

Soldier On! W/ Leroy Garrett
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Yes, But Not Yet!

YES, BUT NOT YET!

And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth! -- Rev. 6:10

Those who uttered those anguished words had been martyred for their faith. They are asking what suffering humanity has been asking throughout history -- Will things be set right, and if so, when?

The question is asked in different ways. The prophet to the exiles in Babylon -- puzzled by God's apparent inaction during troubling times -- cried out, "Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down!" (Isa. 64:1) He goes on to complain, "You have hidden Your face from us." (v. 7). The psalmists often complain in like manner: "Lord, why do You cast off my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me" (Ps. 88:14).

The prophet Habakkuk was another who asked that gnawing question: "O Lord, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear? He pointed to all the injustice and violence in the world -- "even the law is powerless" -- and wanted to know if and when the Lord was going to do something about it.

Psalms 137 is a lament of the exiles in Babylon waiting impatiently for God to deliver them: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion." When they were taunted by their captives to sing one of the songs of Zion, they responded, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" And then: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill!"

The exiles had been waiting a long time. New generations had been born in Babylon. They had been promised in letters from Jeremiah the prophet that their bondage would one day end -- "I will cause the captives of the land to return as at the first, says the Lord" (Jer. 33:11). -- but the years rolled by and they were still in bondage.

It is often the case in Scripture that How long? or When? is answered with -- at least by implication -- Not yet! In Gal. 3:17 Paul counts 430 years that God took in fulfilling a promise to Abraham! Faith is often a matter of believing that God's will is, Yes, but not yet!

There is the promise of Christ's second coming -- "Behold, I come quickly!" is the language of the Bible (Rev. 22:7). Time has taught us that "quickly" or "soon" might run into centuries, leading scoffers to say, "Where is the promise of His coming: For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Pet. 3:8). But the same Scripture reminds us that "quickly" and "soon" are to be measured against a daunting truth: With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

So, "Yes, but not yet" may mean only another day or so -- but that could be thousands of years by our time!!

The prophets and the apostles were not remiss in naming the promises. And they are overwhelming in their import, especially in reference to a future peace on earth. Such as:

There will be new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (Isa. 65:17; 2 Pet. 3:13).

Spears will be beaten into plowshares and swords into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither will they study war anymore (Isa. 2:4).

There will be no end to the rule of peace on earth (Isa. 9:7).

The will of God will be done on earth as it is done in heaven (Mt. 6:10).

Neighbors will be at peace with each other (Zech. 3:10).

The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14).

No more fear, no more tears, no more death, no more sorrow or pain (Micah 4:4, Isa. 25:8, Rev. 21:4).

No more high birth mortality rate; everyone will live in good health a hundred years or more (Isa, 65:20).

Justice will roll down like water, righteousness like a mighty stream (Amos 5:24).

No more terror or destruction (Isa. 65:25).

Now for a few facts about conditions in the world at the present time:

Violence, terrorism, and destruction are rampant around the world.

Diseases like AIDS and cancer are of near epidemic proportions -- cases of AIDS may soon number 100 million, and in the poorest of countries.

There is gross economic inequality, with upwards of half the world in poverty, with an income of less than \$2 a day; hundreds of millions go to bed hungry.

Corruption, greed, bribery are in high places of government and business, and it is of global proportions, oppressing the innocent.

Multiplied millions suffer from injustice, racism, intolerance, denial of civil rights, and persecution -- including widespread persecution of Christians.

The list could go on, but it is enough to show that the world is far from being the way we think it should be. It is not what the Bible promises. It is not what the prophets dreamed of in terms of peace on earth and goodwill toward men. It is not descriptive of a long -expected Messianic age -- not even 2,000 years after the Messiah came to planet earth announcing the kingdom of God.

What is the Christian response to this? What do we say to the cynic -- such as the philosopher Albert Camus -- who sees it all as absurd, a world that makes no sense. The dreams of the prophets are just that, empty dreams. The only answer is to accept the reality of the meaninglessness of it all, Camus would say, and make the best of an impossible situation. Then there is the response of the hedonist: Get all the pleasure you can out of life and let it go at that.

Part of the answer may be that the promises of God in the Bible are being realized, little by little. The kingdom -- like the mustard seed that Jesus talked about -- will eventually grow into the likeness of a mighty tree, but it will be gradual. Look at all the good in the world. Consider what the community of faith has done through the centuries for peace and justice. The amelioration of society is partly realized -- which is evident when comparing the modern world to the ancient -- and it is ongoing.

To put it another way, what would be the condition of the world had not God given Christ and the church to the world? Yes, the AIDS epidemic is not reflective of the promise of a kingdom of peace and joy, but there are multitudes of noble souls rising up with technical and financial resources to attack the problem. Perhaps that is what the coming kingdom of God is about -- "the kingdom within us" -- the will and the commitment to alleviate human suffering. It is a

fact that in every evil situation listed above there are monumental and heroic efforts on the part of many caring people to deal with the problem.

Why is that not part of the coming kingdom of God -- casting out the demons of poverty, disease, ignorance, discrimination, racism, sectarianism, legalism, and all the rest? To paraphrase Jesus: "If we by the finger of God cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon us" (Lk. 11:20).

There is another answer to the problem of unfilled promises of peace and justice. An important dimension of faith is "not-yetness." Faith accepts the fact that promises are often long delayed in being realized. A family has no less faith in the father simply because his promise of a new home is delayed in coming. Faith says, "Yes, I believe the promises, but I realize that -- due to God's sovereign will -- they may be "not yet." That they will come -- in God's own tomorrow -- is beyond question. "Not-yetness" is one of faith's virtues.

An example of this is Alexander Campbell's view of slavery, which was an explosive issue in his day -- dividing the nation and churches alike. While he made it clear that he was "institutionally, religiously, and economically anti-slavery," he called for sympathy and brotherly kindness toward those in the South caught up in the evil institution. He advised that the issue of freeing the slaves be left to "the opening of Divine Providence" and to "the developments of time," which he described as the greatest of teachers and the most successful of revolutionists.

Campbell granted that slavery was, of course, inimical to the kingdom of God -- and certainly contrary to the promises of the prophets. But liberation of the slaves did not have to be now -- which might incur other social evils. Give the leaven of righteousness time to work. Time -- our great teacher -- will find a way. Time -- both an innovator and a revolutionist -- will eventually bring victory. God uses both men and time to effect change. Yes, but not yet. Give God time! While we are impatient, God is not.

If Campbell's view had prevailed -- a view also held by Jefferson and other leaders of that day -- 600,000 men would not have had to die in the Civil War, and half of the nation would not have suffered devastation.

Will nations one day study war no more? Will the lion and the wolf one day lie down together -- symbolic of peace and goodwill among men? Will there one day be new heavens and a new earth -- where God's will is done as it is done in heaven? YES! But not yet.