

### *Waiting for Jesus!*

The **hope** – the radical hope (as Christiaan Beker puts it in his book *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel*, Fortress Press, 1982, page 89), the excitement and anticipation, and the confidence and patience I hear in this text seem to grow directly out of the expectations of Paul and the early Church of an early, indeed, an imminent return of Jesus Christ to the world to establish the Kingdom of God. It makes me wonder.

If we truly believed that Jesus Christ was returning, if not this coming Saturday, then surely within the next 12 months, I wonder how that would affect us, I wonder how that would change us – our faith, our behavior, our attitudes and our actions? For Paul and for the early churches, such an expectation of Christ's imminent return filled them with hope, cranked up their excitement about following this Jesus, and gave them incredible patience and tolerance, even in the face of exclusion, oppression and outright persecution.

But the reality for us is, that no little time has transpired since Paul and his first churches held such expectations of Jesus' early return. There simply was no "early" return; what we are dealing with today is a "delayed" return. So, what are we, today, to make of this difference? More to the point for today, how can we reclaim something of that same expectation in a way that would accrue also to us as such radical hope, and excitement, and patience? I have some ideas about that.

The delayed coming of Jesus, I suggest, comes to us as a unique gift, one that puts us in a somewhat different place than Paul and the early church. What do we make of this delay? How do we look upon this delay, how do we interpret all the time that has passed since the days of that expected early return? First of all, the delayed return of Jesus certainly gives us hope, but a hope tempered by the delay itself, a hope that allows us to acknowledge, to accept and then to grieve all the sad and terrible things and events that transpire in this life, and throughout history. Wars, genocide, and wholesale oppression and violence must not be ignored. Horrendous sin and evil in life and in the world must be met by an equally powerful and very intentional period of grieving over it, all, of course, as the first and critical step toward eradicating such sin and evil; because we can and must frame our grieving in the hope of resurrection, and in the hope of the return of Jesus Christ to bring the ultimate end to all such sin and evil, death and dying, killing and grieving.

Secondly, and related to this first thought, is that our hope in the delayed return of Jesus allows, indeed *enables* us to acknowledge our own sins and limitations, frees us to admit our part in the sins and evil of society, culture and economy; and moves us toward forgiveness and renewal and transformation.

Thirdly, ours is a hope that provides the necessary and appropriate motive for compassion and empathy. If we see our own sins and limitations, and if we acknowledge those of our larger society, if we count ourselves no better than others, but if we know the grace of God that forgives and redeems and transforms, then we can be a real force in this world for healing, for reconciliation, for growth and for dignity.

And finally, ours is a hope that has learned to look deeply for excitement about the future, our future, others' future, the future of the world. Ours is a hope that is renewed again and again, over and over, because the God of History also stands outside

of that same history, and is the One who will get the last word. And that last word will be a word of love and grace! Come Lord Jesus!