

# NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES ON EVIL

By Jerry Flora\*

New Testament theology is the attempt to describe the theology of the New Testament on the basis of the writers themselves in the context of the first century. It does not try to move into the territory of systematic theology, but it does try to get past the point of exegesis so that we have a sense of what the various authors believe. Our task here is to look at the New Testament materials in their context, taking account of the fact that Matthew is not Mark, Mark is not John, and nobody is Paul except Paul.

Let us begin by calling attention to several points in the Gospel materials where evil appears to be overcome. The first of these is the temptation of Jesus. Following Jesus' birth we have only one incident from his childhood (Luke 2:41-52). We know nothing else about him except that at about the age of thirty he was baptized in the Jordan Valley in a renewal movement that was occurring in Judaism. Then he went into the wilderness where he was tested. This probably needs to be thought of not in the word "temptation" but "testing." As a man he goes into the wilderness and as a man he is tempted. But he is more than just a human being because the one who is testing him says, "If you are really the Son, do this; if you are really the Son, do that." In each case Jesus overpowers the force of the evil one. He survives the ordeal by quoting scripture. The scriptures are all taken out of Deuteronomy 6-8, where it is Israel in the wilderness that is being tested.

The nation was called to be God's child and to respond to God in faith and obedience and endurance. Israel did not survive the test very well. Israel has now been reduced to one solitary individual in the wilderness of Judea, and he is approached by a power of evil that says, "If you are really God's Son, there are better ways to get to the promised land than through the desert. Make bread, jump off the temple, fall down and worship me, but by all means take a short-cut. You don't have to go through the wilderness of putting up with this generation, wrestling in the garden, or enduring the cross. You can get around all that." Jesus responds in every case with words from the early chapters of Deuteronomy in which he now personifies the true Israel. He meets the test in the wilderness and when he survives all of this, we are told that on the one hand he was desperately hungry and required angelic assistance to sustain him (Matt. 4:11). We are told on the other hand, that when he came out of the wilderness he was full of the Spirit and the power of God (Luke 4:14). When Jesus walked out of that desert he blazed just as Elijah in the old days when that prophet lived out in the desert.

Now comes the new prophet, and he begins to speak in a strange way. "You know that nobody can break into a strong man's house and plunder the strong

\*Dr. Flora (Th.D., Southern Baptist) is Professor of NT and Theology at ATS.

man's treasure unless first they bind the strong man. But once the strong man is bound then they can plunder his goods" (cf. Mark 3:27). What is he referring to? He goes into the synagogue in Nazareth and says, "This is my ministry. My mission is to bring freedom into this world; to open the eyes of the blind, make the lame to walk, let the deaf hear, enable the dumb to speak, set the prisoners free, and bring joy on every hand. If I, by the Spirit of God, have cast out demons then the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (cf. Luke 4:16-19; Matt. 12:28). The verb is in the aorist tense: the Kingdom of God has come. But the aorist may also mean that the Kingdom of God has begun to come. The Kingdom of God is in the process of coming; there is no longer any delay. The Kingdom of God long awaited is now in the process of arriving in the ministry of this one man who has come out of the desert and is preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, raising the dead, and causing the poor to smile. Every time that happens he is plundering the treasures of the evil one. He has bound the power of the strong man because he is in fact stronger.

What we are dealing with is the Kingdom of God, which is a mixture of motifs in the Old Testament. One motif seems to suggest that God's "day," when he makes his final move and turns the world right-side up, will be the result of historical forces already in progress. The apocalyptic view, also rooted in the Old Testament, is not that things evolve out of historical cause and effect to bring in the day of the Lord, but God brings in the day of the Lord by shattering the present historical existence of nations and peoples. The day of the Lord breaks all that we know of present progress and civilization. It is a vertical strike into our historical existence, and God turns things right-side up. In the literature that developed between Malachi and Matthew that apocalyptic view was highlighted.

The apocalyptic view goes like this: there are two ages, this age and the age to come. The dividing line between them is the resurrection of the dead and the judgment. Now, that cannot be done by historical process. That is God breaking into human experience, and the age to come in this view represents a quality of life never known before. It is a quality of life in which God rules, a quality of life that is eternal — not just everlasting but eternal — because it partakes of the very nature of God. It is a quality of life that involves salvation, rescue for God's people. It involves righteousness, conforming to the standards, the standards which God sets up. It involves holiness, likeness to the very character of God in every respect. This kind of life entails, among other things, love — eternal love. The apocalyptic view says that these things are not going to evolve out of this age because this age is evil. It is wicked, it is fallen, it is broken, and we do not have within us the strength to create those things on earth. But when the day comes that God raises the dead and judges the world, God will bring it all in, and this will be a part of that great day, a part of the age to come.

The New Testament says that this is what began to happen in the ministry of Jesus. He brought in the Kingdom of God; the rulership of God now became active. A new kind of life began to emerge, a quality that the Fourth Gospel

calls eternal life, the very life of God himself. Salvation, the rescue of God's people, and righteousness, which we also know as justification, came into the world with Jesus' ministry. This includes a sense of holiness, a sense of love, and what we have in the rest of the New Testament is simply different writers picking up different aspects of all this.

The Kingdom of God is the language of the Synoptic Gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke all agree in saying that it is the basic category for Jesus' teaching, but we do not find that in the rest of the New Testament. John prefers to write not so much in terms of the Kingdom, but in terms of eternal life. "These things have happened that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that believing you may have life and have it right now" (cf. John 20:31). Paul prefers the language of salvation, speaking in terms of rescue and justification with holiness and love running all the way through. Once we get this kind of background as a framework, the ministry of Jesus falls into place as a bringing into the world of the blessings of the age to come but without shattering this age. Herod is still on the throne, Pilate is still governor, Augustus and Tiberias are still emperors, and there remains the possibility of injustice and crucifixion.

Where, then, is the Kingdom? The Kingdom is working quietly in a ministry of preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, raising the dead and causing the poor to smile. It is working without smashing all the powers of this age, *but it is working*. The Kingdom, said Jesus, is like what happens when a woman is ready to bake. She has a basketful of dough and a handful of sourdough which she sticks in there. Once it starts its action no one can back it up. The Kingdom of God, having come in the ministry of Jesus, will not be reversed. It is going to go on; it is going to do its work and no one can turn it back. But don't they attempt to do so? Don't they crucify him? Of course, but God raised him from the dead on the third day, and that is the heart of the New Testament message.

If God has raised that man to life, then in that man the judgment of the world has begun. Everything revolves around this. The Christian faith stands alone among the religions of the world in saying that its founder is alive. He is not just a prophet who pointed us to God; he is in fact God come among us, God who walked on this planet for one time in human history. By virtue of his resurrection Jesus of Nazareth, son of David, has now been declared Son of God — not just Son of God in person but Son of God with power (Rom. 1:3-4).

How does this come about? It has come about by the work of the Spirit of holiness, wrote Paul. There are no capital letters in the Greek, so is this "spirit" or Spirit? Paul does not use this language elsewhere. He does not talk about the Spirit of holiness but about the Holy Spirit. Here is antique language, semitic language probably coming from the church in Palestine. Paul has picked up this older confession of faith and said, "This is the Christian faith, and I am sending it off to you believers in Rome. You who are Jewish will recognize this kind of language. Let me explain it then to those of you who are Gentiles." Notice the heart of it is that God raised Jesus from the dead, and in that act the powers of evil were overcome. If in fact God has raised one human

being from death to this kind of life, then the age to come has started. The entire New Testament is written against that background.

Oscar Cullmann wrote in his book *Christ and Time* that the powers of the age to come have entered this age and have given us a new center point of reference: Jesus Christ and his ministry (Cullmann 1962). In Jesus Christ certain crucial things have already happened, but there still remains much that has not yet occurred. What God has done is take the one great action that the Old Testament looks at as fulfilling the plan for the world and begin to accomplish it in two phases. We must not think of Christ's first coming and his second coming as two separate events; they are two stages, two phases, of a single divine work to straighten out the world. As Peter says in his letter, what the prophets did not understand was the sufferings of the Messiah and the glory that was to follow (1 Pet. 1:10-12). The sufferings are the first advent; the glory to follow begins with his resurrection. That goes on through the time of the church and into the second advent of Christ.

Let us refer to a few more incidents in the Gospel material where the powers of evil are overcome. One of the most dramatic stories in the Gospels is the Gerasene demoniac, the man who lived in the cemetery, driven out from human society. No chain could bind him, and yet internally, spiritually, he was bound. When Jesus healed him he was unbound, freed, loosed for the first time in his life and begged to become one of Jesus' followers (cf. Mark 5:1-20).

There is the similar story of the unbinding of the woman in the synagogue, found only in Luke 13. Jesus enters a synagogue and there encounters a woman who is bowed over, apparently with a spinal condition which has imprisoned her for almost twenty years. Without any invitation Jesus approaches her, lays his hands on her, and commands her to straighten up. For the first time in nearly two decades she can see the sky. She can see birds flying and clouds floating. She can look into the face of her family without being contorted. According to Jesus, Satan had bound her and it is right that she be loosed, on a sabbath day, a day of rest, a day of delight, a day of rejoicing. Martin Luther has a wonderful phrase in which he says that all of us, like the woman, are curved inward upon ourselves (*incurvatus in se*). We are all spiritual hunchbacks, if you will. What Jesus Christ does is come into our experience and enable us to stand up straight and be the human beings we were created to be. We are empowered for living up to the potential of goodness, holiness, righteousness, and love which God planted in us from the beginning.

There is another story found only in Luke that we need to touch on. In sending the seventy-two (Luke 10), Jesus gave them commands to do what he had been doing: preach, teach, and heal. Jesus sent these seventy-two out, and when they reported back to him they said, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name." That was not included in their marching orders, but they had seen him do it, so they tried it and it worked. Jesus replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning out of the sky." In their ministry, which was duplicating his own, he saw the defeat of the powers of evil. Jesus came into the world partially for the purpose of challenging Satan. As he did his work of preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, cleansing lepers and raising

the dead, Satan was backed off. As the disciples extended his ministry, he saw Satan falling. The fall was a precipitous one, as quick and dramatic as lightning. In the ministry of Jesus there was a decisive breakthrough, and the powers of evil began to be overwhelmed by a power stronger than theirs. While it was dramatic to see, yet it did not smash the structures of this age. Government went on, politics went on, economics went on, marriage and family life went on, injustice went on. But wherever this divine energy was at work, the powers of evil had to retreat one step further.

There is one of the parables found in Matthew's Gospel which may give us a philosophy of history. It is the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matt. 13:24-30). This is not a parable about the church containing belief and unbelief, for the interpretation in Matthew clearly says that the field is the world (Matt. 13:38). World history is apparently going to be a mixed situation in which we have to live with ambiguity, sometimes winning, sometimes losing, always struggling because there is a counterfeit present. The counterfeit is deliberately planted to deceive and, if possible, bring death. On the other hand, in the mercy of God the uprooting waits until judgment day, but that means great risk on the part of the Almighty and the people that are his. Just as surely as good moves toward its final fruit, so will evil move also.

When we turn to the Fourth Gospel, we have a very different picture. According to the Synoptics, especially Mark and Luke, casting out demons was one of the outstanding points of Jesus' ministry. When we come to the Fourth Gospel, however, there are no exorcisms; we find instead a different way of looking at the ministry of Jesus. Four words characterize this so as far as our subject is concerned. The Gospel of John begins in the opening lines by saying that there is *conflict*: the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out. Immediately we discover that the world is a world of darkness, but light comes into the world. Try as it will, the darkness cannot overwhelm it for the light is stronger, and the light is still shining (John 1:5; cf. 3:19; 15:18-19). This conflict motif structures a large part of John's Gospel. Some interpreters even say that chapters 7-12 of John describe the conflict as it grows larger and larger in the context of Jesus' ministry.

A second word beyond conflict is *division*. The conflict brings about division. There are several times in the course of Jesus' ministry where John reports that there was a division among the people because of this man and what he was doing (John 7:43; 9:16; 10:19). The conflict was engaged, he was locked in battle with the powers of evil, and it divided the people. They chose up sides as a result of what was going on.

The result of this in the third place was *judgment*, and judgment in John first of all represents discernment. It means decision-making, rendering a verdict; ultimately it will mean an unfavorable verdict, a verdict of condemnation. John pictures Jesus as saying that in the courtroom of his ministry the evil one has been judged. We need not wait for the end of the universe for Satan's condemnation. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world is driven out (John 12:31). According to John, Jesus sees the judgment of the world not somewhere in the future but in the context of his own

ministry. In the act of the crucifixion, when the powers of evil think they have won, they have in fact been defeated. The Fourth Gospel puts the emphasis on the "already," on what has come into the world with the arrival of Jesus. The future has entered the present and has become a realized eschatology. John repeatedly stresses the present experience of eternal life, and this comes from the ministry of Jesus in which the evil one has in fact been judged and the verdict has been rendered (John 16:11).

A final term to describe this conflict as we observe it in John's Gospel is *overcoming*. "In the world," says Jesus as he talks to his disciples, "you will have pressure, but cheer up, I have already beaten the world. I have overcome, I have conquered" (cf. John 16:33). The theme of those who overcome is picked up in the Johannine Apocalypse. All of the letters to the seven churches close with a promise to those who conquer, those who overcome (Rev 2-3). Revelation says that one overcomes by endurance and by faithfulness — not just a quick fix saying, "Lord, I believe," but the faith which walks that out in faithfulness every day of one's life.

This brings us to the idea of Christus Victor, Christ the conqueror. The phrase was coined by the Swedish theologian Gustav Aulen. One way of looking at the death of Jesus is to say that it is the greatest revelation of the greatest love the world has ever known. Here is a prophet who, out of his love for God and love for people and love for this broken world, went to the cross and allowed himself to be killed, but he never gave up loving.

A second reason for the death of Christ is to deal with the problem of sin and to make the final sacrifice for sin for all time. He makes the great offering for sin which a priest needs to make.

Aulen pointed out a third view of Jesus' death found in the New Testament: it is the ultimate, decisive battle in the conquest of evil in the world (Aulen 1969). God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ to challenge and defeat the devil, and the place where this reached its climax was the cross. The reason the Son of God came into the world was to destroy the works of the evil one (1 John 3:8). The Son took flesh and blood in order to destroy the one who has the power of death because he terrifies us with the fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15). This is the Christus Victor motif. He died in order to draw all the fire of the enemy to himself, and in drawing the enemy's fire he has now disarmed the enemy. The enemy has done his worst, and in God's raising Jesus from the dead the crucial battle has been fought and won. All that remains now is the uncertain length of time after the crucial battle until the war is finally over.

If this understanding of the Gospel materials is correct, then we have a very simple and important premise: *the most significant event in Christian expectation is already behind us* (Hoekema 1979, 77).

Here we may adapt several ideas from Wolfhart Pannenberg, in his book *Jesus - God and Man* (Pannenberg 1977, 66-73). First, if God raised Jesus from the dead, then the end of the world has begun. People from time to time ask, "Are we living in the last days?" The New Testament answers, "Yes, we have been for 2000 years." If God raised one person from death to that

plane of existence promised by the prophets, then the end of the world has begun because by definition that comes only at the end of the age. What we see now is that in the mercy of God the last days have been extended for 2000 years in order to bring people into the reign of grace rather than wrath. Second, if God raised Jesus from the dead, then God confirmed Jesus' ministry. Humanly speaking, the cross said, "You are all wrong, Nazarene. You don't understand." The resurrection says, "No, Jesus was right." If God raised Jesus from the dead, he vindicated his ministry. Third, if God raised Jesus from the dead, then Jesus can continue to be active in the world. Fourth, if God raised Jesus from the dead, this calls for a universal mission on the part of Jesus' followers. The world has a right to know about this because it means the overturning of the powers of evil and the healing of the human situation.

All this implies freedom, one of the great categories in Paul's thinking. The problem is that in the church many have heard of redemption so long and so often that it does not crackle anymore. The word redemption basically means liberation, liberation by the payment of a price. It is a term used in the slave economy of the ancient world. All slaves had a price on their head. Many slaves, particularly household slaves, received some wages. They knew their price. They could, at times, save part of their wages and eventually earn enough money to buy their freedom. Sometimes masters would free slaves and, on some occasions, not only emancipate them but then adopt them into the family. Paul says that is exactly what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, setting us free from whatever it was that enslaved us and adopting us into the family. Now we are not only children but heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ. Whatever he inherits, we inherit too.

The category of freedom was explored in an article fifteen years ago by Eldon Epp. Epp says that there are many images in Paul's thought for the powers that enslave us, the powers of this evil age, the forces that characterize the world in which we live. Paul refers to these as principalities, powers, rulers of darkness and high places. It is the language of apocalyptic. Paul says further that some people were enslaved by the law. They did not really understand how it was supposed to be used. The law was meant to be that which gives structure to the lives of free people. The problem is that the human heart wants to turn it into a means of acquiring liberty, and that does not work. The ancient world also lived in terror of death. The mystery religions tried to give people life, but Paul says that in Jesus Christ we have life, ultimate life.

These are all categories of evil: evil powers, evil personalities, evil forces personal or impersonal that bind and enslave. Paul takes all of these and declares that in Jesus Christ we have been set free — free from sin, free from wrath, free from death, free from the law. We are free to live for the first time as human beings. Only when we begin to understand freedom radically have we understood Paul (Epp 1978).

In I John, the writer arranges ideas in contrasting fashion. John particularly likes to play with a series of four words: light, life, love, and truth. John poses the opposite of these as darkness, death, hate and lying. He will also talk about obeying and disobeying. What we should understand is that in this theology

darkness is not only the opposite of light, it is also the opposite of all the other positives. Darkness is the opposite of love, the opposite of truth. Lying is the opposite of life and light. All these go together as two great masses of land with a chasm between them. John sees Jesus Christ as the bridge by which a person goes from one side to the other, leaving the land of darkness, death, hatred, and lying and entering the new experience of life, light, love, and truth. John would paraphrase Thornton Wilder, "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is Christ. He is the only survival, he is the only meaning" (Wilder 1959, 117).

In the world, said Jesus, you will have pressure (John 16:33). The Greek word is usually translated "affliction" or "tribulation," but the term basically means pressure of any kind. How we are to deal with the pressure is addressed in Revelation. Several times in the course of the book, the writer will pause and say, "This is a call for the faith and endurance of God's people" (cf. Rev. 13:10; 14:12). Remember that in the Greek language the words faith and faithfulness are the same. To say, "I believe" does not mean, "I believe today." It means, "I believe today, and I continue to believe every day hereafter." It includes the sense of faithfulness. As the world gets better and better and worse and worse, Revelation and the teaching of Jesus together sound as though it is headed for death. But it is really labor pains, birth pains, whose purpose is life in the world. The world is getting ready for the arrival of something new. What we experience is a great conflict, great tension of the powers of good and evil wrestling in the world, but ultimately there arrives on the scene the one who is called the Word of God, faithful and true, King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:11-16). The final battle is never described. The closer we get in scripture to the second advent of Christ, the less we know about it. The language is metaphorical, symbolic, imagistic, and we are asked simply to believe and go on believing with endurance. This last word means, in William Barclay's terms, to transform the situation. It is the kind of perseverance that not only takes everything thrown at us but then transforms the situation (Barclay 1960, 1:75-76; 2:127).

Revelation contrasts the great city, sometimes called Babylon, with the holy city, also referred to as the new Jerusalem. There is likewise a contrast between two women. One is the scarlet woman, the fallen woman, the great prostitute. The other is the pure bride adorned for her husband, and she comes out of heaven. These kinds of contrasts move Revelation through a description of conflict into a description of conquest. This is the "overcoming;" this is the victory.

Let us try to summarize the New Testament perspective on evil in a set of eight propositions. *First*, God is sovereign in both power and goodness. The New Testament does not say this in so many words; it is an inference which poses the question of theodicy, the justification of the ways of God.

*Second*, moral evil is real and dangerous, and centered in personality. Just as we believe that good comes ultimately from the one whom we call God, we have every right to posit that evil comes from one whom we call the attacker, the opponent, the adversary, the slanderer. More and more contem-

porary translations of the Lord's prayer are reading "deliver us from the evil one" — not just deliver us from evil in the abstract, but deliver us from the one who is evil and who perpetrates evil in the world. Moral evil is real and dangerous and derives from an incredibly powerful evil personality.

*Third*, the New Testament is not interested in evil for speculative purposes but for redemptive reasons (Ladd 1974, 51). It does not ask where it comes from or why God allows it. The New Testament speaks of evil for redemptive reasons, and by "redemptive" here is meant liberating reasons. The New Testament is interested in evil for what we know of God setting the human race free.

*Fourth*, Christ is victor over evil and equal with God. The book of Revelation speaks about the throne of God and the lamb. There is a single throne occupied by the one who has been sitting there and now also by the lamb (Rev. 5:13; 14:5; 22:1,3). The rule of the universe is jointly shared, so much so that one of the great scholars at the turn of the century dared to say that the Christology of Revelation is the highest Christology in all the New Testament. Christ is victor over evil and equal with God.

*Fifth*, Christ's followers in the world are and will be under pressure. "You will have pressure," said Jesus; that is simply a fact of life. In the land there is a good deal of possessing yet to be done, and God's people in this world are under pressure ("tribulation" or "affliction") until full liberation occurs.

*Sixth*, pressure will escalate as the world grows simultaneously better and worse. Time, therefore, is both an enemy and a friend of human life on earth.

Sheldon Vanauken has made an interesting observation. He says that so far as we know all life forms on earth are comfortable with their environment. But human beings seem uncomfortable with space; we want to go faster or higher or deeper or something other than where we are at the moment. And, says Vanauken, humans are even more uncomfortable with time. It never moves at the pace we are comfortable with for long, and we often see it as an enemy rather than a friend (Vanauken 1977, 202-203). Time is both friend and enemy to us as long as we live in the world.

*Seventh*, the final disclosure of Christ and all that involves is the goal toward which the suffering earth strains. In Romans 8 Paul uses three great images to picture this. He says the creation is on tiptoe or, as it has been translated, "the creation waits with eager longing" (Rom. 8:19). The Greek expression means "the creation waits with outstretched neck." It is like a crowd of people standing on tiptoe to see someone or to watch something. The final disclosure of Christ and all he brings is the sight toward which the suffering earth strains. The second image is creation in slavery, creation in bondage, awaiting liberation and the declaration that these people are in fact God's children (Rom. 8:21). Paul's third metaphor is creation in childbirth, creation in labor pains, struggling to bring forth a new race and a new world (Rom. 8:22). Try as we will, the New Testament suggests we may only approximate that, but we will not achieve it because God alone can do that.

*Eighth*, until that disclosure (revelation) occurs, the calling of the church and of every Christian is to extend the ministry of Christ in the world. That is, eschatology leads to ethics. The study of last things, the study of the ultimate

deliverance from the powers of evil as the New Testament presents it, is not meant to lead us to speculate, to set dates or to draw charts. The purpose of considering last things is to give us a renewed focus on what we are supposed to be doing here and now. Thomas Carlisle wrote, "Our business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance but to do what lies clearly at hand." Just as the New Testament is not interested in the origins of evil, neither does it speculate on things like the chronology of last times. Instead it consistently calls us to questions of behavior, to realities of ethical practice in the world.

Because this is so important, let us illustrate it from the teachings of Jesus, Paul, John, and Peter. The Synoptic Gospels agree in saying that in the final days of his life Jesus spoke with his disciples about the end of the age and the destruction of Jerusalem which he saw approaching (Matt. 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21). It did not take divine insight to realize that Judea and Galilee were on a collision course with Rome. At the end of that Synoptic Apocalypse (Olivet discourse) are exhortations about keeping alert, staying awake, being those who are on the job working. There is no speculation about the date of the end or anything like that. The focus is on the present. "Our business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance but to do what lies clearly at hand."

Paul, in the longest chapter given to eschatology in his writings, pens I Corinthians 15. It begins by speaking about Jesus' resurrection, then proceeds to our resurrection. Paul raises the question: in light of that, how are we to conduct ourselves? He answers, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord forasmuch as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). Eschatology leads to ethics. We are to be steadfast, unmoved, abounding, spilling over, in the work of God. The work, the labor is not empty, not meaningless; there is value to it.

First John 3 says, "Beloved, now we are the children of God — even now — and it does not appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is; and all who have this hope purify themselves even as he is pure (cf. 1 John 3:2-3). Do you see what is here? The writer holds out the expectation of finally being like Christ but then brings us back into the present and says that holiness should be our ongoing concern.

Second Peter is the most debated book in all the New Testament in terms of authorship. The early churches were not all sure that Peter wrote Second Peter, but they did accept it at a time when they turned down other documents that also had Peter's name on them (Gospel of Peter, Acts of Peter, Preaching of Peter, Revelation of Peter). "The heavens will pass away with a loud noise and the elements will be dissolved with fire and the earth and everything in it will be disclosed or burned up. Since all those things are to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness?" (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-11). Again we are taken out of future expectation back into the present. It is not just a matter of waiting for this to happen; our work may in fact enable it to come sooner so that the world may be set right-side up. Our labors may have something to say about the timing of the end (2 Pet. 3:12).

In the closing pages of his best-seller *People of the Lie*, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck says there is the possibility in this world that perfect love can take evil up into itself and absorb it. Peck writes with almost prophetic power:

I can only say that there is a mysterious alchemy whereby the victim becomes the victor. As C.S. Lewis wrote: "When a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards." I do not know how this occurs. But I know that it does. I know that good people can deliberately allow themselves to be pierced by the evil of others — to be broken thereby yet somehow not broken — to even be killed in some sense and yet still survive and not succumb. Whenever this happens there is a slight shift in the balance of power in the world (Peck 1983, 269).

What if it is God come into the world in the person of a human being who allows that to happen? It would be more than a slight shift in the balance of power — it would be a decisive shift, and the world is never the same. That is just what the early Christians believed. Every sermon in Acts celebrates the fact that God has raised Jesus from the dead. The world will never be the same again, for in that event the beginning of the end has arrived. There is no turning back.

The Liberator has come. The most significant event in the overthrow of evil in the world is already a matter of history. The New Testament says that what remains is for us to live out the implications of that wherever it is that our mission will take us.

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