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The Christian's Hope for the Future

May 15, 2022

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TEXT: Revelation 21:1-6 (ESV)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment."

We hear that word "hope" a lot in this world. For instance, a friend says, "I hope I'll get that job I just interviewed for." Or another person says, "I hope I'll win the lottery." Or in sports, we're hoping to go all the way this season, says the manager and players and fans at the opening of baseball season. They're all hopeful. Hoping in this case, though, is more like wishful thinking. We want this to happen, but we can't be sure it will. It's just not a sure thing. Christians also use that word "hope" a lot as part of our faith. In fact, hope has always been a major theme in the Church of Jesus Christ. You'll find it used frequently, for instance, in the New Testament. As God's people, we have hope for the future. And behind that hope is a resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Peter says, "You've been born anew to a living hope to the resurrection of Christ."

Now this Christian hope is different from that wishful type of thinking I was describing earlier. This hope is a deep-seated confidence and certainty about the future. It's based upon the character and promises of God ultimately revealed to us through the resurrected Jesus. Because of the risen and ascended Christ, you see, we know the end of the world story. He's the first fruits of the resurrection, and therefore we have hope even in the midst of trying circumstances, because we know who's in charge of history and our future. It's a sure thing. God wins. And those who followed Jesus share in his resurrection victory and can be absolutely confident about their destination and heavenly inheritance. As someone once profoundly said, "I know not what my future holds, but I know the one who holds my future. So I have no fear of where I'm going."

Our Scripture reading for the day is taken from a book of the Bible that's known for that message of confident hope. After the resurrection of Jesus, scripture records what happened to the disciples of Jesus and the early believers. In the book of Acts, we see them filled with the promised Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Now they were empowered from on high to bring the good news of what God has done for the world through His Son, Jesus Christ, so that all might repent and believe in Jesus and be saved. But we also know that those disciples ran into a lot of hostility and violent pushback as they carried out the mission Jesus had given them. Scripture and other historical sources as well testify that while many people came to faith in Christ through the witnessing of those disciples, religious and political opponents rejected the gospel message and worked to forcefully silence them and stop this Jesus movement, which was gaining such momentum. They brutally persecuted them, had them arrested, beaten, threatened with death. They sometimes drove the disciples out of their towns, and even stoned some Christ followers to death. Most of the first disciples of Jesus were martyred for the cause of Christ.

Now, one of them named John wasn't executed, but instead he was exiled to an island called Patmos to live out the rest of his earthly days. In the meantime, while John was exiled, the persecution of the Christian church continued on, causing great despair. And God responded to their cries with a message of hope to John. One particular Sunday, John was what he described as was in the spirit. He became aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit surrounding him, and John was taken to Heaven and the throne room of God. There he was, given a revelation of a vision of things to come. He was told by God to write this vision down and to pass it along to other Christians who were experiencing suffering and persecution in the present world because they worshipped

and served Jesus. And what John wrote down ended up becoming the final book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. The book's always been seen as mysterious and challenging by many because of the imagery and symbols that John uses to describe the last days when Jesus returns. But in the midst of all these strange visions are Holy Spirit-created words and images meant to give confident hope to all believers in Jesus Christ.

Such is the case in our passage for today. This seventh and last vision, which begins in our reading, is the climax of the whole Book of Revelation. John says he saw a new Heaven and a new Earth. The old Heaven and Earth had passed away. And the sea, which represented chaos and evil in Hebrew thought, was no more. It's a new day. The old, decaying world's passed away. The old order, which was in bondage to sin and suffering and death and evil, has been banished and replaced by a new one; done away with and replaced by a new cosmic order, which is perfect and beautiful, spectacular. John saw the holy heavenly city of Jerusalem coming down out of Heaven from God. He says the new dwelling place prepared for believers in Jesus Christ. John describes it as a bride adorned for her husband. I just think of the bride processing down a church aisle toward the groom, who's awaiting her. It's a vision as she comes down, a blend of beauty and splendor. She's breathtaking. And this is the new home for the faithful who follow Jesus. And as John is looking at this beautiful vision, he hears a loud voice from the throne announcing, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is now with men." God will be dwelling with us and they will be His people. The barriers between God and humankind have dropped away. The believers will see him face to face and live in his presence forever. The first thing God will do is wipe away every tear from the eyes of his people and minister to them. He'll wipe away the tears of suffering, the tears of regret and sorrow, the tears of loneliness and disappointments that flowed in the old world. And death will no longer be part of the picture. As we live in the presence of God death, our enemy's been eliminated once and for all in life, eternal with God is the norm. We'll live forever. There'll be no more mourning, no more crying, nor pain, because everything, the former things that we've known will have passed away. And it will be a new day and everything's new and perfect. And then God who's seated on the throne speaks up and confirms all this. "Behold, I am making all things new." You can hang on to this vision, He's saying. And God told John, "I want you to write this down for these words of trustworthy and true." My own can bet the farm on these words.

And then he says it's done. What's done? God's Salvation Plan, which began back in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve's fall into sin. It will then be complete, done on the cross. Remember, Jesus announced it is finished. Humanity's debt of sin had been paid for in full by Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, and God affirmed that sacrifice and declaration when He raised Jesus on Easter. And we await the day that is coming when all will be complete. God will say "It's all done now. My once broken world is perfectly restored. It's new. It's all because I'm the alpha and the omega. The beginning in the end. I'm sovereign. I'm in charge of the future. I've been standing above history all along." And finally, God promises in this vision to the thirsty: "I will give from the spring of water of life without payment." The Bible says it away from God, our soul thirsts for him. We read in the Psalms, "My soul thirsts for the Lord." But now that thirst will be quenched as Jesus promised: "Come to me. You'll never thirst again. You'll have a restored relationship with God forever." Notice the living water flowing from the throne of grace is given. It's not deserved or merited. It's a gift from God to His own that flows from God in the Lamb's, meaning Jesus's, throne of grace.

Now, that's quite a grand and glorious vision, isn't it? A wonderful future hope! Question: will you be there to enjoy it and rejoice in it? Have you received the free water of life which comes through faith in the risen Jesus Christ? That's the important question today. For some of you, this vision given to John is for the hope and encouragement of those who have received Jesus as the Son of God and placed their trust upon what He's done for us at the cross and the tomb, who declare "In Christ alone my hope is found." If you have not received him and what he has done for you, I encourage you. I plead with you to do so now. Ask him to forgive you for your sins and give you eternal life with him that he's promised. And then this heavenly vision that we've been describing will become your hope. Your sure thing. As well as your confidence in this present world.

And for those of you who are trusting in Christ Jesus for your eternal salvation already, keep your eyes on the big picture. That's the message. We live in the in-between time – we're people in waiting. All creation groans for that glorious promised new day, when the imperfect world in which we live well, it still has pain and death and sorrow and still causes us to have some tears. We don't have to shed our tears with despair because in Christ we know the end of the story. It's a good ending. It's been promised and revealed to us. We're headed toward something new and far better than anything we could ever imagine. It's being prepared for us by Jesus himself, who loves us and

promises to take us to himself. We're moving towards a day when we will be free of death and crying and pain. As the gospel song puts it, "soon and very soon we are going to see the King. No more die in there, because we're going to see the king. No more crying there. We are going to see the king." As you serve Jesus, stay the course. And be not afraid. Instead, confidently hang on to that vision of a glorious new day that we will see and rejoice in with the angels and the acquitted in Christ who have been cleansed by his precious blood and pronounced not guilty. We will live forever with him. And on that day, all will be well... in fact, perfect. Perfect love, perfect joy. Perfect peace. Perfect worship, perfect obedience. Author Peter Kreeft asks us to imagine the day when sin, death and evil are finally defeated once and for all by Christ. He writes this:

Suppose God took you on a crystal ball trip into your future and you saw with indubitable certainty that despite everything: your sin, your smallness, your stupidity, you could have free for the asking your whole crazy heart's desire, Heaven and eternal joy. Would you not return fearless and singing? What can earth do to you if you're guaranteed Heaven? To fear the worst earthly loss would be like a millionaire facing the loss of a penny – less – scratch on a penny.

So I want to end this message with a story. In his talk entitled *The Sense of an Ending*, Jeremy Bigby tells a story about attending a worship service in a poor South African township.

I was told immediately before the service that the house around the corner had just been burned to the ground because the man who lived there was a suspected thief. And a week before that, a tornado had cut through the township, ripping apart 50 homes and five people had been killed. And then I was told that the very night before, a gang hounded down a 14-year-old, a member of the Church's of Sunday School and stabbed him to death. The pastor began his opening prayer at worship. "Lord, you are the creator and the sovereign. But why did the wind come like a snake and tear our roofs off? Why did a mob cut short the life of one of our children when he had everything to live for? Over and over again, Lord, we are in the midst of death."

As the pastor spoke, the congregation responded with a dreadful sighing and groaning. And then once he finished the prayer, very slowly, the whole congregation began to sing at first, very quietly, then louder. They sang song after song of praise, praise to a God who in Jesus plunged into the very worst to

give us a promise of an ending beyond imagining. The singing gave the congregation a foretaste of the great end. Christian hope isn't about looking around at the state of things now and trying to imagine what where it's all going. It's not about trying to calculate the future from the present. It's about breathing now, the fresh air of the ending, tasting the spices and sipping the wine of the feast to come. So believers: hang in there. God's in charge. He has a last word. So keep the faith. Fight the good fight. Run the good race. Never losing sight of the finish line and the glorious new beginning that awaits those who long for Christ's reappearing. And by all means, friend, keep on singing praise to God, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Amen.

Let's pray. Thank you, Father, for the promise that one day we will be with you forever. And all will be well. We thank you for that assurance that is ours in Christ. Amen.