

Grief, Hope and Theology That Matters

Does theology matter? A year ago I sat on a bed in Huntsville, AL and looked at the faces of my three small children. I had to tell Isaac (five), Jude (three), and Naomi (one) that their mother was dead. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. I hope it's the hardest thing I'll ever do. I first asked Bethany on a date when she was nineteen. She married me at twenty-two. We saw the world together and dedicated our lives to serving God and others. She was dead at thirty-two. Does it actually matter what someone believes about heaven when life becomes hell?

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In this life, there is no amount of truth that will cure grief, but good doctrine can furnish us with a more robust sense of hope than many of us ever thought possible. For most of my life, I considered almost anything having to do with the afterlife or eschatology as being largely speculative. It seemed that there was so much disagreement on these matters that the best a Christian could say was that when we die our souls go to heaven. When asked about heaven, we picture clouds, angels singing, or some other seemingly spiritual or ethereal reality. It was all very vague and not very helpful or comforting. A few years before Bethany died, God began to use his Word (and people who study it seriously) to better shape my views. In retrospect, I can say with confidence that God equipped me with a solid doctrine of hope in preparation for the pain that was to come. This is some of what I learned:

1. The Resurrection of Jesus is the basis of the Christian's

hope.

This may be a basic statement of Christian belief, but centuries of weak theology have conditioned us to think that our hope is that our souls will escape our bodies at death. Centuries of weak theology have polarized the spiritual and the physical. The apostles taught otherwise. They saw Jesus' physical resurrection as the first of many. Paul argues at length in I Corinthians 15 that our bodies will be raised from the dead and glorified just like the dead body of Jesus was gloriously, physically resurrected. Jesus is the "firstfruit" of God's new creation.

The year before Bethany died, I found N.T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope* in the library of the school I taught at in Peru. I had listened to his sermons, lectures, and read a few of his books, but this book was a game changer. In keeping with Scripture, Wright establishes his understanding of Christian hope on the reality of Jesus' physical resurrection. The conclusion? Christian hope is not based on a vague platonic ideal of spiritual existence after death, but rather it is grounded—and I do mean "grounded"—in God's work of restoring his physical creation because of Jesus' resurrection.

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Does this provide comfort? I believe it does. A few weeks after Bethany died I wrote a friend, "When it's said and done, I am greatly comforted that Bethany (the physical, real life Bethany that I love so much) is going to be raised. She will have a body that can never, ever get Cancer. She will be perfect, body and soul."

2. Death is real, the world is real, and hope is real.

I get the feeling that the grieved are to be comforted by believing that their loved ones are in a better place, a place that is more real and significant than where we are now. Certainly, those who die in Christ are present with Him, and that is far better than being anywhere else (II Corinthians 5), but it does no one any good to downplay the reality of the world we live in. To act like the things that happen here are insignificant when compared to the things of heaven is misleading and not comforting. Yes, we should live our short life in light of eternity, but this short life has tremendous value. Jesus certainly thought so! Even the martyrs gathered in God's presence in Revelation 6 call for justice to be done in this world!

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The world where we live now is God's creation. A creation he cared enough about to become part of in his incarnation. Humans were created to be physical and spiritual. While the fall and the curse have thrown both of these elements of God's creation off track, the gospel is God's plan to restore both of these things. Christ does this through the power of the cross and the glory of the empty tomb. He will do this ultimately when he comes again.

A few years before I lost my wife, she lost her father. This death was even more sudden. It rocked our world, changed our family, and opened my eyes to some realities that I had never thought much about. Before her father died, he talked to me and other family members about Randy Alcorn's book Heaven. After his death, this book provided comfort to many of his family member's including myself. Like Wright, Alcorn contends

that our notions of the afterlife must be rooted in the biblical doctrine of Jesus' resurrection rather than ethereal notions of floating in the clouds. While some of the book is speculative, he develops his speculations out of a solid biblical theology. Because of Heaven, my hope for life after death became much more real and much more tangible than I ever thought possible. Our future is real, it is physical, it is spiritual, and it is amazing!

We take comfort in God's plans for the future, but we know that these plans are connected to his love and design for the world he created. Our lives, our bodies, and our tears are not insignificant things when seen in light of eternity; they are exactly the things that Christ came to restore to a full and vibrant relationship with the father.

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3. God hates death.

Among many things, grief is rage. It is bloodied knuckles and heartfelt curses. Grief is not just anger; grief is rage. So, who or what are we supposed to be so mad at? When we turn it on ourselves, we are crushed with guilt. When we turn it on our deceased loved one, we only feel disgusted with ourselves. Do we turn it on God? He is supposed to be in control of everything, right? And when someone tells us that God has a plan for this loss, it only gives our rage against God more ammunition. Did God want this to happen?

As I've studied the God of the Bible, I find him most clearly displayed through Jesus Christ. In Christ, I don't see a God who rejoices in the death of our loved ones. I don't see a God who delights in our pain. Rather I see a God who is on a mission to destroy death. In I Corinthians 15, Paul describes

death as an enemy that Christ will destroy. In II Timothy 1, Jesus is described as the one who has abolished death. And in the first chapter of Revelation, Jesus stands in triumph holding the keys to death and the grave.

Even more vivid is the account of Lazarus' resurrection in John 11. When confronted with the death of his own loved one, Jesus weeps alongside his family. Jesus fully participates in the grief. By verse 38, Jesus is so enraged in his grief that he does what every grieving person wishes he could do—a miracle. It is in this account that Jesus reminds his followers that He is the resurrection and the life. He is the conqueror of death. Jesus not only hates death; He hates it even more than we do.

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This resonates deeply with us for at least a couple of reasons. First, it is good theology. We know that God is the author of life and because sin separates us from God. It separates us from the source of life, God himself. Throughout the New Testament, the cross is seen as the place where Christ defeated the age old enemies of God (for example: Colossians 1:15). The cross defeats sin. The tomb defeats death. Christ is victorious, the only one worthy of all our praise, glory, and obedience.

Secondly, it is great comfort. Bad theology will lead us to believe that God is against us and that He has taken away our loved one. Good theology brings us to John 11 where Jesus is weeping beside us, where he is enraged at the loss of precious life, and where he has a plan to do something about it. It is in John 11, where Jesus and I share the same pain, even the same rage. It is here where we take so much comfort in Him being "the Resurrection and the Life."

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As an active follower and imitator of Jesus Christ, Bethany lived her life to glorify God, read good books, and show love to other people. The week before she died I took her suggestion and read a book she loved, Tim Keller's Reason for God. I had no idea when I started reading what the words of this book would do for me in the months to come. Keller explains the hope found in Christ: "For the one who suffers, the Christian faith provides as a resource not just its teaching on the cross but also the fact of the resurrection. The Bible teaches that the future is not an immaterial 'paradise' but a new heaven and a new earth. In Revelation 21, we do not see human beings being taken out of this world into heaven, but rather heaven coming down and cleansing, renewing, and perfecting this material world. Jesus insisted that his return will be with such power that the very material world and universe will be purged of all decay and brokenness. All will be healed and all might-have-beens will be."

This is real hope. This is theology that matters.



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