

# The Hope of Glory

by Richie Temple  
Cary, North Carolina

So, let us ask some basic questions: Was Paul a "pre-millennialist"? Or, did Paul believe in a "pre-tribulation rapture" of the church into heaven? How odd these questions would have seemed to Paul or to those who are most familiar with his life, thought and writings. Why? Simply because there is no certain evidence that Paul knew anything at all about a coming "millennium" or that he had ever even considered the concept of a "pre-tribulation rapture" of the church. *In all of Paul's voluminous writings he never, ever, mentions either concept.* Instead, for Paul the Christian hope was simple. It was based on OT promises that had been explained by Jesus himself and it focused on the second coming (Gr. *parousia*) of Christ and the complex of events that would follow: the resurrection of the just and unjust (Acts 24:15), the final judgment (Acts 17:31) and the ultimate establishment of God's kingdom in a renewed, glorious and transformed earth (I Cor. 15:50; Rom. 8:19-21). Paul's point of view about this Christian hope never varied throughout his Christian life. It is summarized in what he taught in all the churches he had founded:

*They [Paul and Baranabas] preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships [Gr. *thlipsis* = "tribulation"] to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22; cp. II Thess. 1-2 for a detailed account of what is summarized here).*

Let us remember that Paul was rooted and grounded in the OT Scriptures. Wherever he went he "preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ" from those scriptures (Acts 28:31; cf. Acts 8:12; 14:22; 20:25; 28:23). More importantly, Paul's understanding of those OT Scriptures was based on all that Christ himself had taught and all that he had already accomplished via his life, death and resurrection. There was, of course, no "New Testament" for Paul to consult; no

Book of Revelation for him to try to "unlock;" and no multiplicity of books on the "end-times" to confuse him. Instead, it was his own understanding of Christ - begun on the road to Damascus, nurtured through the teachings of the other apostles and enlightened through the Spirit - that was Paul's "canon" in all that he did and taught. For him, the Christian hope for the future was based on all that Christ had *already* accomplished and the glorious transformation that had *already* begun to take place in the life of each Christian believer. This truth is summarized in the startling statement of Paul in Col 1:27 that each believer - even from among the Gentiles - has:

*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

Simply put, for Paul *future glory was based on present reality.* Whatever he had to endure on this "road to glory" was for Paul simply part and parcel of the Christian life. *Christ*, via the Spirit, was already "in him" (Gal. 2:20) and each day he was being "transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" (II Cor. 3:18). As Gordon Fee states:

We read the letters of Paul as part of the New Testament, the record of God's new covenant with his people, effected through Christ and the Spirit. But in fact Paul did not know that he was contributing to such a "new testament." For him the "new covenant" was not a written record at all but a historical reality, experienced anew at the Table of the Lord and through the presence of the Spirit (Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, Hendrickson Pub. p. 3).

As a "minister of the new covenant; not of the letter, but of the Spirit" (II Cor. 3:6) Paul firmly believed that the glorious transformation that had already begun in each believer would one day be completed in full at Christ's appearing (Col. 3:4). Like Peter, he believed that believers had *already* been "born again into a living hope" and were thus assured that they had "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven" for them (I Pet. 1:3-9; cf. Col. 1:5). It remained only for believers to "continue in the faith and be not moved away from the hope held out in the gospel" (Col. 1:21-23; cf. Acts 14:22). For, as "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ" Christian believers are "heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7) and will one day,

with Christ, "inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50).

**“Inherit Salvation” = “Inherit Eternal Life”  
= “Inherit the Kingdom of God”**

The believer's understanding of the second coming of Christ must be based first and foremost on a correct understanding of the terminology used by the NT writers regarding the topic of salvation. It is fundamentally wrong to read back into the scriptures concepts or ideas that the NT writers did not intend to convey by their words. Concepts such as a "pre-tribulation rapture" were not a part of their vocabulary or thinking. Instead, their thinking was rooted and grounded in the OT concepts of "salvation" "eternal life" and the "kingdom of God" - all of which are used almost interchangeably throughout the NT to describe that which the believer will "inherit" at Christ's return. Look at these verses:

*Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to **inherit the kingdom he promised** those who love him? (James 2:5).*

*I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot **inherit the kingdom of God**, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed (I Cor. 15:50-51).*

*But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by grace, we might **become heirs having the hope of eternal life** (Titus 3:4-7).*

*Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will **inherit salvation**? (Heb. 1:14).*

These terms were based on OT promises and concepts and then understood in the light of all that Jesus himself had taught - as well as in the light of

all that Christ had already accomplished via his life, death, resurrection and giving of the Spirit on Pentecost. The perspective of the NT writers was simple: Christ was "coming back" (cf. Acts 1:11) and when he did they would inherit "salvation," "eternal life" or "the kingdom of God." The synonymous use of these terms is recognized by almost all NT scholars today. For example, the *New International Dictionary of NT Theology* states:

The expression "eternal life" (*zoe aionios*) ... is to be understood primarily as life which belongs to God. From the Book of Daniel onwards "eternal life" is an expression of the longed-for eschatological blessings of salvation, **life in the age to come** (cf. Dan. 12:2) ... This is a life that is awaited in the future along with the resurrection of the dead, just as the term can be used ... alternately with ... **the kingdom of God** .. to denote **salvation**" (NIDNTT, vol. 3, p. 832, Zondervan).

This was simply the language of Judaism based on OT prophecies and promises. Let's look at each of these terms more closely.

### **Salvation**

The terms "saved" or "salvation" are sometimes used in the NT in a comprehensive sense to speak of the whole experience of salvation. At other times they refer to what believers are "saved from." i.e., "saved from our sins," and therefore "saved from the coming wrath." This is a constant theme throughout the NT. The "coming wrath," refers to God's coming judgment against unrepentant sinners in the "the day of the Lord" or "the day of God's wrath" - which will take place after Christ's return. John the Baptist also spoke of believers fleeing from "the coming wrath" (Matt. 3:7) and Jesus spoke of "wrath" as the opposite of "salvation" (John 3:36). Paul, who used the term "saved from the coming wrath" several times (Rom. 5:9; I Thess. 1:10; 5:9), explained specifically what he meant by this "coming wrath" in Rom. 2:5-16. Instead of being condemned and destroyed in the final judgment believers in Christ are already "justified." Thus, believers will be "saved" from "God's wrath" and "inherit eternal life."

There is nothing in this concept of "salvation" that exempts believers from "tribulation" in this life - whether small or great - as Acts 14:22, II Thess. 1-2 and the rest of the NT clearly show. Nor does the term "saved from the wrath to come" mean that God

cannot inflict "wrath" upon unbelievers in various ways during this "present evil age" - even while Christian believers are present (cf. Rom. 1:17ff; I Thess. 2:16; cf. Luke 21:23).

### **Eternal Life**

In the Bible the term "eternal life" is never presented as a vague or nebulous concept; instead, it has a fixed and definite meaning that would have been understood in the light of its OT background and, especially, in the light of the teachings, illustrations and explanations of Jesus about "this present evil age" and the glorious "age to come." Biblically, the words "eternal life" (Gr. *zoe aionios*) mean "life of the coming age." That is, life in the coming age of the kingdom of God. Joseph Fitzmyer explains when speaking about Rom 2:7:

This is the first Pauline mention of "eternal life," an idea derived from his Jewish tradition (Dan. 12:2; 2 Macc. 7:9; 4 Macc. 15:3; cf. 1QS 4:7); **It is life in the *aion*, in the "age" to come.** See further Rom. 5:21; 6:22-23; cf. Gal. 6:8. So Paul formulates the destiny of Christian existence, which he will further specify in time as a share in the "glory" of God (3:23; 5:3) and in the life of the risen Christ (6:4), i.e., being "forever with the Lord" (I Thess. 4:17; cf. Rom. 5:21; 6:22-23). Three qualities of that destiny are mentioned: Gr. *doxa*, "glory," Gr. *time*, "honor" and Gr. *aphtharsia*, "imperishability, immortality" [J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible, Romans*, p. 302].

Note carefully that there is nothing whatsoever in the term "eternal life" about:

- (1). The idea of dying and going to heaven;
- (2). A so-called pre-tribulation rapture of the church into heaven;
- (3). A one thousand year reign of Christ on earth with his saints.

Instead, the words "eternal life" always have a fixed and definite meaning - "life in the coming age" of the kingdom of God.

### **The Kingdom of God**

According to Jesus and Paul the "kingdom of God" which believers are to "inherit" will be an "imperishable" realm in the "age to come" that will be inhabited only by people who have been made immortal (Luke 20:35-36; I Cor. 15:50-54). In addition, there can be nothing that causes sin or evil within this kingdom (Matt. 13 :37-43). It is

precisely for this reason that "the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God." Instead, *only* believers will have an inheritance in this kingdom for it is only they who will be made immortal. Since "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" all believers must undergo a transformation at Christ's second coming into "glorious," "immortal" or "incorruptible" bodies - empowered by a "life-giving spirit" (I Cor. 15). Only after this will they "enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

### **Paul's End-time Perspective: Sharing in Christ's Glory**

Paul's "end-times" perspective was based on the fulfillment of Old Testament promises that God had made to his people (Acts 24:14-15; 26:6-8). In turn, these promises were understood in the light of all that Jesus himself had taught - especially the truths of the "Olivet Discourse" as recorded in Matt. 24-25; Mark 13 and Luke 21. Paul's most complete end-times chronology is set forth in passages such as I Thessalonians 4:13-18 and II Thessalonians 1-2 and I Cor. 15 and it's easy to see the similarities in those records with the Olivet discourse. Nowhere, however, in all of Paul's writings does he ever mention such concepts as a "pre-tribulation rapture"; a "two-stage" second coming of Christ, or, even, a coming "millennium." - these concepts must be read *into* his writings. Yes, "secrets" were revealed to him about various aspects of this hope (I Cor. 15:51; Rom. 11:25-27), but it is still the same hope. Paul's point of view is always simple: Christ is coming back and when he does evil will be destroyed and believers will "inherit the kingdom of God."

These same truths are taught throughout Paul's letters - sometimes emphasizing one aspect of the believer's hope and sometimes another. The issues he deals with and the terminology he uses always depend on the group to which he is writing at any given time and the questions or issues with which he is dealing (e.g. I Cor. 15; I Thess. 4:13-18; II Thess. 2:1ff). However, in every case there was always a common basis of understanding that Paul had already taught them - usually in person - so there was never a need to rehearse everything again in its entirety.

As G.E. Ladd states, "*Our* problems arise when we begin to ask questions that were not in the minds of the authors" such as Paul. There are simply many

questions about the second coming of Christ that no one knows the answer to and that honest people may disagree about - e.g. such as what, or who, is the "restrainer" of II Thess. 2:6; etc. Dogmatism or pretending to "know" all the answers on such matters only causes unnecessary divisions. Ironically, it is normally those whose knowledge of biblical languages, history, culture, etc. is the *most* expert who are the *least* dogmatic in their assertions concerning such questions. Others tend to marshal their arguments to fit within pre-conceived interpretative programs that must be made to "fit" - usually, with great violence being done to the natural meaning of the biblical text.

Despite difficulties over details the biblical picture of Christ's second coming is basically clear. But the texts must be allowed to speak for themselves according to their natural meaning. The translators of versions such as the NIV, NRSV, NKJV, REB, NAB, etc. are the leading experts in their fields - compare their versions with each other and when necessary consult Study Bibles or Commentaries. No, they don't always agree with each other but the idea that someone else who is not

an expert in the biblical languages, history, etc. is going to come up with a true "scoop" about something on this topic that hasn't been seen already is remote at best. From such "scoops," "insights," "prophecies," "revelations" etc. have come innumerable groups through the centuries claiming to have *the* truth - only to be proven wrong at a later date, to the great spiritual and emotional damage of their followers.

As for Paul, all the evidence - as in II Thessalonians 1&2 - suggests that he viewed the second coming of Christ as a single climactic event when evil would be destroyed, the earth renewed and all of God's people - whether dead or alive - transformed so as to enjoy forever "the glorious freedom of the children of God." Paul's firm conviction was that "our present sufferings" - *whatever* they might be - "are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:19-21). It was the clear and simple hope of "sharing in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (II Thess. 2:14) at "his appearing and his kingdom" (II Tim. 4:1) that was Paul's hope. May it be ours as well.

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