

loved ones again? Is there a heaven, and is there a hell? Just as important, how do our views about the future shape our attitudes and actions while we are still alive?

Realistic Hope

When speaking about the future, Christians are cautious about using the verb “to know.” It is an awkward verb to pair with the future. We anticipate the future; we plan for the future; we speculate about the future; sometimes we worry about the future. But we cannot really *know* the future until it gets here. To speak about knowing the future is a bit like saying we can taste the color blue or smell the hardness of a rock. The grammar works, but the phrase itself does not make sense.

Although we cannot know the future, we can describe some of its characteristics. Most notably, God

has promised a final triumph of good over evil and of love over hate. Consequently, Christians face the future with hope rather than with worry or fear. Like other people, we have legitimate concerns about our future health and happiness, but we also have a larger perspective that encompasses the prosperity and joy of the entire world. We hope for peace, for justice, and for God’s righteousness to be established on earth. We also hope that eventually we will be deemed worthy of citizenship in God’s eternal kingdom, where love truly will define our affections for God and our concern for our neighbors.

What does it mean to be hopeful as a Christian? How is this similar to or different from optimism? How is hope related to faith and love?

This hopeful posture may, at times, be at odds with the dominant culture. In the ancient Roman Empire, most citizens feared the future. They worried that the gods were conspiring against them, eager to crush

anyone who seemed too smug or too well off. So the Romans consulted the stars and analyzed the entrails of birds, trying to get a glimpse of the gods' devious plans in order to sidestep the traps that were being set. They grasped for any bit of knowledge that might enable them to outmaneuver the gods' ill will and to live long, healthy, and prosperous lives.

The attitude of their Christian neighbors was utterly different. Rather than feeling they needed to protect themselves from God's devious plans, the early Christians looked to God as their protector, comforter, lover, and friend. Rather than worrying about how to maximize their own wealth and status, Christians served others. Rather than thinking they could somehow outwit God, Christians freely admitted that God knew them better than they knew themselves and could not be tricked. So rather than worrying about what might happen, Christians trusted God and went about their daily tasks in peace.

How does your view of the future affect the way you live now? How does your view of

God affect the way you think about the future? How should we pray and what should we pray for when we or others are suffering?

Christians today possess that same trust, even though our subjective experience of hope may vary from day to day. Some days we feel closer to God and more secure in God's hands, and some days less so. Sometimes we feel upbeat about the prospects for peace and justice in our world; sometimes we do not. The world can regress as well as move ahead; there will be times of oppression as well as liberation. Hope is not always easy to maintain in the flux of life. In fact, hope is a virtue that needs to be cultivated in order to be kept alive. Even for Jesus there came a time when it was hard to hope: on the night of his arrest when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that God would remove the cup from him and would spare him the agony of the cross (Mark 14:32-42).

Jesus was not spared from the cross, and we will not avoid all the pain and suffering of life. Like everyone else, Christians will experience sickness and disease,

the death of loved ones, the dissolution of friendships, the loss of jobs, the shattering of trust, the slander of enemies, the destruction that results from natural disasters, and the ravages of war. While miracles can happen, God does not usually hand out free tickets allowing us to bypass all the challenges of ordinary human existence. In the midst of trials and trouble, we remain hopeful because we trust that both our own lives and the final resolution of all things are ultimately in God's hands.

Praying and Working for God's Kingdom

Christians express hope through prayer, just as Jesus did in the prayer he taught his disciples as part of the Sermon on the Mount. The Lord's Prayer is recorded in two of the Gospels (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4), and the specific wording varies from church to

church and translation to translation. Here are the traditional words of the Lord's Prayer from the King James Version of the Gospel of Matthew:

Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

The prayer of Jesus begins by expressing the desire for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Then Jesus models how to pray for our own more immediate needs: to have enough food for each day, to be forgiven of our sins in the same way we forgive others, and to be spared from temptation and testing.

The Lord's Prayer approaches the future with a distinctive mix of patience and impatience. There is a

tone of patience and contentment in the clauses that deal with our needs for daily sustenance, forgiveness, and freedom from temptation, but simultaneously, the Lord's Prayer sounds impatient when it speaks about God's kingdom. We want God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as soon as possible. In fact, the Beatitudes, which precede this prayer, say we are literally to hunger and thirst for *dikaiosune* (a Greek term that can be translated as both righteousness and justice). There is nothing patient about that kind of language.

It has been said that "when we pray 'Thy kingdom come' we are not making a request. We are taking a vow. We are pledging our willingness to allow God's kingdom to be established in and through us."¹ If we are not working to change the world so that it corresponds to what we request in prayer, then our prayers can hardly be considered heartfelt. Prayer is serious business, and working for God's kingdom—working to establish God's rule of love and justice in our hearts and in the lives of others—is urgent

business that rightly makes us impatient.

Martin Luther King Jr. modeled this kind of holy impatience in his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In response to criticism from a group of northern white clergy who thought he was being overly confrontational in his quest for civil rights and was asking for too much justice much too quickly, King wrote:

For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."²

Christians are called to holy impatience in their efforts to promote peace, righteousness, and justice.

Like the prophets of old, we are to seek real change for real people in real time. But just as the Lord's Prayer mixes patience with impatience, we are also called to season our holy impatience with godly patience. If we fail to do this, we can easily become disappointed with ourselves and others and even with God, and that can lead to cynicism and despair.

Patience, however, comes in many forms. The kind of patience that leads to complacency is not helpful, but patience that strengthens us and reinvigorates us for the long-term work of God's kingdom is necessary and good. Martin Luther King Jr. denounced patience when it delayed justice, but he was fully aware that patience and endurance were needed if his work was to succeed. He is often quoted as saying that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Patience, seasoned with holy impatience, is what keeps us energized as we traverse that long arc.

Have you ever felt you were being too patient in the face of injustice? Are there signals that tell us when to be more patient or less

patient? Are Christians called to different levels of patience?

The kingdom of God forms slowly in the world as each of us learns personally and together how to love God and one another more willingly, more fully, and more selflessly. The kingdom of God's righteousness is not something to be imposed on others; in fact, it cannot be imposed at all. As Christians, we have no delusions about the success of our efforts; we readily confess that God's kingdom will be fully completed only with the return of Christ.

Christians believe that Jesus will some day return to earth, but no one knows exactly when or how that will happen. If Christ's return is anything like the birth of Jesus, everyone will be surprised. No one expected the incarnation to happen the way it did, and it is highly unlikely that anyone has accurately guessed what God has in mind for the future.

When some people read the Bible, especially the book of Revelation, they think they can decipher a clear and detailed description of the end times in the

fantastic symbolism of that book. Some people in every century have read Revelation as a blueprint of the future, convinced they knew exactly who the Antichrist was, when the great tribulation would begin, and much more. But they have all been proven wrong, and people making similar predictions today will almost certainly be proven wrong as well.

The Bible contains numerous reminders that we can never know the future in detail, and that applies to the return of Christ as much as to any other subject. The book of Revelation is not intended to provide Nostradamus-like prophecy about future events. Its message is that no matter how bleak the situation may become, God ultimately will prevail, justice will be done, love will be victorious, and the powers of arrogance and evil that deform the world will be defeated once and for all. That is our reason for hope and our comfort in times of trouble.

Does your church hold strong views concerning how and when Christ will return? What do you think about such matters? Is it

helpful to speculate about how history will end?

Living and Dying

The previous chapter made a distinction between the grand story of the Bible and the many smaller stories it contains. A similar distinction applies to the future. So far we have been talking about the grand story of the future, but each of our own smaller, individual stories is also important. In fact, when we ponder our own death or the death of someone we love, our concern about the general fate of the world loses its intensity. We concentrate on the individual, and well we should. While God is deeply concerned about the world as a whole, God is equally interested in our own small but special lives, and God mourns with us when death comes near. The only time the Gospels record that Jesus wept is when he heard that

his friend Lazarus had died.

Death is, however, unavoidable. It is a fact of life. It is a part of being mortal. But death still comes as a shock. Anyone who has had a foretaste of death or who lives under the shadow of a terminal disease knows the dread of leaving family and friends as well as the anxiety of feeling fragile and vulnerable. Awareness of one's own impending death is like a knife cutting through raw flesh, leaving its jagged awareness in every corner of our being. When death stalks, whether we are Christians or not, we feel its presence as an enemy knocking at the door.

We experience similar pain when death takes someone we love. The deep sorrow caused by separation from a loved one reveals how much we are defined by our relationships. In fact, in many ways we *are* our relationships, and when a loved one dies, a part of us literally dies with that person.

What has helped you most when a loved one has died? Have you helped others who have suffered loss? Is it ever better to grieve alone?

In an odd sense, however, the inescapability of death can also be perceived as a gift. The writer Anne Lamott says that “death is God’s no to all human presumption.”³ That “no” can be comforting. When we contemplate our own deaths, it becomes apparent that everything does not depend on us. We can let go and trust the world to God and to those who survive us. We have work to do, but our work has its limitations. Others will pick up where we leave off; another generation will care for the world. Recognizing the limits of our lives gives us direction for the present.

Awareness of our own mortality is not always comforting, however. It has been said that “greed for life is what love for life becomes when it is limited by the fear of death.”⁴ Many people in the modern world find it hard not to be greedy for life. Ignoring the needs of others, they scramble frantically to fill up their own memory banks of experience before they die.

Hope for life beyond death and in the company of God dramatically alters a person’s value system. It offers freedom from the mad rush to accumulate this-

worldly experiences and encourages us to take time to be more gracious with friends, neighbors, family, and even strangers we meet along the way. This is God's good earth for us to enjoy with whatever depth of experience we can morally muster, but this is not our final destination.

During the days we live on earth, our job is to try to become the people we want to be for all eternity. That means understanding our calling in life and seeking to follow that calling as best we can, doing good and serving others. Death is not tragic; the tragedy is when people die with "commitments undefined, convictions undeclared, and service unfulfilled."⁵

Does reflecting on your own death make you more or less anxious to experience as much of life as possible? When observing others, is it possible to distinguish "greed for life" from "love for life"? Can you distinguish them in yourself?

Judgment, Heaven, and Hell

The belief in a final judgment has been a part of Christian teaching from the very beginning, and it has often been depicted in graphic, and sometimes goofy, detail. It is difficult to know what to make of these popular images of heaven and hell. Surely heaven will be much better than the pictures we have seen of harps and clouds and angel wings, and when it comes to hell, the imagery of underground fires and demons with pitchforks can seem equally cartoonish. What we do know is that our actions and attitudes in the present have long-range consequences for both ourselves and others, and the traditional symbols of heaven and hell point toward those consequences with dramatic, visceral power.

In terms of understanding God's final judgment on our lives, however, heaven and hell may not be the best place to begin. It may be better to ask what *final* judgment entails. What makes it final? Many contemporary theologians suggest that the finality of

God's judgment on our lives has as much to do with its incontestability as with the time when it will take place. In other words, God's judgment is final because when it is rendered, whenever that may take place, we will know once and for all exactly who we are. In that moment of divine judgment, all pride will disappear and so will all false modesty. We will see ourselves as God sees us.

In the present, none of us is very good at judging ourselves. Some of us worry about every little thing we may have done wrong; others of us go through life largely oblivious to the good or evil we leave in our wake. We are obviously incapable of judging our own lives, and we are not likely to do a better job with others. What is more, Jesus said to refrain from judging. Judgment is God's work and never ours. The parable of the wheat and the weeds found in Matthew 13:24-30 reinforces this point. In this story, a field has been sown with both good seeds and weeds. As the tiny plants begin to grow, the farm workers, certain they can distinguish between the two, want to remove

the weeds immediately. But the master says to leave the field alone until harvest, when the weeds can be removed without damaging the crop.

This parable reminds us that during our lives on earth none of us is ever in a position to spiritually judge our peers. We can never fully understand the challenges others face, nor can we know their hidden capacities for goodness or evil. We do not know what unexpected turns their lives may take, and we do not know what tragedies or blessings may befall them. In sum, our knowledge of others is so limited and our weaknesses are so encompassing that we are simply incapable of rendering any kind of fair judgment at all. Instead of constantly evaluating the failures of others, we are called to forgive those failures, and instead of trying to pick all the small splinters of sin from our neighbor's eyes, we are told to concentrate on removing the logs of sin from our own (Matt. 7:1-5).

When have you felt judged by other Christians? When have you judged others? What is the difference between judging and

appropriate discernment?

We still wonder, however, what will happen to us when we die and, in particular, what will happen to the obvious faults we possess? Few if any Christians have thoroughly holy lives. What happens to those imperfections when we die and face God's judgment?

Historically, Christians have given two rather different answers. The traditional Catholic view, in very simple form, is that God provides an experience or a place called purgatory. Those who have tried to love God and others but have not done so perfectly will have the sin "purged" from their lives so that they can stand before God in complete holiness. Purgatory is sometimes portrayed as a kind of antechamber to heaven, a place to stay until we are ready to enter God's presence without shame.

Protestants recognize the same reality as Catholics—that few if any of us are fully holy when we die—but traditionally, they have proposed a different scenario. Those who are entering heaven will have their remaining imperfections immediately covered over by

Christ's holiness in the same way that clothing covers our nakedness. That borrowed, or imputed, holiness of Christ will eliminate any shame we might otherwise have felt in God's company, and we will experience perfect joy.

Both of these scenarios are speculative, but both are helpful in their own ways. Christians do not claim to be perfect. We know we are dependent on God's grace both in this life and the life to come, and we know that any holiness we possess either now or in the future is a gift from God. We do not know exactly what will take place after we die, but we know who will be in charge. It is the same gracious God who has already come to us in Jesus who will render final judgment on our lives—and if we know anything about God, it is that God is much more, not less, gracious and forgiving than we are.

The question of how God will judge us naturally brings up the issue of hell. What does the Bible's language of eternal punishment mean? Doesn't belief in hell contradict the graciousness we have ascribed to

God over and over again in this book? This is a subject of lively debate within the Christian community. Christians agree that hell is separation from God and from one another. Most also agree that hell is the result of our unwillingness to embrace God's love much more than it represents a limitation of God's grace. In Jesus' story about the prodigal son (discussed in chap. 4), the older son metaphorically places himself in hell (i.e., separation) in relation to his father because of the disdain he feels concerning the grace bestowed on his younger brother. Embracing grace is clearly the antithesis of hell.

Christian hope is, of course, much more concerned with heaven than it is with hell. The Bible provides images of heaven as a wedding celebration, a city made of jewels, a banquet without end, and a realm where even animal enemies—lions and lambs—live peaceably together. C. S. Lewis envisioned heaven as much more real than the world in which we now live. In one of his works of fiction, he describes newcomers to heaven as so weak and flimsy that initially the grass pokes right

through their feet, and only with time do they grow as real as everything else around them.⁶

Many Christian writers have stressed that the central experience of heaven will be endless worship of God. Others have emphasized relationships—that heaven will be a place where relationships with loved ones will be restored forever and where friendship with saints from every age will flourish. Whatever the specific details, most Christians believe that heaven promises a depth of holy pleasure that is currently unimaginable. Our enjoyment of God will be intensified, as will our enjoyment of one another, and every moment “will be saturated with a joy that is undiminished by the thought of its possible end.”⁷

Christians cannot, of course, *know* the details of what happens after death. We do not know the future; it is all a matter of hope. But that hope is not mere speculation. It springs from the longings of our hearts, is grounded in assurances from the Bible, and, most concretely, is based on the historical resurrection of Christ. Christians hope that we, like Jesus and because