

# St Andrew's Presbyterian Church Penrith

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## ENCOURAGEMENT LETTER 24/4/2024

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

How are you today? I am thankful holidays and having the kids at home.

A while ago in my final words in the Encouragement Letter asked people for suggestions to look at and had a few: A series on Evidence for the Bible, Romans, Hebrews, the Attributes of God and what they mean, and considering the question: "If we set our hope on our own redeemed bodies that will be free from pain and suffering and disability and groaning, do we not run the risk of making ourselves the centre of our hope?" I am going to start with the question this week, while I work out what to look at after that.

### ENCOURAGEMENT: Our Hope – Christ!

So in my response to see what people would like me to look at, I was asked if I could consider these words:

*When I began to meditate on this aspect of our hope as Christians, I saw very quickly that a danger lurked in the bushes. If we set our hope on our own redeemed bodies that will be free from pain and suffering and disability and groaning, do we not run the risk of making ourselves the centre of our hope? Are we not in danger of exalting physical comfort as the centre of our hope when God himself should be our hope?*

*The danger is very real. For there are many people who embrace the Christian religion (at least in its externals) because they are afraid of the physical pain of hell and want the physical comforts of heaven, but who do not have a heart for God. If God were not there in heaven, that would be all right, as long as they were physically fit and could have fun. God is not the centre of their hope. And they are deceiving themselves that they will ever see the kingdom. (This is a quote from the "Desiring God"*

*website: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/our-hope-the-redemption-of-our-bodies>)*

The dilemma posited here represents an imbalance in theology and at this point it relates to our hope in Christ. The Bible does talk about the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23, 1 Corinthians 15:42-44) so that when Christ returns, we will be raised from the dead and receive new, imperishable, glorious bodies that will be "free from pain and suffering and disability and groaning". But if this hope for a new body is what we ultimately long for we have moved off target. The hope for a new, redeemed,

resurrected body is not the centre of our hope. Christ is. Our hope is first and foremost for Christ – to know him and the Father. Our resurrection body is one part of that hope we have in Jesus.

If our primary hope is to be free from physical suffering forever, that will be seen to shape the way we live now. We might see it in a number of ways. We might live to be free of any pain or suffering. We might promote health and fitness in our lives to the extent that they become idols. We might become scared of getting sick to the point of avoiding people and public places. When we do suffer, we might see our lives as not worth living and having any purpose. It is an unbalanced understanding of what our hope is. Our physical comfort and pain-free existence is not central to our hope as Christians, Christ is.

In Revelation 21-22 we see a glimpse of the New Creation, and yes, it shows us a new world where “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (21:4) but this is not central to the New Creation to come. At the heart of it, we see our relationship with God, the culmination of his covenant love for his people, so we hear declared, “God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” This relationship with God is gained for us by Christ and it is Christ that we see at the centre of our hope.

Throughout these two chapters, we are shown the New Jerusalem, the eternal home for God’s people. We read:

*I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp... The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.*

Revelation 21:22-23, 22:3

Central to our hope is Jesus, here called the Lamb because he gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins (see Revelation 5). At the heart of the earthly Jerusalem was the temple, the place where people could meet with God, but now here there is no temple because God and the Lamb are its temple. Jesus is the focal point of worship in the New Creation, and everything that happens will be for him – to love him and enjoy him together as his people. There is no sun or moon because God’s glory is its light and Jesus is the lamp. God’s glory shines throughout the New Jerusalem from the lamp that is Jesus. Jesus is the bright point of God’s glory where we see his love and mercy most clearly because Jesus the Son of God gave himself up for us in costly sacrifice. The earthly Jerusalem was the seat of power for the Kings descended from David, whom God promised would have someone to reign on his throne forever. There is only one throne in the New Jerusalem and it is occupied by God and Jesus without conflict and competition because Jesus is God in the flesh. The activity of the new world to come centres around the throne in service to God.

This brings clarity to the dilemma of placing your hope first and foremost on receiving new bodies that will not perish or suffer. We are given new bodies for a purpose, and it is the same purpose for which we were created in Genesis 1-2, that is, to worship and to serve God himself and Jesus the Lamb. Our life in the New Creation centres around Jesus. Since Jesus is the centre of our hope, he is also to be the centre of why we live now and we see this exemplified by Paul in his letter to the Philippians when he says,

*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*      Philippians 1:21

The reason Paul lives in the present is Christ – he lives to know Christ, serve Christ, to make Christ known. Further, he says later in the letter:

*But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.*

For knowing Christ is the reason he lives both now and in the life to come. Anything that competes with knowing Christ is considered loss – like we might write off a loss in accounting books. Anything that eclipses Christ, that we might offer to God as our own righteousness, Paul sees as garbage. The original language is stronger than garbage here and more akin to “poo” or “dung” but even that does not grasp the disgust and revulsion of the original language. Paul wants to experience the reality of all Christ is and what he did so that his life models the gospel. We see it in how he wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, to participate in Christ’s sufferings, to become like him in his death, to be raised to life like him. How does Paul achieve this? It is in Philippians 2 that we are given a road map of how to live the gospel when he writes:

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus...*  
Philippians 2:5

What follows is Christ’s humiliation, to give himself as servant to us, expending himself for our sake, even dying on the cross (2:6-8). That is the pattern of our life, and as God raised Christ up after his death, we too, after our death, have the hope of being raised physically to life to live with Christ forever.

To be honest, I look forward to having a new body, one that will not fail or breakdown, but the best thing I look forward to is enjoying Christ and God in the New Creation to come. We will see him. We will know him. And we will worship him, our hearts eternally satisfied in him. If our hope rests only on the promise of a new, redeemed body, it falls far short of what the New Creation is all about. It is about Jesus. If life is about Jesus then, it will be about him now. We will seek to live life in his footsteps willingly suffering and struggling for the sake of others and we look towards a day

when suffering and struggle is no more. Can you say with Paul, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain”? Are you prepared to live as Christ did for the sake of others? Let’s seek to have the same mind as Christ:

*Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own  
advantage;  
rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!*

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.*

As always, love and prayers,  
Steve