

TIME & ETERNITY

SERIES: THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE

By Doug Goins

How do you define hope? When that word is spoken, what immediately comes to mind? In casual conversation, oftentimes it can really express a wavering, wishful, uncertain view of the future. We say things like “I hope I can make it to the party,” or “I hope I do well in my final exams,” or “I hope I do well in this work project,” or “I hope that my new sport utility vehicle is as much fun as the commercials promise it will be.”

I had an experience like that when I was ten years old. I found a coupon in a *Superman* comic for a Whamo pellet gun. I convinced my mom to let me buy it from my allowance. We went to the post office and got a money order, sent away for it, and then I waited--hopeful, doubtful, anxiously, full of anticipation. I dreamed of possessing this sleek, cold steel, blue-black pistol, much like a German Luger. When it arrived six weeks later, it was made out of cheap black plastic, spring-loaded, and went “doink” when you shot it. By the second day it was already broken. Now that was unrealized, unfulfilled hope.

But the Bible never uses the word hope in that way, in a doubtful sense. Christian hope is not wishful thinking. Instead, biblical hope focuses our attention on God and fills us up if we are followers in Jesus. It results in eagerness, anticipation and optimism. Biblical hope is always the anticipation of something good. It does require patience in waiting, but it really is powerfully motivating for how we live here and now.

A biblical view of hope doesn't make us passive or resigned. It is energizing. It helps us overcome disappointments and fear so we can live actively and serve the Lord with enthusiasm and follow him wholeheartedly. Paul describes this kind of hope in the book of Romans: “For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it” (Romans 8:24, 25).

Chapter 4 of 2 Corinthians is filled with that kind of hope. In 4:16-5:10, the apostle Paul expresses his own hopeful confidence in his eternal future with the Lord Jesus. And for Paul, that future hope is powerfully motivating for how he lives his life right now, in the present. The relationship between time and eternity is significant and that is emphasized in this passage.

Notice the vocabulary of hope that Paul uses in these verses: In 4:16, “Therefore we do not lose heart....” Hope is not demoralized. In verse 5:1, “For we know that...” and the same word is used in 5:6 “...and knowing that while we are at home in the body....” That means we are absolutely confident. We are sure beyond a shadow of a doubt of what is true and real. Then, in verses 5:6 and 5:8, notice the repetition of the phrase “...being always of good courage...” and “...we are of good courage....” Hope makes us courageous, regardless of the circumstance. Finally, in verse 5:9, “Therefore also we have as our ambition...to be pleasing to Him.” Hope galvanizes, it motivates us.

Second Corinthians 4:16-5:10 can be divided into three sections, each focusing on an aspect of this hope that we have. First, in 4:16-18 it defines the reasons for our hope. Second, verses 1-5 of chapter 5 define the nature of our hope. Lastly, 5:6-10 defines the practical implications of our hope. In other words, does it make a difference now? We can answer “yes!” In fact, it is powerfully effective in terms of how we live life now.

The reasons for our hope

In chapter 4, verses 16-18, the issue raised is fixing our eyes on the unseen things. What makes us hopeful is how we see reality.

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

It's the sense that something more is coming, which is consistent throughout scripture. King Solomon wrote that God has placed eternity in our hearts. Our outer man, that Paul mentions in verse 16, corresponds to the earthen vessels that we looked at previously (see Discovery Paper #4639). Paul is talking about our physical bodies, the point being that living here and now we do experience difficulties, pressures, problems, pain in life, as well as joyful things such as being gifted with a godly wife. In reality, pleasure and pain go hand-in-hand; tears and laughter, joy and sorrow get all mixed up together. But there is more. What we are experiencing now, the good and the bad, is preparing us for something yet to come, something even greater, “beyond all comparison.”

C.S. Lewis said that this human existence is only the title page to the real story, which has not yet begun to be told. That *is* the Christian hope. Everything that happens to us in this life is directly related to what is coming. Nothing in our present experience is futile, or without purpose.

Verses 16-18 suggest three aspects of our present experience that tell us, as believers in Jesus Christ, that something much greater is coming--three reasons for hope. First, Paul says we experience daily inner renewal. Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way in *The Message*:

So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace.

Paul was hopeful because he was able to experience the daily spiritual renewal of God within him. Even though Paul was confronted by the aging process and the possibility of death, he could still express that strong conviction. His strenuous schedule and the arduous way he lived his life had taken a toll on him both physically and emotionally. Yet he says that through the Holy Spirit of God he enjoys spiritual renewal regularly and on a daily basis. Literally, he is made afresh or made anew. He is provided the resources of God's grace whenever he needs them and whatever the circumstance. That is another way of describing the new covenant in action: everything coming from God, nothing coming from us. Christians who enjoy that kind of spiritual resource on a daily basis, people who really do live out of the grace of God, are

adventurous people. Despite physical limitations and loss, they still hunger and thirst after righteousness, and they never stop growing in the scriptures.

What is the basis for that kind of renewal? Consider, again, verse 17. We know our suffering has purpose to it, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison....” Paul’s momentary light affliction included experiences that he summarized earlier in this chapter: the troubles, the perplexity, the persecution, and catastrophic things in his life. But he accepted this mysterious reality, that those trials and hardships were actually being used by God to create a glorious, eternal reward that Paul is going to enjoy in heaven. Paul writes in Romans 8:17 that we suffer with Christ in order that we also may be glorified with him. He then goes on to say in 8:18: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

What is this “eternal weight of glory”? First, it is the idea of honor, respect, or admiration; perhaps the way we use the word “weight” as meaning “the weight of responsibility,” or as one having the “weight of authority.” The other biblical idea of glory means brightness or radiance or splendor. We use the word “glory” when we talk about a gloriously beautiful sunset or, perhaps a glorious vista of a mountain range.

C.S. Lewis addresses both of those nuances of meaning in a powerful sermon entitled *The Weight of Glory* (1). This is how he addresses the first definition, the one of honor:

When I began to look into this matter I was shocked to find such different Christians as Milton, Johnson and Thomas Aquinas taking heavenly glory quite frankly in the sense of fame or good report. But not fame conferred by our fellow creatures—fame with God, approval or (I might say) “appreciation” by God. And then, when I had thought it over, I saw this view was scriptural; nothing can eliminate from the parable the divine accolade, “well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

For glory means good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgement, and welcome into the heart of things.

He also addresses the idea of radiance in that sermon:

And this brings me to the other sense of glory—glory as brightness, splendor, luminosity. We are to shine as the sun, we are to be given the Morning Star. I think I begin to see what it means. In one way, of course, God has given us the Morning Star already: you can go and enjoy the gift on many fine mornings if you get up early enough. What more, you may ask, do we want? Ah, but we want so much more—something the books on aesthetics take little notice of. But the poets and the mythologies know all about it. We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive into it ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.

What a beautiful picture of glory. And that is what we wait for, hope for.

There is a third reason for hope in verse 18 and it has to do with seeing again--seeing what is permanent and eternal, rather than seeing only the things that are right in front of us, the material, and the temporal: “...while we look not at the things

which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

I still remember as a college student being struck by reading A.W. Tozer’s statement that the invisible world that is described in the Bible is the only real world. That is a difficult concept to grasp as the things of this physical, material world are so real to us because we experience them with all of our senses. Paul is not saying this world is a bad place or those realities are somehow unfortunate realities. He is saying that they are transient, destined to pass away. The abiding spiritual realities cannot be seen. Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 18: “There’s far more here than meets the eye. The things we can see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can’t see now will last forever.” The writer of Hebrews uses the same argument when talking about the faith of Abraham and the faith of Moses: “[By faith Abraham] was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God... By faith [Moses] left Egypt not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing him who is unseen” (Hebrews 11:10, 27).

Fixing our eyes on the unseen gives us hope. It puts *this* moment into the context of eternity and all things that are visible to us in the context of the invisible, giving us a much different viewpoint. When we become spiritually nearsighted it’s because we live in a world of instant gratification, a world that has taught us to value the temporary over the long-term. Therefore, our experience here and now overwhelms eternity in our perception and in our anticipation.

This spiritual perspective, emphasized in verses 16-18, enables us to focus on eternal values. And, having the eyes of our hearts enlightened in this way, exposes in us what is temporary, what is useless, and the misaligned priorities in our lives. In the story *The Little Prince*, a wise fox shares the secret of life with the little prince: it’s only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is what is invisible to the eye. The reasons for our hope have to do with how we see reality. Learning to see rightly, fixing our eyes on the unseen, gives us hope.

The nature of our hope

The first five verses of chapter 5 give us a fuller picture of this eternal weight of glory that is beyond all comparison. These verses define the nature of our hope. It moves from seeing something to knowing something or thinking about something. We are called to fix our minds on our eternal home and that is what will give us hope:

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.

Here is Eugene Peterson’s contemporary restatement of this paragraph:

For instance, we know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven--God-made, not handmade--and we’ll never have to relocate our “tents” again. Sometimes we can hardly wait to move--and so we cry out in frustration. Compared to what’s coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an

unfurnished shack, and we're tired of it! We've been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies! The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less.

What a great image! Let's put heaven in our hearts so we won't settle for the things that no longer matter.

The first contrast is found in verse 1 in which Paul contrasts a tent and a building. Oftentimes, when Jesus was trying to communicate an idea that wasn't easy to grasp he would begin the illustration with the words "it is like...." That is what Paul is doing here when he compares living in this world and living in the world to come, with the difference between living in a tent and living in a house. Paul didn't need to explain that illustration to the first-century readers because they were familiar with groups of people in that setting who were tent dwellers. The tent symbolized a fragile, temporary place to live, whereas the house is obviously more substantial and permanent. The phrase, "if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down..." is Paul's way of saying "when we die." The second phrase in verse 1, "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens," means that dying is not about leaving home, but about going home to the place where we truly belong.

Another contrast is found in verses 2-4, this time between fear and groaning in contrast to fulfillment and completion. Paul shifts the analogy from the tent and house to the picture of clothing: "longing to be clothed"; in verse 3: "having put it on"; and, in verse 4: "we don't want to be unclothed, but to be clothed." The first-century Greek culture that Paul was speaking to viewed the body as something bad. It was like a tomb for the soul. Physical existence was not a good thing so death meant release or escape from the tomb of the physical body. But that was not how the Jews looked at the physical body. They considered it the "clothing" of the real person. The physical body was what made contact and communication with others possible, so the death of the body deprived them of everything that meant being a person. Their fear of death was this being "unclothed" or "naked."

Paul consistently writes that death is the last great enemy. Death does, in fact, come between us--our experience now, and the resurrection life that we anticipate. But, whether we do experience physical death or whether we are still alive when Jesus comes back at his second coming, God's promise in verse 3 is that "we shall not be found naked." Paul did not believe that death was the place of extinction or that in death we are absorbed into the divine being, or that we become disembodied spirits floating around the universe through eternity. What Paul believed and what he taught was that in death God gives us a new resurrection body and that we will be able to love and serve him even better than we can now. For Paul it never was a question of "does the person survive death?" But rather, he insisted that life beyond the grave is even better. We will be swallowed up by life.

Hope of fulfillment, of completion, removes the fear of death that we may still harbor inside of us. When we are young and healthy, our whole life seems to be ahead of us, so a passage like this may not mean much. But as you get older this passage makes more sense. I find myself more and more growing in anticipation, yearning, sighing for my new resurrection body.

However, we are not alone in our groaning. Paul says that the natural order of this physical world that we live in is sinfully flawed, and is subject to futility. He writes: "For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body" (Romans 8:22, 23).

The mention of the Holy Spirit brings us back to chapter 5 of 2 Corinthians. In particular, verse 5 goes on to say that we already have a sense of heaven inside of us because God put the Holy Spirit within us. There is a foretaste of glory and the

Holy Spirit guarantees the fulfillment: “Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God [and that purpose is living with God eternally; experiencing this eternal weight of glory], who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.”

Look again at 2 Corinthians 4:16: “...though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.” We are being renewed because of the activity of the Holy Spirit inside of us. In verse 5, it is also the guarantee of resurrection life eternally. Think about your own history as a Christian. Think about how many times the Holy Spirit has renewed you, has resurrected you from the death of discouragement--something that represented destruction to you. It was the Spirit of God who restored morale and perspective and objectivity. That spiritual power to renew us is God’s guarantee that he will bring us to glory. Do you see the spiritual realities that Paul sees? Is your mind fixed on this heavenly home? Are you thinking straight? Is your belief system right about heaven?

The practical implications of our hope

If we dwell too much on this issue of heaven, one of the concerns raised is that we become unplugged from real life. However, verses 6-10 don’t allow that. There is no danger of being so heavenly-minded that we will be of no earthly good:

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord for we walk by faith, not by sight we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

This hopeful confidence, this optimism about our eternal future with the Lord, produces courage, confident anticipation. Repeated, first in verse 6, and then again in verse 8, is the phrase: “we are of good courage.” Whenever the apostle Paul writes about the certainty of death, his tone exudes that spirit of courageous confidence because he was convinced that life or death, being in the body or with the Lord, was about growing in relationship with Jesus--falling more in love with him, a deeper intimacy. Being at home, being comfortable with the body on earth is about walking by faith and responding by faith to Christ--to his life and to the gift of salvation. Part of that response is learning to walk by faith and not by sight, as paraphrased in *The Message*: “It’s what we trust in but don’t yet see that keeps us going.” Death will not be the end result for those of us in Christ, but an intensified continuation of a love relationship with Jesus, both in pleasing him and serving him. Augustine wrote, “the rapture of the saved soul will flow over into the glorified body.” So we will be even more at home in heaven and more comfortable with the Lord in eternity than we are here. And, we will still be responding by faith to his life and love for us.

As much as Paul enjoys the challenge of life and ministry here on earth, his preference, he says in verse 8, is to be at home alone with the Lord. It’s an issue of identity, of citizenship. To the Christians in Philippi he wrote, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself” (Philippians. 3:20, 21). That is what we look forward to, what makes us courageous to live here and now.

The second effect of living hopefully, of trusting in what we don’t yet see, is found in verses 9 and 10 of chapter 5: it produces lives that please Jesus here and now. However, it does require regular, ongoing choice: “Therefore also we have

as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.” This expectation, this anticipation of face to face communion with Jesus Christ, motivates Paul to want to serve him faithfully, to be pleasing to him in all that he does. It was Paul’s lifelong and eternal ambition to please Jesus Christ.

In terms of motivation and behavior, pleasing Jesus Christ in everything that we do is a universal, guiding principal and radically challenges the reality of our profession of faith in Jesus Christ. It strikes at the root of discipleship. It rules out any sinful disobedience. If I love Jesus Christ, then I want to please him. That’s what love does--it seeks to please the object of the love relationship. Pleasing Jesus Christ out of love for him rescues us from rigidity, from moralism, from Christian Pharisee-ism which tries to reduce morality to a list of do’s and don’t’s. We are now bound, as James says, to a royal law of love.

Finally, learning to live a life that pleases Christ is a lifelong process, it’s progressive. We can never claim that we’ve “arrived” or that we are finally totally pleasing to him until we get to heaven. That is assured, but we are always in the process of learning what it means to please Jesus with our lives.

Verse 10 speaks of the final revelation of the judgement seat of Christ, which is not a seat of terror; it’s not a place to be afraid of. Rather, it’s a place that is of both evaluation and encouragement, for we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ. Each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done whether good or bad. Again, that anticipation really does reinforce the continuity between this world and the next. The scriptures represent this court of judgement, which awaits us as believers. It is something that we face as we step from time into eternity.

The apostle Paul spoke of the judgement seat of Christ in 1 Corinthians 4:5, “Therefore do not go on passing judgement before the time, but wait until the Lord [Jesus] comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.”

Ray Stedman summarizes the judgement seat of Christ in his book *Authentic Christianity*:

These verses seem to suggest an occasion when our entire earthly life passes in review before us and we learn—perhaps for the first time!—what has been pleasing to God and what has not. It will undoubtedly be a time of great surprises. Many things we felt were acceptable to God and profitable to us will be found to be spoiled by improper or wrongful dependence. At the same time, God will single out many forgotten or seemingly insignificant acts as greatly pleasing to Him. (2)

We are responsible to God for our thoughts and actions in this life and in the world to come. Our generation, by and large, doesn’t like the idea of the judgement of God, but it misses Paul’s point. Paul was comforted in that the very One who he served here and now, is the One before whom he would stand in judgement. This is not only a judgement of evaluation, a judgement of disclosure to recognize the bad attitudes, wrong motives, unprofitable behavior, but it’s also a place of encouragement and praise. Knowing that eventually everything will be out in the open doesn’t at all strike fear in Paul’s heart. Why? Because he has a love relationship with the One who will judge him. He has experienced forgiveness of sin.

Frederick Buechner writes, “The judge will be Christ. In other words, the one who judges us most finally, will be the one who loves us most fully.” So, again, how do you define hope? What do you see? Do you see unseen spiritual realities? Do you know that you are going to heaven? Do you anticipate fulfillment and completion there? Does pleasing Jesus Christ matter more to you than anything else in life? If you can answer yes, then your life can be hopeful. Jesus *is* the answer. He *is* the hope of eternity.

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NOTES:

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*. Copyright © 1975, 1980 by the Trustees of the Estate of C.S. Lewis. Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY. Pp. 33, 36-37.
2. Ray C. Stedman, *Authentic Christianity*. Copyright © 1996 Elaine C. Stedman. Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 161.

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