

God's Plan for the Future

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening everyone. Wonderful to have you tuning in with us. Thank you so much for taking the time to do that. Let me encourage you to grab a Bible and come with me back to those verses that we read together in Isaiah chapters 2, 3 and 4.

Now, I won't have escaped your attention, the fact that we're taking on three chapters tonight. So we're going to up the pace a little bit. But sometimes just taking a section as a whole of one of these bigger books of the Bible, sometimes the best way to see the main point.

And talking of the main point, here is a pop quiz for you as we begin. Here's a famous quote, and I want you to name the film. And I'm going to give you 10 seconds on the Zoom chat to get your answers in.

And then I'm going to tell you what the answer is. Okay, so you ready for this? Here's the quote.

Roads, where we're going, we don't need roads. So here's your 10 seconds.

What do you think the answer was? Answer, back to the future. And your prize, if you've got that right, is you can give yourselves a little thumbs up emoji on the Zoom for everyone to see.

[1 : 12] That could be your prize. But that's the answer. Where we're going, we don't need roads. It's back to the future. Which, when I was growing up, was the film to watch on Christmas Day. Right?

You kind of organise Christmas Day around the film. So excited to see it. And I remember as a kid being fascinated by its contents. Right? Watching it and thinking, wow.

Do you think that's what it's going to be like in the future? So the film's giving us all sorts of things about what's going to come. Right? So you're seeing things like flying cars. You're seeing hoverboards.

You're seeing baseball players with robotic arms. You're seeing dogs taking walks with automated machines walking them. And the one that got me really excited was little pizza packs that you would get and you would put in a special machine.

And then moments later, bingo, it would go. And out would come a full-blown pepperoni pizza. And I'm going, how exciting is that? How cool is that? Here's the question of this passage I want you to think about tonight.

[2 : 14] Friends, have you got any idea what the future holds? Any idea what the future holds? So thinking on that question, let me make an observation about the thing that we would normally do at this time of year.

Right? January in any kind of year. What would we do? We would make New Year's resolutions, wouldn't we? What we want to achieve. Who we want to see.

Where we want to go. Who we want to be. And normally my Facebook and my Twitter feeds would be full of this stuff. People saying, this is what this year is going to be all about for me. I'm planning it out. But the thing is, observation January 2021.

I don't see anyone making any New Year's resolutions. Isn't that interesting? Could it perhaps be that as a society we're realising that we don't know what the future holds?

I mean, how humbling is it to think on the fact that all we've been through in the last 12 months of our lives, that not a single person on the planet saw it coming?

[3 : 25] Friends, if you've got any idea what the future holds. It's going to be that way. Into that backdrop. How timely is the main point of this passage?

Because it's all about what God is going to do in the future. And how that impacts our today's. And friends, let me just say straight off the bat, my heart needs this.

It needs this all the time. It needs this all the time. What God is going to do. Who he is. And my life that changes all the time.

And our world that shakes. I need it all the time. But I especially need it now. When I am prone to wander. When I doubt. When my heart struggles. When I take my eye off the ball.

When I get distracted by silly things. I need to be strengthened by this God of grace. And his promise about what he is going to do in the future. This needs to be like look his aid for our souls.

[4 : 28] We need this, friends. So I want you to come with me to Isaiah chapter 2, 3, and 4. As you're turning there, let me just, to give appreciation for the author and how he's crafted this.

Let me just help us understand the quite deliberate play in this section. Isaiah helps his readers to see the main point through the structure. You can think of it like two plastic cups in the middle with a piece of string.

Did you ever used to play that game when you were young? You used to cup. Your friend used to cup. And you used to see whether you could talk to each other. Maybe that was just me. I don't know. But this is what I thought of with the structure. The two cups in either end.

So we look at the text there. Two plastic cups. Chapter 2, verses 2 to 5. That's one end. And chapter 4, verses 2 to 6 that we read. It's the other end.

And these two things are all about the vision about what God is going to do in the future. And so in the middle, chapter 2, verse 5 to chapter 4, verse 1, the string is all about a stinging rebuke to this present generation of God's people and how they are living.

[5 : 39] Two visions of the future. One stinging rebuke to this present generation. Right? Let's start with a string. Isaiah is pitching this. Here's what we need to understand.

To a generation in the present who are getting it horribly, horribly wrong. Right? Now we do well to remember that as the camera focuses, verse 1 of chapter 2 on Judah and Jerusalem, we do well to remember that these folks are supposed to be the covenant people of God.

Right? Now what does that mean? Well, this is the people. This is the through you I will bless the nation's people. This is the I have rescued you from slavery in Egypt, says the Lord people.

This is the I will be your God and you will be my people people. This is the I've led you to the land that I promised your forefathers people. And this is the you are to be my holy set aside people who will shine my glory to the world kind of people.

You can do this after this. Deuteronomy 4, Moses lays out for the people as they obey God's law what's going to happen to them.

[6 : 53] Right? He says this. Moses says to the people, observe them carefully, God's laws, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations.

Right? So in other words, if God's people live in covenant relationship with Yahweh, the people of the nations round about will look in and say, I have never seen anything like that.

How different is that to the way that we live our lives? How different is this God of Israel's to the gods of ours? How powerful and awesome is the Lord, they will declare.

And how do I know this God? Who is he? And how can I come to know him? As God's covenant people are compellingly different to the world around them.

The world looks in and says, I want to know the Lord. Right? One of my favorite things about where we live in the city is that we live in an area that's slightly raised.

[7 : 52] Okay? Which is bad news on a windy day. Right? Got our girls a trampoline not so long ago. And that is pitched into the ground.

Right? Windy. But the good news is, like me, good news, get cracking panorama views of the city. So I go out every day just trying to go for a walk, try and get outside.

And I take in the incredible views of our city. Right? And I look out. What do I see? I see Carton Hill. I see Edinburgh Castle. I saw what is, what have come to be known as the John Lewis Cranes.

Here's what I also see. I see tons of church spires. I was always told that the original idea of a spire was that if at any point the people in our city wanted to know where to go to find truth in their troubled times, where to find love in their times of need, where to find help, all they needed to do was to lift their eyes and just look for the spires.

Look for the spires. You see, there's a great question to ask, isn't it? Are we that kind of community? We've got a spire. But in terms of us as a people, are we this kind of people?

[9 : 10] There's something in this, I think, of what God calls his people to be. Right? Just a beacon of hope and of holiness to the world around the world.

But the tragedy is that Isaiah's generation that he's speaking to are a million miles away from that. How are this generation getting it horribly wrong?

Here's what we need to see. There's one core issue that's manifesting itself in four different ways. Right? Four different problems. Really quickly, we'll scan over this in the text.

Follow with me. Chapter 2, verse 11. What is there? Four problems. Here's the first one. There's a character problem. A character problem. Right? Chapter 2, verse 11. Holiness has been replaced with haughtiness.

Right? There's an arrogance that oozes from God's people. And the woman, chapter 3, verse 16. What they're described as dressing up to the nines. That's the phrase we would use.

[10:10] Right? Dressing up to the nines. Way more concerned about outward beauty than they are about inward beauty. And I think the idea of how it's pitched there is that these women, by the way that they're dressing, the way that they're behaving, are leading others astray.

Right? There's a character problem with this generation. Their hearts. There's a leadership problem with this generation. Chapter 3, verse 12. What does God say?

Your leaders mislead you. They confuse your paths. Right? They tell you bad ways to go. They teach you bad decisions. These people are being badly led.

And I think the reason is because this generation of God's leaders, they don't know the Lord for themselves. Okay? And it's a stinging warning, isn't it, for any of us who would find ourselves in positions of leadership.

Does our love for the Lord, our love for the Lord, is that how we lead out of our love for the Lord? Robert Murray McShane, who was a famous Scottish minister back in the day, he used to talk about, people used to ask him, what is the most important thing that your congregation need from you?

[11:21] And he said, the greatest need of my people is my own personal holiness. In other words, if I'm not seeking the Lord first and foremost, if I'm not loving him with my whole being, if I'm not loving my neighbor as myself, if I'm not basing myself on his word, then how can I expect my people to do it?

This is what they need. This is what God's people need from their leaders. And he just ain't getting that at this generation. People are even looking to mediums for guidance, right?

Just a generation who've given up, given up on seeking God in prayer. What's the point? This is functional atheism right here. God isn't here. He doesn't know.

Verses six and seven, the land is full of the occult. And God's judgment on this generation, I think as we read it, will be that this leadership crisis here for this people is going to get worse, right?

Leadership problem. There's a justice problem. Chapter three, verse 14. You devour the vineyard. The spoil of the poor is in your houses.

[12:33] You're crushing the faces of my people. You're grinding their faces. Feel the imagery there. Feel the imagery. And this isn't just the peoples of the nations round about that God's people are failing to live up to the standards of justice and equity that God has called them to.

This is their own people. Friends, would we see how God is so concerned about justice? These people are just about selfish gain.

There's a justice problem. And lastly, there's a worship problem. Chapter two, verse eight. Land is full of idols. Full of idols. Right?

People just bowing down to the work of their hands. The land is full of treasures, full of horses, full of chariots. I take it that is just things that people put their confidence in.

Got some stuff in the bank. Got some stuff behind me. They seek assurance and protection in the things that they can see and they control. Just like the nations round about, rather than the Lord.

[13:37] So there's four problems, friends. You see it? Character, leadership, justice, worship. Four problems which plague this generation. And yet it all comes back to the one core issue.

And it's that this generation, they have a very small view of God and a very big view of man.

If you're into marking your Bibles or you're into memory verses, here's one for you. Chapter two, verse 22. Easy to remember, 222. Right?

Chapter two, verse 22. Here's what Isaiah pitches to this generation. Here's the summons. Stop trusting in mere humans who have but a breath in their nostrils.

Why hold them in esteem? Now here's what I want you to do. I want you to mark it in your Bibles, but I want you to feel the imagery of that. And here's what I want you to do.

[14:39] I want you to breathe in and out. Do it a few times. And keep doing it. I'll tell you the story.

You know, I remember when we were young, going on family outings in the car. And because we lived in the north side of Glasgow, every time we wanted to travel to the south side of Glasgow, we would go through and under the Clyde Tunnel.

Right? And as we were approaching it, the radio would start to go dead. No radio signal in the tunnel. And at that point, my brother and I, sitting next to each other in the car, would look at one another.

Right? And nod. And we both knew what that meant. It meant it was game time. And the game was to see who could hold their breath for the whole time that we were in the tunnel.

Could you hold your breath from the minute that we entered to the minute that we exited? So what we would do is we would look at each other and all of a sudden, as the radio would start to go dead, we would just take a big gulp of air.

[15:44] Can you do it? Can you do it? Here's the thing. Never did it. Every time, I've realized just how little time I can go without breathing.

We need breath. We need it all the time. We cannot live without it. And that's Isaiah's point. Human beings, they're here one minute, they're gone they're next.

Human beings are the breath in their lungs. They are fragile. And yet this generation are navigating and evaluating life according to the standards and the customs and the wisdom of those that breathe.

Presumably the might of the foreign nations around about them who are pressing in. Right? They're evaluating life according to those that breathe rather than the one who gives the breath.

I'm reminded of that famous quote from C.S. Lewis, that everything that is not eternal is eternally out of date.

[16:53] You see, that's the core issue. That's the core issue. This generation have a fear problem. And I asked myself this week, friends, do I have a fear problem?

Think about it. Do you have a fear problem? Do you know how it manifests itself for me? One of the ways, and we could go many different places here, but because of time, one place. It manifests itself for me in my evangelistic endeavors.

Right? You know how it goes. You're walking to the office on Monday. Probably not doing that just now, but you know what I mean. You're walking to the office on Monday. People ask you, what did you do at the weekend? At that point, you've got a choice, haven't you, as to who you fear more. And I know it when I go to pick up the girls from school. Parents, they ask me, what do you do for a job? And I tell them what I do for a job. I'm a minister. And I can choose, can't I, either to push the conversation further or just to bow out at that point.

And they've got the Vicar of Dibley in their minds. Friends, here is the call to push the conversation on. Because you fear the Lord.

[17:57] Right? We can read in a great book just now by a lady called Becky Pippert. Right? She's an evangelist. She's been traveling the world for years telling people about Jesus. Cracking story that she tells in this book.

About when she first came to faith. In her halls at university. She discovers who Jesus is. Gives her life to Jesus. And all of a sudden, her friends begin to ask questions. Right?

A couple of her friends ask, Becky, we've noticed a difference in you. Can we read the Bible together? So there's a couple of them that meet in their halls to read the Bible together.

All of a sudden, this gets around. Word gets around that this is going on. So there's an announcement comes across the tannoy and says, Becky, would you report to the principal's office? So she goes to the principal's office. Principal says, you need to stop reading the Bible together.

He says, well, listen, I didn't ask to read. They asked me to read. We're just having conversations. We're reading it together. But more importantly, I don't want to stop telling people about Jesus. So she keeps on going.

[18:56] She goes away for a little while. She comes back a few weeks later. And in the room where they read the Bible together, tons and tons of people. And she's really worried, saying, why are they in this room?

We can't have the Bible study together. There's so many people. And she's trying to elbow her way through to get there. And then she realizes the people are there for the Bible study. Because the word had got around, spirit of the 60s, this kind of revolution.

Revolution. Word had got around that this young lady had said, I'm going to keep reading the Bible with my friends. Word got around. Why would she do that?

People were intrigued. People flocked to hear. Friends, let's never underestimate what small steps of obedience, what the Lord can do through these things.

Do we fear the Lord? This isn't a call for arrogance. This is a call for reverence. Do we fear the Lord? Are we willing to be obedient to him? And do we fear him more than we fear man?

[19:57] You see, the problem with this generation, friends, is they've got a massive fear problem. Massive fear problem. How does God feel about this? Well, the covenant terms, the old covenant for the blessings and the curses, for obedience and disobedience, that they're spelled out in Deuteronomy.

And to this people in rebellion, God pronounces, chapter 2, verse 12, that he has a day of judgment against the proud and the haughty. God will bring judgment against his rebellious people.

And he gives them time to change. How gracious and good of God to do that. But this judgment is going to come, we know this in history, first through the Assyrians who will come against this city. And later, more fully, the Babylonians as they come and take this people into exile in 586 BC. That's how God feels about this present generation.

Grieved. Now listen, we do well to remember that reading this today, we are not Old Testament Israel, right? We are new covenant people. And we know that these covenant curses that lawbreakers deserve have been born by Jesus Christ, the perfect covenant keeper on the cross for us.

[21:14] And so, all those who have trusted in Christ, yes, there will be a day of the Lord. At the end of history, where every human being who has ever existed will have to give account to Jesus.

But friends, in Christ, we have no fear of this judgment. We know grace. But we do well to see God's timeless heart here for his chosen people.

So we turn from a generation of God's people who in the present are getting it horribly wrong. To a people in the future.

A future generation who will have it wonderfully right. So we turn from the two cups. Sorry, we turn from the string to consider the two cups, right?

The two bookends. Where God lays out what he will do in the future. What he will do in the future, right? To transform the fortunes of his people. And we're going to see this as all him, right?

[22:10] This is not about these guys up in the ante, up in the game. This is not, they can't do it. This is not them. This is about God through Christ, through the work of the Spirit, in a way that only he can, working to bring hope.

Now, follow with me, right? First cup, verses two to four of chapter two. Scan your eye over it. What will God do? God will establish his house on the mountain.

Okay? So it's there. It's there for everyone to see. High and lifted up. And from there, God's word is going to go and it's going to be so powerful that the nations and the peoples of the world are going to come streaming up the hill to hear it.

Okay? And as it goes forth from Jerusalem. Okay? And this word, do you see, is going to cause peace between the peoples. That's what it's going to bring.

Do you feel this imagery there, Isaiah? Of swords being put down, of war coming to an end. This is what this word is going to accomplish between the peoples of the world. As they stream up the hill to hear God's law.

[23:20] And then have a look at the cup at the other end of the bit of string, right? Verses two to six of chapter four. On that day, God's going to raise up a branch from the tree of David.

And this branch will be beautiful and glorious. And this branch will be the joy of all of God's people. And God's going to both judge sin and his holiness and rebellion. And he's going to bring about spiritual transformation in his people. He's going to deal with their sin.

He's going to cleanse them. Or as in the words of Alec Mateer, Old Testament scholar said, He's going to make his people fit for his presence. That's what God's going to do in the future. Okay, and he will be their canopy.

I love that image, right? Just canopy, shelter. That's what God is going to be for his people. They will find refuge in him. They will find a shelter from the storm.

[24:20] They will find a safe place to live their lives. I love how God describes himself as that. He's a safe place. He is a refuge. He's a rock in times of trouble. How good is it to know that right

now?

And this is the vision of the future then. Do you see when God's people will have it wonderfully right? And in light of that, verse 5, here is the summons.

Come descendants of Jacob. Let us walk in the light of the Lord. Again, one asterisk start. Start in your Bible. Remember in your mind.

Come. Let us. Come descendants of Jacob. Let us walk in the light of the Lord. This is something I've done and got into over the last little season of life.

I've got into long runs. And the only time of the day I can seem to do it at the minute in the week is really late at night. And I had that experience recently of trying a usual route.

[25 : 19] And running down it. And it gradually dawning on me that I'm running further and further into the darkness. Okay? It's a horrible place to be. You can have all your fluorescent tops on.

You can do whatever you want. But cars are driving. They can't see you. It's a horrible place to be. And having that experience of running into the darkness, realizing that it's increasing, and stopping, and looking for the light, and running towards the light.

That's the safe place to run. That's the safe place to be. That's the greatest place to be. And that's exactly what Isaiah is urging his generation. Come descendants of Jacob.

Let us walk in the light of the Lord. Let's turn it and base our lives on his word, his promises, his goodness, his grace, his track record of things happening exactly like he says they will happen.

And on that note, talking of track records, as you know, Back to the Future was filmed in 1985.

[26 : 33] And the year that they travel to in the future is 2015. That's the year, apparently, that all these gadgets and gizmos would be ours.

But the thing is, I'm aware of only, I think, one of those that came to pass. And it was a pair of Nike trainers. But the thing about what God says here to this generation, standing where we do in the story almost 3,000 years later, right?

That was 30 years Back to the Future. We're talking 3,000 years later. Did God deliver on his promises? Friends, right here, we can see that he did. And we can know that he will.

Okay, there's been a partial fulfillment in everything that we see here about what God will do in the future. In the coming of Jesus Christ, like he is the branch.

He is the branch who will be beautiful and glorious. He is the branch that God's people will delight in. Let me just ask you that right now. Whatever is going on in your life, wherever you're at.

[27 : 37] Friends, do you love the Lord Jesus? Do you love him? Is he beautiful and glorious in your sight? You know, I love the words of that old hymn. I love thee in life.

I love thee in death and praise thee as long as thou lendest me breath. And when the death dew lies cold on my brow, if ever I love thee, my Jesus, tis now.

You see, Christ is the delight of the hearts of his people. He is the one who shed his blood on the cross so that we can be cleansed from our sin.

If the very essence of this generation's covenant failings, think about it, our character, leadership, justice and worship. What do we see in the life of Christ? We see that he is the very essence of covenant faithfulness.

Friends, and in him, that's what it means to be a Christian. We are in him. We are treated like we have done the same. And the word of the Lord going out from Jerusalem and the nations responding, going up and having life in the Lord.

[28 : 45] Friends, do you see, that's us. That's us. And the gospel of peace that God's word will bring. How often have we been thinking about that in Ephesians recently?

This is what God will do. He will smash the hostility that exists between the peoples of the world. And the thing is, friends, that this message is still going forth and changing lives.

And my favorite tweet from this week was just a picture of a huge crowd of people. And they were called the D people. And I presume that's to protect and make their identity anonymous.

People are there. Huge crowd of people in Southeast Asia. And the story goes that Christian missionaries have traveled there. They've spent time learning the local language.

They've translated the gospel into the language. And for the first ever time, the photo was of this huge crowd of people for the first time ever hearing the gospel.

[29 : 41] Isn't that thrilling? First time ever hearing the gospel. Friends, there has been a partial fulfillment of this that we can see standing where we do. But there will be a full fulfillment then.

This is talking about God's new city. This is heaven. And a call to this generation, friends, and how much more to us today is to be strengthened by the grace of the Lord and to know that he will bring this to pass.

He will bring this to pass. Because do you know what the future holds? On that note, let me finish about just an example this week of where really the rubber hits the road if you know what the future holds.

Right? A dearly loved man in our congregation called Finley. He died this week and went to be with the Lord Jesus. I was speaking to his daughter on the phone the other day. And just hearing from her.

And she was telling me that she was amazingly able to be with him in his final moments. And together in those moments, they listened to the great old hymn by Augustus Toplady, The Rock of Ages.

[31 : 00] While I draw this fleeting breath, when mine eyes shall close in death, when I soar to worlds unknown, see thee on thy judgment throne. Rock of Ages, cleft for me.

Let me hide myself in thee. Friends, do you know what the future holds? Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing to pray for one another this week? Whatever's going on in our lives that we would know in Christ the certainty of what the future holds.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. Thank you that you are a God who has revealed yourself.

And you are a God who's got the track record of always being right on your good promises. And so, Lord, I pray that particularly at a time like this, when we realize we don't know the future in so many ways, that you would strengthen us in Christ by a glorious vision of who you are and what you will do in the future.

Father, thank you for your great fatherly love for us. And we commit ourselves to your care, dear Father. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.