

This is our last week of a 5 week journey across the terrain of the entire Bible. We've gone from Genesis to the gospels as we have surveyed the one big story that holds this book together. Essentially there are two questions: 1) **What is the big story that holds it together?** 2) **Can I believe it?** Is it really true, and if it is really true, what difference does it make?

We've gone from the height of creation to the depths of broken relationship with God for human beings. We've seen that God promised one who would destroy the work of the devil as he rescued his people. Moses rescued the Israelites and took them to a land of their own where God would be with them in the tabernacle, but didn't crush the devil.

Solomon built a temple as a permanent dwelling for God but he could not crush the devil.

Last week we saw that Jesus came and through his death and resurrection enabled us to have a new relationship with God through faith, and he did defeat the devil. Of course, that's not the end of the story – there is more to come.

Edgar Whisenant was a former NASA engineer and Bible student who published the book, '88 reasons why the rapture will be in 1988'. 4.5 million copies were sold around the world and, as is often the case, some people took him seriously. Of course he was challenged about his prediction of the year of the return of Jesus because Jesus himself said no one knows the day or the hour. Whisenant replied that didn't mean you couldn't know the year.

One fairly wise way of dealing with these issues can be seen in the nineteenth century in the Catholic Church. A Catholic priest had predicted that the world would end in 1847 however, being very strong on authority he was forced to seek permission from his superiors before publishing his book. It was agreed that he could publish his book with one condition, that it could not be published until 1848, the year after his proposed date.

This next section of our expedition brings us to a letter written by Paul. Paul was one of the early church leaders and his letters are designed to help believers prepare for the future. And today we have the opportunity to ask a number of questions about the future.

Our first question: **what will happen when we die?** V 13 *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.* Don't be uninformed says Paul. Don't be ignorant. There are a lot of things we don't know but the big picture is clear. This letter, the letter to the Thessalonians, is generally considered one of the earliest in the New Testament. And even from its beginnings, some Christians have been confused by death. Think about this for a moment - if Jesus has crushed the work of the serpent through his death and resurrection, why do we still suffer and die? Why is there still pain, war, and cruelty? It may be that some of those first Christians were anxious when their friends died. Even if it were an old age, not from persecution, why would a believer die if Christ has conquered death? If we are in Christ the risen one, why do believers die?

Two thousand years later we have come to terms with the fact that people still die however for those first Christians this would have been a cause of some anxiety. Paul writes making it quite clear that they are not to grieve like everyone else, like those who have no hope.

My experience of carrying out funeral services is that there are those which only require a Minister because the family have no idea what else to do; those which require Minister because the family think it is the right thing to do, even if none of them have any faith; and, those where the deceased was a believer and there are lots of other believers in attendance. There is a significant difference between the first two and the last. The difference is the hope that we have. The first two have an element of cross your fingers and hope it will be okay but that's not what we talk about as believers. The Greek word used here has the meaning of knowing something is true with good reason, even although we can't see it. So our knowledge of the future, in that sense, is hope. It's a hope with profound assurance and is filled with confidence. It means that when a believer passes away they are safe in the arms of Jesus. Chrysostom, one of the early church leaders, said, "*Weep at the death of a dear one as if you are bidding farewell to one setting out on a journey.*" How can a believer have such confidence? Let me give you an example: DL Moody was an American evangelist from Chicago who spent his time travelling and preaching the gospel in the late 1800's. He was overjoyed when his son and daughter-in-law had a baby boy and called him Dwight after his grandfather. He doted on the little boy, taking over raids in the buggy and spent lots of time with him. One day while he was away preaching he got the news that the little boy had died from meningitis. How do you deal with that when you're supposed to be preaching good news? He wrote back to his son, "*I know that Dwight is having a good time and we should rejoice with him. What would mansions be without children? He was the last to come into our family circle and the first to go up there, so safe and so free from all of the sorrow that we pass through. I do thank God for such a life. It was nearly all smiles and sunshine and what a glorified body he will have. And with what joy he will await our coming. God does not give us so strong a love for each other through these years without it lasting forever.*"

What inspires that kind of confidence in the midst of grief? What inspires someone to write 'And Lord haste the day, when my faith shall be sight'?

Christians are a resurrection people. Death is not our destiny. The grave is not our home. And how can we be so confident and speak with confidence as we look to the future - verse 14: *For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.* You see how this unfolding Bible expedition fits together? Right at the centre point is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus has conquered death and has paid the price for our sin. He has brought about salvation and now in his resurrection, death holds no fear for the believer. That's why the resurrection matters. I am not interested in a poetic resurrection anymore than I'm interested in a poetic salvation. I was having a conversation with colleagues recently and they were speaking about a Minister in a neighbouring Presbytery who doesn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Apart from wondering why someone like that would want to be a Minister, or be allowed to remain a

Minister, I have to ask where is his hope? I want a real resurrection because I want real salvation.

That is our destiny. And what happens mean time when a believer dies? Paul uses this world sleep in the reading which gives rise to a number of confusing ideas. Many of us are tempted to think that when we die we simply fall asleep ready to wake up when Christ returns and intervening time will have felt like nothing at all. I'm not convinced that's what the Bible teaches. I think this is simply a metaphor for death.

Elsewhere in Scripture we are told that when we die there is an immediate judgement - separated from our body we either go to be with God or to be separated from him. It's what theologians call the intermediate state. It's not a final destination but is an intermediate state where we are either with the Lord, or separate from him waiting the final judgement. What is that final judgement? There is a resurrection of the body yet to come, and resurrection from the grave. And to understand where history is really heading we need to look further on this journey, to the return of Christ.

And that is the second question: **what is going to happen in the future?** What does the future hold? Verse 16 *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.* The sleep is over, whatever that means. All those who have died in Christ will be resurrected to life at that trumpet call. Verse 17 *After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the clouds. And so we will be with the Lord forever.* What Paul's describing here is that those saints who have died in the past will be raised to life with Christ again. And they will join with those who are alive at that time, so that together they will meet the Lord when he returns. This is what Christians call the second coming. Jesus came in to the world two thousand years ago as the son of a carpenter but he will come again as the heavenly King and a mighty warrior. The Greek word that we translate coming, Parousia, has in Latin the meaning of advent. We know that word from Christmas when we have an advent season. We look forward to the first coming of Christ at his birth but there is still an advent of Christ that we look forward to in the future.

The Latin word advent actually comes from the world of the Roman Emperor. When a Roman emperor went to visit a city there would be a ceremonial arrival where the dignitaries of the city would leave the city to meet the Emperor and accompany him back into the city. It was the emperor's advent and there have been ceremonial coins found which celebrate some of these advent occasions. But this is the advent, the coming of Christ, and the image here is that when Christ returns we are caught up with him like the dignitaries to return alongside Jesus as he comes to reign. That is the image being used here. In other words it is a big public event. When Jesus comes back it's not going to be some secret or invisible return and if you don't have the right cable channel you might miss it. It is a big public event and we will all know that moment when he returns. And why will he meet us in the clouds? Well if you think back through our expedition you will be aware of the parts that clouds have played: out in the desert

God was present with his people in a pillar of cloud; King Solomon built a temple and the holy place was filled with the cloud of the glory of God. And so as we look to the future, and we look to meet the King in the clouds, I don't think it's so much a spatial location as our spiritual location in the presence of God.

And so verse 17 continues: *And so we will be with the Lord forever.* That is the destination of the story. The Lord Jesus has crushed the serpent and when he returns he will be fully displayed as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, the serpent will be no more. And what will we see when we are with the Lord forever? For that we need to read a few verses from revelation chapter 21. Revelation is the book that describes in visionary terms what lies ahead. Rev 21:1-4 *Then 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. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 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. 4 '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."*

What will the new heaven and the new earth be like? The Bible describes it in language that goes beyond what our imagination can capture. This new creation is not only paradise regained, it is paradise renewed and transformed, enlarged and expanded.

The Bible describes a place without pain and suffering. The curse of Genesis chapter 3 is over. The Bible describes it as a place that is a beautiful city, not a city with crime, tension and overcrowding. It's a city because of the vast number of people who will be living together in peace.

The Bible describes it as a great river, a place where the curse of Babel, the fragmentation of nations, can be repaired because there's a tree that produces in season food that will be for the healing of the nations. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not found there, but the tree of life is.

Where else can we look for images of this new creation? We have this biblical vision that expands our imagination but what else can we understand this future to be like? Well we can start by looking around us: Fields, trees, mountains, sea, the wind and rain, the stars. The new creation will be different from this world now. But our mediaeval images of clouds and harps have become so distracting - the new creation will be different but it will not be less than we have now. It will be more. It won't be less creative than what we see now, it will be more creative. It will be this present creation with the handbrake taken off. If we can see and admire what God has done in this creation all around us now, how much more of God will be in a new heaven and new Earth.

You see, this vision of the future, this vision of this destination is fundamentally encouraging. We are not looking forward to an interminable school assembly, we are looking forward to a new creation that goes way beyond anything we have begun to glimpse. Verse 18 *18 Therefore encourage one another with these words*

The trouble with a lot of teaching and future prophecy is that it is unsettling and troubling. There are different views of the millennium and people argue whether you should be pre, post or a millennial. If anybody ever asks you you can simply tell them that you are pan millennial, because it will all pan out in the end!

It's easy to take verses out of context and to build a whole theology on obscure words or pictures but Paul is saying here, keep the big picture in mind and encourage each other. So what do we do about the Middle East crisis right now? What do we do about the rise of the right in Europe and America? Would we do about the violence in Africa? What do we do when we see these problems and want to give up because we don't understand how God is reigning? How do you maintain this confidence in the word of God in the midst of all we see around us? Well let's go back to the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:6 *You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.* Jesus says don't be alarmed, these things have gone on for two thousand years so don't be alarmed because the end is still to come.

And that leads us to our final question: **when will it happen?** When will Christ come back? 1 Thess 5:1 *Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you...* Paul doesn't need to write about the date, despite how many people over the years have written books proving that they are right about when it will happen! Paul doesn't need to write about the time or the date because we are not to know. Verse 2 *for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.* A thief is unexpected. Of course people will mock Christianity and say, "where is this Jesus who is supposed to be coming back?" They mocked the early church but the whole point about a thief is that you need to be on the alert. It doesn't mean that you sit alone in your hallway every night waiting for the thief to arrive. It simply means that you take precautions and live with the understanding that it's possible for your house to be broken into. And so the point for the Christian life is that we live life aware that every day could be our last. That all we have is a gift on temporary loan and all our possessions and everything we have including our health is fading away.

History, for all the wonderful things that we can learn about and study, history is a preface. Your life is only a training ground for something greater. So perhaps you wonder why Jesus is taking so long, and it's a good question. If Christ has crushed the serpent and one day will return to bring all evil to an end; if one day he will get rid of all pain and sorrow and wipe away every tear from every eye, why wait? Why not invade right now with force? CS Lewis the Christian author explains it like this: *God is going to invade. But what is the good of saying you're on his side then when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else comes crashing in. Something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left. For this time it will be God without disguise. Something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you will be choosing to lie down when it's become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing, it will be the time when we discover which side we have already chosen, whether we*

realised it before or not. Now says, CS Lewis, today, this moment is our chance to choose the right side and God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever and we must take it, or leave it.

You see, God has brought Satan's reign to an end. Satan has a sell by date stamped on him. Why does the King delay, and the years pass by? Because this is the day of opportunity. This is still a time for people to hear the good news of Jesus. There are still people coming to faith, lives are being transformed and God wants to give people the opportunity to come to him. That's why we need to speak to our family, friends and neighbours who don't know Jesus yet. It's why we do outreach and try to introduce people to Jesus. Our expedition has brought us to the end of this mountain range and now we can see the destination on the horizon only there is a fork in the road. There are actually two destinations, heaven and hell. The new creation and the presence of God, or the hell of separation from everything that represents the goodness, kindness and love of God. Two destinations, the presence of God or the judgement of God; irresistible love or irresistible horror.

Now is the time of decision. You don't choose the King when the King comes in power, that wouldn't be a proper choice. You choose the King while he reigns hidden from view. Choose Christ. There is a fork in the road and we see this destination. Choose Christ. Choose the new creation with Jesus. At this fork in the road the story is not over and the expedition hasn't finished, we don't get to take boots off yet. At this fork in the road a choice has to be made and there is no alternative route.

Many of us here have chosen to follow Jesus and it is not always an easy road. There is no promise that everything will go well and there will be no rough sections but the amazing thing is that the King has promised that he would walk that road with us.