

Dreams

Christ and No More | Ch. 2

It is remarkable the degree of influence which the future plays on the present. So many decisions are made on the basis of a possible outcome. Stocks are bought and sold with an eye to what may be. And your current state of mind rests comfortably or uncomfortably on what you suspect awaits you in the week to come.

The ancient orator Cicero illustrated the power of the future when he spoke of Damocles. An Italian courtier, Damocles was granted to sit upon the throne of the king with one stipulation—a dagger would be hung above his head, point down, suspended by nothing but a single strand of hair from a horse's tail. Damocles eventually surrendered up all the wealth and authority of kingship; it isn't worth having everything in the present if you are certain to lose it in the uncertain future. A mere thought of the future pressed the courtier to give away a crown!

There are other forces with the strength to dethrone monarchs, like love or loyalty. But what surprises us about the might of the future is that the future, for all our intents and purposes, does not yet exist. A man may empty his bank account because of his love for a girlfriend—we may question his wisdom, but at least it is something real that propels him. There is an actual girlfriend. But the man who empties his bank account to protect himself from a possible apocalypse is wagering everything on something that does not exist. The apocalypse he imagines is an imagination. He swings his fists with all his fervor against the wind; he is tired from the exertion, but he has not struck anything substantial. "Anxiety," observed Spurgeon, "does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows, but only empties today of its strength."

This is the bad side of future-facing thoughts; I do not want to stay here. I am more interested just now in the good side of them. As imagination may deplete a woman, so it may fill her up. Consider your own tendencies and you will find my claim true to life: for example, think of some event you honestly enjoy, either an evening with your family or a vacation to Florida or a weekend or something else. You may be burdened by the care of your responsibilities and feel ground down by the monotony of your schedule, yet when the happy event approaches—when it is one week, then one day away—what happens to your mood? It improves. I know some people whose state of mind shifts when they begin to discuss dinner arrangements. The thought of future happiness, in fact, can lift that final pre-vacation day into the lower parts of heaven—even if the day is difficult!

The contractor may Friday be cooking on a surface of black shingles, back aching as he nails them down, but if his mind is on the vacation

that begins Saturday he can smile down the physical pain. He can laugh at the irony of his equipment sliding off the roof's edge. How powerful this future that does not yet exist! But the *thought* of this non-existent future exists, and the thought animates and brightens the present.

The Bible has a precise term for such enlivening thoughts about a happy future: hope. It is easy to assume (as assuming always is) that hope is a matter of the future; we throw hope as far as we can into an unseen eternity and think we will have no use for it until we reach it again. But hope, though it has its eyes on the future, stands right here, where we are, in the now. Hope is a force for today, even if it is a thought about tomorrow.

And if we desire to find in Christ all we need today, we must realize that a solid part of our enjoying him comes to us in the cup of hope. The blasé of our day-to-day parchedness is quenched by Christ, yes—but how? In what way do we take Christ in, so to speak? And one answer to that question is that we drink him in by lifting the cup of hope to our mouths. The critic who responds, “Yes, yes, pie in the sky by and by—you Christians are so heavenly minded that you’re no earthly good,” that critic knows very little about hope. For hope, as we have said, is one of the mightiest forces in the world. Give the world bread and circuses and you can restrain it; but give it hope and you can turn it upside down. That is the lesson the Roman Empire learned at the dawn of Christianity; may we learn it too.

Christ in the future

But what does it mean to drink the cup of hope? Before I give an answer I give an example of one group who really did drink that cup. Peter wrote of them by writing to them: “Though you do not now see him [that is, Christ], you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.”¹ They gulp down the honeyed nectar and their eyes beam more brightly than Jonathan’s. Some might say this inexpressible joy comes only from their love for Jesus, for that is mentioned just before—very well. But love longs to be with the beloved. It is at least as likely that their joy is budding in the soil of a hope in Christ’s return, for that is found before and after.

Before, Peter had been saying that his readers’ suffering refines their faith so that one day, “at the revelation of Jesus Christ,” their refined faith might glimmer like pure gold. “In this,” Peter writes, “you rejoice.”² They rejoice at the thought of Christ in the future, coming to vindicate all their woes. After our text, Peter says that the believers obtain as the outcome of their faith the salvation of their souls. And this salvation, prophesied long ago, is a future salvation—a “grace that will be brought

¹ 1 Pet. 1:8 (ESV).

² V. 6.

to [them] at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”³ They are to set their hope fully on this grace, this salvation, this future that begins when Jesus is revealed to the world. They believe in Jesus and in his return, and therefore they rejoice. And since hope is faith looking forward, we may rephrase our claim: They *hope in Jesus* and therefore they rejoice.

That is the subject of this chapter: the powerful joy that happens when you hope in Jesus. Peter calls it a joy that cannot be expressed—and here I am, trying to express it! But Peter did the same when he followed with “and full of glory.” Just know that I will not express this joy as it deserves; I will not show you the whole picture. Whatever joy we see in this chapter, it will be far less than what there is to see. Very good! But we can dip our toes in the shallow end at least—or to return to our previous metaphor, we can sip.

The death of dreams

Now, if you want to know the strength of any hope, you must set it on fire. You will never know the strength of a bodybuilder by watching him lift pillows; he must be given an almost unbearable weight to bench press. A soldier’s quality is not proven in the barracks but in the battle. Hope must be put in the line of fire, must be made to tear its muscles, if we are to discover its strength.

And since hope produces joy in the hoper, the best test of a hope is this: burn away the joy of other hopes, and see how much joy remains. You cannot know how much of a happy Christian’s happiness comes from the common hopes of mankind—hope in pleasure and honor in this world—and how much comes from hope in Christ, until you have removed the worldly variables and isolated the heavenly.

What is really necessary is what we might call the death of dreams. The Bible calls these deaths trials. You can take my own case as an example—pastoring lends itself to certain joys and sorrows, just like your occupation and place in life does. One pleasure peculiar to pastoring is a degree of honor, conferred in part because I am visible to many (which is of course what opens me to unusual dishonor as well). The honor is not bad and need not be wrong: “elders who rule well” are, in Paul’s words, “worthy of double honor.”⁴

In my heart therefore, in many of my labors, I have an expectation of honor that makes my job a joy. So if joy is a measure of my hope, how will I know which hope my joy is coming from? What if I only think I am hoping in Christ and finding my joy from that hope, but really my happiness comes from my hope in honor? A good God, given this circumstance, will set fire to my hopes; he will kill my dreams. He takes

³ V. 13.

⁴ 1 Tim. 5:17.

no delight in the death of a dream or the suffering it causes, but he is too kind to let any of his people continue on in a delusional joy, one rooted not in Christ but in something else.

I am reminded of a profound chorus I heard in a Relient K song, that well expresses this attitude in God:

You said, "I know that this will hurt,
But if I don't break your heart things will just get worse.
If the burden seems too much to bear, remember,
The end will justify the pain it took to get us there."⁵

For me, though I enjoy honor, my soul is benefitted more by dishonor and slander, by misunderstanding and failures made public, than by honor. If Christ never let me be humiliated, if he never stripped me of honor, how would I know the state of my heart? When Christ is seen, torch in hand, walking among the dry bushels of your hopes, do not be alarmed. He means as much good as the doctor who cuts your skin to remove cancer. The fire, the trial, must come to clear away your other hopes and show you if you have an authentic hope in Christ that can resist the firestorm.

Another line from another song, this time by Beautiful Eulogy, comes to mind: "What's concealed in the heart of having is revealed in the losing of things."⁶ The death of dreams is not an end in itself; God is not cruel or sadistic. He has a better purpose in his use of fire. When he led Israel through the wilderness for forty years he fed them manna, a kind of bread from heaven, every day. He could have given them a feast full of all the meats they craved—but he didn't. He set fire to their hope in pleasurable foods, their hope in creature comforts. And this, Moses tells them at the end of their trek, he did "that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart."⁷ Did they look to the water that came from the rock, or did they look to the spiritual Rock itself, which was Christ?⁸

Think back to the readers of Peter's letter before.

In this you rejoice, [he wrote,] though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials"—and why would trials be necessary?—"so that the tested genuineness of your faith [or we might say future-facing faith, which is hope]—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by

⁵ Relient K, "Let It All Out," *Mmhmm*, Gotee Records (Nov. 2, 2004).

⁶ Beautiful Eulogy, "If...," *Worthy*, Humble Beast (Oct. 20, 2017).

⁷ Deut. 8:2.

⁸ 1 Cor. 10:4.

fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.⁹

You may now be living through the death of dreams. Hopes for yourself, or for your spouse or children, hopes for your country are disintegrating in your hands. A blaze consumes one expectation after another, driven by a favorable wind from God; and you may be sitting now somewhat like Job, alone and scratching your boils with a potsherd.

God's providence may be frowning in an inexpressibly ugly manner—death of a loved one may be the death of a dream you are feeling now. You had hopes of more time together, and that hope has burnt up. Life without that hope may feel gray and meaningless, yet that is precisely what God wants you to feel at present. You have been curling a barbell with improper form, using your back and legs to hoist the weight when you should have been using only your arms. Now your form is right, the other muscles taken out of the lift, and you notice that your biceps burn in a way they did not burn before. Your other supports have gone, and now you are in the position to strengthen the one hope that cannot fail—namely, hope in Christ.

The life of a dream

I have already observed that hope is a force in the present, since the future does not yet exist. Hope is a thought, right now, about something expected later, and so the thought, being now, gives light and energy now. I have also said that hope gives more light and energy than almost anything else. We act on our expectations. We are moved by vision or by fear of the future.

If hope is one of the world's most influential forces, then what can we say of the hope that is the greatest of all the hopes? I will tell you what we can say of it: "inexpressible and full of glory." I will not say that hope in Christ is the greatest motivator among men and women—there is one force equal, if not greater, and we will consider that force next chapter. But even that force is incomplete without this one. It is safe to say that whatever you think of hope in Christ, you think too little of it. We have considered the death of other dreams; now we must consider that one great dream for which they all must die.

The best display of the joy that comes from this great hope in Christ can be seen in the martyr's face. Physical death is the death of all, or nearly all, of our dreams in this life. If you die, you cannot expect to taste the pleasures of this world again; you do not hope, when you stand before the executioner's blade, to become rich, or to spend much time around a table with children and grandchildren. Your hope in these good things all burn up together when death approaches.

⁹ 1 Pet. 1:6-7.

And when these hopes burn up, and only hope in Christ remains, what joy can there be? All the martyrs, past and present, join their voices to answer: “a joy inexpressible and full of glory!” See Stephen gazing into heaven, granted a foretaste of glory divine. As the stones that will end his life are flying toward him, he does not look at them. He sees in the sky Christ, standing at the right hand of God, and he cries out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”¹⁰ No doubt he shares the sentiment of Paul: “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”¹¹ Bring the stones! When Stephen’s other hopes are ashes, the only hope left shimmers with a glorious joy amidst the black mounds.

Turn your eyes to the Colosseum of Rome, one of the portals to heaven for the early church. “Reproach Christ,” comes the voice of the Roman Proconsul, “and I will set you free.” There before the crowds in the arena’s middle is Polycarp, at age eighty six. The Proconsul threatens him with wild beasts, and the old man replies, “It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil. I will be glad though to be changed from evil to righteousness.”¹² This he said well, since he would soon turn from whatever remnant of evil he harbored in the flesh and enjoy the righteousness of heaven.

Look again and now Perpetua and her companions are in the arena. Aged twenty two and a new mother, her father had pled with her on the basis of every other hope he could summon. “Daughter,” he begged, “have pity on my grey head...Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child...” While she and her companions were on trial her father appeared again, holding her infant son, and urged her to repent and be set free. She refused. And in her journal she etched these words, “Then Hilarianus [the governor] passed sentence on all of us: we were condemned to the beasts, and we returned to prison *in high spirits*.”¹³

The joy in the aged Polycarp and in the young Perpetua is enough of a happiness to support the whole motivational center of the person. Imagine for a moment the life of Polycarp before his death, at age eighty five. His hope was a martyr’s hope, even before he was a martyr. If Polycarp had built his happiness upon family, if he was the patriarch in a tribe full of glad children and grandchildren and if he derived his joy from that fact, his joy would be mortal. As soon as the decree of death was given, his joy would have died with it. If Perpetua, at age twenty one, wanted no more than a calm environment and the fresh joys of romantic love, how horribly her heart would ache at her death

¹⁰ Acts 7:59.

¹¹ Phil. 1:23.

¹² “#103: Polycarp’s Martyrdom,” *ChristianHistoryInstitute.org*, Christian History Institute (accessed May 26, 2018).

¹³ “The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas,” *PBS.org*, Public Broadcasting Service (April 1998; accessed May 26, 2018); emphasis mine.

sentence. But her heart did not ache in that way. She heard the sentence and then left the forum in high spirits.

Hope in Christ produces a joy that cannot die, even when you must. The death of your dreams does not need to be the death of all your dreams, for one dream can survive the fire. The death of dreams is, for the Christian, a short prelude to the growth and dominance of one dream, and that dream is to be with Christ. He may come to earth and take us to himself, to which our hope cries, “Come quickly, Lord Jesus!” Or we may die and depart these bodies to be with him, to which we say, “Bring out the lion!” Either way we are with him, which is much better than the alternatives.

A beatific preview

We have been speaking much about hope in Christ, but we have not made clear what it means to hope in Christ. What, specifically, are we hoping in. With what space remains in this chapter, I want to paint for you what we who hope in Christ are hoping for. I will add some creative inferences, but none too extreme.

Let us say that today is the last you will experience in this world, and that by some means your life will end in the early hours of tomorrow. You come to consciousness and notice first that you feel no discomfort whatsoever. Your lower back and your neck have never felt this at ease; you had become so accustomed to the low-grade pains of your body that you forgot they were there. But now you remember, and they are only memories.

Another relief is present—you feel no fear. The slight tension in your gut is gone and you, for the first time in your adult life, have a mind void of anxiety. You cannot fear or fret; your soul is light and never can be heavy again. You realize that you have tasted your final sorrow and never will taste that bitter herb anew. The thought of pains and problems banished forever, of an existence that cannot know a single grief again, is almost too happy a thought. But there is no pessimism to dampen your joy; things are not too good to be true. They are true.

And then you see him. Of course you believed in him much of your life, but it is different to see him. You search your soul and cannot find a doubt left; and you realize you will never doubt again. The first thing you notice about him is that he is smiling—at you. Remember how many days you wondered if you were pleasing him; remember how many nights the enemy of your soul oppressed you with suggestions of your Lord’s displeasure? The suggestions have been silenced.

This man is not far away, but standing just before you. How could he have the time to attend to you alone? But he does. And for a few eternal seconds you just look into his eyes. They are friendly eyes. You

did not think, in your earthly life, that you could ever meet his eyes—how many times you failed him! Yes, you knew the gospel and the promise of God’s favor, but still you did not dream that his friendly eyes would really be smiling at you. And now here you stand, just looking and being looked at.

On earth you occupied so small a place and always felt like a grain upon the seashore—that’s what you are and always will be! But you, the tiny grain, are looking into the face of God. You are not afraid, for perfect love has cast out fear, and all you feel is the most delighted wonder, the freest sense of comfort, and the gentle warmth of his blanketing love. This is nothing less than the beatific vision. And you have only seen it for the first fifteen seconds of forever.

If you have an intermediate body, tears well in your eyes. It cannot be, but it is. The songs and the suffering, the many conflicts of the Christian life, the sermons you sat under and the precious, and parched, times in prayer and the word on earth were all leading to this point. Every other hope is gone and good riddance, and that one immortal hope that was planted on the day you trusted in this Savior, which grew over the course of your life, has finally blossomed from its bud. You are experiencing the ultimate end of human life, of your life. And it is only the beginning.

C. S. Lewis captured something of this experience at the very end of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. The children who are the main characters in the books die suddenly in a train wreck and find themselves in Aslan’s country, speaking to Aslan the lion himself.

Lewis concludes his book, and I conclude this chapter, with his description of that scene.

And as [Aslan] spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.¹⁴

This is what we hope for when we hope in Christ, and this is why, if we have a true hope in Christ, we need no more.

¹⁴ *The Last Battle*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2002), 228.