

Already But Not Yet

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Biblically, there is quite a tension between what is already true but has not yet taken place. In a worldly sense this is impossible because nobody really knows the future, but God has not only predicted certain things, He has already determined them. I think we can all agree that the second coming of Christ is widely predicted throughout the Bible, and God has already fixed a date for that blessed event. Whether our resurrection will take place before the tribulation of the end times or in conjunction with the second coming of Christ, we can agree to disagree. In any event, the resurrection of believers in Christ is fixed and predetermined by God. In that sense, from a biblical view, these events are treated as already true, but not yet experienced. The New Testament continuously tells the church that in God's eyes we are united with Christ so that what is true of Him is true of us. The phrase "in Christ" is used repeatedly to refer to the position that believers have before God. In a sense we participated with Christ in His death and resurrection as Paul wrote in Colossians 2:12, "having been buried with Him...you were also raised up with Him through faith". The verb tenses are in the past tense because Paul is saying it is a done deal even though our actual resurrection is in the future.

Co-Resurrected

In Colossians 3:1, Paul used the certainty of our eternal life with Christ to motivate the church in Colossae to have a spiritual-heavenly perspective about life here on planet earth. Paul encouraged them to "keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth." Paul was telling them to let their spiritual mindset of heavenly realities govern their earthly thinking and responses. View things, people, and circumstances through an eternal perspective. The reason is given in v.3 that believers have died to the world system and way of thinking, and our new life is determined by our focus on Christ. We are still alive physically, but in a spiritual sense the old guy we were before Christ is dead, and the new spiritual person in Christ is alive. The world still sees this same person, so to them this spiritual reality is "hidden", but the real new person will be fully revealed with Jesus in the resurrection which is regarded as a done deal. God sees us already as the new spiritual person, therefore we should also think like it and live like it. Spiritual life is a life centered on Christ, not this present world with all its distractions.

The positional reality of being a new person alive in Christ must be currently worked out in practical living. We have died to sin's penalty, but sin's power can still be strong and our flesh is weak. In the last 2000 years people have tried repeatedly to overcome the desires of the flesh through their own will power. In the third century the famous theologian, Origen, had himself castrated. Afterwards he had second thoughts, and did not recommend it to anyone else. Middle Age monks scourged themselves, and wore belts studded with nails (sharp points on the inside). The idea was to be in such pain that you couldn't think about any sinful behavior. I don't recommend this either. The New Testament tells us that we have a daily, moment by moment battle within us between the Spirit and the flesh as Gal.5:17 says, "the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please (that you know are right)". Our goal then is to be controlled by the Spirit and not the flesh. Paul was saying in Colossians 3 that the first step then is to have a spiritual mindset. Train your thoughts on spiritual realities and promises, and take the focus of your attention off the difficulties of the world. The key ingredient is the Word of God as Paul says in Colossians 3:10, "the new self is being renewed to a true knowledge (the Word of God), and then again in Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you". This is a continuous process, and there is no progress apart from the truth. This is made clear in Paul's instruction to Timothy found in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." How then can we do good works without the control of the Holy Spirit in the use of the Word of God?

Example of Abraham

Hebrews 11:8 tells us that when Abram got the call from God in Genesis 12, that he responded by faith even though he was "not knowing where he was going". He was called by God, and only God knew where he was going or what was in store for him—kind of reminds us of our life a little. When we were called to Christ, we began a pilgrimage away from our former life into a new life. In the same way, Abraham's new found belief separated him from paganism, and he walked toward a new life marked by previously unknown spiritual realities. Paul said it well in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold new things have come."

Abraham actually never owned the land or even lived in a house or city. He “lived as an alien in the land of promise, dwelling in tents” (Heb.11:9-10). He never really possessed the land, he only possessed God’s promises which he patiently waited for. Why was he so patient? The author of Hebrews tells us that Abraham’s patience was due to his hope in the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises. His mindset was more on a “city...whose architect and builder is God.” He was looking up to the heavenly home which he believed he would receive. Meanwhile, he lived like a refugee in his own promised land because he had a heavenly perspective, and believed that what had not happened yet was still a reality. His motivation was that he “desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.” Abraham regarded his future heavenly home as his true homeland, so he was able to be patient and endure his experience as an “alien and a stranger on earth”.

Ephesians 1-3

Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus was typical of one of his letters in that the first three chapters have to do with what is positionally true in Christ, and chapters 4-6 are the application of what is true in Christ. To Paul, it is a guaranteed deal from God that we are forgiven, redeemed, and we have already got an inheritance in heaven awaiting us. Our current guarantee is backed up with the Holy Spirit who has been given to us “as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession” (Eph.1:14). In Eph.2:4-6, Paul went on to say that God has already accomplished our spiritual birth, not due to any merit of our own, but strictly by His gracious act of sending Christ to die for us. He did this because of the love that is in Him, and not because we deserved it. In fact, in God’s eyes He has already “raised us up with Christ, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places”. Notice that this is in past tense since God has already accomplished it. Because this is already a done deal, it should motivate us to holy living now, which is the subject matter of Eph.4-6. Paul said, “therefore, I entreat you to walk (live) in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called”. He then proceeded to entreat them to be unified, use their spiritual gifts in service, be kind to one another, forgive one another, put away any immoral behavior, and love your wife and children as Christ loves you.

Philippians 3

In Philippians 3, Paul again establishes what is already true positionally, because of our relationship with Christ, by giving a dramatic contrast of his own life before and after. Before Christ, Paul had tried to accomplish his own righteousness by keeping the law and doing good works. He even went so far as to say that if anyone could have done this it would be him because he had reached the state of being considered “blameless” by his peers. Nevertheless, he had discovered that the only true righteousness comes from a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. In comparison, Paul counted all his past achievements as “loss” in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ as Lord.

Realizing all that Christ has done for him, Paul then focused on the current life by saying that since he had not yet experienced the resurrection or the perfection that it would provide, he currently was pressing on, striving towards that ultimate prize of the resurrection. He asked them all to share that attitude of striving for godliness by following his example (Phil.3:15-17). Then he gave the Philippians a contrast of the enemies of Christ and the true believers in verses 18-21. The enemies live by their fleshly appetites and their minds are set on worldly things, but those who follow Paul’s example have already been given full “citizenship in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of our current humble state into conformity with the body of His glory”. That is a nice way of saying that by position we are ALREADY citizens of heaven, but we have NOT YET experienced it because we have to live a little while longer in a fallen world in aging weak imperfect bodies. This will end at the rapture/resurrection when the Lord comes for us and transforms us into our heavenly eternal bodies.

Application

In Paul’s letters he establishes who we are in Christ and what our future guaranteed promises are. Then he encourages his audience to respond. Since we are citizens of heaven, we should act like it even now on earth. Our perspective of being in Christ should rule over our lives. Stand firm in the truth, be Christ’s ambassadors even now, and live in harmony rejoicing always.

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