

Communion

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Date: 08 November 2015

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[0 : 00] Could you turn back with me to that passage we read in Revelation chapter 22, and I would like to look at some words at the end of verse 5.

Revelation 22 verse 5, the last sentence of that verse, and they will reign forever and ever, and especially just the words forever or for eternity.

We just recently had fireworks displays in connection with Guy Fawkes, but there were much bigger fireworks displays at the beginning of the new millennium, the year 2000.

And one of the first great displays was, of course, in Sydney. And there was a very striking image as part of that display.

The single word eternity was lit up in 50-foot-high letters on Sydney Harbour Bridge. And people around the world might wonder why the word eternity was lit up like that in Sydney.

[1 : 23] Eternity had become a kind of motto of the city of Sydney. But how exactly had that happened, and what's the story behind it? It seems quite a strange kind of word to be the motto of a city.

Well, from the 1940s through to the 1960s, the word eternity had mysteriously appeared written in chalk in immaculate copperplate writing on pavements and buildings throughout the city.

Who was responsible? Nobody seemed to know. But eventually, after many, many years, it was revealed. It was a man called Arthur Stace.

And Arthur Stace had had a very poor background. He'd been brought up in a brothel. He became a petty criminal. He returned from service in the First World War, gassed and shell-shocked.

And he slid down into alcoholism. Then one day, he was at a meeting for Down and Outs in a church. And he saw the difference between himself and the Christians who were there.

[2 : 29] And he prayed. And as a result, he became a Christian himself and was able to give up drinking. He subsequently heard a preacher say, I wish I could shout eternity through all the streets of Sydney.

Arthur Stace said to himself, He repeated himself and kept shouting, Eternity, eternity. And his words were ringing through my brain as I left the church.

Suddenly, I began crying. And I felt a powerful call from the Lord to write eternity. I had a piece of chalk in my pocket and I bent down there and wrote it.

Well, he was barely able to write his own name. But he found that he could write eternity beautifully two foot wide on the pavement. And from then on, for the rest of his life, he walked the streets of the city at night writing the word eternity.

We don't know how many people were reminded of the reality of eternity by this witness of this poor soul.

[3 : 38] Thomas Chalmers, who was a great preacher and philanthropist in the 19th century and a founding father of the Free Church in 1843, he was once criticized in the General Assembly while he was still within the established church.

He was in the assembly against what were called pluralities. That was the idea that a parish minister could hold another job or another post alongside his parish work, like being a professor in one of the universities.

And Chalmers was arguing very strongly against that because he believed in the essential nature of the parish and evangelistic ministry. Well, the criticism aimed against him was that in his younger days, he had argued the very opposite in the assembly.

Because in those days when he was a minister in the rural parish in North Fife of Kilmenny, he was unconverted, although he was a minister. And he thought that just two days a week was plenty of time to spend on his parish, and the rest of the time he could be a professor of mathematics in St.

Andrew's University, which wasn't all that far away.

Well, how was he going to respond to this criticism now being made, that he was being inconsistent? Well, this is his reply. He said, What is mathematics?

[4 : 58] Because it was a chair of mathematics. What is mathematics? It is the study of magnitude. But then I thought not of two magnitudes, the littleness of time and the greatness of eternity.

On an occasion like this here tonight, I'm very conscious of the littleness of time. It's something like 32 years since I came here to this pulpit and to this congregation, and yet it seems only yesterday how quickly time has passed, although time has left its mark on all of us who remember those times.

But time is little in another sense. Maybe momentous things may have happened in the world and in the church over those years, yet most of those things shrink into insignificance in the light of eternity.

All the great things that people talk about and that happen, they may be of little concern in the light of eternity. Only those things that are eternal ultimately matter.

So what is eternal? What is forever? According to this passage, only the city of God, only the new Jerusalem that Jesus is building, only the new heavens and the new earth that he will recreate out of the present universe, and at its heart will be a new people.

[6 : 26] That is what is eternal. Because you see, human beings are eternal in a certain sense too. We don't end when we die.

Jesus said in Matthew 25 verse 46, Then they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. There's one of two destinations, but both are eternal.

C.S. Lewis in one of his most amazing passages in a sermon he preached called The Weight of Glory, he refers to this. He says, It's a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.

All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat.

[7 : 55] But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit. Immortal horrors are everlasting splendors. I'd like to think with you this evening about one or two things suggested to us by this word eternity or forever.

The first thing is that those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ will live forever. Our text here says that they will reign forever and ever, and we'll come to think of the meaning of reigning or ruling in a little while.

But the first part of that is that they will live forever. In Romans chapter 6, verse 23, we're told, The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Eternal life, that is the gift through Jesus Christ, and all who accept Him have that gift. You see, life in this world is for a short time, no matter how long.

Psalms 90 that we were singing from, verse 10, it says, The length of our days is 70 years, or 80 if we have the strength. Yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

[9 : 15] The oldest woman in the world until just quite recently, I think, was 117. Her life spanned three centuries, from the 19th century into the 21st century.

Yet I'm sure as she looked back on that life over a century, it seemed to pass so quickly, and especially as you near the end of life, it seems to pass more and more quickly.

The incredible string band had a song called October Song that speaks about time. He said, I met a man whose name was time. He said I must be going, but just how long ago that was, I have no way of knowing.

Sometimes I want to murder time when my heart is aching, but mostly I just stroll along the path that he is taking. Two ways of dealing with time there, wanting to murder time sometimes because our hearts are aching and time is passing too slowly or it's passing too quick, but other times, just kind

of fatalistically strolling along with time, whatever is going down.

In his youth, Paul Simon, the songwriter, wrote a song in which he said, it was 21 years when I wrote this song. I'm 22 now, but I won't be for long.

[10:31] Time hurries on and the leaves that are green turn to brown and they wither with the wind and they crumble in your hand. So sometimes it's when we're young we feel the passage of time and we're not achieving anything.

Or maybe sometimes it's in the middle years of life. We have a kind of midlife crisis as it's called. We suddenly realize that life is slipping away. It didn't turn out perhaps as we dreamed.

Van Morrison has a song in which he says, say, que sera, whatever will be, but then I keep on searching for immortality. She's so beautiful but she's going to die someday.

Everything in life just passes away. Precious time is slipping away. You know she's only queen for a day. The idea of precious time slipping away and that's true for every one of us.

What are we doing with this time that is so limited in light of the great reality of eternity? Caesar Borgia, who was a member of the infamous Borgia family in Renaissance Italy, said, when I lived I provided for everything but death.

[11:38] Now I must die and I'm unprepared. Are we using the time that has been given to us in the way in which God intended that we should be prepared, that we should be ready for eternity?

Compare what Caesar Borgia said with what the evangelist D.L. Moody said. He said, some fine morning you will see in the newspapers D.L. Moody is dead. Don't you believe it?

I shall be more alive that morning than ever before. You see, that's the confidence that the Christian can have because of this word forever or this word eternity.

The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. And it's exactly the same thing that Jesus said, John chapter 6 verse 51, I am the living bread that came down from heaven.

If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever. This bread is my flesh which I give for the life of the world. He died on the cross. His flesh was broken there.

[12:39] His blood poured out. And that's what was done in the place of sinners so that he would give eternal life to us so that we'd live forever.

in John chapter 10 he says a similar kind of thing in different context. He's speaking about himself as the good shepherd and he says, My sheep listen to my voice.

I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand. And of course the most famous passage in the Bible altogether, John chapter 3 verse 16, the kind of succinct summary of the gospel.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ you live forever, you live eternally.

So make sure of this one thing that you have accepted this gift of eternal life. It's called a gift. The wages of sin, what we earn is death, eternal death.

[13:43] But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ. But a gift has to be accepted. We have to hold out our empty hands and simply receive what God has done for us.

Second thing about this is that if we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ we will never thirst eternally. We will never thirst forever. In this very chapter, chapter 22 of Revelation verse 17, it says, The spirit and the bride say, Come.

And let him who hears say, Come. Whoever is thirsty, let him come. And whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. What an amazing, open, wide invitation to everyone to come. But it's referring to this fact that we are thirsty. And that passage in Revelation seems to be based on the words that Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman that he met by the well in Samaria there in John chapter 4 verse 14.

Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Literally what he says is, Will never thirst eternally. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

[14:55] We spend our lives looking for that deep and lasting fulfillment or satisfaction, but we seldom find it. Put most famously by the Rolling Stones, I can't get no satisfaction.

And that's the way so often we feel in life, frustrated, not having satisfaction for this deep longing that is within us for something greater than what we seem to find here.

People try to find that satisfaction in all different kinds of ways. The pursuit of pleasure. Robert Burns in his great rollicking poem Tamashanta has a beautiful passage right in the middle of it that

says that pleasures are like poppies spread.

You seize the flower, its bloom is shed. Or like the snow falls in the river, a moment white then melts forever. We pursue pleasure it seems just so passing, so transient.

It disappears so quickly. Is that what life is all about? Is that something that's going to last? No. What about wealth? People think that if I have more money, if I have more possessions, I'll be happy.

[16:01] And we all pursue that kind of thing. We think if we get this latest gadget, it'll be great. But then very quickly we're tired of it or it breaks down or whatever. The former Mrs. Onassis who was married to the richest man in the world at that time said, wealth has not made me happy nor as the world knows has it made my husband happy.

And that testimony could be repeated hundreds, thousands of times. The people who actually have achieved great wealth and have tremendous possessions, they still are not satisfied.

What about ambition? What about seeking to achieve something worthwhile in life? Surely that's something good and can bring satisfaction. Well, Jack Higgins, who's the author of numerous best-selling thrillers including *The Eagle Has Landed*, was asked what he would like to have known as a boy.

And he replied, I'd like to have known that when you get to the top there's nothing there. In other words, here's someone who reached the very pinnacle of his profession and his achievement and yet it felt empty.

There was nothing there. The book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament explores all of these themes and says, in the end, it's just emptiness. There's no satisfaction in it.

[17:17] But what Jesus is offering is lasting satisfaction. St. Augustine said, God has made us for himself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in him.

That's the source of our restlessness because God has made us for himself and yet we're estranged from him by our sin and rebellion. And our hearts will be restless until they find rest in him.

There's no lasting satisfaction until we find God or are found by him. In Psalm 63, we hear these words, O God, you are my God.

Earnestly I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. My body longs for you in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.

My soul is satisfied as with the richest of foods. Or in another psalm, Psalm 16, verse 11, you have made known to me the path of life.

[18:20] You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand. Isn't that an amazing expression? Eternal pleasures at your right hand. People think that the Christian message and the church and Christians are all kind of killjoy and wet blankets.

Here God is saying it's not that you desire too much, it's that you desire too little. But I want to give you an eternal pleasure at my right hand.

That's the eternal life, the eternal satisfaction that is offered in the gospel. We were made by God and for relationship with Him. And God has done everything necessary in Jesus Christ to restore that relationship.

Thirdly, we come to the exact words of our text here. We will reign forever and ever if we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and we'll be in that city of God.

They will reign forever and ever. Literally, it is to the ages of the ages. It's the Greek expression for eternity. You see, we were created in the beginning to rule, to have dominion.

[19:34] In Genesis chapter 1, verse 26, it says, Then God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, over all the creatures that move along the ground.

God's purpose was that human beings should be those who would care for the earth and look after it and manage it. They would be ruling over it in that sense. And Adam, remember, Adam and Eve were placed in a garden to look after it, to care for it.

And the picture was of something beautiful and something that was going to be beneficial to every aspect of creation. But then human beings rebelled against God and we have been rebelling against Him ever since.

And as a result of that, we're told very quickly in Genesis that the creation has rebelled against us. In chapter 3 of Genesis, verse 17, Cursed is the ground because of you, God said to Adam.

Through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground since from it you were taken.

[20 : 51] For dust you are and to dust you will return. Everything now out of joint, out of its proper interconnection. Yes, we were created to have dominion over the creation, but the creation now is intransigent.

It kind of reacts against us. Everybody who has tried to cultivate a garden or everybody who is a farmer knows the struggle with the natural world. Anybody who does engineering or anything, dealing with any materials, we know how difficult it is to achieve things.

Anyone who is an artist who is trying to use particular materials to create something beautiful knows what a struggle it is. Romans chapter 8 talks about this, verses 20 to 22.

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Now there, that's talking about the frustration of the present time, but also, it's talking about some hopefulness because this pain and the struggle is not unproductive, it's like the pains of childbirth, that something is going to be produced out of that.

[22 : 20] What is it? Well, in Hebrews chapter 2, verses 6 to 9, we have some clue as to that. There, the writer quotes from Psalm 8.

What is man that you are mindful of him? The son of man that you care for him. You made him a little lower than the angels. You crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet.

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. It's referring back just to that passage we read in Genesis chapter 1. Yet at present, he continues, we do not see everything subject to him.

In other words, this rule and reign and dominion that human beings are supposed to have is so broken and disjointed. It's so imperfect. We're frustrated in every way. But how does the writer continue?

At present, we don't see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death so that by the grace of God, he might taste death for everyone.

[23 : 30] We don't see everything subject to the human race at the present time, but we see Jesus. Who is Jesus? He's the King of kings and Lord of lords. He's the one who rules over the whole of the creation.

In Revelation chapter 11, this very book, verse 15, we're told, the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.

He is king. He is ruling at the present time. One day, we will see that reign and that rule implemented. And that's the background to our text here because it says here, they will reign forever and ever, and they will reign only because the Lord Jesus Christ reigns.

In other words, all the frustrations of this present world will pass away in that perfect kingdom of Christ. Now, yes, this is something that can work backwards into our experience here as we acknowledge Christ as our Lord and our King, and we seek to implement things in this world according to his plans and purposes.

But yes, still there will be frustration and there will be disappointment until that great and glorious day when he will establish his kingdom perfectly and create a new heavens and a new earth.

[24 : 48] We will reign eternally. Fourthly and finally, there's just this. Those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ will be with Christ forever.

If we are going to reign forever and ever, and he is the one who reigns forever and ever, we will be with him. First Thessalonians chapter 4, verse 17 says, and so we will be with the Lord forever.

What is at the heart of the gospel is the promise that we will be with Christ forever. That's the very heart of it. That's the very attraction of it, that we will be with Christ forever.

The great catastrophe of the human race is that we are estranged from God. Your sins have separated you from God, we're told in Isaiah 59, verse 2.

Your sins, your iniquities, have separated you from God. We're estranged. We're alienated. The apostle Paul picks up the same kind of thought in Ephesians chapter 2, verse 12.

[25 : 53] Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

That's the description the Bible gives of us. Is that the description of you tonight? Are you still far from God? Are you still without hope and without God in the world?

But the good news is that God himself has done everything necessary to bring us back to himself because that very passage continues into the next verse, but now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near.

How? By the blood of Christ. That's the only way in which we can be brought near, to be with Christ and to be with him forever. forever.

This salvation, this redemption, this reconciliation is not a temporary thing. It is forever. It's not just to make us feel good here and now for a particular time.

[26 : 56] It's just forever. This is the amazing thing about it because we are reconciled to God. We're in friendship with God. We are, like Abraham, called friends of God.

In John chapter 14, Jesus says, in my Father's house or many rooms, if it were not so, I'd have told you. I'm going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that you also may be where I am.

Isn't that an amazing reality? To be with Jesus where he is. And that's what the Apostle Paul is referring to when he says in Philippians chapter 1, I desire to depart and to be with Christ which is better by far.

That's at the very heart of what the gospel is, to be with Christ, to know him. Because, think about it, a glimpse of Jesus, a moment in his company would be heaven enough.

This amazing person, the Prince of Glory, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, the one who has come down, come down to the very dust and come down to that cross for our sakes.

[28 : 07] To be with him would be amazing, even for a moment. But we are to be with Jesus forever if we trust in him. So make sure tonight that your faith is in Jesus.

Make sure you love Jesus. And by God's grace, I'll see you there. So there is a now and a forever. There's time and there's eternity. I want to finish off with reading a poem. Some of the older members of the congregation may remember me reading this a long time ago.

It's a very powerful poem, but quite strange in some ways. It's called Playing Out Time. It's by a man, Gordon Bailey. And he pictures us as living our lives in one of these amusement arcades, as if we're just wasting our time as people waste their money by pumping their money into these machines.

At birth, they wheel you into life's great slot machine arcade. At death, your epitaph describes the kind of game you've played. But gravestones hide not just a corpse, they cover countless sins and lie about achievements in a game where no one wins.

[29 : 25] A man sits in the change kiosk. The kind of change he pays is months for years or weeks for months or moments for our days. Some games cost just a moment, others cost a day per try.

We pay out carelessly and watch the years go tumbling by. The younger punters act as though each year was worth a dime. They fail to see death waiting for the fools who play with time.

A jackpot here, a small wind there, two lemons and a bell, a mind-consuming, time-confusing one-way street to hell. This one-armed bandit is not one-armed. I hold the arm, I see, but what about the arm it's got that has a grip on me?

The arm that binds me, blinds me, finds each moment that I've got and forces me to pay my precious time into the slot. I've often thought I'm such a fool and then see other folks who seem content to act as though they haven't seen the hopes.

I've seen a few folk leaving here, not dead like most folk go, but still alive. Just let me tell you of one bloke I know. A mate of mine, this fellow was, he'd lots of time to play, was playing for a jackpot, happened on a Saturday.

[30 : 32] He'd paid out many hours but didn't seem to mind his losses. Three oranges, he yelled, but then he said, I've got three crosses. He called for an attendant, then he asked him what he'd won.

I'd never seen the man who said, eternal life, my son. They left the place together and I don't know where they went. I heard the man explaining but I don't know what he meant. Perhaps one day I'll

see those crosses.

Maybe then someone will tell me what they mean and take me where my mate has gone. I wondered where the living go outside of this arcade. I'm told I dreamt it, yet I'm sure it happened. I'm afraid that soon I'll play my final game. Then hear the bandit laugh as he pays out my winnings, one gravestone, one epitaph.

My life paid out, my death to buy, a summary of the cost. Here lies a man, a normal man, who played for time and lost.

[31 : 31] Time and eternity. We've only got a limited amount of time. Are we going to just play with time and lose in the end? Or are we going to take the opportunity God is giving us here this evening to trust in Christ?

A great contrast with the man pictured in that poem is the hymn from which we sung The Sands of Time Are Sinking. Anne Cousin, in 1857, took some of the ideas of Samuel Rutherford, his notes, on this very passage in Revelation, and she combined it with the idea of the hourglass.

You know how in the past people would tell time not with a clock or a watch but through like a big hourglass which was like a big egg timer basically that the sand would run through from the top to the bottom in one hour.

And this is the picture in that hymn. The sands of time are sinking, the dawn of heaven breaks, the summer morn I've longed for, the fair sweet morn awakes.

Dark, dark has been the midnight but sunrise is at hand, with glory, glory dwelling in Emmanuel's land. With mercy and with judgment my web of time he wove, and every Jew of sorrow was glistening with his love.

[32 : 50] I'll bless the hand that guided, I'll bless the heart that planned, when in his glory dwelling in Emmanuel's land. The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bridegroom's face.

I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace. Not at the crown he gives me, but on his nail-pierced hand. The Lamb is all the glory of Emmanuel's land.

Let's pray.