

Resurrection of the Body and Life Everlasting

Psalm 23; Revelation 7

Drama

It was John Calvin who said, "the world is a theatre of God's glory. Calvin of course is only echoing what is plainly taught in God's Word. The Psalmist says:

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.*

In the world, God puts his glory on display for all to see. But there is a profound insight in the way Calvin expresses himself. For he doesn't say *the world is a picture of God's glory, or the world is an art gallery of God's glory*. He says it is a *theatre*. And what do you see at a theatre? **DRAMA!**

There is movement and action, beginning and ending, tension and resolution. There is plot and characterisation and speech. Everything in the world, from creation to human history unfolds a great drama of the majesty of God. You could say, the drama is a five-act play, each initiated by *God's speaking and acting*.¹

The first act is *creation* and its subsequent *corruption*. God speaks the world into being, and even after humanity turns from God, this sets the stage for everything else that follows.

Act II begins with God's word of promise. First in the garden of a child who will crush the serpent. Then to Noah after the flood.

¹ This insight, and the outline that follows, is borrowed from *Hearers & Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples Through Scripture and Doctrine* by Kevin Vanhoozer

Then to Abraham, that through him God will bless the whole world. Act II runs through the whole Old Testament (it's a looong act), characterised by Israel's faithlessness but even more so by God's faithfulness.

The pivotal and climactic third act is Jesus himself: God's definitive saving Word. Conceived, born, suffered, crucified, dead, buried, risen, ascended and ruling at God's right hand. Jesus comes clothed in the good news of the gospel as the YES to every promise of God.

Act IV begins with the risen Christ sending his Spirit to create the church. Here we see that the drama of Scripture is not just a story to be read, but a script to be performed. The Spirit unites us with Jesus, makes us actors in the drama, gives us our lines, and equips us to participate in God's Story! This is where we are now, in the closing scenes of Act IV.

We look back to what Jesus has done and we look forward to Act V. When Jesus will return to judge the world and usher in the new heavens and new earth. one This final act has everything you're looking for in a blockbuster ending: the good guys win (that's God), the bad guys lose (that's the devil), there is a wedding, and it ends with a song.

By the Spirit, we share in the benefits of Jesus' death: we believe in the forgiveness of sins. AND IN THE SAME WAY we will also share in his resurrection: we believe in *the resurrection and the body and the life everlasting*. Because he lives, we too will live!

And so as we conclude our series in the apostles creed, today we will consider these final two lines of our confession. And it's my prayer that God will excite us with the substance of our hope, and encourage us to play our part as we take up our positions in the theatre of God's glory.

Doctrine

For the Christian, resurrection and life everlasting is no generic hope of "life after death", as if all religions basically share the same hope. It is something specific, and it is stunningly beautiful.

And as we consider this doctrine, I want to highlight three distinct aspects of our Christian hope: It is *physical*, it is *personal*, and it is *promised and present*.

- *Physical*

So first, our Christian hope is physical. There are all sorts of spiritualities that speak of the reincarnation of our souls, or the ascent of our life-force to the divine energy of the universe. And there is a certain caricature of heaven as disembodied spirits floating around in the clouds.

But the Christian hope is not only a spiritual reality. It is physical.

We tend to think of this world as physical and real, and the life to come as wispy and ethereal. But, to borrow an image from CS Lewis, it is *heaven* that is solid and substantial, and our sinful bodies are mere shadows of the resurrection bodies we will be given to us at the return of Jesus.

And so In the Apostles' Creed, in total contrast to the Greek and Roman world in which it was written, Christians confess, the resurrection of the *body*. We believe that God, our Good Father in Heaven, created the heavens and the earth, including our bodies. And though our bodies, like the rest of creation, are corrupted by sin, God is committed to redeeming all that he has made.

And so in Revelation 7, the saints do not float around as spirits. Rather, they serve before the throne, God dwells among them, they are led by Jesus their shepherd, they drink from living streams, and tears are wiped from their eyes. This is a physical, tangible hope.

Where every wrong you have done in your body is washed away and you are made totally clean. And where every wrong done *to your body* is made right, and you are made completely new, with bodies fit for the new creation.

This is our hope: that God will redeem us, both soul and body, and transform us into the image of the resurrected Jesus.

...our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

(Philippians 3:20-21)

- *Personal*

Which leads to the second point, Christian hope is profoundly *personal*. For there is a certain view of life after death, which is primarily about our own pleasure. As if on the other side of death is some heavenly Disneyland, where our every desire is satisfied.

This is pretty much the picture of Paradise in Islam. In the Quran Paradise is described in physical terms, yes, but it is mostly sensual. The Muslim person looks forward to streams of alcohol and sex with 70 virgins. But conspicuous by his absence is Allah himself. There are many pleasures in paradise, but not God himself.

How different, then is the Christian hope! You just can't miss it in Revelation 7. At the centre of John's vision is *the throne and the Lamb* in verse 9. The chapter climaxes with the *therefore of* verse 15:

Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

This is true paradise. Not wine and women but the wonder of being face to face with God, of sharing in the intimate, eternal communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Revelation 7 finishes with this beautiful trinitarian picture: **Jesus**, the lamb who died for our sins will be our shepherd, eternally guiding us and protecting us. The living water of **The Holy Spirit** will be our eternal satisfaction and refreshment. **The Father**, will wipe every tear from our eyes, giving us eternal comfort and peace.

And so here's the thing, our every desire *will* be satisfied in Heaven, because our desires will find their perfect completion and total fulfilment in God himself.

We confess we believe in the *life everlasting*. But this is more than just life that goes on for a really long time. In John 17, Jesus prays for us, and teaches us what we really hope for:

*Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent...Father, I want those you have given me to be **with me where I am**, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. (John 17:*

Eternal life is being WITH Jesus, seeing his glory, sharing his love.

- *Promised & Present*

And this hope is both promised *and* present.

It's promised because we do not possess it yet. We are still on our way home, we still live as foreigners in a strange land, we still live in this vale of tears, awaiting what is to come. We still feel the frailty of our bodies, we still feel the sting of our sin, we still grieve in the face of death, we still long to see God face to face.

But it is also promised in the sense that it is *certain*. While we are still on the road, there *is* a place prepared for us in our Father's house. We are foreigners and strangers because we *are citizens in heaven*. J.I. Packer says, "Christian faith is *hope resting on fact*—namely, the fact that Jesus rose bodily from the grave and now lives eternally in heaven."

Jesus has pioneered the way through death and into resurrection life. He has gone ahead of us, and prepared a place *for* us. This is what we remind ourselves when we declare the Creed. We recount historical events of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, and remind ourselves that our hope is grounded in who *he is* and what *he has done*.

And because of this, the Christian believes, stunningly, that this promised future has actually broken into the present. So Jesus can say,

*Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me **has** eternal life and will not be judged but **has crossed over from death to life.***

Brothers and sisters, by the Holy Spirit, the resurrection power of Christ is at work in you *now*. Christ is strengthening you and sustaining you *now*. By his grace, you possess the unbreakable, unquenchable, eternal life of God that even death cannot take away.

Now this doesn't mean Christians won't face trials of many kinds, but it does mean that in the midst of every trial Christ is with us, the Spirit is strengthening us, and the Father's love simply cannot be taken from us.

This is our hope. Physical, personal, promised and present, and entirely based in the all-sufficient work of Christ for us.

And so we read in Colossians 3, the sort of thing that when you stop to think about it, takes your breath away:

*Since, then, you **have been raised** with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and **your life is now hidden with Christ** in God. When Christ, **who is your life**, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

Discipleship

And it's by lifting our hearts and minds to things above, by fixing our eyes on Christ, that we actually find the key living our lives now. Knowing the final act of the drama, helps us to take up the script and play our part in the unfolding work of God in the world. Once again, our doctrine determines our discipleship.

In the New Testament we see this primarily, I think, in 2 ways.

- *Purity*

The first is *Purity*. Consider Paul's exhortation the church in Rome, at the end of Romans chapter 13. Here he is exhorting the church love each other, and their neighbours.

And do this, [he says] understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

This passage picks up two common pictures the New Testament uses to help us understand the way our future shapes the present.

The first is the contrast between day and night. The light of Jesus has shone in the darkness, and illuminated the ways things really are. So we live our lives now with the clear vision that comes from Christ. The second is clothing. Heaven is a party where the dress-code is Jesus. And so we put on Christ now in preparation for the life to come.

Here's the big idea: In Jesus, we see what a full life really is. And it is not in satisfying our own desires, but in humble service of others. It is not about accumulating stuff for our selves, but freely giving out of what we have. It is not about securing our own comfort or position, but lifting others up above ourselves.

The purity of Jesus is not a holier than thou prudishness, but an overflowing love that turns him out in kindness and compassion and care for those around him. So, yes, this has implications for what we do with our bodies: as Paul says, we behave decently, *not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery*. But it also means pursuing the sort of peace and community with others that is impossible outside the unity that comes through faith in Christ. We live without *dissension and jealousy*, but with humility and grace.

The future belongs to Christ. And so we live for him, not for our own selfish desires. And we live like Christ, not like the world around us.

- *Perseverance*

And in this we will need to persevere. Because it will not be easy to live with Christ-like purity. It will not be easy because of the persistent weakness of our own mortal bodies. And it will not be easy because we live in a world that still opposes God and his Christ.

But we *can* keep going living for Christ because we know the future that God has won for us in Christ. We do not yet possess it fully, but we look forward with eager expectation for our heavenly hope.

We read in Philippians 3 from verse 12:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

We *press on*, with great energy and effort. We don't cower in fear, or shrink back in passivity.

And we strain towards *the goal*. We have a purpose.

That is the *prize* for which God has called us heavenward, *literally the upward call* of Christ. There is nothing second rate about life with Jesus. There is satisfaction and fulfilment and joy in following Christ that is entirely unmatched and unsurpassed by anything else that the world can offer us.

So dear brother. Keep going. Dear sister. Don't give up. Through all the chaos of our life, we are on this upward trajectory of growth, adventure, discovery, and possession as we hold onto Christ, and even more importantly, as Christ holds on to us.

Let us remind each other of this hope, and proclaim to one another the excellencies of Christ. Let us encourage each other with the gospel and spur one another on to holiness and righteousness. Let us carry one another's burdens, weeping and rejoicing together, praying with and for each other. Let us persevere in purity, and press on towards the prize.

Doxology

It requires imagination to see the world as a drama of redemption. In a world of politics and pandemics, sickness and suffering, it's very easy to buy into the discontentment, the decadence, the distraction, and even despair of so many around us. As if everything is fizzling out, or going down in flames.

But the Apostles' Creed presents to us a very different world. A world created by a gloriously good Father. A world where the crucified and risen Jesus rules at the right hand of God. A world where the Spirit of God is at work in the church and in the world. A world of forgiveness, and grace, and joy and hope.

See, this is the point of Christian doctrine. Doctrine teaches us to see the world as it really is. So that even in a strange and confusing world we can *sing*. Praising God in a joyful chorus for all that God has done, is doing, and will do.

- *Singing songs of Home*

There is this scene near the end of the Lord of the Rings when Sam-Wise Gamgee is in the depths of Mordor. Frodo's companion, the gardener, had by this point fought off orcs and giant spiders, but now he was separated from his Master and all hope seemed lost. And at this point, seemingly at the end of the road, Sam sings of home.

With a wavering and weary voice he sings a simple tune of the beauty and joy of the Shire. His song ends like this:

*Though here at journey's end I lie
in darkness buried deep,
beyond all towers strong and high,
beyond all mountains steep,*

*above all shadows rides the Sun
and Stars for ever dwell:
I will not say the Day is done,
nor bid the Stars farewell.*

As one writer says,

*Sam the hobbit...wrote a poem and sang it into Sauron's lair and
let the truth of Home blast fiercer than Elven starlight. He
stopped being a hero and remembered he was a hobbit. He
wasn't an Elven-lord with a bow or sword, but a Shireling with
dirty feet and an ache to see his country one last time.*

Like Sam, our fiercest weapon is not the sword, but our song. The most revolutionary act in this world is hobbit-like hope that one day we will be brought Home. What deals death to Mordor is the childlike faith that one day the true King will return and set everything right. In this world we will still feel the darkness, but *all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so.*

So in the meantime we sing the light of the gospel into the darkness. We join our voices with the heavenly chorus, and we dare to sing songs of our heavenly home, saying

*Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."
"Amen!
Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"*