

The Already and the Not Yet
1 Corinthians 1:7
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Introduction

This morning's sermon will be much more theological in nature than normal.¹ I am well aware that the emphasis of last week's message is subject to great misunderstanding and abuse. Last week I emphasized the entirely future-oriented nature of our hope as Christians. This morning it is my desire to do a study on what God, in His word, has to say about our salvation won through Christ. More specifically I am going to be discussing how much of our salvation is a present reality and how much of it is a future hope. Here, then, is my game plan for this morning's sermon; I am going to recap what was taught last week, we will then review the main theological point that was made last week from 1 Corinthians 1:5-7, and then we will see what the rest of the New Testament has to say on the subject. In short, this morning I will be speaking about the already/not yet tension in the New Testament regarding our salvation in Christ. But before we get there we need to recap what we learned last week.

Recap

In order to quickly exercise your memory in regard to what was preached last week I have boiled everything that was communicated last week down into one statement: ***The Christian life is characterized by two things: Spirit-empowered ministry and waiting.*** This is exactly what Paul states in 1 Corinthians 1:5-7. He said, and I am paraphrasing, that God, as an expression of His grace, made the Corinthians rich in regard to the grace gifts/spiritual gifts as they wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Waiting, eagerly waiting, is the posture of the Christian life. But the waiting of the Christian life is not like that experienced in an airport terminal (in other words, it results in neither snoring nor the twiddling of thumbs), but rather like that of a college freshman who studies with all due diligence as he waits for the day on which he will receive his diploma. Christianity is correctly identified as an eschatological faith—a forward looking faith. After all, the object of our hope as Christians is the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ from heaven.

As I stated last week, while our hope finds its basis in the finished work of Jesus Christ, the object of our hope involves the final appearing and full salvation brought to us at the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God purchased our salvation through the death of His Son on the cross, but our salvation will not be finally complete until the 'day of the Lord Jesus Christ'. Thus, the cross is the basis, the surety of our hope, but Jesus Himself, His return, is the object of our hope. Just look at Paul's words in 2 Timothy 4:8.

¹ Theology is merely 'the study of God.' However, theologians (those who do theology, that is) have made a distinction between what is termed 'theology proper' and 'systematic theology'. Theology proper is the study of the character of God specifically. Systematic theology is a more general term used to designate the study of what the Scriptures on the whole have to say about any given topic. So when I say that this morning's sermon will be more theological in nature I am saying that this morning is going to be an attempt at doing systematic theology. In other words, a sermon which is more theological in nature is merely a sermon which focuses on what the Scriptures on the whole have to say about any given biblical subject. I generally do my best to stick to the thought flow of the specific passage in view. But I am not even going to attempt to make the main point of 1 Corinthians 1:7, as understood in its context, the main focus of this morning's sermon. The whole point of this morning's sermon is to see what the word of God has to say about the already/not yet tension as revealed in Scripture on the whole (and we will be narrowing our focus to passages in the New Testament).

In the future, there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, but to all those who have loved His appearing.

This came from the lips of Paul at the very end of his ministry. His hope was still a forward looking reality. This is why Peter could talk about our salvation as a future event—as a “salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5). Paul even goes so far to say, “If we have placed our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone” (1 Corinthians 15:19). So the Christian life is rightly identified as a life of hope. It is a life which looks forward to our final, eschatological salvation that God will bring to pass at the second coming of Christ.

Already/Not Yet Tension

With all of this in mind, however, we must not lose sight of the fact that we do presently enjoy many of the blessings won for us on the cross of Calvary. Certainly, salvation in the fullest sense of the word is still yet a future reality for us (as communicated by the many passages cited last week—see especially Romans 8:18-25), and yet we know that our salvation is a present reality. In fact, last week I said that our salvation in Christ can be seen in three dimensions: 1. I was saved when I first repented of my sins and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, 2. I am presently being saved from sin, and 3. I await the final salvation that is to come at the second coming of Jesus. This morning I want to answer one question (I will state the same question in two ways so that the question is clear);

In what sense can our salvation be both present and future? To what degree and in what way is our future salvation realized in the present?

In an attempt to answer this question I want to point you to a few passages which speak of our salvation as both a present reality and a future hope. In other words, there is an already and a not yet aspect to our salvation in Christ. Theologians call it the already and the not yet tension. I am going to take you through a whole host of passages to show you the reality of this already/not yet tension and then I will lay forth one or two applications of this theology for our lives today.

Salvation

Throughout the New Testament, salvation is spoken of both as a present reality that we already possess and a future hope that we anticipate. Just look at a few passages with me.

Already

Ephesians 2:8; “By grace you are saved through faith”

2 Corinthians 6:2; “For he says, **In an acceptable time, I heard you, and in the day of salvation, I helped you.** Look, now is the **acceptable time**; look now is the **day of salvation.**”

Not Yet

Romans 13:11; “Besides this, knowing the time, it is already the hour for you to wake up from sleep, for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.”

Hebrews 9:27-28; And just as it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment—so also the Messiah, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.

There is a clear tension in regard to the salvation that we have in Christ—we **already** possess it but our salvation is **not yet** brought to its consummate, completed stage. Although we are already saved, we are closer to our final salvation, than when we first believed.

Redemption

Redemption is spoken of both as a present reality that we already possess and a future hope that we anticipate throughout the Scriptures as well. Just look at a few passages with me.

Already

Galatians 1:7-8: “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.”

Not Yet

Ephesians 4:30; “And don’t grieve the Holy Spirit, who sealed you for the day of redemption.”

Romans 8:23; “And not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly awaiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

Our redemption is realized in the now **already**, but it has **not yet** been brought to its fullest, completed realization in the lives of the people of God. Paul in Ephesians 4:30 speaks of “the day of redemption.” This is a clear reference to the second coming. The day of Jesus’ return is referred to as ‘the day of redemption’ because it is the day in which He will bring our already-purchased redemption to its fullest fulfillment.

Adoption

Adoption is also spoken of both as a present reality that we already possess—we have already been made sons of God—and a future hope that we anticipate throughout the Scripture. Consider the following passages with me.

Already

Galatians 4:4-6 “But when the completion of the time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Father!’”

Romans 8:15-16: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.

Not Yet

Romans 8:23; “And not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

We have **already** been adopted as God’s children in Christ, “but we are **not yet** God’s children in the way we one day will be—possessing full inheritance, enjoying perfect holiness in resurrected bodies, and glorified”² (emphasis mine). Both Galatians 4 and Romans 8 communicate the fact that we are already ‘children of God’ and yet we await our final adoption as sons.

Freedom From Sin

The Scriptures teach in many places that the Christian has **already** been set free from the condemnation of sin, the guilt of sin, and the domination of sin in our lives and yet the Scriptures teach that the Christian is **not yet** fully set free from the reality and presence of sin, and will not be until Jesus returns.

Already

Colossians 1:13-14; “He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Romans 6:2; “How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

Romans 6:6-7, 11; “For we know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that sin’s dominion over the body may be abolished, so that we may no longer be enslaved to sin, since a person who has died is freed from sin’s claims... So, you too consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Not Yet

Romans 6:12; “Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body, so that you obey its desires.

² Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*; The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 267.

Galatians 5:16-17; “I say then, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don’t do what you want.”

1 John 1:8; “If we say, ‘We have no sin,’ we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

This set of passages indicates the truth that although our sins have **already** been forgiven—the condemnation of sin having been removed (Romans 8:1)—and although we have been set free from the guilt and bondage of sin, we have **not yet** been liberated from sin *in toto*. We still struggle with sin on a regular basis until we die, and we will not be finally liberated from the presence of sin until Jesus returns. We already died to sin and yet the one who claims to ‘have no sin’ (1 John 1:8) is self deceived. We will all battle the flesh until we die and yet we have already been set free from the dominion of sin. Romans 6 is just dripping with the tension of the already/not yet reality of our Christian existence.

Heavenly Dwelling

The Scriptures clearly teach that our heavenly dwelling is an already present reality but that there is a not yet aspect to our heavenly dwelling as well.

Already

Ephesians 2:6; “He also raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavens, in Christ Jesus”

Colossians 3:1; “So if you have been raised with the Messiah, seek what is above, where the Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God.”

Not Yet

Colossians 3:2-4; “Set your minds on what is above, not on what is on the earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with the Messiah in God. When the Messiah, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Hebrews 11:13-16; “These all died in faith without having received the promises, but they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth. Now those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been remembering that land they came from, they would have had opportunity to return. But they now aspire to a better land—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”

Because of our union with Christ we are truly seated with Him in the heavenly realms. This is the reality of our present day Christian existence. We were buried with Him in baptism, raised with Him in his resurrection and here we see that we also ascended with Him when He rose on high. Wherever He goes we go because we are ‘in Him.’ This is a spiritual reality, but it

is a true reality. Paul even suggests that our lives should reflect our present heavenly dwelling. He exhorts the Colossians to seek the things above. And why? Because that is where they are—they have been raised with Him and are sitting in the heavenlies with Him. He wants them to get their ‘seeking’ in line with their present position in Christ.

If I were to move to New Hampshire from Missouri (as I did) I would not seek for a job or a house in Texas! If I were to move to New Hampshire I would seek for a house and a job in New Hampshire. And why? Because that is where I am. Paul uses the same logic in Colossians 3:1. If we have been raised with Christ to the right hand of God, we should seek the things above, because that is where we are at. And yet, we know that our heavenly dwelling is only a spiritual reality at this point. We still have to be exhorted to not seek the things on this earth because this earth is our present physical home (see John 17:14-16). We are temporary residents here on this earth. We are caught between the already and the not yet. We are already citizens of heaven and yet our full possession of heaven is a future hope. It is a matter of faith and hope. The mere presence of the negative command to **not** set your minds on “what is on earth” in Colossians 3:2 is evidence itself that although we have been raised up with Christ, our lives are so much so tied to this earthly dwelling that there is a tendency for us to lose sight of our already attained citizenship in heaven. The fact that Paul describes our life in Christ as something hidden which will be revealed when Jesus returns (Colossians 3:3-4) also points to the already/not yet aspect of our heavenly dwelling. The author of the letter to the Hebrews also clearly communicates the idea that although our citizenship is in heaven, we are still “seeking a homeland”—we are identified as “temporary residents” of this earth. Let me put it to you this way, we are less like vagabonds without a home, and more like vacationers who are temporarily in a foreign land.

Peter T. O’Brien, commenting on Ephesians 2:6 says, “...the fact that believers conduct their lives in this world and have not yet experienced salvation in all its fullness but look forward to God’s lavishing the full abundance of his grace upon them in the coming age (2:7) shows that the eschatology of Ephesians is not wholly realized but has a future dimension to it as well.”³ Thus we are caught between the already and the not yet.

Eternal life/knowing Christ

The Scriptures also communicate that there is an already/not yet aspect to the promise of eternal life.

Already

1 John 5:11; “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life and this life is in His Son.

John 17:3; This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and the One you have sent—Jesus Christ.

Not Yet

1 Corinthians 15:50-54; Brothers, I tell you this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, and corruption cannot inherit incorruption. Listen! I am telling you a

³ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 172.

mystery: We will not all fall asleep, but we will 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 will be changed. Because this corruptible must be clothed with incorruptibility and this mortal must be clothed with immortality. Now when this corruptible is clothed with incorruptibility and this mortal is clothed with immortality...”

Romans 2:5-8; “But because of your hardness of heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment is revealed. He **will repay each one according to his works**: eternal life to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but wrath and indignation to those who are self-seeking and disobey the truth, but are obeying unrighteousness...”

The first two passages clearly teach that eternal life begins at the time of conversion—the second passage (John 17:3) evidences the truth that eternal life is wrapped up in knowing God—however, the latter two passages communicate the fact that eternal life will only be fully realized when immortality is granted to the believer at the second coming of Christ. Some have overdone the already aspect of John 17:3, suggesting that we already have eternal life because we already know Christ. We must remember, though, that we do not yet know Christ as intimately as we will when He comes at the last day. Look at 1 John 2:2-3;

1 John 3:2; “Dear friends, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that we will see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself just as He is pure.

There is a limited ability for believers to know Christ in this present age. In the coming age we will all be changed, rid of sin, and we will see Christ as He is. We can know Christ in part in this present reality, but our knowledge of Him will not be complete until we are changed (see also 1 Corinthians 13:8-13). Thus there is a clear already/not yet tension in regard to this promise of eternal life. We possess eternal life now—we know Christ now—but we await the gift of incorruptibility and immortality. Until then, our experience of eternal life will only be partially realized. We can be 100% certain that we will be rewarded eternal life when Jesus comes back (as communicated in Romans 2) because the gift of eternal life was secured by the death of Jesus, and yet eternal life will not be realized in its totality until we both see Him as He is and when immortality is bestowed at the second coming.

Relevance for our Lives

Getting a handle on the theology of the already/not yet tension of the life of the Christian is of utmost importance. There is not one aspect of the Christian life nor of Christian doctrine that is not effected by a correct understanding of the already/not yet tension in biblical Christianity. It effects how we view our relationship with sin, how we view God’s present working in our lives, in our families, in our churches, and in the world. What can we expect from God? What is God’s intention for our lives, for our church, for the government, for this world? All of the answers to these questions are shaped by your view of the already/not yet tension.

It seems that Christians have the tendency to fall off either side of the road; they either believe that all of the blessings of the cross are realized in full in the here and now (this is referred to by theologians as an ‘over-realized eschatology’) or they believe that none of the

blessings won for us on Calvary will be realized in the here and now but will only be revealed in heaven (this is referred to by theologians as an ‘under-realized eschatology’). Christians are, of course, all over the map in regard to what degree and in what way the blessings won for us in Christ are realized in the present.

How much of our future salvation is realized in the present? Health, wealth, and prosperity preachers look for the present fulfillment of promises that God has primarily meant to be fulfilled in the future. Others, such as many of our reformed brethren, underemphasize the intention of God to grant us **real** victory over the sin in our lives in the present. We will never experience the fullness of the future heavenly reality in this life. The bulk of the promises given to us in the Gospel are future oriented and yet God has intended for these blessings to be at least partially realized in this present age.

While some Christians believe that sinless perfection is an attainable goal, others feel as if the Christian life is by nature a life of defeat. Both of these extremes must be put to death. Both are equally absurd. We live in an age of tension, in ‘the time between the times’. The eschatological blessings of the cross are being realized in the present, but they will not be fully realized until the coming of Jesus. This should save us from despair, on the one hand, as we can have much hope that God intends to pour out in at least one measure or another many of the untold blessings bought at Calvary, and it should save us from depression, on the other hand, as we understand that it is not God’s purpose to create spiritual utopias on this earth. This saves us from the danger of expecting God to fulfill promises that He has never made (that is, promises that He has never intended to fulfill *in toto* in this life), guarding us from the depression of unmet expectations, and yet it keeps us from underestimating His power and work in the present, guarding us from the grips of drudgery, defeat, and despair.

Get on board with God’s plan—it is not His plan to fully rid this world of the effects of the fall; however it is His plan to rid the world of the effects of the fall to a certain extent. We must never underestimate what God can do, but we must always be **biblically realistic** about what God has planned to do. We must never underestimate the work of the Spirit in our lives, but we must also never presume that it is ever His goal to perfect us in this life. We must never put Him in a box, but we must always take Him at His word—as He has spoken in Scripture.

Expect hardship—life is not a cake walk—expect church to be an uphill battle; expect the Christian life to be a battle. And yet, anticipate the mighty work of God as the blessings won for us by Jesus on the cross flow to us even now. This theological perspective, and I believe it is biblical, ought to leave one in what Gordon D. Fee refers to as the “radical middle.”⁴ There is much tension here. On the one hand we realize that we cannot over-anticipate the work of God in our midst and yet we realize that His intention is not to create a heavenly utopia on this earth. I will close with a quote from Fee.

“He [Paul] ‘theologizes’ about the Christian life in a way that makes him neither triumphalist nor defeatist, but realist. To recapture the Pauline experience and understanding is the key to our finding our way into the ‘radical middle,’ where we expect neither too much nor too little. Here we will know life and vitality, attractive life and vitality, in our personal lives and in the community of faith. Here we will constantly have the veil removed so that we might behold God’s own glory in the face of Christ, so that we are constantly being renewed into his likeness. Here we will regularly expect, and

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence; The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 8.

see, both working of miracles and the fellowship of his sufferings, without sensing frustration in either direction.”⁵

⁵ Ibid.