

John Chrysostom, a 4th Century Archbishop, advised preachers: “Every sermon should be an agony of the soul, a passion to beget Christ in the souls of men.” My earnest hope is that each sermon in our current series, *A More Christlike Christianity*, might bring Christ into the crevices of our souls where we’ve not yet permitted him entry. Yes, it’s lovely when someone accepts an invitation to receive Christ as Savior. But, in the unique call God has given to me, I’m called to focus on those who’ve received Christ as Savior, but who have yet to receive Him in his fullness; as Lord over every aspect of their lives. (Make no mistake, that’s something I need to pursue daily!)

This is a primary function of the church, to help us receive Christ in his fullness. To provide a holy discomfort such that we would deepen in our discipleship. As one pastor observes, in addition to those outside of the church, “Jesus wants to save Christians.” As I’ve said a couple of times, this is a series where I think it will be particularly fruitful to go back and listen to each of the 7 messages, as Sunday upon Sunday we’ve been building upon the prior weeks.

In addition, as today’s theme is *A More Christlike Hope*, the series just prior to this one, our 5-week *Hope Unfettered* series, is also worth revisiting. Both that series, and the current series, can be accessed and viewed on our website, or heard on our new podcast: St. Paul’s Voyager.

Our scripture reading this morning is Romans 8:18-25.

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In 1827 an Irish clergyman, John Nelson Darby, began to formulate a novel method of biblical interpretation focused on ‘the end times.’ As Darby saw it, the current age (the mid-1800’s) would get steadily worse until Jesus returned. Just before Jesus’ return, particularly faithful Christians would be raptured into heaven, thereby spared a 3½ year tribulation, after which Jesus would come and reign on earth for 1000 years.

In 1909, an American lawyer deeply influenced by Darby, Cyrus Scofield, published the *Scofield Reference Bible*. Scofield’s version included detailed notes to explain passages of scripture according to Darby’s new method. For Darby and Scofield, the key feature of Christian *hope* is the anticipation of God’s dramatic and decisive intervention to upend the disorder of the world.

Focusing primarily on a few biblical texts, particularly in Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation, Darby and Scofield – and more recently Hal Lindsey and Tim LeHaye – believed the Bible foretells events, figures, and times when the final apocalypse will unfold. Given the popularity of Lindsey’s book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and Tim LeHaye’s *Left Behind* series, it may come as a surprise that the vast majority of Christian Bible scholars and theologians are not on board with a Darbyist way of interpreting scripture.

From the dates I’ve mentioned, 1827 and 1909, you can see that Darby’s mode of scriptural interpretation is not yet 200 years old. The *Scofield Reference Bible* is just over 100 years old! This means that this approach to

interpreting scripture was a significant departure from the ways our Protestant forbearers – Martin Luther and John Calvin, and later, John Wesley – interpreted scripture. For this reason, some see Darbyism as playing fast and loose with the Bible. NT scholar James Efrid writes: “To take bits of various Scripture texts out of their contexts and weave them together into a scenario that none of the biblical writers knew anything about is to do violence to the sacred revelation of God.”

Efrid is arguing for a more conservative (conventional) approach to biblical interpretation where we don’t read into scripture things that are not there. But I mention this to point out that the Darby/Scofield way of articulating biblical hope is both modern and *innovative* in terms of Christianity’s 2000-year history. And so the question is, what did Christians hope for before Darbyism gained its footing and influence?

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This takes us back to the *Hope Unfettered* series where we surveyed the theme of hope in 5 major sections of the Bible: the Psalms, the prophets, the Gospels, the Epistles, and in Revelation. Had that been a 6-week series (instead of 5), we might’ve looked at how the early church expressed Christian hope. We’ll do this today, looking at The Apostles Creed and our reading from Romans.

Let’s start by noticing how The Apostles Creed, which has been the baseline of Christian orthodoxy for more than 1700 years, has a 3-part – Trinitarian – structure, affirming belief in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Based on the witness of scripture – particularly the NT – the Creed also identifies the function of each aspect of our Triune God. And so God the Father is creator of heaven and earth, etc.

As I point out in new member classes, it’s interesting that The Apostles Creed is silent on several matters we typically assume to be basic Christian beliefs. For example, the creed says nothing about Scripture being the inerrant word of God. It also says nothing about *how* Jesus saves us, which has been a matter of great debate among theologians through the ages. The silence of the Apostles Creed on these subjects raises the question: if these matters were not considered essential from the beginnings of Christianity, should they be now? Or are we just adding unnecessary burdens and barriers to those who might otherwise receive the Gospel?

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Before we delve into what the creed says about the ‘end times’ or ‘last things’, let me point out three things. First, when we say God is the Creator of heaven and earth, this means our existence is not an accident. Indeed, it means we are intended; *that you exist is intended by the maker of heaven and earth!* Some of you really need to hear that! As one theologian said, God’s creation of human beings reveals that God did not want to be God without us! But as Paul makes clear, this planet and it’s non-human creatures are also intended by God. This is why Paul writes in the whole creation is groaning for redemption.

Second, through God the Son, we learn that we are beloved of God. If God comes in the flesh, suffers, dies, and goes to hell and back, does that not testify to our belovedness? Though we are all prone, as prodigal sons and prodigal daughters, to forget that we are intended and beloved, Paul says the Spirit bears 'witness to our spirit, that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.'" Wow! Just wow. But bear in mind: we are beloved heirs even while we're prodigal, which should give us a heart to show other prodigals that they too are intended and beloved.

And there's more! Third, God the Spirit is the perpetual reminder that we are not alone in experiences of both joy and suffering. No. We are accompanied! Even in our sufferings, Paul wants us to know that the Spirit accompanies us such 'that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.'" As one more recent creed puts it: (In life, in death, God is with us. We are not alone!

This is the life-giving and hope-filled launching point for heirs of Christ: we are intended, we are beloved, and we are accompanied by God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or as some say: Creator, Christ, and Companion. When we prodigals come to know ourselves as intended, beloved, and accompanied, we can't help but seek Christlikeness.

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That said, and brief though it is, the Creed actually provides us the contours of the hope the earliest Christians had in Jesus. First, the Creed affirms that Jesus is raised from death and is seated at the right hand of God, the good, good Father, who intended us to be. This means that death and suffering, fearsome though they be, are not the end. And so we etch upon our hearts a truth Paul would affirm: "[Christ's] Resurrection means the worst things are never the last things." That's consistent with v. 18: "The worst things are never the last things."

Second, the Creed (consistent with what Paul writes in many of his letters), asserts the hope that Jesus will return. The classical theological word for this is 'parousia' a Greek word which means either 'coming' or 'arrival.' In saying this, Christians from the earliest times in the church have articulated their audacious hope that "the world has not seen the last of Jesus of Nazareth." (Richard Mouw)

But here is an important thing to bear in mind. The Christ whose arrival we await will not be different than the Christ who has already come. As Douglas Migliore writes, Jesus of Nazareth came forgiving sinners, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, blessing the children -- in compassion for the least of these -- and, yes, in resurrection. So, if we read the Bible as saying that Jesus will come as an entirely different type of Christ when he returns, we need to go back and re-root ourselves in the witness of scripture: particularly the Gospels!

In Matthew 25:31-46, as we saw last week, Jesus makes it clear that we should not be looking for him in the corridors

of political or economic power, nor should we expect him to return brutally smiting his foes. It is in the hungry, thirsty, homeless, the stranger, the prisoner where Jesus says: that is where you find me. At the very least, we should never, never place our messianic hopes or anticipation in anyone who bears no resemblance whatever to Jesus as he is revealed in scripture.

Finally, the creed announces the good news that in that day Jesus returns, he will judge the living and the dead. In case you think you misheard, let me say clearly, when we realize that Jesus is the judge, it is a hopeful thing to look forward to His coming in judgment. As one pastor writes, "For the earth to be *free of anything destructive* or damaging, certain things have to be banished. Decisions have to be made. *Judgments have to be rendered.*" And so [prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, and Amos] spoke of a cleansing, purging, decisive day ("the day of the Lord") when God would render judgment.

As Rob Bell writes, Central to the scriptural vision of God's renewed world, is the prophets who announce that a number of things that can survive in our broken world will not survive in a world where God is making all things new. War. Rape. Greed. Injustice. Violence. Pride. Divisiveness. Exploitation. Disgrace. Misogyny. Xenophobia. Racism. Tribalism. Nationalism. Can we not hope that all such things as these will be judged and banished? Genocide, sexual assault, child prostitution, human trafficking, torture... (not to mention conspiracy theories, telemarketing, email forwarding, Facebook and Twitter!)

Is it wrong to hope that all that is in me that is disordered and false and broken will be fully judged by Jesus... as worthless? When all of me that is twisted, dishonest, and dark will be uprooted... Such a day will likely be the happiest day any of us has ever known! At that moment too, all that is inside me that's generous and honest and loving will be identified. God will know the very steep path I've walked, the temptations I've faced, along with my deep longings for holiness and goodness.

If God is who Jesus reveals God to be, we can have every hope that God's merciful judgment will release us from the grip of past sin and exaggerated guilt because we are included the story of Christ where: "Nothing stands outside of God's redemptive purpose."

But as Richard Mouw states, "we can face the future with a basic confidence, not because we have been provided with a special collection of secret facts about what is to come, but because we've been allowed by grace to enter into a relationship" with the Triune God who desires us to know that we know that we are intended; we are beloved, and that we accompanied by a God who from first to last, does not want to be God without us. This was the central hope of the earliest Christians. And I'd bet my life that they were not wrong. Amen.