



Lesson 10: Conclusion – Hope Unseen

Dear friends,

Warm greetings once again from Wesley Theological Seminary. I hope that this finds you well.

Because this is the final week of the course, I want to do something different with my weekly letter. What follows is longer than usual, but I hope you'll indulge me just this once.

A while back an editor at Eerdmans Publishing Company asked me to compose the final chapter in a book on the Apostles' Creed titled *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed*. Each article of the creed (that is, each individual faith statement, such as "We believe in God") was to be covered in two chapters, the first a historical and theological introduction and the second a sermon. The Apostles' Creed ends with "life everlasting," for which I was assigned the sermon.

It occurred to me that an abridged version of that sermon might serve as the appropriate punctuation mark at the conclusion of our study of biblical eschatology. I hope that you will find this proclamation of faith a suitable last word.

Many thanks again for your participation over the past several weeks. If this course has proved beneficial, please consider taking part in another of our courses (see www.WesleyMinistryNetwork.com for details). Also, I would be most grateful if you would tell friends in other churches about Wesley Ministry Network. Thank you!

Yours ever in hope,
Craig

LIFE EVERLASTING

"And they lived happily ever after." That is the fairytale ending we read to our children before switching off the light at bedtime. We reassure them that dragons and witches and bullies do not finally triumph, that virtue is rewarded and that love endures. We reinforce their belief in a moral universe in which happiness is the offspring of goodness and not its chance acquaintance or certain competitor.

But life soon confronts our children with other narratives, stories in which every wrong is not righted nor every injustice overturned. They discover danger, witness prejudice, and experience failure. They learn that things do not always work out as they hope and that they cannot always get what they want. Eventually, they encounter death and with it loss that is not reversed by a wizard's spell or a heroine's kiss.

Life thus schools us in doubt. We cannot believe everything we hear. It is right to doubt that we can "lose forty pounds while eating whatever we want," or "look ten years younger overnight," or "get rich working only a day a week from home." It is right for us to question such extravagant claims, lest we be swindled, lest we be injured, lest we be disappointed. Prudence demands that we become wary of strangers and suspicious of even our own motives. On one level, this is no more than an awareness of sin, in others and in ourselves. More deeply, it is a recognition of the mystery of evil, whose embassy is to thwart and cheapen and diminish human life.

“If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.” For many people today, that advice applies preeminently to religion, whose hopes are dismissed outright as wishful thinking. The “real world” consists only of what is accessible to scientific verification. Therefore, meaning itself is an illusion. The universe has no creator, no purpose, and, ultimately, no future. According to today’s most popular cosmology, in the end there will be only a burned-out and dissipated universe: not noise and fury, but silence and futility, signifying nothing. In this scenario, there can be no “happily ever after.” According to microbiologist Jacques Monod,

[T]he choice of scientific practice, an unconscious choice in the beginning, has launched the evolution of culture on a one-way path: onto a track which nineteenth-century scientism saw leading infallibly upward to an empyrean noon hour for mankind, whereas what we see opening before us today is an abyss of darkness.[1]

Retrospectively, I might regard as wishful thinking a material universe whose physical characteristics, such as electromagnetism and gravity, are so finely balanced as to make possible the emergence of life and, even more extraordinary, sentience. Who could have predicted a cosmos whose rock would birth Pythagoras’s theorem, Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, Chartres’s cathedral, and Shakespeare’s Hamlet? Nevertheless, such a universe exists. Not every desirable object is an illusion.

Our desire for purpose, order, and meaning is fundamental to our existence. Many of the earliest cultural artifacts are religious in nature, and belief in life after death is nearly universal. This does not prove the validity of religion, but it certainly weighs in its favor. To use Huston Smith’s analogy, wings do not prove the existence of air, but they surely count as evidence. We know instinctively that we are something more than the sum of our parts and part of something more than ourselves. Consider the final chorus of Joni Mitchell’s Woodstock,

We are stardust, million-year old carbon
We are golden, caught in the devil’s bargain
And we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden

On the one hand, we are, quite literally, stardust, assemblies of primordial carbon. On the other hand, we are something more, something “golden.” Yet, we are not now fully ourselves; we are “caught in the devil’s bargain.” To get “back to the garden” is to go to the place of wholeness and innocence for which we long.

Christianity is grounded in the hope that we shall indeed arrive at such a place -- not the garden but that for which the garden is the prefiguring image, the Reign of God. The core affirmation of Christian faith is that God—not evil, futility, and death -- is the final reality in the cosmos. This belief encompasses not only the hope of eternal life but also the expectation that creation itself will be redeemed (Rom. 8:18-25). Why believe in the happy ending? For the first Christians the answer was obvious: because of Jesus’ resurrection.

Several years ago, my wife, Robin, became increasingly ill over a period of weeks. She was tested for numerous ailments, nearly all of which would have proved fatal. After two months, she could scarcely get out of bed, and I began to take seriously the possibility that she would die. My faith was hard pressed. Did I truly believe with Paul that “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us,” that “neither death ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:37-39)? It was not easy.

As I meditated on Scripture, I came to value particularly 1 Corinthians 9:1, in which Paul declares, “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” This is one of only a handful of places where Paul refers back to his experience of seeing the resurrected Jesus at his conversion. Moreover, Paul’s letters provide the only undisputed primary-source testimony composed by an eyewitness of the

resurrection. His writings would be invaluable for this reason if for no other.

In the course of my wife's illness, I learned to borrow from the faith of Paul and other early Christians who paid with their lives for their unyielding conviction that God in Christ had triumphed over death, in whose victory they believed they would one day share. Fortunately, Robin eventually recovered, but I have never forgotten what it was like to pass so near to death.

Concerning death the Bible is remarkably unsentimental. Paul and other New Testament authors do not tell us that deceased believers will become angels or stars, nor do they say that we shall be melded with some divine force. There is no greeting-card sentiment about God needing more company in heaven. Instead, death is seen as that great enemy which, apart from God's ultimate and undeserved act of re-creation, would unmake us all. In short, death is real.

According to Paul, "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). The hope is for the resurrection of the body, not the immortality of the soul. Eternal life is not a given; it is a gift bestowed only by God. The One who created conscious beings is able to recreate such beings by resurrection. Hence 1 Cor. 15:50: "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." Christians are not required to believe in an immortal soul that exists independent of the body. Instead, Paul writes, "we will be changed" (v. 52), given bodies like that of the resurrected Jesus himself. On this point the New Testament is clear and yet sensibly reserved. Compare 1 John 3:2:

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

John Polkinghorne, Cambridge physicist and Christian author, contemplates these matters in his book *The God of Hope and the End of the World*. He emphasizes that resurrection involves a measure of both continuity and discontinuity. We will be the same persons, but also changed beings. Writes Polkinghorne,

Whatever the human soul may be, it is surely what expresses and carries the continuity of living personhood. ... It is certainly not merely material. The atoms that make up our bodies are continuously being replaced in the course of wear and tear, eating and drinking. We have very few atoms in our bodies today that were there even two years ago. What does appear to be the carrier of continuity is the immensely complex 'information-bearing pattern' in which that matter is organized. This pattern is not static; it is modified as we acquire new experiences, insights and memories, in accordance with the dynamic of our living history. It is this information-bearing pattern that is the soul.[2]

According to Polkinghorne, this pattern remains in the mind of God and can be reproduced, much as software can be moved from one computer to another. To extend this (admittedly inadequate) analogy, the software itself may be enhanced by the capabilities of the new computer. Also, it may continue to be upgraded.

That a future life might include our "upgrading" is much discussed by theologians. If we are to live in the presence of God, we must be holy as God is holy. That implies a bit more than a move up from version 1 to version 1.1. Christian thinkers have speculated for centuries about whether moral perfection will be instantaneous or gradual, the second option being one basis for belief in some form of Purgatory.[3] A similar debate surrounds depictions of life in Heaven. Most theologians today reject the notion that heavenly existence will be static, represented at its silliest by the sitting-on-clouds-playing-harps stereotype. They see heaven not only as a place of endless praise, joy and fellowship, but also as a realm of ceaseless fascination and development. I am in no position to evaluate these claims, nor, beyond a certain point, do I find such speculations helpful. More concrete and much more useful is Paul's advice about the present-day

implications of our future hope:

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Cor. 15:57-58)

The Gospel places demands upon us that conflict at many points with our worldly self interest. To love our enemies is not necessarily going to make us happy. To serve the poor is unlikely to advance us socially or economically. It is no accident that the radical ethic of Jesus is situated within an equally radical proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God. That is the only context within which it makes sense. To attempt to follow Jesus' teaching while denying its core affirmation is an exercise in futility. "Eschatological demands require eschatological commitments and eschatological resources."^[4]

Paul urged the Corinthians to be steadfast and immovable, "always excelling in the work of the Lord." But being "steadfast and immovable" implies meeting opposition, and "the work of the Lord" is endlessly sacrificial. Is it worth it? Yes, "because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." Good deeds may be undone, faithful choices may be frustrated, and loving acts may be rejected; nevertheless, they are not wasted. The Christian philosopher Jerry Walls put it this way:

To recover heaven as a positive moral source is to recover our very humanity....It allows us to hope that the worst things that happen can yet come to a good end rather than to dread the prospect that the best things will come to a bad end. And if it is indeed the Holy Spirit who inspires this hope, it is a hope that will not be disappointed.^[5]

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Is death the end, the final page in the story of our lives? Or can we believe in a happy ending? "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Cor. 15:55, 57). Amen!

¹ Cited in Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 41.

² John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (New Haven: Yale, 2002), pp. 105-106.

³ An fascinating defense of Purgatory is found in Jerry Walls's excellent *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2002), pp. 34-62.

⁴ Craig C. Hill, *In God's Time: The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 198.

⁵ Walls, *Heaven*, p. 200.