

How Long?

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Date: 03 March 2019

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[0 : 00] The aftermath of a communion, the coming down as it were from the mountain, is inevitably a time of thanksgiving for the blessing of the last few days.

And so it should be. We have everything to be thankful for that the Lord has done for us, not only in times of communion, not only in times of particular awareness of the Lord's nearness, but everyday blessings, our homes, our food, the clean water in the tap, all the availability of so many blessings and riches that even a couple of generations ago people couldn't even dream about.

The Lord has blessed us richly and we have everything to be thankful for. But as we come back to thoughts of our communion season, inevitably the communion crowds soon disperse and when the event is over and any visitors have gone, local believers must pick up and carry on the torch of witness in their own local setting.

We are each called to serve where the Lord has placed us. But for a brief time we are able to gather with each other and support one another in the different communion seasons and that's good.

So we do give thanks but we also look onward. We look onward to what might at times seem to be the plodding requirements of Christian life and service over the next few months and all that will be for us.

[1 : 43] We don't know what will be for us inevitably, albeit unbeknown to any of us sitting here as to the details as we're sitting here in church.

It would be unusual indeed if there were not some or someone sitting at the Lord's table today for whom this will prove to have been their last communion on this earth.

There's almost always someone and I don't see that morbidly. It's just that eventually for all of us there will come a final time and it's highly unlikely that as we sit there at the Lord's table we'll know, yes, this is my last communion.

None of us knows but almost always it's the last time for somebody. But that's God's time and that's perfect.

This always the Lord's will being unfolded. For the rest of us too though there will be an inevitable question expressed in two words from our Old Testament reading.

[2 : 47] How long? In Psalm 6 at verse 3 we read, My soul also is greatly troubled but you, O Lord, how long?

For how long must we continue? Carry the cross, witness the truth, keep the faith, not so much in relation to our own mortality. How we're getting weedy of serving the Lord but rather in relation to our Lord Himself.

How long before you restore all things, Lord? How long before you return and reign in justice and righteousness and the glory that we long to behold?

How long? The story is told of an army instructor who was busy yelling at his recruits, putting them through their torturous paces and saying, Feel the pain.

He told them, Pain is your friend. It tells you when you are wounded. It lets you know the limits of your endurance but most of all it lets you know that you are still alive.

[3 : 51] Well, I suppose it's true. And the pain of separation from our Lord whilst he is in glory and we are here upon earth.

Yes, he's here by his spirit but we long to behold him as he is and that pain of separation, that pain is in a sense our friend because if you feel it, you must be alive.

Born again or at least wrestling in the womb of faith, working up to, looking towards, longing for the day of the new birth. The spiritually dead cannot feel this pain.

The dead do not ask, How long, O Lord, holy and true? The question, How long, is a question only ever on the lips of the believer.

It is the agony of separation from the ultimate loved one. It is the pain and the cry of the faithful in every generation.

[4 : 58] Psalm 74, we read at verse 9, We do not see our signs. There is no longer any prophet and there is none among us who knows how long. In Psalm 90 verses 12 and 13, So teach us the number of our days that we make it a heart of wisdom.

Return, O Lord, how long have pity in your servants. In the prophet Habakkuk, in chapter 1, verses 1 and 2, the very first thing Habakkuk cries out is, O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear or cry to you violence and you do not save?

It is the cry of the angel in Zechariah chapter 1, at verse 12, We read then the angel of the Lord said, O Lord of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah against which you have been angry these 70 years?

And even in eternity, it would seem that there is a context in which the faithful might have cause to cry it out.

Revelation 6, we read verses 9 and 10, When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.

[6 : 14] They cried out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?

Of course, we long for him to come back and make all things new, but of course, we may well be summoned to him before ever he comes to us and we are mindful of our own frailty.

But it is not just we who are frail. The world in which we live has only a limited shelf life.

We read in 2 Peter 3, verses 10 and then 12, But the day of the Lord will come like a thief and then the heavens will pass away with a roar and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved and the earth and the works that are done in it will be exposed.

And verse 12, Waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn.

[7 : 22] Indeed, we might consider that those who are summoned from hence before the world itself dies are the truly blessed. I mean, who wants to be around when this lot goes down?

For the coming of the Lord will certainly mean the death of this world. But why should that be? Why doesn't the Lord just come back and tweak it a bit and make it a wee bit better?

Why doesn't he just sort of improve the way it is and sort of renew it without having to dispose of it?

Well, apart from the fact that it is irrevocably marred with sin and causing even creation itself to groan longing for its new birth, because we read in Romans 8 verse 22, we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now longing for that renewal, that new birth, aside from all that, and the fact that this world is itself fallen and under a curse, the world will quite simply have fulfilled its purpose.

It will have provided a home for the children of God during their time on earth, providing all the food, water, clothing, light, heat, and enjoyment that their physical or bodily requirements could ever need.

It will also have been a home for multitudes and billions of others who were not the children of God, but from whom the blessings of the earth are not with health.

[9 : 01] Remember what Jesus says, He makeeth the Son to rise on the evil and the good. He senteth the rain on the just and the unjust. God is good to the unthankful and the unholy.

Furthermore, it will have served as a witness throughout the whole of time to the perfection and power of a Creator.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handiwork day and the day after its speech, and night and to night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard, their line is gone out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.

Creation is not theologically neutral. Creation is theologically loaded.

Any of us can see that all the perfection and regulation, the laws of nature which are called laws precisely because they are so fixed and predictable and reliable and of universal benefit to all the creatures of this world, all the intricate detail of the created order declares in banner headlines we have a Creator.

[10 : 18] Part then of creation's purpose is to declare the indisputable fact of the presence of a Creator. So that no one in this world will have the least excuse when it comes to judgment day.

Now creation is not sufficient in itself to reveal the nature of God, nor the identity of the Savior, nor the fact of His crucifixion and resurrection, nor of what we must do to be saved.

But it does say there is our God. There has to be hand and mind of infinite complexity and sophistication behind all of this.

For all the rest, man may discover it by asking, seeking, knocking. The land is full of churches, the bookshops are stocked with Bibles, the internet provides access to almost any Christian body on earth and born again Christians can be found and interacted with either in the flesh or at the very least online.

Indeed, this is one of the ways being most effectively used by some missionary organizations to penetrate closed countries and to disciple individual new believers who may be the only Christian for hundreds of miles.

[11 : 39] And they have to be a secret Christian at that. But if man has a desire to find out about the Lord, he can follow the trail that begins with the creation around him and that will lead him inevitably and inexorably to Calvary.

If only he will view the evidence all around him, telling him that he ought to begin and soon. He cannot say at the last day, I did not know there was a God.

He will be compelled instead to concede. I did not believe in God because the evidence is there. When you think of the sophistication and the complexity, even of a single celled object, the amoeba, single celled, you open as it were that amoeba and you find it's of an intense sophistication and complexity.

But the single celled organism is so much detail within it, it cannot possibly be the work of anything or any one other than a highly sophisticated intentional designer.

[12 : 53] When we think of all the detail in creation and the vastness of the universe and in the microcosms in all their complexity and balance and detail that are on the sea bed or on the land or the miracles of the human eye and how it works and the irreducible complexity of something as seemingly obvious as the knee joint.

It can't just gradually evolve. Giraffes, necks and so on and the way that cows operate, all these things, they are irreducible.

If they're not exactly as they are, they don't work, they don't function. The evidence is there, if you were to take a walk out into a moor, let's say a big vast moor like Rannach moor or something, you know, in the mainland and in the midst of this vast moor wilderness, you come across a black house.

You come across a black house and it seems to be in reasonably good nick, you know, it's got its stonework, it's all in reasonably good condition and there's nobody about but you know, there's a nice dry stained dite round about it and it's quality thatched roof, it's got, bubbit and old lazy beds you can see have been dug, decided and what is the evidence to take the equivalent and when you consider, you know, the number of stones, for example, in a black house will probably be, you know, tens of thousands and the need and the effort to produce the furrows of a lazy bed, it's not all that complicated to build a dry stained dite, again, tens or scores of thousands of stones in it, but that's as nothing compared to the millions of atoms and microbes and complexity in any living creature.

Think of the complexity of the human body and how it operates and the miles of internal organs and how they operate so perfectly and the way that the kidneys and the liver and everything else functions.

[14 : 47] You know, building a black house is dead simple, child's play by comparison, but to take the equivalent from the example of creation it translated into our example there, a non-believing so-called scientist or atheist or whatever would have you believe, oh no, all these stones just sort of piled themselves up by themselves, it just happened over millions of years, of course, it just happened, the stones just sort of piled themselves up in a rectangle with little holes for windows and the sort of, the wind just blew the head up off the window and it just arranged itself, you know, on the roof nicely like that and a door just sort of manufactured itself and plunked itself on hinges in the doorway and you know, the force of the wind drew a stone along the ground in it and it made these furrows and rolled a stone in it and it made it look like these furrows that look like lazy beds, but really it all just landed itself that way.

I mean we think that don't be ridiculous, that's stupid, of course somebody designed it, but the design and the building of even such a simple structure, the appearance of which we're all familiar

with and we think oh no that needed man's and that needed the definite input of somebody intending to build that, but when it comes to the beauty and complexity and balance and sophistication of creation somehow we think oh no, oh that just happened, just happened by magic, just happened by itself, who do we think we are kidding, of course it didn't happen by itself, somebody made it happen, somebody designed it.

Now let's add a little detail, let's go back to our example of the black house in the middle of nowhere, let's say you push open the door and instead of it being cold and empty and said you find there's a fire burning in the grate, you find there's a table and it's set with a tablecloth and cutlery and plates and you see there's food cooking on the range and there's cups and mugs and plates and everything but there's nobody about still.

I mean what does this tell you, this doesn't just tell you somebody made this, it means that somebody's here, they're not here just now but somebody not only did this but they're coming back and soon, otherwise they wouldn't have left the food cooking on the range, otherwise they wouldn't leave the fire burning in the grate, all the evidence indicates not only intentional design but a soon return.

Now the unbeliever must still say, oh it's all just coincidence, but the earth is busy serving its purpose, if our little black house in the middle of the moor in the middle of nowhere testifies to know somebody lives here, somebody's here, definitely, they must be, it can't have happened all by itself. [17:32] And think of how comparatively simple and easy that is to do compared to making the work of creation and all its detail and sophistication. The unbeliever must still say it's coincidence but the earth and all the work of creation, the heavens and the earth is busy serving its purpose, giving its witness, compiling and accumulating the evidence that will one day convict untold millions not of their ignorance but of their unbelief.

But one day that purpose for the earth will have been served, completed. Then what does God do? Well we read about it in Peter there but you know think about it, what do you do when something is finished with?

One reason I personally like having a real fire in the house and not just a bin in the kitchen is that it's hygienic for waste disposal, much tidier than simply accumulating piles of rubbish and it's much better at reducing it, just a little pile of ash.

So I say, wait a minute are you saying this creation of God is just rubbish? Well of course not as to its quality but what is one definition of rubbish?

Well if you go into the supermarket and you buy a packet of bacon and a loaf of bread and maybe a can of juice or whatever, you don't say oh look this packet of bacon it's been wrapped around with all this plastic rubbish, that's horrible.

[19:07] You don't say oh this can of coke it's surrounded by this rubbishy tin, I don't like that do you think a can of coke, you think a packet of bacon, you think a loaf of bread, you take it home, you open the bacon, you cook it, you make toast to whoever with the bread, you open the can of coke, you drink it but when it's all finished and gone, what do you then say, oh what a wonderful, valuable packet this bread used to be in, how wonderful it is, you think no okay that's it now, it's finished with it, it has become rubbish, the bacon packet that all the bacon in, you put it on the side and it's just an empty, greasy packet of plastic, what are you going to do with it, you're not going to say oh wasn't this wonderful the bit you say okay it's rubbish now, why is it rubbish, was it rubbish before no because it contained something that was usable and valuable and that you wanted and needed but now you have used up the reason why you bought it in the first place, same when the can of coke, it's empty now, it's an empty coke, why do people throw litter away because it's no longer any use for them, why don't they throw the full cigarette packet out the car window, why don't they throw the full can of coke or the full packet of bread or whatever it is because they still need it, they throw litter away because to them it's rubbish because they have finished with the purpose for which they required the packaging, they have finished with the purpose why they bought that item wrapped around as it was before, now of course you might recycle your tins or perhaps some glass or whatever and some things you can make use of again but for the most part certainly in our house rubbish gets burned, they've served and completed the purpose for which they were designed, this world likewise has a shelf life which is drawing toward its conclusion, when it is finished, when it has served its purpose the Lord will return, dispose of it, burn it up, replace it with a new one, a new heaven and a new earth, how long oh Lord, how long, one of the things we need to recognise is that God doesn't count the time of the world so much in seconds as in souls, however long it takes for

the number of the elect to be complete that is when everything will come to an end, that is when the world will have served and fulfilled its purpose, somewhere at some point in future history there is a soul perhaps not yet born, perhaps not going to be born for centuries, we don't know but when that soul, the last name on the roll of the elect, finally comes into the world and finally closes in with Christ and receives him as his or her saviour, then they have become converted, then the number of the elect will at some point be complete and when it is complete there's no longer a purpose for this world to continue, the Lord will come back then and gather his children to himself and bring with him all those who have gone before, it will have served its purpose and so it will be burned up and he will replace it with a new one, how long oh Lord, how long, well it can be over in a day when the time comes, we read in Luke 17 verses 26 to 30 Jesus said just as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man, they were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage until the day when Noah entered the ark and the flood came and destroyed them all, likewise just as it was in the days of Lot, they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire

and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all, so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed, now you could speculate on how it might happen, you know if even using nature if even a tiny portion of the sun were to become dislodged and to make its way toward earth and just collide with us, a tiny portion of the sun would still be massive in terms of the earth, it would destroy everything, it would melt everything, with the heat all the rocks and all the mountains would just be melted, we're told of course that they were molten at one point anyway and that's entirely possible, we could speculate of course on how the Lord might choose to do it but it would only be speculation, but what we do know is that people will look to the mountains and hills to hide them, to fall on them, to shield them from the wrath of the Lamb but they will not be able, how long oh Lord, how long does this world have before it has served the purpose for which it was designed, if you ever read some of the material from the Barnabas Fund or Release International or other bodies like that their prayer notes tell every single day of the need to pray for specific people and places of persecution, of Christians murdered, martyred, imprisoned, tortured, families having to flee, churches bombed out or burned to the ground, sometimes with people locked inside them, we read again what we read earlier in Revelation 6 when he opened the fifth seal

I saw under the altar, the souls of those who have been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne, they cried out with a loud voice, oh sovereign Lord holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth, then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete who were to be killed as they themselves had been, whatever that total is which has yet to be reached, it is fast mounting up all over the world, it is said that there were more Christians martyred in the 20th century than in all the previous 19 together and that is entirely possible, the 21st century looks to be going the same way, how long oh Lord, well whatever the time left is, it behoves us to make good the time, to redeem the time, you can't stop the world from heartling towards its conclusion, you can't stop, not should you want to stop the number of believers being accumulated and gathered in, this is what we want towards, we want people to be converted but every single time somebody is converted, that's the world taking another step towards its conclusion, you might think oh dear how terrible is it terrible, is it terrible for the Lord to be coming back, is it terrible to have a new heavens and a new earth, is it terrible that all that is wrong in the world, all the suffering, all the brutality, all the sin, all the oppression, all the harm that is done in the world that that should all cease, is that terrible, no it's not terrible, that's good news, every single soul that is converted brings nearer the completion of the harvest and the return of the Son of God and we don't know when that's going to be and we don't know whether it's always being added from our islands or from other countries on the far side of the world whatever it may be, they're being brought in as well, the number is clocking up the whole time and one day it will be reached, one day the total will be full and then it won't matter anymore about what we do here so we don't know how much time we've got, so the first thing we need to do is make good the time, redeem the time while we have it, if you feel the time to be breathlessly short then what can you do, you can do now and do quickly with such things for the Lord as you know you are able to do and perhaps it always meant to do but just never got round to doing it yet, the Lord will never require of you what He has not equipped you to do, He will never ask more of you than He has given to be able to do in the first place, so make the time, make the effort, go the second mile if you want to go

the distance with Christ and if you are a mature Christian, perhaps a father in God or a mother in Israel, one who has served faithfully and perhaps now feels the time long and wants to be away having a desire to depart and be with Christ which is far better than think, think on what may be the things you still want to do for Christ or for some other soul that is on your heart or on your mind which will still be doing it for Christ of course but you have not yet done, they may be very simple things, God doesn't necessarily require the spectacular from us, He doesn't expect us to be supermen or superwomen, He expects us to do faithfully and diligently the ordinary faithful things, that they may be secret things that nobody else will see or they may be more public but if you know what they are, do them, do them while you have strength and ability and time for the fact that they remain as yet undone, may be precisely why your time here is not yet complete, maybe it is the Lord is waiting for you to fulfil these final tasks before He allows you to come to Himself, who knows but this we know, His time will be perfect, how long O Lord, short enough for the busiest and most impatient of saints, long enough for the slowest and weakest child in the Israel of God, some of us may feel like we are spiritual tortoises but the Lord will abide and wait till we have crossed the finish line, His time will be perfect, it will be long enough, it will be short enough, it will be perfect, not a moment longer, not a second sooner for the earth or for us, so let us be ready and let us keep on time after time with each Lord's Supper and keep on, yes, coming together and keep on remembering His death which we are commanded to do, it's part of our witness, part of our obedience of who we are and of whose we are and keep on doing it until He comes, let us pray. Almighty, most loving Father, Thou who art the immortal and eternal, we do pray even so, come Lord Jesus, come quickly, but if we are conscious Lord that there are things as yet undone, things as yet unfulfilled, if we know in our heart we are not yet ready, then help us Lord to do that which requires to be done, let us be found faithful, there will in a sense never be everything done that we wanted to do, but we pray Lord there will be everything done that you wanted us to do, help us Lord and if as yet we are outside of Christ, then give us that sense of urgency, give us that sense O Lord of hastening into the ark before the flood comes, of hastening within the shelter of the high tower which the name of the Lord is, the strong tower, the righteous run into it and are safe.

[31 : 56] Lord we know that we are not righteous of ourselves but we do pray we can trust in the Lord our righteousness, so help us then this night, help us to view with thankfulness the world around us, the creation that testifies morning by morning not only to the beauty of what that was done but to the beauty of holiness in our Creator, help us to be thankful for every occasion we have gathered together in such times as this and Lord if there be amongst us any for whom this will be on earth the last time, then help us Lord to treasure one another, help us to value each other while it is called today and get the most out of each day, Thou give us this, whether it be a communion or whether it be an ordinary time of service and labour, just bless all that we seek to do and may it be done for thee that however long or short the time may be, the time may be thine and we may be thine and when Thou dost come again Lord we shall be found ready and waiting, hear our prayers and forgive our sin for Jesus' sake. Amen.

We close our worship this evening singing to the Lord's praise in Psalm 126 in the traditional Saltery, Psalm 126 of which we will sing the whole Psalm that is the four stanzas verses 1 to 6, when Zion's bondage, God turned back as men that dreamed were we, then filled with laughter was our mouth, our tongue with melody, the among the heathens said, the Lord great things for them hath wrought, the Lord hath done great things for us, once joy to us is brought, as streams of water in the south our bondage Lord recall, whoso in tears a reaping time of joy, enjoy they shall, that man who bearing precious seed and going forth doth mourn, he doubtless bringing back his sheaves, rejoicing shall return.

Psalm 126 the whole Psalm to God's praise. When Zion's bondage, God turned back as men that dreamed were we, then filled with laughter was our mouth, our tongue with melody, the among the heathens said, the Lord great things for them hath wrought, the Lord hath done great things for us, once joy to us is brought, as streams of water in the south our bondage Lord recall, whoso in tears a reaping time of joy, enjoy they shall, that man who bearing precious seed and going forth doth mourn, he doubtless bringing back his sheaves, rejoicing shall return.

Our loving Heavenly Father, we thank thee for thy goodness to us in this day and all the days of our life. As we prepare now, Lord, to close our time of formal worship and to turn now to a time of fellowship, we pray thee, Lord, to bless our time together and we pray thee, Lord, to abide with us, for it is the word even in the day is far spent, abide with us that our fellowship may be blessed and

sanctified.

And we ask thee also to bless all the refreshments, the food and drink which has been prepared. We thank thee for the hands which have prepared it with such love and faithful service, and we pray thee to bless such diligent labours, and that as we receive we would give thanks that we have such abundance, thanks to the God who provides for us day by day and give us, O Lord, grateful hearts for all thy goodness. And so we ask thee to bless all that we receive now and grant that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our Heavenly Father, and the communion of God the Holy Ghost would rest upon you and remain with you each one this night and forevermore. Amen.