

## Systematic Theology: Appendix C

### The Already/Not Yet Tension

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“The Already/Not Yet Tension” involves the answer to the following related questions:

How much of our salvation is a present reality and how much of it is a future hope?

In what sense can our salvation be both present and future?

To what degree and in what way is our future salvation realized in the present?

Waiting is the posture of the Christian life. But the waiting of the Christian life is not like that experienced in an airport terminal, but rather like that of a college freshman who studies with all due diligence as he waits for the day on which he will receive his diploma. Christianity is correctly identified as an eschatological faith—a forward looking faith. The object of our hope as Christians is the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ from heaven.

While our hope finds its basis in the finished work of Jesus Christ, the object of our hope involves the final appearing and full salvation brought to us at the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God purchased our salvation through the death of His Son on the cross, but our salvation will not be finally complete until the “day of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Thus, the cross is the basis, the surety of our hope, but Jesus Himself, His return, is the object of our hope. Just look at Paul’s words in II Timothy 4:8.

*In the future, there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, but to all those who have loved His appearing.*

This came from the lips of Paul at the very end of his ministry. His hope was still a forward looking reality. This is why Peter could talk about our salvation as a future event—as a “salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (I Peter 1:5) Paul even goes so far to say, “If we have placed our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone.” (I Corinthians 15:19) So the Christian life is rightly identified as a life of hope. It is a life which looks forward to our final, eschatological salvation that God will bring to pass at the second coming of Christ.

Theologians have framed this scriptural truth using the phrase “the already/not yet tension.” In other words, they suggest that the blessings of the cross are already being poured out on the people of God and yet they are not yet being poured out in the fullest sense of the word, and will not be until the second coming of Jesus. We are caught between “the already and the not yet.” Jesus has died and risen from the grave, securing our salvation. The Spirit has been given that this salvation might be enjoyed by the people of God, but our final salvation will not take place until Jesus comes back to usher in His kingdom. In other words, although the blessings of the age to come are already being realized in our present age, they are not yet being realized in their fullest, consummate form.

The “already/not yet” tension is summarized in I John 2:8.

*“Yet I am writing a new command, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.”*

Notice how John characterizes the shape of God’s redemptive activity for this present age. There are two foundation realities to God’s Kingdom in our present age. First, “the darkness is passing away.” And second, “the true light is already shining.” John says that the darkness is in the process of passing away. It has not passed away in the fullest sense of the word, and yet it is being pushed out. The age of this world is already being overcome by the Kingdom of Christ and yet it is not yet fully overcome. Second, we see that the true light, which is Jesus in all of His glory, is already shining. This light shines and dispels the darkness, and yet the darkness is not yet finally gone.

The age of darkness and the age of light are coexisting in this world. We live in an age of transition. Our world is characterized by both darkness and light. The darkness is in the process of passing away and the true light is in the process of completely overtaking the darkness. We are stuck between the “already and the not yet.” The darkness is already being pushed out and yet it is not yet fully pushed out. The true light is already shining and yet it has not yet fully overcome the darkness.

“Very early, beginning with Peter’s sermon in Acts 3, the early Christians came to realize that Jesus had not come to usher in the ‘final’ end but the ‘beginning’ of the end. Thus they came to see that with Jesus’ death and resurrection, and with the coming of the Spirit, the blessings and benefits of the future had already come. In a sense, therefore, the end had already come. But in another sense the end had not yet fully come. Thus it was “already but not yet.” The early believers, therefore, learned to be a truly eschatological people. They lived between the times—that is, between the beginning of the end and the consummation of the end.” (Gordon Fee)

The following are examples from the New Testament of the “Already/Not Yet” Tension.

## **SALVATION**

Salvation is spoken of both as a present reality that we already possess and a future hope that we anticipate.

### **Already**

Ephesians 2:8

*By grace you are saved through faith.*

### **Not Yet**

Romans 13:11

*Besides this, knowing the time, it is already the hour for you to wake up from sleep, for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.*

Hebrews 9:27, 28

*And just as it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment—so also the Messiah, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.*

There is a clear tension in regard to the salvation that we have in Christ—we **already** possess it, but our salvation is **not yet** brought to its consummate, completed stage. Although we are already saved, we are closer to our final salvation than when we first believed.

## **REDEMPTION**

Redemption is spoken of both as a present reality that we already possess and a future hope that we anticipate.

### **Already**

Galatians 1:7, 8

*In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.*

### **Not Yet**

Ephesians 4:30

*And don’t grieve the Holy Spirit, who sealed you for the day of redemption.*

### Romans 8:23

*And not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the first fruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly awaiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*

## **FREEDOM FROM SIN**

The Scriptures teach in many places that the Christian has already been set free from the condemnation of sin, the guilt of sin, and the domination of sin in our lives; and yet the Scriptures teach that the Christian is not yet fully set free from the reality and presence of sin, and will not be until Jesus returns.

### **Already**

#### Romans 6:2

*How can we who died to sin still live in it?*

#### Romans 6:6, 7, 11

*For we know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that sin's dominion over the body may be abolished, so that we may no longer be enslaved to sin, since a person who has died is freed from sin's claims...So, you too consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

### **Not Yet**

#### Galatians 5:16-17

*I say then, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don't do what you want.*

#### 1 John 1:8

*If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*

This set of passages indicates the truth that although our sins have already been forgiven—the condemnation of sin having been removed (Romans 8:1)—and although we have been set free from the guilt and bondage of sin, we have not yet been liberated from sin “in toto.” We still struggle with sin on a regular basis until we die, and we will not be finally liberated from the presence of sin until Jesus returns. We already died to sin and yet the one who claims to have no sin (1 John 1:8) is self deceived. We will all battle the flesh until we die and yet we have already been set free from the dominion of sin. Romans 6 is just dripping with the tension of “the already/not yet” reality of our Christian existence.

## **HEAVENLY DWELLING**

### **Already**

#### Ephesians 2:6

*He also raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavens, in Christ Jesus.*

### **Not Yet**

#### Colossians 3:2-4

*Set your minds on what is above, not on what is on the earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with the Messiah in God. When the Messiah, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.*

Because of our union with Christ we are truly seated with Him in the heavenly realms. This is the reality of our present day Christian existence. We were buried with Him in baptism, raised with Him in His resurrection and here we see that we also ascended with Him when He rose on high. Wherever He goes we go because we are in Him. This is a spiritual reality, but it is a true reality.

If we have been raised with Christ to the right hand of God, we should seek the things above, because that is where we are at. And yet, we know that our heavenly dwelling is only a spiritual reality at this point. We still have to be exhorted to not seek the things on this earth because this earth is our present physical home. We are temporary residents here on this earth. We are caught between “the already and the not yet.” We are already citizens of heaven and yet our full possession of heaven is a future hope.

“...the fact that believers conduct their lives in this world and have not yet experienced salvation in all its fullness but look forward to God’s lavishing the full abundance of His grace upon them in the coming age shows that the eschatology of Ephesians is not wholly realized but has a future dimension to it as well.” (Peter O’Brien on Ephesians 2:6)

## **THE KINGDOM**

The Scriptures clearly teach that although the Kingdom of God, which is really synonymous with the reign of God, was inaugurated upon the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Christ, His Kingdom will not be consummated until the second coming.

### **Already**

#### Luke 17:20, 21

*Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God will come, He answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming with something observable; no one will say, ‘Look here!’ or ‘There!’ For you see, the kingdom of God is among you.”*

### **Not Yet**

#### Revelation 12:10

*Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “The salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Messiah have now come, because the accuser of our brothers has been thrown out, the one who accuses them before our God day and night.”*

## **JESUS’ DEFEAT OF SATAN**

The Scriptures clearly teach that although Jesus already dealt Satan a death blow (from which he will not recover) on the cross of Calvary, Satan has not yet been finally judged.

### **Already**

#### Hebrews 2:15, 16

*Now since the children have flesh and blood in common, He also shared in these, so that through His death He might destroy the one holding the power of death—that is, the Devil—and free those who were held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death.*

### **Not Yet**

#### 1 Peter 5:8

*Be sober! Be on the alert! Your adversary the Devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour.*

#### Revelation 20:10

*The Devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet are, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.*

## **RELEVANCE FOR OUR LIVES**

Getting a handle on the theology of “the already/not yet tension” of the life of the Christian is of utmost importance. So much of the Christian life is affected by a correct understanding of this tension. It effects how we view

our relationship with sin, how we view God's present working in our lives, in our families, in our churches, and in the world.

However, Christians have the tendency to fall off either side of the road; they either believe that all of the blessings of the cross are realized in full right now ("over-realized eschatology") or they believe that none of the blessings won for us on Calvary will be realized until heaven ("under-realized eschatology"). Many Christians live lives of defeat because they do not realize that the blessings of the future age are already present realities, actualized by the Spirit of God. Others live lives of depression because they are not biblically informed about God's intentions for this present age—they have "pie in the sky" ideas about God's work in this present world. And when God fails to live up to their expectations, they are thrust down in depression, suspicious of His presence in their lives.

We must never underestimate what God can do, but we must always be biblically realistic about what God has planned to do. We must never underestimate the work of the Spirit in our lives, but we must also never presume that it is ever His goal to perfect us in this life. We must never put Him in a box, but we must always take Him at His word—as He has spoken in Scripture. Expect hardship—life is not a cake walk—expect church to be an uphill battle; expect the Christian life to be a battle. And yet, anticipate the mighty work of God as the blessings won for us by Jesus on the cross flow to us even now.