

“Christian Hope: Waiting with Confidence”

Introduction: If you were to invite a non-Christian friend or colleague to share a cup of coffee, and at some point before your cups run dry and your doughnuts are consumed, you were to ask, “So, what do you look forward to in life? What is your long-term hope for the world?” What might their answer be? Maybe more importantly, how would you explain the hope that you have, for your life, and for the world? And what difference does it make in how you live life in the present?

Remember that everyone, Christian or not, has a gospel story, a narrative of good news, that he or she believes and lives by. If you listen closely, this narrative has essentially four parts, four essential questions they seek to answer, whether they realize it or not: In what do they find their identity? [Creation] What is the fundamental problem, or the reason things are broken in their lives? [Fall] To whom or what are they looking to rescue them from this brokenness? [Redemption] What is their ultimate hope for the future? [New Creation]

As we move into the last chapters of Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica, this last question, the question of hope, emerges as a major topic, though it’s not the first time it’s come up. For instance, Paul opened, you might recall, by affirming for this church “your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” And then a few sentences later, Paul applauds their having “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (1:3, 9-10).

So it’s obvious that Paul has taught them that God’s program of bringing his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven has been launched in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, but that it still needed to be completed. This would happen upon Jesus’ return when evil and suffering will be done away with, and we will be given new resurrected bodies with which we will live and serve fruitfully in God’s new creation. This is the fullness of the Christian hope. But, as they may for us, questions still remained for the Thessalonians. So, Paul returns to this topic toward the end of his letter in order to address a couple of them. Ultimately, his discussion was to enable them, and to enable us, to live in the present, between the two comings of Jesus, with confidence, resilience, fruitfulness, and joy.

I. What about those who have already died?

A. The first question Paul addresses has to do with those Christians who have already died before Jesus returns. At least some in the congregation had gotten the impression that, having come to faith, they would not die before that time. But, some obviously had, so what would happen to them? Have they lost out in some way, these new believers seem to be wondering? We may not have this exact question, but we do wonder, do we not, what’s happened to those who have died? In response, Paul turns to a discussion of the return of Jesus. Now, understanding what that event is going to be like is kind of like trying to describe what the color red, or blue, looks like to a blind person. It’s not easy! What Paul does is join together several Old Testament pictures to give an overall picture that points to the glory of that return. It’s a picture of what happens when an emperor or grand official pays a visit to a city or town. Seeing him coming, the leading citizens of that town would go out to meet the emperor in the open country and then provide him and his entourage with a royal escort back into their town.

B. In (somewhat) like manner, when Jesus returns, those who are still living will head out to meet him “in the air” (where else would they meet him?). When they arrive, they will find that those who have already died will be with him, having been woken from their sleep by a great deal of racket: the blast of a trumpet, the voice of the chief angel, and the loud command of the Lord himself. If you’ve ever wondered about that passage in John 5 where the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live, that’s probably what’s going on here (Jn. 5:25). And then, most importantly perhaps, the whole group will not escape “further up” into heaven, but will return to earth because the return of Jesus means that God’s kingdom will finally be in place on earth, as it is in heaven, as Jesus has instructed us to pray all along. All things in heaven and on earth will have been unified by Jesus (Eph. 1:10) as the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven to join with earth where God will dwell intimately with his people. At that point there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things will have passed away (Rev. 21:1-4).

C. Significantly, concludes Paul, you all do not need to grieve the death of your Christian brothers and sisters in a hopeless way, in the bleak, dark, and depressing way everyone else grieves their losses. You can have a hopeful grief based upon the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the promise of restoration and reunion that his return affords. Those who have died while believing in Jesus will be safe in his presence and will be raised when he appears.

There is a wonderful witness to a watching world in all of this. It doesn’t mean we won’t feel the pain of loss or that we won’t grieve. But we should be able to grieve with hope because of what Jesus has done in space and time and history, which in turn grounds the promise that God is in the process of making all things new.

II. When will Jesus actually return?

A. Given what Jesus has done in the past, and will do in the future, the next logical question has to do with how his followers should live in the meantime. Some in the church seem to have been wondering if knowing exactly when Jesus will return might help with that. Paul does not agree! Essentially, he says, it’s pointless to try to predict the return of Jesus, because Jesus himself never went there. The best we can be sure of is not a time or a date, but that, like a thief in the night, Jesus will return without warning, and like labor pains on a pregnant woman, his return will be unavoidable! This stands in contrast to those who would be saying, “peace and safety.” This might refer to those who didn’t believe Jesus would return at all and so no one would really have to worry about it. And his audience would certainly have recognized that this was the political mantra preached by the Roman Empire which proclaimed that with its rise to power the whole world was now at “peace” and therefore “safe.” This, of course, they could not actually guarantee and never brought about.

B. So what is the solution to being prepared for that time when Jesus actually does return? It lies in recognizing the time and living according to it. While there may be darkness all around, for the follower of Jesus, it is really daytime, so set your lives accordingly, Paul teaches.

Illustration: Those of you who have ever traveled to Europe have some sense of this. Next Sunday night, for instance, we’ll be leaving for Scotland at 9:00 p.m. When we arrive, it will 3:00 a.m. and still dark, at least according to our sleep cycle. But in Edinburgh it will be 8:00 a.m. and broad daylight. So, we’ll need to set our watches and live as if it’s no longer night but day.

When Paul says that followers of Jesus are children of the day and not of the night, children of the light and not of the darkness, he's saying that we're to set our lives accordingly and not live drowsily or drunkenly, for that is the character of those who are still living in the dark. More to the point, they won't be prepared for the return of Jesus and won't have any hope when he comes. Rather, we are to live in the character of daylight, faithfully, lovingly, and hopefully. If we live in that way, we will be well prepared for his return.

What we see in all of this is how Paul takes theology and applies it to life in a very practical way. He takes the gospel, the good news surrounding Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return, and declares that it provides us with all of the comfort and strength that we'll need. If we understand it and live by it, it will enable us to live between the two comings of Jesus with resilience, confidence, and joy, no matter what our questions, no matter what happens. And as we do so, we'll be bearing a wonderful and sure witness to the love and mercy and power of the King, Jesus.