**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**ENDURING HOPE**

**“The Incentive for Persevering Faith”**

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If this life is all that there is, I am sure I would plunge into utter despair. If this “is as good as it gets,” as the Old Milwaukee beer commercial suggests, I’m quite certain I’d be in therapy for a long, long time. I would be looking for ways to navigate through the senseless sufferings and stunning reversals and bitter disappointments of this life.

But I have hope – as do all Christians. I am confident that “*our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*” (2 Cor. 4:17, NIV). I am confident that “*our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us*” (Rom. 8:18, NASB). I am confident that when Christ appears, then I “*also will appear with him in glory*” (Col. 3:4, NIV).

Such is the “hope” of all Bible believing Christians. It’s the *confident expectation* of experiencing a future glory. It’s the bedrock belief that this life and its pain and sorrow and disappointments will yield to an unyielding, eternal glory. *That* is our hope.

J. I. Packer has said it best when he writes, “Living between the two comings of Christ, Christians are to look backward and forward: back to the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb, whereby salvation was won for them; forward to their meeting with Christ beyond this world, their personal resurrection, and the joy of being with their Savior forever.”**1**

There are some, of course, who think that if we are going to be of any earthly good, then we must get our minds off heavenly glory. But the New Testament teaches the precise opposite. It consistently reveals the practical, life-changing benefits of being heavenly minded. For example, living in light of this hope *reminds us* that we are in the world as strangers and aliens, traveling home (1 Peter 1:11; Heb. 11:13). It *frees us* from excessive dependance on earthly wealth and comforts (1 John 2:15-17). It *enables us* to escape the grip of “earthly things” (Phil. 3:19). It *prepares us* to leave this world for a closer relationship with Christ, whenever our time comes (2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:21-24). It *causes* us to be patient, as we await the fulfillment of this hope: “*But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience*” (Romans 8:25, NIV), or, as we read in the NASB, “*we wait for it with perseverance*” (the better translation!)

More than anything else, fixing our gaze on this hope of eternal glory *energizes us* to *endure* our present sufferings. It gives us strength and confidence for running the race, fighting the good fight, and enduring the “*light and momentary troubles*” (2 Cor. 4:17) that still remain before we go home.

We see this perspective for example, in Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. He begins with his customary salutation (1:1), followed by his thanksgiving for the Thessalonians’ faith, love, and hope (1:2): “*We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work* ***produced by faith****, your labor* ***prompted by love****, and your endurance* ***inspired******by hope*** *in our Lord Jesus Christ*” (NIV).

As the NIV has made clear, faith, love and hope have concrete, practical results. A true saving faith in Christ leads to good works. A true love for others leads to labor on their behalf. And a true *hope*, which looks expectantly for Christ’s return, leads *to endurance,* which is *patient fortitude* in the face of opposition and adversity. That is the *premiere practical benefit* of being heavenly minded. As our gaze is fixed on our future hope, we find strength to endure present day suffering.

This is the clear message of numerous New Testament texts. Each one reminds us of our on-going, unfading, enduring hope of eternal glory. Each one is designed to encourage us to press on in the midst of adverse pressures. What follows is a bird’s eye view of five of these passages. We’ll look at them in the order in which they appear in the New Testament.

**A. Matthew 5:11-12.** “*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you*.”

If we have ever drawn fire for honoring the truths of God’s Word, we should never be surprised or alarmed. Instead, we should take courage and be strengthened in light of our future hope. And in view of the fact that Christ promises us abundant reward for our faithfulness, we can even rejoice! “Yes,” writes John Stott, “we may lose everything on earth, but we shall inherit everything in heaven.”**2** And it’s always good to remember that when we experience these hardships, we stand in the best of company; men like Elijah (1 Kings 18:17), Jeremiah (Jer. 38:4), and Amos (Amos 7:10) did as well.

**B. Romans 8:17-18.** “*Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us*.” Here we are *not* asked “to treat pain as though it were pleasure, or grief as though it were joy, but to bring all earthly adversity into comparison with heavenly glory and thereby be strengthened to endure.” **3**

**C. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.** “*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*” Here is a text that brings everything into its proper focus.

In light of what is “eternal,” the troubles that we face today are “momentary.” The afflictions of this world are regarded “light” when compared with “weight” of the glory yet to come. Suffering only appears prolonged in the absence of an eternal perspective. It is burdensome only when we lose sight of our heavenly future. “The key to success in suffering, as odd as that sounds, is in taking the long view. Only when juxtaposed with the endless ages of eternal bliss does suffering in this life become tolerable.”**4**

**D. Hebrews 13:12-14.** “*And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come*.”Jesus’ suffering outside the city gate symbolized his rejection by the religious leaders of Judaism. These Jewish Christians were now called to *accept* their own rejection from their familiar Jewish institutions (the synagogue, the temple, perhaps their families as well.) To soften that hardship, they were called to look forward – with confident expectation – to “*the city that is to come*.” **Q.** What is that city? **A.** It’s the city already mentioned as “*the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*” (Hebrews 12:22).

This was the future inheritance which had energized Abraham’s heart to persevere in a foreign land. He, and all the patriarchs, realized that God had promised them an inheritance that far exceeded the land of Canaan: “*All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were looking for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them*” (Heb. 11:13-16). According to what we have just read, it was Abraham’s expectation of an eternal blessing in the heavenly city that enabled him to submit patiently to the hardships and disappointments during his earthly pilgrimage in Canaan!

**E. 1 Peter 1:3-6.** “*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this we greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials*.”

Here Peter reveals that the purpose of the new birth is to give us a “*living hope*.” This hope is now described as an “*inheritance*.” It can “*never perish*,” which means it can never spoil, or decay, or disintegrate. Best of all, it’s not only unending; it’s also unfading. Its capacity to strengthen us will never diminish. It’s kept safe in heaven for us, protected against any and all intrusion. This enduring, never ending, unfading hope is the reason for the joy that sustains us in our various trials and sufferings. For in light of eternity, we can be assured that we will experience them only “*for a little while*” (v. 6).

A few verses later Peter exhorts us to “*set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed*” (1:13). **Q.** What does it mean to “fixate fully” on the grace that we will receive when Christ returns? **A.** Tolerate no distractions. Don’t be swayed by any diversions. Devote every ounce of spiritual energy to contemplating on the “grace” that is to come. **Q.** What grace is that? **A.** It’s the grace of the unending and unfading inheritance described in verses 3-6!

In Pilgrim’s Progress, there is an unforgettable scene that illustrates the importance of fixing our gaze on what we can’t see. The path that leads to the Celestial City passes right through a town called Vanity. In this town, the god and prince of this world operates a never-ending fair, called Vanity Fair.

It’s filled with all kinds of amusements and entertainment. The “merchandise” offered at the fair includes all the things the people of this world live for: houses, property, jobs, positions, honors, promotions, and titles. Beelzebub has set up this fair for only one purpose – to distract and seduce pilgrims into ending their pilgrimage. There is no way to by-pass this town. The only way to go through it is to go through it. Here’s how Bunyan describes this next part of the pilgrims’ journey.

 “*Now Faithful and Christian would have to go through this fair, and so they set out.*

 *Even as they first entered the fair, however, all the people took notice. In fact, the entire*

 *town came together in a great commotion around them. There were several reasons for this.*

 *First, the pilgrims’ clothes were so different from those who traded at the fair that the*

 *people just stood and stared at them. Some said they were fools; others said they were lunatics; still others said they were very strange.*

 *Second, just as the people marveled at their clothing, they also wondered at their speech,*

 *for only a few could understand what they said. This was because the pilgrims naturally spoke*

 *the language of Canaan, but those at the fair were people of the world. So from one end of the*

 *fair to the other, the pilgrims were thought to be uncivilized foreigners.*

 *Third, the pilgrims showed little interest in the items displayed for sale, something not*

 *at all appreciated by the city’s merchants. The pilgrims didn’t care enough even to take*

 *a look, and when the merchants called upon them to buy, they would put their fingers in their*

 *ears and cry, ‘Turn my eyes from looking at vanities’ (Psalm 119:37 RSV). They would look*

 *upward, signifying that the only things of interest to them were in Heaven.”***5**

It wasn’t too long before the pilgrims’ presence antagonized the people of Vanity. In the end, Faithful was condemned to the cruelest death that could be imagined. He was taken home to glory. Christian remained in prison for a time, but in God’s providence he managed to escape. He continued on his pilgrimage until he, too, arrived at the Celestial City.

**Q.**  What was it that energized both of these pilgrims to stand firm, and to press on, in the face of such adversity? **A.** They knew where they were headed, and what awaited them once they entered the Celestial Gate. They knew, in the words of an old gospel hymn, “It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus.” Their eyes were fixed on heaven. That’s the persevering power of our enduring hope!

It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus;

Life’s trials will seem so small when we see Christ.

One glimpse of his dear face all sorrow will erase,

So bravely run the race till we see Christ.

(Esther Kerr Rusthoi)

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**1** Concise Theology, J. I. Packer, Tyndall House Publishers, 1993.

**2** The Message of the Sermon on The Mount, John Stott, IVP, 1978.

**3** The Hope of Glory, Sam Storms, Crossway Books, 2007

**4** Ibid.

**5** The Pilgrim’s Progress Devotional, Cheryl Ford, Crossway Books, 1998.