

Philippians 3: 20-21

Christ Our Hope

The Bible is a great book for insisting on living in the present. But it never draws a foolish line between the past, present and future. Successful life in the present takes account of the lessons and blessings of the past, and of the demands and prospects of the future. Here in these two verses we see that we must have a forward look – this was so characteristic of the New Testament. Did the apostles believe that Christ would come back in their lifetime? Of course, they did, for no other attitude is permitted to the New Testament – then or now.

This is a doctrine that has very largely been forgotten – where it is not denied altogether by the church today. And very often in those sections of the church where it is still held and studied, the joy of the Lord's return is lost in controversy over dates and speculative chronological tables. Paul has a word for all in these verses. Those who have forgotten the Lord's coming again will find here a thrilling reminder of it. Those who have almost lost sight of the coming Saviour amid complex theories will be recalled to the bare and glorious essential, that he will come again. Those who dismiss such a doctrine, for whatever reason- must face here an apostolic reaffirmation of it in the most unequivocal terms.

A distinctive Christian belief

For Paul, the 'enemies of the cross' (v18) are heading for destruction, but we are waiting for *a Saviour* from heaven (v 20). They are devoted to the body, worshipping and making a god of its appetites. But we, quite the reverse look for its transformation- our *lowly bodies*.

The Philippians are *awaiting a Saviour*. This parity of the cross and the return of Christ is noteworthy. Is it not true to say that we think of the cross as a central Christian doctrine to a degree that we do not usually accord to the second coming? But Paul makes the two events equally the basis of present Christian living.

The Christian's personal longing

Because he has this awareness of the return of Christ as a central Christian belief, alongside the cross, Paul expects that all Christians will be one with him in looking for it expectantly. What is this expectation?

First, we note a longing for the blessings which the returning Christ will bring with him. Very practically Paul puts his finger on the point of our present need, *our lowly body* (v 21) We hope for One who will change our lowly body *to be like his glorious body*. Paul elsewhere described this refashioning as the continuation of personal identity in the midst of remarkable alteration: the seed growing into its characteristic flower. When Paul says that our destiny is to be like his glorious body, we must be cautious in what we understand it to mean. What we can say is that when the Lord Jesus comes again it will be to bring us into full possession of the total salvation he obtained on the cross. In particular according to the present verses, in place of a body which is so often at odds with spiritual aspirations, so often a drag on spiritual endeavours, there will be a body matching his in being the perfect means of living the full whole life of Christ.

The blessings which the returning Lord brings are great, yet they are not the primary object of our longing expectations. The first longing is for the Lord himself: *we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ*. The verb expresses concentrate eagerness and persistence of expectation.

A guaranteed certainty

No argument against the possibility of the second coming can survive the teaching of these verses. Here is something that deserves the description 'hope' for in the New Testament there is not uncertainty in hope, but the assurance that what we hope for will happen at an unspecified time. The guarantee is expressed here in the words *by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control*. The power of the Lord Jesus is effective power.

Present implications

We do not gaze into the future in order to satisfy a horoscope mentality. The promise of his coming is given without date so that we may live daily preparing to meet our Lord. Life in the present is motivated by awareness of the future. Indeed, Paul opens his discussion of the future coming with a present tense: *Our citizenship is in heaven* (20). Christians are even now, citizens of the commonwealth of heaven, and this is our status as we await our Saviour. We belong to a far-off homeland and we await for the King of that land to come and fetch us. This would have appealed to the Philippians, for they were already living as citizens of the far-off Rome and they knew the sort of life citizenship involved. In our heavenly homeland, the primary feature is the presence of the King.