

Scripture on Heaven:

Interim/ intermediate state:	Resurrection:
When?	When?
What?	What?
Philippians 1:21	Job 19:23-27
Luke 23:43	Ezekiel 37:1-14
	Matthew 27:50-54
	Romans 8:11, 18-25

	Philippians 3:7-11, 20-21
	1 Corinthians 15

# **Regaining Biblical Hope: Restoring the Prominence of the Parousia**

**Jeffrey A. Gibbs**

This essay seeks to offer to the church and specifically to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod a corrective view, as the title overtly suggests. The needed correction is not, however, a turning from false teaching in favor of true, Biblical doctrine, for our Synod has not lost the true and Biblical teaching about Christian hope. Rather, the problem is more subtle; I shall be arguing that the church today needs to restore a balance when she looks forward in hope. This essay is an exercise in Biblical theology, and I regard it as a necessary exercise. The exercise is necessary because of a contrast. The contrast stands between the hope that fills the pages of the New Testament on the one hand, and on the other hand, what is often the actual, standard piety of our church body, both laity and clergy.

In its simplest terms, I would say it this way. The New Testament's authors thought and lived and wrote eschatologically, with their hope fully, firmly, and fervently directed toward the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our hearts and minds, however, are not so oriented, even though our tradition and the ancient creeds and the Bible itself should teach us otherwise. They *lived* eschatologically. We, in practical terms, do not. And we should. I am suggesting that we need to apply Romans 12:2, the usual translation of which illustrates the problem: "Do not be conformed to this age—it's not 'world,' but 'age'!—but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...."<sup>1</sup> If we are to believe and to live as the New Testament writers did, then we need God to renew our minds through the power of His Word.

I acknowledge at the outset that I might overstate my case. Moreover, one should always be open to being corrected. But I will sin boldly, because my goal is to dislodge from our minds an error in thinking. A very minor Biblical theme, which really belongs on the sidelines, has supplanted true

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<sup>1</sup>The English translation of ὁ αἰών οὐτος as "this world" is hardly to be preferred, for it blurs the temporal, eschatological meaning. As Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. (*The Anchor Bible: Romans: a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 640-641) comments, "Paul alludes to the Jewish distinction of 'this world/age/aeon' and the 'world/age/aeon to come,' a distinction that was adopted by the early church and given a Christian nuance. For Paul the 'world/age/aeon to come' has already begun; the 'ages' have met at the start of the Christian dispensation (1 Cor. 10:11)." See also C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 608.

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Biblical hope and become the functional center for many if not virtually all of our people. I'm speaking of the doctrine of the "interim state of the soul," *der Zwischenzustand*, the teaching concerning the soul's existence after the death of the body. Somehow we have allowed this minor Biblical emphasis to become our hope and our longing to the exclusion, for all practical terms, of the Parousia of Jesus Christ. God would like us to change that situation; as a student suggested to me in a conversation regarding our topic, it may be that we have lost our first *hope*.

I have two goals for this essay. The first is that all who read it would more fully accept the challenge of re-thinking our world view, adjusting it to the Biblical doctrine and hope. The second goal is that each of us will more deliberately, consciously, and eagerly long for the return of Jesus Christ at the consummation of the age. To accomplish these goals, we shall begin by recalling the enormity of our world's need for hope.

## I. The Need for Hope

The Christian Gospel looks in two directions. The proclamation of Jesus' work looks backward to the past in faith, and forward to the future in hope. Why two directions? Christ Jesus has already come. He has already paid the price for our redemption, already won the victory, already forgiven our sins. Isn't that sufficient? Isn't that enough? If we have faith, why do we need hope?

Yes, it is enough. But it's not *all*. He's not done. Allow me to recall some realities that may need no recalling, depending on what's going on in your life or ministry at the present. But we in the Missouri Synod are, by and large, a comfortable, middle to upper middle class, health-insured denomination. On this continent at least, we are experiencing no persecution in any serious sense of that term. Moreover, the temptation of Romans 6, sinning that grace may abound, has always been a problem in the church. And it's easier to be conformed to this age when it's a comfortable age. So, permit me to make us all a bit less comfortable, to create if possible a necessary and holy discomfort.

It is so blessedly true that Christ's completed past work is sufficient, and that He provides for our sustenance through the means of grace. But can you hear? Can you hear the groaning? Our ears must never lose the ability to hear the groaning. It sounds like a woman in danger, in the dangerous agony of labor and childbirth. Can you hear the creation groaning? It's happening again in Africa; it is famine season, and people are starving to death. If we lived in parts of Africa, our hearing would be better. All around the world—disease and sickness. My family and I had to face it last year in a small but profoundly frightening way—softball-sized tumors were removed from my wife's abdomen. For quite some time now, my favorite English adjective has been the "b" word; benign. But sometimes, even often, it's not that happy. It wasn't supposed to *be* this way—"In the

beginning” קָדוֹם וְנָאֵץ, “very good.”

Can you hear the groaning? Even as peace negotiations continue, radicals in the Middle East use violence to undercut the process. The life of a six-year-old Cuban boy remains in turmoil because of unfathomable hatred for Fidel Castro, and politicians jockey in order to make some leverage out of the evil. In North St. Louis, a man named Otis Woodard stands on a street corner where he has stood for decades, and he speaks to a generation that lives in a neighborhood with 85% unemployment and drug abuse and poverty and all that goes with it. About two miles from the park-like campus of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, every Saturday morning faithful picketers peacefully and legally walk the sidewalk in front of a Planned Parenthood clinic, speaking the truth in love and calling out to mothers as they enter the abortion clinic with an appointment to end the lives of their unborn children. Occasionally there is cause for rejoicing—a mother doesn’t enter, or she quickly re-emerges to speak with the pro-life warriors. But most of the time, they go in the front...and they go out the back and the evil continues to stain the land. Because for them and in some evil ways for *all* of us Americans, even you and me, the first and greatest commandment is “Thou shalt not take away my right to choose.”

We live in a world that needs hope, in a creation that is unable to manifest God’s *לִילּוּא*. Has God already done for the world all that He desires to do? Is His name being fully hallowed, His reign coming completely, His will done throughout the creation? Not yet.

Listen to the groaning. Listen to your own life, and the lives of fellow Christians. Petty jealousy and laziness and just plain indifference prevent us from reaching others with the Gospel. Gossip destroys the good name of our neighbor. Promises to children and spouse are broken. Does Christ forgive all these sins? Yes, He does. But does the sin work its damage and echo throughout the generations? Yes, it does. Are there, in your lives and in the lives around you, the crippling effects of sin in both body and soul, effects that will not go away until Jesus comes again? We know all of this, and no one knows it better than a pastor. It was as a parish pastor that I first learned to call these things “parousia problems.”

And then there’s death. Our bodies die. Does death separate us from the love of God in Christ? Of course not! Does it separate us from one another? You better believe it does. Does death take our humanity and tear it right down the middle in a way that grieves the heart of God? Yes, it does. In the divine economy, death is the final enemy that Christ Jesus has not yet overcome (1 Cor. 15:54-55).<sup>2</sup> We have to be willing to hear the groaning for what it is.

We can see how finite and bent and twisted this old age is when we

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<sup>2</sup>According to Ben Witherington III (*Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 310) 1 Corinthians 15:54 and following “are the only place in his letters where Paul cites an Old Testament text as a prophecy yet to be fulfilled.”

look at the ministry of the Lord Jesus. Jesus' ministry is the present manifestation, the in-breaking of the reign of God. Wherever He went, He forgave sins. *And* He healed the sick. *And* He cast out demons. *And* He calmed deadly storms. *And* He raised the dead. Wherever He went, Satan's power and sin's effect were held at bay. Jesus's miracles were not just proofs of His divine power. They were, in fact, manifestations of the reign of God, and it was altogether fitting and necessary that the Bringer of the Reign of God should heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons. In Him, the reign of God is already present in anticipatory fashion and when God's reign breaks in finally and completely, then He will heal our bodies and all creation and will raise us up forever.

Yes, already now, the great and powerful good news is that by faith, we have forgiveness of sins and peace with God. But do we still have sin? Is there still sickness and death? Does Satan still wield the power of his lies? And is God content with that? Should we be content with that? If we are content when God is not, we should repent and seek the mind of Christ.

Just in case we forgot, this finite, flawed, dying age needs hope. And the Christian Gospel looks forward and proclaims hope. All is done, but there's more coming! Christ has completed His work, but He's not finished yet. What is that hope?

## II. The Biblical Hope

“Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus according to the command of God our Savior and Christ Jesus our hope...” (1 Tim. 1:1). “As we look for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). Christ Jesus Himself is the hope, the hope of final eschatological glory. He is an infinite hope, because when He comes again—and only when He comes again—He will bring about the final triumph of God, His Father, the final and complete victory over all sin and all sickness, and death will be swallowed up in victory. Satan's power to tempt, to twist, and to terrify will be taken away. The Son of God will bring about the entire and complete redemption of the creation.

How could it be any other way with the One who descended and took unto Himself a human nature? The physicality of the incarnation demands a redemption of the physical, of the world. Every New Testament writing, on page after page, is occupied and focused and looking for this hope. The New Testament is filled with the “tension” between a completed work that is only partially experienced, and a completed work that will be fully given and fully received.

The dividing line is the parousia of Jesus, His visible return at the consummation of the age. Since Christ is the focus of our faith, He is also the content of our hope. The New Testament takes the big view, the big picture. The Scripture focuses our eyes on Christ, and on His action—first coming, second coming. To believe in the one is to long for the other. Even

the same words are used, sometimes in the same breath. Already and not yet. The present and the future occur in one breath from the mouth of Jesus in John 5:25-29:

Truly, truly I say to you that an hour is coming *and now is* [emphasis added] when the dead will hear the Son of God's voice, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in himself, so also he gave to the Son to have life in himself and he gave to him authority to do judgment because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at *this* [emphasis added], for an hour is coming at which all *who are in the tombs* [emphasis added] will hear his voice and those who have done good things will come out to the resurrection of life, but those who have worked evil things will come out to the resurrection of judgment.

Already raised to life...and not yet raised to life. The first resurrection occurs at conversion, at Baptism. The second when Jesus comes again.

Over and over again, salvation words in the New Testament are both "already" and "not yet." The content of the already and the not yet is Jesus and His action, given expression through aorist indicatives and future indicatives. "According to his great mercy he *saved us...*" (Titus 3). "By how much more *will we be saved* from the coming wrath" (Rom. 5). "But *now* a righteousness of God has been revealed, being witnessed by the law and the prophets..." (Rom. 3). "For we in the Spirit by faith are looking for the *hope of righteousness*" (Gal. 5). "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus *has freed* you from the law of sin and of death..." (Rom. 8:2). "Wretched man that I am! Who *will deliver me* from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7). "God sent forth his Son, *to redeem* those who were under the Law, in order that we might receive *adoption...*" (Gal. 4). "We also even ourselves groan within ourselves because we are looking for *adoption, the redemption of our bodies*" (Rom. 8:23). [Emphasis added in all verses.]

What we have already received...we have not yet received. Redeemed, we long for final redemption. The reign of God has already come: the disciples of Jesus cannot fast because the bridegroom is here, and the wedding feast is ready—come to the feast! But the ten maidens must wait and watch, for the bridegroom has not yet arrived, and the wedding feast has yet to begin.

Paul writes, "For we were saved...in hope" (Rom. 8:24). The present evil age cannot destroy us and nothing can snatch us out of His hand. But the power of evil is still very great, and the enemies remain at work, Satan, sin, and death. Our hope, and the hope of this finite world, is that once more God will act, God will come down, Christ will return. This hope is centered not in us or in what we do, but in God and what He will do in Christ Jesus. Our hope waits for the day when God's name will be hallowed throughout the creation, and when sickness and death and sin will

be done away with and when death itself will be swallowed up in victory. That will not happen until Christ returns in glory. We were saved in...hope. And Christ is our hope, and the pages of the New Testament give ample witness to this hope of Christ's return in glory. They knew how finite the world still was, how great the power of evil still is. They longed for the day when every knee—in heaven and on earth and under the earth!—would bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. This hope acknowledges God as creator, as savior, and takes the big picture. When will God come down? When will Christ return as judge of the living and the dead? “We were saved...in hope; now hope which is seen is not hope, for who hopes for that which he already sees? But if we hope for that which we do not yet see, we look for it through endurance” (Rom. 8:24-25).

### **III. The Hope Obscured**

We look for it with endurance. Or do we? I don't think we do. I don't think our members do. I don't think our church does. The hope is in our doctrine. It's in the Bible. It's in the creeds. But the hope which genuinely, actually looks eagerly for the second coming of Christ has been obscured, partially and even sometimes completely obscured by something else. The sun has been eclipsed by the moon. When you ask Christians, Missouri Synod Lutherans, what their hope is and what their goal is, their answer will probably be, “Dying and going to heaven.” By that phrase, they mean, “Entering the interim state, the condition of the soul's presence with Christ once the body dies.” A minor Biblical emphasis about which we know very little and to which the Bible gives hardly any attention has supplanted the return of Christ as the content of Christian hope. We've given the second coming over to the “calculators,” to the dispensationalists. And I say that we need to get it back. It is not enough to deny false teaching and harmful speculation about the last day and the return of Christ—although we surely must continue to do that. We must recover for ourselves the power and the joy that flow out of the true and Biblical understanding of the consummation of the age.

When, practically speaking, we lose sight of our Christocentric Biblical hope, this feeds modern non-Biblical assumptions and can even open the door to false doctrine. Under six headings let me describe what has happened in minds and hearts because “dying and going to heaven” have taken the place of a true eschatological hope and longing for Christ's return.

First, a faulty anthropology is at work. This faulty view of human nature thinks that, essentially, we are really souls—the “immortal” part of us is the soul. The body is somewhat unnecessary, really a hindrance. And this view, incredibly, regards the death of the Christian's body as a victory, as something good rather than as an ongoing manifestation of sin and evil. You hear it at the casket at funerals: “That's not really him; it's just his

body. He's really in heaven." Far more Biblical is the comment of the child at the same casket: "Grandpa is sleeping."

Technically speaking, this anthropology is false doctrine. Human beings properly understood are comprised of bodies and souls, knit together. Death, no original part of God's plan, tears us apart. This is linked also to Christology. We confess that the eternal Logos, God the Son, assumed a full human nature from the womb of Mary, His mother. That human nature, just like ours, consisted of a body and a soul. We are not essentially "souls." When our bodies die, that's not God's plan, and He's going to change it.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the substitute hope focuses on the soul's existence apart from the body and in practical terms cares little for the return of Christ. This approximates a form of gnosticism. "Spiritual" is good. "Physical," if not bad, is at least indifferent or unimportant. A moment's reflection can reveal what this mind-set might do to one's view of the Sacraments. Moreover, such a neo-gnostic view no longer sees salvation in linear Biblical terms of God coming down into history and into His creation to save it. Rather, salvation is "up," vertical, and this world is a vale of tears from which we hope to escape forever. This is Greek philosophy, not Biblical hope.

Third, and typically American, to make the interim state our true and practical hope is to think egocentrically and individualistically. The hope has to do primarily with my soul, with the death of my body, with me "dying and going to heaven." But the Biblical hope is not centered on me, nor is it only centered on my soul. The Biblical hope is Christocentric, and it is focused upon God's honor and God's reign and God's glory in Christ Jesus.

Fourth, there is what one colleague has called "the scandal of Lutheran eschatology"—there isn't any. Our dogmatic tradition has not allowed true Biblical hope to occupy a prominent place, nor perhaps even to retain its true Biblical content. In particular there is the problem created by the standard dogmatic categories, under Christ's kingly office, of the "kingdom of grace" and the "kingdom of glory." When I lecture in the church, I

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<sup>3</sup>In his discussion of the hypostatic union of two natures in Christ, Martin Chemnitz compares the necessity of two natures that constitute the one Person of Christ to the definition of human nature as necessarily both a body and a soul. He writes, "Thus the soul considered by itself, and the human nature in Christ, although they are individual substances and intelligent, yet do not have the full and complete status of a person.... If we apply carefully these points to the doctrine of the Incarnation of the Son of God, some light will be shed on the subject. Thus, in angels one person consists of one nature; but in men one person consists of more than one nature, since man is made up of body and soul, which are different and distinct substances" (Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, translated by J. A. O. Preus [St. Louis: Concordia, 1971], 92). Chemnitz, further comments, "For the soul and the body constitute human nature, which consists of these two elements, neither of which is so perfect without the other that the body alone would be a complete man or the soul alone would be a complete human nature. For the soul is only part of man, and the body only part of human nature" (107).

find great confusion in the use of these terms, and I don't think the various dogmaticians use them consistently either. But the single most influential dogmatician in our tradition, Francis Pieper, defines the "kingdom of grace" as "the church of God on earth," while the inhabitants of the "kingdom of glory" are "no longer subject to cross and tribulation."<sup>4</sup> This sounds to me as though the crucial dividing point is at the death of the body. For the Bible, the *crucial* dividing point is at the return of Christ. There are not two kingdoms or reigns of God in the New Testament. There is one reign of God, manifested now and manifested at the last day. The use of this distinction in systematic theology at least needs to be reevaluated, clarified, and brought more closely into line with the Biblical view.

This dogmatic distinction of "kingdom of grace" vs. "kingdom of glory" also results in the misuse of Scripture, and that brings up the fifth unfortunate result of the obscuring of true Biblical hope. By lumping together the interim state and the resurrection of the body, Scriptures that apply only and properly to the realities to come when Christ returns are made to apply to the interim state. To me as an exegete, this is the most remarkable and distressing thing of all; we actually and persistently misapply Scripture. Let me give you my current list of examples of misinterpreted Scriptures, heard most often at funerals.

Pride of place goes to John 14, preached at funerals as if the soul of the departed Christian were already in the "heavenly mansion" that Christ has prepared. But read the text: "In my Father's house are many dwelling places, otherwise, I would have told you, because I am going to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming *again* and I will *take* you to myself, so that where I myself am also you yourselves may be" (John 14:2-3, emphasis added). Jesus here refers in the first place to His parousia, when He will come again. In the second place, He may also be referring to the dwelling of Father and Son with the believer, for later in the chapter Jesus says, "I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you.... If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we will come to him and we will make a dwelling place with him" (14:18, 23). But what is certain is that Jesus is not talking about the death of the body and the interim state.

Here's another. "Well, done, good and faithful servant." These are not words heard when the soul goes to be with Christ—at least, not according to Matthew 25:21. The parable of the talents records the words of the master who, after a long time, returns and settles accounts with his servants. It is a parable of the parousia. The final approval comes only when Jesus returns.

Yet another. "Henceforth is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which does not fade away." Awarded at the death of the Christian's body? Not according to St. Paul—read on: "the crown of righteousness which does

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<sup>4</sup>Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), 389.

not fade away, which the Lord, the righteous judge will award to me *on that day*—and not only to me, but to all who have loved his *appearing*” (2 Tim. 4:8, emphasis added). Paul’s crown is safe, laid up—but not yet awarded. For how can the servant receive the final crown when his Master is not yet receiving the full praise and worship of all creation?

Another example. The Christian’s funeral is a service of victory, right? “Death was swallowed up in victory.” Sorry, not yet—at least not according to 1 Corinthians. I do not know, to be quite frank, if the Bible ever speaks of the death of the Christian as a victory—I can’t find any passage to that effect—but 1 Corinthians 15:54 says, “And when this corruptible [body] is clothed with incorruption, and this mortal [body] is dressed with immortality, *then* will happen the word which is written, ‘Death was swallowed up in victory.’” The victorious swallowing up of death occurs when death is undone, removed. Paul is quoting Isaiah 25:8, a passage that speaks of God’s final victory at the end of this age.

What about Philippians 3:14? “I press on toward the prize of the *up-ward* (emphasis added) calling of God in Christ Jesus.” I’m not sure about this one, and perhaps certainty isn’t possible. But the adjective is ἀνω and it does not have to be translated “up-ward.” In view of Paul’s other uses in Galatians 4:26, Colossians 3:1, 2, and in light of the entire structure of Paul’s thought and hope, it is at least as fitting a translation to render “the calling from above” or the “heavenly calling,” indicating the source from which the call comes rather than the direction to which it calls us. For later in that same chapter, Paul’s hope is entirely focused upon the return of Christ *from* heaven: “For our citizenship is in heaven (ἐν οὐρανῷ), from which we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly, humble body to be conformed to his glorious body, according to the power by which he is able also to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:20-21).

Part of the ongoing problem is one of referent: what do we mean, to what do we refer when we speak of “heaven”? Often in Scripture, “heaven” or “the heavens” is simply where God is in Himself: “Our Father, who art in heaven.” This is also “where” Christ Jesus is now seated, even as He fills all things, and we are *now* seated with Him in the heavenly places. But if “heaven” refers to the “place” or condition of the souls of believers between the death of the body and the return of Christ, then the New Testament doesn’t have much to say about it.<sup>5</sup> And if by “heaven” we mean to refer to the renewed creation, then we need to be clear about that.

One final example in my list of misinterpreted parousia passages and concepts: the “pearly gates.” We commonly speak of people dying and en-

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<sup>5</sup>Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), 511, begins his discussion of “The State of the Souls Between Death and Resurrection” with these words: “Holy Writ reveals but little of the state of the souls between death and the resurrection. In speaking of the last things, it directs our gaze primarily to Judgment Day and the events clustered around it.”

tering the “pearly gates.” Now, we all know better than to actually entertain the notion that Peter is guarding them. But to speak of the “pearly gates” invokes the vision in Revelation 21 of the new Jerusalem, with its twelve gates of pearl. When does Revelation 21 takes place? John the seer writes, “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, because the first heaven and the first earth departed, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city Jerusalem as it came down out of heaven from God...” (Rev. 21:1-2). That great hymn, “For All the Saints” gets it right. Stanza six speaks of “rest for faithful warriors” in “paradise the blessed.” That’s exactly what the interim state is—rest from the battle—and to that I shall return. But then comes stanza seven, “But then there breaks a yet more glorious day, the saints triumphant rise in bright array—the King of glory passes on his way”...and stanza eight, “From earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast, *through gates of pearl* streams in the countless host, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—Alleluia!” By the way, that’s the order of stanzas in Lutheran Worship #191. The Lutheran Hymnal #463 got the order wrong.

Sixth, our hymnody has been thoroughly infected with this confusion, and far too often we sing as if the interim state were our true and real and complete Christian hope. Now, I know I’m treading on really thin ice, here—you can criticize my hermeneutics all you want, but don’t mess with my favorite hymns! That’s of the same magnitude as trying to switch a congregation from individual cups to the common cup. But if our true hope is Christ Himself at His parousia, then how can a hymn speak of future blessing *only* in terms of the interim state, and *omit* any reference at all to the true hope and victory at Christ’s return? Some familiar and much-loved hymns have helped to blur our focus and to obscure our genuine Biblical hope. They speak purely in vertical terms, as if the main goal were for us to go up, leaving our bodies behind. “I’m but a stranger here, heaven is my home.” The goal is to make it through our earthly lives, and get “up” to our true home.

Now I realize that there is a sense in which this can be true. But let me say it in a somewhat provocative way. My home—and yours—is not “up there.” Our home is right here! We are creatures, part of the creation. But our home was ruined by sin and we helped to ruin it. Yet God is not about to let His creation remain ruined. He didn’t just beam us up—no! He came down, and became part of the creation, born of a woman, born under the Law. He came down and saved us, and He will come down again, fully to save.

Some of our hymns are not helping us, but some are preserving us. “Jesus Christ my Sure Defense” (LW #266) is fantastic theology and Christian hope, as is “For All the Saints.” (LW #191). The corrected balance for which this essay is arguing comes to beautiful expression in “Lord, You I Love With All My Heart”: “Then let at last your angels come, to Abram’s bosom bear me home that I may die unfearing. Within my earthen cham-

ber keep my body safe in peaceful sleep until your reappearing. And then from death awaken me, that my own eyes with joy may see, O Son of God, your glorious face, my Savior and my ground of grace! Lord Jesus Christ, oh hear my prayer oh hear my prayer—your love surround me everywhere (LW #413)!" That's hope!

Well, if the interim state isn't the true content of our hope, what can we say about it? We should say what the Bible says. After all, there are a few clear verses of Scripture that teach that the souls of believers are "with Christ" (Phil. 1:23), "with Christ in Paradise" (Luke 23:43), and "away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:9). Much more than this we cannot say, for how can we conceive of an existence without a body?

Contrary to the popular opinion, I know of no direct Biblical evidence that encourages us to think that souls are unaware of the passage of time. There may even be one piece of evidence to the contrary, from Revelation 6:10: "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God...and they cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge and avenge our blood?" How long?

We just do not know much about the interim state. There is a lot of speculation about it, and some of that might be correct. But it is just speculation. We know enough to take comfort for our loved ones who die in the Lord. Yes, blessed are they, for they rest from their labors (Rev. 14:13), and they are praising the Lamb unceasingly. But the final victory is not yet theirs. The full manifestation of final victory is not yet God's in Christ. Not yet.

Even when dealing with our own death or the death of those we love, the word of God, spoken through the apostle Paul, does not direct our attention primarily to the interim state. To the Thessalonians, concerned about fellow Christians who had died before the parousia, Paul said, "the dead in Christ will rise first...comfort one another with *these words*" (1 Thess. 4:13-18). And in the face of his own impending death Paul wrote to Timothy and looked, not toward the condition of his soul after the death of his body, but toward the final victory and coming of Christ!

For I am already being poured out and the time of my being taken up is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have run the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth the crown of righteousness is being stored up for me, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me *on that day*, and not only to me but to all who have loved his appearing (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

#### **IV. The Hope Restored**

If this presentation is at all on target, we have work to do in the church today. Too often our approach to eschatology has focused on refuting error, showing the faults of the dispensationalists and the millennialists. Dispensationalist Tim LaHaye's "Left Behind" series of novels have sold millions of copies in this country. There's work to do, refuting error.

But we have our own *de facto* error to correct, so as to restore true Biblical hope and to set it before the minds and hearts of our people and to live in it ourselves. How shall we do this?

First, gently, pastorally, and patiently. Correcting such a massive misreading of the Scriptures will be like turning an ocean liner; it takes a long time once you've started, and you have to be patient and you can't turn too quickly. So you give it time, and you can let the Bible speak for itself. Because it does speak—over and over and over again. Let the interim state have its rightful place. How shall I think about my dear Christian friends and relatives, whose bodies now sleep in the grave? They are resting from their labors. They are with Christ, at peace, waiting for the last day and the final victory of God. That is enough. But that is not the final victory that awaits us in Christ Jesus.

Second, we'll have to be willing to listen to the groaning, and to take seriously the extent to which this present age is still the evil age. This will mean seriously confronting sin, in our own lives and in the lives of others. This will mean thinking theologically about sickness, and disaster, and death. This will mean being willing to be disturbed, our hearts troubled by the evil that still remains. For the Savior's heart is troubled. It's nothing new; we just need to take seriously the theology of the cross.

Third, we can straightforwardly teach and preach the Biblical hope. Just *read* the Scripture, carefully, taking off the distorted lenses that have obscured the true and full hope of believers. Just read it, looking for the future hope, the focus on Christ's return. It's everywhere and in every document. It won't be hard to find. It's in both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds—"And he will come with glory to judge both the living and the dead.... I look for the resurrection of the dead, and life of the *age to come*...." "From thence he will come to judge the living and the dead.... I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen."

Just do what the Bible does. Point God's people to their true hope, the day of the Lord. In so doing, we will also glorify more fully the present reign of God, the completed work of Christ, the benefits of which we already possess by faith. The end has already drawn near in Jesus Christ. On the cross, under that sky darkened by the judgment of God, above that ground that was rent with an earthquake, our Savior received the final eschatological fate that we by our sins have deserved. How fully has Christ forgiven and justified and redeemed us? So fully that we do not fear the awesome day of His coming—we may long for it as the day of His great

victory for us and for all His creation.

One of the most exciting things about recovering a truly Biblical eschatological framework is the way that every major Christian teaching is sharpened, highlighted, accented, and made even more important by the addition of “end-time” color to the portrait. Let me just suggest that our identity and faith as *Lutherans* should predispose us, among all the children of God, to appreciate and appropriate this eschatological point of view. For Lutherans delight in paradox, in tension, in saying “yes” to two antinomous truths at the same time. Law and Gospel. Old man, new man. Saint and sinner. Divine initiative and human responsibility. May I suggest to you that there is only one reason why such paradoxes exist at all? It is because we live in the tension between the inauguration and beginning of the last days in Christ, and the final consummation of the age in Christ. When Jesus comes again, we won’t need to properly distinguish between Law and Gospel, because all will be received purely as God’s gift. There will be no more tension, no more struggle between the old man and the new, for all will be made completely new. There will be no *peccator* any more. Only *iustus*. But until that time, we live in paradox, we expect paradox—because we were saved...in hope.

Living in hope in this troubled finite world. A recovery of Biblical hope would also call us to reflect a concern for the creation that God Himself has. A Biblical eschatology implies and requires a Biblical theology of creation. It’s the bigger picture. Our love and concern in Christ can reach out to the wider issues of society, to poverty, to illness, to addiction and all forms of abuse. Jesus’s ministry of the reign of God meant healing, and exorcisms, salvation for the whole person. May we not find application here for our ministry as well, so that the Gospel of the kingdom that we preach may be accompanied by the desire to bring relief to those who suffer the effects of death and sin? I’ve been told that the committee working on the new hymnal has discussed the possibility of a liturgy for a service of healing. That’s good theology; one day, Christ will come and heal our diseases forever. Perhaps, in gracious answer to the prayers of His people, He will give an anticipation of that healing now in the present evil age.

Regaining true Biblical hope will also mean, I suspect, a renewed desire and commitment to the mission of the church. For living in hope means that we understand not primarily “where” we are living—“down” as opposed to “up.” Rather, Biblical hope teaches us “when” we are living, in the “now” time, during the overlap of the ages, after our Lord’s eschatological resurrection victory and before His final return in glory. During this time, He has given us something to do: “Make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that He has commanded us.” And look! In that mission endeavor He is with us always—even to the consummation of the age.



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