

This is the third and last of our studies about living in the past, the present and the future. On Monday we looked briefly at the seriousness of the *present* - and the necessity of redeeming our God-given opportunities. Yesterday we thought about living in the light of the *past* and the lessons which the past has to teach us. This evening we conclude the series by asking what it means to live in the *future* - or, more accurately, what it means to live in the light of the future.

Let me begin by making clear what it doesn't mean - it doesn't mean worrying about our future here on earth - whether we expect that to be long or short. To do that would be to fly directly in the face of the teaching of our Lord Jesus - as given a little over half-way through the so-called 'Sermon on the Mount' - in the latter section of Matthew 6 to be precise.

There the Saviour took up the subject of anxiety and worry - in particular anxiety about what are normally regarded as the necessities of life - food and clothing. He made several points. First - that worry about even such relatively important matters is **unnecessary**. For there are, He pointed out, even *more* important things - 'life' - for which we want food and drink - and the body - for which we want clothing. By implication, He was saying that - if God has given us life - and He has - we can surely count on Him to provide what is necessary to maintain that life. And if God has given us a body - and He has - we can surely count on Him to provide us with a covering for that body. That the One who is powerful enough to have created both life and the body in the first place, is surely able to provide food and clothing to sustain them both.

But worry, He continued, is not only unnecessary - it is **blind**. Possibly gesturing to the birds above His head and the flowers at His feet, He invited His disciples to 'behold the fowls of the air', to 'consider the lilies'. Anxiety, He argued, is blind to God's providential care all around us. Leading His disciples into the classroom of the natural world around, He invited them to open their eyes and to think about what they saw there. 'Look at the birds', He said - the point being that the birds of the air make no provision for their future. They don't sow, reap, or gather grain into barns - whoever saw a sparrow or raven driving a tractor or combine harvester? Yet God feeds them. Similarly, the lilies of the field neither toil to produce raw-material, nor spin to manufacture the material once produced - whoever saw a lily work a sewing machine? Yet God clothes them - and how!

But worry, Jesus says, isn't only unnecessary and blind - it is altogether **futile** - useless - it accomplishes nothing positive. 'Which of you by anxious thought can add one cubit (about 18 inches) to his stature' - or possibly, 'Which of you by anxious thought can add the shortest period to his life?' It isn't easy to decide between the two possible translations of Jesus' words - but either rendering is true enough - anxiety isn't going to make us *grow any taller* nor is it going to make us *live any longer*.

'And so', Jesus said, 'don't worry - saying, what shall we *eat*? Or what shall we *drink*? Or what shall we *wear*?' And we do well to remember that, though He was indeed the Son of God, He was no stranger to such physical needs Himself. He knew full well what He was talking about. He commenced His public work on earth *hungry* - eating nothing for 40 days - and we know He hungered at least once again - one morning during Passion Week as He entered Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> And He knew what it was to be *thirsty* - on more than one occasion - and He ended His life here on earth *stripped of His clothing* and nailed to a cross. Yet He never worried about what He ate, what He drank, or with what He was clothed.<sup>2</sup>

And what about the future? His message about anxiety ended with a reference to the morrow. 'Don't worry about tomorrow', He said, 'for tomorrow will worry about itself. Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof' - in other words, 'Each day has enough trouble of its own'. The Lord wasn't saying, of course that it's wrong to plan or make preparations for the future.<sup>3</sup> It is, of course, essential that we plan for the future - the apostle Paul did it constantly, for example - on one occasion (in Romans 15) providing us with a page out of his busy schedule - in which were detailed his plans to go from Corinth to Jerusalem, then to Rome - and using Rome as his springboard - to reach as far as Spain - which he may or may not have ever succeeded in doing. No, the Lord wasn't forbidding us to *think* about tomorrow - He was forbidding us to *worry* about it. God doesn't chew *His* fingernails over the future - and He doesn't want us to chew ours either.

All too often, we foolishly increase our burdens in the present by bringing forward the perceived problems of the future. Jesus points out that each day has its own troubles - and for us to bring forward tomorrow's troubles into today is simply to double them up. And what does this anxiety about tomorrow achieve? It doesn't empty tomorrow of its troubles, but it does empty today of its strength. It doesn't help us to solve tomorrow's problems, but it renders us unfit to cope with today's problems. Because in the end, God provides us with our strength on the same basis as He provides us with our bread - *a daily basis*. And it's plain silly to try to carry tomorrow's load with today's strength.<sup>4</sup>

No - the Christian ought not be anxious about the provision of tomorrow's necessities - still less the relatively minor matters which we often worry about. Indeed, this evening I am not suggesting that we should live in *tomorrow* at all. I note that Hebrews 13 says of our Lord that He is the Same yesterday, today and - not 'tomorrow' - but 'forever'. And I too have the longer view in mind - not our future *here in this world* but our future *in the next*. And, according

to the consistent teaching of the New Testament, that should have a practical effect upon our present and daily lives.

By way of example more than any thing else I refer you to a just three passages which apply what lies ahead of us to either encourage our hearts or challenge our lives and behaviour. It has been pointed out many times that an understanding of future events leads, in 1 Thess. 4, to **solace for the sorrowing** – in 1 John 3, to **sanctification for the saint** – and, in Romans through 2 Corinthians, to **stimulation for the servant**.

Briefly then, '**solace for the sorrowing**'. The background to *the latter part of 1 Thess. 4* is well known.

From the first, the Thessalonian church had been marked by their eagerly awaiting the return of God's Son from heaven - but then some of their believing relatives and friends were taken away by death - a contingency which - with their burning expectation of the Saviour's imminent return - they had simply not foreseen. They feared that, in some way or other, their deceased loved ones would lose out when the Lord came. Paul was able to assure them that, when our Lord comes in glory, He will have all His saints with Him - including those who had formerly died - and went on to explain how this will be brought about - that not only are the dead to share in the benefit of His coming but – according to God's scheduled programme - they will in fact be the first to benefit - albeit the whole event will be over in just a moment, in a twinkling of the eye.

For when the Lord Himself descends from heaven – 'Himself', mark you, not a representative or substitute – for though accompanied by archangel's voice, it will be no archangel who comes – but the Lord Himself – and when He comes, the dead in Christ will rise first, prior to the living being caught up (plucked, snatched away) with them to a meeting of the Lord in the air – and so to always be with Him. 'Therefore comfort one another with these words', Paul concluded. In this way, the apostle was able to help the bereaved Christians at Thessalonica come to terms with their grief and loss by directing their minds to the future.<sup>5</sup>

And many, many saints since Paul wrote have found tremendous comfort in the assurance of such a reunion. Yet, interestingly, in one sense, we owe this consolation to the devil! For Paul explained at the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3 that the reason he had previously failed get to Thessalonica – and therefore his reason for now writing – was that 'Satan hindered us', 2.18. This was why he had sent Timothy to them, he says, to exhort and 'comfort' them, 3.1. Though, in the event, Paul's letter has comforted countless thousands more than Timothy's presence ever could. There can be no question that, in this case – as in so many, Satan was too clever by half – and overreached himself.

Then, in the opening verses of *1 John 3*, we find that our bright future prospect means - not 'solace for the sorrowing' but '**sanctification for the saint**'. John wrote first of our present privileged position and status as the children of God – owed to the 'foreign and unheard of' kind of love lavished on us by the Father – then added that it 'has not yet been manifested what we shall be'. The revelation of that is reserved for another world. Just as the reality of *our present identity* is hidden from world – 'the world knows us not' – so the details of *our future destiny* are hidden from us. We can no more comprehend what we shall be then than the world can comprehend what we are now. And this for the simple reason that we do not possess the faculties, the equipment, to enable us to grasp what it will mean to be raised in incorruption, glory and power – to be raised a spiritual body. We can no more do that than caterpillars can imagine what it will be like when they become butterflies! And yet, while openly admitting that there is so much we not know, there is, John insists, something we do know – and it is the most important thing. 'We know that when He is manifested we shall be like Him!' Wow! One day, as John wrote elsewhere, 'his bond-slaves shall worshipfully serve him: *And they shall see his face*', Rev.22.3-4 – and that vision will trigger the great change and transformation - surely the ultimate expression of God's favour – to conform us totally to the image of *His Son*.

But then John draws out the profound practical implications of this hope. Moving on from *what we are* and *what we shall be*, he makes it clear *what we should be*. 'Everyone – everyone – who has this hope set on Him (the Lord Jesus) purifies himself – not, of course, as 'He purified Himself' – for He never needed to do that – for 'in Him is no sin' – but 'as He is pure'. *There* then is the standard of my purity. As John had made clear in chapter one of his letter, it is the blood of Jesus – and His blood alone – which *cleanses* me - continually - from the guilt and consequences of my sins, but *my part* is to *purify* myself from the love and continued committing of those sins.<sup>6</sup> One day I shall be altogether like Him and my Lord expects me now with His help to begin that process – and not least in this – that I imitate Him in His purity and freedom from defilement. And so, contemplating my future hope leads me to purify my life in the present.

And, thirdly, an understanding of future events – and I refer here particularly to the judgement seat of God and of Christ – references to which span from Romans 14, through 1 Corinthians 3, 4 and 15, to 2 Cor. 5 – means **stimulation for the servant**.

The two passages which make mention of the judgement seat by name stress its practical relevance in the life of the believer now. Romans 14.10 reads, 'But why do *you* judge your brother? Or why do *you* despise your brother? *For* we shall all stand before the judgement seat of God'. And 2 Cor. 5.9-10 reads, 'Therefore we labour (make it our aim – our ambition) ... to be well pleasing to Him. *For* we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,

that each may receive back the things done through the body, according to those things he has done, whether good or bad'.

First, Romans 14. There were major disagreements in the churches at Rome over which food Christians could and should eat and over whether or not Christians should regard some days as having special religious significance. There were two opposing camps - the one party 'judged' the other party and criticised them - while the other party looked down on and 'despised' the first party. The one camp viewed the other with an attitude of *condemnation* while those in the other camp viewed them with an attitude of *contempt*. Needless to say such attitudes did nothing for the peace and unity of the churches of Rome. The point which Paul makes is that 'We shall *all stand* before the judgement seat of God'— adding 'each of us *shall give account* of himself to God' – that is, I am accountable to *God* – not to you – nor you to me. On that day you and I shall *stand* before that seat - not *sit* on it. We shall not be giving account *of* each other, *for* each other or *to* each other. So for me to judge you now is for me to invade God's domain and to usurp God's prerogative. And that is gross presumption!

But if in Romans 14 it is a question of what I am to *give* – namely 'account' – in 2 Corinthians 5 it is a question of what I am to *receive* – or better, to 'receive back' – namely the things which I have practised through my body - whether 'good or bad' – 'bad', not in the sense of morally evil, but, as the word means, 'worthless, paltry, 'good-for-nothing' - with the loss of reward which that involves.

Great stress is laid on the fact that *all* the people of God, without exception, are going to stand and appear before the judgement seat – '*we shall all stand*', Rom. 14; '*we must all appear (be manifest)*', 2 Cor. 5 - no invitations are going to be issued, no excuses be accepted, no apologies for absence be noted.

But, although we shall all be there, the time of review will also be intensely personal – for '*each of us will give account of himself to God*' and '*we shall each receive back*'. There will be no opportunity then for me to hide in the crowd – I shall answer personally and directly to the One who died to save me - as Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 3 - '*each will receive his own reward according to his own labour ... the work of each will become manifest ... the fire will prove the work of each of what sort it is*'. My wife and I recently stayed in a Christian Hotel in North Wales, and were amused to spot a prominent notice there which declared, 'No smoking! If we see you smoking, we will assume you are on fire - and take appropriate action!' But I know that, alas for me, when my service passes through the celestial fire test, I will have no fire extinguisher or bucket of water to hand to quench any flames!<sup>7</sup>

But, on the positive side, we can rest assured that 'the Lord, the righteous judge' will miss nothing that has been done sincerely for Him – 'God is not unjust to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name', Heb. 6.10. As Azariah the prophet said to King Asa, 'Be strong, and let not your hands be weak; for your work shall be rewarded', 2 Chron.15.7. I guess that the end of 1 Corinthians 15 says it all, 'Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord', v.58.

And so, to my reading.

Hebrews 11 opens by telling us that true biblical faith gives substance to, it makes real, those things we hope for – and it brings conviction<sup>8</sup> of the unseen, it provides evidence to us of that which we cannot see.

And throughout the chapter, the writer provides us with a catalogue of men and women whose lives and exploits bear witness to the power and effectiveness of such faith – although the chapter is dominated by the faith-exploits of just two men – Abraham and Moses – whose stories fill over half the total space devoted to named individuals. The writer's spotlight falls especially on them no doubt because these two men stand out in the biblical record as those who deliberately turned their back on this world and all it had to offer because they believed in the existence and reality of another world.

Take Abraham first. He enters the stage in Genesis 11 – a chapter which opens with men who set out to built one great city – that of Babel – and closes with a man (Abram) who turned his back on another great city – Ur of the Chaldees.

For Abraham turned his back on the prosperous and powerful city of Ur - home to the most important centre and shrine of the Sumerian Moon-god – Nannar Sin. Nannar's symbol was that of the horn-shaped crescent moon – by reason of which the Moon-god managed to double as the Bull-god as well. The largest temple at Ur (the name itself meaning 'light' or 'brightness') was known as 'the house of the great light' - dedicated to Nannar and his wife, the goddess Nin-gal. But one day the God of *glory* appeared to Abram the idolater<sup>9</sup> and His glory eclipsed all the light and brightness of Ur – as a result of which Abraham not only went out when he could have stayed, not only sojourned when he could have settled, but remained when he could have returned ... and why, pray?

He 'went out and sojourned in a strange (a foreign) country, dwelling in tents' the writer says, 'for he looked for a city ('he expected a city') which has foundations (he 'lived in the expectation of *the* city which has *the* foundations' lit – that is, the only city with enduring foundations), whose builder (whose designer, planner, architect) and maker is

God' - a city which owes everything it is to God – its architect - the one who drew up the design – and its builder - the one who did the actual work.<sup>10,11</sup>

'A city which has foundations ....'. I have read that on the 13th February 1979 some architects met at Skegness Pier on the north-east coast of England to present an award to one George Sutherland for the best designed pier theatre. Rather embarrassingly, during the actual presentation ceremony the theatre was swept out to sea.<sup>12</sup> Doubtless the design was good but apparently the foundations left something to be desired! And as the centuries passed, the city of Ur fared no better - founded originally on reclaimed marshland which had been drained – the city was totally desolated around 300 BC when the river Euphrates burst its banks – from which the city never recovered. But the city Abraham looked for will never pass away - it is *'the city with the foundations'*!<sup>13</sup>

Nor is Abraham ever going to be disappointed at the choice he made. Verse 16 says, 'Therefore God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God, for He *has* prepared for them a city'.<sup>14</sup> God is happy to link His name with theirs because He knows He has no cause to blush - no one will ever say that He let Abraham and the other patriarchs down – either by failing to provide them a city at all – or by preparing them a city which falls short of their expectations – an inadequate compensation for their sacrifice.

And we do well to remember that it is of *us* the writer says in chapter 13, 'here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come', v.14.<sup>15,16</sup>

And then there was Moses, who 'refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter – choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season – esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt – for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward', Heb. 11.24-26.

Moses was a remarkable man in every way. He was the child of a slave, yet became the son of a princess – was born in bondage yet grew up in a palace – inherited poverty, yet enjoyed fabulous wealth – was educated in all the wisdom of Egypt, yet had the faith of a child – was at home in the royal court, yet spent two-thirds of his life in the wilderness – was the keeper of sheep yet led an army – was backward in speech, yet talked with God – for most of his life carried only the rod of a shepherd, yet with it wielded the power of God – was born under sentence of death, yet lived for 120 years.

It is clear from what the writer says that Moses made his life-changing decision to throw in his lot with God's people *before* ever he went out to 'look on' them and their burdens – as recorded in Exodus 2.<sup>17</sup>

So – no – Moses didn't forfeit his status as the son of Pharaoh's daughter as a result of killing the Egyptian. He 'rejected', disowned, that position first – making the conscious decision to throw in his lot with the despised and oppressed people of God - not, note, because they were *his* people, but because they were *God's* people - knowing that by identifying himself with the downtrodden Israelites, he would be renouncing the status he enjoyed as a member of the royal household - but preferring to be known as a son of Abraham than the son of Pharaoh's daughter.<sup>18</sup> The world lay at his feet – its honours, pleasures and wealth – its power and position – its pomp and prestige – and he trampled on it all.

But what kind of man, we may well ask, would choose hardship in preference to comfort – reproach in preference to honour – poverty in preference to treasure – shame in preference to fame – the slave camp of Goshen in preference to the palace of Pharaoh – the enduring of affliction in preference to the enjoyment of untold pleasure? In the eyes of the world, I guess only a madman in an act of supreme folly would make such a decision. But Moses was certainly no fool. It was simply, the writer informs us, that his faith laid hold on the realities of another world – and, in the light of *that* world, he reached a perfectly sane decision – indeed, the only rational and intelligent decision possible – and plumped for the most valuable and the most durable.

He 'esteemed' - he considered, accounted - that is, he weighed two very different sets of values in the scales - laying in one pan the untold, fabulous wealth of Egypt - and in the other the reproach and stigma which association with the enslaved people of God would bring on him - and he reckoned the reproach to be the greater riches.<sup>19</sup> And so, what others would have considered as something to be shunned at all costs - reproach and affliction - he esteemed as a prize to be obtained.<sup>20</sup>

And *why* did Moses do this? Because he had respect to 'the recompense of the reward' - literally, 'to the payment of the wages'. The word translated 'had respect to' indicating that he looked attentively, steadfastly and continually away from all else to focus on just one object - in the context he looked away from the things of time to the things of eternity.

Moses, that is, was confident that his sacrifice and service would be more than adequately recompensed in due course – that he would not be the loser - and that it was therefore all well worth it.

And so, while Abraham 'looked forward' to a city, v.10, Moses 'looked away' to a reward, v.26.

I guess that, if Abraham and Moses had known Jim Elliott's dictum, 'he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose', they would have shouted a loud and hearty 'Amen'.

There is no getting away from it - what I believe – 'believe', I say, not know or understand - what I believe about the future and that other world has a profound effect on how I live in the present.

I will ask the apostle Peter to draw our session to its conclusion:

'The heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat - the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Seeing then that all these things *will* melt away, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness'. And that is exactly how both Abraham and Moses reasoned. May God enable us to follow in their steps.

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## End-notes

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 4.2; 21.18.

<sup>2</sup> 'Food, drink and clothing', Jesus says, 'are the things which the gentiles (the pagans) seek after', verse 32. 'But' He adds, 'Your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things'. Let the heathen - if he will - be anxious - he knows nothing of a Father in heaven. But anxiety is totally unworthy of a Christian. And what use is all our knowledge of the Christian faith if we live in the same anxious and distrustful manner as the heathen? Speaking to Christians, the apostle Paul once wrote, 'Having food and raiment (clothing), let us be therewith content', 1 Tim. 6.8. Ouch!

'But seek first', Jesus demands, verse 33, 'God's kingdom and his righteousness'. That is, be concerned - above everything else - with the rule of God in your life - and with what He requires of you. Seeking God's will and God's way is the first priority. 'And all these things shall be added to you' - 'all these things will be given to you as well'. In other words, 'If we concern ourselves with God's interests, we can rest assured that God will concern himself with ours'.

<sup>3</sup> See an example of Paul's diary in Rom. 15. 23-29

<sup>4</sup> In His word, God has promised that He is 'a very present help in trouble', Psa. 46.1 - 'a help in distresses, very readily found', JND. Yes, God is 'a very present help in trouble' - but in worrying about tomorrow's troubles you're on your own!

<sup>5</sup> Note from 2<sup>nd</sup> century - Irene to Philon and another friend about loss of her friends' loved one - 'But in the end there is nothing one can do in the face of such trouble. So I leave you to comfort yourself. Farewell'. How sad - sense grim despair and hopelessness gripped ancient world - as does ours.

<sup>6</sup> The word translated 'purify' in Tit.2.14 is the same as that translated 'cleanse' in 1 John 1.7 - and not that of 1 John 3.3.

<sup>7</sup> I will, according to Rom. 14, stand to 'give account' - not 'an account' in the sense of 'any old account'. I will, according to 2 Cor. 5, 'appear' - not 'put in an appearance' - but be displayed and manifested - with no mask, no pretence - with nothing to hide me and my life here from those eyes which are as a flame of fire. I have thought on occasions of a hymn from Light & Love which had at Bethesda some time ago; "How shall I meet those eyes?" [HoLL 599 (3)].<sup>7</sup> I will then re-live my life down here; video will be rewound and replayed in the presence of the Lord who sees and knows all. Speaking as a Christian of almost 45 years years, my chief regret is that I haven't given Him more.

<sup>8</sup> Used by the Lord Jesus when He laid down His challenge, "which of you convinces Me of sin?", John 8.46.

<sup>9</sup> Josh. 24.2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham built no city - as once had Cain, Gen. 4.17 - for he was more than content to lived in the expectation of that city of which God Himself was the maker.

<sup>11</sup> City of Rev. 21 - Abraham enjoy prospect city has no need of sun, neither moon shine in it for glory of God lightens it, Rev. 21.23 - cntr Nannar.

<sup>12</sup> Amazing Blunders and Bungles, Peter Eldin.

<sup>13</sup> Kenyon's 'Abraham'.

<sup>14</sup> RV, JND, as Greek.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Lyte captured the point brilliantly in one of his hymns :

*'My home is in heaven, my rest is not here,  
Then why should I murmur when trials appear,  
Be hushed my dark spirit the worst that can come,  
But shortens my journey and hastens me home.*

*It is not for me to be seeking my bliss  
And building my hopes in a region like this;  
I look for a city which hands have not piled,  
I pant for a country by sin undefiled'.*

<sup>16</sup> Abraham left what was probably a comfortable 13-room villa in sophisticated Ur of the Chaldees - choosing to sojourn in the land of promise, living in a tent - and why? Because 'he looked for a city which has foundations, whose architect and maker is God'. In a sense, the life of Abraham can be said to be a 'Tale of two cities', if excuse second reference to Dickens! And Moses chose to suffer affliction with the people of God .. esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: because he had respect unto the recompense of the reward'.

In his second epistle, Peter wrote of the time when 'the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat - the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up', and made the powerful application, 'Seeing then that all these things will melt away, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 3.11. Abraham and Moses both reasoned the same way.

<sup>17</sup> Verse 11 - something which God Himself is said to do at the end of the chapter, 2.25. Though raised in comfort of Egypt, Moses' heart was a reflection of the heart of God, looking with compassion and pity on the afflicted.

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<sup>18</sup> Would have been east to rationalise decision to stay – owe her his life, home and first-class education – not blind providence of God – opportunity exert influence on behalf of brethren – could argued do more for Israel by remaining in P's court and using influence on their behalf.

<sup>19</sup> Christian magazine = 'Land my (!) safe on Canaan's side' - from 'Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah' by William Williams.

<sup>20</sup> Much as Paul some 2000 years later counted loss all those things which had once been gain to him, that he might win Christ.