

THE HOPE OF THE AGES—Part 1

by Mike Stallard

This article begins a multi-part series outlining the Bible's message of prophetic hope as it pertains to the future of this age, the Church, the nation of Israel, the Gentile nations of the world, and the created universe. The Bible has been and always will be a book of hope. Its hope is centered in its key figure, the Lord Jesus Christ, and what He has accomplished for us in His death on Calvary's Cross for the sins of the world. Beyond this, the promise of Jesus, "I will come again" (John 14:3) has given hope to millions of hurting people in this present evil age that their best days are yet to come.

First of all, the panorama of biblical history gives great hope to the reader by showing the wonder of God's multi-faceted plan of creation and redemption. As it does this, it reinforces the notion that the triune God has an interest in both unity and diversity. As God's plan heads to ultimate fulfillment in Him and to His glory, one can easily see that it does so with respect to several different, but related, strands of history. What is fascinating is that the initiation of each strand in the Bible (creation, the nations, Israel, and the Church) finds the start of its ultimate fulfillment in reverse order in history.

For example, the Bible obviously begins with God creating the universe (Gen. 1). However, the restoration of the created order, itself corrupted by sin, is the last strand of God's plan of accomplishment as he brings about the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21-22). The second element in God's multi-faceted plan is the development within history of the nations (Gen. 10). These nations figure somehow into God's coming kingdom, being judged or rewarded based primarily upon how they have treated the nation of Israel (Matt. 25). This judgment of the nations occurs after the Second Coming of Christ that is described in Matthew 24.

The third element in the many-sided historical blueprint of God is the raising up in history of the nation of Israel. This unique nation is not chosen due to its own goodness but because of God's sovereign choice in the world (Deut. 7:6-8, 9:4-6). The time of its appearance in history begins with the story of Abraham (Gen. 11:26ff). Its early development is revealed in the history of the patriarchs from Abraham down to the stirring of the Israelites under Moses (Exodus). However, the ultimate fulfillment of the promises given to Israel throughout the Old Testament including its national deliverance begins with the Second Coming of Christ (Lk. 19:12-27, cf. Dan. 7:13-14). At that time the Messianic Kingdom will begin headquartered in Jerusalem (Zech. 14).

The fourth element in God's plan of the ages is the founding of the Church in Acts 2. The Church as an institution is an entirely separate institution from the nation of Israel. God's wonderful design for the Church during the present age calls for the establishment of Jew and Gentile together in one international body of Christ. However, the Church is the first of the four mentioned elements to experience the beginning of its ultimate hope. This will be at the rapture of the Church when the Lord comes in the air for His own (I Thess. 4:13-18).

The above survey reminds us that the order of God's *creative working* is (1) the **creation** of the world, (2) the raising up in history of the **nations**, (3) the calling of the nation of **Israel**, and (4) the establishment of the **Church**. However, as the plan of God unfolds, the *redemptive work* of prophetic hope begins the end-time fulfillment in reverse order: (1) the

rapture of the **Church**, (2) the conversion and restoration of the nation of **Israel**, (3) the judgment of the **nations**, and (4) the renewal of **creation**.

At the present time, we find ourselves in the Church Age awaiting the predicted blessed hope of the Church, the coming of Christ to rapture the Church (Titus 2:13). This event precedes the seven year Tribulation Period described in Revelation 6-19 and the subsequent kingdom established by Christ Himself at the Second Coming. The Rapture, as the first phase of the Second Coming, is the wonderful event of hope that should be anticipated by all believers in Christ. This was a starting point for both Peter and Paul. In I Peter, the great apostle focused on the issue of persecution and suffering by believers. To those who were enduring mistreatment (1:6-7), Peter offered the hope of the coming inheritance in Christ (1:4), which would be activated or “revealed in the last time” (1:5). Peter encouraged Christians to bear their trials “tested by fire” with the hope of reward and honor at the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7). Peter is strong-minded and clear. His basic message to mistreated Christians was “Gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope **completely** on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:13). Hence, he could say “to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation” (4:13). The sharing of the sufferings of Christ means also the partaking of the “glory that is to be revealed” (5:1) and elders were expected to look to the Second Coming as their ultimate reward (5:4). Peter’s final message appears to be a repeat of his opening exhortation to find encouragement in the midst of suffering based upon future hope in Christ: “And after you have suffered for a little, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (5:10).

Paul follows the same general outline in 2 Thessalonians. The occasion of the epistle is the persecution suffered by the Thessalonian Christians. Paul did not focus on any present inauguration of the Messianic kingdom to produce a sense of hope in the Thessalonians based on the present activity of a loving Church (as good as that would be). Instead, he pointed to the Second Coming of Christ as the great hope and motivation for their present situation: “For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed” (1:6-10). Now this is not to say that Peter and Paul do not address other concerns even in these epistles. However, it is to show that, at least for Christians who were being oppressed for who they were, the presentation of hope is the Second Coming of Christ.

Future articles in this series will explore further this sense of hope for the Church and go beyond that into a discussion of the great hope that Christ’s predicted Second Coming is for Israel, the nations, and creation.