

## God's Big Picture 7 The Proclaimed Kingdom Acts to Revelation

### Introduction

People can have expectations about all kinds of things. On the day I was writing this message sports journalists were writing in copious detail about Manchester United player Wayne Rooney's ankle injury. For those interested in the feverish speculations concerning the likely England squad for the Football World Cup in South Africa in the summer, it was being billed as the equivalent to David Beckham's metatarsal injury prior to a previous World Cup. However, for those with newspapers to sell the story was not good news. The injury sustained in the Champions League game against Bayern Munich on Tuesday 30 March 10 was not as bad as it had been feared. Alex Ferguson, the Manchester United manager was reported to have said: '**The nation can stop praying**', in response to fears that his star striker might miss the summer tournament in South Africa. [BBC Sport website 2 April 10] The likelihood of England winning that football competition – if Wayne Rooney is guaranteed to play! is as probable as the disciples of Jesus grasping His message about the nature of the kingdom of God prior to Pentecost. However, would you and I have got on any better 2,000 years ago? Only an extremely brave or foolish person would declare that they would have spotted what Jesus meant when His own Jewish followers, familiar with the Old Testament, did not do so.

### 1. The Disciples' Confusion

The Gospel accounts have explained that Jesus fulfilled the promises of God in the Old Testament concerning the Messiah. [this message largely follows the approach in Roberts, *God's Big Picture* chapter 7] The disciples of Jesus had a hazy grasp of what it was about. They sought to view Jesus in the light of the Pharisees understanding of the coming Messiah, that he would judge and destroy the enemies of Israel and give the Jews the pre-eminent kingdom on earth centred in Jerusalem. Yet instead of being a military conqueror, Jesus spoke some extraordinary words which shocked them: *You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'*<sup>14</sup> *But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you* (Matthew 5:43-44). From their perspective this approach appeared to end in failure on Good Friday, with Jesus dying on the cross. Luke 24 records Cleopas and Mary's anguish as they expressed it to the stranger who accompanied them on the journey to Emmaus. *Jesus of Nazareth... was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.*<sup>20</sup> *The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him;*<sup>21</sup> ***but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place*** (Luke 24:19-21). Where was God in all this? What made it worse was that these solemn words from Deuteronomy 21:22-23 appeared to condemn Jesus before God also: *If a man guilty of a capital offence is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.* Paul will address this issue in Galatians 3:13-14: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.*<sup>14</sup> ***He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.*** Their hopes are

reawakened by the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, but their enquiry recorded in Acts 1:6: *So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"* Jesus had told His followers on a number of occasions that He was going away and that He would return at a date and time when this was least expected. For example: Matthew 24:36-44: *No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.* <sup>37</sup>*As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.* <sup>38</sup>*For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark;* <sup>39</sup>*and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.* <sup>40</sup>*Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left.* <sup>41</sup>*Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left* <sup>42</sup>*"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.* <sup>43</sup>*But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.* <sup>44</sup>***So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.*** These words have implications for those Christians who are committed to particular detailed prophetic timetables for Jesus' return. Be ready for when He does come, but be humble enough to acknowledge that His coming will take us all by surprise.

## 2. The Significance of the length of the Church Age

(a) **The Last Days** It is important to be aware that the whole period between the first and second comings of Jesus are called 'the last days' in the Bible. Peter with reference to the prophecy of Joel concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit declared in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost: *this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:<sup>17</sup> "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams* (Acts 2:17). This reference clearly relates to the beginning of the Church Age 2,000 years ago. James in a passage that warns rich people who have gained their prosperity by less than ethical means, not to hoard their wealth, rather to grant justice to workers who have been exploited. The charge he brings against such people in James 3:4 is this: *You have hoarded wealth in the last days.* It appears that these words were written at least initially to people alive at the time when James wrote this letter in AD 48. Paul, in II Timothy 3:1-5, before going on to describe how bad things will get prior to Jesus' return, prefaces his remarks with: *But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days* (II Timothy 3:1). These words can be plausibly understood to refer to a future time beyond his own generation. We must recognise that the kingdom of God is both 'now' and 'not yet'; 'amongst us' but also 'still to come'. The kingdom began in Jesus' ministry *this age* but it is also future *in the age to come* (Matthew 12:32). Speaking of children Jesus declared in Matthew 19:14 that: *the kingdom belongs to such as these*; yet in Matthew 25:34, a description of the final judgement at the end of the age, He can speak of His followers on that day in this way: *Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.* (b) **The Length of the Last Days** There is no doubt that the first followers of Jesus would have been shocked if they had known Jesus was not returning for more than 2,000 years. Already in the first century AD sceptics were mocking Christians over the apparent 'delay' in Christ's return. II Peter 3:3-4 stated: *First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.* <sup>4</sup>*They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."* Peter encouraged his readers to remember the bigger picture of God's purposes: *But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water.* <sup>6</sup>*By these*

waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. <sup>7</sup>By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. <sup>8</sup>But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. <sup>9</sup>**The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**<sup>10</sup>But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.<sup>11</sup>Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives <sup>12</sup>as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat (II Peter 3:5-12). The reason for the delay in His coming? It is so that more people can hear of the good news of the gospel and come to faith in Christ! Jesus had told His followers on Easter Sunday evening, recorded in Luke 24:46-49: *He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup>and repentance and forgiveness of sins **will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.** <sup>48</sup>You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup>I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city **until you have been clothed with power from on high.**"* At the end of Matthew's Gospel Jesus reminded them of their life's calling: *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth **has been given to me.** <sup>19</sup>Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely **I am with you always, to the very end of the age"** (Matthew 28:18-20). At His ascension back to heaven, recorded in Acts 1:8, the same message is repeated: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" What is the incentive to fulfil this commission? Matthew 24:14 reminds us: *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.* Jesus will not return until every people group in the world has had the gospel proclaimed to them in a language they can understand. There is still work to be done in our generation –every member of this congregation is called to be a missionary for Jesus, the only question is whether your calling is to the home or overseas sphere of service.*

### **3. The Importance of the coming of the Holy Spirit**

You could not have failed to notice the central significance of the empowerment of the followers of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. The extraordinary events of Acts 2:1-13 of the coming of the Holy Spirit were both a fulfilment of prophecy as a judgement from God on the Jewish people for failing to heed the preaching of their own Jewish Messiah (Isaiah 28:11: *Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people.*) and a reversal of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9 the dispersal of humanity after the flood and the confusion of their languages); in that people heard the gospel proclaimed in various foreign languages (Acts 2:4-11 ( it is not helpful to persist in using the Old English word 'tongues') and *native dialects* (Acts 2:8 Greek text) which could never have been learned in a language school! Peter using words from the prophecy of Joel declares in Acts 2:17: *In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on all people.* It is through the enabling power of the Spirit that the Church spread from Jerusalem to the heart of the Empire, Rome, in thirty years. It is no accident that the most rapid growth of the Christian Church in its history, since the first century AD, that has taken place in the last hundred years, has coincided with a fresh appreciation of the significance of the Holy Spirit. Jesus warned His followers in John 15:5-6: *I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man **remains in Me** and I in him, **he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.** <sup>6</sup>If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.* What does the Spirit do to extend God's kingdom? (a) **He brings new birth** (John 3:3-5) Jesus declared,

"I tell you the truth, **no one can see the kingdom of God** unless he is born again." <sup>4</sup>"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, **no one can enter the kingdom of God** unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Natural birth and a spiritual birth are both essential requirements for entering and ministering in God's glorious kingdom. When we are in the process of coming to faith it is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of our sin and opens our eyes to see our need of Jesus (John 16:7-11). The purpose of the Spirit's coming, Jesus said: *He will bring glory to Me, by taking from what is Mine and making it known to you.* Only through the Spirit's enabling are we effective servants of Jesus Christ. Paul reminded the Church at Rome that: *You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.* Our offensive weapon in the faith, the Bible, is described as *the sword of the Spirit* (Ephesians 6:17). Word and Spirit go together and must not be separated. (b) **He equips us for ministry** Frightened disciples who had locked themselves in a private house out of fear of their religious opponents (John 20:19) were now speaking openly for Jesus. Acts 4:8-13: *Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! <sup>9</sup>If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, <sup>10</sup>then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. <sup>11</sup>He is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone. <sup>12</sup>Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." <sup>13</sup>When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.* What God did for Peter He can do equally for you and me today, in the circumstances in which he has placed us. The Spirit equips and enables us to function as a team (I Corinthians 12:12-27), to work together for the building of God's kingdom in local communities throughout the world. Paul stated that: *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good* (I Corinthians 12:7). (c) **He is working in us to make us like Jesus** The Bible uses three tenses to describe our salvation: We have been saved from the **penalty** of sin: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God* (Ephesians 2:8). We are being saved from the **power** of sin. *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God* (I Corinthians 1:18). One day we shall be saved even from the **presence** of sin. *For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup>And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified* (Romans 8:29-30). Paul uses here the same tense in v30 (Greek aorist a past tense) describing these present and future events as if they had all been completed in the past. In Philippians 1:6 Paul states: *being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.* Hallelujah what a wonderful assurance of what the Holy Spirit is doing in your life and mine if we are Christians. However, we must never think it is a 'letting go and letting God' do all the work within us. The balance is declared by Paul in Philippians 2:12-13: *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out [present imperative –an urgent command] your salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup>for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.* One day He will succeed in making you and me like Jesus –perfect – take a look around at people who one day will be perfect!

#### **4. The Citizens of the Kingdom**

(a) **We are God's People** actually the Greek word used is 'saints or holy ones'. A saint is not someone immortalised in a stained glass window—they are all alive, according to the New Testament! We are called to become what we are already in principle in Christ. Peter expresses it this way in I Peter 2:9: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.* The Church of Jesus Christ is comprised of Jews and Gentiles who share the same faith, the same Saviour and the same future hope! Paul reminded the Roman Church that: *A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.* <sup>29</sup>*No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code* (Romans 2:28-29). All of us together in Christ are the spiritual children of Abraham. <sup>13</sup>*It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.* <sup>14</sup>*For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.* <sup>16</sup>*Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.* Paul told the Ephesian Christians: *For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility.* <sup>17</sup>*He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.* <sup>18</sup>*For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit* (Ephesians 2:14-18).

(b) **We are God's temple** Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians: <sup>19</sup>*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body* (I Corinthians 6:19-20). Jesus has gone back to heaven. But His Spirit lives within each of our lives. This has implications for how we treat our bodies; that is, not to abuse or misuse them, rather respecting them and taking reasonable care of them. It also has implications about our relationships with other people. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of His Church and we build our lives individually and collectively on His message and values. As a result of Jews and Gentiles being reconciled to God the Father through the sufficient sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. We are: *no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.* <sup>21</sup>*In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.* <sup>22</sup>*And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.* (Ephesians 2:19-22) We are always on duty for God. Hebrews 13:15-16 gives us this pressing invitation: *Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess His name.* <sup>16</sup>*And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*

(c) **We will face tough tests for our faith** Then and now there can be a heavy price to pay for our faith. Peter wrote his first letter to Christians experiencing persecution for their faith. In I Peter 1:5-9 it states: *who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.* <sup>6</sup>*In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.* <sup>7</sup>*These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.* <sup>8</sup>*Though you*

*have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup>for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* I was shocked on Saturday 27 March 2010 to read the story of a Baptist minister in Glasgow, Shawn Holes, locked up in a police cell over night and only released when a fine of £1,000 was paid for the crime of sharing his faith with members of the public in the open air in Glasgow. What he said and the apparent manner in which he said it was consistent with the approach any Evangelical Christian should have taken in that situation. A sheriff convicted him of ‘religious prejudice’ for saying that ‘unrepentant sinners face an eternity in hell’ if they die without putting their faith and trust in Jesus. He delivered his remarks in a general way and only gave illustrations of sinful conduct when repeatedly pressed in private conversations by people present on Sauchiehall Street on Thursday 18 March. CARE on behalf of Evangelical Christians; Peter Cairney on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church and the Muslim Council of Scotland, together with other individual Christians supported Mr Holes and some were able to stand in the court to give him moral support. Shamefully Rev. Ian Galloway, Convener of the Church of Scotland’s Church and Society Council declined to support a fellow Christian. The Daily Mail editorial of 27 March 2010 included this sobering line: ‘Are Christians now required to deny their faith as in Nero’s Rome under laws passed by Holyrood?’ [*Daily Mail*, 27 March, pp. 1, 5, 16]. Peter’s letter was written to Christians suffering under Nero. If you ever thought about not voting in parliamentary elections this should serve as a wake up call as the days are coming fast when Christians will be imprisoned for our faith in this land once again. Will we be ready to support and care for one another in the face of increasingly hostile and prejudiced authorities? However, let us be encouraged by these words of Paul to the Roman Church: *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. <sup>19</sup>The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. <sup>23</sup>Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup>For in this hope we were saved (Romans 8:18-24).* We must always remember, as Philippians 3:20 reminds us: *But **our citizenship is in heaven.** And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup>who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body.* May our testimony as we complete our time on earth be like that of Paul who could say with confidence: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup>Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing (II Timothy 4:7-8, Amen.*