

THE BIG PICTURE
LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF THE FUTURE

Do you like living in the city? You might not consider that do live in a city. Would you see Juniper Green, Baberton Mains, Currie as part of the city? Let's assume for a moment that we are part of the city, so what do you like about it? There's a buzz about city life; things go on in cities that don't happen elsewhere: concerts, culture, visitors, tourists, a great variety of events of all kinds happen and there's a buzz about it that many people enjoy and would miss if they were transported to remote rural Scotland; some people are born to be city people. What do you hate about the city? Well, there are places in our city into which you would not want to go alone at night, dangerous places even in our small city; sometimes the noise and hustle and bustle get too much for us and we yearn for a quiet life; dare I mention the trams? Other people can be a bother; we live at fast pace and can be more self-centred in way we look at life in the city.

Cities, of course, are communities of people. Edinburgh is a community of half a million people who live, work, relax and worship in one big community. There is an argument that Edinburgh is a collection of villages and that the city has grown up from these villages to be a city yet these small villages persist: Corstorphine, Juniper Green, Colinton, Morningside and so on. Certainly our city pales in comparison to metro Tokyo with its 32million people, or Seoul and Mexico City with over 20million! I've not done much thinking about city life, but a few years ago I was asked by SU at their Es-team night to talk about 'God in the city'. I set about looking at the New Testament to see what that might mean and in the story of Acts, cities are key. It is the gospel in cities that Acts highlights; it is the church in cities that we hear about there. We see stories of God at work in the cities of the ancient world and the gospel making an impact on the culture of the first century through its cities.

Today we come to the end of our 8-week journey through the Bible and it ends with the picture of a city. It began with the story of creation and God making this good world, but sin entered and ever since we've lived in the tension of this good world/bad world. There are inspirational stories of faith as well as stories of a people who drifted away from God and forgot their love for Him. All the way through the story God has had a plan to bless the world, to give us a whole number of good things. All the way through God has been involved in our world and that involvement came to a climax in the coming of Jesus, God become a real human being for us. Jesus came to heal and to teach, but most of all He came to lay down His life on the cross; He died and was raised and is the Saviour of the world. The church that bears His name, we are His people; the Spirit is poured out into our hearts to equip us to follow Jesus and to live by faith and to be witnesses to Jesus' power and love. The story of Church goes on and we are part of that story.

Today we come to the end of the story and to the very last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. Arguably this is the hardest book to understand. If it is hard to tell the whole Bible story in 8 weeks, it is hard to summarise Revelation in 15-20 minutes! It is attributed to John the apostle who wrote the gospel and some letters, by this time a man in his 80's, the leader of the church in Ephesus, but who is in exile on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. It is a sort of a letter, written for a Church that is being persecuted for its faith; it comes from the time when Rome was persecuting Christians for their faith, and they were thrown into prison, to the lions; this was the time when Christians met in secret for fear of the Romans and when faith was hard because of this persecution. They also had a clear promise from Jesus that He would return to the world

in glory and they had a sense that this would happen quickly, but with the delay and the promise not happening, some began to question their faith; should they give up their faith because of their persecution and Jesus' promise being delayed? So God reveals Himself to John to encourage the Church, to strengthen His people and give them reasons to persevere in their faith.

The problem for us is that Revelation is picture book. It is a book full of pictures and images and we often don't know the key to unlock these pictures. The first century Christians would understand it and would take great benefit from it, but it is hard for us. For that reason, sometimes the pictures have been misunderstood and people have turned Revelation into a detailed account of the future of the world and "this is going to happen and then next thing" and so on. It is not a detailed account of the future; it is not even to be taken as one thing after another. It is a set of pictures to show us what Jesus is like. This is what is going on behind the scenes: John says, in effect, "you see the world, you see the persecution you face, you see the enemies of the gospel, you see trouble; but here is what don't see; here's what else is going on; take heart". Let me give you three examples: Chapter 1 paints a picture of a glorious man, holding seven stars in His hands, walking amongst seven golden lampstands – Jesus is with His Church, amongst us and holds His people in His hands. Chapter 5 has the picture of a throne and standing at the centre of the picture is a lamb which had been slain and this lamb is the object of worship – Jesus is King of the universe, the world, of life, He has the world and everything in His hands so take heart. Chapter 19 is the picture of a great warrior, "*King of...*" (19:16) who wins a great victory over His enemies – Jesus is King and He will overcome. All three pictures are meant to give courage to persecuted, beleaguered Christians.

Then we come to the pictures of the city: "*then I...*" (21:1ff) This goes all the way back to Isaiah 65, this notion of the new heaven and the new earth and God will create a city, a new Jerusalem, to be a glorious place, a place where everything is perfect; there will be no more pain, suffering, nothing evil will happen there. "*the throne...*" (22:3ff) A river runs through the centre of the city and provides blessing for people of all nations. There are two keys to understanding these pictures. First of all, both of these pictures are cities as communities of the people of God; God's people will live there in perfect peace and harmony, they will enjoy a new quality of the perfect life in which they will serve and worship God. The second key is the overwhelming impression that God will live there with them; they are pictures of God and His people living in perfect peace and harmony for ever, where God will bless His people and the people will enjoy God. Do you remember Genesis chapter 3? It is the picture of the garden and in the evening, God walks in the garden to talk to Adam and Eve and bless them with His presence and conversation; that harmony and intimacy was lost because of sin; here is paradise regained and a thousand times a thousand more; God and in His people living in perfect harmony for ever. Because God and His people are in perfect harmony, everything is made new, everything is healed and the blessing of God on the world is complete.

There is a whole sense of 'not yet' about the New Testament. The gospel is about the love of God being lavished on us, but there is something yet to be. There is a personal 'yet to be' for the Christian: death is not the end of everything but we go to be with Christ and share His glory; because He is raised, we shall live with Him and share His resurrection. We call that 'heaven' and it has been the Christian hope for 2000 years. There is also a cosmic 'yet to be', the sense that history is working towards an end, a point when the world as we know it will come to an end and everything will be made

new, the notion of a new heaven and a new earth and that all of time and eternity is in the hands of God. *"I am..." (21:6)* Some historians and philosophers will tell you that life goes in circles and that what goes around comes around; we must learn from the past and not repeat its mistakes because we will get more chances to make it right. It is certainly true that we need to learn from the past, but the Bible's view of time and history is a line, not a circle, a line with a beginning and an end and that Jesus is the beginning and the end of time, the A to Z of everything. There is this 'yet to be' but if anyone tells you they know when world will end, don't believe them; they don't know!

There is one more element to consider: Jesus has promised that He will come again to world. *"Behold, I..." (22:7)* This promise goes back to days of His ministry and towards the end He said this to His disciples: *"At that..." (Mk 13:26f)* After the resurrection, after He returned to heaven, the Christians had a strong notion that He would come again into the world, that He would keep this promise and do it quickly. As time passed and it didn't happen quickly, some people drifted away from the faith, but most Christians learned to persevere in their faith, learning that faith is a marathon not a sprint and so they needed to persevere. That promise has not gone away; again if anyone tells you they know when it will happen, don't believe them; even Jesus didn't know! But He will come and His coming will trigger all of these promises that God has made about making everything new and the cosmic 'yet to be' will become reality.

Some are critical of this idea of hope; they say that Christians who have 'heaven' in their hearts are dreaming of pie in sky, that it is all somehow unrealistic and they are no use to life on earth. On the contrary, hope is a powerful thing and here are some of the ways it makes an impact on us:

It inspires us – we have a dream to live for and that dream inspires us to great things in the service of Jesus; some have this dream and it has inspired them to great things in the world, to make this world a better place for everyone, for the poor, for needy people; it has inspired them to work for peace and justice; they want to create little bit of heaven on earth now and so have given themselves to serve Jesus and other people. It inspires us to mission and evangelism, to share this hope with other people to make their life better. The trouble is, we have so often allowed 'What we don't know!' about this dream to cloud the glorious reality; the questions and the doubts and the controversies have taken over and we have forgotten to be inspired!

It reassures us – Jesus is king; no matter how bad life is in our world, the reality behind the scenes is that Jesus is king and He is working out His purpose for the world. Ultimately evil will not triumph, but will be destroyed; suffering, war and pain don't have the last word. The whole world is in His hands; He is with us; He is King and Lord of everything; the One who loves us is sovereign of the whole world.

It gives us courage – what keeps us going when life is hard? Many Christians have been given courage to persevere by this future hope of heaven. How did the first century persecuted Christians survive their ordeal with their faith intact? By seeing Jesus on the throne and by the hope of heaven in these pictures in the book of Revelation. They found new courage and new energy to follow Jesus.

This is a real hope, a sure and certain hope; this is the end of the story that began with creation; this is the culmination of the promise of God to bless the world.

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This is the end of the story; let me finish with some words of CS Lewis, the last words of his last Narnia story called *The Last Battle*: “for us this is the end of all the stories and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.” Lift your eyes and dream; dream of the story that never ends; dream of the city into which the light comes only from the glory of God; dream of the city where God and His people live together in perfect harmony; dream of a new story, that is better than ever! This is God’s story and it is our story too; and it is glorious!