

Our Hope for the New Year

The coming of a new year is filled with the hope and anticipation of good things to come. Perhaps this New Year finds you mostly hoping to see an end to the coronavirus epidemic. Or for something good in the world of politics. Maybe there's something else big in your life coming in the new year. Well, never mind any of these things. We live most of our lives in tiny bubbles that surround just us. For 2021 let's *hugely* enlarge our understanding of things.

Let's live the coming year obsessed with a view of what great things God plans for his creation. And it all is centered on the Return of Christ. God wants us to be filled with the hope and anticipation of Christ's soon return (see 2 Tim 4:8). That is, for the believer, our great hope and desire. Or at least, it *should* be. Sadly, as I look around at the Church today, the Return of Christ doesn't seem to be on anybody's mind. It's not a real event, it's something abstract and theoretical. It's an interesting doctrine, something for theologians to discuss. It's something way off in the future (if even then). We need to live our lives, people in American churches say, in the here and now, dealing with what's going on in our world, not dreaming about something that's other-worldly. Yet Paul says that there's nothing more important to a believer than His Return. (Dear Reader: it would be an extremely valuable exercise for you to read thru Paul's entire corpus to ponder all that he wrote about Christ's Return.)

The whole physical world awaits the Return of Christ. The Book of Revelation was written to thrill us with the anticipation of His Return. It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that the whole Bible has the Return of Christ as its great, over-arching theme. Nothing could be more important or more appropriate for us this coming year than to be filled with a burning desire for its imminent fulfillment.

Old Testament experts argue about how to interpret certain of the Psalms that seem to point to Christ. Some say that Psalm 22, for example, is Messianic. Others deny it. Same for other Psalms. My view is, all the Psalms in one way or another anticipate Christ, some more explicitly than others. And why not? The Spirit of God is the ultimate author of Scripture, and God's will and plan for His cosmos is to exalt the Son. So even if the human author didn't fully comprehend all that the Spirit intended, it's there, written down for us to see and marvel at. Balaam certainly didn't understand what he prophesied in Numbers 23 and 24, yet we find there precious statements about the coming exalted Messiah and King. Old Testament Messianic prophecy is not only how God has authenticated His Word (it absolutely does that), it's how God communicated the exceedingly great importance of Messiah to us.

It happens that Psalm 45 is one of the most explicit of the Messianic Psalms. Let's look at it. And there's a reason for doing this: We need to open our minds to what's really important to us. God was already anticipating the Return of Christ thousands of years in advance. If it's that important to God, it must take the highest priority in our lives too. There's no better way to approach a new year than filled with the hope of Christ's Return and all that it brings.

Psalm 45 praises Israel's king. But as we read through these verses, this is no ordinary, human king. This is a king who is also deity! This king sits on an eternal throne. Look at the text:

"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom" (v. 6).

"The king is enthralled by your beauty; honor him, for he is your lord" (v. 11).

"I will perpetuate your memory through all generations; therefore the nations will praise you for ever and ever" (v. 17).

And it's someone who is distinct from God. Look at these verses:

"You are the most excellent of men and your lips have been anointed with grace, since God has blessed you forever" (v. 2).

"You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your god, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy" (v. 7).

This king is also a mighty warrior:

"Let your sharp arrows pierce the hearts of the king's enemies; let the nations fall beneath your feet" (v. 5).

Of whom does the psalmist here speak? He's prophetically anticipating the coming King-Messiah of Israel, someone who is totally unique in human history, who one future day will rule over Israel. No wonder the psalmist here says (v.1) that his heart is "boiling over" ["stirred" in the NIV] with excitement at this person he's contemplating. He's having trouble containing himself. Our hearts should be even more stirred because we know exactly who this king is. He's the greatest reality that there is. He is the most "excellent" person in existence (v. 2). He's absolutely beautiful, "clothed with splendor and majesty" (v. 3). The psalmist also anticipates a wedding for this king (vv. 9 to end). The bride is admonished to separate herself from previous ways because she's to be attached to this godly Person. And she's to "honor Him, for He is Lord" (v. 11). It isn't too difficult to associate the bride in this psalm to the bride in Revelation 19 and 21. John must have picked up the imagery of a bride for the Lamb from this psalm, meaning that the psalmist was prophetic.

In 1 Chronicles 17, Nathan the prophet received a message from God that he was to pass on to David, who desired to build a temple for God. "I declare to you that the LORD will build a house for you...I will raise up your seed...one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever...I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever" (vv.10-14). Later, in 1 Chronicles 22, David retold this prophecy to Solomon, saying, "He is the one who will build a house for my Name. He will be my son, and I will be his father. And I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel forever" (v.10). In these verses, the one referred to is Jesus the King-Messiah. And in both 17:14 and 22:10 we have "throne," "forever," and "kingdom" together, just as we have those same 3 words together in Psalm 45:6. These are the only places in the Bible where these 3 words appear together. Psalm 45 is certainly speaking of Jesus.

Psalm 45 alludes back to, or builds on, Genesis 49:8-12, Jacob's prophetic blessing to Judah. Jacob said to his sons, I'm telling you what will happen to you "at the end of days" (v.1), ie, in the distant future. And he tells of a coming king, one from the line of Judah, who will be victorious over all enemies, who will be powerful beyond imagination, to whose rule all the nations will submit, and who will bring great prosperity to Israel.

The prophet Isaiah (in 9:6,7) refers to this future king who is also God in an absolutely extraordinary passage. Someone will come from Israel, who is deity (*El Gibor*, "the mighty God"), who will rule on the throne of David forever. The phrase, "the government will be on his shoulders," refers to the robe a king wears. "Wonderful" probably refers to the uniqueness of his Person. He will be different from all other humans. He is God! "Everlasting Father" means He's an eternally existing Person, the author of life. And with Him comes not only peace, but prosperity and blessing (*shalom* is translated simply as "peace," but it really means a lot more). The extent of His rule will encompass more than just Israel. It will be a time when righteousness, at last, will prevail. And it will all come about by the direct work of the sovereign creator God, "The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this."

Zechariah also had a glimpse of Him. In 9:9 we read this astonishing prophecy: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, victorious and triumphant [in the NIV, "righteous and having salvation"], humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey." In the ancient Near East, a king entering a city on a donkey meant that he was coming in peace, as opposed to entering on a war stallion, which meant he came to conquer (see Revelation 19:11). The Holy Spirit is so excited about all that God has planned that, centuries in advance, He's already, in the writings of these authors of Scripture, alerting us of what's to come.

When Jesus was here on earth, He taught about His Return. In Mark 13, Jesus warned His followers repeatedly (6x) to be alert and vigilant about His Return. These warnings are for the Church because the discourse ends with, "What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" (13:37). Why do we need to be alert? Because we're to be attentive to the responsibilities of a relationship with Christ. He doesn't want to come back and find us negligent or unfit to be with Him. Because we're to be observant of the times, and respond appropriately in a way He would want. And because we should be so filled with anticipation and love for Him that His Return doesn't surprise us.

Conclusion: The hope of the entire Old Testament rested in a Person, Jesus the Christ. For thousands of years ahead of time, humanity was told of His coming. That's because the hope of all humanity is Christ Jesus, and apart from Him, there exists no hope at all whatsoever for anyone. Jesus is the greatest, most perfect, most beautiful and most important Person there is. There is no greater reality than being united by faith to Jesus the Savior. And the Return of Christ promises to be the greatest moment in the history of the cosmos. (Notice how many times "Hallelujah" appears in Revelation 19!) It's also when our salvation will be complete, when we'll be supernaturally transformed into the very likeness of Christ. Another hallelujah for that! May these exquisite and precious truths so fill you, so thrill you, and so energize you that the coming year, 2021, promises to be the most exciting one of your life.