

The Biblical Hope

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In the Bible there is one God, one people of God and one hope for all of God's people - eternal life in the coming age of the kingdom of God. Though this hope was foretold and foreshadowed in the pages of the OT, it comes clearly into focus through the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a result of these events Christ has "brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (II Tim. 1:10). Therefore, the hope of God's new covenant people is no longer seen "from a distance" as in OT times (Heb. 11:13) but is now centered on the clear and simple truth of Christ's own glorious resurrection and his future second coming for his people. At that time *all* believers - whether dead or alive - will be transformed so as to be with Christ in the glory of God's kingdom forever (I Thess. 4:13-18; I Cor. 15:50-54). This glorious "parousia" of Christ will also bring about the "universal restoration of all things" - as "foretold by all the prophets" (Acts 3:17-26) - so that even "creation itself will be delivered from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19-21). In short, the Christian hope for the future is now centered on the final fulfillment of God's foreordained plan "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:10).

In the NT this hope can be summarized in a single phrase: "Christ Jesus our hope" (I Tim. 1:1). This truth is the result of the incorporation of each believer, by way of the Spirit, into the one body of Christ (I Cor. 12:13). Because of this incorporation "in Christ" the church of the body of Christ is now bound up in all of Christ's accomplishments - past, present and future. This can be seen quite clearly in many of Paul's Letters. Look, for example, at his Letters to the Ephesians and Colossians:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ ... And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable

riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-7).

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:1-4).

Here we have explicitly stated the simplicity of the Christian life. *Christ* is our "life". For Paul and the other new covenant believers it was impossible to think of their lives - either in the present or in the future - apart from Christ. The life, death and resurrection of Christ, together with his giving of the Spirit on Pentecost, had forever changed the Christian believers' perspective on history. In the cross and in the resurrection the decisive events of history have *already* taken place. In Christ, God has accomplished victory for mankind over the forces of sin, death and Satan forever. As a result the life of every believer is now bound up in their existence "in Christ."

Because of this Paul's entire life was focused on Christ - whether in this life or in the life to come:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live. But Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Christ was Paul's "life." Paul's whole existence - both in the present and in the future - was determined by this single overwhelming truth. It was "in Christ" that he had been redeemed and now, by way of the Spirit, Christ lived "in him." Since even now Paul's life was "hidden with Christ in God," he knew that when Christ appeared, he also would "appear with him in glory" (Col. 3:3-4).

It is often thought that Paul's words "depart and be with Christ" indicate that Paul expected to go to heaven immediately after his death and to live consciously there "with Christ." However, this seems unlikely because Paul nowhere else speaks in these terms and even in Philippians it is the resurrection and Christ's return that he longs for (Phil. 3:10-21). In fact, other clear statements by Paul seem to make such a scenario almost impossible. This can be seen in I Corinthians and I Thessalonians where he clearly expresses his understanding of how believers will come to be "with Christ" forever:

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him (I Cor. 15:22-23).

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (I Thess. 4:15-17).

In these verses it is crystal clear that Paul believed that Christians who died were "asleep in

Christ" and would only be "with Christ" when they were "awakened" and raised to be "with him" at his second coming. This fits both the OT and NT pattern of the state of the dead as well as the future resurrection (cp. Dan. 12:2-3, 13; Acts 24:14-16). Most likely, Paul's words "depart and be with Christ" simply indicate the degree to which Christ was indeed Paul's "life" and that for him the next stage of conscious life after his "departure" (II Tim. 4:6) would be to be "with Christ in glory" - on the day of his appearing. Look at II Timothy 4:

In the Presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word ...

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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 Tim. 4:1-8; cf. Heb. 9:27-28).

For Paul, the next stage after death, on the chronological timetable of God's plan, was to "appear with Christ in glory" - on "that day" of "his appearing and his kingdom." This was the simplicity of Paul's life and hope - may it be ours as well.