

To Hope Again

In 1991, when the former Soviet Union was falling apart, I gave a series of Bible lectures in Moscow's famed Kremlin auditorium. Thousands of Russians seeking meaning in their lives attended our prophetic series each evening. Bible truths came alive. New hope dawned in their hearts. New peace filled their souls. It was amazing to me to see how these honest-hearted Russians so steeped in atheistic Communism had a longing deep within for something better.

Our meetings were featured in the Russian media daily. As a result, I received an invitation to speak to a group of Russian scientists in a city of about 25,000, one of the Soviet Union's closed cities. Even Russian citizens were unable to enter the city without a special permit. In the 1950s, during the time of Nikita Khrushchev, this city became a center for experimentation in biological and chemical warfare. Hundreds of Russian scientists were settled here from throughout the Soviet Union. Here many of the scientific geniuses of the nation settled and worked in laboratories conducting sophisticated biological experiments.

I was invited to speak for three consecutive nights to these scientists and their families. My topics were "Is the Bible Reliable?" "Who Was Jesus and Was He Really the Divine Son of God, or Was He Just a Moral, Ethical Teacher?" And last: "Is There Any Hope for the

Future?” When I arrived at the cultural center for my lecture, I was amazed that the auditorium was packed. More than 1,000 scientists and their families crowded into the lecture hall. The first two nights went extremely well. The Soviet scientists listened intently, asked intelligent questions, and responded favorably. It was the final meeting that gripped their attention most. They wanted to know, in a nuclear world where human beings have the capacity to destroy most of life on Planet Earth, is there hope? They wondered how we could face the future with confidence. Could we march into the future with the assurance that a new world is coming, or are we headed for doomsday?

Hope on the Horizon

The one thing these Russian scientists wanted more than anything else was hope, and the Bible is full of hope. The apostle Paul especially is the apostle of hope. Writing to the Roman church, he encourages the members with these words: “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4). The fifteenth chapter of Romans concludes with these words: “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (verse 13). In troublous times God’s Word fills our hearts with hope. In life’s trying experiences God’s Word fills our hearts with hope. When the future seems uncertain, God’s Word fills our hearts with hope.

There is hope on the horizon. Writing to his young companion Titus, the apostle Paul assures him to keep “looking for the blessed hope and glorious

appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). All of history is moving to one grand climax in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. History had a beginning point, and history will have an ending point. All of history began when God created this world, and the climax of Creation is the return of our Lord, who will eventually re-create a new heavens and new earth.

There are three great events in the Bible—Creation, the cross, and the coming of Christ. The return of our Lord to this desperate planet longing for hope is the climax of the ages. It begins the culmination of the long drama of sin and death. The Old Testament prophets and the New Testament disciples heralded it. The angels affirmed it, and Jesus promised it.

The psalmist David triumphantly declared, “Our God shall come, and shall not keep silent: a fire shall devour before Him, and it shall be very tempestuous all around Him” (Psalm 50:3). Paul echoed it as he proclaimed, “The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16, KJV). Even the angels at Christ’s ascension affirmed it. As the disciples strained their necks and squinted their eyes at our ascending Lord, looking longingly into heaven, two angels standing by said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Jesus Himself promised He would return when He clearly stated to His disciples, “I will come again” (John 14:3). The second coming of Christ is the ultimate answer to the

great questions of life—those issues that we struggle with that seem to defy solutions.

The Second Coming of Christ and Life's Great Questions

The second coming of Christ is the solution to the problem of loneliness, low self-esteem, despair, hopelessness, and that nagging emptiness within our hearts. Deep within every human being is the desire to love and be loved. We were made to experience unconditional love based not on what we do but on who we are. There is that innate desire for companionship. We were not made to be alone.

Scientists studying rats noticed that mother rats often licked their young. At first they thought that this might be some sort of bathing. The more they studied the phenomenon, however, the more they concluded that the mother rat was not bathing her babies. Rather, she was love-licking them. The licking was a form of embracing. Further research revealed that when the baby rats are separated from their mothers at a very young age but still provided with the essentials of life, they die at a younger age. Evidently the licking provides a sense of security . . . a sense of belonging . . . a sense of identity.

We all need this sense that someone cares. Every one of us has this longing to be loved unconditionally. To be accepted as we are, no matter where we are from or what we have done in the past. Revelation 21:3 affirms that one day when Jesus returns we will be with God forever. The apostle John joyfully exclaims, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.” The tabernacle of God is

the very dwelling place of God. John promises that one day soon we will live with Him forever.

We were not made to live apart from Him. We were made for Him. He will fill the emptiness of our lives. As Augustine said so well centuries ago: “Lord, we were made for You, and our hearts will never find rest until they find rest in You.” The ultimate answer to the problem of this cosmic loneliness, this angst within our souls, is the coming of Christ, when we will be in the presence of God forever.

The One who knows us best loves us most and is soon coming to take us home with Him. We can look forward to a future that is bright with the promises of God—a forever future with Him. We are not specks of cosmic dust in the universe. We were created for fellowship with the God that made us. We have a place to belong. One day we will see Him face to face and be immersed in His love. He has promised never to forsake us. Daily He longs to be our companion. The friendship we enjoy with Him today is just a slight foretaste of the deeper fellowship and greater joy we will experience with Him throughout all eternity. Although today we cannot see Him and communicate with Him face to face, the promise of His return reassures us that one day we will see Him and live with Him eternally.

One day we will live in His presence. One day love will reign supreme, and our hearts will be at peace. One day the longing inside to be fully loved with no barriers between will be gone.

The second coming of Christ is not only the answer to loneliness. It is also the ultimate solution to the problem of pain.

Solving the Problem of Pain

Pain, suffering, sorrow, and tears plague our world. Heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes afflict hundreds of thousands of people each year. In cancer wards across the country patients have had their bodies weakened through multiple surgeries, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. They have lost their hair, their strength, their energy—and some have even lost their will to live. Disease of all kinds ravages our bodies.

In many of the developing countries malaria is still a major problem. Dysentery and diarrhea, which are often a result of a polluted water supply, cause immeasurable suffering to the very young and old alike.

Natural disasters appear suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, to destroy homes and leave a wake of suffering and sorrow in their path. Uncontrollable forest fires fueled by fierce winds sweep down canyons and destroy entire communities. The ravages of war cause untold misery. Bombs drop. Battling forces rampage villages, towns, and cities. Children are maimed. Legs are blown off by indiscriminate blasts on innocent civilians. Often in the horrors of war, the women and children suffer the most.

When our bodies are racked with pain because of some dreaded disease, when our lives are turned upside down because of some natural disaster, and when the ravages of war invade our land, we can still find true comfort in the fact that one day Jesus will return, and all our pain and sorrow will be over.

When your body is racked with pain so intense that you cannot think, when you are overwhelmed with grief, anger, and fear and are asking, “Why me, Lord?” remember that suffering will not last forever. Pain will

not last forever. Tears and sorrow will not last forever. Jesus is coming again.

Isolated from his family and friends, suffering alone on the isle of Patmos, as a prisoner for the Lord, the apostle John wrote these encouraging words: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Revelation 21:4, KJV).

With all our advances in medical science as marvelous as they are, we have not discovered the answer to the problem of pain and suffering. The sophisticated technology of our time has not found a solution to sickness. We have made some giant advances in treating various diseases, but our generation still gets sick. We still suffer. We still experience pain.

I think of my own father, who died several years ago. He suffered with heart disease. His body was afflicted with diabetes. As he aged, his weakened body experienced remarkable pain, but he never complained. He believed that a better day was coming. His hope was anchored in the return of our Lord. He fixed his mind on the day that Jesus would burst through the clouds to take him home. One day when we were talking, he made—in his frail condition, suffering from multiple afflictions—a comment that I will never forget. He said, “Son, I am not afraid to die, because when I do, the next thing I will know will be Jesus coming in the sky to take me home.”

He looked beyond his suffering. He saw beyond his pain. His mind was fixed upon eternity. For Dad, the second coming of Christ was a reality he grasped by faith. He lived in the light of Christ’s return. The second

coming of Christ is the ultimate answer to the problem of human suffering. It's the only answer to this world's agonizing pain. The epidemic of human suffering and the rivers of human tears cry out for it all to end.

When you suffer, when your body is racked with pain, when you can't stand it another day, when your eyes are filled with tears, you can hope again. You can look away from your suffering because you know that regardless of what happens to you, there is a God that loves you with an everlasting love. He will put an end to all disease, suffering, sorrow, pain, and tears. One day all the trials of this life will be over. One day war will be no more. One day there will be no more natural disasters. One day we will live in a land in which sickness is gone forever, and we will experience life to the full. In that new world joy will abound, and our bodies will pulsate with the vibrancy of health.

The Answer to the Problem of Injustice

Often life seems very unfair. When people sometimes say that we get what we deserve in life and that life is fair, they often have never experienced what some people go through. There are times that we do suffer because of our own poor choices, but there are millions of people who suffer through no choice of their own.

When a baby is born to a crack cocaine addict and suffers from a horrible addiction at an early age, or a child is born HIV positive because of the poor choices of a mother, that is unfair. The child did not make that choice. Think of the Christian teenager driving home from school who is hit by a drunk driver and killed, while the drunk walks away from the accident unharmed. Consider the children whose village is bombed

out and who suffer immeasurably or the poverty-stricken country devastated by drought and famine. Imagine the children who are starving to death around the world. In so many instances it was not the individual's choice at all, but circumstances that brought about untold suffering.

Where is fairness when your husband leaves you for another woman? You have raised your children together. Now they are married and out of the home, and you are alone. Where is fairness when you have lived a decent life and you get cancer, but your smoking, alcohol-abusing neighbor with the unhealthy diet seems to do well?

Life may not be fair, but God is always fair. When life kicks us in the stomach and knocks our breath out, He is there to encourage, support, and strengthen us. He is there to remind us constantly that He is coming again to make all things new.

The Bible's last book, Revelation, provides the answer to the problem of injustice. In Revelation 21:5 our Lord says, "I make all things new." One day the King of righteousness will reign. Christ will sit upon His heavenly throne. He will make all things new. Throughout all eternity justice will prevail. We may not be treated fairly here, but we will be then. Justice may not always take place on earth, but in heaven God will make all things right. Justice may not always be meted out by human beings, but it has been established by God as an eternal principle of His government. When you have been treated unfairly, look beyond the injustice to the kingdom of God, when all things will be set right. When you have been cruelly treated, look beyond the hurt to God's new society,

where Jesus will reign in righteousness.

Her Affliction Made Her Better, Not Bitter

When Joan Herman was 17 years old, she radiated with the idealism of youth. She spent the summer of 1948 working in a Quaker work camp as a volunteer in the hills of Pennsylvania. Her great desire was to help these impoverished mountain people improve the quality of their lives. Along with other volunteers she spent hours each day digging irrigation ditches to bring running water to some of the remote areas.

It was in the summer of 1948 that a polio epidemic spread through the midwestern and eastern United States. Joanie's symptoms started simply at first. They began with what appeared to be a severe cold, then progressed to an extremely high fever combined with chills and profuse sweating. The muscle pain became intense. She was absolutely fatigued. She could hardly stand it. The back pain became unbearable. She often leaned over her shovel and pushed against the warm earth in the ditch she was digging. Rubbing her back against the drainage ditch wall seemed to give her some modest relief from the intense pain.

One day while trying to continue her work, she was seized with pain that was so bad she collapsed in the ditch. Now it was impossible for her to continue. After a series of medical tests, the diagnosis was polio. As her disease progressed she was paralyzed from her neck down. There was nothing medical science could do to cure her from the dreaded disease.

Her medical providers arranged for her to be placed in a large pressurized cylinder with only her head sticking out. Since her lungs were also affected by polio, her

so-called iron lung was the only way to maintain her breathing.

Joanie survived in this iron lung for 20 years and became the longest living survivor in an iron lung in history. My wife and I met her when we were in our early 20s. She was a remarkable woman with an amazingly optimistic attitude. She helped found a comprehensive community for individuals like her—individuals with severe physical disabilities. Her affliction led her to search for deeper meaning in life. This quest led eventually to serious Bible study and reflection upon God's Word. Day by day she immersed her mind in the hopeful message of the Scriptures. Although she was completely paralyzed, she managed to read the Bible that was mounted on a stand attached to her iron lung. The hope of the coming of Christ inspired her that one day she would be whole again. Passages like these brought her enormous joy.

“The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing” (Isaiah 35:5, 6).

“And the inhabitant will not say, I am sick” (Isaiah 33:24).

“Behold, I make all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

Joanie was able to look beyond her pain. She was able, with eyes divinely anointed, to grasp the reality that Jesus was coming again. Polio did not conquer her. She conquered it. Her buoyant, positive spirit touched the lives of countless others. She used her iron lung as a pulpit to proclaim God's love to all who entered her room. They came to minister to her, but she ministered to them. Person after person accepted Christ and the

message of Scripture because of her witness. What enabled her to hang on despite life's unfairness? By faith she believed that a better day was coming. The hope of the coming of Jesus burned brightly in her heart. She looked beyond the confines of her iron lung to the day that she would leap and run through fields of waving grain beside the crystal-clear waters of eternity. She had the assurance that Jesus would make all things right, and to the degree that she suffered she would rejoice. She trusted the God who would come to take her to her eternal home.

Cancer is unfair, but one day it will be done away with. War is unfair, but one day it will end. Poverty is unfair, but one day there will be prosperity for all. Famine is unfair, but one day there will be abundance. We can hope again because this earth is not the end of the road, and God will ultimately set all things right.

Death, the Final Enemy, Will Be Defeated

The second coming of Christ is the only answer to the problems of aging and death. No wrinkle-free cream will keep you from aging. No cosmetic surgery will keep the years from marching by. No eye bag job or eyelid operation will keep you looking young forever. There is no magic potion or formula. Hair transplants to combat baldness won't do it.

Although a healthy diet and adequate exercise may extend your life for a few years, they are not the secret of eternal life. Everyone who is born will one day die, unless Jesus returns first. Throughout history people have faced death in a variety of ways. Some have faced it with fear and absolute horror. Others have faced it with hopeless despair, but there are those who have faced

death with the absolute confidence and assurance that death is a rest until the glorious resurrection morning, when Jesus shall return. They have faced death with the hope of Christ's return radiating in their hearts.

There is a glorious reunion day coming. When a child dies young, it is not goodbye forever, but goodbye until the morning. When a teenager is killed in an auto collision, it is not goodbye forever, but goodbye until the morning. When a middle-aged man dies from a heart attack, it is not goodbye forever, but goodbye until the morning.

The apostle Paul echoes these marvelous words, "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. . . . Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory' " (1 Corinthians 15:51–54).

Have you lost a loved one by death? Have you laid a child to rest on some grassy hillside? Has your wife, your husband, your son or daughter, been stricken with some fatal disease? Does the grief seem too much to bear alone? Jesus will carry you through. Listen to His voice encouraging your heart. There is a better day coming. You can hope again. The second coming of Christ is the answer to aging. It is the answer to death, to tears, and to sorrow. In loneliness you can hope again. In discouragement you can hope again. In pain you can hope again. In disappointment you can hope again. In injustice you can hope again. In tears you can hope again. Jesus is coming, and that is the best news anyone can possibly imagine.