

Look Again

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Date: 11 December 2022

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- [0 : 0 0] A few weeks ago, the BBC reported a discovery that had been made in the art world. It all had to do with the work of an abstract artist by the name of Pierre Mondrian, and the piece of art was entitled New York City One. It was created with pieces of adhesive strips on blank, I'm not sure if it was canvas or what it was, but it had been displayed in Europe and in America for some 75 years. And the big discovery was that all that time, they'd been displaying it upside down. Do you want to see it? We've got a picture? Now, they decided they can't turn it back up the right way, because if they were to do that, it could damage the piece.
- [1 : 1 1] But the chief curator said, and I quote, Once I pointed it out to the other curators, we realised it was very obvious. The passage that we're presented with in Isaiah, says something absolutely central to Christian hope. Whatever your reality is, hope turns it upside down. It completely turns it upside down. However you look at reality, the message of the Christian gospel, and we need to remember that when we read Scripture, all of it is about Jesus and his kingdom. Even though, you know, words from Isaiah were written hundreds of years before Jesus walked this earth, it's all about Jesus. It's always either pointing forward or pointing back, pointing to Jesus. Jesus and his kingdom. When we hear that message, wherever in Scripture it is presented, it says, look, whatever your view of reality, it's got to be turned upside down.
- [2 : 3 6] Look again. Now, that actually is challenging news at times. It's very, very encouraging positive news, because it means that however bleak your reality may seem, no matter how completely devastating things may look, the message of the kingdom of God turns it upside down. You see it through a different lens. And that's what we find here in these verses from Isaiah, that the people of Israel were in exile. Their homeland was completely trashed. Their lives seemed utterly hopeless, and there was no sense of what their future would be. How could things ever seem different? They were devastated. And yet Isaiah says, you've got to look again. And so we have this very rich imagery, as he presents this, of how their homeland would be restored to them, and how they needed to look again. And we have this image where we have a scorched, barren desert will be transformed into a lush garden with bubbling streams, with flowing springs, flowing streams, and blossoming flowers.
- [4 : 0 1] It was almost like we have this kind of contrast of opposites in this passage, that you see this reality, well, it's going to be transformed into its opposite. Whatever you see right now, it's going to be different.

It's going to be changed. It's going to be transformed. And that's what hope is. It turns reality upside down, and says, look again. See how this may be different.

Now, to the people of, Isaiah was speaking to at his time, were people who were in exile. But when we take this message into the whole of the scriptural message, it talks about the coming of God's kingdom.

It's talking about the kingdom that Jesus has inaugurated, but one day will come in all its fullness. Let's just close our eyes right now. I want you to picture something.

It can be anything. And don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to talk to anybody about what this is. This is just between you and you and God. And I want you just to imagine anything that maybe it might be something that's going on in your own life right now, which causes you to fear or to feel anxious or distressed or worried or concerned.

[5 : 20] It might be something that you're actually going through or something that isn't actually a reality now, but you fear it could be. Maybe very soon or maybe in the distant future. But just think of something.

Now, for most of us, that won't normally be a difficult challenge to imagine something like that. But, you know, if you're struggling to think, well, think of something beyond your own personal experience and your own personal life and think of something perhaps national or global.

Picture a scene somewhere in the world that you've heard reported in the news in recent times where the situation looks bleak. Think of a war zone.

Think of a situation of tragedy and brokenness. Now, whatever it is you're thinking of right now, just picture it in your mind.

Picture some scenes in its worst form. I'm just going to give you a moment just to think about this as you unpack that scene in your imagination.

[6 : 29] Now, holding that picture in your mind, do you imagine Isaiah speaking this message into it? Because whatever you're picturing, I want you to now transform that picture into the absolute opposite of whatever it is you've just been thinking about.

Where that picture is no longer one of fear or devastation or brokenness, but one of life and hope and energy and goodness and things restored.

Let's open our eyes again. We're going to come back to that shortly as we come to pray. But this is what, this is what Isaiah's message, this is what the message of scripture when it comes to hope is all about.

However we see reality, we are called to turn it on its head and see it differently through a radically different lens. That kind of means, I think, broadly speaking, two things.

Firstly, it means that we are challenged to see potential in realities that might not be immediately obvious. So in other words, that we may experience something that seems absolutely, completely void of hope.

[7 : 45] Whereas when we bring hope into it, we're able to see something not as it is, but as the potential that it contains. There was another artist, actually, who was, his name was James Whistler, who's an American artist.

He was not exactly bashful about his talent. And apparently there was an occasion where some canvases, some blank canvases, had been dispatched to him.

There were quite a lot of them and they were lost in the mail. And apparently he was asked, were these blank canvases of great value? To which he replied, not yet.

Hope means seeing the potential that is inherent in something that hasn't yet been brought out. And God sees that potential, he sees it in our lives in a way that we don't see.

That's the first thing. But the second thing that hope does is that it enables us to see reality even in those situations where it seems absolutely impossible to see a turnaround.

[9 : 02] Where no matter how hard we think and we try to imagine how things could contain potential, we just can't see it. Those situations of utter, utter devastation.

God says to us, no, you've got to think again, you've got to see this differently. You may think there is no potential here. You may think that there is absolutely nothing here. to envisage how it could be different, but it can be and it will be.

Very early on when I first started in ministry, it became very apparent to me how important hope is. Because there are situations and we always need hope, no matter whatever situation we're going through.

It's part of life and without it, we're devastated. We need it. We need its energy. We need to be able to see how things can be different, can be changed, can be transformed. And that's true of all of life.

But it became apparent to me that, in fact, when it comes to talking about Christian hope, about what it is that we hope for as Christians, unless we can speak of that in a way that is genuinely meaningful in the most broken and devastating and tragic of situations, then it's going to be difficult to speak of that in a way that's meaningful in any situation.

[10 : 19] And so, and some of you will know this, I spent the next five years of my life researching this as my PhD. I wanted to know what is hope?

What do Christians mean when we talk about hope? It took me in two areas of research. On the one hand, I wanted to know what psychologists had to say about hope.

And over a period of five years, I read pretty well everything that had ever been written about the psychology of hope and about what nursing science in clinical settings happened to say about hope.

What does it mean to have hope in palliative situations? What does it mean to have hope in the face of death? It's fascinating. It's a pretty well universally held set of principles that we need hope.

But the question is how do we find that hope? Particularly in those situations where things are so broken and so devastated that it just seems impossible to see how things could ever improve.

[11 : 23] And the other part of my research was looking at the theology of hope. I came to the conclusion which I still hold to is that ultimately, ultimately, that thing that is distinctive to our Christian belief is unique and is the only thing that can hold out hope in the face of literally anything and everything.

Why? Because that's focus is upon the resurrection of Jesus. At the heart of our faith is this conviction that Jesus actually died.

He was tortured and killed and was dead and buried and stayed dead for a whole weekend. And only out of that experience of crucifixion and being dead and buried was he raised.

And only God can do that. Only God can create a universe out of nothing. Only God can breathe life into a dead body. And so it is that only that hope in Jesus Christ and his resurrection that turns history around, only that will suffice.

You take that away from the Christian gospel and we're not left with very much. But we don't need to take that away from the Christian gospel because that is the Christian gospel.

[12 : 55] Look again. The thing is is that when we look at the realities around us, the very things that God is doing and the promises of God are realities that we cannot see.

They're not tangible but God can. Which is why throughout the New Testament we have Paul talking about the powers and the principalities that we cannot see. They're of a different kingdom but they are that dimension, that reality that are there that we need to know about.

Whenever we pray, whenever we bring anything before the throne of God in prayer, we are engaging in a reality that is not a material reality. It's not something that you can see and touch and unpack and explore.

We are dealing with ultimate reality and it is ultimate reality that God promises us. All the while that we may be surrounded by brokenness and destruction, God sees things differently.

I want to share with you a story and close with this story which I'm going to read to you because it's presented far better than I can present it in my own words.

[14 : 11] And it's a story about a family in a town called Jezero. It took place in the 1990s.

Jezero was in the Bosnian region. It was before the start of the Bosnian war, the Malcock family lived next to a small lake in the northwestern village of Jezero.

One day in 1990, Smedio Malcock returned from a trip to Austria with an unusual gift for his teenage sons, Zavad and Katib.

It was an aquarium with two goldfish. Two years passed before Bosnian Serb forces advanced on Jezero.

The women and children fled and the men stayed back to resist the attacking soldiers. Smedio Malcock was killed. When his wife, Fahima, sneaked back into the destroyed village to bury her husband and rescue what remained of their belongings, she took pity on the fish in the aquarium.

[15 : 27] She let them out into the nearby lake, saying to herself, this way they might be more fortunate than us. Fast forward to 1995.

Fahima Malcock returned with her sons to Jezero. Nothing but ruins remained of their home and their village. Through misty eyes she looked towards the lake.

Glimpsing something strange she walked over to the shore. The whole lake was shining from the thousands of golden fish in it.

She said, it made me immediately think of my husband. This was something he left me that I had never hoped for. During the years of killing all around the lake, life underwater had flourished.

After their return for him and Malcock and her sons started caring for and selling the goldfish. By 1998, homes, stores and coffee shops all over the region featured aquariums containing fish from Jezero.

[16 : 46] The Malcock house rebuilt on its original site is one of the biggest in the village. Two new cars are parked in front and the family says it has enough money to quit worrying about the future.

Zavid Malcock said it was a special kind of gift from our father. Hope says look again.

Hope says all the while there are things there are realities going on that you cannot see but are there. All the while that war and devastation was raging there were realities of life flourishing where it could not be seen.

And this is the dynamic by which we are called to live as Christians. to trust that God is in control of those realities that we cannot see.

Spiritual realities and spiritual truths but to connect with him and to trust that that which we cannot see is real and is true and is to be trusted.

[17 : 57] As Tagore once said faith is the bird that sings when the dawn is still dark. so let's pray once again. Let's join together in prayer.

As we once again I invite you to close your eyes and as we do so let's just revisit those realities that we thought about just now. and in our minds let's just think if they may be realities in our own lives they may be global realities they may be things that present us with a sense of angst or concern or fear or worry.

Let's hold those realities and all their brokenness before God in prayer. Lord God thank you that you call us you challenge us to see things through a different lens that you turn reality upside down.

Lord we hold in our prayers now those situations in our own lives and those situations more widely across the world where all that can be seen is apparent destruction and chaos.

We hold before you those situations that seem apparently full of nothing other than despair. Lord we hold before you our worst fears.

[19 : 41] Lord as we bring these things before you in prayer help us to trust in you and to see these things differently to see them turned upside down to see them as you see them to trust in you that your kingdom is promised that your kingdom will come and it will come in all its fullness.

So Lord give us the strength to live by that promise to live by that hope and to know that you are coming to us in Christ to make all things new.

May we live by that, trust by that and hope by that. Now and every day in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen.