

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING

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Resources for Christ-Centered Discipleship

Certain key words are connected with Christianity. One of those words is *hope*. Hope is important in the Bible, and it's important in life. David Aikman worked for more than twenty years as a respected journalist, but a few years ago he took some time off and wrote a book titled *Hope the Heart's Great Quest*. Through extensive study and interaction with people from many backgrounds he came to the conclusion that every human heart literally yearns for hope. He also said that there is a special connection between hope and Christian faith.

What is hope in the Christian faith? In the Scriptures, it is a kind of confidence in the future that lifts your spirits right now. That's the biblical picture of hope. Hope is the lifting of your spirits now because you see, with the eyes of faith, the certainty and goodness of your future in light of God's promise.

This kind of hope is so much a part of the Christian message that the Apostles' Creed, the oldest formal summary of Christian faith in existence, ends on the theme of hope followed by a final affirmation of confidence. It says, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen."

What we have in the Apostles' Creed is a concise but good statement of what is at the heart of Christian hope.

The Promise of Christian Hope Is the Promise of the Resurrection of the Body and Life Everlasting

That's what Jesus said in John 6:40. "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." The best way to understand the promise of the Christian hope is to look at the whole picture of what the Bible tells us about life beyond this world for believers in Jesus Christ.

The Bible Promises That When You Die As a Christian, Your Spirit, Your Inner Person, Leaves Your Body and Enters the Presence of God

Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

In Philippians 1:23, Paul says, "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."

Second Corinthians 5:6-9: "Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it."

Paul says that departing this life to be with Christ "is very much better" (Philippians 1:23) and that he would "prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). Notice also that being in heaven with the Lord is referred to as being "at home." One of the things that will make heaven so great is that we will know and feel that we are in our true home.

Here's the interesting thing. Even though when you die your spirit is at home with the Lord, in His presence in heaven, that is not all that God has promised.

The Bible Promises the Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting

The promise of the resurrection is the promise that just as God has renewed our spirits so that at death they are sinless, He will renew our bodies at the Second Coming so that they are glorious. The Christian hope and confession is not just the immortality of the soul but also the resurrection of the body.

What that means is that the Christian hope is not just an ethereal, ghostlike experience in a distant and purely spiritual heaven. It is the whole person raised to a whole new and complete existence in a powerfully transformed body.

Listen to how Scripture speaks about the resurrection of the body. "But someone may ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?' How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body (1 Corinthians 15:35-38).

Paul says there is going to be a link between our present body and our resurrected body just as there is a link between a seed and the plant that grows from it. A huge, beautiful oak tree can grow from a small acorn. The whole tree is linked to the acorn, but it is dramatically different from the acorn. A tree is the result of a seed's being transformed into something bigger and better, with greater capacities and qualities. In the same way the resurrection is the transformation of the body in which we now live into something better, with far greater qualities and capacities.

First Corinthians 15:42-44 continues: "So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body."

Notice that the Scripture says our current bodies are weak, perishable, unglorified, and natural. But in the resurrection state they will be imperishable, powerful, spiritual, and glorious.

Our resurrected bodies will be imperishable. They will not get sick or injured. They will not age or die.

Our resurrected bodies will be powerful. They will not be vulnerable to stress, fatigue, or weakness.

C.S. Lewis once said that, when you are just learning to ride, they give you unimpressive horses to ride on. Only when you are ready for it are you allowed an animal that will gallop and jump. (Cited by J. I. Packer, *I Want to Be a Christian*, 96).

Our resurrected bodies will be spiritual. They won't be natural, fragile bodies that are prone to physical needs and desires that can be exploited by sin and temptation. They will be instruments for the Spirit and fully responsive to the Spirit.

Our resurrected bodies will be glorious. Theologian Wayne Grudem comments on this truth:

This term suggests that there will also be a kind of brightness or radiance surrounding our bodies that will be an appropriate outward evidence of the position of exaltation and rule over all creation that God has given us. This is also suggested in Matthew 13:43, where Jesus says, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." Similarly, we read in Daniel's vision, "And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever" (Daniel 12:3; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 833).

The Christian Hope Is More Realistic Than the World's Hopes and More Optimistic Than the World's Hopes

I first heard this pointed out by a professor named Tim Keller. He used the following analogy.

A couple of years ago there was a small controversy going on between two men in wheelchairs. Christopher Reeve was the former film star who had suffered a terrible tragedy. His spinal cord had been severed, and he was in a wheelchair. Until his death, his whole focus was on getting a cure.

One year he did a Super Bowl commercial in which, through special effects, he was shown walking. He said the reason he did it was to counter a problem the disabled had. He said their biggest problem was people in wheelchairs thinking, "OK, I'm going to spend the rest of my life here." He believed it's wrong to think that way and said the only way he could have any hope was if he was sure that

one day he would be cured through medicine and would walk again. That was his hope.

But a man who is also in a wheelchair wrote an article on the back page of *Time* magazine about this. His name is Charles Krauthammer. He has been in a wheelchair since he suffered a spinal cord injury as a twenty-two year old medical school student. He is also paralyzed. This is what he says:

His propaganda undermines those, particularly the young and newly injured, who are struggling to face reality, master and make a life for themselves in their wheelchairs. He says their problem is that they don't dream enough about getting out of them. I believe the problem is that some dream too much about it.

Krauthammer believes Reeve's view to be "false optimism and psychologically harmful."

He says, "You can have a job, and a life, and a career, but you have to start with the acceptance and reality that Reeve was so determined to undermine."

I'm not in a wheelchair. I don't know what that is like. But we can talk about the positions that these men represent. One is saying to the other, "Your hope is too pessimistic. I couldn't live with that hope. It doesn't work." But the other person is saying, "Your hope is too unrealistic. It doesn't work." So the question is how do you get a hope that is both realistic enough and optimistic enough to inspire endurance through the hardness of life.

The Christian answer is the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. This is the hope that is more optimistic than the greatest human optimism and more realistic than the greatest human pessimism. To the person who says, "I'll never be cured, my body is broken," the Christian message at first sounds even more negative.

The Christian message says it's not just your body that is broken. It's not just your legs that are disabled. It's your heart and mind and emotions and will. You are lost and under the curse of sin. But here's what you need to know and believe: God sent His Son to be broken for you. Jesus said, "This is my body which is broken for you." Jesus offered Himself to be broken body and soul for you on the cross. He died to pay for the sins of your spiritual brokenness. If you will accept that and receive Him, He will not only forgive your sins and renew your spirit through a new birth, but He will promise you resurrection and transformation of your body and life everlasting in the new heavens and the new earth.

That means that one day, through the redemption that He offers, you will not only rise and walk but also run and jump and dance with joy for ever and ever. If you are a Christian in a wheelchair, you can say, "I know I *will* walk again." Not in the

way that Christopher Reeve meant but in a manner more realistic and more optimistic. You won't just walk. You will be transformed, renewed, glorified, and it won't be just for a while; it will be for a life everlasting.

You don't have to say either of the things that most people say: "I know I won't be healed," or, "I know I will be healed." You can say, "I know God's love in Christ, and I know God hears my prayers in this life. He may bring healing here and now or in eternity, when I am resurrected and renewed. I don't know when it will come, but I know that it will come. I know because of Jesus Christ, His life and words, the witness of the Scriptures, the power of His resurrection, and the promise of my resurrection.

You don't have to be in a wheelchair for this to mean something to you. It means life-giving hope for all of us.

The book of Revelation gives a beautiful picture of our hope. It's not just that we are taken out of the earth and into heaven but that, in the end, when the resurrection of the body and life everlasting fully come, heaven itself comes down and there is a new heaven and a new and renewed earth. The old passes away, and it's the beginning of a whole new order of existence and a real but radically renewed and glorified world.

In the Bible God uses both plainspoken promises and fantastic, dramatic visions to communicate the nature of our hope as Christians. He wants us to understand and believe in this hope He promises us.

The Power of the Christian Hope Is Power to Inspire

Incredible Strength and Endurance

The Bible often talks about the power of hope. First Thessalonians 1:3 says that endurance in life is inspired by hope. Hebrews 6:19 says that hope is an anchor for the soul that is firm and secure.

The Christian Hope Is Powerful Even in the Worst of Human Circumstances

One way to see the power of the Christian hope is to reflect on the power and purpose of the book of Revelation in the Bible.

Look at Revelation 21:3-5. "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'

Now, because the book of Revelation has so often been studied as a revelation of mysteries that surround the end of history, we sometimes forget that it was also written in history to actually help a particular group of people face huge hardships.

There are a couple of views on the date of Revelation, but scholars agree that the people to whom it was written were facing a season of intense persecution. Look at all the things that are mentioned in 21:4: tears, death, mourning, crying, pain.

The people to whom Revelation was first given were about to face a time in history filled with more tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain than most of us will ever see. What did God give them through the apostle John to help them endure the hardships they would face? He gave them this hope that is at the heart of the promises of the book of Revelation: the hope of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, when every tear will be wiped away and there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain.

One of the lessons of the entire Bible, and Revelation in particular, is that you can find great strength to face very difficult situations in this life when you have a God-given hope for the future in which you truly believe. It's a fact of history that this future hope gave the early Christians incredible strength and courage in the face of great hardships and challenges.

The Christian Hope Is Powerful Because What We Face in Life

Cannot Be Compared with What God Promises Us in Christ

In Romans 8:18-21 the apostle Paul says: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."

Throughout this passage there is a sharp contrast developed. On the one hand you've got *suffering, frustration, bondage, decay, groaning, and pain*. On the other hand you have *glory, eager expectation, the revelation of the sons of God, hope, liberation, and glorious freedom*. The Bible clearly tells us that the future glory will far surpass in every way any suffering in this present life. Verse 18 reads: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

I once heard a pastor give an interesting illustration of this principle. He invited his listeners to imagine two different people who have the very same job. They work in the same place. They have the same job description, situation, and

conditions. Now in this job they are working eighty hours a week. The work is boring but hard. There are no vacations for the whole year. They have about a half day off every week. The co-workers, all of them are idiots. But the first person is told that at the end of the year he will be paid \$15,000. The second person is told that at the end of the year he will be paid \$15,000,000.

So they both go to work, and you know what? They face the same situations very differently. They are basically the same people. But after three weeks the first person is saying, "I can't bear this. It's too much." The second person is saying, "I can take this, it's worth it. Boring, but I can handle it. Difficult people, no problem. It's worth it." The first person says, "It's too much." The second person says, "No problem." Why? It has nothing to do with the present. It has everything to do with the future. They are completely influenced by their future hope. (From a taped message by Dr. Timothy Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, titled *The Amazing End of History*. www.redeemer.com).

That's a pretty earthy comparison, but the principle is still true. When you have great hope you can face huge hardships. It makes you wonder if we modern Western Christians have so much in the here and now that we have not fully developed our hearts' hope for the greater promises that are given in Scripture.

God wants us not just to confess this hope as true but to actually bring this hope into the very center of our lives so that it shapes us, empowers our endurance, and inspires our devotion.

Some say they believe in Christ, believe in the Scripture, and believe in the reality of this Christian hope, but they act as if this life and the little bit they carve out of it is all they have or ever will have. They are afraid to obey God when it looks as if obeying might cost them, money, friends, pleasure, experiences, status, or anything else. They are afraid to endure hardships and stand firm in difficult situations.

Often people without a living hope do not think of themselves as without hope. They just think of themselves as simply being practical and realistic. But what they are doing or refusing to do only seems practical and realistic, because they do not have a living hope that reaches beyond this world. We need this hope. It is this hope that inspires the endurance and commitment we need to follow Christ in this life.

Who gets to claim this hope? It is just for the very good? No. Look at verses 5 and 6: "He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.'"

The “water of life” is without cost because Christ paid the price. He died for our sins and rose from the dead for our redemption. All we have to do, all we *can* do, to experience the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting is receive Him as Lord and Savior. What an incredible gift we are offered and given in Christ.

If you haven't come to Him, come now and receive the gift of everlasting life. If you have received that gift, let the power of your future hope inspire your endurance throughout your life.

The testimony of the Scriptures, the witness of the Holy Spirit, and the resurrection of Jesus, all of these show us that we have a hope in which we can trust, but we have to choose to live in this hope.