

THE ABOUNDING JOY OF NEW TESTAMENT HOPE - Part eighteen

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HOPE IN GOD IN THE FACE OF DEATH

2 Corinthians 5:6-10 - "So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, [7] for we walk by faith, not by sight. [8] Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be *away from the body and at home with the Lord*. [9] So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. [10] For *we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ*, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."

Hebrews 2:14-15 - "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might *destroy the one who has the power of death*, that is, the devil, [15] and deliver all those *who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery*."

1) MAN HAS ETERNITY PERMANENTLY FIXED IN HIS HEART TO CAUSE HIM TO HOPE IN GOD ALONE

The Bible teaches that what separates you from whales, dolphins and chimpanzees is not *mutations and chemicals* but *personhood in the image of God*. When you accept and understand this truth you will know why there are times when you lie awake at night and think about eternity: **Ecclesiastes 3:11** - "....he has put eternity into man's heart...."

That's why the fool is forced to constantly tell himself there is no God (**Psalm 14:1**).

The central thesis of this series of messages is when people lack hope in the future goodness and blessing of God they don't just go into moral hibernation. They begin to rely on the false hope promised by immediate temptations and distractions.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 states that people created by God can't help but think about eternity. It's an unavoidable part of personhood that is both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing if you know what the New Testament teaches about the real living Person, Jesus Christ, God the Son. Our opening text from Hebrews says He came and tasted and conquered death for those who live under his Lordship.

But thinking about eternity is also a curse for millions of people:

2) THE FEAR OF DEATH BRINGS BONDAGE TO OUR LIVES

Notice the words of our opening text: **Hebrews 2:14-15** - "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, [15] and deliver all those *who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery*."

Now those are very interesting words. I think they are easily misunderstood. The writer does *not* mean that these people live every minute afraid they are going to die with their next breath. Most people don't fear death in that sense. No one, except perhaps the terminally ill, lives every moment fearing death in that sense.

I think there is a better way to interpret those words. The text says that there is a kind of "*bondage*" that people are held in because of a fear of dying. It's not that they live each minute saying, "*O no! I'm going to die! I'm going to die!*" But rather, they *fill their lives with a thousand things to keep from deeply pondering and facing the inevitable reality of the death they must eventually face*.

What they're "*enslaved*" to is the thousand ways every day of their lives of *avoiding* the nagging fear that one day it all comes to an end. They are enslaved to the *denial* of death. And the effort required to hold this fear at bay is astronomical. Paul describes this treadmill of bondage in **1 Corinthians 15:32** - "....*if the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'*"

Indeed, eat and drink and buy and spend and travel and see and play your brains out, because tomorrow - and you can do nothing whatsoever about this - it's all over. This is the bondage the fear of death brings to those outside of Christ. Look at our world. People are hopelessly addicted to what they eat and drink and wear and buy and drive and live in and work at. The Bible says people are actually *held in bondage to these pursuits*. And bondage is the right

word.

Remember our topic in this series. This bondage to *trivial pursuit* - this *hope-killing* bondage - is what opens our souls up to a thousand and one *false hopes*. We get *locked-in* - taken *hostage* - by a thousand and one competing distractions and pipe dreams. In other words, the fear of death is a *root sin* that leads to bondage in all areas of life. It sets people on desperate, irrational, and self-destructive chases for purpose and meaning.

This is so important. More than anything, the fear of death and the bondage of attempting to avoid facing it opens up the life to the entrenching power of the devil. He knows desperate people when he sees them. He can spot those with a hunger for false hope. As I feel my race against the clock he offers countless false detours - short-cuts - to joy and pleasure. He is a master at pulling false hopes out of a hat, like a magician does a rabbit.

3) JESUS BRINGS FREEDOM FROM THE FEAR OF DEATH AND CONCENTRATES MY ENERGIES ON MY HOPE IN GOD

This is the immediate point of **Hebrews 2:14-15** - “**Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, [15] and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.**”

It's easy to misread this text. The *deliverance from bondage and fear of death* described as a result of Christ's atoning incarnation and death isn't a deliverance we experience at the *time* of our death. It's a deliverance experienced *right now*, while we experience health and life. We are freed from the *distractive power of all the false hopes to take our mind off death*. Or, put it this way - we don't live life spending energy *dodging* death.

Because of our hope in Christ's life-supplying redemption we can live life *accomplishing* God's will rather than *avoiding* a dreaded death. We are now free to risk everything for the cause of Christ. Our lives have a deeper meaning that dodging the reality of our own death.

This is the point of *application* for this message. We simply must see it clearly. My ultimate *security and safety* through Christ in the face of death is to have an *immediate effect* on the way I invest my life here and now. The difference isn't merely that I will one day die and go to heaven to be with Jesus. The Bible says that this truth of my ultimate security and *hope* in Christ Jesus is to do something for the way I live today - tomorrow - this week, next month - every single day until I die or Jesus comes again.

And the difference is this. Not only do I *feel* better about the fact that I'll go to heaven when I die, but I am free - really free - to pursue the great things of God in this life. I am free - really free - to use my best strength, my best energy, and my best time to relish and delight in the beauty of God.

Through my hope in Christ Jesus I am finally free to say “*No*” to the deceitful promises of sin. I am finally free, through the power of hope in Christ Jesus, to think *long term* rather than *short term* in the way I ponder my future. I'm not *running* from my ultimate future. I'm *planning toward* it.

This means I'm finally free to *not* set my affections on the things of this earth. I am free for the joy of the Lord to be my strength. I am free to be so unfettered by the things of this world that people begin to see my good deeds and actually glorify my Father in heaven.

Because I really believe that my future is secure, I know that nothing will separate me from the love of Christ. I am free to live for Christ's kingdom because Jesus has already cared fully for my needs. This is what I have been describing all along in this series as the *daring* power of Biblical hope. That's what it means to be free from the bondage of the fear of death. It means life is unleashed to live for eternity.

This is a very good test of where my hope is ultimately placed. If I cherish Jesus Christ - if I cherish eternal life with Him - if I cherish this more than anything else - then I live this whole life for the greater joy of my Lord. If, deep in my heart, Jesus Christ is only a back door escape from hell - if my religion is all *pre-packaged* by my church or my upbringing - then, whatever my creed may be, I will live this whole life acting on the premise that life will ultimately only work as I secure my own fleeting happiness as a distraction from death. My life will be a “*rat-race*” in the truest sense even if I have millions.

Whatever my doctrinal beliefs, *this life* will be the place where I find my pleasure, and eternal values will be cashed in for wealth, fame, success, revenge, lust, or whatever else will keep me from thinking about where this life is all

very quickly going to end up.

Picture two skydivers. Both jump from the same plane, trying to land on a small target painted on a farmers field. Both jump from the same height. Both fall at the same speed. Both are free-falling without being tangled by wires or cords. And each will have the opportunity to win \$1000,000 if he is closest to the target!

In fact, there is only one difference. As they jump from the plane they are suddenly aware that one has a parachute and one doesn't. Now, let me ask you a question. Which of the two is free to keep his mind and energies centered on hitting the target?

In the same way, our **ultimate security - our hope in Christ** - is to have an **immediate effect** on our lives. Our lives are undistracted by the terror of hitting the ground. Our hope in Christ Jesus fixes our thoughts and energies on the **purpose** of life, not just the **end** of it. We live for Jesus because we're heading home.

4) **THERE IS A LINK BETWEEN THE FEAR OF OUR INEVITABLE DEATH AND BONDAGE TO THE POWER OF SIN**

Jesus came and dealt with two related enemies, **sin** and **death**. He conquered sin on the cross and He conquered death by His resurrection. And when Paul says believers now live life "**in Christ**" he means those two victories are related in my daily experience **right now**. They aren't just truths I happen to **know**. And they aren't just doctrines I've been trained to **agree with**.

Here's how the fear of death and the bondage of sin are interrelated and both dealt with through hope in Christ. Because the bondage of the **fear of death** has been broken in my life, I no longer need to be deceived by the short-term pleasures and promises of **sin**.

We need to think this right down to the bottom. Christ had paid the penalty of all my sins. And that means I no longer dread God's judgment of those sins when I die. This is the way Christ delivers us all from the bondage of the fear of death.

So far so good. But there's more. Much, much more! Because I no longer fear my inevitable death, and because I embrace my future through and with Christ Jesus, I'm no longer desperate to **escape** the reality of my inevitable death with the false hopes of sinful temptations and distractions. Remember, **all** sin comes from false hopes. No one sins out of duty. All sin offers an alternate to **God** for satisfaction, or, especially in this case, **security**. And **nothing** makes us long for joyful satisfaction in life or security for our future like the gnawing pangs of the fear of our inevitable death.

5) **WHAT DOES HOPE LOOK LIKE AS IT GETS EXPRESSED IN OUR VERY SHORT EARTHLY LIVES?**

Here are some Biblical pictures:

2 Corinthians 5:6-10 - "So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, [7] for we walk by faith, not by sight. [8] Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. [9] So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. [10] *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.*"

Revelation 22:12 - "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, *to repay everyone for what he has done.*"

Romans 2:5-8 - "But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. [6] *He will render to each one according to his works:* [7] to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; [8] but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury."

There is something Christians wrestle with in verses like these. It seems strange syncing up these verses about God's judgment on all people together with passages that speak of salvation being a **free gift**:

Romans 6:23 - "For the wages of sin is death, but *the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

Ephesians 2:8 - “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; *it is the gift of God....*”

This issue confuses many Christian people. What is the purpose of a judgment according to **deeds** if salvation isn't by **works**? How can **works** determine my eternal standing if salvation is by **faith alone**?

And the Bible gives only one answer to that question. It isn't confusing. But it's so ignored by the entire church today that millions of believers have a distorted picture of what faith in Jesus is all about. Christ's judgment of believers' deeds proves whether or not their faith was real and genuine. And this judgment is essential because it's not **professing** faith in Jesus that saves me. It's **possessing** faith in Jesus that saves me. The deeds will be judged to show whether I have saving faith in my heart.

Truly, the whole New Testament works this theme to death - **James 2:26** - “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also **faith apart from works is dead.**” This is why we are **saved** by faith but are **judged** by our deeds. The deeds show whether or not real faith was present in the heart.

My deeds will accomplish two things at the judgment. **First**, my deeds will determine the reward for faithful service in God's Kingdom - **1 Corinthians 3:8** - “He who plants and he who waters are one, and **each will receive his wages according to his labor.**” And **second**, my deeds will prove the genuineness of my faith

Perhaps no one made this link between faith and deeds more striking than Jesus Himself: **John 5:24-29** - “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and **believes him who sent me** has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.[25] Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. [26] For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. [27] And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. [28] Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice [29] and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”

The really important point is the way Jesus described people who “**believed**” in Him (24) being judged by their **deeds** (29). That's because faith is not just what you believe in your head. It's the **setting of your hope on God**. It's where you turn for delight and satisfaction and security in this present, short, precious life. Faith is **hope aimed at God**. It longs to **please** God. It knows that it is only at His right hand that there will be pleasures forevermore.