in the nature of what Jesus did that he died for his people.

He suffered the punishment that his people deserved. He took it in full. He paid the price. He paid the penalty.

And God's justice says, I can't punish the same sin twice. If I've punished Jesus, I can't punish you for it.

[40:54] Yeah? And so it is his justice that saves us. He's already punished Jesus and we can look to him and say, justice, heavenly father, your justice means that far from you punishing me, you will do the very opposite and uphold me and fight for me and help me and hear my prayers and guide me forward and strengthen me in my weakness and give me the holiness that I need because he is just and faithful.

Do you get that point? It's absolutely important that we get that point. That's why in chapter, going back to Isaiah 35, behold your God will come with vengeance, with divine retribution, he will come to save you.

Now bring, that's to be understood in the context of what Jesus Christ has done. And the Apostle Paul will go on to say very boldly, this being the case, God is not against us.

He's for us. And if God is for us, who can be against us? Get that. If God is for us, who can be against us?

Nobody. So let's go back into chapter 35. Well, what sort of salvation is it? Well, it's described here in the, again, more vivid terms.

[42:34] The desert and the parched land will be glad. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom. It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

There's a lot of shouting going on and a lot of gardening going on. So people who know in their minds what a crocus looks like, you're well ahead of me. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like a crocus, it will burst into bloom. It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon, which I presume would be notable for its garden-like countryside.

The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon and this glory is that of the glory of God. They will see the glory of God and the Lord and the splendor of our God.

What does he mean by this vivid picture? I don't know exactly. Is he talking about the fruitfulness of people? People will be blossoming and fruitful.

[43:36] Is he talking about the environment of the new world? Because when I said heaven, that ought to be improved on.

Heaven is not, what's ahead of us is not just sort of a wafty sort of heaven. It's a new heaven and a new earth. It's a resurrection world. Which is going to be a physical world in some way that we can't comprehend because we will have physical bodies.

And is that what's being described here, the beauty of a new physical world? Because the beauty of it seems to be much the same as the glory of God. Well, I can't get my head around that, but there we are.

You will see, he says, you will see the glory of the Lord. God. That would be worth seeing, wouldn't it?

Do you not think so? That to have a journey in front of us at which it said at the end of it, you will see the splendour, the glory of the most glorious God with your own eyes, you will see that.
[44:47] Wouldn't that be something? I think it would be, I think it would be wonderful. And then we have this God coming to vindicate and to save them.

Your God will come. Please notice verse three. Strengthen the feeble knees, sorry, strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way, say to those with fearful hearts, be strong, do not fear.

fear. That's some advice, well actually it's orders given on the way to this happening.

This is going to happen right now, strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way, say to those with the fearful hearts, be strong, do not fear. This is the bit the writer of the Hebrews picks up when he talks about hardship in the Christian life.

Dear brothers and sisters, please be under no illusion, hardship is part of the Christian life. It's not a mistake that has come in, you know, God has promised that you'll never have any hardship, never have any trouble, and now something's gone terribly wrong.

[46:07] That is not the nature of the Christian life. The Christian life includes hardship, suffering, difficulties, trials, stresses, losses, crosses.

That's what it includes. God has made it to include that. If your Christian life doesn't include any of those things, then I think something's gone wrong. And why does God see fit to include these things in whatever measure?

He uses these things to make us holy. He uses these things to make us holy. Because you yourself know that you don't pray.

No, it wouldn't. You really pray when the pressure's on. And you really don't pray when the pressure's off. And God uses, as it says, discipline.

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. And it says in that passage, actually, God is acting as a loving father because loving fathers discipline their children.

[47:25] Loving fathers discipline their children. That's what a loving father does. And that's what our heavenly father does. So please don't think if you are suffering hardship, God doesn't love you.

Don't think that. Please don't think if you are suffering hardship that God has forgotten you or it's all gone wrong because that's not true either. God is totally in this and he has a plan to use this and he wants you to understand that and respond to that.

And the response that is given here is, okay, you've been knocked over strength strength in your feeble hands, steady your knocking knees and take courage in your fearful heart.

And today if you are bashed and battered by whatever it might be, looking around the room, there's all sorts of things that can do that to all sorts of us.

So I'm not going to say it didn't happen and I'm not going to say it doesn't count for much, I'm going to say totally, totally, I'm sure that was a terrible loss or a terrible stress or a terrible anxiety or whatever, but God says, okay, we've got that, but don't become spiritually incapable, spiritually immobile, spiritually stuck.

[49:17] A little bit like those of us who have back problems, the old medical advice used to be if you had a back problem, lie on a bed for six months and don't move.

And actually that's terrible advice because your muscles wither away and then you can't move after that. What they say now, if you had back problems is as soon as it's safe to do so, get moving, get your muscles moving, get your joints moving, that's okay, it will hurt, but it does strengthen you. And here's the same advice spiritually, you've had a knock, you've been battered, but don't just lie there doing nothing, get up, get on, get moving, say to those with fearful hearts, be strong, do not fear, your God will come to you.

Now what else does it say in this text? It talks about physical and spiritual healing. So here we have verse five, then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame leap like a deer, the mute tongue will shout for joy, a whole lot of shouting going on, I'm glad we had some reasonably loud music this morning because that's what it deserved.

So we have these physical things, eyes opened, ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame leaping, the mute tongue shouting for joy. Now what does he mean by this?

[50:51] Well if you put it into its context of course, blindness and deafness and dumbness can be used as a metaphor for a spiritual reality.

So Isaiah actually has a lot to say about the blindness and deafness and dumbness of Israel. Israel. And there is a Israel had huge problems of being deaf and blind and dead and silent.

And you might remember back in the early chapters of Isaiah 6, make their ears dull, close their eyes, lest they hear and turn. So it's a spiritual, there's a spiritual deafness and blindness and dumbness.

and it's saying God can reverse that. Of course if you haven't yet become a Christian, you are spiritually deaf, dumb, blind, immobile, unable to say what you should say.

And it is only the power of the Saviour that can open your eyes and your ears and your mouth and get you going. And that's the person you ought to be talking to because you're incapable of responding unless he does that.

[52:13] But interestingly there's several dimensions to this because when Jesus was asked, as I said earlier, by John the Baptist to confirm his own ministry, he said, John the Baptist was saying, okay, there you are Jesus, we can see what you're doing, is this it?

is this what the Bible's been looking for all these years? Is this it? And Jesus replies, well, this is what he replies, I don't think I've written it down actually, the eyes of the blind are opened, the ears of the deaf are unstopped, lame people are leaping, the dead are raised, the gospel is being preached, this is it.

Jesus is the one who brings this to happen. Now of course there's subtlety to it because he doesn't, part of the genius of what Jesus explains is he doesn't do everything that's promised at once.

A lot of his parables emphasize as a time lag between his first coming and his second coming. You know the parables about the weeds growing and the wheat growing and you have to wait and all that sort of thing and the people waiting until the bridegroom comes with the lamps and all that sort of thing.

But Jesus says, but be assured although you might have to wait, what I've come to do and what I've come to bring is this. And what we're waiting for is the future bodily resurrection when no eyes will be blind, there'll be no dead people, everybody will be made alive, there'll be no illness because everything will be healed, there'll be no bad backs because we'll all have new backs, there'll be no bad hips because we'll all have new hips, and whatever medical condition you like to specify, it'll all be healed because that's what will happen in the world to come when he makes all things new.

[54:23] and you might say, well what about the present day? Can I pray for people being ill at the present day? Of course you can pray and God is able to heal the body remarkably if he so wishes but please be assured his general plan is that we wait.

His general plan is what he started off spiritually, he will totally complete on the last day and that's where we're told to put our hope.

So what sort of salvation? It's that sort of salvation. Let me just quickly say there's something here about irrigation, water gushing forth in the wilderness, streams in the desert, the burning sand will become a pool, thirsty ground bubbling springs, etc.

And I could think the way to go on that would be the promise of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised living water, by this he meant the Spirit whom those who believed in him were later to receive, but I'm not going to stop on that, that's perhaps for another time.

Let's go to the end where what it describes here is a journey with a wonderful joyful homecoming.

The people who had been exiled in Babylon, let's imagine them thinking one day we're going home.

[55:50] And this is imagining them trekking back across the desert to go home. And it says those exiles will become, will be going home.

The New Testament envisages us as exiles actually. We're not home. We're temporarily in Babylon, but one day we'll go home.

And Peter refers to Christians as strangers in the world scattered throughout Pontus, Belatia and Bithynia. Strangers and pilgrims, he says, this world is not our home, we're just here for the interim.

Don't get too comfy here. Don't get too comfy here because this world is not our home. We're on the way to the city of God and this way is called the highway, the path of holiness. It's for holy people. It says the unclean don't walk that way. Where does it say that? It says that in verse 8. And wicked fools don't go about on it.

[56:50] It's not for people who are spiritually stupid. It's safe. The lion isn't allowed on there, nor the ferocious beast. Do you know John Bunyan's little picture about the lions?

Do you know that one? Just in case you don't know that one, it's in Pilgrim's Progress. And the pilgrim has a path to walk and as he looks ahead he sees some lions and he can hear them roaring. And he thinks it won't be safe to walk any further, I'd better just stop.

And the interpreter says to him, what you can't see is those lions are on chains and the chains only allow them to go so far and you can go safely on the path and the lion won't get to you because the chain will hold it back.

And that it's an allegory, it's a picture. But it's a helpful one, isn't it? We can be so scared about the future because of the lions that roar at us and the lions don't stop us traveling on the path to Zion. and what it ends up with is this overwhelming joy. The redeemed of the Lord will return and enter Zion with singing.

[58:02] Everlasting joy will crown their heads and sorrow and sighing will flee away. What a wonderful prospect. It's there, isn't it? There's a hell to be avoided and there's a heaven, if we can put it in that loose way, there's a new world to go for.

There it is in the Old Testament, Jesus says that's exactly right, it's totally relevant to us. What we have ahead of us to spur us on, to say to one another that's where we're headed.

So, you know, get your knee joints working, get your hands strengthened up, do a few spiritual press ups, go forward, that's where we're heading and even if we had to have seven lifetimes getting there, it would still be worth getting there.

And that's what we're going to sing. We're going to sing number 909.