

THE CHRISTIAN HOPE AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

FREDERICK MAWUSI AMEVENKU AND

ISAAC BOAHENG¹

ABSTRACT

Persecution and suffering are among the most prominent challenges facing the Church in the 21st century. Day in, day out, we receive news about persecution of Christians in many parts of the world. The numerous cases of beheadings, torture, rape, kidnappings, mass killings, forced starvation, imprisonment and even crucifixions confirm H. van Dam's assertion that, "Christ's Church here on earth is a militant Church — a Church under persistent attack and a Church at war."² This study discusses how biblical eschatology should inform believers to live faithfully to Christ in this era of persecution and suffering. The thesis of the study is

¹ FREDERICK MAWUSI AMEVENKU is a Senior Lecturer in New Testament studies at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Accra and a PhD student of Stellenbosch University, South Africa. ISAAC BOAHENG is a Minister of the Methodist Church Ghana and a Translator with the Bible Society of Ghana.

² H. van Dam, *Teach All Nations: Stories from 2000-year Church History* (nc: Dutch Reformed Tract Society, 2012), 20.

that the Church can be equipped to face her contemporary challenges through the proclamation of eschatological messages that bring hope and comfort in the mist of unceasing evil.

Introduction

The German reformed theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, in his book *The Coming of God*, observed that “a theology of love characterized the Middle Ages, a theology of faith the Reformation, and a theology of hope the modern era.”³ This remark suggests that the message of Christian hope for the coming of the Kingdom of God and the accompanying eschatology has had a relatively more emphasis in modern times than previously. Indeed, the modern era, characterized by Christian suffering, automatically calls for a theology that can give hope to Christians as they wait for the imminent return of the Saviour. Going by Moltmann’s assertion, one wonders how successful biblical eschatology has been — even in modern times — with regards to its role of strengthening believers’ faith and emphasizing the Christian hope.

Typically, when we hear the term eschatology, what comes to mind are the various positions regarding the 1000 year reign of Christ described in Revelation chapter 20, such as premillennialism, a millennialism, postmillennialism and its related last events— for example the rapture, the new earth and the new heaven, tribulation — which are “to break into this world from somewhere beyond history, and to put an end to the history in which all things here live and move.”³ For centuries, eschatological discourses have also centered on wild creatures, torment, hardship, famine, bloodshed, and other cataclysmic events related to the end times. For many Christians, overemphasis on these things may have muddied the waters and detracted from the general concept of hope found in the study of

³ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 5.

Eschatology. Consequently, some of the people who preach or write on eschatology tend to make their audience more hopeless and terrified than before. Should this be the case? This cannot be so, because knowledge of Eschatology ought to be applicable to the daily lives of modern Christians.

Eschatology is the theological term that refers to the study of “the last things”⁴, whether the end of an individual life, the end of the age, the end of the world or the nature of the Kingdom of God. Thus, Eschatology is the branch of Christian theology that studies the doctrines of the end times. In Moltmann’s view, Eschatology is, “the doctrine of the Christian hope, which embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it.”⁵ Wayne A. Grudem makes a similar point when he says, “True Christianity trains us ‘to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, *awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ*’ (Titus 2:12–13).”⁶ Sharing the same view, Regin Prenter describes Eschatology as “the presentation of the Christian hope as an expectation of the revelation of the glory of Jesus Christ, through which, in faith, hope, and love, the life of renewal brings forth the fruit predetermined by God through his acts of creation and election.”⁷ We could clearly deduce from the submissions of these scholars that Eschatology and the Christian hope are intertwined. It is for this reason that it is not uncommon for some scholars to use Eschatology and Christian Hope interchangeably.

The term hope, in the biblical context, may refer to a sure expectation for the good and wonderful things that God has prepared for his children, which transcends their earthly existence. Unlike worldly hope, which is desire for something that we deem

⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 964. (pdf)

⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 6. (pdf)

⁶ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 964. (pdf)

⁷ Regin Prenter, *Creation and Redemption* translated by Theodor J. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 546.

good in this earthly life, Christian hope is that which enables one to endure difficult circumstances with joy and peace, knowing that when the Lord is revealed there would be greater comfort for the faithful.

According to Moltmann, “Hope is nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith has believed to have been truly promised by God... hope anticipates that it will sometime be revealed; faith is the foundation on which hope rests, hope nourishes and sustains faith.”⁸ There is therefore a strong connection between faith and hope, and more importantly between faith, hope and love. Paul uses the trilogy as a teaching mechanism when he writes, “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

On the relationship between faith and hope in particular, Wolfhart Pannenberg writes: “The core of eschatological hope, hope beyond death, is faith in God. Faith in the eternal God encompasses everything that must be presented as object of Christian hope. Such hope does not come as something additional to faith in God, and it cannot persist without such faith.”⁹ The hope of being present with the Lord at death, of a future resurrection, and of rewards for faithful service, helps to sustain us not only during times of trial and suffering, but also during the tedium of our everyday lives. Indeed, the Christian hope, therefore, is “like an anchor.”¹⁰ In the view of Prenter, eschatological hope centers on three themes. First, it centers on the *parousia*, the glorious appearance of Jesus Christ at the end of history.¹¹ Second, it centers on the eschatological judgment, which is the universal

⁸ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 1011.

⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, “The Task of Christian Eschatology”, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *The Last Things: Biblical & Theological Perspectives on Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 3.

¹⁰ Charles R. Swindoll, *Hope Again* (London: Word Publishing, 1996), 15.

¹¹ Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, 546.

acknowledgement of Jesus' glory.¹² Third, it centers on eternal life, which is the final victory of the glorified Christ.¹³ In all of this, it can be seen that the eschatological hope serves to comfort believers who are currently experiencing evil of all kinds.

Eschatology and Godly Living

From time immemorial to the present, people who truly live for God are persecuted in one way or the other. When Cain murdered Abel, it was a form of persecution (Gen. 4). In the Old Testament, people lived with hope of future deliverance from their enemies through faith in the promised Messiah who was to establish God's kingdom. In this wise, Anthony Hoekema points to seven key eschatological realities hoped for by Old Testament believers: the coming Redeemer, the kingdom of God, the new covenant, the restoration of Israel, the outpouring of the Spirit, the day of the Lord, and the new heavens and the new earth.¹⁴ Confirming the eschatological hope of Old Testament believers, the writer of Hebrews states concerning OT saints:

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. (Heb. 11:11-16)

¹²Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, 546.

¹³Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, 546.

¹⁴Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 11.

The point is that these saints believed that what God had promised them will surely come to pass. For this reason, they were ready to endure suffering so as to secure an inheritance in heaven, the kingdom of heaven. Israel's monotheistic religion, which claimed that only Yahweh is God, gave other nations cause to fight them.

The book of Daniel gives us a classic example of God's people whose faith in Yahweh led to persecution. Religious persecution sent Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the furry furnace (Dan. 3). Daniel was sent into the lions' den because of his faith in Yahweh (Dan. 6). As the Jews suffered in the hands of the Babylonians and Persians, they wondered whether the unrighteous would go unpunished and whether the righteous would be vindicated. The answer Yahweh gave to his people was, "...and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book." (Dan. 12:1) We learn from this message that Yahweh will reward us in the end, our toil will not be in vain, and the righteous will shine like a star. Based on such promises, the people were prepared to suffer for Yahweh and to wait patiently for the day Yahweh shall reward the righteous and punish the wicked.

The book of the Acts gives us several examples of Christians who were persecuted. Not long after the Pentecost experience, the disciples began to face persecution. They were charged with teaching in the name of a "heretic" and "blasphemer." They were called before the Sanhedrin, interrogated and ordered not to teach in ~~in~~ Jesus' name. (Acts 5:27-28) Stephen was cast "out of the city and stoned ... to death"¹⁵ because of the faithful way he preached the Gospel to the betrayers and murderers of Christ. (Acts 7) After Stephen's martyrdom "a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1). Also, Christians were arrested, shamed, beaten, censured, and yet they continued with the mission. Eventually, James was also killed (12:2), but even then,

¹⁵Foxe's book of martyrs, 1

the believers remained faithful. Surely, the early church believed that in the end the incompleteness of their present experience of God will be resolved, loose ends will be tied up and wrongs made right. They believed their faithfulness would be rewarded when the Lord returned.

In his book, *Heroes of the Early Church*, Richard Newton brings out lessons from the life of some faithful church fathers. Concerning Clement of Rome (30-100AD)¹⁶, Newton records that at the time of his trial he was made to choose between sacrificing to the Roman gods and being banished. He refused to sacrifice to the gods and was eventually banished.¹⁷ Newton describes Ignatius as a hero.¹⁹ First, Ignatius was cast into prison where he was “subjected to the most severe and unmerciful treatment.”¹⁸ “He was whipped” and also “forced to hold fire with his naked hands, while the sides of his body were burnt with paper dipped in oil.”¹⁹ As Ignatius bore all this suffering without murmuring, his tormentors were “astonished at his perfect endurance.”²⁰ Finally, when the emperor was convinced that no amount of torture could let Ignatius change his mind, he (the emperor) “pronounced the death sentence upon him.”²¹ Ignatius’ last words before his death are very remarkable. “I thank thee, O Lord, that thou hast been pleased thus perfectly to honour me with thy love, and hast thought me worthy, with thy holy apostle Paul, to be bound with iron chains.”²² History goes on to say that he cheerfully embraced his chains and after praying earnestly for his church, “he delivered himself into the hands of the soldiers appointed to transport him into the place of execution.”²³ What

¹⁶ Richard Newton, *Heroes of the Early Church: Life changing lessons for the young* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2005), 9.

¹⁷ Newton, *Heroes of the Early Church*, 13-14.

¹⁸ Newton, *Heroes of the Early Church*, 13-14.

¹⁹ Newton, *Early Church*, 20.

²⁰ Newton, *Early Church*, 21.

²¹ Newton, *Early Church*, 21.

²² Newton, *Early Church*, 21.

²³ Newton, *Early Church*, 21.

about Polycarp? He was asked to forsake his faith and swear by the Roman gods. To this request, he replied, "Eighty and six years I have served my blessed Saviour. He has done nothing but bless me all the time; then how can I forsake him now?"²⁴

Finally, when he was about to be executed, he prayed, "O Lord God Almighty... I bless thee that thou hast graciously brought me to this day and hour, that I might receive a portion among the number of thy martyrs and drink of Christ's cup. Wherefore I praise thee for all thy mercies; I bless thee, I glorify thee through thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ... Amen."²⁵

Christian Hope as Motivation for Victorious Christian Living

At the dawn of the 21st century, Christ's prophecy about persecution of his followers rang as clearly as ever. Day in, day out, we get news about the persecution of Christians in many parts of the world. The numerous cases of beheadings, torture, rape, kidnappings, mass killings, forced starvation, imprisonment and even crucifixions indicate that Christianity is the most persecuted faith in the contemporary world. In view of this, Pope Francis profoundly asserted that, "the 21st century has seen more Christians under siege for their faith than during the time of the early church."²⁶ Today, Christians are required to bribe employers before getting jobs, bribe heads of institutions before gaining admission and so on. All these point to the fact that, the contemporary world makes the practice of Christianity very difficult. Yet biblical eschatology gives believers hope to look forward to the future with a sense of expectancy and anticipation. In this wise, Moltmann persuasively argues that: "From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also

²⁴Newton, *Early Church*, 33.

²⁵Newton, *Early Church*, 34.

²⁶<http://www.christianpost.com/news/pope-more-persecuted-christianstoday-than-ever-before-122469/>

revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day."²⁷

Eschatology ought to inject into Christian hearts a sense of hope for everyday living. In that sense, it may be valid to argue that to be a Christian is to be a person of hope irrespective of one's circumstances.

Hope in the Complete Reign of God in the World

First, eschatology gives us hope of God's total rule on earth, rule characterized by justice and righteousness. The concept of the kingdom of God in the mind of the OT worshipper was that of God's visible conquest of his enemies, the vindication and restoration of his people, Israel, to supremacy in the land, and the fulfillment of the promises of a Davidic throne and rule upon the earth in power and glory. That this kind of a kingdom was expected by the average Israelite in the first century is indisputable. According to N. T. Wright, "God's kingdom, to the Jew-in-the-village in the first half of the first century, meant the coming vindication of Israel, victory over the pagans, the eventual gift of peace, justice and prosperity. It is scarcely surprising that, when a prophet appeared announcing that this kingdom was dawning, and that Israel's God was at last becoming king, he found an eager audience."²⁸

The New Testament emphasizes the first and second advents of Christ or the Christ Event and Eschatology. At the first advent, Jesus *inaugurated* the blessings of the new age; at the time of his return he will *consummate* them. Jesus declared that his mighty deeds were signs that his kingdom had arrived in his Person. Thus, when Jesus was accused of operating with the power

²⁷Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 6. (pdf)

²⁸N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 204.

of Beelzebub, he responded, "...if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (Matt.12:28). His point was that since he cast out devils by the Spirit of God, the kingdom of God was already on earth. Yet in passages such as Matthew 24, John 14:2-4, Matthew 25, Jesus clearly spoke about a future consummation of the kingdom at the end of the world. The setting up of the kingdom of glory is clearly future in those passages, for Jesus declared, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne; All the nations will be gathered before him . . ." (Matt. 25:31-32,). The Kingdom of God can therefore be described as "already but not yet." One of the main focuses of Eschatology is to give the assurance that God will one day establish his rule fully on earth.

Eschatology tells us that Jesus will come again to reign over the earth. The coming kingdom provides the church with a much broader view of reality than merely a private vision of personal salvation. The coming kingdom also creates a confronting and transforming vision of the mission of the church as the people of God. This promise of God is the propelling force of history and the source of continual new impulses toward the realization of righteousness, freedom, and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come. The escalating suffering in the world and in the Church leading up to the Last Day will finally culminate in deliverance for the people of God. Jesus will come back in the flesh and triumph with finality over the devil and over all evil. When the kingdom is fully established humankind will be delivered from the presence of sin - humankind's biggest challenge since the fall of Adam. Jesus will banish all ungodliness, bring a new heaven and a new earth and ensure that there is only righteousness and peace. The governance of the new heaven and earth will be devoid of injustice, corruption, hatred, hardship, persecution and so on. Justice, equality and peace will be its hallmark. Through the study of Eschatology, we come to realize that our struggle with human governments will one day be over.

Hope of Resurrection

Second, Eschatology gives hope of resurrection. According to Prenter, the theme of the *parousia* is “an indispensable expression of faith’s conviction that death, the result of all men’s guilt ... is the entrance to the glory which the resurrection of Jesus Christ revealed as the mystery of his death.”²⁹ Those who have been born again in our Lord Jesus Christ have been promised a living hope through his resurrection. The prophet Daniel describes the final resurrection in these unambiguous words: “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” (Dan. 12:2) Like other parts of Scripture, the promise of the miracle of the resurrection is closely associated with the Last Day or the Day of the Lord. In Akan, the word for burial is *sie*, the meaning of which seems to suggest that the Akans believe that the corpse will not remain in the ground forever. To *sie* means “to consciously hide something precious at a safe place so that one can go for it anytime the need arises.” This is quite different from the expression *to twene* which means “to throw away” or “to dispose of.” Joseph seems to demand *sie* rather than *to twene* when he instructed the Israelites to carry his bones from Egypt and bury them in Canaan. (Gen. 50:25, Ex. 13:19) Moltmann wrote in the last paragraph of his *Theology of Hope*:

The hope of the resurrection must bring about a new understanding of the world. This world is not the heaven of self-realization, as it is said to be in Idealism. This world is not the hell of selfstrangement, as it is said to be in romanticist and existentialist writing. The world is not yet finished, but it is understood as engaged in history. It is therefore the world of possibilities, the world

²⁹Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, 549.

in which we can serve the future, promised truth
and righteousness and peace.³⁰

Eschatology makes us aware of the fact that we will not die and remain in the ground forever, we will resurrect one day. Our present hope is that all those who have ever lived upon the earth will rise again from the dust to which their earthly bodies had returned for them to stand before the Almighty for the public proclamation of their eternal fate. As believers of Christ, this day is very important because it is that day that gives us the assurance that, even though humankind was made from dust and is to return to the dust, that does not end the human story. There is a day when the righteous will be raised from death to live forever with Jesus Christ whereas the wicked will be raised into eternal damnation. “The Hope of Eternal Life”, which is closely connected to the resurrection, is a human desire that is both deeply personal, generally shared and constantly confessed. This eternal life is “the complete restoration of human life through its participation in the glory of the risen Jesus Christ.”³¹ Better still eternal life is the resurrection life in which the power of sin and death are no more, where humankind is forever reconciled with the Creator, with their fellow human beings, and with the entire cosmos.³²

In the Apostles’ Creed, we declare: “I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.” Likewise, in the Nicene Creed, we confess, “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” Christianity, therefore, hinges on the belief that death is not the end of life for the individual, for humanity, or the universe. For this reason, Paul says, “If it is for this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). For every Christian,

³⁰Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 338.

³¹Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, 546.

³²Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, 546.

“to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Death is not the last word, for “death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54). This hope is not only for ourselves, but for all things: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God . . . in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19, 21).

During our difficulties Christian hope gives us assurance of the resurrection. Our shared hope is not vague or uncertain, for it focuses on Jesus Christ. “For as by one person’s death came, by one person also the resurrection of the dead has come. Christ “abolished death, brought life and immortality to light” (2 Tim. 1:10). Christ is not simply the reason we hope; he is the content of the Christian hope.

Hope of Eschatological Reward and Glorification

More so, there is hope of reward and glorification. Charles H. Spurgeon opens his discussion on this topic by asserting that, “It is exceedingly beneficial to our souls to mount above this present evil world to something nobler and better.”³³ As the believer is suffering on earth and has no hope in the things or circumstances around him/her, biblical Eschatology gives the assurance that there is going to be a day of reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. For this reason, believers feel even privileged to be part of the suffering which leads to glorification. Biblical Eschatology gives us the hope that we will finally be delivered and numbered among those who awake to everlasting life to be counted among the sheep. The *Te Deum Laudamus* captures this when it says, “to be numbered with saints in glory everlasting.” This glorification comes about not because of any work of our own but because of our faith in our Savior and his redeeming work on our behalf. Yes, it is truly by grace that we

³³Charles H. Spurgeon, *Sermons on the Last Days* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 15.

have been saved and it is truly by grace that we will be raised from death to be numbered among the righteous on the Final Day.

According to the prophet Daniel, all those who turn many to righteousness will shine like the stars forever and ever. (Daniel 12:3) This is a wonderful promise for faithful Christians, of all ages, who lead others on the path of righteousness and teach them by word and deed. Such people will be among those God will reward by his grace and they will be shining lights in his glorious kingdom. Surely, our hope is that even though these last days may be times of great distress for our world and for the Church, they will end in deliverance for the people of God. Our sure hope is that when the final resurrection occurs, we will know it as a time of great mercy, a time of joyful recognition, of glorified bodies to live with God forever and ever. Paul therefore assures us: The glory that awaits us as children of God seen from eternal perspective supersedes our present sufferings. Paul's point is that our glory is eternal while our sufferings are momentary; our glory is great while our sufferings are but light, our glory is unseen while our suffering is visible. What is visible is temporal but what is unseen is permanent (Rom. 8). A similar passage is found in 2 Peter 3:13-15, which reads: "But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him."

Commenting on this passage, Calvin says, "Hope is living and efficacious; therefore, it cannot be but that it will attract us to itself."³⁴ True Christian hope will take on a character of deep longing, but will also long for others to share in the same hope.

For Spurgeon, our eschatological hope is this: "...Glory awaits us, if we abide in Christ. Therefore, keep your garments

³⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles: The Second Epistle of Peter*, ed. and trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 422.

unspotted, your lions girded, your lamps trimmed, and your lights burning, and ye yourselves as men that look for your Lord, that, when he comes, you may have confidence, and not shame.”³⁵ In view of this, the believer is always ready to go through hardship, if need be, as he/she awaits the glory that lies ahead. “We can also rejoice through suffering because we have a permanent inheritance secured. And our place there is reserved under the safekeeping, under the constant, omnipotent surveillance of Almighty God”³⁶ We rest assured that “nothing can destroy it, defile it, diminish it, or displace it.”³⁷

Hope of Judgment

Furthermore, Eschatology gives us hope of God’s just judgment. Daniel predicts a time of resurrection and judgment for the unbeliever and he reminds God’s people that the Final Day will be for them a time of mercy and joyful recognition and for all those who will inherit eternal life. (Dan. 12:1-3). In the book of Revelation, the martyrs called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev. 6:10) Storm supports this by saying, “The certainty of final judgment is also affirmed ... in 2 Corinthians 5. Paul insists that ‘whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil’ (2 Cor. 5:9–10)”³⁸ God’s righteous and just judgment is indeed certain even it tarries presently.

³⁵ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Sermons on the Last Days* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), back cover.

³⁶ Swindoll, *Hope Again*, 16.

³⁷ Swindoll, *Hope Again*, 16.

³⁸ Sam Storm, *The Restoration of All Thing* (Illinois: Crossway, 2011), 16. (pdf)

Implications for Contemporary Living

What are the implications of the Christian hope for our lives in the present? Hardly a day passes without reports of unresolved murders, terrorist attacks by Boko Haram, Al Shabab, ISIS, etc and arbitrary executions, political turmoil, corruption and exploitation of the vulnerable among other evils. Even the Church is no longer a place of solace for those for which life is turmoil. Many leaders of the Christian community are nothing but magicians and occult practitioners who are happily exploiting gullible and unsuspecting followers to their personal material advantage. No wonder it is not uncommon to hear some of them tell their followers that a Christian life without suffering and persecution is entirely possible and they claim to have keys to such Christian practice. As we live in these troubled times, we do not have to be surprised, even though the end times will be marked by greater and greater distress culminating in Judgment Day. We have to live our daily lives with last days' promises in mind. Biblical Eschatology helps Christians to smile through their sufferings, since they are reminded that their present situation is not the end of the story — “it's simply the rough journey that leads to the right destination.”³⁹ We are assured that the wicked will not go unpunished. God will surely punish all wickedness. Therefore, it is incumbent on all genuine Christians to be bold and stand up to the truth, fight injustice and challenge the powers that be to let justice and righteousness prevail no matter the cost involved. This is how to remain faithful to the Lord as our forebears did and this is how to live out the Christian hope, the blessed hope.

Conclusion

Clearly, Eschatology has good news for believers. To the believer, Eschatology is not frightening but comforting. In this article, we have contended that Eschatology, when properly understood and taught will infuse joy into believers' lives and hope for the future regardless of prevailing circumstances. The Christian life has to

³⁹Swindoll, *Hope Again*,15.

be lived with eschatological expectation that God is in control of our lives and world. Such a hope will eventually lead us to live for Christ in all circumstances of life. Proper biblical Eschatology will comfort the broken hearted such that the persecuted will smile in his/her persecution. Swindoll suggests that we can cope with a situation whereby we run low on hope by accepting the “mystery of hardship, suffering, misfortune, or mistreatment” and trusting God protect us by his “power from this very moment to the dawning of eternity.”⁴⁰ Surely, to be able to accept suffering and trust God for his final deliverance is exactly one of the various roles which biblical Eschatology plays to firm our faith. Being a double-edged sword, biblical Eschatology has the power to invoke confidence and hope in those who love and serve God, as well as invoking fear of impending judgment in those living in rebellion against him. Eschatology, therefore, speaks to unbelievers by sending a warning that unbelief will lead them to eternal punishment. Life on earth is very short; eternal life has no end but whatever a person does on earth has eternal consequences.

With eschatological hope, the believer’s response should include the mission of the church to all nations, the hunger for righteousness in the world, and love for the true life of the endangered and damaged creation. The church should therefore be the people of hope, who continually experience the God who is present in his promises. Indeed, we must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope. D. Edmond Hiebert has stated that, “the hope of Christ’s return is an essential part of the believer’s equipment for fruitful Christian living. The anticipation of the Lord’s return must have an impact on present Christian conduct. In the face of persecution from without, believers, inspired by their hope of the future, must band together in loving service to each other to the glory of God.”⁴¹

⁴⁰Swindoll, *Hope Again*, 17.

⁴¹D. Edmond Hiebert, *Living in the Light of Christ’s Return: An Exposition of 1 Peter 4:7-11* *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (1982) 243-254. 243.

His point is that as we study Eschatology, it must affect our present way of living. Eschatology deals with expectation, with hope, with death, with the future. It gives the assurance that not everything about human beings is over after death, that death is not human beings' radical end and absolute destination, and that there is something beyond. We conclude with Moltmann's assertion that, "The coming lordship of the risen Christ cannot be merely hoped for and awaited. This hope and expectation also sets its stamp on life, action and suffering in the history of society."⁴²

Finally, since the *parousia* "marks the end of history, the time for its occurrence cannot be predicted. It will in the strictest sense be unexpected. (Mark 13:32-37, Acts 1:7; I Thess. 5:1-4)."⁴³ In fact the *parousia* does not depend on forces which are already in operation in the is world. For this reason, it cannot "be related to any general historical development so that it should be possible in advance to calculate when it will take place."⁴⁴ This means that we should be watchful all the time for the *parousia*. Having said all these, it is appropriate to conclude with the words of Prenter that, "The church's entire life of worship, rightly understood, is nothing other than a perpetual witness concerning the unexpectedness of the second coming as expressed in the cry of the ancient church, *Marana tha!* To go to church is to go there to await the Lord's return."⁴⁵

Bibliography

Calvin, J. *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles: The Second Epistle of Peter*, edited and translated by John Owen. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948.

Grudem, W. A. *Systematic Theology: Introduction to Christian Doctrine*. Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011. (pdf)

⁴²Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 338.

⁴³Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, 551.

⁴⁴Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, 551.

⁴⁵Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, 551.

- Hiebert, D. E. "Living in the Light of Christ's Return: An Exposition of 1 Peter 4:7-11", *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 139 (1982) 243-254.
- Hoekema, A. *The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.
- Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften as quoted by Thomas Schirmacher, *The Persecution of Christians Concerns Us all: Towards a Theology of Martyrdom*. Bonn: Culture and Science Publ., 2008. (pdf) <http://www.christianpost.com/news/pope-morepersecuted-christians-today-than-ever-before-122469/> Moltmann, J. *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*. London: SCM, 1996.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *Theology of Hope*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965. (pdf)
- _____. *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
- Nauck, W. "Freude im Leiden" as quoted in Thomas Schirmacher, *The Persecution of Christians Concerns Us all: Towards a Theology of Martyrdom*. Bonn: Culture and Science Publ., 2008. (pdf)
- Newton, R. *Heroes of the Early Church: Life changing lessons for the young*. Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2005.
- Pannenberg, W. "The Task of Christian Eschatology", in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *The Last Things: Biblical & Theological Perspectives on Eschatology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, pp
- Prenter, R. *Creation and Redemption* translated by Theodor J. Jensen. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967.
- Spurgeon, C. H. *Sermons on the Last Days*. Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009.