

“The Joy of Leaning Forward”: The power of biblical eschatological hope

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Abstract:

Many youth and young adults are experiencing the loss of joy and the lack of hope which leads to boredom, apathy, depression and sometimes suicide. Finding it difficult to be motivated and self-disciplined, individuals turn to the diminishing stimulants of substance abuse, social media, technology addictions, and destructive relationships. This loss of joy is an outcome of the loss of existential purpose and eschatological hope.

“The Joy of Leaning Forward” describes a biblical, eschatological hope that generates joy and purpose for life. Unlike human hope may be nothing more than wishful thinking, scripture proclaims an ultimate hope, rooted in the resurrection reality of Jesus Christ who will come again. Biblical promises of the future invade the present, calling us to live purposefully and joyfully between the cross and the coming. This hope motivates ethical living and compassionate service. The biblical eschatology of hope is a redemptive paradigm for those who are apathetic, broken, bitter or despairing. “Leaning forward with joy” describes young adults who have discovered forgiveness for the past and God’s hope for the future.

Note: This paper is based upon literature review, scripture, and youth ministry research.

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Note: This pre-conference paper does not include the youth ministry research data that the author is currently completing, which will be included in the paper presented at the conference.

“The Joy of Leaning Forward”: The power of biblical eschatological hope

Glenn Russell

The Necessity of Biblical Eschatology:

Artistic expressions of existential joy and despair are pervasive in our contemporary culture. These themes are favorite leitmotifs for movies, music, visual arts, and social media. But a haunting 1862 poem by Emily Dickinson resonates clearly with the soundtrack of contemporary worldviews. “This World is not Conclusion” is a profoundly ambiguous poem about the future, an uncertain expression of her faith and doubts, of certainty and skepticism.

*This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond –
Invisible, as Music –
But positive, as Sound –
It beckons, and it baffles –
Philosophy – don’t know –
And through a Riddle, at the last –
Sagacity, must go –
To guess it, puzzles scholars –
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown –
Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
Blushes, if any see –
Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
And asks a Vane, the way –
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –
Strong Hallelujahs roll –
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul”¹*

Though the poem accepts the reality of something beyond this life, it is skeptical about knowing anything about it. It hints that science, philosophy, nor religion cannot tell us much about either the contemporary and the eternal. It recognizes the haunting pervasive suffering as “the Tooth

that Nibbles at the soul.” The form of the poem is significant. The only period is in the first line: there is certainty that this life is not all there is, but that is where the certitude ends. “Dickinson’s poetic idiom is well suited for the task: elliptical, filled with dashes and sentence fragments, jagged and jarring, and open to many layered interpretations. Katherine Sonderegger notes that Dickinson’s form and content are well matched as her own anguished and faithful struggle with heaven and hell cannot be resolved, but must remain forever open, undetermined and over-determined.”² Today many voices would join Dickinson’s in declaring “This world is not conclusion” but the ambiguity of the future remains. Before looking forwards, it is useless to look back.

One response to the recognition of this imperfect world is to choose a neo-Platonic, neo-pagan worldview that sees the world as an illusion, a transitory existence from which we should escape. This perspective asserts that we are meant to be immortal beings in an infinite, abstract, aesthetic world beyond matter, space and time. This life is just the dark journey to the other side. Such a view cares little about contemporary social injustices or environmental imperatives. While such escapism has much appeal, it is comprehensively insufficient when faced with injustice, suffering and death.

Another way to look at the future is to subscribe to the myth of human progress and a future utopia. Historically, the Renaissance (1350-1600 CE) followed by the 17th-18th century period of the Enlightenment sparked bold belief in the inevitable triumph through human progress. In spite of its many outstanding contributions to humanity, the Renaissance also turned from faith in God to confidence in human potentiality. The idealism of the Enlightenment matched the mechanistic evolutionary paradigms proclaiming the certainty of continuous human

development. A hopefully formula was conceived: freedom + democracy + science + education + technology = a millennium of peace and prosperity. Philosophers and politicians proclaimed the certainty of humanity marching forward to an incredible future. But the two world wars of the twentieth century crushed the optimistic hopes of many. “The world is in fact still a sad and wicked place, not a happy progress toward the light.”³ The myth of progress could not deal with evil because it could not stop evil today or tomorrow and it can’t resolve the moral evil of the past. Past injustices must be resolved. “The myth of progress fails because it doesn’t in fact work; because it would never solve evil retrospectively; and because it under-estimates the nature and power of evil itself and thus fails to see the vital importance of the cross, God’s no to evil, which then opens the door to his yes to creation.”⁴ The long-hoped-for utopia of prosperity, equality and morality became a vanishing mist in the stark realities of totalitarian regimes, oppressive systems, increasing crime, environmental pollution and multiplying conflicts around the world. In the twenty-first century, we are experiencing unprecedented technological advances and unrelenting moral and societal decline. Moving beyond post-modernism, we are entering into a post-Christian age. The collapse of human hope leads too many youth and young adults into nihilistic philosophies, soaring addiction rates, and self-destructive or hedonistic lifestyles. Human eschatologies collapse beneath the harsh realities of contemporary chaos. The world’s trajectory is self-destruction. For millions in the world today, life is too oppressive to believe in the myth of human progress. The marginalized and the oppressed long for a better hope, a redemptive future, a future that humankind has been and will ultimately be unable to deliver.

It is important to recognize the clear distinction between human optimism and biblical eschatology. “A hope that rests solely upon the transient nature of biological life and human

resources is, in the final analysis, hopelessness, since death still remains the last word a person will speak to himself. Our hope must rest not on unredeemable human promises for a better tomorrow, but on the surety of God's Word which tells us that the One who came to save us from the condemnation of sin will return to deliver us and our world from the effects of sin."⁵ – "Christian hope and belief in salvation must never be confused with human optimism. Christians do not believe either in never-ending human progress or in unending time."⁶ Biblical hope is not mere wishful thinking, rather it is a settled confidence rooted in the promises of God; "it is grounded in the character of a faithful God."⁷

In their provocatively-titled article "When Up Is Down and Down Is Up: Preaching Heaven and Hell to the Lost Generation," authors Karoline M. Lewis and Joanna L. Flaten assert that future eschatological considerations are considered irrelevant by "twenty-somethings." When the focus is on the here and now, heaven and hell are considered irrelevant. "Nobody is asking this question, really...the postmodern generation is simply not talking about, wondering about, or worrying about it (eternity)... Death is a distant reality for most of us."⁸ As young adults pursue their career goals and navigate their relations, it may be easy to push eternal realities to the side. Unfortunately, this fixation on the present experience to the neglect of future realities leaves many contemporary young adults with little for their feet to stand on when a marriage fails, a career collapses, or when suffering, tragedy, injustice or death suddenly break into the "right now".

Fear is the dominant emotion of many people when they hear anything about the time of the end, or the end of the world or the second coming of Jesus. "For many of these people, eschatology could be summarized: "Things are bad on the earth today. They will get worse and

worse until Jesus returns and destroys the earth.’ Is it any wonder that fear is the overwhelming response?”⁹

The reality of climate disruption has shattered the naïve environmental optimism and positive activism of the past several decades. “The fear of environmental apocalypse that motivated a host of activity in the 1960s and 1970s has given way to a sense of fatalism... The enormity of the problems seems too overwhelming to face.”¹⁰ A major report by the National Intelligence Council, published in 2016, projected the anticipated climate disruption impacts for the next 20 years. “Climate change is projected to produce more intense and frequent extreme weather events, multiple weather disturbances, along with broader climatological effects, such as sea level rise. These are almost certain to have significant direct and indirect social, economic, political, and security implications during the next 20 years. These effects will be especially pronounced as populations continue to concentrate in climate-vulnerable locales such as coastal areas, water stressed regions, and ever-growing cities.” The report also recognized that climate disruption will cause increasing conflicts within and between nations. “Many countries will encounter climate-induced disruptions—such as weather-related disasters, drought, famine, or damage to infrastructure—that stress their capacity to respond, cope with, or adapt... Decreases in water and disputes over access to arable land will increase the risk of conflict between people who share river basins, aquifers, or land areas.”¹¹ Without biblical hope, fear would be a natural response to these global realities.

But fear is not the focal point of eschatology; instead biblical hope throbs with hope and victory. The most apocalyptic book of scripture is the Revelation of Jesus Christ (Rev 1:1) and it concludes with the promise that Jesus is coming soon (Rev 22:20). This is good news. This is the

basis of eschatological hope. Biblical hope recognizes the reality of the presence of evil in the cosmos and in our own lives: our thoughts, our desires, our perceptions, our attitudes, our relationships, our actions, our entire human experience. Biblical hope is not mere human optimism which assumes the continual improvement or progress of human life. The past two centuries have smashed the myth of human moral and societal progress. the loss of human hope often leads to despair (from Latin meaning "to be without hope"). God's hope - biblical hope - resolutely promises the eventual and ultimate eradication of evil and the evil one.

Eschatology must deal with the issue of suffering. Believers are called to live by faith with the open wound of theodicy. There are many kinds of suffering. Some suffering is the result of personal choices... choosing poor relationships, choosing to begin substance abuse, and making many other foolish personal choices and actions. But most suffering is not a choice and scripture recognizes the human systems and realities that cause suffering. Humans most often suffer as a result of other people's choices which generate economic hardship, political upheavals, oppressive systems, destructive entertainment. In contrast, and even in the context of suffering, joy is a choice. A biblical eschatology provides the foundation to choose joy. "Hope finds in Christ not only a consolation *in* suffering, but also the protest of the divine promise against suffering."¹² The joy of God's future enables us to bear the cross of the present. Because of the joy of the assured future, believers can embrace the joy of abundant life in Jesus Christ.

Whether one considers at the environmental disruptions or the global social and political upheavals or the biblical narrative, the future will present major challenges for humankind. In kindness, God has given us the window of the prophetic word to reveal to us the coming apocalypse. The challenges that are coming are insurmountable for human beings. "God is trying

to get His people to realize their own helplessness as they face final events. He does not want them to become scared and lose hope, but He does intend that they realize the enormity of the crises ahead. God wants them to flee to Him in utter dependence, to know as never before that He alone is their Creator and Redeemer.”¹³ Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith (Heb 12:2).

On our campus, I teach a university course in world religions. During the semester, we explore the differences and similarities between various worldviews and religions. Students are often surprised at the diversity of faith practices and beliefs. The myth that all religions are various roads leading to the same destination is quite quickly dispelled. Yet there is one reality that every philosophy, worldview and religion must face: death. This world is a global cemetery and every human being sooner or later is confronted with his or her own mortality. In his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus defined the paradox of human existence as we build our lives on the absurd hope of tomorrow yet each tomorrow brings us closer to death. All of philosophy can be summarized in the fundamental question as to whether life is worth living or not.¹⁴ Christian eschatology has the courage to face the problem of death and dying. It does not deny or gloss over this human reality. “Christian hope does not trust in the false saviors who claim to fix the unfixable problem of death... Christian hope testifies that God alone, with his covenantal preference for life, can awaken his people to a resurrection life in Christ such that death does not have the final word.”¹⁵ Biblical eschatology is in the hands of the sovereign Lord, YHWH, “God with future as His essential nature... the God who raises the dead and calls into being the things that are not (Rom 4:17).”¹⁶ Only God is greater than death and His vision of the future proclaims the day when death will be defeated: totally, completely, eternally.

This weary world will not come to an end by itself; God will bring it to completion.

Eschatology is about a loving God breaking into human history to re-create, to generate a new beginning, to restore full community with His human creation. There is a deep and profound connection between divine agape and biblical eschatology. God cannot be indifferent to the chaos, suffering and evil of our world. Just as his love drove him to the cross, his love compels him to intervene and rescue lost humanity at the end of time.

The Reality of Biblical Eschatology:

As a young man, Jürgen Moltmann had been deeply influenced by secular philosophies and the writings of Nietzsche and Goethe as Moltmann served in the German army during World War II. Later, as a prisoner of war, he was overwhelmed with remorse as he learned of the atrocities of Nazi Germany. In despair, he met Jesus and was converted from hopelessness to biblical hope. In his 1964 book "Theology of Hope", Moltmann advocated the centrality of eschatology, a theological dimension often neglected by his contemporary scholars. The cross and resurrection of Jesus are pregnant with present and future meaning. For Moltmann, the resurrection of Jesus is an eschatological, not merely a historical event. With the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection and ascension, the messianic age has come. In the resurrection, Christ comes from the past and the future and invades our present. "Christ's resurrection must be understood not as a mere return to life as such, but as a conquest of the deadliness of death—as a conquest of godforsakenness, as a conquest of judgment and of the curse, as a beginning of the fulfilment of the promised life"¹⁷ Moltmann wrote of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus as an eschatological invasion into this kingdom of death. Because Jesus has been raised, we have

absolute confidence in our future, “knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus” (2 Cor 4:14). Therefore we will reign with Christ and sit upon the throne because he has overcome and sits with His father upon the throne (Rev 3:21, 2 Tim 2:12). We will live forever because He has been raised and lives forever. “From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present”¹⁸ “Eschatology talks about God’s future... Christian eschatology declares that the future “has already begun with the coming of the Messiah Jesus. With the coming of the Messiah, the messianic time already begins.”¹⁹ Though profoundly and powerfully significant in many of its contributions, Moltmann’s theology of hope unfortunately blurs the prophetic distinctions between present experience and future fulfillment. The blessed hope, the promise of future intervention and restoration does enter into our experience now even as eternal life begins now. Eternal life begins now with the new birth experience; eternal life is much more than infinite time. Eternal life is kingdom life, the life of the next age, and it begins now. Yet both eschatology and eternal life have future dimensions unrealized at the present time.

The cross is the hermeneutical key to the scriptures and to biblical eschatology. Jesus took upon Himself the sins of the world and experienced the fullness of God’s judgment (John 1:29; 2 Cor 5:21). “Christian eschatology, properly understood, always points to the cosmic scope of the conquest of Christ on the cross, whereby the cross is an event of cosmic reordering, which by faith awaits its full consummation. The eschaton as end-event imparts to life a meaningfulness which it would not otherwise have.”²⁰ The foot of the cross is the most important vantage point for

interpreting the end times for “the cross liberated the world from the usurper Satan” and prophecies of the end reveal the consequences of Christ’s victory.²¹

Biblical hope is not centered in a place, in a position, in a set of spiritual practices or religious beliefs. Our hope is not dependent upon governments or technologies. “Our hope centered in a person. “Belief in the resurrected Jesus makes everything we do matter... He is our reason for living, our reason for serving, for life itself.”²² No wonder we pray with John of Patmos, “Amen, Even so come Lord Jesus (Rev 22:20).

There is a strong desire and practice in our Western society to minimize and avoid the realities of death and dying. “With the eclipse of dying a death comes the eclipse of its antidote – resurrection... (in our society) resurrection hope is replaced with hope for earthly flourishing, happiness, and the avoidance of pain and suffering.”²³ Biblical hope is unrelentingly realistic; it never dodges the realities of suffering and death. “The resurrection (of Jesus) did not defeat death by bypassing the process of dying, or bypassing biological death. The resurrection did not defeat death by an ascent to heaven like Elijah, or by a miraculous resuscitation, like that of Lazarus. Rather Jesus died, and was really dead. For a time, the disciples were left in grief at his loss”²⁴ During the Reformation, “Calvin and Luther understood the denial of death as idolatry: presuming mortal creatures to be lords of time like God –from everlasting to everlasting”²⁵

J. Todd Billings wrote these words as a patient dying with incurable cancer. He admitted that there is a temptation among cancer patients to indulge in “age envy” – a very real temptation to quantify life’s value – the longer the life, the better”²⁶ Cancer patients and others wrestling with terminal illness often long for miraculous healing. But Billings recognizes the miraculous healings or medical miracles will not ultimately solve the problem of death. These are temporary solutions

that will only temporarily remove the sting of death. "We cannot defeat death... But the good news is that we hope in a God of resurrection who can do far beyond what we ask or imagine. True resurrection hope does not mainly seek the ongoing extension of creaturely life, or the denial of the profound corruption involved in dying and death. Resurrection hope, in this fallen world, is an act of witness to a reality that, as of yet, is unseen."²⁷ Biblical hope resides in our risen Lord and He will have the final word over death. 1 Thess 4:13 "But we do not want you to be uniformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope"

Faith in the resurrection rejects a negative response to death. This was a radically different perspective to the philosophy of Stoicism, the predominant moral philosophy during the first two centuries of Christianity. "For the Soics, the individual lacks knowledge of the future, so it could be a source of anxiety... In contrast, through faith and hope, the Christian possesses a sure knowledge of the future. Salvation becomes real through God's promise, so the Christian can dwell on this future without anxiety."²⁸ When a loved one dies, a believer begins with grief but gradual reinterprets the loss in light of Christ's death and resurrection. Thus grief becomes longing... longing for reunion on that resurrection morning. Scherz uses the example of David as a illustration of how hope transforms grief into longing. David, though he "begged God to save his son with Bathsheba, did not mourn when the child died because of his great faith that he would see the child again... In contrast, David mourned for Absalom and Amnon, whom he knew to be doomed by their vices."²⁹ Likewise, Christian hope is not for a mere extension of our current bodily life, or a bypassing of death. It is participation in the New Creation after dying, waiting, and then rising again in incorruptible bodies.³⁰

In his commentary on Hebrews 11:1 John Calvin wrote: "To us is given the promise of eternal life – but to us, the dead. A blessed resurrection is proclaimed to us – meantime we are surrounded by decay. We are called righteous – and yet sin lives in us. We hear of ineffable blessedness - -but meantime we are here oppressed by infinite misery. We are promised abundance of all good things – yet we are rich only in hunger and thirst. What would become of us if we did not take our stand on hope, and if our heart did not hasten beyond this world through the midst of the darkness upon the path illuminated by the word and Spirit of God!"³¹

In the great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, Paul declares the resurrection of Jesus Christ to be of "first important" for believers and if Christ has not been raised then our preaching and our faith is in vain (1 Cor 15:14). "The resurrection of Jesus is a prototype of creation's liberation and resurrection"³² The worldview and self-identity of early Christians was formed though the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. "The early Christians looked back with joy to that great event. But precisely because of their very Jewish belief in God as the creator and redeemer, and because they had seen this belief confirmed in the totally unexpected event of Jesus' resurrection, they also looked forward eagerly to an event yet to come in which what began at Easter would be completed. This larger picture of a still-future renewal"³³ Jesus spoke often of the kingdom of God, which is both present and future, "already and not yet." This is the creative paradox of our faith which encompasses the past (creation and the cross) and the not yet (the Coming). Past and future define our current state of grace, for now, in Christ, we have no condemnation! This is the Christian's hope: secured in the past, experienced in the present and anticipatory of the future. This is the present promise of Jesus to the request of thief on the cross. "Lord, remember me when you come in your kingdom." The thief could see the present realities

but he had faith to hope in some far distant future. Jesus' answer brings this future hope into the present: "Today." This is biblical hope: today's assurance of a future reality. It is complete confidence that God as promise-keeper will remember all who trust in Him. "In the contradiction between the word of promise and the experiential reality of suffering and death, faith takes its stand on hope... Yet this happens in a way that does not suppress or skip the unpleasant realities... Hope finds in Christ not only a consolation *in* suffering but also the protest of the divine promise *against* suffering"³⁴ Faith perceives the dawn in the darkness of night and the promise brings forth the morning.

The contours of biblical eschatology encompass difficult truths that cause us to struggle with our understandings of God. "Among the beliefs which many modern Christians find difficult to accept are those dealing with eschatological hopes, particularly the second coming of Christ, the day of judgment, and the resurrection of the body."³⁵ King declares that these aspects of biblical eschatology are part of the "pre-scientific thought pattern" of early Christians – which cannot be accepted literally today. His solution is to spiritualize these events. For example, the Second Coming is not an event in the sky but an experience in the human heart: it's present, not future. Such a solution requires spiritualizing away the prophetic realities. David

Neville's stimulating volume "A Peaceable Hope" recognizes the interpretive struggle when dealing with eschatology. "There is a discrepancy at the heart of the New Testament. Briefly stated, the discrepancy is this: although the canonical Gospels present a fairly uniform picture of Jesus as an advocate of peace and practitioner of nonretaliation, certain texts within these same Gospels and in other parts of the New Testament apparently anticipate a future arrival, or Parousia, of Jesus in the guise of a violent avenger. The same Jesus who blesses peacemakers,

teaches nonretaliation, and responds nonviolently to violence directed against himself is nevertheless associated with end-time violence.”³⁶ To deal with this discrepancy, this paradox of a peaceful Jesus and an end-time Judge, Neville invests considerable energies into extensive exegetical considerations of problematic passages. He implements a “Christological principle” which prioritizes the peaceful incarnate Christ above the portraits of the King of Kings coming in Judgment. Additionally, the “shalom principle” and the use of “treasure texts” shape his interpretation of New Testament passages in ways that minimize the reality and necessity of judgment as a pre-requisite for re-creation. Ultimately and foundational the book is unable to reconcile the biblical reality that Jesus is both Savior and Judge.

Christopher Morse’s book “The Difference Heaven Makes” seeks to move beyond traditional eschatological paradigms and definitions. Sonderegger notes that “Morse is straining every nerve in this book to move the doctrine of heaven away from this traditional notion of heaven as the place beyond earth secured for those redeemed by the perfect work of Christ’s passion.”³⁷ Trevor Eppehimer is more direct: “Morse’s determination to develop his theology of heaven apart from the contrasting points of reference traditionally provided by either earth (as in “heaven and earth”) or hell (as in “heaven and hell”).... Heaven is both nearer to and father from us; it is no longer “up there,” but also no longer “within us.” Morse’s readers may be excused for being uncertain as to where heaven now is, or what exactly, Morse has done with it in his book.”³⁸ For Morse heaven is the new creation breaking into the world while the old decayed cosmos is passing away. His reinterpretation of key terms such as heaven and hell led one reviewer to proclaim, ““Heaven is closer than it was before. Trouble is, I don’t know where to look for it anymore.”³⁹ It may be wiser to retain the biblical terms and diligently seek for biblical definitions.

One of the most difficult dimensions of biblical eschatology is the process of divine judgment upon humanity. To avoid this complexity, universalism declares that all will be saved. Silcock articulates the Lutheran position against such non-biblical inclusivism. "To proclaim cavalierly that all people will ultimately be saved is morally questionable... since it completely overrides the decision that individual people may have made against believing in Christ and trusting his promises."⁴⁰ God will respect the decision of the wicked to reject the offer of eternal life.

Due to the violent portrayal of divine wrath in the Old Testament, Marcion of Sinope rejected the jealous, violent, tribal God of the Hebrew scriptures and affirmed the Loving Father of Jesus in the New Testament.⁴¹ Such a heretical view continues in a much milder form in the minds of some contemporary Christians who fail to reconcile the One God of both testaments. Old Testament hope is centered in the Creator God who at times intervenes to bring judgment and justice to the world. The psalmist, prophets and many others clung to this promise of divine intervention. It was a joyful hope in the midst of suffering. The flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are examples of cataclysmic judgment. These very events provide the imagery for Jesus' warning to be ready for the final judgment (see also 2 Peter 3:10). In Daniel 7 the Ancient of Days, judges the nations. And in the Gospels Jesus takes on this role as Son of Man, as evidenced in his cleansing judgment of the temple. At the end of earthly time, Jesus Christ will appear in the role of cosmic judge. Scripture is very clear: there will be a final judgment and this is a good thing. The Psalms yearn for and celebrate God's coming judgment. "In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their

due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation and wickedness, a good God must be a God of judgment."⁴² Without divine judgement, evil triumphs, oppression defeats justice, power crushes humility. Meanwhile the righteous implore "Why do the wicked prosper? (Psalm 73). Thus the solemn reality of the judgment upon the wicked (Rev 20:10, 14; Rev 21:8) must be "interpreted as an expression of God's love."⁴³

There are countless of injustices that must be put right in the final reckoning. "Genesis tells us about the first shedding of blood. Cain rose up against his brother Abel and the blood-flow started. It has yet to stop. Armageddon is the end of the story begun with Cain and Abel's conflict. It is the ultimate human conflict....The point? We settle our disputes with conflict, not reason, not love... We are hardwired for conflict."⁴⁴ Is it not understandable that the millenniums of conflict will lead to an ultimate conflict before evil can be eradicated. "This is the human way, the way without God... and we want to be accountable to no one, definitely not accountable to God. "Armageddon reminds us of who we are – a people prone to conflict."⁴⁵

The cosmic controversy between good and evil, between God and Satan, must always be the interpretive framework for eschatology. God declares that now is the time to decide one's future. Who is coming and who is judging is much more important than what is coming. Psalm 2 depicts the Messiah as God's agent of justice. "The judge, whom the Father appoints to represent him, is the Son; the judgment seat of God (Rom 14:10) is the judgement seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). Therefore, the Judge is none other than the Savior."⁴⁶ This should be a great comfort for all believers. We will not face a wrathful judge eager to find every fault and failure as he tries to keep us out of heaven. Instead Jesus who bears the agape marks of the cross will be our Judge. We can

approach the final judgment with confidence. In scripture, Christology and soteriology are inseparable with eschatology.

Eschatology is about God – about God breaking into human history to end, cleanse and recreate, to generate a new beginning. Yet this Christocentric hermeneutic does not erase the value of understanding what the scriptures say about the “last things”, especially in light of the biblical warnings of the Anti-Christ. Judgment is “God’s strange act” (Isaiah 28:21-22). Divine wrath is best understood as God’s protective love for his people which destroys that which would destroy them. God’s purpose and passion in judgment is definitively clear (Ezekiel 18:32): “I take not pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!” Prophetic descriptions of divine judgment “serve as warnings, divine wake-up calls...the Bible’s threats of judgment are meant to lead to repentance.”⁴⁷ The ark of Noah and the blood on the doorposts of Egypt are evidence of God’s justice and mercy. God never sends judgments without providing a warning and a way of escape.

The judgment is God’s decision about our decisions, especially our decision about Jesus Christ. Future judgment is rooted in our relationship to Jesus today. “Justification by faith is what happens in the present time, anticipating the verdict of the future day when God judges the world”⁴⁸ This is the Good News. In the present time and on that future day, for those in Christ there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1; 1 John 5:22-30). Thus true disciples don’t have to worry about the future; they can seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:24-34).

The final events will be cataclysmic - unlike anything this world has ever seen. We must not diminish the dual realities of massive cleansing destruction and amazing divine deliverance. These are the two graphic extremes in this final battle between God and the Evil One. The forces

of evil which have claimed this earth as their own since the fall in the Garden of Eden will not give up their dominion without a bitter conflict. And we are living on the battlefield. For those who believe scripture, a thoughtful reading of the book of Revelation calls forth sober reflection and repentant, dependent prayer. This presentation does not provide space to explore the profound truths of Daniel, Revelation and the other prophetic books that shape biblical eschatology. To ignore these solemn prophetic warnings is to risk our very faith itself.

Yet a balanced view of biblical eschatology moves through these dramatic final scenes of this own world into the new horizons of the world made new. There is more to eschatology than fearsome beasts, death and destruction. Instead of gazing at the apocalyptic antichrist, we need to fix our eyes upon the risen Christ, the victorious Lamb who alone is worthy, who was slain from the foundations of the earth (Rev 13:8)

Revelation 17-20 is a final judgment description of all things evil. But the story does not end there. The last two chapters of the book describe the most glorious descriptions of the reward and dwelling place of the righteous. In chapter 21 "the scene suddenly changes from the execution of judgment to a vision of the new heaven and it's capital, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven... In portraying the restored earth and its capital, John uses language drawn almost entirely from the Old Testament prophets, particularly from Isaiah and Ezekiel."⁴⁹ In other words, eschatological hope has been realized in this new city where God dwells eternally with His people in a sinless cosmos. Revelation 21:3 identifies the New Jerusalem, the holy city, as the tabernacle of God. "In the New Jerusalem, there is no temple (Rev 21:22); because of the abiding presence of God, the city functions as the temple itself."⁵⁰ Therefore, in the rest of the text, John describes the New Jerusalem in OT temple imagery. Revelation has presented the story of

redemption revealing the dual foci of divine sovereignty and human freedom. "The purpose of Revelation is above all to constantly remind God's people as they face oppression and hardship not to look to the things of the world but to fix their eyes on him who is their only hope. The book is not just a revelation about the course of history or final events, but rather about the presence of Jesus Christ with his faithful people during the course of history and final events. The Christ of the book of Revelation is the answer to all human hopes and longings amidst the enigmas and uncertainties of life. He is the One who holds the future. Rather, he is our future."⁵¹

Though there is a drastic discontinuity between the current world of sin and the coming world of righteousness; "the primary emphasis of eschatology is not what will be terminated, but on the establishment of God's eternal kingdom on earth and the healing of the cosmos."⁵² A cosmic disaster (sin) requires a cosmic solution (salvation). "Destruction, doom and damnation are not the final word in Revelation. Instead, the book ends with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, and the restoration of the Garden of Eden."⁵³ Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay" (Rom 8:21). This is a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, a fitting environment for the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:2). "This holy city is the beautiful place where God and humans will live together eternally, a city that descends to earth instead of remaining in heaven."⁵⁴ Of all the possible places where God could establish his cosmic headquarters, he chooses to live among His people here in the recreated earth (Rev 21:3). According to Rev 22:1-7 there will be an urban garden of Eden in the center of the New Jerusalem. "This is a powerful message about God's desire for the human world to exist in harmony with nature, and it serves as biblical support for the church's commitment to the stewardship of the earth."⁵⁵ Biblical eschatology presents a cosmic panorama stretching from Creation to re-creation. "The work of

redemption will not be completed until all the effects of sin are eliminated, when all creation will be made new (Rom 8:18-21; Rev 21:1-5; 22:1-5).⁵⁶ Earlier, in Revelation, the springs of water became blood (16:4), the Euphrates “dried up” (16:12), and a third of the waters became wormwood (8:11). In revelation 21 the Garden of Eden is restored through a river of life. The prophet Ezekiel describes a magnificent river flowing from the temple, with trees bearing fruit for the healing of the nations (Ezekiel 47:12). Now, in the New Jerusalem of Revelation, on “either side of the river is the tree of life ... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Rev 22:2).”⁵⁷ Yes, God will heal our world. He alone is worthy. He alone is able.

It is impossible to speak in definitive details of the world made new and one would be wise to refrain from speculation. After all, in 1 Corinthians 2:9, Paul quotes Isaiah to declare, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man, The things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (NKJV). But there are sacred clues of the realities of the world made new and these hints of heaven are capable of stirring the minds and hearts of contemporary youth. Recently, our youth group explored the following incredible possibilities of what will heaven be like:

- You will see Jesus face to face. Imagine what you would tell Him as you thank Him for dying for your sins and saving you for eternity. What will his smile be like? How will His eyes look at you? How will it feel to know that He has chosen to be with you?
- Sin will be no more therefore there will be nothing to ruin one’s happiness.
- The New Jerusalem will be a magnificent city with a verdant garden in its center.
- Because there is no sickness, every human being will be vigorously healthy. Imagine joy of physical exercise in heaven: hiking through meadows, swimming in crystal clear streams, flying like an eagle, sailing on the sea of glass.
- The redeemed will be reunited with their loved ones in Christ as the sting of death is removed for all eternity. The aching loneliness in your heart will be forever healed.
- There will be the opportunity to pursue any and every avenue of knowledge and science. Imagine studying biology with Jesus, learning mathematics from the angels, exploring

geography throughout the cosmos, absorbing history from the ancient patriarchs and prophets.

- Without the effects of sin, your mind will no longer be restricted. Learning will be a joyful adventure.
- There will be the most awesome music! Voices and instruments will combine into inspiring melodies and exquisite harmonies. If you love music, down here, you haven't seen anything yet!
- In the world made new, the mysteries and perplexities of this life will be explained. Now we see through a glass darkly, but in the new creation the veil will be lifted. You will be able to ask God any question you want and get any mystery of your life explained. All the "why's" will be answered. You'll see how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together. You'll discover how God's sovereign mercy guided and protected you. It will be clear that "in all things God works for good" (Romans 8:28).
- Without sin and selfishness, every relationship will be perfect. Self-centeredness and jealousy will not exist. Anger and resentment too. Kindness, generosity and authenticity will be our natural dispositions. All will be harmony.

Romans 8:18 18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

"The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats throughout the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, through the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love."⁵⁸ GC 678 (1911)

The Efficacy of Biblical eschatology

What difference does a biblical eschatology make in the lives of contemporary believers?

"Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present... This hope makes the Christian Church a constant disturbance in human society"⁵⁹ A proper understanding of biblical eschatology motivates activism not escapism. Believers get their hands dirty while they "wait" for their returning Savior and King.

Luke 16 records Jesus telling two parables of stewardship: the parable of the dishonest manager and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. These narratives need to be interpreted together because both deal with responsible stewardship in light of the impending future. The first parable is more challenging for Jesus teaches a positive lesson from a negative scenario. The dishonest treasurer/manager is not commended (Luke 16:1-8) for his crass selfishness and blatant dishonesty. In the narrative, he is given a period of grace before the judgment. What Jesus commends is the man's resourcefulness; he uses the period of grace to "lay up treasure/influence" for the future. With a sense of urgency, he implements his creative, strategic (and unscrupulous) plan to secure his future. This man faced an imminent crisis and he carefully developed a plan to deal with this impending reality. We also face the future reality of eternity yet we often fail to prepare for it. We take our eyes off tomorrow because we focus on today.

In the rich man & Lazarus parable (Luke 16:19-31) Jesus paints a portrait of contrasts. The rich man (sometimes called Dives from the Latin word meaning rich) has no thought for the future. He demonstrates calloused inhumanity towards those in need around him. There is no expression of regret for how the rich man lived his life. There is no repentance; just a desire to ease his suffering in the next world. The rich man's concern is his pain, not his calloused heart due to his pride and love of money. "With its eye on the future, the parable warns people about the perils of wealth, self-satisfaction, skepticism and unbelief."⁶⁰ This parable clearly teaches that the future judgment will review how we responded to the opportunities we had to serve the marginalized and suffering. (The parabolic elements of the narrative reveal that it is clearly not a doctrinal teaching on the nature of hell.) The rich man sees Lazarus reclining in the place of honor at Abraham's bosom. This seems to be the first time he really sees Lazarus. Jesus is teaching that

in the new world there will be a reversal of injustice and inequity. “The text points the reader to sense the contrast between the time of decision in the earthly sphere and the time when no decision can be made – in the afterlife.”⁶¹ There’s an old story of a student who asked a rabbi: “When should I get right with God?” The rabbi answered, “The day before you die.” The student responded, “But when am I going to die?” The rabbi replied, “No one knows. Therefore the Scriptures say, “Today if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.”⁶²

“Waiting” for Jesus to come involves an active ethic. Eschatology gives birth to profound ethical questions: “What does it mean to lead lives of holiness and godliness, to care for the earth, and to love our neighbours in a world of staggering inequalities, in countries built upon profligate use and abuse of the planet’s resources, and in societies addicted to unsustainable practices that endanger the earth’s life, alter its atmosphere, and threaten all who live at the margins?”⁶³ This eschatology is a warning and challenge for those of us living in the Western world today: “If God has been generous with you, he will expect you to serve him well. But if he has been more than generous, he will expect you to serve him even better” (Luke 12:48 CEV). As the Message paraphrase succinctly states: “Great gifts mean great responsibilities; greater gifts, greater responsibilities!” Our present ethic must “anticipate the future justice and righteousness of the coming kingdom within the present moment”⁶⁴ Compassion and inclusion will mark the hearts of those who are now citizens of the coming kingdom. Their kingdom living is a prelude of future realities.

Our culture promotes individualism and celebrates autonomy yet we long for connection and community. Young adults are often cognizant of this inner longing for community and sometimes turn away from church in disappointment. “In response to our experiences of isolation

we are seeking community and connection, and we are not experiencing it in church, so we look elsewhere.”⁶⁵ A simplistic, individualistic Christianity sometimes proclaims, “Jesus died for your sins so you are going to heaven. Amen,” But many young adults respond, I don’t want to hear that. Hearing those words doesn’t mean a thing for me... I actually want to hear what it means that Jesus loves me, and I want to hear the direct correlation: Jesus loves me and calls me to love my neighbor.”⁶⁶ Perhaps more than many previous generations, young adults demand that eschatological hopes be transformed into ethics of compassion and service. They may resist being told what to believe but they long to know how to live it, how to make each day significant. The primary motivation for acting in love toward neighbor is faith – loving their neighbor is a fruit of that faith...In faith, we receive God’s love and then we pass it on to our neighbor.”⁶⁷ Thus the community of believers can be light and salt to the world. Love for others is the overarching theme of the eschatological exhortations of 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5. Believers should abstain from speculation, encourage one another (5:11), help the weak (5:14), respect those who are labor for you (5:16), rejoice always (5:16), pray without ceasing (5:17) live in peace with one another (5:13), and be patient with everyone (5:13). The interlacing of personal ethics, community life and compassionate service for others is exactly the kind of contagious, authentic faith that this generation is longing to see. “Christians have to wrestle with what it means to do good to all, even if our first responsibility is toward the household of God, serving as salt in a decaying world, as light in a dark world.”⁶⁸ Eschatological ethics requires community. “The Christian life can only be lived with the aid of other believers... The church practices forgiveness. Righteousness only exists in the context of forgiveness – a unique and decidedly Christian reality.”⁶⁹ Eschatological hope embraces more than personal holiness. It arouses deep compassion for those who suffer, the

marginalized and the weak. Eschatological hope is never indifferent to the sorrow of this broken planet. Like their Savior who was moved with compassion and went about healing and forgiving (Matt 4:23).

In his conclusion to *Soul-Searching*, Christian Smith observes that many adults are reluctant to teach teens about faith.⁷⁰ Unfortunately, due to factors such as the decline of Christianity, the rise of eastern religions and eclectic process of developing beliefs, only about half of American youth believe in the afterlife as defined in the scriptures. Biblical illiteracy among youth and young adults is a tragic reality. Singleton's research in Australia, a country with a strong Christian cultural heritage, the majority of those who believed in life after death also believed in reincarnation.⁷¹ Increasingly, Western youth, even those who identify themselves as Christian, believe the general ideas about the future but the details are increasingly non-biblical. What they need is biblical truth, not entertainment and hype. "Let's instead give them the true hope that is not entertainment, nor escapism, nor diversion, nor a consumerist appeal to taste, but that teaches us instead a realistic appraisal of sin and evil, that reminds us of the victory of Christ over sin and evil at the cross and empty tomb, that enfolds us in the presence of God's reign in the world now, that challenges us to participate in that reign in ministry in our world, and that assures us of the truth that someday God will usher in his kingdom in all its fullness."⁷² Young adults in our faith communities need a foundation for faith beyond themselves.

As I was completing this article about the joy of biblical eschatology this afternoon, I received a message on my sad phone. One of our former students, now an employee on our campus, was killed yesterday while bicycling. A drunk driver struck Tod, left the scene, was identified and later arrested. My heart aches with this news. How can his parents and friends

cope with this senseless, tragic loss of a young life with such potential? No human words of comfort suffice. It has taken some long moments of reflection for me to continue writing. The reality of the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of Christ's return give hope at times like these. The words of the Gaither song are ringing in my ears: "Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives, all fear is gone. Because I know who holds the future, and life is worth the living just because He lives."⁷³ We cling to the promise of our risen Christ who will return to deliver his people and wipe away every tear, every sorrow, every sickness, every sin – and death itself. Even so – come Lord Jesus." That is the efficacy of Biblical eschatological hope. We lean forward with joy, anticipating eternity!

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