

## **Blessed with Hope – Hope for Today and for Eternity**

### **Ultimate Hope**

**Wednesday 19 May 2021**

**6:30 PM-8:00 PM**

#### **Opening Prayer**

#### **Background**

Tonight, we attempt to address issues in ninety minutes that would take perhaps months to address fully. This will be only a brief overview. Over the past five sessions we have discussed a variety of understandings of the meaning of hope. In this final session, we will see that our concept of Christian hope in the modern church is weak, flawed, and confused. We will see that the original concept of hope in the church was quite different from what we think today.

The Nicene Creed is our statement of faith, in which we affirm what we believe. We pray it regularly. In the Creed, we say we believe that, “On the third day he (Jesus) rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” We go on to profess that, “He (Jesus) will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” We further affirm that, “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”

These are the classic Christian beliefs, based on the New Testament.

But what do we understand the return of Jesus to mean, and what happens when he returns? We declare every Sunday and many times during the week that we believe in “the resurrection of the body.” But do we really believe what we say, and what does it mean?

In this session, we explore what these words that we pray so often really mean and whether we believe what we say.

Some ninety years after Jesus was last seen on earth, many church members had come to doubt that he would actually return as promised and were leaving the Jesus Movement. In actuality, the belief in the imminent return of Jesus had been growing weaker for decades. The writer of 2 Peter addressed this crisis with these words.

*“But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn’t really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.” 2 Peter 3:8-9*

Today, members of the Movement, which has now persisted for over two thousand years, still ask if Jesus will actually return, and if so when, and what will that return be like.

Most Christians today if asked what the ultimate hope is would say that it is to go to heaven when we die. Going to heaven has become the goal of most modern Christians if they believe in life after death. Many will say that they work to be good so that they will be eligible to go to heaven, even though we are not saved by works.

Going off to heaven is not, however, the ultimate Christian hope. Neither is the return of Jesus by itself the ultimate hope. What Christians from

ancient times up to today hope for is the return of Jesus who will make all things new, who will restore all creation to oneness with God, bring about our resurrection, and rid the world of evil. We do not fly off to heaven. Heaven and creation are finally reunited. Creation does not go seeking God. God comes to creation.

As long as we place our Christian hope in “going to heaven,” and see a salvation that is essentially away from this world, we will fail to truly follow the direction of Jesus to do our part to change, rescue, and transform this world that we have so damaged by sin. And we will also fail to appreciate the ultimate hope.

*“But if the Christian hope is for God’s new creation, for ‘new heavens and new earth,’ and if that hope has already come to life in Jesus of Nazareth, then there is every reason to join the two.... together. And if that is so, we find that answering the one is also answering the other. I find that to many—not least, many Christians—all this comes as a surprise: both that the Christian hope is surprisingly different from what they had assumed and that this same hope offers a coherent and energizing basis for work in today’s world.”*

*Wright, N. T.. Surprised by Hope (p. 5). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.*

## **Death and Afterlife**

Let’s first look at what we believe about death. There are essentially three common beliefs about what happens to people after death.

A belief that has existed since ancient times is that of complete annihilation. Once you die, everything goes dark. That is the end. There is nothing else. A growing belief in Western societies is in some form of New Age reincarnation, in which the person comes back to life as some

other person or creature. This is believed to go on and on. So, it can be viewed as a sort of everlasting life. The final belief is that after a person dies their soul goes away from the earth to a place called heaven, while the body decomposes.

None of this is actually consistent with New Testament biblical teaching.

*“It comes as something of a shock, in fact, when people are told what is in fact the case: that there is very little in the Bible about “going to heaven when you die” and not a lot about a postmortemhell either. The medieval pictures of heaven and hell, boosted though not created by Dante’s classic work, have exercised a huge influence on Western Christian imagination.”*

*Wright, N. T.. Surprised by Hope. HarperOne. Kindle Edition.*

The Kingdom of God, or Kingdom of Heaven, in the teaching of Jesus is not a place where dead people go. It is not an escape destination from this world. Rather, the Kingdom of God refers to God’s reign. In our case, the will of God coming “on earth as it is in heaven.” Heaven is the God dimension, if you will, and we look forward to the joining of that dimension with ours.

*But faith’s way of getting right with God says, “Don’t say in your heart, ‘Who will go up to heaven?’ (to bring Christ down to earth). Romans 10:6*  
Christ will come in his own time of his own will.

The ancient Christian future hope centered on resurrection as an essential component of God’s restorative process. The ancients spoke of resurrection of the dead, as a two-step process in which resurrection, meaning new bodily life, would be preceded by an interim period of bodily death. Resurrection means bodies not disembodied souls.

## God's Plan

In modern Western thought, there are now a variety of ways of looking at the future of the world. Two major ones are “progress” and Christian salvation.

The myth of progress. Many people in the Western world, especially politicians and secular observers, promote this myth that humanity is on a continuous path of never-ending improvements. We are making the world better by our own efforts and will one day achieve a human utopia. The problem with the myth of progress is that it is a hollow materialistic vision and cannot address the continuing reality of human evil, even after centuries of “progress.” This myth will never achieve its imagined perfection. People are not actually in control of anything, even themselves.

Christian Salvation. Christianity asserts that God loves creation and is in the process of restoring it to its right relationship with its creator. Humans are called to be God's workers on earth in part of this process. God has begun this process in the life teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and intends to extend a similar restoration to the entire cosmos. God is in control, not humanity.

## God's Dimension and Bringing Together Heaven and Earth

We now come to the most magnificent image of new creation, of cosmic renewal, in the entire Bible.

*“And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.”*

*Ephesians 1:10*

What is foreseen in this passage is what Isaiah foresaw: a new heaven and a new earth replacing the old heaven and the old earth, which were bound up in decay and human vanity and evil.

*The final coming together of heaven and earth is, of course, God's supreme act of new creation...But what we can and must do in the present, if we are obedient to the gospel, if we are following Jesus, and if the Spirit dwells in us, energizes us, and directs us, is to build for the kingdom. Justice – Beauty – Evangelism (Bringing Good News & Hope)*

*Paraphrase - Wright, N. T.. Surprised by Hope. HarperOne. Kindle Edition.*

*“And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent?” Romans 10:15*

## **Judgment**

We will not explore judgment in this discussion except to say that it is clearly laid out as part of the biblical teaching. Universalism cannot avoid it. This may be a topic of a future discussion.

### **Questions to Consider**

1. Prior to this course, did you ever consider the ultimate Christian hope? What did it mean to you at that time?
2. Does 2 Peter 3:8-9 seem believable to you?
3. *“But tell me this—since we preach that Christ rose from the dead, why are some of you saying there will be no resurrection of the dead? For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave.” 1 Corinthians 15:12-15*

*There are also bodies in the heavens and bodies on the earth. The glory of the heavenly bodies is different from the glory of the earthly bodies. The sun has*

*one kind of glory, while the moon and stars each have another kind. And even the stars differ from each other in their glory.*

*It is the same way with the resurrection of the dead. Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever. Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength. They are buried as natural human bodies, but they will be raised as spiritual bodies. For just as there are natural bodies, there are also spiritual bodies. 1 Corinthians 15:40-44*

How do you interpret Paul's statements above?

4. Do you really believe what we say in the Nicene Creed, and, if so, what do those words mean to you?
5. What do you understand the return of Jesus to mean? Does it concern you that it has not yet happened?
6. Do you believe in a renewed creation in which evil is defeated? Do you hope for it?
7. If we do not believe what we say in our creeds, why do we continue to profess Christianity? No pressure. Be honest.
8. How should we be working for the Kingdom of God on earth?

## **Closing Prayer**