

2 Peter 3:14-18

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 May 2018

[0 : 00] The reading is in 2 Peter, chapter 3, beginning at verse 13.

It's on page 1224 in the Church Bibles. Lesson is written in the second epistle of St. Peter, chapter 3 and verse 13.

But in keeping with his promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation. Just as our dear brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him.

He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other scriptures, to their own destruction.

[1 : 27] Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard, so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position.

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thanks very much, Michael.

What are you looking forward to? Are you looking forward to your summer holiday? Guaranteed, of course, to be bright and sunny, as it has been here for the last several weeks now. I'm sure it's going to last all through the summer.

I'm not sure, but I hope so, anyway. Maybe you're looking forward to graduating and getting a job. One of Ros's young cousins, my wife's young cousins, has recently announced her engagement.

[2 : 41] She's looking forward to getting married. Not until next year, I have to say, but very exciting. For me, I'm looking forward to retiring in just over a month's time.

It's actually my third time I will have retired, but it is definitely going to be my last. I do not plan to take up any more paid employment. The last time I retired, I went down from a full-time job to what was technically just two days a week.

And I was really looking forward to that, and I thought, just think. I'll have all those other three days, plus the weekend, to just do my own thing. And which I did. Unfortunately, my own thing turned out to involve getting involved in rather a lot of charities, and ended up being quite hard work.

So I now haven't got time for any paid work, so I'm retiring again, finally. I don't know what you're looking forward to, but I hope there is something.

I know some people's lives are really tough, and maybe they don't have a lot to look forward to. As Peter comes to the end of this letter, he talks about what's really important in terms of what we're looking forward to.

[3 : 48] So there in verse 13, That is the promise which we have.

And of course, it's a promise which came from Jesus himself. And talking about his promise, that's the promise of Jesus. And in a sense, his whole life on earth was to show that promise, to demonstrate that promise.

When he started his ministry, he talked about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of God has come among you. And that all the wonderful prophecies in the Old Testament would be fulfilled in him.

And he demonstrated the sort of kingdom he was talking about. So God would live among his people. And of course, he was himself. God made man come among us.

God would take away the guilt of our sin, the barrier which separates us from God. And as people eventually learned, that was going to be through his own death on the cross. And pain and sickness would disappear.

[5 : 04] And he demonstrated that because people came to him and they were healed. And I know there are many people in this congregation for whom they or others have got, or their relations and people in their family or friends, have much pain and sickness.

And God is going to take that away. And evil spirits will have no more power. We may not be aware of evil spirits among us, but they're certainly there.

And they're separating us and working to keep us separate from God. And the poorest and most humble people in society would receive their share of the good things that God gives.

And people would put other people's well-being ahead of their own, as Jesus did and demonstrated for us to follow. And then finally, death would be defeated, as he showed by his own power to raise people from the dead, and especially in his own resurrection.

So this was already being demonstrated. And Jesus said, it's come among you. It's already here. But he promised, too, that he would come again. And that would be the time when the kingdom of God would fully come on earth.

[6 : 15] And all the bad things would finish. People, shortly after Jesus' ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit, they thought the time was going to be quite soon.

And part of the rationale for Peter's letter was to help people understand that it might not be just yet, and to live with the consequences of that.

But there are promises there. The kingdom of God will fully come amongst us. When I was much younger and first read about the kingdom of God in the Gospels, I wanted to be part of it.

It was just tremendously attractive for me. And I hope it is for you. And I hope you are wanting to be part of that new kingdom now, but supremely in the future. So my answer to that was, yes, I want to be part of this new kingdom.

But it's not necessarily easy to live that kingdom life just now. And the way the world lives around us is one which largely ignores the idea of God altogether.

[7 : 31] We'll come back to that later on, in something later on in this passage. It's something which we need to be constantly taking the grace of God and the strength of God, because the culture around us is tending to lead us astray.

The way the world around us lives is to accumulate money and possessions and put that security in earthly things. And that's tempting for us to want to do that as well. And so we need to make every effort to live the life of the kingdom.

So the beginning of this passage, then, as we come on to verse 14, tells us a little bit about three of the qualities that we need to live the life of the kingdom.

The first one is there in... I've lost my place in the Bible. So there in verse 14.

Since you are looking forward to this, make every effort. We found spotless. Spotless. Very interesting word. And we use the word spotless to indicate something that's just sort of pristinely clean, you know, absolutely perfect.

[8 : 49] And so we are, to make every effort, to be found spotless. And it's a word which was used in the Old Testament of the sort of sacrifices that people needed to bring to God, only the very best.

It needed to be spotless. And, of course, that language was also used for Jesus himself. In the first letter of Peter, he writes, For you know that it was not with perishable things, such as silver or gold, that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

So the same idea there is spotlessness. So in what sense can we be spotless? Well, we are spotless, of course, because Jesus takes away the guilt of our sin.

So that is our ultimate fate. But we need to be spotless now as well, in as far as we can. And that means letting the Holy Spirit take control of our lives, so that we are drawing on his power to live in the way that he leads, and to avoid the sins which tend to beset us.

So we need to be spotless. And when we fail to be spotless, then we have to come to Jesus for that cleaning, to make us spotless again. The second word there that Peter uses is blameless.

[10 : 24] Blameless. And this is as much the same import, I think, that we need to allow, to let the Holy Spirit guide us and strengthen us to do what is right.

But when we get things wrong, we need to confess and repent, and we need to understand and be willing to accept that we have done things wrong. It can be very difficult to accept that we have messed things up.

But to be blameless, we have to let Jesus take away that guilt and put us back on the right path. We have to believe that the blood of Jesus cleanses us and enables us to receive that forgiveness and restitution into God's grace.

And thirdly, we are to be at peace with God. At peace with God. And Jesus has done that for us, to make us at peace with God.

We need to be at peace as well with the people around us in our own fellowship, so that we are not beset by division.

[11 : 27] Again, we need to work at being unified. And so when we're aware of things which are dividing us, we need to sort them out and let Jesus do that in our midst.

And then the third aspect of being at peace, of course, is to give our worries to God and let Him sort them out. I'm a tremendous worrier, and it's one of the things I really need to work at, to give my worries to God and trust Him to see me through the things I'm worried about.

So then, we need to hold on to that hope in Christ and to live in the light of that promise which He's given to bring the kingdom amongst us now and fully to bring it in the future.

The next part of the passage, from verse 15 onwards, is about holding on to our truths in the Bible and rightly discerning them.

So verse 15, bear in mind that the Lord's patience means salvation. So this was the issue that Peter was particularly concerned about. There were forced teachers around who were saying that the fact that Jesus hadn't yet come meant that probably He was never going to come and that this hope was an illusion.

[12 : 58] But Peter stresses that this is not the case, that the Lord is patient with us because He's giving us more time to come to repentance and giving other people more time to come to repentance.

And it's very interesting that he calls upon the authority of Paul as well as himself, because they, of course, were the two key people, at least certainly as it seems from the New Testament as we have it, that they were the two leaders in the Christian church and encouraging people in right doctrine.

And it must have been quite a severe threat, I think, that made Peter make this point that Paul also taught in the same way and they needed to stand side by side and that people needed to realize that this was a unified message which was coming from that both.

So what is he referring to in Paul's letters? Well, there's certainly in Romans, talking about, in Romans 2, do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance.

That's one of the clearest references, but it comes also later in that letter as well. So Paul, like Peter, was keen to make sure that his hearers did not take the delay in Jesus' coming to mean that he was never coming at all.

[14 : 31] And there was a second element to the concern, and that was that some of the false teachers seemed to have been saying that the delay in Jesus' coming meant that they could live how they liked.

They didn't need to live a godly life. And of course, most of Paul's letters finish with a lot of encouragement for people to live out the kingdom now and not to make use of the fact that forgiveness was free to take license and do what they liked.

So we need to be very much aware that there are teachers and false teachings around us whose teaching doesn't accurately reflect the Bible. And that's something that Peter is saying here in these verses.

There are many people who want to distort, ignorant and unstable people distorting the Bible. And we're very much aware of this, of course, at the moment in the discussions about what's appropriate in terms of marriage and sexuality.

And this is the latest, if you like, of the false teachings which have come to the fore. There have been many false teachings which have been gaining ground in the church and in the world, hopefully not so much in the church, but certainly in the world over the last couple of centuries.

[16 : 00] And in many ways, they have their roots in the tendency of people to try to shut out God out of their lives.

And so from a couple of hundred years ago, there was a movement to say that we don't need explanations of God in thinking about the world and that we can describe it rationally in terms of science.

And therefore, things like miracles in the Bible are actually just fantasy and they couldn't possibly happen. And we need to be aware of that and to recognize that actually, if God exists, and we do believe he does, and there's good evidence for that, then God can do anything.

And the world is not self-contained. And that's the God is there and he is more powerful than anything in the world. And miracles can happen.

And especially that the resurrection did happen in history. And that in many ways was the key to showing that the idea of a closed system for the world was actually not true.

[17 : 14] And there'll be many over the years who've argued that actually Jesus wasn't anything special. He was a very good teacher, but not divine. And again, that's something which we need to resist. Jesus was God to come amongst us.

So there are many other things that we could talk about. But we need to take the Bible seriously and not let it be distorted by the world's view of it.

Having said that, it's worth just taking a little moment to reflect on the fact that Peter says that much of Paul's writing is hard to understand. And I think we would probably say that of much of the Bible generally.

It does require work and we need to work at it. And we need to make sure that we are taking the whole message of the Bible and not just selected bits of it. And I think we need to recognize that the Bible, when it talks about God and who he is and how he works, is saying things which are actually intrinsically not easy to understand.

God is so much greater than us. And we try to use human language and human experience to understand him. And, of course, the fact that Jesus came to be a person and to be a person living amongst us was to help us understand what God is like.

[18 : 40] And so we have tremendous help in understanding God. But nevertheless, God is much greater. And so there are mysteries which we have to accept we're never going to fully understand.

The Trinity, three persons in one God. How Jesus can have been both fully human and fully divine. The balance between predestination and free will.

All of these things are never going to be completely understandable. That's how it seems to me. Because our minds just aren't big enough. We need to take what the Bible says and base our doctrines upon that.

Personally, I find it very helpful to, when I'm thinking about theology, but to also be aware of another area of human learning which in a way presents similar challenges.

And that is the realm of particle physics and indeed not just particle physics but modern physics generally as it's developed in the last hundred years or so.

[19 : 48] Again, we're dealing here with things which we use our everyday ideas and experience to try and get pictures of what's going on, but they're always going to be inadequate. And we've known, for instance, for a hundred years now that subatomic particles behave both as waves and as particles.

And our images, waves are things which go up and down and waves on the sea, sound waves and so on. Particles are discrete things which are little balls or however you want to imagine it.

but there are classic experiments which show the particles when you get down to these very small sizes are both. And it's got much worse since then.

We now know that the pairs of particles can be entangled so that measuring one affects another one and it affects it instantaneously faster than the speed of light. And that actually goes against certain other principles of physics.

So, not at all easy. And in fact, physics is in a bit of a crisis because there are two very good theories which explain huge amounts. One is quantum theory and the other is general relativity.

[20 : 59] Sadly, they don't actually, they're not compatible. And a large number of mathematicians and scientists are working very hard to try and work out how to make them compatible. And one day they may succeed.

But they haven't yet. So, if you're a physicist, I admire you greatly. I wouldn't be in your shoes. And biology is much simpler. But theology is intrinsically hard probably in the way to say and physics gives a certain analogy to that.

We need to be humble and take what the Bible says and use it as our basis for doctrine and not pretend that we can completely understand God. So then, we need to be faithful to the Bible and that's the main message that Peter wants to bring to them.

Finally, he comes on at the end to say, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that means putting our faith into practice. So we need not only to understand the Bible as best we can, we need also to practice what it says to live out the kingdom of God.

[22 : 26] We need to pray believing that God is hearing us and wants to answer our prayers. We need to live generously. we need to be willing to give away what we have for the sake of the people around us.

We need to look to show God's love for those who are in need and in general to be loving people and not self-obsessed with ourselves. We need to be aware of and develop the gifts that God has given us so that we may build up the body of Christ and be more effective in his service.

And it's really exciting that as we do this then we will grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. The study of the Bible is not a theoretical exercise. Well it is, but it's much more than that.

It is meant to lead us to action. And if we let us lead, let the Bible lead us in what we do, then the last sentence of this epistle will become reality.

To him be glory both now and forever. Our lives are to bring him glory. Let's pray that they will. Father, we thank you for your word. Thank you for all its complexity, its richness, its variety.

[23 : 50] Thank you that you have inspired it to lead us into all truth. And so we pray that we may be faithful in studying it and understanding its complexity and be humble in submitting to it.

We pray that you would continue to send us good teachings, good teachers to help us understand it. Thank you for for Martin and for his insights and his leadership.

We thank you that we do have quite a number of preachers to help us. We pray that you would continue to bring people who will be faithful to your word. In Jesus' name. Amen.