

Our Great Hope

On October 22, 1844, over a hundred thousand people were awaiting Jesus' imminent return and the destruction of the world by fire. This was the result of teaching based on the careful mathematical calculations of a man named William Miller.

- There were farmers so sure of the date that they abandoned their animals and didn't bother planting crops.
- Merchants closed stores and gave goods away.
- Some sold property and quit their jobs.
- It's been said that some even gathered on hilltops in white robes to be a little closer to meeting Jesus when he showed up.

Of course, nothing happened. Jesus didn't show up. And after what they called the "Great Disappointment" another date was set, and yet another. Eventually, under the teachings of a woman named Ellen White, the movement transformed in the Seventh Day Adventist which argued that Jesus HAD arrived in a more spiritual, rather than physical manner.

In contrast to that, think of a stormy evening on April 3, 1968.

A weary Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed a crowd in Memphis, TN with no script and a note of sadness in his voice.

King reflected on the significance of the time and noted that if God had given him a choice of any point in history to spend his days - he would have bypassed all the great ages of the past and chosen to live them exactly where he was.

King went on to share about an incident a decade prior when he'd been stabbed so close to the aorta that the doctors told him if he would have sneezed, he would have died.

If he had sneezed, he would have missed:

- The freedom rides,
- African Americans stirring the nation in Albany and Birmingham,
- The chance to give voice to a great dream of unity and equality at the Lincoln Memorial.

He was glad he hadn't sneezed...but then he said,

"It doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter what happens now...because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody I would love to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But," he said, "I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. And I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worry about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

By the next evening, King's voice had been quieted by the bullet of a sniper's gun.

Two visions - Miller's and King's.

One focused on mathematical speculations from scripture, giving up this life in hopes of advancing to the next.

The other spent a lifetime bring the hope of God's eternal kingdom to bear on THIS life.

This morning, I'm capping off a series on the BASICS of the Christian journey for us by reflecting on our ultimate hope for eternity.

I'll forewarn you that this is one of the MOST debated areas of theology. There is a ton what we could talk about here, but since we're really just talking about the BASICS in this series, I'm not going to get into the weeds on all of that. Instead, I just want to offer the contours of what scripture teaches us about the end and the hope that is offered in it.

What is ALL OF THIS for? What's it all leading to?

There's several places we could go to in the Bible to talk about this, but perhaps the most compelling vision is given in Revelation chapter 21 - join me there starting in verse 1:

The writer, John, has been recounting a series of visions he had of the heavenly throne room, the return of Christ, the judgment of sin, and the consummation of all things...and at the end he says,

READING

Revelation 21:¹ Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Pray with me.

What a beautiful picture of our future hope - dwelling with God as our eternal peace. THIS is our hope. That God WANTS to be with us.

The Bible teaches us a few things clearly about what we can expect on account of that:

1. Jesus will return.
2. Death will die.
3. God will restore & reign.

I. JESUS WILL RETURN (Acts 1:11; Hb 9:28; Lk 21:25-28; Rv 1:7; Rv 22:12; Jn 14:1-3; 1 Th 4:16-17).

The Bible tells us that Jesus will return much in the same way he left - which if you don't remember was by lifting off up into the clouds like Superman - but before Superman was cool. Jesus was resurrected from the grave and exalted to the right hand of the Father where he is now interceding for us and preparing a place for us to dwell with Him.

There's a lot of tricky and false teachings out there about when Jesus will come back and what exactly it will look like. You can know that it's false if someone claims they know when it will happen, because Jesus literally said that no one knows when it's going to happen.

Matthew 24:36 and 42, Jesus says, "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father...therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come."

If someone gives a date and time - you can almost guarantee it will happen any time BUT that time.

What we do know is that it will be PERSONAL AND VISIBLE - We'll know that it's Him, and He'll come in all the glory of His exalted nature as King of kings and Lord of lords.

And when He comes, He's coming to gather His bride - the Church - all those who have received Him, so that we might be with Him forever. This is what is referred to when you hear the word "rapture".

There is a LOT of speculation on what that looks like, when it will happen in relationship to other things stated about how things will wrap up in history.

- Will Jesus take the church away while there's a period of wrath and suffering on the world, what is referred to as Tribulation?
- Or will this be the final gathering of all God's people at Judgment day?

Those are interesting questions worthy of study in the scriptures, but ultimately, they aren't that important in the grand scheme of things. And as close as we get to understanding, we'll probably still be pretty far off.

With all the prophecies and data given from the OT, NO ONE from Jesus' time was able to really discern and recognize that the Messiah would come the way that He did - and they especially didn't think it would be the FIRST of TWO advents.

Only in hindsight can we see evidence of 2 - the first as a Suffering Servant and the second as Lord and Judge. It's much like hiking a mountain, where in the distant view there appears to be

only one peak, but details come into clearer focus as you draw close and find that in fact there are 2 quite separated peaks.

The important thing is that Jesus has promised to return for His people. And Jesus, in very nature God Himself, keeps His promises.

I wouldn't be surprised if we are as startled by the reality and nature of Jesus' return as people were at His first coming. But when it happens I want to be waiting with the expectancy and discernment of John the Baptist, and the readiness and openness of the disciples - who knew very little, but were ready to follow.

II. DEATH WILL DIE (Rv 20:6, 14; Rv 21:4; Lk 23:43;).

The next promise that we have is that death will die when Jesus consummates all things.

Prior to the vision of the new heavens and earth, Revelation chapter 20 describes a final climax of judgment in which all of the powers of evil are exposed and defeated. And in Revelation 20:14 it says that, "death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵ Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire."

Death itself is defeated - and because of that, all that have died - no matter their moral or religious status - are raised to life again.

Now this is actually a VERY profound statement. And I want to unpack why.

Since Christianity has been around for so long, we can kind of take for granted the concept of an afterlife. But that idea in and of itself - that there would be a whole other created realm and life to live beyond this one - has not always been evident, even within the Bible itself.

Think about this for a second. God already made a wonderful place for us to dwell with Him in blessed union - and we messed it up. Genesis tells us of Adam and Eve's life in the Garden with God and their rejection of Him in favor of trying to figure things out on their own.

That act of rebellion put this seemingly irreparable barrier between us and God - even though God consistently and faithfully offered ways into covenant relationship, we continue to throw it right back in his face.

He keeps offering us the way of life, and we keep choosing self-destructive behaviors that breed more sin and more brokenness.

Interestingly, throughout the OT, the Israelites - God's chosen people - had no real conception of an afterlife as any sort of reward or punishment. Death was the due penalty for our rebellion, and the blessings experienced during life were considered a gracious gift.

Throughout the Psalms, God's people spoke of Sheol as this mysterious, unknown after this life. The pit - the grave - the end of life.

Hope was firmly grounded in THIS life. And their GREAT HOPE beyond death was that there might yet be a better life for their descendants in the land.

It wasn't until the later prophets and the period leading up to the New Testament that the idea of resurrection and a life beyond this current one might exist.

You can see this present in the Gospels with the occasional arguments between a group called the Sadducees and another group called Pharisees.

Sadducees argued against the notion of resurrection and afterlife because there was nothing about it in the law of Moses AND in general they viewed it as a selfish desire.

When you think about it in those terms - they kind of have a point.

If we think of life after death purely from our perspective, it tends to become a self-centered and selfish pursuit - I want reward or I want to avoid punishment.

The Sadducees would have said what many atheists say today: Why not just worry about this life? Why can't we just appreciate the gifts that have been given to us and try to live good lives, being decent to one another?

The Gospel's response to this is YES! AND! - Yes, we ought to live fully present lives of gratitude and love, AND we ought to live in light of eternity - not because WE want it, but because GOD wants it.

The REAL truth and beauty of all this comes when we realize that our great hope isn't really about US and what we want. Our hope is God's hope.

Our eternal destiny isn't about your reward or punishment - it's about the fulfillment of God's hope and God's plan from the very outset of Creation.

God, in His great hope, has envisioned from the beginning an eternal dwelling and union with His creation as an expression of His perfect love.

We can only understand the death of death in light of God's great love for us. If God didn't love us, our sin would not be a problem. He'd just let us die and that would be the end of it.

Because God loves us, He's not content to let death be the end.

And so the dead shall be raised - despite ourselves - to stand before the throne on Judgment Day.

- Those who have received the gift of Christ's grace stand humbled but victorious - all of our sins and failures forgiven, and our hearts transformed in the light of His righteousness.
- Those who have rejected that gift have to stand on their own merits, and all would fall short on that count.

There is much that can be said here about hellfire and the punishment of the wicked. That's perhaps for another day.

But what shouldn't be forgotten is that God longs for all to come to repentance and salvation...and yet there are some who will harden their hearts even unto the end.

The exact nature of eternal life after the judgment leaves more fuel for speculation, but what matters is that every person will reap the consequences of a decision to live with and for the Creator of the universe or a decision to reject Him.

You WILL experience eternal life - the question is what kind of life that will be.

Finally, that leads us to the knowledge that...

III. GOD WILL RESTORE & REIGN (Rv 21:3).

The proclamation comes from the heavenly throne "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

God establishes a new heavens and a new earth. This may be a rude awakening to any of those who imagine that life after death is some sort of disembodied spiritual life in heaven.

The final dwelling place of God with restored humanity is very physical, with both a new earth and a new heavens being enmeshed with each other in a way that sin prevents currently.

You might ask: so will we be in heaven or on earth? The answer is YES! One and the same.

The earth as we know it will undergo a radical destruction by fire, much in the same way that Genesis tells of the Flood in the days of Noah.

2 Peter chapter 3 is instructive here:

⁷ By the same word [*he's speaking of God's word that both created the world and brought destruction through flood*] the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

[Peter explains that in God's timing there is a patient desire that all might come to repentance, but that patience won't last forever]

¹⁰ 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 done in it will be laid bare.

¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹² 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. ¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

Notice that it's not only the earth, but the heavens as well that will experience this refining fire of destruction.

Much like the flood, while there is catastrophic damage, there is also new life on the other side.

And our vision in Revelation tells us that the life on the other side is a new and perfect dwelling where God will be with His people eternally. He will wipe away all our tears.

Unlike the beginning in the Garden, this time we will dwell in a city. And unlike the Garden, there will be no temptation to live without God, because we'll have chosen Him freely and His law will be written on our hearts.

THAT is our great hope...

Not that we will be rewarded for our good behavior, or that evil will finally be punished in the end. Not even that there will be an end to sadness and mourning or that we'll see our loved ones again.

Our great hope is that God's plan will be realized. And we'll be with Him.

CONCLUSION

Summarize and drive it home.

Many of you, like myself, have been reading that proclamation from the throne in chapter 21 as if it were for us. But I'm not so sure it is now...at least not primarily for us.

I think it's for Jesus.

"Look! The Bride is ready! God's purposes are finally being made complete! He'll dwell with His people and be their God with no sin or brokenness in between them. He'll wipe every tear and begin a new life together with His people."

God WANTS to be with us.

He's wanted it from the beginning. He wanted it badly enough, that even though He knew humanity with free choice to love would result in all of the mess of sin and rebellion that it has, He believed it was worth it to accomplish this future vision He has in mind.

And so Jesus will return.

And death will be no more.

And God will make all things new, and reign with His people forever and ever.

May that hope not let us turn our backs on the world He so loved and seek escape.

May it drive us all the more ardently to love as He has loved us.

To live and work patiently and faithfully, bringing the hope of God's Kingdom to bear on the present.

And to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To him be glory both now and forever!

Pray with me.