

What the Future holds

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[0 : 00] We turn now to our Bible reading, which is taken from the second letter of Peter. And you'll find that if you have one of our visitor's Bibles on page 1019, page 1019.

A little later this morning when we come to the sermon, I want to dwell particularly on verse 13, which is the last verse of the passage that I'll read. So 2 Peter, chapter 3, beginning at the first verse.

And Peter is talking here about the return of the Lord Jesus in glory. This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved.

In both of them, I am stirring you up. I'm stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.

Knowing this, first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, where is the promise of his coming?

[1 : 27] For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation. For they deliberately overlook this fact that the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God.

And that by means of these, the world that then existed was deluged with water and perish. But by the same word, the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and the destruction of the ungodly.

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day.

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief and then the heavens will pass away with a roar and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

[2 : 41] Since all these things are thus to be dissolved. What sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn.

But according to his promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord and may it be a blessing and a joy to us. Let's bow our heads for a moment of prayer before the sermon this morning. God, our Father, it is your voice that we long to hear and it is your Bible which brings it to us.

And we pray, therefore, that you will open to us the words of scripture from the Apostle Peter and that you will help us to hear, to understand and to rejoice in what you say to us.

And we ask it in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. The tradition of Remembrance Sunday was established very soon after the end of the First World War in 1921.

[4 : 02] The British and their allies emerged victorious, as we know, but victory had been very costly to the nation. That war had been such a devastating experience that the British and their leaders said, we must never forget, we must never allow to slip the memory of those millions of young men who saw and suffered terrible things in the trenches in France and Flanders, so many of whom died terrible deaths in unspeakable conditions.

And so Remembrance Sunday began 90 years ago. And the need for it has been reinforced by the coming of the Second World War only 20 years afterwards and then reinforced by further conflicts.

The Korean War of the 1950s, the Falklands Conflicts of the 1980s, and then these very difficult and costly campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years.

Now Remembrance Sunday has always had two main purposes. First, to remember with sorrow and pride and thankfulness those who lost their lives in the service of their country.

But second, to act as a spur to the nation to avoid future wars if at all possible. That is to say, if the memory of just how awful war is can be kept fresh and painful, it will perhaps make us extremely hesitant before embarking on yet another armed campaign.

[5 : 37] So Remembrance Sunday is a good tradition and it's healthy for us to perpetuate it and also to get it into the bloodstream of each younger generation as they come along. It won't necessarily prevent us from going to war again, but it may deepen in us a horror of tangling with it.

Now the question I want to raise this morning is this. When you bear in mind the periods of war and the periods of peace which mark human history, what kind of future is it right for Christians to look for and to hope for?

Just to give a little historical context to that question, think back a hundred years or so. To that moment just before the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 or the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

At the very beginning of the 20th century, there was a widespread sense of real optimism about the future of the human race. Victorian Britain had had a great deal of grime and poverty and difficulty, but the leaders in Victorian Britain were very energetic and made huge advances, especially in medicine, science and technology and engineering.

Electricity was being harnessed. Telephones were coming into use. Aeroplanes and cars were just beginning to be developed in those first years of the 20th century.

[7 : 09] And it seemed as if the possibilities for improving human conditions were boundless. And many people at the beginning of the 20th century really did believe that this new century was going to witness the end, the end of poverty, disease, crime and war.

Then the Titanic went down in April 1912. The unsinkable Titanic, as it was called. And a dark question mark was raised over the glittering powers of technology and engineering.

And then the Great War came in 1914. And by 1919, as the country was licking its wounds and beginning to look around itself, it realized that that optimism of 1900 lay in rags and tatters.

Yes, in the 1920s, people danced the Charleston and created fashionable hats and skirts and tried to look chic and bonny. But something had died. What kind of future could there be in this world?

Now, here we are, 90 years later, and we're still asking the same question. We've realized, I guess, that those golden dreams of 1900 have been shattered forever.

[8 : 30] I don't suppose there's a single person here this morning who thinks that the 21st century is going to see a new age where poverty and crime and disease are eradicated. We've been forced by the history of the 20th century into painfully realizing how intractably aggressive and fierce human beings really are.

The Bible teaches us, after all, that the world is gripped by sin and Satan, and that is borne out by our history. And yet, despite all the evidence of wars and famines and economic turmoil and disease and poverty and ecological decline, isn't there something in human nature that still longs for and hopes for a better world?

It was back in the 16th century that Thomas More coined the term utopia, and he wrote a book called Utopia, in which he pictured an ideal world, a perfect society.

And political dreamers throughout the ages have dreamed of wonderful societies where peace and brotherly love become dominant. Karl Marx's vision was a utopian vision.

It's just that he never took human sinfulness properly into account. Even Hitler's warped and wicked vision was a kind of utopia, where, in his view, a super race, which had wiped out all weaklings, would establish a super society characterized by dominance and power.

[9 : 57] The American dream. I guess it's a bit more ragged around the edges than it was, but it still exists. Martin Luther King's famous speech, I have a dream, was a dream of brotherly love and equality being established on Earth.

And even in our own little personal individual lives, we can nourish dreams of little personal utopias. You know the kind of thing? A dream of little me and my little wife reaching old age.

A smiling, gentle, silver-haired couple who have managed to survive the knocks and shocks of work and child raising and can now enjoy a pleasant, peaceful closing period of life in our little cottage, nestling in the hills with hollyhocks and delphiniums in the front garden and potatoes and cabbages and a hen house in the back garden.

And nothing more demanding to do than attending choir practice on a Monday evening in the little parish church down the road. Isn't that the kind of thing that we're waiting for and hoping for?

Well, friends, we'd better allow Simon Peter to tell us what the real future will be like, because it is rather different. Let's turn, if we may, to this second letter of his chapter 3 and verse 13.

[11 : 10] Page 1019. And let me read just verse 13 again. 2 Peter 3, 13. But, says the apostle, according to his promise, according to God's promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Now, the we there, the we in verse 13, refers to all people who are Christians, the Lord's people. And Peter is telling us that God has promised us a wonderful future, a future that we're waiting for.

But it's not a utopia in the old world. It's the promise of new heavens and a new earth, a new world of his making.

And you'll see in verse 13 that Peter tells us that God has promised the arrival of this new creation. And this promise of God, which Peter knew well from studying his Jewish Bible, this promise is found in the closing chapters of the prophet Isaiah.

Let me read you a couple of verses from the very end of Isaiah. For behold, says God, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.

[12 : 23] Or in the very last chapter of Isaiah, and this emphasizes the permanence of the new world. God says, for as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain.

So those are the Old Testament promises which Peter is referring to here in verse 13 in his chapter 3. So let's look carefully just at this one verse, verse 13, and I'll try to point out three things which God has promised about the future of his people.

First, he has promised us a new home. As the verse puts it, new heavens and a new earth. Now in that phrase, heavens and earth are what you and I would normally think of as the sky and the land.

Peter means by that phrase exactly what Isaiah meant by it, a new environment. Yes, there'll be a sky above, there'll be solid earth beneath our feet, but it will be new. It will be a new creation.

Now I'm pointing this out simply because somebody might look at that word heavens and think that it meant heaven as in our Father who art in heaven. In other words, God's dwelling place.

[13 : 40] But that's not what Peter meant and it's not what Isaiah meant. The new heavens and the new earth simply means a total new environment for God's people to live in. The sky and the land all made new.

There's no suggestion that heaven in the sense of God's dwelling place needs to be remade. There has never been any problem with heaven in that sense. It's the sky and the land as we know them and experience them that need to be remade because they are shot through with corruption and decay.

The original creation was perfect. But since man's rebellion in the Garden of Eden, the old creation has been the home of death, injustice, sin, pain, aging, sickness, conflict, war, and a thousand other horrors.

Remember how Paul in Romans chapter 8 writes of the whole creation groaning together as in the pains of childbirth or the pains of labor. And that's precisely what the news media convey to us every day.

This world is a place of great conflict and great suffering. And we find it very uncomfortable. All of us find it uncomfortable to live in a world of great suffering.

[14 : 54] Sometimes when you're listening to the news on the television or the radio, it's so unbearable you simply want to turn it off. And our natural reaction to all the pain and suffering is to try to make our own immediate living space a little bit more comfortable and pleasant.

So, for example, if you move into a new house or a new flat, what do you do? You spend your first few days or first few weeks getting the place as nice as you possibly can.

So you get out your flash and window lean and detto and detox and Jay's fluid. You put up new curtains. You get the central heating running properly.

If necessary, you buy a new boiler. You tidy up the garden if there's a garden. You sweep up the leaves. You buy bulbs and you plant them in tubs and pots outside the front door so that you've got something pretty to look at in the spring.

Now, we all behave like this, don't we? Our instinct is to create a comfortable environment for ourselves to relax in and a nice place to invite our friends to come and visit us. But the power of decay and disorder is always there.

[16 : 04] So the winter comes and the gales come and the wind blows the tiles off your roof. You get dry rot, wet rot and woodworm. Mice come into the kitchen, even rats occasionally.

Spiders build webs in unsuitable places. And your own body inexorably begins to disintegrate. Crow's feet, bowed shoulders, sciatic nerves, hernias, osteoporosis.

We have to start visiting cardiologists and oncologists and chest physicians and hematologists and psychiatrists. And then we're off to Weight Watchers. And we have to join the rambling club or the gymnasium.

And every last one of us ends up in the hands of one of those ologists sooner or later. In fact, even the ologists have to go to other ologists eventually.

None of us escapes the clutches of the National Health Service. As Moses said to God in Psalm 90, you return man to dust and you say return, O children of Adam.

[17 : 10] Isn't it a good thing then that God has promised his people a new home? New heavens and a new earth. Remember Jesus' words.

I am going ahead of you to prepare a place for you. And after I have gone, I will return and take you to be with me where I am. Well, that wonderful place prepared for us is nowhere in the old world.

So there's the first thing. Peter assures us that God has promised his people a new home, an eternal home. Now, second, it is a righteous home.

Look again at verse 13. But according to his promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Righteousness, in other words, is at home in the new creation, which it certainly isn't in the old world.

Think of it. In this old creation, there are, of course, thank God, moments, even extended periods, where righteousness makes some kind of an advance and conditions are improved.

[18 : 20] And let's thank God for these things when they come. Let me give one or two examples. There was that brave Christian man, William Wilberforce, who battled for 30 or 40 years, almost all his adult life, both inside the House of Commons and outside it, to secure the abolition of the slave trade.

The work of Wilberforce and his colleagues secured a real advance in righteousness. Or think of the effort of Britain and her allies in defeating Adolf Hitler in 1945.

If the Nazis had won that war, if they had managed to establish a grip on Western Europe and Britain, the history of the last 70 years would have been far more horrible than it has been.

But the victory of the Allies in 1945 marked a significant advance in righteousness. We think back with real thankfulness to God for the work of Winston Churchill and his fellow leaders.

Or think of other things more recently, perhaps on a slightly smaller scale. Northern Ireland is by no means fully settled. There are still major tensions and unresolved questions there.

[19 : 30] But life has been much better there in the last 15 years or so. South Africa, likewise, still has some very severe problems. But when Nelson Mandela came to power in 1992, the apartheid laws were abolished and the cause of righteousness was advanced.

And it's not only in the sphere of politics and social justice that we can see glimpses of righteousness from time to time. We see little shiniings of it in all sorts of other places, too.

For example, mental illness is much better understood and much more sympathetically treated today than it used to be. People with physical disabilities are much better catered for and cared for in public places.

But despite these advances, and you could name quite a few others, I'm sure, despite these advances in righteousness, the fact remains that righteousness, in the sense of right living that pleases God, it's always a shy stranger in this world.

The life of the world fundamentally is hostile to it. The forces that really make their mark in the world are the forces of greed, dishonesty, corruption, and naked power used for selfish ends.

[20 : 48] Whole nations are oppressed by tyrants. Haven't we all had our eyes opened in this last 12 months or so as the lid has been lifted off one oppressive regime after another in North Africa and the Middle East?

The Apostle John tells us bluntly in his first letter that the whole world is in the power of the evil one. Jesus speaks, rather surprisingly, Jesus speaks of the devil as the prince of this world.

We can't expect a world whose prince is the devil to be a place filled with righteousness, the kind of living that pleases God. Now, of course, it is true that the earth is the Lord's in terms of its original title deeds, but the devil has insinuated himself into it since Genesis chapter 3, and he exercises power over it temporarily.

And it's because of Satan's grip on the world and its systems that righteousness is not at home here. Isn't it good, then, that in 2 Peter chapter 3, verse 13, God promises his people an eternal dwelling place in the new creation where righteousness is at home?

Think of it, where every relationship, every thought, every conversation, every impulse, every action, every fiber of every being will be filled with righteousness.

[22 : 15] And we who belong to Christ will have lost the power to think evil or ill of other people. It will be impossible for us in that new realm to hate or to covet or to despise or to demean other people.

Righteousness will be at home in the new creation and in the hearts of all who live there. Righteousness will be the native air of the new creation, just as unrighteousness is the dominant force in the old world.

So a new home is promised to Christian people. A righteous home is promised to Christ's people. And then third, Peter tells us that this is a home worth waiting for, worth waiting for.

Look at verse 13 again. According to his promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. The Christian, you might say, is a bifocal creature.

Our eyes need to be in two places or at two levels at the same time. So we look at what is immediately happening around us in the world just here, the world of our friends and our families and our work, and we have to get on with life in the close-up.

[23 : 32] And it's important that we do that. We have to make a living. We have to make a wholesome contribution to our society. But our eyes are also lifted up onto the distant horizon.

We're scanning the far horizon. We're waiting. We're looking for the Lord Jesus to come back and fetch us. That's what this third chapter of 2 Peter is all about, the return of the Lord Jesus.

And it is that cataclysmic event which will precipitate the arrival of the new heavens and the new earth. Think of it. The schoolboy waits with longing for the school holidays.

The engaged couple waits with longing for their wedding day. And the Lord's people wait with eager longing for his return.

The New Testament ends with Jesus saying, surely I'm coming soon. And the people cry out, amen, come, Lord Jesus. Now, friend, if you're a Christian, isn't this a glorious prospect?

[24 : 38] If you're not a Christian, you need to repent and come to Christ this very day because you don't know what tomorrow will bring. But if you're a Christian, this future beyond this world is the very thing that God is preparing for you to enjoy forever.

So, friends, let's learn to tread lightly upon this earth because we shall soon be leaving it. Let's not get too attached to our plans and our projects or our homes and gardens.

For example, you might be a capable and bright young student, a student with ambitious plans. You might be saying something like this to yourself in your own head.

I'll get a good degree and I'll make sure I'm noticed by the professors in my department and then perhaps I'll do a PhD and then I will set my sights on a sparkling career.

I'll show the world that I've got brains and energy. World, watch out. Here I come. And by the time I'm 35, I shall be a force to be reckoned with. Now, if you're young and energetic, of course it's good to get stuck in and to work hard and to serve, to serve other people.

[25 : 51] So, yes, be a doctor or an academic or a lorry driver or a nurse or an entrepreneur. Serve your fellow human beings. Make the world a better place. But you've only got a few decades.

And then, eternity. Peter is teaching us to focus our waiting and our expectation on the new heavens and the new earth. The new heavens and the new earth remain when all our plans and ambitions will have turned to dust.

Or maybe you're at the other end of life. You're retired now. Perhaps you're enjoying a quiet life in shorelands or Bear's Den. Your house is comfortable and warm in the winter.

You've got a pretty little garden with miniature cyclamens in it and some exquisite rose bushes, which you've been surrounding with loving care and horse manure.

And think of it, on a warm evening in late June or July, you sit out in your garden and you smell the sweet aroma of the roses. And you take your wife by the hand and you say to her, Darling, we could enjoy being here for at least another century, couldn't we?

[27 : 04] Peter says, we're waiting. Waiting for the new heavens and the new earth. And it's the verses immediately before verse 13 that give verse 13 its forcefulness.

Let me just read from verse 10 again. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. And then the heavens will pass away with a roar and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed or laid bare.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn.

In other words, when the Lord Jesus returns and his return will be sudden and absolutely unpredictable in its timing, like the coming of a thief, when that happens, the world as we now know it will be done away with in the most spectacular and fearsome fashion.

Those final words in verse 10 suggest that it will be all scorched away to oblivion. All man's achievements and works will be obliterated.

[28 : 23] The cities, the skyscrapers, the cathedrals, the bridges, the motorways, the hospitals, the flats and houses, the gardens and farms, Silicon Valley itself and all the wonders of information technology, all will be gone.

And this very place where we are sitting today, there will be nothing here but silence. And let's notice the consequence of all this in Peter's teaching.

Verse 14. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, in other words, waiting for the new heavens and the new earth, be diligent to be found by him, by God, without spot or blemish and at peace.

And back in verse 11, Peter has also emphasized the importance of living lives of holiness and godliness as we wait for the Lord's return. Now, we might be tempted to think rather differently.

We might be tempted to think, if this world is so soon to be destroyed, wouldn't it be more sensible to live self-indulgent lives while we can? Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

[29 : 32] Not at all. Peter's motto is quite different. Live a godly life now, for tomorrow we live. It's because of our future with the Lord in the new creation that we're to live lives of love and godliness and self-control here on earth.

A self-indulgent life is not a life of love. It doesn't care for others. It only cares to gratify its own appetites. But those who are preparing for the new creation and longing for it are already in this old world learning the delightful standards and values of the kingdom of God.

For Christians, life in this world is a life of preparation for the world to come. By the grace of God, our lives are progressively being reshaped and transformed so that we learn and get into our bloodstreams the things that the Lord treasures.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. So Peter is teaching us to wait expectantly and longingly for this new creation.

One of the real problems of being a Christian in the Western world is that we are relatively affluent. Not everybody is. I know there's real poverty in Britain, certainly in parts of the West of Scotland.

[30 : 54] But for many people in this country, it is possible, at least perhaps in later life, to get a bit of money saved up and to buy a nice little nest and to make it comfortable and pretty.

But it is a dangerous thing to do because we so easily start to create our own little heaven on earth and we allow it to satisfy us.

About five years ago, we had a Cornhill training called Students Party in the summertime out at our house, out in Ayrshire. And I was in the kitchen in the evening.

I think we were doing some washing up at the end of the party. And one of our students was there with me, a bright lad, and he noticed the dishwasher in our kitchen. And he looked at me and said, oh, Edward, brother, you're lost.

When a man buys a dishwasher, he's getting too attached to his home comforts. Now, he was teasing me, but he was only half teasing me. He was making a real point.

[31 : 55] In fact, every time I look at that dishwasher now, I'm thoughtful. You see, if I were to get so attached to my home that I failed to long for the new creation, I would be a fool and I would have lost my bearings.

Now, these words of Peter restore Christians to our proper bearings. He's telling us about the real future that God has promised. In verse 13, God has promised us a new home, a righteous home, and a home worth waiting for.

So let's wait for it eagerly. It's this clear teaching about the new creation that enables us not to be overwhelmed by the fear of death. Death would have a fearful sting for us if Christ had not intervened.

But he has intervened. His death and resurrection have broken the power of death for all who belong to him. And he has opened the way for us to join him forever in this new world which is being prepared for us.

So if you ever go to a church where the preacher says that the big goal of our life is to make this world a better place. Don't believe it.

[33 : 12] Of course we're to love and serve our neighbor. We're to help the lives of others to be fuller and happier. But the goal of the New Testament is not located within this world at all.

It's in the world to come. For as Peter teaches us with all his authority as an apostle, according to God's promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness is at home.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Lord God, your power is infinite and your purposes are infinitely and wonderfully good beyond the reach of our full understanding, far beyond.

And yet you've told us so much and you've revealed to us in the Bible so much about your great purpose. And we thank you for these words of your servant, Peter, in which he assures us that those who belong to Christ have this great future laid up.

[34 : 32] And we pray, as Peter teaches us, dear Father, that you will hasten the coming of the return of your son and thus hasten for us the arrival of the new creation, that we should enjoy it and enjoy our knowledge of you and our full appreciation of what it means to belong to you forever.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.