

Blessed with Hope – Hope for Today and for Eternity

Hope of Ancient Christians

Wednesday 21 April 2021

6:30 PM-8:00 PM

Opening Prayer

Background

What we know as Christianity today began in Jerusalem as a small sect of Judaism. As such, its initial religious, cultural, and intellectual traditions were based on Second Temple Judaism, including worship at the Temple. The early members of the Jesus Movement in Jerusalem believed in adhering to the Law of Moses.

What distinguished them from other Jewish sects was their belief that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. The vast majority of Jews did not accept Jesus as the Christ. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, they expected him to quickly return triumphantly from heaven with his heavenly army to defeat the armies of the earth and restore Israel, under his leadership, as the most powerful kingdom in the world. They believed initially that the new kingdom was only for Jews, but later accepted Gentiles. This new kingdom would be endless, and would be known as the Kingdom of God. The citizens would have eternal life.

At some point early during this period, a devout Pharisee, Paul of Tarsus, was visiting Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost. He became familiar with the Jesus Movement and did not like what he saw. He determined to extinguish it with the help of the Jewish religious leaders. During a trip to Damascus, Syria, he

underwent a mysterious conversion to the Jesus Movement and afterwards became one of its major leaders.

Paul's message varied from the message of the Jerusalem leaders. He said that strict obedience to the Law of Moses was not required of converts to the Jesus Movement. Paul taught that they must only have faith in Jesus to be saved from sin. He taught that Jesus had come into the world to save both Jews and Gentiles, and that Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to be saved. For Paul, the Kingdom of God was more than a restored and exalted Israel. It appears to consist of a joining with Jesus of both the resurrected and the living forever on some other plane.

Eventually, the Jerusalem Jesus Movement faded. Pauline Christianity became the dominant form throughout the world.

Questions to Consider

1. How do you explain the persistence of Pauline Christianity and the fading of the Jerusalem Jesus Movement?
2. What was the hope of the Jerusalem church?
3. What was the hope of the Pauline church?
4. The belief of Christians in ancient times might have been that in the end the incompleteness of their experience of God would be brought to completion, and all wrongs would be made right. How does this relate to hope?
5. How might these original Christians have reacted to the dawning reality that Jesus was not quickly returning?
6. How do you think the Christians lived during this period of waiting for the return of Jesus? What would an ordinary week have been like? Do they provide lessons for us?

Closing Prayer