

OUR GLORIOUS HOPE

Phil 3.20-4.1

Introduction

“All religions lead to God,” some people will say – often using the analogy of routes up a mountain.

Illustration. If you go down to north Wales, there are several different paths you could take to get you to the top of Snowdon – there’s the Miner’s track, the Watkin path, the Pyg track, the Llanberis path and the Mountain Ranger’s route. If you follow anyone of those paths, it will take you to the top of the mountain. But anyone who done any hill walking will know that it’s a nonsense to say, “All paths on a mountain will take you to the top.” Some might lead you down to the bottom again, or over a sheer cliff to your death! Many are simply sheep tracks and not real paths at all.

And so it is with all the other religions of the world. The idea that they all lead to God is one that the Bible refutes absolutely.

- Jesus himself explained to us, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,*” [John 14.6]. There are no exceptions to the fact that Jesus is the only way for anyone to come into a true relationship with God, as our Father.
- And so shortly after Jesus had returned to heaven, Peter explained to an ecclesiastical court [Acts 4.12], “*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people, by which we must be saved.*” Jesus alone is our hope of salvation – rescue from our guilt and sin, and reconciliation to our Creator God.

Last week we were thinking about two possible lifestyles we can adopt.

- There was ***the pattern Paul promoted*** (v17), through his direct teaching and his own personal lifestyle.
 - *his heart was set on getting to know Jesus better* (v10);
 - *his mind was fixed on becoming more like Jesus* (v12);
 - *his sights were fixed on achieving the goals Jesus had set before him* (v13-14);
 - *and his energies were directed towards living out the truths Jesus had brought him* (v16).
- And then there was ***the pattern Paul lamented***, especially when it was evident in the lives of those who had once professed to be followers of Jesus. They were now living as enemies of the cross, because everything about them made a mockery of why Christ had died for them (vs 17-19).
 - *they were earthbound in their thinking* (v19);
 - *they were dominated by their appetites* (v19);
 - *they were topsy-turvy in their values* (v19);
 - *and so as a result, they were destined for a destruction of their own making* (v19).

And that’s why the analogy of the mountain is so important. If there is only one route to God, which there is, any other path that people may choose to follow will result in their eventual undoing, their ‘*destruction*’ as Paul puts it here. The word he uses means ‘total loss’ or ‘complete ruin.’ It’s the same word that Jesus used in **Mat 7.13** to describe the destination of the ‘*broad road*’ that so many people travel unthinkingly. It leads to ‘*destruction.*’

And so in the verses we are looking at this morning, Paul homes in on the destination that awaits those who follow the other way of life, the pattern he promoted through both his direct teaching and his personal example.

First, he reminds us of

1. WHERE WE TRULY BELONG (v20)

But *our citizenship is in heaven*, he writes emphatically at the start of v20.

The people of Philippi were very proud of their citizenship. They had been granted a rare privilege indeed. They had been honoured with *Roman* citizenship after supporting the Emperor Octavian in his battle against Anthony and Cleopatra, in 31BC. So from that time onwards, Philippi is referred to in all its official documents and on its coins as ‘*a colony of Rome.*’ That meant its citizens enjoyed exactly the same

rights and privileges as the citizens of Rome itself – including some very good tax concessions! Their legal position was identical to those living in Rome, as far as their land-ownership rights were concerned. The people of Philippi couldn't be scourged; and they had the right to appeal to Caesar in serious legal disputes. This rare privilege of Roman citizenship, described as 'one of the most coveted prizes of the Roman empire,' also meant that their names appeared on the electoral roll of Rome [Motyer, p93] – just as the citizens of a number of French colonies, like Guadeloupe and Martinique, were entitled to take part in France's recent referendum on the European constitution.

But what Paul is telling *the Christians* in this highly privileged city is that they all enjoyed an even greater privilege than their Roman citizenship. By God's mercy and grace, they had been made *citizens of heaven*. Their names appeared on *God's* electoral roll; they were written in his *book of life* (4.3).

So heaven, not earth, is our true home. And so as long as we are living down here on earth, we Christians are like foreigners (cf **Heb 11.13**; **1 Peter 1.1**.) We're strangers. We don't really belong here. But we're not like tourists in a foreign land, out to enjoy ourselves as much as we can, as we take in all the sights and sounds and sample the local way of living. No, we're ambassadors for our king, representing our homeland to all we encounter, so that others might be attracted to it too.

That means

1.1 There's a life to be lived – an exemplary life.

- It's what Paul has reminded us of in **1.27**. *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ* – or more literally, '*exercise your citizenship* in a manner worthy of the Gospel', he urges us.
- Turn over to **1 Peter 2.11-12** for a moment to see what that means in practise. *Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*
 - Negatively, we are to **abstain from sinful desires** – all those things that the people of *this* would throw themselves into, but which we know are contrary to God's will.
 - More positively, we are to **live such good lives** among the people of this world that they will sit up and take notice of them. Indeed more than that. Though *they may accuse us of doing wrong*, they will find that they have to eat their words when they see what a power for good we can be in society. Instead of accusing us of wrongdoing, they will *see our good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us* – and they will do so because through our good deeds, they will have been won over to Jesus. We have often said that for the Gospel to be credible, it must be visible as well as audible – seen in our lives as well as heard from our lips.
- What an incentive this is to live an exemplary life, as one of Christ's ambassadors.

But you will have noticed from these verses in 1 Peter 2, that as well as there being a life to be lived,

1.2 There's a battle to be fought.

So long as we are down here on earth, away from our true home of heaven, all sorts of **sinful desires war against our souls**. There are all sorts of evil desires - stemming from our old, fallen human nature - that will rear their ugly heads within us to try to get us to compromise our commitment to Christ and our likeness to him, and so destroy our soul – the real deep down you or me. We have seen what some of them are, in Phil 3.

- There's the temptation to put great store by our human credentials or past achievements, to commend ourselves to God (**3.4-8**). "Look at me and what I've done."
- There's the temptation to pride ourselves on how much we know, to the neglect of putting it all into practise (**3.16**).
- There's the ever-present tendency towards self-indulgence, so that personal satisfaction and fulfilment becomes the unspoken goal of our life, as we seek to satisfy our natural appetites (**3.19**);

- There's the temptation to be earthbound in our thinking (**3.19**), instead of focussed on the risen and exalted, reigning Christ (**Col 3.1-2**);
- There's the temptation to adopt rather topsy-turvy values, so that we end up trying to justify what God has declared to be wrong (**3.19**).
- There may be the temptation to live in the past, over-nostalgically; or to dwell on past hurts or failures (**3.13**), so that we miss what God has set before us in the present and for the future;
- There may be the temptation to believe we have somehow arrived at all God wants us to be (**3.12**);
- We might have a secret craving for an easy life, instead of a life of sacrificial loyalty to Christ (**1.29**);
- Perhaps we're guilty of harbouring *selfish ambitions* (**2.3**) or adopting a 'me first' mentality – "what's in it for me; what's in my best interests," - instead of *considering others better than ourselves and looking out for their interests, rather than those of our own* (**2.3-4**).
- Perhaps we've sought to cling on to our hard won rights and privileges, instead of being willing to give them up to serve other people (**2.5**).
- Perhaps we've adopted a rather superior attitude towards other people, instead of being willing to lay down our life for them, as Christ did for us (**2.8**).

It's easy to think of the '*sinful desires that war against our soul*' in terms of the obvious temptations that come our way, instead of these rather more subtle ones. But anything that would seek to water down our commitment to Christ, or compromise our likeness to Christ, is part of the battle we're caught up in, this side of heaven. It's unavoidable, but it's winnable, if we keep our eyes on Christ!

Then as well as being called to live an exemplary life and battle against the sinful desires warring against our souls,

1.3 There's a hope to offer other people, as Christ's ambassadors on earth.

Turn to **2 Cor 5.20** with me for a moment. Here Paul writes, *we're Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.* We're people with a message, a message of reconciliation. In fact, more than that – Paul has just indicated that we are people with a *ministry* – a *ministry of reconciliation* (**v18**). *God reconciled us to himself through Christ and [in turn] gave us the ministry of reconciliation*, to bring other people into a reconciled relationship with God too, through Christ. This is our task so long as we are living as foreigners on earth, away from our true home of heaven. God has entrusted us with the task of bringing people back to himself, as we urged others to take Christ as their own Lord and Saviour. *Since we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade other people to do the same*, Paul has written in **2 Cor 5.11**.

So, having spoken of where we truly belong, Paul goes on next in Phil 3.20 to speak about

2. WHO WE EAGERLY AWAIT (v20)

Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. The return of Christ to this earth is the brightest hope on our future horizon as Christians. It's not just 'heaven when we die' for us as Christians – but 'Christ on earth' to reign as undisputed king.

- The use of the title 'Saviour' for Jesus is comparatively rare in Paul's writings. The title occurs 12 times in Paul's writings out of a total of 24 in the New Testament. We can compare that with his use of the word 'Christ', which occurs 381 times in Paul's writings, and 'Lord' which occurs 257 times! Some people have suggested that the title is a comparatively rare one in the New Testament because of its adoption by the Roman Emperors of Paul's day. In 48BC, the people of Ephesus issued a decree declaring Julius Caesar to be '*the general saviour of mankind*'; and that title was adopted thereafter by every ruling emperor.
- So perhaps Paul's use of it here is deliberate. As a Roman colony, the people of Philippi would have considered it an enormous privilege to have been honoured with a state visit by the Roman Emperor – just as British colonies today are honoured by a state visit from our queen. For many of them, it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience.
- And if that's so, how much more should we as Christians be looking forward to the return visit of *our* Saviour-king to this earth! That really is a once-in-a-lifetime experience to look forward to!!

- *This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven,* the disciples were told on our Lord's Ascension Day (**Acts 1.11**).
- *You turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God,* Paul reminded the Thessalonians (**1 Thess 1.9-10**) *and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath* [cf 1 Thess 2.19; 3.13; 4.14-18].
- The return of Christ to this earth at the end of this present age is the brightest hope on our future horizons as Christians.
- The word Paul uses here to describe our attitude towards Christ's return speaks of *'a concentrated eagerness, a persistent expectation, an eye detached from every other object to watch only for him,'* writes Alex Motyer (p196). *The blessings that our returning Lord will bring with him will be very great. Yet they are not the primary object of our longings. That place belongs to Jesus himself. He himself is the supreme attraction in the Christians hope. It's true that we look forward to deliverance at last from the presence of all sin and temptation. We look forward to meeting our loved ones again who have gone before us into the Lord's presence – and all the great heroes of faith from the pages of Scripture and the annals of church history: Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Peter, James and John; Dr Luke and Pastor Paul; Martin Luther, Billy Graham, and so many more besides. There will be the glory of God's angels to marvel at too. But excelling all of these great but lesser blessings will be the bliss of coming face to face with our Saviour – through whom alone this great company has been gathered, and to whom all glory will be due.*
- *"Face to face with Christ my saviour, face to face, what will it be - when with rapture I behold him, Jesus Christ who died for me?"* It will be an experience indescribable – but totally wonderful!

And so from the 'where' and the 'who' Paul goes on to speak about the 'what'.

3. WHAT WE ANTICIPATE (v21) at Christ's return. And there are two things here.

First, Paul speaks about

3.1 The power that enables Christ to bring everything under his control

We hear an echo here of **Eph 1.9-10**. *God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure. He purposed his will in Christ – Jesus is the vehicle through whom it will be brought about. It will be put into effect when the times have reached their fulfilment* and it consists of *bringing all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ*. God's long-term plan is to bring everything in the cosmos under the loving headship of Jesus, his Son – the one who has proved his credentials for such an enormous task, through his self-sacrifice at the cross.

- At present, a great battle is raging between good and evil in our world. But on the day of Christ's return, evil will be banished forever from our cosmos. It was dealt a decisive blow at the cross. There the ultimate victory was secured. But the struggle still goes on – until that moment when Christ returns, when the final whistle will be blown and the match will be over. The forces of evil will leave the pitch, never to trouble us again; and the field of play will be left entirely to the victor and his supporters – just like at the end of a Cup Final!
- Someone has pointed out three great qualities of Christ's power that are spoken of here.
 - It's **available**, because it has already been given to him. *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*, he told his disciples before returning to heaven (**Mat 28.18**).
 - It's also **effective**, for it *enables* him to carry out whatever he desires.
 - Then most importantly of all, it's **invincible**. It enables him to bring *everything under his control*.

And that includes

3.2 Transforming our present lowly bodies to be like his glorious body – the body of his current glory!

What a fantastic hope this is! Paul has already explained, in **1.21-23**, that when a Christian dies, we are brought into the immediate presence of the Lord. *To me, living is all about Jesus, and to die will be gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. To be away from the body is to at home with the Lord*, he tells us in **2 Cor 5.8**.

But at Christ's return, all of God's people will become clothed in a resurrection body like Christ's.

- Paul describes our present bodies as being lowly – or more literally, 'subject to humiliation'. They are beset by all kinds of weaknesses - not just the more obvious physical ones, but moral and spiritual ones too. It's through the weaknesses of our physical appetites that it's all too easy to end up making a god out of our belly, Paul has explained in verse 19! Because our body is so weak, we are frequently tempted to pander to its appetites.
- *Most Christians are all too aware of the downward pull of their present bodies*, Alex Motyer comments (p194). *We fail to tame our tongues, or control our lusts. We find it hard to overcome the laziness that keeps us out of our beds too late at night and in our beds for too long in the morning! With the passing years, our mental powers wane, like the capacity to understand new ideas quickly. We may suffer from memory loss, or a deterioration in our eyesight or hearing – or both.* Our body really is subject to all manner of humiliations as time goes by. And so against this background, the prospect of us receiving a new body – like the body of Christ's present glory – is a wonderful prospect! In place of a body that is so often at odds with our spiritual aspirations, we will receive a body that designed to give full expression to a our transformed, Christlike personalities. *This is the end product of Christ's redeeming activity*, someone has pointed out (Martin, p164); *Christ, at last, will have taken shape in us. We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is*, John tells us [1 John 3.2]. This is our great end hope – seeing our Saviour face to face, and being transformed to be like him in every part of our being, body, mind and soul.

Paul spells out how this will come about most fully in **1 Cor 15.51-53** (a passage worth turning to for a moment). *Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet [the trumpet heralding Christ's return]. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.*

Paul has spelt out what this will involve earlier in the chapter, in **verses 37-38, 42-44a**. *When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed, he gives its own body. ... So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.* What Paul is explaining here is that there are both **differences and continuities** between our present body and our resurrection body. And he uses a lesson from nature to help us understand how this can be.

- When we sow a seed, what we sow is very **different** from the plant that will emerge from the seed (v37). It's different in its size, in its shape, in its colour; and most importantly of all, it's different in its liveliness! A seed is completely dead, whereas the plant it produces is fully alive!
- But there are also **continuities** between a seed and the plant it produces, Paul goes on to remind us in verse 38. *God gives the seed a [new] body, just as he has determined; and to each kind of seed, God gives its own body* – not some other kind of body. This means that when we sow a tomato pip, we don't expect a cabbage to grow from it. And when a farmer sows a field of corn, he doesn't expect to reap barley from it. In other word the *identity* of the seed and the plant are the same, even though their *forms* are very different.

And so it is with *the resurrection of the dead*, Paul tells us in verse 42. There will be **continuity of identity but a difference in form**.

- This is where resurrection is so very different from reincarnation. According to those who believe in reincarnation, there's a change in identity as well as in form. You may die as a human being, but return as a fly, or a horse, or a thistle – or even as someone else.
- But with Christian resurrection, there's **a continuity of identity** between the person who has died and the person who has resurrected. *This continuity of identity guarantees the natural desires we have, of being able to recognise and enjoy those we've known and loved in this life, throughout eternity to come,*

someone has pointed out (Prior, p272).

- We see this with Jesus and his disciples. After his resurrection, he was able to prove his identity to them by pointing to the nail marks of his crucifixion (**Luke 24.39-40; John 20.25,27**). But the form of his resurrection body was different to the body of his incarnation.

And so Paul draws out four pairs of contrasts in these verses.

- (a) The body that is sown is *perishable*, but it is raised *imperishable*. Our present body isn't designed to last forever, even though we may live to a ripe old age. Eventually, our present body will wear out or break down; but not so our future body. It will have been designed to last forever, free from every form of weakness or deficiency. It will be immune from every form of potential attack, whether by disease or accident.
- (b) Our present body *is sown in dishonour*, Paul goes on to say, by which he means that a dead body has no rights in law. It isn't entitled to a passport or a vote at a General Election. But our future body will be *raised in glory*, with all the rights of a citizen of heaven.
- (c) Our present body *is sown in weakness*. It's really very fragile, however muscular it might be; and it is bound by all kinds of limitations. Even in our youth, our bodies can't do all that we demand of them. But our future body *is raised in power*. It will have the built-in capacity to do whatever we might want it to do. Best of all, it will have been carefully designed to enable us to give full expression to our recreated personalities, modelled on Jesus himself.
- (d) *It is sown a natural body*, Paul tells us – that is to say, it's a body that belongs to the present earthly age. But it will be *raised a spiritual body* – a body belonging to the age to come.

And so Paul concludes this section by telling us that this is

4. HOW WE STAND FIRM (4v1)

Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

We'll suffer many knocks in our Christian life. We will be like a tree being buffeted by numerous storms, with the wind coming against us from every possible direction. That's why it is so important for us to have good, strong roots in the faith.

- We are surrounded by people with a very different mindset from our own; that leads them to live a very different kind of lifestyle, and to adopt very different values.
- It means we may be laughed at, or teased, for being a Christian.
- Some of our closest friends, or members of our family, may succumb to the pressure and desert the cause of Christ.
- There will be deep disappointments and heartaches to cope with.
- We may face accidents or tragedies, painful bereavements.

These are some of the storms that will hit us. But this is how we stand firm in the midst of them – by setting our sights on the glorious future God has in store for us. *We gaze into the future not to satisfy our curiosity with a 'horoscope'-like mentality; but so we may live each day of our life day in readiness to greet our Lord. Our life in the present is motivated by our knowledge of the future* [Motyer, p198].

And our hope is sure, because it is based on the fact of Christ's own death and resurrection. *We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him*, Paul writes in **1 Thess 4.14-18**. *According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore, encourage each other with these words.*