

Hope in an Age of Despair

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[0 : 00] Well, I do want to begin by asking you the question that is in the outline, right at the top. Do we live in an age of despair?

Do we live in an age of despair? This isn't a question about you personally or how your life is going. Rather, it's about the social climate that we live in.

Are people worried about how things are going? Is there a sense in which we are a society or a world headed toward dark and dangerous times?

Now, I know this is always a subjective thing, but my sense is that there is a vibe out there of despair. Just reading the papers or watching the news, it seems pessimism is getting the upper hand at the moment.

Even if things in life might not be that bad in reality. But there's, I think, fear about the future, anxiety, and perhaps a sense of despair.

[1 : 09] What, you might ask, is causing such despair? What are people worried about? Well, at a macro or global level, certain things seem to keep coming up, don't they?

So, for example, climate change. I remember when Al Gore's Inconvenient Truth came out in 2006 and warned us of the coming catastrophe that is global warming.

And we've had that constantly in our face, haven't we, since that time? And then to that is added, of course, the lament that we're not doing enough to the point where some already say that it's too late.

So, whether you believe it or not, it can't help but feed into our psyche, can't it? That our planet is doomed, even though, by and large, we just carry on as though nothing's happened.

Of course, there are other global issues as well, like global terrorism since 9-11, threat of nuclear war with North Korea and then Iran now.

[2 : 18] And so we get the sense that the world is teetering on the edge of some abyss, and all it takes is one thing to trigger another world war or something.

But there's also anxiety at the micro level, isn't there? So, in Australia, for example, people worry about housing affordability. I dug out a graph here from the internet that shows the house price increase tracked against CP...

No, that's not it. I've deleted it. Oh, anyway, there was a graph. There was a graph, trust me, tracking CPI and house price increase.

And at first glance, it looks alarming, not like that donkey there, which I'll get to in a while. But, anyway, you don't need graphs to tell you, right? I mean, you go to auctions and you know, oh, I'm just out of reach.

Or you just see prices keep going up. And, thankfully, the last two years have seen some reprieve. But, still, I think many young people, if you ask them, think that the dream of owning their own homes is now out of reach.

[3 : 28] And that feeds into other things, too. Because parents worry for their children. And so they want their kids to have good jobs, not just any old job, so that they can afford to buy that house.

Which means that they get pushed hard to study and have a good education. And that means parents, too, have to work extra hard to have the money to provide for these things. So they all sort of feed into each other, don't they?

But then despair sets in when people get the sense that, despite trying harder, they're not really getting ahead. Because if everyone else is running faster, too, it feels just like that.

It's like donkey, yes, chasing the carrot. But it doesn't matter how fast you run, that carrot, that prize, is always just out of reach.

And all this and more, I think, has translated into Australia actually having one of the highest depression rates in the world. In a study published by the World Health Organization in 2017, Australia was found to be near the top in the world at 5.9%.

[4 : 40] Comparable, you might think that's not a lot, but that's actually very high. The highest is Ukraine at 6.3%. But we are comparable to another country like the United States.

And then when they studied the rate of anxiety disorders as well, Australia ranked pretty high. Now, it could be just that Australia has a different way of diagnosing and reporting these things, or we're better at picking them and then treating them.

But certainly, as a pastor, I would have to say that I do see more and more people struggling with depression and anxiety. And so the question I want to turn to next is why?

What is the root cause of this despair? What is the common factor, if you like, that turns these challenges, external challenges, in life into internal despair?

Because the reality is, life has always had its challenges throughout the ages. Death, disease, and other forms of suffering are a constant in any age.

[5 : 50] Sometimes these challenges spur us on, whereas at other times it turns to despair. So, when is it that it turns to despair?

Well, I want to argue that despair occurs when there's a loss of certainty over our destiny. That is, when our vision of what life ought to be like, the ideal to which we're aspiring to evaporates because we no longer think it's attainable.

And we can certainly see that playing out, can't we, with the issues that I spoke about earlier. At the global level, those who have placed their hope in living in an ecologically sustainable world see that ideal melting away, along with the polar ice caps and glaciers, probably.

They despair that the rising global temperatures and the sea levels are irreversible. Likewise, those who see house prices going up, up, up, and up, well, they can't see it ever returning to affordable levels.

And along with that goes their vision of the good life, the Aussie dream of owning their own home, raising your family on the quarter-acre block, as it were.

[7 : 06] Instead, what they have to settle for is cramped apartment living, or else living so far away that you spend hours travelling to work, stuck in traffic, or squished up in overcrowded trains.

They might still hang on to the hope that perhaps their vision of their ideal destiny could be realised, but there's no certainty of it coming to pass. And that's when, I think, despair sets in, because you have no more guarantee that it will happen.

Well, I wonder whether that's your experience in life. Maybe these are not your issues that affect you, but I wonder whether you've seen your hopes fading away, seemingly dashed, whatever you're hoping for.

So, ideals that seem less and less attainable. Well, in his book, *Down Not Out*, by Chris, I think it's Cipollone or Cipollone, one of those, he shares candidly about his struggles with depression and anxiety.

It's actually quite a good book, if you're interested. You're more than welcome to borrow it from me. But in it, Chris shared a surprising discovery of his own experience. He said that one of his triggers for depression wasn't caused by feeling hopeless, but rather it was caused by an over-inflated sense of optimism.

[8 : 38] His depression was brought on because he had an over-inflated sense of optimism. And he said this, which I've got on the slide, It was misplaced hope that led me to hopelessness.

You see, hope is essential for living well. We need hope for our lives to give us direction and purpose. But it isn't simply the presence of hope that matters.

But where we place our hope is just as important. Because as Chris says, if our hope is misplaced, if we have an over-inflated optimism in something that will ultimately disappoint, then it will eventually lead to despair.

And that's the problem with the things I spoke about earlier, all the things that people have put their hope in. At the end of the day, there are really no guarantees that they will come to pass. And even if they do, there are no guarantees that they will last.

And so what can we put our hope in where we can be sure it will come to pass and last? What vision of our destiny can we be, can we have that will be certain to come to pass?

[10:00] Well, the good news is that as Christians, what we find in the Bible is a clear vision of our destiny and we have great confidence that it is well placed.

First, as I say in my outline, because it's a destiny that God Himself promises. So in our Old Testament reading tonight, God promises to create for us a new heavens and a new earth. So in verse 17, which I've got on the slide again, he said, See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create. For I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people. The sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. As Christians, our hope isn't placed on anything in this world, but in a new world which God will create anew.

[11:08] And yet, the very things that we yearn for in this world that will bring us joy and delight, the absence of sadness and mourning, will be hallmarks of this new world.

We will get to live as we would love to in our current world. So take a look at verse 21. They will build houses and dwell in them.

They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people.

My chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune.

For they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. It sounds very much like the Aussie dream, doesn't it?

[12:08] Only much better. Multi-generations of family living together in prosperity, in security. But how will this come about?

Well, God completes this picture in Revelation, the last book of the Bible, at the very end of that book, actually. So you see in Revelation 21, we find another vision of this same destiny. In language and imagery, that's actually remarkably similar to the one here in Isaiah.

But there we find a few more details filled in. So in verse 1 of chapter 21, John, the writer, I've got that on the slide, 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. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them.

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.

[13:27] So now we discover that this new heavens and earth will come about as the first one passes away. That is, it will be the end of time. It is also likened as a city coming down from heaven, this Jerusalem.

God Himself is coming down, as it were, and dwelling among His people. And if you are familiar with Christian history, you'll probably be reminded of another time when God did come down from heaven to dwell with His people.

And that was when Jesus, the Son of God, walked the earth, when He dwelt among His people for a time. Jesus' first coming, if you like, was a little taster, if you like, of what we can expect when He comes again the second time.

And this is made explicit a few verses later in verse 22. For once the city comes down from heaven, John writes, I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.

[14:45] Now the background detail you need to understand here is a reference to the old Jerusalem, where the temple was for Israel. There they would come year in, year out to sacrifice lambs.

Why? Because they needed to have their sins atoned for. Well, Jesus is here called the Lamb because He is the ultimate sacrifice that takes away the need for a temple.

Because of His blood shed once for all, God is now able to dwell with His people for eternity. But here's the catch.

Because this destiny of the new heavens and earth is only available for those who claim Jesus as their Lamb. That is, those who trust in Jesus to pay for their sins.

And that's because our hope for this destiny is only well placed when it's secured by what Jesus has done. You see, it isn't secured by what we do, what we strive after, what we try and achieve or attain, whether as individuals or as a world.

[15 : 53] None of our efforts can bring about this new creation. Instead, only Jesus' resurrection from the dead can do this. That's why with Helen's reading in 1 Peter, the apostle says that God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.

Our hope of this inheritance cannot perish, spoil, or fade because it's already begun. Just as Jesus coming to earth gave us a taster of God dwelling with us, so in Jesus' resurrection, we have a taster or glimpse of this new creation.

His disciples said that they saw this glory when they touched His side and His hands. They saw it when they walked through closed doors and walls.

And they saw it as He ascended into heaven. This new heavens and new earth is actually a reality because Jesus' resurrection from the dead is evidence that it exists.

And it is ours to own when we put our trust in Jesus and wait for that day. Now, I have to say that if you're not yet a Christian, some of this might all sound a bit far-fetched to you.

[17 : 24] All you are able to grasp, perhaps, is what you see on this earth. And you might be asking, how do I know that that's true? Well, that's how I was at one time as well, until God opened my eyes to what is written in God's Word.

And so if that's how you are at the moment, then I do want to encourage you to investigate what God says in His Word. We want you to be convinced of the evidence.

We have seen what the Bible says about Jesus, who He is, His coming to this earth. We have investigated what it says about His death and resurrection and the promises that God has made to those who believe.

And I, and many in this church, believe this to be true. That actually is the basis of our hope, secure, a hope that will not disappoint.

Now, if you look around the world and you see people putting their hopes in things and yet are now despairing of it, whatever that may be, then it should tell you something, shouldn't it?

[18 : 34] It should tell you that really the things that they are putting their hope in is unattainable, that at the end of the day, they are insecure and ephemeral. And so the question is, do you really want to give your whole life to put your hope in these same things?

Same things that people are now despairing it. Do you want to place your hope in what may just be a passing dream? But if on the other hand, you see people under great pressure and suffering and yet refusing to despair or give up hope, even when they lose everything that they have, when you see someone like that, it ought to make you sit up and think, right?

It should make you think, why? Why are they doing this when everything tells them not to? Well, I want to say that around the world right now, there are many Christians suffering for their faith in Jesus.

In Africa, in the Middle East, in China, they are being thrown into prison, they've had their children taken from them, some have died for their faith, and yet, many of them refuse to give up their faith in Jesus.

Many of them are still full of joy. It ought to make you think, why? One example of this is the early reign covenant church in China, Chengdu.

[20 : 03] I've got a picture of the church, actually. Looks like a normal group of people, don't they? Just like us. But in December last year, the Chinese authorities arrested their pastor, Wang Yi, along with 100 members of the church.

Some of them are still in prison. Their whereabouts are known. Those who have been released have been sent back to their hometowns, that is, away from Chengdu, so they can't meet together. They're kept under heavy surveillance. The children have been separated from their families. And their church property has been confiscated. But in the midst of this great oppression, let me read you some of the prayers that I find on their Facebook page.

So on June 11th, this is what they said. As the church faces this nationwide persecution, we ask God to protect His church and to train up His children in the midst of this unique situation. May these trials not breed fear, but rather hearts full of love and hope. May we always be ready to respond with meekness and reverence to those civil servants, police officers, and community monitors who do not generally give themselves the opportunity to hear the gospel.

[21 : 21] Or next, as the Lord's church faces societal challenges and changes, may it use this opportunity to reflect on and pray for the healing of society's wounds.

And may the church and Christians proclaim to this world even more proactively and courageously that Christ is the only hope and means of escape for the world and that He alone is our peace. And then finally, on June 17th, may every persecution and trial be for us an opportunity for greater repentance, greater wakefulness, greater steadfastness, greater commitment, and greater service. It makes you think, doesn't it? How can you pray such prayers unless what you hope for is really something that is real? It's just, as the Apostle Peter said in our reading earlier tonight, which Helen did in the second part, in all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

[22 : 41] When we see Christians suffer for their faith and yet refuse to give up hope, what it proves is the genuineness of their faith. Likewise, there is no guarantee that our lives will be better just because we become Christians.

In fact, like the Christians in Chengdu, there may be more suffering. But that's simply a reminder to us that our hope isn't found in this passing world.

It fixes our hope instead of the glorious world to come. Now, it's not that we give up entirely on this world and just, you know, sit back and not do anything here. No, God still created this world and we should not hate life in it and where we can contribute to its welfare.

But we shouldn't expect life in this world to be absolute bliss. We should expect sickness and death and disaster because there is sin in this world and it's passing away.

Instead, we are to place our hope in this new world, these new heavens and new earth because that's where God's promise lies. That's where our hope lies.

[23 : 51] That's where security lies. So let me end by asking you these questions. What security do you have for your hopes in life? Are you certain of what will happen at your life's end?

Well, if you're not, then let me encourage you to carefully consider what Jesus has to offer, what He has achieved in His death and resurrection, and what God promises to those who place their trust in Him.

Come. Come and put your trust in Jesus. He has to offer to thankfully the Trinity and the Trinity and the Trinity and Reiko a■■■ services to the sensory remains.

Do you think this gives up