

RESURRECTION AND APOCALYPSE: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE

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And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in thee. (Psalm 39:7)

No man's "hope for years to come" is better than interim unless his "expectation" of his future (including his death) has already been committed to God's love and tendance. (Albert C. Outler, Who Trusts in God: Musings on the Meaning of Providence)(1)

The issue, then, is Christian hope. We ask after the continuing purpose and providence and presence of God behind and before, above and beneath, within and beyond human existence and the created order. Immanuel Kant wrote in his Critique of Pure Reason that the whole interest of reason, both speculative and practical, is centered in three questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? All three are important questions. However, in a time such as ours, marked as it is by uncertainty, anxiety, and loss of confidence, the first two pale before the third. What, indeed, may we hope? How often do our prayers echo that of the Psalmist:

And now, Lord, for what do I wait?

For what do I work? To what end is my knowledge? Toward what do I live? These are questions deep within the human self to which resurrection and apocalypse are addressed.

Both resurrection and apocalypse have God as their subject, and therein is the secret and source of the hope they offer. Resurrection and apocalypse point to the sovereign grace and gracious sovereignty of this God who raises the dead and creates a new heaven and a new earth. They stand as distinctive last words at the end of the Biblical drama of divine grace which begins with the call of Abraham (historically), with the Exodus (dramatically) and with creation (actually). In this sense, the resurrection of Jesus and apocalypse (specifically, the Apocalypse of John) might well be called the climax and finale, respectively, of the Biblical revelation of God as Savior and Lord. In them are gathered up the great themes of creation, reconciliation and redemption, of grace and providence which run through the Biblical drama. In them we are bidden to hear and trust the great good news that God who, in Jesus Christ, graciously elects to be "God with us" and "for us" is, at the same time, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the One from whom we come and to whom we go. And conversely, the Creator of heaven and earth is One whose very name (i.e. nature) is a sure promise:

I Am . . .

I Will Be . . .

I will be with you.

I will be there with you/for you.

Immanuel--God with us.

Resurrection and apocalypse stand at the end of the Biblical story as the gracious promise and the sovereign guarantee that the One who creates and controls the future for which we are bidden to wait and work and hope, is the God who meets us in scripture, and supremely in the person of Jesus Christ, as the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer of the universe. It is my purpose, in the remainder of this article, to point in the direction of the Biblical bases for this claim, and to suggest some theological conclusions for the living of our days.

I

RESURRECTION AND THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead . . . (I Corinthians 15:20a)

. . . and I am counting on the resurrection of the dead . . . (Nicene Creed, alternate translation)

The solid core of all damnation is the false persuasion that we are done for, that the powers of sin and death have no match, that despair is an honest reading of existence. What we need to know is that all of the power wielded by "the powers of sin and death" is actually supplied by us in our sin, pride, and fear, as we feed the lie that evil has the upper hand. (Albert C. Outler)(2)

At its deepest level, the resurrection of Jesus Christ means that God is faithful. We have referred to resurrection as the climax of the Biblical revelation of God as Savior and Lord. In one sense the resurrection of Jesus is announced, reported and proclaimed in the gospels and epistles as an absolutely unprecedented event, the acting subject of which is, and can only be, God. At the same time, however, as the supreme expression of the faithfulness of God, resurrection is completely consistent with God as we have been given to know Him in scripture up to this point.

In Exodus 3, in the context of Moses' call and as a prologue to the event of Exodus, there occurs the revelation of the name of God.(3) Two themes are consciously brought together here which identify God, on the one hand, as the God who saves . . . as One who sees the affliction of His people, hears their cry, knows their suffering, and comes to deliver them (cf. Exodus 3:7-8). The very name, Yahweh, (I Am . . . I Will Be . . . I will be there for you/with you) seems to have the character of a promise of God's effective presence with and for His people. On the other hand, God identifies Himself with the God of the Fathers—the God of the promised blessing to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the God who, by them and their descendents, will bless "all the families of the earth" (cf. Genesis 12:1-3; 26:3-5; 28:13-15). The content of this mysterious revelation is God's promise that He will be known as the One who accompanies, sustains, secures, guarantees, saves, and provides for His people. But He will be known thus in His own way and in His own time and on His own terms.

Throughout the Old Testament, in the subsequent history of Israel, the promises of salvation (deliverance) and blessing (provision) are made good time and again, and they give shape to Israel's understanding of God. As the God who does Exodus and who acts faithfully and mightily to deliver His people from the threat

and oppression of their enemies, He is called "Savior." As the God of the covenant who binds them to Himself, He is the God of "steadfast love." As the God who condemns sin and who disciplines His people in their disobedience, He is called "righteous judge." As the God who is never satisfied with vengeance, but always seeks restoration and reconciliation beyond punishment, He is called:

. . . merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
(Psalm 103:8)(4)

God's faithful presence as Savior/Deliverer takes many forms, and, as the people respond in worship, there is a tendency to underscore compassion as a dominant trait of His character. God shows compassion through his mighty, saving acts for those who suffer (e.g. Exodus 3:7-8; Psalm 78; Isaiah 40:48; 54). He shows compassion also for the sinner in His acts of discipline, mercy, forgiveness, and atonement (e.g. Hosea 11:1-9).

At the same time, God is understood to be as truly present, as effectively present, in the routine, continuous, unspectacular affairs of life. God keeps His promise even in those times and circumstances which fall in the intervals between Exodus and the victory of Gideon and the success of David and the reforms of Josiah and the rise of Cyrus and other such "saving" events. Here God is present and at work to give security, sustenance and provision in the birth and development of children, the growth and maturing of individuals, the development and expansion of families--God present with and for His people, as it were, as the God who blesses.

In all this, God is understood as One who makes good on His promise to be with His people, to deliver them and to provide for them. It is no accident, therefore that when the New Testament announces the incarnation of God in the Christ-event, it brackets the life, death and resurrection of Christ with the familiar language of the God whose very nature is the sure promise of His presence:

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, And His name shall be called Emmanuel (which means God with us). (Matthew 1:23)

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

In the One whose name will be Emmanuel, the promise rooted in God's name (Yahweh), which dominates the revelation in Exodus 3, finds its final fulfillment. When the risen Christ promises: "I will be with you always . . .," we are meant to know that God's faithfulness to His promise is maintained in and beyond death itself, in and beyond each and every death including your death and my death and the deaths of our dearest loved ones. The Bible leaves little doubt as to Who is in control of the future, and consequently, as to the Source of our hope. The Psalmist in Psalm 39 was more on target than he knew when he answered his own question:

And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in thee. (Psalm 39:7)

Now, in our effort to hear the deep and profound truth of the resurrection, it is important to remind ourselves that nowhere does the Bible deny that death is real and that it is a threat to the human self. And yet nowhere has the Bible any

misgivings about God's freedom and omniscience. Everywhere His creativity, His divine initiative, His providential care and direction and resourcefulness stand secure against evil in all its forms: sin, unbelief, suffering, disobedience, death. Nowhere does the Bible suppose that God's own fate is locked into or frustrated by the fortunes of His creation, and it is unthinkable that anything creaturely can finally defeat His purposes. His final goal--the rule of righteousness and the reign of love--is never hedged or sold short. Indeed, the very concept of resurrection has its roots not in the concern for individual survival, but in the theodicy question and concern about the ultimate triumph and vindication of God's purpose.

The promise of God to be present with and for His people is not thwarted by death, even in the Old Testament. Over and again we hear of God's eternal presence, freedom, purpose in face of death and Sheol (Isaiah 40, 46; Psalm 90, 139; Job 38). Compare, for example, Psalm 139 and its soaring confidence in the presence of God (not only in history and nature but in the Psalmist's personal life) to the picture of Sheol in Job 10:21-22:

. . . the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos where light is as darkness. (Job 10:21-22)

. . . if I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost part of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Let only darkness cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is bright as the day; for the darkness is as light with thee. (Psalm 139:8b-12)

While we have here no idea of a personal survival in heaven, nor any other idea of immortality, and while much about death remains unknown, still God is acknowledged to be present at death as the gracious, ultimate reality who undergirds and even controls our coming and our going.

In the New Testament, under the impact of Easter faith, the idea of resurrection develops in such a way that it becomes a source of hope for the individual, God's victory over death in the resurrection of Jesus now coming to have personal implications. As with the Old Testament's emphasis upon the reality of God over against the reality of death, so in the New Testament the meaning of resurrection, at its deepest level, centers upon God and His power and victory over death. It does not mean primarily that "there is hope for me." It does mean that secondarily, and truly. But that is as it should be; for it is because God is faithful that we have eternal hope, not because of any immortality we possess in and of ourselves. The key question and concern in the New Testament treatment of death is not individual immortality, but whether the universal fact of death mocks the moral integrity of God's sovereign grace and righteous purpose. That is to say, the key question is theodicy. In this connection, Leander Keck comments:

The New Testament views of death are not at all concerned with the preservation beyond death of the identity and achievements of the middle and upper class individuals, as are many books today. Rather, because the New Testament is open to a broader range of reality it implies that the starting point for a theology of death and of resurrection is moral outrage against the world in which there appears to be no justice on which the weak can count, a world in which sucklings are bombed and

rabbis gassed. The central issue is not whether man has an essence that survives death, but whether the God in whom he believes, however fleetingly, has enough moral integrity to "make good" with the life He himself called into existence. In the last analysis, the central theological issue in the death of man is the character of God. In its own diverse ways the New Testament has always been saying this. It can still hold our feet to the right fire.(5)

This does not mean that the question of personal survival is unimportant. It simply reminds us where, according to the Bible, our hope really and ultimately lies--in the faithfulness and sovereignty of God. The Incarnation is significant not only for history and the community, but for the individual as a present and future participant in the Kingdom of God. To say this is emphatically not to justify idle speculation or undue concern over what form "eternal life" will take, or any other self-centered manifestation of the eschatological itch into which pietism and sentimentalism so easily lead us. Like the whole of the Biblical drama, the resurrection has God as its subject, and not humanity. We need to remember that our lives and the lives of those we love are "hidden with Christ in God," that He will shape them for His purposes and fit them into His plan for His Kingdom, and that they are and will be safe in His keeping for time and for eternity.

II

APOCALYPSE AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 11:15b, with gratitude also to George F. Handel for knowing that this is more appropriately sung than spoken.)

Hope is not the projection of our wishes onto the calendar of the forthcoming future. It is, rather, the confidence that God is holding that future open so that its potential for meaningful participation will remain, so that life will still be fit for living and dying, secure in God's provident presence in life and death and destiny. (Albert C. Outler)(6)

If resurrection means that God is faithful, apocalypse means that God is sovereign and that His is a gracious sovereignty of which the Christ-event is the interpretative key. If His resurrection is the climax of the drama of God with us and for us, the Apocalypse of John, with its vision of a new heaven and a new earth, conforming in every way to God's purpose and dominated in every way by God's presence, is the finale.

The scene is, appropriately, cosmic--the whole created order. The good news is not only that individuals are reconciled but that nature and history are to be redeemed as well. In the dramatic movement of the Bible, the whole history of salvation unfolds on the stage of creation. Indeed, the conscious placing of Genesis 1-11 at the beginning of the Bible serves to set the stage, as it were, for the drama of "God with us" and "for us" to take place. Conversely, it is in and through this drama that creation receives its ultimate meaning, its ultimate purpose, its ultimate destiny. God's intention to be "with us" and "for us," expressed in His promise to save and to bless, and make good in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,

is the very goal of creation--the reason why "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." All this is brought to dramatic expression in the apocalyptic vision of the new heaven and the new earth in which everything is determined by and conforms to what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Understood in this way, apocalypse is delivered from misunderstanding and especially from human arrogance which, through some literal, self-serving interpretation or another, strips it of grace, empties it of hope, fills it with fear, and turns it into a tool for exploitation of frantic people in the hands of a religious charlatan. To do this is both to read the Bible and to live in the world amid the suffering and tragedy of life as if Christ had not come.

Apocalypse is not a word of gloom! It is a promise!

He shall reign!

Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they shall be His people and God Himself will be with them . . . (Revelation 21:3) (Note the repeated emphasis on the promised, effective presence of God.)

We are not given a blueprint for this fulfillment. Indeed, Jesus warned the disciples about wanting to know "the times and seasons the Father has fixed by His own authority." Like the people of God from the beginning, we are given a promise . . . a promise uttered . . . and then the promise made flesh . . . in Person . . . and sealed with death and resurrection. Let us understand: The consummation of history is hidden. But like our own lives it is "hidden with Christ in God."

For the time being, the reality of evil and sin, death and chaos do threaten faith and life and hope. The poet, Yeats, knew it:

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

(W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming")

It is our Christian responsibility to live against evil, to oppose all the woes that afflict humanity and to stand against their human causes. We dare not leave misery unalleviated. We dare not leave social reform to the angry and the selfish, even the angry and the selfish within the Christian community, which is all of us some of the time and some of us most of the time. We dare not stand aloof from what Keats called "the giant agony of the world." To do so is a kind of practical atheism in face of the good news of a God of compassion who "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," who was "in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." This has always been the "answer" to the problem of evil given by the saints and heroes of the faith: evil is overcome through the intelligent, confident, courageous concern of people who live by the promise that lies at the heart of apocalypse. This is the promise that not even the principalities and powers, much less human rebellion and disobedience, are a match for the God who will descend into hell, move heaven and earth (or create new ones), and even raise the dead in order to keep His promise to be with us and for us.

Like the hope of resurrection, the hope of apocalypse is realistic about the

problem of evil. Like resurrection, apocalypse knows there is a cross in the heart of God . . . that God is with us in the agony of sin and death, evil and chaos. Like the promise of resurrection, the promise of apocalypse is that whether or not God's grace is irresistible, it is invincible. And that is good enough news by which to live and by which to die.

III

CHRISTIAN LIFE UNDER THE FAITHFULNESS AND SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, And His name shall be Emmanuel (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:23)

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. . . . and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matthew 28:18, 20b)

Of all creatures (the Christian) is the one who while he simply experiences the providence and lordship of God also consents to it, having a kind of "understanding"--if we may put it this way--with the overruling God and Creator. (Karl Barth)(7)

We would, therefore, do better (or so it seems to me) to learn to live in the atmosphere of God's grace with the courage provided by His love--the courage to face death daily and to react to disaster without hitting either the panic or the destruct buttons, to labor and love with the confidence that counts on grace as the fulcrum for the levers we have to push and pull in getting the world's work done. (Albert C. Outler)(8)

To live under and by the promise of resurrection and apocalypse means to live in the world not as one who claims to have all the answers, but as one who acknowledges the mystery of God's sovereign grace and gracious sovereignty. To do so does not answer all questions or solve all riddles. One still asks: Why? Whence? Whither? Wherefore? One still has to struggle for faith and, with Jacob, wrestle with the heavenly presence amid the ambiguities of life. The Christian has no master-key to all mysteries and all knowledge. Indeed, the Christian is especially wary of anyone who claims to have a master-key, whether in the name of religion (even the Christian religion) or some other authority which a human being can construct and possess. One thinks of the claims about life after death put forth in popular books by people like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (On Death and Dying), or Raymond Moody (Life After Life), or those claims about the future in the name of "Biblical prophesy" espoused by Hal Lindsey (The Late, Great Planet Earth) and others. Some may be more helpful than others, but are they not all, at bottom, attempts to secure the future and find the key to the future within ourselves and on our own terms? Karl Barth put it succinctly:

(The Christian) will not be like an ant which has foreseen everything in advance, but like a child in a forest, or on Christmas Eve; one who is always rightly astonished by events, by the encounters and experiences which overtake him, and the cares and duties laid upon him. He is the one who is constantly forced to begin afresh, wrestling with the possibilities which open out to him and the impossibilities which oppose him. If we may put it in this way, life in the world, with all its joys and

sorrows and contemplation and activity, will always be for him a really interesting matter, or, to use a bolder expression, it will be an adventure, for which he for his part has ultimately and basically no qualifications of his own.

And all this is not because he does not know what it is all about, but just because he does know. All this is because he has an "understanding" with the source from which everything derives, from which directly or indirectly everything happens to him; the "understanding" of the creature with its Creator, which is, for him, that of the child with its father.(9)

In short, to live under the promise of resurrection and apocalypse is to live with a quiet confidence that the whole of life is etched in grace, cradled in mystery, carried in love by One of no mean strength. It is to know, as Gerard Manly Hopkins wrote:

. . . we are wound
With mercy round and round
As if with air.

It is to trust what Karl Barth called the "basic and controlling grace" of God which begins as a readiness of God the Creator to be God with us and for us; which appears and continues as God, the Savior and Provider, gives and keeps His promise to be with us and for us; which reaches its ultimate expression in the life, death and resurrection of Him whose name is Emmanuel (God with us/I will be with you always); and which is given final expression in the apocalyptic vision of a new heaven and new earth in which the dwelling of God will be with humanity . . . God having graciously directed everything that occurs in this world for good through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Given this understanding of resurrection and apocalypse, there may well be a sin against the Holy Spirit which cannot be forgiven; namely, for the Christian man or woman, or the Christian community, to live as if Jesus Christ had not come. This sin might take the form of being at ease and complacent amid the suffering of the world which is loved to death by a God who then raises the dead. Or it may consist in showing off our zeal for righteousness, or flaunting our cynicism, or nursing our despair when we should long since have been satisfied and confident that:

The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.

(1) The Sprunt Lectures, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1967. Published in 1968 by Oxford University Press. The quotation is found on page 126.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 108.

(3) For a more complete treatment of what follows in these paragraphs, see Claus Westermann, What Does the Old Testament Say About God? The 1977 Sprunt Lectures at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. John Knox Press, 1979. Also, see Westermann's monograph, Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church, in the Fortress Press Series "Overtures to Biblical Theology."

- (4) See W. Eugene March, "The Dynamics of Biblical Authority," a study of the creedal and cultic formula describing God as "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. . . ." This article appears in the Austin Seminary Bulletin, May 1980, Vol. XCV, No. 8.
- (5) Leander Keck, "New Testament Views of Death," in Perspectives on Death, Liston Mills, ed. (Abingdon Press, Nashville), pp. 97ff.
- (6) Outler, op.cit., pp. 109f.
- (7) Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Vol. III, 3, pp. 242f.
- (8) Outler, op.cit., pp. 131f.
- (9) Barth, op.cit., pp. 243f.