

6. Godly ambition in achieving Christian Parenthood

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[0 : 00] Well, let's bow our heads in prayer as we come to God's Word. Heavenly Father, please open our minds and our hearts and help us as we seek to understand your ways and your truth, especially about subjects that are tender and very near to our hearts.

Grant us your help and your balance and your right thinking, we pray. For Jesus' sake. Amen. My subject tonight is godly ambition and achievement of parenthood. And I want to talk about some of the issues surrounding the whole matter of what are right and godly ambitions for Christian couples in achieving parenthood and especially where it would appear that the desire that they have for children is being sorely tested and frustrated and perhaps even denied altogether. And right at the outset, I need to say that I know that this isn't an easy thing for people to listen to, especially some people who find themselves in that situation.

That may be so for some here tonight. I'm aware of that. I'm very aware of that. And that means also that it's not an easy thing to speak about. And I realize that it could be easy for people to be hurt tonight by some of the things that are said.

[1 : 43] Maybe because of misunderstanding of something I say. Or maybe because I say something not quite in the way that I mean to say it. Or maybe just because I say something wrong.

And so I want to say at the outset that it really is my intention tonight to be as sensitive as possible in this very difficult area. And if some do find it very difficult just because of the subject matter, I want you to know that I am greatly exercised by that.

And I have been all the way through my preparation. But I do think it's something that we need to talk about as a fellowship. And I suppose for two particular reasons. One is that some here may be, indeed, very likely will be, either now or in the future, having to face up to the reality that their natural and godly ambition for having a family may indeed be frustrated.

And I want to help those of us who find ourselves in that situation. And I want to help them in their thinking and some of these real anguishes and pains and struggles that this subject does inevitably bring.

But secondly, and equally important, I want to help the rest of us know how we can be and how we must be real friends and real brothers and sisters in Christ to others who are knowing the pain of that particular trial and how we can be real encouragers.

[3 : 19] And we have a responsibility to one another to bear one another's burdens, don't we, in the family of God. That's what it means to fulfill the law of Christ. And sometimes the fact is that, unwittingly, perhaps, we can not only fail to help those who are in that situation of pain, but we can actually add to the pain that they're suffering in that area.

So I want tonight, as part of our series on right relationships, to continue to apply the Bible's theology of marriage to our thinking about practical issues, and especially the very painful issues of this whole area of what we might call involuntary childlessness.

Last week we spoke of the contemporary phenomenon of voluntary childlessness. In other words, couples who consider children as just really a lifestyle choice, so that you have kids if that's what you want, and if that's what you find fulfilling, but if you don't, well, then you don't, and that's that. And we saw that for the Christian, that can never really be a right attitude, because procreation is integral to the very purpose of marriage, and it's part of the whole way that marriage serves the kingdom of God.

But not only is that attitude wrong, it's more than that, actually, for the Christian couple who are longing to have children, but find themselves unfulfilled in that desire.

[4 : 50] It's deeply wounding, and it's deeply painful to them, and it can only magnify their own agony of childlessness when people talk like that.

So I want to think a little tonight under two headings. First, the Christian couple's godly ambition for parenthood, and then the Christian couple's godly achievement of parenthood.

And a right thinking about the first, about our ambition, will help us towards a right thinking about the length that we will feel free to go to as Christians in order to achieve that parenthood that we naturally long for.

Now, of course, I can't be exhaustive about this. Neither do I want to be too specific or prescriptive. Far less do I want to dig in and question avenues that people may have gone down in these areas themselves.

But I do think it's important to try and give some biblical pointers for our thinking, and that the way that our thinking should be shaped by the Bible's message in this, just as it is in every area of our lives.

[6 : 05] It's part of the renewing of our minds that Paul speaks about in Romans 12. Through which we offer to God true worship in our lives, as our whole lives, in every part, honour him, in everything that we are and everything that we do.

So first of all then, the Christian couple's godly ambition for parenthood. The first thing to say is this, there can be no doubt, none at all, about the very real pain felt by couples who are unable to have children.

Even the terminology itself can be terribly painful. Infertility. Infertile couples. It smacks of a stigma. It smacks almost of a disease. And of course, usually, the people involved are young and fit and healthy.

And that can be a very compounding factor in the pain. And over the years, I've had many friends, many colleagues at work, many acquaintances, family members too, who have found themselves in this situation.

And I do know something of the depths of the anguish that they feel. And I've wept with them and I've wept for them. And so it's no surprise to me when I read of a study done some ten years ago among so-called infertile couples in this country.

[7 : 29] And it showed that one in five of such people had in fact contemplated suicide while waiting for treatment. More than nine-tenths reported depression and isolation and frustration in their lives.

And more than a third said that their relationship with their partner had been seriously affected in an adverse way by their failure to conceive. And of course, added to that is all the stress, the psychological stress, the financial stress of undergoing medical investigation and treatments and so on.

Often it is very large costs if it's private infertility clinics that are involved. And the failure rate is such that it means often repeated cycles which adds greatly to a sense of stress and desperation really among many couples.

And of course, as Christians, we too are humans, aren't we? We share the stress, we share the pain of all the rest of humanity. We're just the same as them. And yet, perhaps we find it even more painful because if as Christians we understand the biblical pattern of marriage such as we've been looking at together in these studies, if we understand the place of procreation and parenting as integral in the purpose of marriage and as a gift from God to serve His kingdom, not just as a lifestyle choice, then denial of that gift, a good gift of God, can be a very, very hard thing to come to terms with.

Of course it can. And I just want to say here at this point that that is one reason why it's so important that our theology of marriage must be truly biblical, not just partially biblical because it affects how we think about this.

[9 : 28] If, for example, we take the Roman Catholic position that sees the primary purpose of marriage as being procreation, if we work that through it can lead to a very difficult conclusion about childless marriage.

I've quoted to you from the book by Helmut Tillicker. I quoted to you also the writings of Pope Pius XII who says this, that the innermost purpose of marriage is the awakening and rearing of new life. In other words, it's procreation. Well, Helmut Tillicker in his book *The Ethics of Sex* says this, if that really is so, then the proper conclusion would be that a childless marriage is not a marriage

because it has failed in its foremost purpose.

And he goes on to point out that in this respect that brings that position into what he calls the dubious proximity of all people to Bertrand Russell, the atheistic philosopher, because he treats childless marriage as non-marriage of no importance to society, he calls it.

Unworthy, I'm quoting, to be taken cognizance of by a legal institution. That's what he calls a rational ethic. That's where his atheistic theology takes him.

[10:49] Well, that's not only deeply hurtful, is it? But that's a terrible insult to people whose marriages in those terms can be said to have failed.

A terrible thing. But of course, equally problematic is the opposite tendency, and of course one can see the temptation to want to distance yourself from that position, but the opposite temptation of downplaying procreation completely as integral to marriage and exalting instead the relationship aspect of marriage and saying that that's the thing that really matters, that's the thing that defines marriage's purpose.

Even to the extent of regarding children merely as a choice, as a thing that you might do or you might not do, neither good or bad in itself, just a choice. That's perhaps a little bit, isn't it, of Elkanah's response.

Do you remember Elkanah? Elkanah, the father of Samuel, when his wife Hannah couldn't conceive, he said to her, look Hannah, you've got me. Am I not better than ten sons?

In other words, it's our relationship that's the important thing. It doesn't matter if we can't have children. Well, that wasn't a great comfort to Hannah, was it? That's not a great comfort to a woman who's desperate for a child.

[12:09] So sometimes we might be tempted to downplay the blessing of children as a good thing. We might think that for our friends who are childless, it'll help them if we just play down the gift of children.

But that's not right at all. That's completely wrong. Christopher Ashe, in his book, I think, puts it absolutely rightly when he says this. To affirm the goodness of birth is not insensitive to those who cannot conceive or who suffer a miscarriage or a stillbirth, any more than affirming the goodness of marriage is insensitive to the widow.

On the contrary, if we do not affirm the goodness, we cannot grieve with them. And that's true. And to downplay the desire for children is just as insulting to the real grief and pain felt by childless couples, especially women, as to so centralize procreation as to make a childless marriage apparently a failure in itself.

So yes, of course, we must be sensitive in the way that we speak to friends who are in this situation, but not silent. It's right to be real.

It's right to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn. But you see, as we've seen, the Bible does not teach either that procreation is the primary and sole purpose of marriage or that partnership alone is the primary and sole purpose of marriage or even that the protection of public order and decency is primary in marriage either.

[13:55] No, all of these things are the goods of marriage. Yes, they are. But all of these things themselves serve the primary purpose of marriage which is to serve the kingdom of Christ through God's purposes of creation and recreation.

You see, how important it is that we keep coming back to the Bible's theology of marriage and get it right. There's nothing more practical than the Bible's theology, its view of the life and the world and everything.

Only that will help us to think clearly and only that will therefore help us to find the answers to the questions that we find ourselves asking about life. Marriage is all about, in fact, it's created for serving the kingdom of God and children indeed are a blessing, a gift to us, yes, intrinsic to the order of marriage.

But because they're not the primary purpose of marriage, the actual bestowal of that gift in every particular case is not essential to true marriage.

It doesn't invalidate a marriage if there are no children. It's not essential for a truly fulfilled marriage either under God's sovereign hand and we must assert that very, very strongly.

[15:19] Children, just like marriage itself, children are a gift, not a right for every individual. Yes, it is normal in the sense that it's usual, but not in the sense that it's universal.

And as our Lord himself clearly says in Matthew chapter 19 of marriage and also, I think, by implication of children, that it's not a gift bestowed on all for various reasons, including one reason which is the privilege of being for the sake of serving the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says. Now, I know that that can be a terribly hard thing to bear, of course. And yet, hard though it is, these are words that come to us from our Lord Jesus Christ who himself was single, himself was childless for our sake and the sake of his kingdom.

The one that we know, the one that we love, the one that we trust, the one who gives us all good things, who loved us with an everlasting love. These are his words.

And so, like marriage, even within marriage, children are a gift, they're a blessing from God. And we can't say, and we mustn't say, therefore, that we have a right to children, only that we are right to seek that gift of children, from God.

[16:48] We're right to have a godly ambition for children to serve the kingdom of God, to bring to birth so that we will bring to faith and bring to fruitful service missionary children for the kingdom of God.

Yes. We rightly long for that, but if we understand rightly children as a gift and not as a right, then that is going to shape our ambition.

for children. It's going to give shape to the limits and the lengths to which we will want to go in order to achieve that ambition of parenthood.

And this is a real issue for us today, something for us to think about very carefully as Christians because we live in an age when there are more possibilities available for achieving parenthood than there ever have been before in history.

And that brings me on to our second heading, the Christian couple's godly achievement of parenthood. I said that we live in an era of achieving parenthood in the most astonishing and advancing of ways.

[18:00] Even in the years since I was at medical school 20 years or so ago, there have been huge advances in reproductive technology. When I was at medical school, the world's very first test tube baby was still a very young child.

And the whole science was still novel and exciting in the front pages of the papers. But now, of course, it's absolutely routine, isn't it? So what are we to think of this as Christians?

Well, I want to give just a very brief outline of the world's technology and of the world's ethics, that is, for using such technology, and then for us to think about a biblical perspective on these matters. What is the world's technology? Well, it's just staggering what can be done and what is being done in this field. Millions of babies are born every year by IVF, by in vitro fertilization.

More than half a million are born in the United States alone every year. No one talks about them now as test tube babies, of course, because IVF is a household term.

[19:09] It simply means the fertilizing of an embryo from gametes, that's egg and sperm cells, outside the body and then implanted back into the womb and from there on it's a normal pregnancy usually.

Often, and probably the first choice, if it's at all possible for couples, is that the process will use the husband and the wife's gametes so that the baby that is born is theirs, genetically, as well as having been carried in the womb by the mother.

But of course, in many cases of infertility, that's not possible. And so donor eggs and donor sperm is used. In the United Kingdom, all of these things are currently still regulated by the Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority, although if you listen to the news, you'll know that there's controversy about its ongoing role in that, and there's a lot of agitation among scientists for more freedom to pursue experimentation in this area, especially embryo research and so on.

And that is one of the problems of our thinking in this whole area, because the currently established treatments for infertility are very much bound up with much wider ethical considerations and the desires for research into areas of, for example, fetal stem cells, the whole area of cloning and all of these things.

And the goal posts in this area are always moving. So it's not just matter now, for example, of egg or sperm donation, but also embryo donation, and there are banks of embryos stored and frozen that seem to be able to last almost indefinitely.

[20:54] As well as today, the kind of things that are hitting the headlines about cloning embryos. There's also surrogacy, where effectively what you're doing is renting a womb, another woman to carry the baby, either using your own genetic mixture or a donor's gametes, or a mixture of both.

That's legal in the United Kingdom, surrogacy. You're not allowed to advertise or pay for it. And in fact, it's a very gray area legally. There's very little comeback, for example, even if a husband and wife pay for their own cells to be used to create their own embryo, which is then implanted by IVF in a surrogate woman.

That woman then brings the child to birth and decides she wants to keep the child. There's very little comeback that the parents or the donors can have. So it's a complex area, and there are all sorts of things that we would need to think about.

However, in this study, I just want to limit ourselves to something much, much smaller in scope. And that is the Christian couple seeking to think how far they might be right to make use of all this technology in order to achieve their ambition, their godly ambition for parenthood.

Well, the basic point is this. The world offers us a lot of very helpful technology. But what is the ethics behind it all? Well, the world's ethics tend to be about what we might call a Lego kit approach.

[22 : 37] That's a term that's been used by Professor John Wyatt, who's the Professor of Neonatology at University College in London. He's written an excellent book called Matters of Life and Death. I think it's published by IVP.

I recommend it very strongly. I'm drawing on it for a lot of what comes in this next section. But he calls the world's ethics the ethics of the Lego kit because, firstly, there's no natural order to a Lego kit.

And secondly, there's no single purpose of design intended by the makers of a Lego kit. You can make what you like with it. It's all facts and no values.

In other words, there's no right way or wrong way to use a Lego kit. You just use it. You make with it what you can. You make with it what works. And John Wyatt likens that to the views of many contemporary scientists.

The human body is essentially a Lego kit. It's value free. We don't have to think in any of our discussions about this, about what is right.

[23 : 43] We don't have to think about taboos of transgressing boundaries and things like that. We only have to ask, really, two questions. Does it work? And is it safe? And that's the approach, essentially, in so much of the reproductive technology that's around today.

Does it work? Does it work? Well, let's find out if it's safe. And if both of those are true, then it's good. And, of course, you can see how the same philosophy really applies to so many other areas of ethics, including human sexuality and so on.

It's endless. Well, that's the world's view, the view of the Lego kit. Does it work? Is it safe? That's really the only two questions that matter. What about the Bible's ethics?

Well, you'll turn in vain to your Bibles to find a detailed discussion of IVF, either in our Lord's teaching or in Paul's teaching or anywhere else.

But that just shows us that we need to have joined-up thinking as Christians. In other words, we need to understand theology. We need to understand the big principles of the Bible.

[24 : 54] And these big principles are, in fact, very clear. And we need a Christian mind that's renewed and transformed so that we don't approach these sort of questions piecemeal. Is this procedure right?

Is that procedure wrong? What bits are right and which are dodgy? No. We take a step back and we ask ourselves the much deeper questions. What does Scripture reveal to us about the nature of human life?

What does Scripture reveal to us about the purpose in God's plan of creation and redemption for human beings as they are? We need to understand what it means to be human and therefore what cherishing and guarding God's created humanity really means.

of course, that's vital in every area of Christian ethics. Well, the Bible is very clear. Human beings are more than just a Lego kit.

Even Genesis 1 to 3 alone gives us that very clearly, doesn't it? God is a creator with a design with a definite purpose. And that's reflected in what we are as human beings in body and in spirit.

[26 : 01] We are God's masterpieces of design. sin. We are made in his image. We are made for his purpose. And so we must take that seriously. But also, of course, the Bible tells us that we are in fact a flawed masterpiece because of sin.

And so we've got to take that seriously too. And our responsibility is to act as preservers and as restorers even of the image of God in human beings.

We are to protect, wherever we can, God's masterpiece from further harm. We're to seek to restore God's masterpiece in line with the creator's original intention.

That's our rationale, isn't it, for preaching the gospel to people, to bring about an eternal restoration of God's plan and purpose for them. But it's also our rationale for all philanthropy in the name of Jesus Christ, for medicine, for social care, for everything we seek to do to improve people's lives, improve society in the name of Jesus.

Now, John White uses a very helpful analogy that I personally have found very, very enlightening in this whole area of medical technology and especially reproductive technology.

[27 : 19] And it's the analogy of art restoration and the very clear and precise ethics that are involved in that. He quotes the manual from the UK Institution on Conservation.

And I think it's very illuminating. Listen. Conservation is the means by which the original and true nature of an artistic object is maintained.

It goes on to say that that true nature is determined by evidence of its origins, its original constitution, the materials of which it's composed, and information which it may embody as to the maker's intentions.

You see that? It's the maker's intentions that are decisive when you're restoring a piece of artwork.

A restorer can use all kinds of tests, all kinds of technology, all kinds of materials, but they're only free to use them within the parameters of seeking to restore the maker's original intention.

It's absolutely out of order to seek to improve what you think the maker's intention was, to change it, to impose your idea upon it.

[28 : 39] So the issue is not so much the invasiveness of the technology that's decisive, but it's the goal. Are we seeking to restore the maker's original work?

Now, of course, no analogy is perfect, but on this one point, I think it's very helpful indeed, and it can be applied to this whole area of reproductive technology, including those areas where an individual technique in itself may seem perhaps quite harmless.

But the question is not just, does it work and is it safe? The question is, does this use of technology allow the maker's intention to be fulfilled?

Or is it, in fact, changing in a very fundamental way the design and the purpose of the maker? And John White, in his book, very helpfully applies this to different areas of reproductive technology.

And he makes the point that in God's design, if I can put it this way, making love and making babies belong together. The DNA, our genetic makeup, is in a sense a means by which the unique love between a man and a woman is converted physically into a baby.

[29 : 56] It enshrines in a new life, if you like, the unique loving combination of the mother and the father. In fact, he says that every person is in their genetic makeup, a roadmap of love going back over generations and generations.

I think that's a very wonderful way of putting it. You see, the evolutionary biologists, people like Richard Dawkins and so on, sexual relationships are still a mystery. The best they can come up with is, well, it's some way of reducing mutations and mixing genes together.

But for the Christian, it's abundantly more than that. It's the way that the special love that God has given between a husband and wife becomes incarnate as a unique, absolutely unique expression of their love.

But you see, by contrast, so much of reproductive technology leaves all of that behind. Rather than a unique gift of God's incarnation of a shared love, babies can very easily become merely the products of our wills, a commodity at our disposal.

You see, if we think of reproductive technology like this, we need to ask, is it allowing the maker's intention to be fulfilled or is it changing the design of God's purpose for sexual relationships at a very fundamental level?

[31 : 29] Is it changing them? I think if we look at it like that, then some things which may work and which may be safe, clearly do fundamentally change that design.

It seems to me that donations of eggs and sperm and embryos and so on and surrogacy seem to be a very substantial break with that whole purpose. Some people want to argue, for example, that what's the difference between a blood donation and a kidney donation and donating an egg or an embryo?

Well, the difference is that one seems very clearly to be seeking to preserve the order of creation, to restore it and repair the normal design.

That's what you do when somebody's lost blood and you give them blood. But the other is making a much, much more fundamental change in the whole relationship between a child and a parent. And all the more so if you take examples, for example, of a single woman with no partner, no desire for a partner, wanting to have a child by technology, either because they're lesbian or whatever other reason it might be.

[32 : 43] Changing the fundamental design of what God has created human relationships of sex and marriage for. What about IVF per se?

That is, using the gametes of married parents for helping them to have a child that they can't conceive otherwise.

Well, my own view, and it's a cautious conclusion, is that of itself, it may be regarded as a restorative technology.

That is, it may be something that enables a couple to bring to fruition what some particular problem is preventing the incarnation of their own love in a child who really is their own.

I said that's my view personally. It's actually also the view of John Wyatt in his book. Others may not be comfortable with that. And I would certainly want to enter myself several caveats.

[33 : 51] The first one would be that that would depend upon the process producing no spare embryos, which would therefore then have to be destroyed. Another is that, as I've said, the current technology has, of course, in the past been very dependent on research which did destroy many embryos.

And we can't escape that reality and we have to take that fact into consideration. And some of us may feel that we just couldn't be part of such a process because of the way it has been brought about.

It might just be too difficult. Even though we could say the technology now, if you like, is clean, it's had rather a dirty past. Of course, that's true of many other medical treatments.

It's true of lots of other things in life, too. We benefit from many things which once upon a time came about through inglorious means, exploitation and so on. And that's something that people will have to work out in their own mind.

But furthermore, of course, the whole process is certainly not without risk and it's certainly not without stress. Although I've said I would cautiously feel that perhaps in and of itself, as it exists today, it may be thought of a restorative technology, I would think that one would need to give a lot of careful thought before you would embark in that particular area.

[35 : 14] I've known friends and colleagues who have gone through this and the stress is very great. And it's something you would need to think about very carefully. Now that's just a very brief, very brief sketch of just some of the issues and certainly it's not all of them.

But perhaps it just helps us to begin to think about some of these very difficult areas. But in drawing some conclusions, I want to restate again the very basic question.

How far should we pursue the achievement of parenthood? Well, that is fundamentally going to be determined, isn't it, by how much we see it as a gift of God and how much we see it as a right.

And I think that we must say that it's right to have the ambition for parenthood. And so it would be foolish, really, not to pursue, for example, medical tests and help that may be able to restore the masterpiece of the maker's intent.

But that ambition must be limited just because we regard it as a gift and not a right for every single marriage in particular. And those limits may be due to ethical issues like some of those that we've outlined, or it may just be due to the practicalities and the wisdom and the sheer exhaustiveness and the stress and the treadmill of repeated investigations and treatments and so on that really do nearly always put a huge, huge strain on a relationship.

[36 : 53] What other options might there be? Well, let me mention two. One, of course, with a very noble and honourable Christian tradition is that of adoption. And from the earliest times, Christians were known as those who rescued orphans and foundlings.

Later, they became pioneers of adoption and fostering and care homes and so on. And one of the tragedies, of course, of the extraordinary increase in abortion that we've seen in our societies is the huge diminishing of the number of babies that are available for adoption.

Did you know that in the 30 years following the passing of the 1967 Abortion Act in this country, the number of legal adoptions reduced to a quarter of what they were before?

But again, even in this area, noble as it is, adoption, we do still need to ask the question why, don't we? Just as we need to ask that question if we're planning to have children naturally and hoping for that.

Is it for me that I'm doing this? Is it to fulfill a desire to achieve a child at all costs? Or is it for seeking to serve the kingdom of Christ?

[38 : 12] It's a natural desire, it's a good desire. But just as with all good gifts, God's good gifts, it must be a desire that we hand over to Him, that we submit to Him, mustn't it?

And that will affect, obviously, how we think about even adoption. What kind of baby will we accept? Must it be the perfect baby? We need to be careful because sometimes the gift that God gives of a child naturally isn't the perfect baby, is it?

Some of us have babies with handicaps of all sorts of different kinds and it's still God's gift. But you see, parenting isn't just for us, is it?

It's not just for our satisfaction and fulfillment, it's for God. It's a response of obedient faith to Him, for His kingdom. And it's a gift for a purpose and therefore the true fulfillment of that gift will be found in that purpose, not just in having the child itself, not even getting the child, achieving the child.

And so we need to think about that, we need to think what is our real motivation for a child, whatever its origin is, even by adoption. Is it to serve God and His kingdom by rearing children for faith and for fruitfulness in His service?

[39 : 27] Well, it may be a very tough assignment, mightn't it? Especially if children have had a very difficult background. But it's a gloriously, wonderfully blessed calling.

I've got some very good friends who not long ago adopted two young boys from a very abused background. They're now in the loving care of a Christian home and they're flourishing, but I can tell you it is not at all easy.

I don't think it'll ever be easy. But it's a wonderful service of the kingdom of Christ that they are fulfilling. Well, that's one honourable way and that may indeed be right for some.

And for the right reasons and the right purposes, it can be a glorious way of fulfilling our calling as Christian couples. The other way, of course, is simply acceptance.

acceptance. Some couples come to the point where they are able to accept that for them there will be no children. And that, of course, can mean great bitterness and resentment and lives lived, really, with a chip on the shoulder.

[40 : 43] And that's so understandable and we who are not in that position should be very slow to be censorious, very quick to be understanding, very quick to be prayerful for brothers and sisters in that place.

But it is terribly sad if that is the outcome. It needn't be like that. If, despite the real pain and the grief and the real sense of bereavement, they are able to see and they are helped to see, perhaps by others, that even this situation can be captured for the glory of Christ and his kingdom, if that can be the case, then even that, painful as it may be, can be captured for a wonderfully fruitful service of Christ in ways that, perhaps otherwise, would have been quite impossible or at least very, very hard.

See, if childlessness, just as singleness, can of itself be a gift from the Lord Jesus Christ, to be used for him, then the freedom and the joy that's possible in using that gift responsibly for him can be really immense and wonderfully fulfilling.

I'm thinking of other dear friends of mine who longed for children, and the wife just loves children, and they love her. If anyone was made to be a mother, it was her.

But children have never come, and it's been desperately hard and desperately painful for them, and many tears have been shed, and we have shed tears with them often.

[42 : 26] But now they're both teaching overseas in a school, and they're being parents, mothers and fathers, to dozens of children. And the wife said to me not long ago with a beaming smile, although not without a tear in her eye, that God had given her the joys of children that she would never have had had she had her own children.

And I was deeply moved by that, because it was said with genuine joy, but I can tell you it was said not without real pain. And yet, in that pain, there was real and productive joy that was serving the

kingdom of Christ.

But this is the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just read in Matthew 19, none who give up the precious relationships of love in this life will ever lose out ultimate not ever.

He will compensate, says Jesus, a hundredfold even in this life. And in the new world, he says, there will be an inheritance of glorious life.

So I want to end, really rather, as we begun this evening, reading some more wonderful words from Isaiah. Words that point us to the new world, to the wonderful comfort and hope of all whose hearts are still wracked with pain and wrenched with pain, even in this life.

[43 : 59] Just listen. This is the promise of our Savior. Isaiah 56, soon my salvation will come and my deliverance be revealed.

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, the Lord will surely separate me from his people. And let not the eunuchs say, behold, I am a dry tree. For thus says the Lord, to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters.

I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. These I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer.

Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Friends, that is the promise of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the great restoration to the true intention of the maker for every one of us.

[45 : 20] Whatever our lack, whatever our unfulfilled desires may be or may have been in this world, that is the promise of God for us.

And that is what we wait for. That is what we long for with confident joy. So may God help us one with another to do so, even through the tears of real grief and real pain and real bereavement as we walk that road.

And in so doing, help us to follow Jesus together and to bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ that we may praise him even in the tears of lack and long for the day when tears will be no more.

And every eye shall see him and there will be no more weeping and no more sorrow and no more pain. for the lamb in the midst of us will be all our glory.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord, be our help and our comforter and our strength, we pray.

[46 : 48] Help us, every one of us, to look to you and to help and encourage one another with the glorious gospel of your grace so that whatever our lack, we may not be lacking in the joy of the grace that is ours in Jesus until you come.

For we ask it in your blessed name. Amen.