

## **THE UNIQUE HOPE**

### **It must be restored!**

By

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When the apostle Peter wrote to encourage Christians who were facing severe persecution, he told them to be ready always “to give answer to every man that asks you a reason concerning the hope that is in you” (I Peter 3:15).

The hope held by these early Christians was so distinctly different from the pagan concepts around that that it aroused curiosity, and generated questions about it. For four hundred years the world had been subjected to the philosophy of Socrates, Plato and Pythagoras, and their speculations about “soul immortality” (something not found in Scripture). Their ideal was to escape the body and become only spirit, free from all physical impurities and limitations. Resurrection did not fit their philosophy. In Athens Paul was mocked for preaching the resurrection (Acts 17:32). In his resurrection message to King Agrippa Paul asked, “Why is it judged incredible with you, if God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:8). The idea was so incredible it caused governor Festus to declare Paul mad (Acts 26:24).

People had come to believe that death is a “release” from an earthly prison and the entrance into an existence of joy and bliss. The doctrine of resurrection denied this, and set Christians apart from mainstream religion. It was one of the reasons they were a “sect...everywhere spoken against” (Acts 28:22). No one cared that they did not enter into the Roman orgies and the pagan Greek festivals, but there was real concern when they taught that the only way to life after death was by a resurrection. This was an outright denial of the common belief. Peter had good reason to exhort his brethren to be ready to answer their questions about this unique hope.

Is Peter’s exhortation still valid? Are people today curious about the hope held by Christians? Unfortunately, no. Many denominations, in forming their creeds, have incorporated the same Greek notions which prevailed in the first century. The modern church, in its ambition for growth, has so accommodated its message to the world that it has failed to give a clear and compelling hope, distinct from the pagan notions of life after death.

This is obvious in the expressions commonly heard in sermons and at funerals. The deceased is said to have “gone to his/her reward.” It is true that when a person dies, the next event for him will be resurrection, either to life and reward, or to punishment by death. But neither will occur until Christ comes. “Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me, to render to each man according as his work is” (Rev. 22:12). Jesus promised a reward “at the resurrection of the just,” not at death (Luke 14:4).

“Where will you spend eternity?” seems to be an appropriate question to those who believe that everyone has an immortal soul. But the Bible makes no mention of an immortal soul. The word “immortal” is used only once in scripture, and applied to God alone. “Immortality” is used five times; once applied to God, once applied to Christ as bringing life and immortality to light, once concerning those who seek it, and twice as a gift to be given to the saints at the resurrection.

If it were true that each of us possessed immortality, and therefore would never die, the fundamental question would be that of where to live for eternity. But the question Jesus died to settle was the question of life or death.

Heard in thousands of churches each week is some expression indicating that if you are Christian you will “go to heaven when you die.” Is this found in Scripture? Surely King David was one of God’s choice servants, but nearly 1000 years after his death the apostle Peter exclaimed, “David...is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.” Peter went on to say, “For David did not ascend into the heavens...”(Acts 2:29, 34).

What, then, of the promise of Jesus: “In my father’s house are many mansions...for I go to prepare a place for you?” (John 14:2). Jesus goes right on to say, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again and will receive you unto myself...” Vs. 3). We are to be received when He comes again, not at death.

The idea of immortal souls with halos and wings, floating around in heaven, is popular in art and literature, but it is pure fantasy. The real hope is expressed by Paul, in giving comfort to Christians at Thessalonica regarding those who had “fallen asleep in Jesus.” Instead of saying that their lost loved ones were enjoying life in heaven, as is usually said today, he wrote that they would be resurrected at the coming of Jesus (I Thess. 4:16). To the Corinthians he wrote, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed...For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible...” (I Cor. 15:51–52).

Such a resurrection is absolutely essential for life. In fact, Paul wrote that if there is no resurrection, then “those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (I Cor. 15:18).

If all the deceased saints are already living in joyful fellowship in heaven, then the Biblical concept of the “hope within” — the resurrection from death — is meaningless. It is often heard at funerals that the brother or sister in the coffin has not really died, but is now in heaven, more alive than ever. This is supposed to give great comfort to those remaining. On the contrary, it often is the cause of unnecessary concern and anxiety, when a remaining child thinks that a mother or father is up in heaven watching everything they do! Such a concept opens the way for prayer to the saints and the worship of Mary. It shifts the focus away from Jesus, the price He paid to give us life, and the importance of His coming to raise the dead.

Some think to find a strong argument for the traditional “heaven at death” in Paul’s “desire to depart, and to be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23). But Paul was more explicit than all the others in declaring that the Christian’s hope will be realized in the day of resurrection. In II Timothy 4:6–8 he wrote, “For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.” Here, also, he speaks of his “departure,” but the realization of his hope, and that of all Christians, is not to take place until the day of Christ’s appearing.

Of course, there is more to our hope than being restored to life. Scripture says that “we shall be changed,” and that “we shall be like Him,” indicating life that is perfect in God’s image (I Cor. 15:51 and I John 3:2).

The Bible gives little description of the eternal home of the redeemed. Peter wrote that since this earth is to be destroyed by fire, “we look for a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness” (II Peter 3:13). John describes a “new heaven and a new earth” where there is no evil, no pain, sorrow or death, and where God dwells with his people (Rev. 21:22). John’s description is highly symbolical, but we can be sure that the reality will be beautiful beyond our imagination. None of this will be available without a resurrection from death.

Of all religions, Christ has the only answer to death and future life. Yet this glorious hope has been buried under the obfuscated pagan notions of immortality, while the world gropes in darkness and sorrow. In India, for example, people starve while millions of cattle roam the land consuming the food, all because of the false belief in immortal souls. They are afraid to kill a cow because it might be the reincarnation of some person! In our own land there are millions being led into “New Age” pagan worship, because they do not know the hope Christ offers.

I challenge each Christian, preacher, teacher, and writer to abandon the language of paganism and get back to the language of scripture, to speak where the Bible speaks, in the Bible’s own language. After the example of Jesus, proclaim the promise of life through a resurrection from death. He did not say, “Believe on the son and go to heaven,” but “whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

“Sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord: being ready always to give answer to every man that asks you a reason concerning the hope that is in you” (I Peter 3:15).

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