

Jesus' Present and Future

The nature of our lives

Many of us have lived together long enough to have experienced the reality that Christians aren't spared the trials and misery of living in this world.

We endure illness of mind or body – in ourselves or our families – that can effect every part of our lives

We move for work or study and can know great loneliness

We can make plans and have them completely upended – by losing work, having an accident, being subjected to Covid emergency measures

Relationships that promised so much can wither, leaving us empty, shamed and sad

We know grief as we experience the loss of those we love

To be sitting in this church is, if those things have not been your own experience yet, to know sisters and brothers for whom that is their life experience.

And as believers we can also face the extra pressure of the suspicion or opposition of others, for whom our faith is offensive and our morality harmful, people quite willing to portray orthodox believers as, in the words of one writer in the Age last week, 'bigoted fundamentalists', and worse.

And there are times when you can think

Where is Jesus? Does He know what I am experiencing? Does He care? Can He help? And is it worth it, worth it to keep trusting, to keep living His way?

The phrases of the creed we are looking at today

*he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

Give a resounding yes to all those questions, proclaiming to all that believers in Jesus, and so believers in the One God, Father, Son and Spirit, are people with a present help, and people with a wonderful future

People with a wonderful Saviour who knows them, cares for them, and is with them now, a Saviour whose glorious future guarantees His people's glorious future.

You mightn't hear that at first in the Creed.

*In fact he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*

Seems to almost suggest that Jesus is now distant and inactive – in a passive kind of retirement in heaven, sitting down with His feet up

*And He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

Doesn't immediately suggest that this is a future we can look forward to

So let's look further at these phrases that describe Jesus' ascension, His going to the Father, and His return in glory

So we can live confident of Jesus' presence and help now, and of sharing in glory then.

A people with present help

Gone into heaven

*Acts 1:*⁹ *After he had said this, he was taken up as they were watching, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*

¹⁰ While he was going, they were gazing into heaven, and suddenly two men in white clothes stood by them. ¹¹ They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven."

Jesus brings His resurrection appearances to an end by ascending to heaven in full view of His followers.

This was important, for it told them they should no longer expect to see Him appearing to them on earth until He returned.

And His bodily ascension also assures them and us that the incarnate Son never ceases to be God and man. The incarnation is not some temporary appearance of the eternal Son as a man in a body which he then abandons so that He can be in heaven.

His body is transformed – no longer mortal, subject to death, and glorious, but

He continues to be the incarnate Son, one who, embodied, can sympathise with our weakness as one of us, and by taking our humanity into heaven, into the presence of God, assures us that we, embodied humans, will one day also be able to come into the presence of God.

And in heaven, as the Creed says, He is said to sit down at the right hand of God in fulfillment of the promise made in Psalm 110 to God's Saving King, the eternal Lord.

As Peter proclaims at Pentecost

Gone to reign

*Acts 2:*³³ *Therefore, since he [Jesus] has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, he has poured out what you both see and hear. ³⁴ For it was not David who ascended into the heavens, but he himself says:*

The Lord declared to my Lord,

'Sit at my right hand

³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.'

But when Scripture speaks of Jesus as being at God's right hand, the point is not location or posture.

Scripture is communicating two things by this language

The first is seen in Acts 2

Being seated at God's right hand declares Jesus' victory and exaltation as God's King.

The right hand is not a location, but a position of supreme authority.

It is a picture from the courts of ancient kings.

The one at the right hand of the King was the one who exercised the authority of the King, to whom the King had delegated His authority and rule

Jesus, at God's right hand, exercises the authority of God, and He does this because He has triumphed over His enemies and death.

The second thing Scripture is communicating when it says the risen, ascended Lord Jesus is sitting at God's right hand is the completion of His atoning work

Hebrews 1: 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

The significance of Jesus sitting down is then spelled out in Hebrews 10

Hebrews 10: 11 Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can never take away sins. 12 But this man, after offering one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. 13 He is now waiting until his enemies are made his footstool. 14 For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are sanctified.

Sitting down means Jesus has completed for all time His priestly atoning work. He can sit down because it was effective – He has perfected forever those who are sanctified. By offering Himself once on the cross He has done all that needs to be done to make us holy, fit to be in the presence of the Holy God.

When we confess Jesus has ascended and is sitting at God's right hand we are saying the Jesus who was shamed and despised on the cross now rules with all authority, the victor

And we are saying He has atoned for our sin, and there is nothing more that needs to be done to deal with our sin.

And that means three things for believers now, in the present.

Firstly, Jesus' bodily absence from us guarantees His spiritual presence with us, that He is present with us through the Holy Spirit.

As the exalted King Acts tells us He has received from the Father the Spirit and poured God's Spirit out on His people

Acts 2: 33 Therefore, since he has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, he has poured out what you both see and hear.

For this to happen our Lord said He had to go away

John 16: 5 But now I am going away to him who sent me, and not one of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' 6 Yet, because I have spoken these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. 7 Nevertheless, I am telling you the truth. It is for your benefit that I go away, because if I don't go away the Counselor will not come to you. If I go, I will send him to you.

Hear that. Jesus' bodily absence from earth is for our benefit, because it means He sends His Spirit to His people, to all who believe in Him [John 7:37-39, Acts 2:38-39]

We are going to start thinking about the great gift of the Spirit next week, but Jesus' absence means He can be present with each and every believer, wherever they are, present in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In a body on earth – a real body – the Lord Jesus could only be in one place at one time. Ascended and sending the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, He is truly with each one of us as He promised when He said.

Matthew 28: 20 teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

With us to empower us to live as His followers in the world, to protect us, and to sustain our witness to Him.

Secondly, Jesus' presence in heaven, His presence in the presence of the Father, means we are secure as God's people. This is what Scripture is communicating when it says the ascended Lord Jesus is interceding for us.

Paul writes

*Romans 8:*³⁴ *Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is the one who died, but even more, has been raised; he also is at the right hand of God and intercedes for us.* ³⁵ *Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?*

And Hebrews says

*Hebrews 7:*²⁴ *But because he remains forever, he holds his priesthood permanently.* ²⁵ *Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, since he always lives to intercede for them.*

Christ's intercession, His presence in heaven as the crucified one who has atoned for our sins once and for all
Means we will never be rejected by God – He is always holding before the Father the effectiveness of His sacrifice
And so believers are secure

Nothing will ever separate us from God for our sin will never be remembered by God, never brought to mind to cause us to be justly condemned, to exclude us from God's presence – for Jesus is constantly interceding for us

And as His forgiven people we will know and can rely on God's steadfast love always, the love that will bring us to enjoy all that He has promised

And thirdly, our Lord's sitting at God's right hand now means we can always be confident of His powerful presence and help, amongst and for His people.

God says in Ephesians that the Lord Jesus is exalted as head of His body, the church

That image alone, Christ as the head of the church, speaks of an unbroken connection with our exalted saviour, and of Him as the source of our continuing life, and as the Bridegroom of His people who nourishes and cherishes the life of His bride. [Ephesians 4:15-16, 5:29]

Ephesians 1 focuses on His present power and authority over all things exercised for and amongst His people

*Ephesians 1:*²² *And **he subjected everything under his feet** and appointed him as head over everything for the church,* ²³ *which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.*

To see what Christ being our head means for His people consider some examples.

Think of that persecutor Saul. He is driving the early church to extinction, seeking to destroy it in his zeal for the traditions of his fathers. And Jesus' people are suffering.

How is the situation turned around?

Not by the plans and power and influence of the early Christians, individually or collectively.

But by the Lord, Jesus.

*Acts 9:*⁴ *Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"*

⁵ *"Who are you, Lord?" Saul said.*

"I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting," he replied.

The Lord Jesus is inseparable from His people, taking the initiative to protect and save them.

Or another incident from Paul's life

*2 Timothy 4:*¹⁶ *At my first defence, no one stood by me, but everyone deserted me. May it not be counted against them.* ¹⁷ *But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that I might fully preach the word and all the Gentiles*

might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil work and will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

Deserted by all at his trial v. 16, he is not alone. V. 17 The Lord stood with Him, just as the Lord will rescue Him

Think of what the book of Revelation reveals of Jesus' present activity as the exalted one, the one who is alive forever, who holds the keys of death and hades.

Firstly it shows Him present amongst His people, present with power and authority. That is what is communicated in John's opening vision of Jesus

Revelation 1: ¹² Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me. When I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and among the lampstands was one like the Son of Man, dressed in a robe and with a golden sash wrapped around his chest. ²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

And He is present as one who knows His people, who cares for them, and is concerned for their life as His people, one who provides the life-saving instruction and warnings we see in each of the letters to the seven churches

Each one of those letters starts 'I know'. For example, the first

Revelation 2: "Write to the angel of the church in Ephesus: Thus says the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil people. You have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you have found them to be liars.

The exalted Jesus is not distant, uninvolved, unengaged with His people. He knows us, and He cares about how we are going as His people.

And that present care is seen in him disciplining His people and offering them restoration.

Revelation 3: ¹⁹ As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be zealous and repent. ²⁰ See! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Believer, the Lord Jesus loves you enough to trouble you, to confront you with your sin, to make you uneasy when you falter and stray

That is the Lord Jesus calling you to repent, to change your direction, the Lord Jesus calling you back to Himself. And He graciously says if you will heed Him, if you will repent – in Revelation 3 it was from complacency and trust in themselves – their wealth and achievements

But it may be from sexual sin, or lust, or unforgiveness

If you will repent, He will restore you to fellowship with Himself, to the peace of table fellowship

As the one who sits at God's right hand He is powerfully present with and amongst His people, present as the Good shepherd, to direct, protect and correct.

Do you see what a wonderful thing it is to confess that the Lord has ascended bodily and now is seated at the right hand of the Father.

It is saying we have an effective Saviour who exercises the authority of God – one who can be trusted completely to save us in all our present frailty and weakness, and to save us completely – now and forever

One who is not absent from us but present with every believer by His Spirit

A Saviour who is not idle and inactive, but one who knows us and is powerfully present to help, who cares as our exalted head for His people, who is speaking to us by His Spirit borne word

A Saviour who hasn't left us to fall back on relying on ourselves and our own works to stay right with God – but secures us forever by His intercession as our High Priest

But while we can be confident of His present interest, care and presence – we are still grieved in various kind of trials

Which is why it is good to be reminded in the Creed of our sure and wonderful hope, that as the angels said at His ascension, the Lord Jesus

¹¹ *They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven."*

A people with a wonderful future

But our hope is not just that He will come. It is that *He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*

that His coming He will bring the end, the judgement of all that will establish God's just and righteous rule over all the earth, and bring in the eternal reign of God in which His people, raised to life, will live in His presence with joy forever.

This is what our Lord taught

*Matthew 25:*³¹ *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*

And at that time He will say to those who are His people, who have welcomed Him in welcoming the gospel messengers

³⁴ *Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*

[Matthew 16:27, Mark 8:38]

Or again, in John 5, Jesus says

John 5:22-23, 27-29

*John 5:*²² *The Father, in fact, judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son,*

²⁸ *Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear his voice ²⁹and come out—those who have done good things, to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked things, to the resurrection of condemnation.*

Our Lord taught that He would come again to judge the living and the dead,

And this is what the apostles proclaimed

Acts 10:42-43 [Acts 17:30-31, Romans 2:16]

*Acts 10:*⁴² *He commanded us, said Peter to Cornelius, to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead.*

We will think more about this when we return to preaching through Matthew and look at Matthew 24 and 25 in term four

But the day of His coming and that judgment is certain,

Sudden and unannounced – like the thief in the night, our Lord said [Matt. 24:42-44, 1 Thess. 5:2, Rev. 3:3]

And the judgement of that day is universal and final, there will be no appeal from that judgement,

I am conscious as I talk of this coming and judgement that it could become just one idea among many, trying to find a space in minds already full – whether with our plans for the day, or the conversations we have had or will have with our friends, or concerns for our children or our jobs

But let this thought lodge in your mind

We will all, every one of us, appear before the judgement seat of Christ [2 Cor. 5:10]

Have you ever tried to imagine that, thought about what He would say of your life

Much of our life is hidden to others, our thoughts hidden even from those we live with,

But He will know, and all will be exposed and measured in the light of His pure love and goodness

It is awesome and unsettling to think of appearing before the glorified Christ – but we should, for the risen Christ will return

And as awesome as that day it, it is a day believers long for – at least the believers of the New Testament

A day believers long for

1 Corinthians 16: ²² If anyone does not love the Lord, a curse be on him. Our Lord, come!

²² If any man loveth not the Lord, let him be anathema. Maranatha. ASB/AKJV

Paul finished 1 Corinthians with the cry Maranatha, translated ‘Our Lord, come’.

That Paul can use an Aramaic phrase with a Greek speaking congregation and expect them to understand it, tells you how early and central longing for Christ’s return is. Maranatha, like Amen, is embedded in the earliest instruction, passed on to believers from the first Aramaic speaking Christians

And the New Testament closes the desire of His church for His coming

Revelation 22: ²⁰ He who testifies about these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!

What can we say of this longing?

Firstly, it is right.

On that day Jesus will be glorified – He will be given the honour, the fame, the praise which is His due, and as those who love Him we should long for that

When someone you love is overlooked, not recognised for their service and achievement – you are grieved

And when they are praised – that child for their sport, or for their academic performance – you are glad

Jesus’ achievements, done in love for the Father and for us, are greater than all. He is the light that dispels our darkness, He has suffered the death that destroys death and brings life and immortality to light

We should long for Him to be glorified

And we should long for the establishment of justice and righteousness in His reign and the end of the reign of lies and violence in the world

long for the vindication of His suffering faithful people, the vindication of the slain saints who cry out

Revelation 6: ¹⁰They cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, the one who is holy and true, how long until you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?"

And it is right also to long, as we suffer the not rightness of a world in rebellion against its creator, for the day when His promises to His people are fulfilled

When our Lord shares with His people His resurrection life, for that is our hope [1 Thess. 4:16-18]

Col. 3: ⁴When Christ, writes Paul to the Colossians, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Or again to the Philippians

Phil. 3: ²⁰Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly wait for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject everything to himself.

It is right for believers to long for the coming of their Lord

But secondly, recognise this longing is a testament to grace and the effectiveness of Christ's work

Of ourselves, when we look at our lives, our failure to love God and our neighbours, we should be terrified of that day.

But the Lord Jesus saves us from the wrath to come. [1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; [Rev. 20:15, 21:27]

Paul writes of the confidence we can have in relation to that awesome day in Romans 5.

Romans 5: ⁸But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹How much more then, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from wrath. ¹⁰For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

Our confidence on that day is not in any good we have done

Not in our transformed lives

Not even in our faithfulness

It is in the grace that gave the Lord Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins [Romans 3:23-25]

That is Paul's reasoning here, what lies behind His how much more

He is moving from the greater to the lesser

If while we were sinners, rebels, hating God and others – we have been justified by His blood – been granted forgiveness, been reckoned as righteous, as those who have kept His law on the basis of faith in the death of Jesus for our sin

IF that is ours now – how much more, when we are His children, living trusting the Lord Jesus, will we be saved then

Having been brought to enjoy peace with God now v. 10 [5:1] through Jesus' death, how much more as those living at peace with Him will the risen Jesus keep us on that day.

We can long for that day that will come on all, that day of wrath, of God's just judgement – only because of the Lord Jesus

Only because of His death for our sin, and God graciously reckoning us righteous by faith in Him, and to put you hope anywhere else will blunt your longing for that day – for you can never be confident that you are good enough, or faithful enough

And we should keep a longing for Jesus' return fresh in our hearts every day, for it is a longing that will help us live ready for that day

We are urged to do that

The great danger, Scripture tells us, is in ceasing to be alert and watchful [Matt. 24:42-44], in falling asleep and so that day overtaking us unawares.

This urging to readiness is found throughout the Scriptures [Romans 13:11-14, 2 Peter 3:10-15, 17, 1 John 3:2-3]

One example

1 Thessalonians 5: ⁶ So then, let us not sleep, like the rest, but let us stay awake and be self-controlled. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled and put on the armor of faith and love, and a helmet of the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

The drowsiness of worldliness – of being pre-occupied with present pleasures and possessions and plans for wealth or new experiences – is the malaise of much western Christianity

We mustn't share in that drowsiness – so test your alertness

Do you live conscious that the Lord could return – today, today you could see Him?

Do you make your plans knowing you will give account to Him for your service?

What is the content of your prayers? Is it for Him to be revealed in glory – soon?

Is there a determination to sustain your own faith and godliness, so you are not caught out in sin?

Is there urgency in sharing the gospel, knowing God's patience will run out one day?

And we must help each other stay alert.

By meeting together – In our meeting we share in the supper, and are reminded month by month we do this – until He comes;

in our meeting we can say the Creed, where we confess He will return in glory;

in our meeting as we hear the word that God has spoken and sing His praises, we are reminded that HE is active in the world, that HE has a plan to exalt His Son as judge and Saviour of the world

All that encouragement to stay alert just comes as we meet week by week, and all is lost if you slip into a pattern of life where you are absent

And we must help each other stay alert by private, daily, encouragement – in our families – reading the bible together, praying together

and in all our relationships, as we encourage each other by having Real conversations because we have taken the time to have real relationships with our brothers and sisters, real conversations because we love them for Jesus' sake, and don't want any hardened by sin's deception

*Hebrews 3: ¹² Watch out, brothers and sisters, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage each other daily, while it is still called **today**, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception.*

Our lives – lived with Jesus, longing for Jesus, ready for Jesus

We do share in the trials of this life, and we share in the hostility the world showed to Jesus

But we are not alone

Jesus is for us – He loves His church, provides, protects, and disciplines – so we will come to what He has promised us

And Jesus is with us, sending the Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and the Son, to abide with us

And we know this life is not all there is

Jesus has risen, He has triumphed, and one day His victory will be revealed to all

We live with a glorious and sure hope

Let yourself long for that day, and stay alert so you are found ready, faithful to the Lord Jesus who

Having suffered and died for us under Pontius Pilate

Has risen from the dead

And *ascended into heaven*

where He is seated at the right hand of the Father.

The Lord Jesus who will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

Amen, come Lord Jesus

[Prayer at end 2 *Thessalonians 1: ¹⁰ on that day when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at by all those who have believed, because our testimony among you was believed. ¹¹ In view of this, we always pray for you that our God will make you worthy of his calling, and by his power fulfill your every desire to do good and your work produced by faith, ¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified by you, and you by him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.]*