



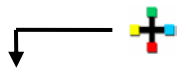
The Present Crisis and the Coming Christ

1954

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

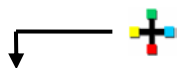
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When we speak of the Christian Hope we must first of all make it clear that the hope of which we speak is something quite certain, more certain than tomorrow's dawn. It is necessary to say this because in common speech the word "hope" usually means something much less than this. It usually refers to something which we greatly desire, but of which we have no absolute certainty that we shall receive it. "Hope" in our common speech has a strong undertone of anxiety. Even to speak of "Christ our Hope" may evoke something much less than the sense of complete assurance which lies within the biblical use of the word "hope." The Christian hope of which the Bible speaks, and of which we here speak, concerns something which is utterly certain, something that we wait for with eager expectation and yet with infinite patience because we know that it will never deceive us. And it is so because it is rooted in what God has done and in what He is doing. It is hope in Him who can say, "I am the first and the last and the living one; and I was dead and behold I am alive for evermore." It is hope rooted in the fact that Jesus, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, rose from the dead and is with us to-day.

The Christian hope is thus no mere wishful thinking about the future. It is based upon solid ground in the past and in the present. It is based upon things that have been done and things that have been given, things which are in themselves the most glorious that we can know in this world, and yet things which point beyond themselves to something yet more glorious to come. The New Testament uses such words as "first-fruits" and "earnest" to describe this forward-pointing character of what has been done and given. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead on the first Easter morning is the most glorious event in human history; but it is only a first-fruit pointing beyond itself in the midst of death and despair to a more glorious end. The fellowship with Christ

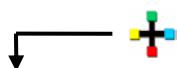


which we have in the Spirit is the most glorious kind of life of which we know anything; yet what is given to us in the spirit is but an "earnest," a token payment to assure us that in due time we

shall receive full satisfaction. Thus the Christian hope is firmly rooted in the past and in the present. And, at the same time, the past and the present – what God has done and is doing – cannot be rightly understood except as we see them as assurances of what He will yet do. Faith to receive and hold and trust in God's mighty deeds of redemption wrought out once for all in the past; love shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us; and hope that waits with eager longing and patient endurance for the completion of His glorious purpose: these three belong together, and we can only understand the Christian hope rightly in this indissoluble relation with faith and love.

Christ who has come. The starting-point is in what God has done once and for all. He has sent His only-begotten Son Jesus Christ to take upon Him our human nature, to enter into the entail of our sins, to die for us upon the cross, to carry upon His own self the whole burden and curse of our sins, and to rise again from the dead in the glory of a new life. That is the place where hope is born. There the full measure of evil was taken, and evil was defeated. There the power and dominion of Satan was expelled in all its range of operation and all its depth of malignity and there at the same time it was overcome by a holy love that went to the last limit of evil's power and overmatched it. And there the finality of death was destroyed. He who broke the dominion of sin broke also the dominion of death and thereby made it possible that men should have hope – hope as sure as the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. This thing that God has done, once for all, is the solid ground of the Christian hope. The proclamation of these mighty events was the first announcement of the Christian hope. These things happened, therefore neither sin nor death has the last word. There is room for hope.

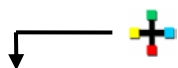
Christ who is with us. That is the only starting-point. But it is only the starting-point. A single isolated event in the increasingly remote past could not by itself sustain the Christian hope. Sin and death have not yet been destroyed. To ordinary sight they appear to be as victorious as ever they were. If there were no more to be said, one would have to conclude that this strange story from the days of Pontius Pilate was a mere fluke, a remarkably, but isolated and therefore not ultimately significant event. But there is more to be said. The story of



Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection comes to us not as a piece of remote history, but as the secret of the present experience of a living fellowship which spans the nineteen centuries which separate us from Pontius Pilate. What we say here we speak from out of that experience and that fellowship. We know Christ as our living and present Lord, and our fellowship with Him and with the Father through Him. This experience and this fellowship were born on the day of Pentecost and have been perpetually renewed ever since. Christ's finished work of atonement has so broken the dominion of evil that God's own Spirit could enter in and take possession of those who had been brought under the judgment of the mercy of the Crucified. It is in the unbroken fellowship which His Spirit has created that the Gospel story has come down to us and it is out of the experience of that fellowship that we speak. We know the risen Christ to-day as Lord and Saviour. We know that He is no remote figure of past history, but that He dwells in us and we in Him. The story of His living and dying and rising again has come to us not as a fable from the past, but with the power of God to judge us and save us, to destroy the proud pretension of our human nature, and to cause us to be born again as children of God. And through Him God's love has been shed in our hearts, binding us into a fellowship which is not of our making and sending us out to serve men for whom Christ died. It is in that fellowship in which He Himself is present, that we can speak of hope.

Christ who is to come. What God has done in Christ is final and complete as the revelation of Himself and as the breaking of the power of sin. But yet it remains to be completed. All things are not yet subject to Him. Sin, pain, and death still exercise their rule. Even we who have received the first-fruits of the Spirit still long for our full freedom. The whole created world is in

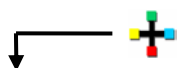
bondage to corruption and waits for release. But Christ has given us the assurance that He will complete what He has begun. Here we rely simply upon His own words, and upon the words of those who were nearest to Him and learned His mind. The whole witness of the New Testament points to a fulfilment of Christ's redeeming work for which we still wait. Christ who has conquered death is victor over every power, and we can await the final unveiling of His victory with perfect confidence. Yet we do not merely wait. The very reason for which the full unveiling of His victory is delayed is that He wills to give time to all men everywhere to acknowledge Him and to accept freely His rule. The time that is given to us



is a time in which His victory is to be proclaimed and acknowledged in every corner of the earth and in every sphere of human life. And we are to carry out that task in complete confidence and eager hope, because we know that the final issue is not at all in doubt.

If we ask, "What is the precise character of the consummation for which we look?" the New Testament answers with a wealth of symbol and imagery which cannot possibly be reduced to the precise language in which we describe every day events. It is obvious that we are here dealing with things which "eye hath not seen nor ear heard." Yet there is much that we, can say with confidence. The central assurance is that Christ is victor over death and every other power. The apostolic witness therefore confidently assures us that all that opposes His will, all that is evil, will be finally destroyed, that sorrow and pain will be done away, that God's people will dwell in the perfect joy of His presence and in the perfect fellowship of His love. Such a vision carries us beyond the present conditions of earthly life, in which death and destruction are an inescapable element. Christ's final victory must mean a new heaven and a new earth, new conditions of existence, a resurrection to a new life in a body fitted to be the vehicle of such a transformed existence.

It is to this glorious consummation of God's work in Christ that the hope of the Christian is directed. It is important to stress this point, because in recent decades many in the Church have lost this hope, and have been content to hope either for the personal survival of themselves and their loved ones, or for the development of a better kind of society on earth for their children. Both of these are legitimate hopes, and we shall speak of them later. But neither by itself is the full hope which we have in Christ. Modern man has too often oscillated hopelessly between them. The first offers a promise of meaningfulness for the individual life, at the cost of making the whole cosmic process meaningless. The result is the development of a form of personal piety which leaves the great affairs of the world to the devil. The second offers a promise of meaningfulness for the whole cosmic process, at the cost of destroying the significance of the human person. The result is the rise of totalitarian movements which dehumanise man. Both stumble at the fact of death, for it is death which removes the individual abruptly out of the cosmic process before its end has come, and thus makes it impossible that anything this side of death should be the meaning both of the individual life and of the life of the world. The

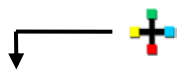


Gospel offers meaning to both because it is a message from beyond death, the message of One who has conquered death and lives for ever, and who will in Himself consummate both the life of the world and the life of every individual.

We must next ask, "When may this consummation be looked for?" That is a question which has greatly perplexed Christians almost from the beginning. The first generation of Christians undoubtedly expected the end almost at once. Later books of the New Testament show us signs of the perplexity which was caused by the fact that it did not come. Yet the Church had a clear work

from the Lord that even He did not know the time of its coming. What He had repeatedly said was "Watch, for you know not the day nor the hour." Christians were to live literally as if every day were the last. Over and over again revivals of vital Christian faith have led some to believe that the End was to be expected at a datable point within a few months or years. These expectations have always been disappointed. Other Christians have concluded from this that the whole concept of the End is itself symbolic, that there is no actual future coming-again of the Lord, but only a constant call to be ready for Him. Yet surely this is to make the Christian hope into something like the proverbial carrot dangled before the nose of the donkey – something which is always just ahead, but never reached. If Christians really believed that that was the truth, there would be an end of hope.

How, then, are we to interpret the teaching of the Bible on this matter ? The answer is that we must remember that the Christ who is to come is none other than the living Lord who is with us now. We have seen that while Christ's finished word of redemption was accomplished at a definite point in history, "under Pontius Pilate," yet it is no – mere isolated event in the remote past, but something which – so to say – meets us here and now in the presence of the living Lord Himself. In the same way we must now see that His coming again to consummate His victory, while it is a real event in the future for which we ardently long, is yet no mere isolated event separated from us by a trackless and meaningless waste of future time. It – so to say – meets us here and now in the presence of the living Lord Himself. He who is the End, in whom all is to be consummated, is He who meets us now and every day and invites us to commit everything to Him. We do not know the day or hour of His victory. We do not know what are the possible limits of human history. We know that it has limits – the



limit of death. If we do not know Christ, that is the only limit we know – and therefore we have to choose (or oscillate) between a hope for personal survival of death and a hope for society which transcends the individual person. But what Christ has done by His dying and rising again is to confront us with a new limit. We who – by faith and baptism – are dead and risen with Him have passed the limit of death. The limit that faces us now is none other than Jesus Christ Himself – He who was dead and is alive for ever more and has the keys of death and hell. We commit everything now into His hands who is Himself the End. We can do this with complete confidence, knowing that death and destruction have been robbed of their power, that even if our works fail and are buried in the rubble of human history, and if our bodies fall into the ground and die, nothing is lost, because He is able to keep that which we commit to Him against that Day. And we must work not merely with complete confidence but with vigour and eagerness, because we know that – in His mysterious wisdom – he has allowed the consummation of His purpose to wait upon our obedience, and entrusted to us the task of making His victory known and effective in every nation and in every sphere of life.

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