

Present – or future?

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Date: 19 November 2017

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[0 : 0 0] Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.

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

And he said to me, It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.

[1 : 1 8] The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God, and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper clear as crystal.

It had a great high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed, on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates.

And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.

[2 : 5 6] And when day came, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles, Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip and Bartholomew, and Matthew and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

And he came down with them, and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples, and a great multitude of people from all Judea, and Jerusalem, and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases.

And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him, and healed them all.

And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said, Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

[4 : 36] Blessed are you when people who hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man, Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy.

For behold, your reward is great in heaven, for so their fathers did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. Well, a friend of ours lost his job last month.

He's a Christian, he's a follower of Jesus, and because God is a God who speaks the truth and doesn't lie, our friend had refused to lie, in order to promote the interests of the company he worked for, and so he was sacked.

[5 : 53] On what grounds, he asked, the answer for having displayed a complete lack of integrity towards his company. Is that not extraordinary?

It's hard, isn't it, to miss the irony, where to refuse to lie is to lack integrity. Aren't there times, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, when you simply find yourself weary of living in such an upside-down world?

Weary of trying to take Jesus Christ seriously in a world that doesn't. A world which, on the one hand, proclaims tolerance and understanding, yet which can be so intolerant and so misunderstanding of Christian beliefs.

Or perhaps you're in jam, perhaps with many others. You went to the Sorted event last weekend with 800 or so other teenagers. It was a great day, a day of great Bible teaching and encouragement. But then on Monday morning, you found yourself back at school with perhaps just a few other Christians in your school.

Perhaps the only one in your class. Or some of the women here might have had a similar experience at the London Women's Convention a few weeks before that.

[7 : 13] A similar Monday morning experience after such a great day. I'm the only one. There are so few of us. Well, I guess for some, that kind of weariness may cause us to ask, am I on the right track?

Turn back, will you, to the beginning of Luke. Luke chapter 1. Do you remember Theophilus? Theophilus to whom Luke writes? Luke chapter 1, verse 3.

Luke says, Now, we don't know much about Theophilus.

Why did he need certainty? Well, presumably because he lacked it. Was he weary of living in a world that doesn't take the claims of Jesus Christ seriously?

Was he a new Christian, unsettled by opposition to the Christian message from the establishment, from both the religious and the political establishment in the first century?

[8 : 26] Was he a not-yet-Christian, investigating the Christian faith, but actually put off again by that same opposition from the religious and political establishment?

Well, we don't know. But back in Luke chapter 6, there are two things that Theophilus and we can be certain and confident about this morning.

And as we look at these two things, I hope we're all going to see that they are thoroughly and completely liberating. And I put them on the back of the service sheet this morning.

First of all, we can be confident in our Christian foundations. Secondly, we can be confident in our Christian experience. First of all, we can be confident in our Christian foundations.

Have a look at verses 12 and 13 of Luke chapter 6. In these days, Jesus went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.

[9 : 30] And when the day came, he called his disciples and chose from them 12, whom he named apostles. Now, this is a key point of decision.

It's signaled by the fact that Jesus spends all night in prayer beforehand. And it is an astonishing moment in Luke's gospel because Jesus is saying, we are going to start again.

We're going to go back to the beginning and start all over again. We'll build a new people of God from the foundations upwards. It's really the logical consequence of the rejection of Jesus' manifesto by the religious establishment.

They have demonstrated that they are unfit for purpose. So just look back to chapter 5, verse 21, for example, as they asked Jesus, who is this who speaks blasphemies?

Who can forgive sins but God alone? In other words, you see, rather than recognizing that here before them is God on earth, they just question him. Or chapter 5, verse 30, why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?

[10 : 46] Rather than celebrating that Jesus is God on earth, come to bring the forgiveness of sins to those who don't deserve it, they just grumble.

Or chapter 5, verse 33, the disciples of John fast often and offer prayers and so the disciples of the Pharisees, put yours, eat and drink. Rather than rejoicing that Jesus Christ is God himself, come to rescue his people, they criticize.

And chapter 6, verse 11, then their fury when Jesus says he is Lord of the Sabbath. But they are filled with fury and discuss with one another what they might do with Jesus.

It is no wonder, is it, as we saw last week that Jesus says, in chapter 5, verse 38, new wine must be put into fresh new wineskins.

In the past, God had worked through the Jewish nation. They were his people, the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel. Joseph with his technicolor dream coat and his 11 brothers.

[11 : 54] Tragically, what is happening now in Luke? Well, as we saw last week and the week before, Jesus is rejected by their descendants, the Jews of his own day.

And so what is he doing now in Luke chapter 6, verses 12 to 16? Why, he is appointing 12 new leaders, the apostles, who will be the foundations of a whole new people of God.

The word apostle simply means someone who is sent, a messenger. They will, if you like, be Jesus' official spokesman. Indeed, it's how Jesus commissions them at the end of Luke.

Just turn on to the end of Luke's gospel, and we can see this commissioning, this formal commissioning of the apostles. Luke chapter 24. Luke chapter 24, verse 46.

Here then is the risen Jesus saying to the apostles, Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

[13 : 18] You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you, but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

They were Jesus' appointed witnesses to the nations. It's why in Acts chapter 2, when another apostle is chosen to replace Judas, it has to be someone who was an eyewitness of the whole of Jesus' ministry, including his death and resurrection.

It's why in that first reading, it's why we had that first reading from Revelation chapter 21, did you notice the wonderful description of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city, and what are we told?

The wall of the city had 12 foundations, and on them were the 12 names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb. Now presumably, these 12 apostles were amongst the original eyewitnesses Luke interviewed, men like Matthew, John, Peter, and James, who between them wrote large portions of the New Testament.

Later, there would also be the apostle Paul, untimely chosen, yet chosen nonetheless. And then there was Judas, verse 16.

[14 : 41] I wonder what you make of Jesus' choice of Judas. Did he get it wrong? Well, I guess Judas should make us tremble, because of course, Judas shows, doesn't he, that you can have all the privileges, as he did, yet not be saved.

You can have all the privileges of a Christian home, to go on Christian conferences, a good church, on the church council, ordained, a bishop even, but actually not be converted.

But as well as making us tremble, Judas should also make us glorify God, because Judas demonstrates God's wonderful, magnificent sovereignty.

Judas isn't steamrolled into doing something he doesn't want to do, and yet at the same time, he perfectly fulfills the role he is given, and plays a key part in the execution of Jesus.

So 12 apostles, they didn't emerge by accident, they weren't chosen by a vote, they were appointed, appointed by the Lord Jesus himself, the foundations of a new people of God.

[16 : 03] They would be responsible for the writing of the New Testament. Notice, will you, that then immediately leads to this amazing scene in verses 17 to 19, a huge multitude of people gather both from within the borders of Israel, but also beyond.

Once again, Jesus demonstrates his authority over sickness, disease, and wickedness, the very things that ruin our world. Once again, here is a snapshot of his everlasting kingdom, a place where disease, and illness, and sickness, and evil, and evil, are driven out.

Just as we are told in that description of the heavenly city, he'll wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

On Wednesday, Leonardo da Vinci's painting, Salvator Mundi, the saviour of the world, was bought for \$450 million at Christie's in New York.

It shattered the record as the most expensive piece of artwork ever sold. It had been part of King Charles I's royal collection, and was last sold in the 1950s for just £45 when it was assumed to be a fake.

[17 : 40] Even now, apparently, there are still lingering doubts as to its authenticity. Now, you may think I'm overly cautious, but I'm not sure if I would spend \$450 million on something over which there were still lingering doubts.

But what if we have lingering doubts about those who wrote the New Testament? Well, I guess at best we'll be cautious, uncertain disciples of the Lord Jesus.

But Luke wants us to know we can be confident in the foundations, the writing, the apostles, the New Testament, and especially in the face of opposition by the establishment.

Because that is exactly what Jesus faces here, opposition by the religious and political establishment. Confidence in the apostles is one of the hallmarks of those who genuinely belong to Jesus Christ.

Christ. And just as you might check the authenticity of a painting by bringing in an expert or a panel of experts, so if you want to check the authenticity of a church, why?

[18 : 59] We bring in the apostles. We bring in the teaching of the New Testament. And we ask, is this church apostolic in its teaching and doctrine? Indeed, I think one of the helpful things in the current debates about gender and human sexuality in the Church of England and other denominations, is that actually those who reject the foundations, those who reject the clear teaching of the apostles, are being exposed.

And that can only be a good thing. In contrast, the great thing about the Reformation was that the teaching of the apostles was rediscovered, which of course is still the great need in so many churches today, to be confident in the apostolic foundations.

But secondly, Luke wants us to be confident in our Christian experience, verses 20 to 26. Now these verses, they're similar, aren't they, to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Gospel, except verse 17, did you notice that rather than taking place on a mountain, this takes place on level ground?

Most likely, it's a separate occasion, presumably as Jesus travelled around the place, presumably he repeated his teaching in different places. Now I guess for some of us, perhaps for many of us, these may be familiar verses.

So I'd really love it this morning if we could look at them freshly and hear them freshly. Both so that those of us who are followers of Jesus can be comforted and encouraged, and also so that those who aren't might be helpfully unsettled and even frightened.

[20 : 53] Now it seems to me the contrast between verses 20 and 22 and verses 24 and 26 could not be greater. And especially did you notice as Ed read the passage for us, the contrast between the future and the present with both groups of people.

Let me read them in a slightly different order to the passage. Verse 20, blessed to you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Verse 24, but woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Verse 21, blessed to you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Verse 25, woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Verse 21, blessed to you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

Verse 25, woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Verse 22, blessed to you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil on account of the son of man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for behold your reward is great in heaven, for so their fathers did to the prophets. Verse 26, woe to you when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

[22 : 25] Now we need to be clear, this is not Jesus the left wing radical who has got it in for the rich and automatically favours the poor. Nor is Jesus saying that this is the way to get to heaven, to get into God's kingdom.

How heartless it would be if Jesus was saying that the way to get into God's kingdom is to become poor, hungry, sad and hated. Besides, we know from the previous chapter from Levi that actually entry into God's kingdom is by following Jesus.

Jesus the sin doctor who alone can forgive sins. Instead, will we notice who Jesus is talking to? Verse 20, and he lifted up his eyes on his disciples.

Jesus is talking to his disciples. And verse 22, blessed to you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil on account of the son of man.

Again, he's talking to his disciples. Those who will be hated on account of Jesus because they belong to Jesus. In other words, Jesus is talking about the experience of being a disciple.

[23 : 41] And he's using the kind of language which those of us who have been going through Luke both on Sundays and in our growth groups last year will by now be familiar with. To be blessed means to be favoured.

Not so much a feeling of isn't this great but more a declaration of God's favour. Just as when you go to a wedding, if you've been to a wedding and there's the declaration that's made, isn't it?

I now declare you husband and wife. They may not feel any different at that moment but it is a declaration. And Jesus is saying if you know what it is to be spiritually poor before God, if you know what it is to have no merit of your own, if you're someone who longs for and hungers after the new creation, if you know what it is to grieve your sin, to weep over a world stained by sin and torn apart by sin, if you know what it is to be hated, excluded, spurned on account of me, not by everyone, but if you know something of that, if that is your experience as Jesus, then you are blessed, favoured by God.

Because you see, these are the characteristics, broadly speaking, of his disciples. Indeed, says Jesus in verse 23, rejoice, rejoice, because your experience now won't last forever.

As we saw last week, the mark of the disciple is that we long, we long for the return of the bridegroom. We long for that final Sabbath rest, to be in the new creation, at home with God and his people.

[25 : 36] And the opposition that we face in the meantime, says Jesus, is one of the marks of authentic, genuine discipleship, justice, just what happened, he says, in the Old Testament to the prophets.

Now, I guess most of us know what it means to feel lost, perhaps on a walk, perhaps trying to navigate somewhere in the car, or get around London somehow.

How that sort of nagging sense of uncertainty becomes a growing anxiety. This can't be right. I'm sure we made a wrong turning five miles ago.

I should never have followed the sat-nav. I should have followed the sat-nav. But then what happens, you see that road up ahead, or you see a landmark, or something like that, and suddenly the gloom lifts, and you rejoice, and you say to yourself, hooray, I'm on track after all.

I guess we can all relate to that. Well, Theophilus, when you find yourself hated, spurned by friends, passed over for promotion, when you find yourself at odds with the religious and political establishment, far from being a sign that you are on the wrong track, that you've made a mistake in following Jesus, be assured you are on the right track.

[27 : 10] Theophilus, don't imagine that it is the rich and impressive people in this world who are blessed by God. I think it's how we all naturally think, isn't it? But no, God's favor is on those who are persecuted, who are opposed, those who know their spiritual need.

in other words, those who suggest that earthly wealth, health, popularity, promotion, pleasures, possessions, are the norm for Christian disciples, are out of step with what Jesus teaches here.

If we have those things, rejoice, but they are not the norm. And I think it's fair to say that actually every generation of Christian disciples, every generation of followers of Jesus, does indeed discover the reality of these words here.

That hostility to Jesus and his disciples, whether it's from the media, from colleagues, from extended family, from legislators, is nothing new.

And therefore, as such, when we experience these things, it should give us a great sense of encouragement. Encouragement in our Christian experience, saying to ourselves, I am on track.

[28 : 35] But I take it there's also a warning here, isn't there? And I take it that some of us will need to heed the warning. In part, it is a warning to those who are not yet disciples, those who, as they look at their lives, they think they have no need for God, no need for the forgiveness of sins, those who are self assured.

It may be their riches, it may be their popularity, their good looks, their social networks, it may simply be that life is fine and satisfying and fun. And Jesus says, woe to you.

You see, it is a disaster to get to the point in life when you don't need God. wealth. Because actually when all you have is worldly security, then actually you are very insecure indeed.

And when all you have is worldly wealth, then you are very poor indeed. I was hearing of a school chaplain who was teaching this passage and verses 24 to 26 to a bunch of sixth form boys, years 12 and 13.

I don't know how you would do that. Just as you sort of think about it, how would you teach verses 24 to 26 to a bunch of 17 and 18 year old boys? Well, this is what he said. He said, if the reason you boys are not turning to Jesus is because you want to have sex with your girlfriend, then it better be good.

[30 : 06] It's a great thing to say, isn't it, having looked at verses 24 to 26. Of course it had. It better be so good that it's worth losing your soul for. Just as we might say to someone in the desirable South London postcode, the lifestyle you long for, the career that you're building for yourself, the holidays and retirement you're planning, they better be good because they won't be anything else.

Let me say it again, this is not a knee-jerk reaction against the rich and wealthy. rather it is the deep compassion of the Lord Jesus that he speaks like this, that he speaks such reality.

But I guess the warning is primarily addressed to Jesus' disciples, isn't it? One commentator writes, the state of life which our Lord blesses, the world cordially dislikes.

the people to whom our Lord says, woe to you, are the very people whom the world admires, praises and imitates. Do we really think that the favour of Christ with trouble and the world's ill word is better worth having than money and merriment and a good name among men without Christ?

Are you taken in by the markers of middle class worldly success? It seems to me that verses 24 to 26, they are the very things, aren't they, which we so easily value for ourselves, for our children, those of us who have children, money, wealth, a sense of fullness and satisfaction, a light-hearted enjoyment of life.

[32 : 01] We want people to think well of us. and we want those things for our children. But you see, the point is that all these are marks of a life lived independently of God.

It begs, I think, very deep questions. Where is the treasure that we are looking for? Do we look for the treasure that is now in this world or do we instead look to the treasure, the reward in the next world, in the new creation?

It's very binary, isn't it, what Jesus says here? It's very kind of one or the other. They are two very different kinds of lives, two very different sorts of people.

And Jesus says, for those who are my disciples, have confidence confidence in your experience as a disciple. And be confident and know that what you experience now is not going to last forever.

And for those who aren't his disciples, who dismiss Jesus and the forgiveness that he offers, who say, I don't need these things, life is just fine. He says, you be assured also that actually what you experience now will not last forever.

[33 : 36] It's very binary. It's either one or the other.