

THE Best IS YET TO COME

Now and Not Yet

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“If we have hope in Christ in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

1 Corinthians 15:28 (ESV)

Hello everyone! It's Peter again - your trusty theologian and most beloved seasonal allergy sufferer. Today, we're going to keep talking about "eschatology," about the doctrine of final things (as it is sometime grandiosely called). Today, I want to share with you a verse that surprised me the first time I read it. It surprised me because it sort of turned my idea of eschatology on its head. The verse is 1 Cor 15.19 and it goes like this in the ESV: "If we have hope in Christ *in this life only*, we are of all people most to be pitied." One more time: "If we have hope in Christ in (or maybe for) this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."

The first time I read that, I thought to myself, *we have hope in Christ for THIS life?! You see, I was raised in a community that focused on getting saved. And what that meant was, if you believe in Jesus, you don't go to Hell if you die. The Gospel was basically divine fire insurance. I always knew that I had hope in Jesus for the next life. What came as new to me was that we had hope in Jesus for this life as well.*

You might be thinking to yourself at this point "Well Peter, aren't you kind of talking about the opposite of eschatology at this point?" I guess from a certain point of view, I am. But let me ask it this way.

What kind of eschatology would lead someone to believe that we had hope for this life? The life we live between birth and death? You know...the life you are living NOW! Certainly the eschatology of my childhood didn't give me much hope. It mostly left me worried that I'd mess something up along the way and I'd have a higher premium on my fire insurance. But St. Paul has the kind of eschatology that would lead people to believe they have hope right up to death. What kind of vision of the end is that?

It's a vision with a different "shape" than ours, if I could put it that way. The shape of history in Paul's mind is different from the shape of history in most of ours. For us, for modern Western people, history is this straight line. It started at creation or the Big Bang or whatever your origin story is and it goes straight until the end when the universe expands to freezing or we are all eaten up by a black hole. In the far east - in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions - history is a great big spiral. It begins where it ends, and in the middle is a series of rebirths.

But the New Testament has a much more interesting vision. Some of the Jews of Jesus' day had a particular expectation for the end of history. After centuries of foreign occupation and oppression, there were plenty of Torah-observant people who were in need of a great vindication. At the end of time, God would resurrect all the righteous people from the dead who had been wrongfully killed in this life. When they finally were resurrected, when the enemies of God were defeated, when God would be all in all -- that would be what they called "the age to come." We lived in the present age of oppression and death. But God had in store an "age to come" with a great resurrection.

What was so bewildering to people like St. Paul was the fact that what was supposed to happen at the end of history happened in the middle: a resurrection. It was a sign, in Paul's mind, that - in fact - the future God intended for the world was happening *right now*. It was like the future had invaded the present. The age to come was now in the present age. The future is now!

This vision of history is what theologians have come to call: "the now and the not yet." In other words, God's future is happening now, but it is also not yet happening. That is why faith in Jesus is hope not for this life only, but also for the next. God's intentions for the world are both our future hope and our present comfort. That is why we have hope, not just for this life only. The best is yet to come.

At the center of all this, again, is the resurrection of Jesus. Tomorrow, I'd like us to talk about how that works exactly. How does the resurrection of Jesus give us hope not just for this life only. How's that sound?

Have you been living life from the hope of your works or the hope you have in Jesus? How can you make a shift from a works based life, to one that focuses on the finished work of Christ?