

## STUDY 17

# Saved in Hope—2

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### INTRODUCTION

In the previous paper our focus was on the hope for the whole creation, now being ruled over by the Last Adam who is bringing it to its full glory.

We will now look at the goal of this renewal, which will culminate in the marriage of the Lamb to his bride.

Our principal texts will be Revelation 19:6–8, 21:1–5a, and 22:1–5.<sup>1</sup>

### APOCALYPTIC HOPE

The marriage of the bride is conveyed to us in apocalyptic terms. To enter this world of hope requires the eyes of the heart being opened by the Spirit of Jesus. ‘Let everyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ (Rev. 2:7). Facing the danger we have of interpreting Jesus’ message in favourite psychological and contemporary sociological theories, Ernst Käsemann says; ‘Apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology—since we cannot really class the preaching of Jesus as theology’.<sup>2</sup> He goes on to say:

... in my view, primitive Christian apocalyptic ... was released on the Church by the experience of the Spirit in the time after Easter, preserved as a living phenomenon by those endowed with the Spirit, nourished theologically from the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic, and finally accompanied by enthusiastic hopes and manifestations, I see in it the first phase of advancing post-Easter enthusiasm.<sup>3</sup>

Listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying opens the implications and cosmic meaning of Christ who was crucified and raised from the dead as having overcome death and the satanic powers. He also shows us that Christ is currently reigning in the midst of the cosmic battle in order to bring his bride to the marriage supper in the renewed creation.

To hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches is to be taken into the realm of the seen and unseen in the affairs of history and politics. In powerful symbols, Christ shows us what is going on beyond the reasoning of the human eye. The key to history

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, SCM, London, 1969, p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, p. 109, n. 1.

## Saved in Hope–2

and the future cannot be found in the depths of religious experiences but only from the apocalyptic interpretation of Christ's resurrection as the sign of God's future glory and triumph over sin, death and the power of Satan (Col. 2:13–15; 3:1–3; Rev. 12:1–12). In our preaching we need to go back and forth from the language, narrative and world view of the Bible on the one hand, to the current language of the secular world we live in.

The media concentrates our imagination on the precarious times we live in with its present evils and catastrophes. Global warming linked with climate change is like the constant background drone of music coming from a vehicle with a P-plate driver. In the foreground, we are confronted with terrorism, environmental poisoning, violence, overpopulation, starvation, hunger, genocide and human abuse. In contrast to this, apocalyptic speaks of the powers behind the scenes; Satan, good and bad angels, the dragon, beasts, and a cosmic battle between the devil and our divine cosmocrator, the Lamb who was slain.

This is the dramatic context for Jesus' unveiling the marriage of his bride. The bride is the holy city, the New Jerusalem, and the dwelling of God. She is prepared, robed and sanctified by Christ (Eph. 5:25–27). This purification is first through Christ's blood (Acts 15:9; 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; Heb. 10:22; 1 John 1:7), second by the Word of God (John 15:3; 17:17; Eph. 5:25–27) and third by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:11; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:2). All these are the one action of the grace of God for the one body of Christ. The white robes of the bride are also the holy deeds of God's people, the fruit of the Spirit, or the vicarious life of Christ lived through the faithful people of God. Abraham and his descendants looked for the city built by God for the spirits of just men and women made perfect, the Jerusalem from above (Heb. 11:10; 12:22; Gal. 4:25–26).

Apocalyptic is not one-dimensional. A heavenly drama determines the drama taking place on earth. What is in fact happening is on two levels which are interconnected. To look at the earthly level is entirely enigmatic. A satanic antithesis with titanic opposition in the unseen world impinges on the seen world and the bride. This can only be overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the testimony of the saints.

### IN HOPE WE ARE SAVED

The creation, the Spirit and we groan as we await coming into eternal communion with the triune God and for the liberty of our bodies from the presence of sin and death. 'In [this] hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see we wait for it with patience' (Rom. 8:24–25). To hope for what we already see is a contradiction in terms. 'In [this] hope *we are saved*' is aorist tense, indicating a saving action that has already taken place. However, those who are saved would be left hanging in nothingness if not accompanied by God's final action still to take place in the future. Steadfast hope for the glory that is yet to be revealed now characterises the Christian's life.

What is seen is passing away (1 Cor. 7:31). Gordon Fee explains this as the world or present scheme of things is passing away. Paul uses a progressive present meaning:

'... in the process of passing away' ... The decisive event is one that has already happened. In Christ's death and resurrection God has already determined the course of things; he has already

## Saved in Hope–2

brought the world in its present form under judgement. And so decisive is that event that it has ‘foreshortened the time’.<sup>4</sup>

What does not pass away cannot be seen for it is Christ’s unseen work, the interaction of the heavenly drama with what is happening in a world characterised by sin and corruption.

Steadfast hope that is yet to be revealed characterises the Christian’s life:

A crucial difference between the secular futurology and Christian eschatology is this: the future in secular futurology is *reached* by a process of the world’s *becoming*. The future in eschatology *arrives* by the *coming* of God’s kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

For the past twenty years, I have prayed and wrestled to understand why Christian messages dealing with the future hope for the redemption of the world and our looking forward to a future realisation of our identity in God seem to be met with such seeming limited connection by people. There would be a number of reasons for this; however, I think a primary cause has been the mentality of our increasingly secular culture. The consequence, says Wolfhart Pannenberg, is that:

Since secularism produces meaninglessness, the human person suffers from lack of meaning . . . Without such a belief people are left to seek narcotic effects of work or diversion by amusement, or they live a life without hope. Actually we live a life without hope already when we stupefy our deeper anxieties and our spiritual emptiness by work or amusement, but where we indulge in unreasonable expectations.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside secularism there is also the void and nothingness that has come from disillusionment. Modernity put its hope in humanistic progress. Jürgen Moltmann refers to Hegel in support for the founding of the modern era of enlightenment with the discovery and conquest of America by the Spanish. Apparently, Columbus was looking for God’s Garden of Eden and for El Dorado, the city of gold. God and gold, Church and state had developed a joint millennial hope. Man would establish the New Jerusalem. Moltmann also says that through human knowledge, power over nature and scientific discovery, Europe gained the power for the instrumentalising of a world-spanning civilization out of the resources of the worlds it had colonized.

The nineteenth century was one of amazing progress in all of life’s sectors. We cannot disdain the many benefits of this. Nevertheless, the twentieth century was an age of incomparable catastrophes. These include Verdun, Auschwitz, the Gulag Archipelago, Hiroshima, Chernobyl and global warming. Hope for a future New Jerusalem has failed. Post-modernity has disdained mega stories, and has drifted into emptiness and meaninglessness.<sup>7</sup> As a culture, we spend a lot of time devising ways to control the future, or even to flee from it.

The Christian who hopes patiently in God does not hope for what he produces but for what cannot be seen and which comes through the apocalyptic death and resurrec-

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 342.

<sup>5</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *The Future of God: The Revolutionary Dynamics of Hope*, Harper and Row, New York, 1969, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, ‘The Task of Christian Eschatology’, essay in *The Last Things: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Eschatology*, eds Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2002), pp. 1f.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, ‘Progress and Abyss’, essay in *The Future of Hope*, eds V. Miroslav and W. Katerberg (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2004).

## Saved in Hope–2

tion of Jesus. In Christ, the violent opposition to God's rule of truth and mercy were overcome, setting the way for the final resolution of the cosmic conflict between God, the world, the flesh and the devil. What faith in the eternal God encompasses is everything that may be presented as Christian hope.

### THE LORD BUILDS THE HOUSE

The Apocalypse reveals the ultimate city of God as coming down from heaven, prepared as a bride for her husband. Jesus has come from heaven to seek his bride, to bring his redeemed community into the communion he enjoys with the Father in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Christ's bride and the city are revealed following the last judgement that encompasses the entire human race as an intervention to restore righteousness and set community right. It will be an act that has encompassed all the injustices of history in Christ's atoning death on the cross, but now culminating as the outcome of the judgement people have made of the gospel of Christ, and it will be the reflex of salvation (John 3:19; 12:47f.; 2 Thess. 1:8–10).

Christ makes all things new through his redemption and judgement. The Lamb gives the holy city a common relationship in the sheer presence of the Almighty. The end will be the utter worship of God with hearts that revere and love him. After the last judgement, sin and death will be finished and not a new possibility. No political power or liberal social policy can ever survive its inner contradictions. The city of God is not the product of human dreaming. The utopia of Babylon has already fallen from the heights of power and totalitarian luxury.

The Jerusalem from above is in fact the temple that has already come down in Jesus Christ: 'Destroy this temple', said Jesus, referring to the sanctuary built by human hands in Jerusalem, 'and in three days I will raise it up' (John 2:19, 21). John adds that Jesus 'was speaking of the temple of his body', his resurrection body which displaces all human action. The perfect union between God and human beings has been achieved in Christ. In Christ, the perfect union between things seen and unseen, things temporal and things eternal, is a perfect reality.

'Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain' (Ps. 127:1). Is our hope in God or in our marvelous devices employed to get people into church? It is tempting for those who love preserving the past to make comments about those congregations that have grown numerically through their active evangelisation of people groups who are not believers. Orthodoxy can also attempt a glory that is not that which comes down from heaven, but can be a forming of a security to enable people to live in the past. Hope is canceled by the myth of eternal recurrence or of the eternal return:

This myth is the triumph of anxiety in the sphere of religion. Only what is perennial is real; only what is repeatable is meaningful . . . Salvation comes by suspending the duration of history, just as in mysticism, and by participation in a timeless event in a mythical epoch.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> C. Braaten, *The Future of God*, p. 43.

## Saved in Hope–2

However, efforts to build better and larger churches by reflecting back to people the culture they live in can dissolve the essential dynamics of the kingdom of God. Following this approach, we may fail to heed the preacher of Ecclesiastes who describes the meaningless as coming from a belief which discards the vertical dimension in order to concentrate on the relevance of the horizontal aspect of living. This brings us back to the meaninglessness of secularism and the one-dimensional mindset of modernity or post-modernity. Churches can work hard to be relevant to the cultural setting and devise worship practices that make people feel good and satisfy their need for personal meaning. Is the provision of churchly bread and circuses the same as the glory of the bride, or is it succumbing to the apocalyptic seductions and temptations of the whore? We may end up with a church quite distinct from the bride of Christ who is revealed in her simple purity:

The two mightiest dangers in the present are: first, to grow weary of hope, by imagining full satisfaction in the present, relaxing the tension toward the futurity of the promise through the immediacy of a false joy and dancing around a stationary god—a golden calf; second, to despair of the future, by yearning to return to the past, the land of slavery, the fleshpots of Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

### COMING TO THE ULTIMATE

Our mega dreams of utopian communities and ideal churches set up by human philosophies and eschatologies may be wish fulfillments or thinly veiled ideology. We are constantly accosted with schemes, programs and structures that promise hope. We need to be discerning. Our ultimate hope must not deceive the world or the Church. Some ultimate hopes have been all too determined and have given permission for acts of violence.

The Apocalypse gives us images that both reveal and obscure the heavenly realities they portray. Our hope is in God (Ps. 39:7). The ultimate hope is beyond what we can get our hands on. It is this; that the community of the holy city, the bride of Christ, will see him face to face, which must be the crowning joy of all we have ever longed for (Rev. 22:4). All that we see now is by faith not sight, partial and not complete. When opaqueness is transcended, 'we will see him face to face' (1 Cor. 13:12). When the end of this present world comes, there is only one thing to be taken into and that is God. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The bosom of the Holy one will be opened to receive his saints.

I think that we need to pass over to this hope. Jesus Christ is the door that opens for us what is the unimaginable secret mystery of God. What defies our intellect is the Word of the crucified God hanging on a cross. At the cross all of our secular and religious hopes are crossed out (1 Cor. 1:18). The cross is the boundary of all violent human hopes and the fullness of God's reign. When we see this it enables us to recognise utopian dreams as false gods. Moreover, in Christ we cross over to the hope of the beatific vision.

'Whom have I in heaven but you? And there nothing on earth that I desire other than you' (Ps. 73:25). Heaven is we and thou, I and thou. It is intimacy and communion where our own identity is realised in the presence of God. Does not our

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<sup>9</sup> C. Braaten, *The Future of God*, p. 48.

## Saved in Hope–2

heart dance at the sound of his name? Jonathan Edwards writes of his paradigmatic experience of the glorious majesty and grace of God where he equates holiness with beauty:

I remember the thought I used then to have of holiness . . . It appeared to me that there was nothing in it but what was ravishingly lovely . . .

What a sweet calmness, what calm ecstasies, doth it bring to the soul. How doth it make the soul love itself . . . how doth God love it and delight in it; how do even . . . the sun, the fields and trees love a humble holiness . . . It makes the soul like . . . a garden planted by God . . . where the sun is Jesus Christ, the blessed beams and calm breeze, the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards*, Oxford Uni. Pr., Oxford, 1988, pp. 15f.