

CONTOURS *of*  
CHRISTIAN  
THEOLOGY

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THE LAST  
THINGS

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# THE LAST THINGS

DAVID A. HÖHNE

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CHRISTIAN  
THEOLOGY

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GERALD BRAY  
*Series Editor*

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For my beloved daughter and sons,  
Anna, Joshua and Samuel:

‘Whatever you do, in word or deed,  
do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,  
giving thanks to the Father through him.’  
Colossians 3:17



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## Series preface

Contours of Christian Theology covers the main themes of Christian doctrine. The series offers a systematic presentation of most of the major doctrines in a way which complements the traditional textbooks but does not copy them. Top priority has been given to contemporary issues, some of which may not be dealt with elsewhere from an evangelical point of view. The series aims, however, not merely to answer current objections to evangelical Christianity, but also to rework the orthodox evangelical position in a fresh and compelling way. The overall thrust is therefore positive and evangelistic in the best sense.

The series is intended to be of value to theological students at all levels, whether at a Bible college, a seminary or a secular university. It should also appeal to ministers and educated laypeople. As far as possible, efforts have been made to make technical vocabulary accessible to the non-specialist reader, and the presentation has avoided the extremes of academic style. Occasionally this has meant that particular issues have been presented without a thorough argument, taking into account different positions, but when this has happened, authors have been encouraged to refer the reader to other works which take the discussion further.

THE LAST THINGS

For this purpose adequate but not exhaustive notes have been produced.

The doctrines covered in the series are not exhaustive, but have been chosen in response to contemporary concerns. The title and presentation of each volume are at the discretion of the author, but the final editorial decisions have been taken by the Series Editor in consultation with Inter-Varsity Press.

In offering this series to the public, the authors and the publishers hope that it will meet the needs of theological students in this generation, and bring honour and glory to God the Father, and to his Son, Jesus Christ, in whose service the work has been undertaken from the beginning.

*Gerald Bray*  
*Series Editor*

## Preface

It is only fitting that this final volume in the series be entitled *The Last Things*. It is a rather cruel irony that the volume has taken so long to produce and that the editors have had to exercise such patience waiting for it. I am immensely grateful for the gracious forbearance shown to me by Philip Duce at Inter-Varsity Press and series editor Gerald Bray and for their steadfast commitment to our agreement to work together on this project. I am also very thankful for their expert advice that has made the manuscript far more readable than when it first left my computer. There are many others who ought to be acknowledged for their various contributions to this book.

Many students listened to the contents of these pages in class, both keenly and sceptically, and their questions have done much to sharpen my thoughts. I am particularly grateful for the encouragements of Revds Dan Anderson, Peter Baker, Dr Andrew Errington, Richard Glover, Matthew Moffit, Blake Hatton, Mat Aroney and Ms Laura Southam. Colleagues past and present at Moore College offered many timely words of encouragement to keep me going (or just keep running). I am especially thankful for Drs Robert Doyle, Michael Jensen, Bill Salier, Andrew Leslie,

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Chase Kuhn and Bishop Greg Anderson. The Governing Board of Moore College has been both kind and generous with study leave.

I have never succeeded in any venture without the love and support of my wife Amelia and this book is no exception. Her ‘work in faith, labour in love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus’ have been a constant source of blessing for me, our family and all whom the Father brings into her path.

‘The ends crown our works but Thou crown’st our ends’  
(John Donne).

*David A. Höhne*

## Introduction

When they came together they asked him, ‘Will you be restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?’ But he said to them, ‘It is not yours to know the times or seasons which the Father has appointed in his own authority.’ (Acts 1:6–7)

In many ways and at various times since the resurrection of Jesus, the church has agonized over the Father’s plans to restore his kingdom to the earth. If Jesus has ascended to the right hand on high and the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, then surely the *Last Things* have come to pass – or very nearly. Of course, after nearly 2,000 years of anticipation Christians in the West struggle to maintain a hope for the future exclusively on the promises of the gospel and to resist the false optimism of the Enlightenment. Ironically, even modernity’s secular critics have come to see that its determination to displace God as the foundation of truth, meaning and purpose has failed miserably. While promising ‘a culture of unintimidated, curious, rational, self-reliant individuals’, it has instead delivered ‘a herd society, a race of anxious, timid, conformist “sheep,” and a culture of utter

banality'.<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century alone the paradoxes of our modern culture, especially the Romantic infatuation with change or revolution,<sup>2</sup> have given ample evidence of both our desire to preserve, at all costs, an individual's right to choose and, simultaneously, the potential to unleash technological forces capable of destroying human life entirely.

Throughout this modern period with its messianic aspirations and apocalyptic visions, Christian accounts of eschatology have expanded to include more than the traditional list or sequence of end-times events. During the twentieth century what has been called the 'now but not-yet' tension of the gospel message has become more prominent. Some movements in Christian theology have favoured the 'now' or realized elements of God's promises, while others have argued for emphasis on the 'not-yet' of God's rule over history. In this book I shall aim to keep these two poles in equilibrium by developing a biblically anticipatory and theologically experiential account of eschatology. That is, the Scriptures will determine what we can expect of God's will for creation in the future, and in the meantime our life will be guided and governed by reflecting on the promises that the God of the Bible makes to his people. As such, eschatology in what follows will mean 'the goal of history toward which the Bible moves' and 'the biblical factors and events bearing on that goal'.<sup>3</sup> One of the chief aims of this book is to construct an explicitly trinitarian description of eschatology that is at once systematic, generated from the theological interpretation of Scripture and yet sensitive to essential elements of Christian practice.

While there is no shortage of books on 'the end times', too few combine systematic theology with a theological interpretation of Scripture and Christian living. Regrettably, many books on the subject arise out of incoherent or superficial readings of the Bible that detract from, or even ignore, the 'once and for all' achievements of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The cost to the church is an eschatology that is insufficiently Christian despite its claim to be 'biblical'. Alternatively, many books on this subject fail to consider how God reveals himself through the Lord Jesus and by the power of his Spirit and are therefore not genuinely Christian, despite the claim to be 'theological'. Sadly, too many books on this subject fail to distinguish between the hope provided by the gospel and the superficial aspirations of a

culture that is shaped by the tenets of free-market capitalism and Western political liberalism.

## A biblical system of theology

Down through the ages Christian theologians have organized their accounts of eschatology according to a list of topics linked to the end of time. These events may include the kingdom of God, the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment with its (usually) twofold outcomes of heaven and hell. In addition, some attention may be given to issues arising from millennialism and various other speculative questions like an intermediate state and/or purgatory. Their eschatology is systematic to the extent that the topics are expounded in the order with which one might die and come back to life again, depending on whether the Lord Jesus has returned or not. In contrast to this, I shall adopt a pre-existing system, or integrated collection of theological themes, that can be found within the Bible itself – the Lord’s Prayer. Using the Lord’s Prayer as a biblical system of theology, and of eschatology in particular, has a number of advantages. These will be discussed more fully in chapter 2, but by way of introduction I offer the following.

The first advantage of adopting the Prayer as the guiding system for expounding eschatology is simply that its eschatological tone is well recognized and, as a coherent collection of theological themes, it is not alien to the Scriptures themselves. Attempts at systematizing theology, even theology that is heavily dependent upon the exegesis of Scripture, invariably run up against the charge of forcing the Christian Bible to ignore contradiction by ignoring parts of Scripture that do not fit neatly within an alien framework.

A second and immediately related advantage of expounding eschatology through the Prayer is that, as a biblical system, it is embedded within the apostolic reflection on the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This means that we can expect the themes represented in the various petitions to align perfectly with the apostolic (dominical even) practice of rereading the Old Testament in the light of the person and work of Jesus Christ. When the Lord gathered his disciples after his resurrection he ‘opened their minds to understand the Scriptures’. The immediate

result was that they were able to perceive ‘that everything written . . . in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled’ in the risen Jesus Christ (Luke 24:44–45). Each of the books in the New Testament is a theological interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures and I shall attempt to follow that pattern as I expound the Prayer.

A third advantage of the Prayer for establishing a biblical system of theology is the fact that, taken together, the various requests outline the Lord’s expectations for the fatherhood of God on the earth to correspond to what it is in heaven. From this perspective, the Prayer is intensely theological because each invocation gives us insight into the being and act of God in the economy of salvation. The Lord Jesus expects us to grow in our knowledge and love of God *as our Father* as a consequence of praying in this manner.

A final advantage, therefore, of shaping our theological description of eschatology via the Lord’s Prayer is that it locates our theological reflection on the Scriptures in the context of discipleship at its most basic level – responding to God’s word in prayer. Not only have Christians always looked to the Lord’s Prayer to shape their theological enquiries; they have, at Christ Jesus’ command, incorporated these requests into their basic piety both corporately and individually. For Christians, prayer is an eschatological experience to the extent that they pray on the basis of what they have/know *now* in anticipation of the Lord’s answers that are *not-yet* a part of their lives with him. Therefore I shall proceed on the assumption that our theological description of eschatology will be experiential in accordance with the word of the Lord in holy Scripture.

## A theological interpretation of Scripture

The practice of interpreting Scripture theologically has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years. I have already indicated something of what that will look like in the present work,<sup>4</sup> namely that I shall seek to read the whole Bible after the example of the apostles who wrote the New Testament. Specifically, I shall explore the canon of Scripture with Paul’s stated rule of thumb that ‘all God’s promises have their “Yes” in Christ Jesus’ (2 Cor. 1:20). The canon of Scripture is a narrative that is guided and governed by the

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gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. I will take it that the gospel and the canon are constitutive of each other. The gospel determines the shape and scope of the canon, while the canon is the means through which I come to grasp the significance of the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

Putting this together with the biblical system outlined above will mean using each of the Prayer's petitions to clarify a specific divine promise to be explored throughout the canon of Scripture. Furthermore, since we are seeking to look over the shoulders of the apostles as we read the Bible, we shall first link the petition with a specific eschatologically orientated New Testament passage in order to establish a firm exegetical foundation for it. So, for example, in order to explore the hallowing of the Father's name on earth as it is in heaven, we shall begin with Paul's words to the Philippians in chapter 2, where he looks forward to every creature 'in heaven, on earth and under the earth' confessing that the name of the Lord has been given to Jesus the Christ (Phil. 2:10–11). We shall then look back into the Old Testament narrative through the lens of Philippians to grasp the eschatological significance of Christ Jesus' being worshipped with this name in terms of the fulfilment of God's promises concerning his name. The same pattern will be repeated in chapters 3–8 according to the ordering of the petitions in the Lord's Prayer with the purpose of understanding what we can hope for when the fatherhood of God on earth corresponds to what it is in heaven.

Reading the Scriptures for the sake of developing a theological description of something is a practice of the church past and present as much as, if not more than, developing the piety of an individual. Therefore as we reflect on the eschatological significance of each of the Prayer's requests we shall engage with a number of conversation partners. Since I intend this book to be a constructive contribution to modern eschatology studies, my main interlocutors will be Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann. These two writers, perhaps more than any others in the twentieth century,<sup>6</sup> have dominated discussions of Christian eschatology, for good and for ill, with their voluminous systematic contributions. Yet their theological input, especially in the case of Barth, is of value to the present project because of their habit in the first instance of reflecting on Scripture.<sup>7</sup> Both of them bring distinct perspectives on how the Bible should be read in the process of

theological enquiry and therefore have distinctive emphases on the topic of eschatology. The point of engaging with them in dialogue is to ‘let the word of Christ dwell among [us] richly in all spiritual wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another’ (Col. 3:16). On the other hand, since understanding the Scriptures themselves is a key focus of what follows, we read them together, ‘so that [we] may learn not to go beyond what is written’ (1 Cor. 4:6). In that vein and because both Barth and Moltmann belong to the Reformed tradition broadly conceived, I shall also frequently consider what John Calvin wrote about various exegetical points. These eminent Bible readers have been included essentially to clarify the faith ‘once and for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3). Therefore our explorations of their eschatology are limited and students of Barth, Moltmann or Calvin may well find them inadequate. However, while I shall make every effort to outline their positions, it is not my primary intention to provide new insights into their work.

## An experiential account of eschatology

To describe an account of eschatology as experiential, especially in our modern context, may seem precariously close to the Romanticism of Schleiermacher with his assertions that ‘Religion’s essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling’.<sup>8</sup> But, and as indicated above, the experience upon which this book will focus is the right response of any and every Christian to the promises of God, namely prayer. More than this, since Jesus exhorts us to call on ‘our Father in heaven’, the prayerful response to God’s promises or the experience of eschatology that will be a focus in what follows is that of gathering together as a church. It is among the family of God that we (most likely but not necessarily) hear the promises of the gospel and receive the gift of faith. It is as the body of Christ that we learn to live together in love and it is as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that hope for the fatherhood of God is born. Throughout this book the experience of eschatology that characterizes the Christian life will be summed up in the phrase ‘life in the Middle’. First, and most basically, it is the time between the ascension of the Lord Jesus as the Christ in the power of the Spirit and his return to perfect the Father’s will for creation. Second, but no less importantly, life in the

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Middle is the space marked out by the church as it is constituted by the Spirit as a testimony to the coming kingdom of the Lord Jesus. Most importantly, though, life in the Middle is characterized by joining with the Lord Jesus himself to call on God as our Father. The goal to which the Bible story moves is the glorious future of the royal and eternal Son of God in the power of God's Spirit. Therefore throughout this book our experience of eschatology will be revealed in what Jesus knew, what he did and for what he hoped.

So then, let us begin by describing eschatology as it is recorded in the Bible. We turn first to life in the Middle as hearing God's promises, responding in hope and embodying that hope in our prayers.



# 1

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## LIFE IN THE MIDDLE?

In response to the Brownshirts building the Third Reich on piles of burning books outside his lecture hall, Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenged the ability of any modern culture to understand history:

Humankind no longer lives in the beginning; instead it has lost the beginning. Now it finds itself in the middle, knowing neither the end nor the beginning, and yet knowing that it is in the middle. It knows therefore that it comes from the beginning and must move on toward the end. It sees its life as determined by these two factors, concerning which it knows only that it does not know them.<sup>1</sup>

According to Bonhoeffer, modern German culture was adrift in a history that had lost its foundational markers. Modern science had divorced European culture from its traditional Christian beginning – the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2. Meanwhile the growing shadow of National Socialism menaced the Weimar Republic with a future described as a putative thousand-year

reign of the Third Reich. To Bonhoeffer, the beginning had been lost and the end was unthinkable. Hence the world was marooned in the middle of history. More than seven decades after the Second World War, after the Cold War, and even after the second millennium, is the world, or just the liberal Western part of it, still in the Middle? Surely the current global threats of terror and of ecological crisis mean that *The End* is nigh. Even if these *ends* do not prove to be *The End*, was it reasonable for Bonhoeffer to assert that the world knows nothing of its end?

Of course, according to our modern scientific culture the answer must surely be, no! Since 1850 exponents of thermodynamics have discussed the possibility of the universe succumbing to an eventual heat death. Based on the principle of ‘closed systems degenerat[ing] from order to disorder’ some scientists somewhat pessimistically predict the far-future dissolution of life as we currently experience it.<sup>2</sup> Naturally the timescale being referred to as *The End* here is too long to have any meaningful connection to the average individual’s end after roughly three-score-and-ten years. Consequently, many in our Romantic Western culture are optimistic about what lies ahead and are happy to accept that the world is in the Middle of history or at least at a turning point prior to a brighter future. For example, Yuval Noah Harari opines that since ‘the average human is far more likely to die from bingeing at McDonald’s than from drought, Ebola or an al-Qaeda attack’,<sup>3</sup> we should strive ahead with ever empowered imagination. Harari backs up these startling claims with an impressively broad sweep of human history as a series of famine, disease and warfare to show that in the early twenty-first century the average Western person (at least) could and should be more optimistic than is in fact the case. When these disasters occur, we need only marshal the considerable resources available to our globalized culture, address the problem and look to a better future that we shall make for ourselves.

In this modern context the Christian gospel comes to us as a promise from the past and for the future, a future with a very definite end – the return of Jesus the Christ to receive his inheritance from God the Father and the establishment of a new creation. From the perspective of the gospel the world is in the Middle between the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from

the dead and his return that will mark *The End* of a dysfunctional creation ruined by sin, death and evil.

What is more, our place in the Middle of this gospel history also has a spatial aspect. Bonhoeffer described it well: the Lord Jesus meets us as the ultimate truth about the reality of God and the world,<sup>4</sup> and its future, amid the everyday activities of the community, the church.

I hear another human truly proclaim to me the Gospel;  
he hands me the sacrament; you are forgiven; he and the  
community pray for me and I hear the Gospel, pray with  
and know myself in the Word, sacrament and prayer of  
the community of Christ, the new humanity, be they  
here now or elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

In this book these everyday experiences of Christian living will serve as a starting point for developing a description of eschatology. My proposal is that life in the Middle consists of hearing God's promises and responding with a hope that is embodied in our prayers. Praying together in response to God's promises will serve as the most basic experience of life in the Middle. This is to ensure that, from the outset, the theological description of eschatology that emerges is not 'simply a plausible intellectual vision but more importantly, a compelling account of a way of life'.<sup>6</sup> Each of the three proposed elements of life in the Middle – hearing God's promises, responding in hope and embodying that hope in our prayers – needs clarification, but first we must define what is meant by the term 'eschatology' in Christian doctrine.

## What is a Christian doctrine of eschatology?

For most of the last 2,000 years, when Christians spoke of eschatology they described the sequence of events surrounding the return, or second coming, of Christ to the earth. These events included (with some additions and variations) a general resurrection of the dead, a final judgment of the living and the newly resurrected, with the blessing of heaven for the elect and the curse of hell for the reprobate. However, the social and political turmoil of the twentieth century was matched by parallel theological upheaval in the way Christians understood eschatology.

Cardinal Ratzinger described it as the shift of eschatology from ‘the quiet life as the final chapter of theology’ to ‘the very centre of the theological stage’.<sup>7</sup> This was the work of biblical scholars and systematic theologians alike. Their common theme was a call for Christians to expand their understanding of eschatology from the events of the end of time to the arrival of God’s reign in the world, but how much of that do we have now and how much is still to come? At the risk of oversimplifying, the key theological question changed from ‘What happens when the world ends and when will that be?’ to ‘What effect should the world’s approaching end have on our everyday existence?’ How should life in the Middle be affected by, from or for *The End*?

The twentieth-century revisionists of eschatology wanted a more *theologically* driven ‘self-control’<sup>8</sup> in the manner with which Christians discussed history. Throughout the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a combination of factors and ideas led liberal Protestant theologians to speak of history as the process of divine education through reason and for the sake of human freedom.<sup>9</sup> The concept of a cataclysmic end to history was abandoned. Instead, Christianity (read, the moral teachings of Jesus of Nazareth) was held to contribute to ‘the moral and cultural progress of humanity’.<sup>10</sup> As Jesus himself taught, ‘the kingdom of God is within you’ or ‘in the midst of you’ (Luke 17:21).<sup>11</sup> Modernist ideas of progress via human achievement abounded, whether these were the increasingly ambitious claims for the supremacy of human reason in all human affairs or ‘a belief in, if not the perfectibility, then at least the improvability of mankind’.<sup>12</sup> These ideas in turn rested on Hegel’s philosophy of history, which saw ‘the movement of Absolute Spirit through the various points of transition that are the existence of finite beings on the way to the Spirit’s absolute fulfilment’.<sup>13</sup> The net effect was the transformation of Romantic Europe’s understanding of the kingdom of God with a liberal Protestantism filled with a cultural eschatology of heaven being realized on earth in the form of rational and free individuals establishing modern nation states.<sup>14</sup>

Against this popular tide, at the turn of the twentieth century, Johannes Weiss argued, ‘actualisation of the Rule of God by human ethical activity is completely contrary to the transcendentalism of Jesus’ idea’.<sup>15</sup> Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God

was thoroughly futurist and instituted exclusively by God. Jesus, according to Weiss, ‘had hoped to see the establishment of the Kingdom’ but realized that he must ‘make his contribution to . . . the Kingdom in Israel by his death’.<sup>16</sup> Albert Schweitzer later added chidingly, ‘Men feared that to admit claims of eschatology would abolish the significance of His [Jesus’] words for our time.’<sup>17</sup> Schweitzer applauded Weiss’s work and added, ‘With political expectations this Kingdom has nothing whatever to do.’<sup>18</sup> The tragic irony is, of course, that both of these scholars considered that the failure of God’s kingdom to arrive on the earth, either in the life of Jesus himself or by the time the first generation of followers died out, meant that God had been defeated. Jesus of Nazareth too, it would seem, was lost in Bonhoeffer’s ‘Middle’.

The idea that Christian eschatology is primarily a *theological* question – what God does in and with history – returned to prominence via the early writings of Karl Barth. After the horrors of the First World War, the idea of God’s judgment as a catastrophic end to the world, previously dismissed by liberal Protestants as archaic, returned as a transcendent reality that overshadowed the present. Christians began again to focus on the relationship between time and eternity, as the resurrection became ‘the model for the confrontation of time through the eternal’.<sup>19</sup> Full of sensational and distinctly existential rhetoric, Barth’s *The Epistle to the Romans* proclaimed of Romans 8:11:

We cannot question Truth [the Spirit] as to why it is what it is; for it has already asked us why we are what we are; and in the question has provided also the rich answer of eternity: ‘Thou,’ it says, ‘art man, man of this world; thou dost belong to God, Creator and Redeemer’ . . . Because Truth is eternally pre-eminent over all that we have and are, it is our hope, our undying portion, and our indestructible relation with God.<sup>20</sup>

The Spirit’s action of giving life to our mortal bodies is at once wholly future and yet secretly present. The confirmation of such a promise was not to be in the advances of Western culture – now lost in the quagmires of Europe’s battlefields. Instead, the Middle is history bounded by God’s transcendent and eternal apocalyptic incursion. In the gospel we hear, ‘By hope we are saved – inasmuch

as in Jesus Christ the wholly Other, unapproachable, unknown, eternal power and divinity (i.20) of God has entered into our world.<sup>21</sup> Barth too advocated the thoroughly eschatological nature of the ministry of the Lord Jesus: ‘If Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever with Christ.’<sup>22</sup> Yet, unlike Weiss and Schweitzer, Barth insisted that Jesus could not be left behind in history, because he is the Lord of history. A thoroughly eschatological Christianity must understand the Middle as the time between the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and the earthly consummation of his kingdom – his defining of our history.

Barth’s revision of modern eschatology renewed the discipline of understanding the pre-eminence of God’s freedom over creation and the gracious nature of his saving actions within it when discussing history. Consequently, there is a distinctly ‘now’ emphasis on God’s kingdom – we understand eschatology based on what he has revealed of his actions already completed. The extent to which life in the Middle should be affected by, or even effected from, *The End* became an acute matter amid the social and political upheaval of the 1960s. The importance of the future hope in Christian theology was the subject of Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*. Broadly influential on both sides of the Atlantic,<sup>23</sup> Moltmann’s work argued for what he saw as a distinctively Christian theology shaped by the future:

From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionising and transforming the present. Thus eschatology 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.<sup>24</sup>

Moltmann’s dedication to the centrality of hope for eschatology was, in his mind, an attempt to return Christian theology to a biblical emphasis on the importance of promise and fulfilment – especially in the exodus and the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. In contrast to these, Moltmann claimed that Christian theology, especially in the West, had too readily adopted the

Hellenistic notion of the immanent presence of absolute being – ‘the god of Parmenides’ – that negates any meaningful sense of history. Moltmann understood himself to be taking the discussion beyond the emphases of the early Barth.<sup>25</sup> He complained that Barth’s stress on the self-revelation of God meant an ‘eternal presence of God in time’, a ‘present without any future’.<sup>26</sup> This, according to Moltmann, resulted in ‘the future redemption [promised] in the revelation of Christ [becoming] only a supplement, only a noetic unveiling of the reconciliation effected in Christ’.<sup>27</sup> Barth’s insistence on the transcendent intervention of God’s eternal present undermined the reality of history and therefore diminished the sense in which the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus could be understood as a promise. In contrast, Moltmann’s desire was for something more than another metaphysical description of the world. He argued that because it is rooted in the resurrection and cross of Christ, eschatology ‘must formulate its statements of hope in contradiction to our present experience of suffering, evil and death’.<sup>28</sup> Thus hope for the future becomes the basis for mission in the present. This is not to return to the ethical reconstruction of a new Christian civilization but to the Spirit’s work of constituting a church in the world, a church that proclaims Christ while waiting in hope for the coming of God. The theology of hope was not to be understood as a quietist vision of life in the Middle – Moltmann’s theology was (and is) always revolutionary in its ethos. Not surprisingly, then, an eschatology that understood the coming of the rule of God as ‘the coming of righteousness, peace, freedom and human dignity’ found great support in environments that experienced the opposite – among liberation theologians of Latin America, for example.<sup>29</sup>

From these twentieth-century revisions in Christian eschatology a theological description of life in the Middle must include the expectation that the rule of God in the world will be a *divine achievement*, not the gradual outcome of human civilization. This divine achievement has already entered apocalyptically into world history with the resurrection of Messiah Jesus from the dead. But this divine intervention remains a promise for the future that is yet to be *perfected*. The promised future provides hope by contradicting our present experience in a world distorted by sin, death and evil. The hope that God will bring about such an end

shapes the gospel that is preached and upon which our prayers are based in the everyday experience of life in the Christian community. With these broad theological disciplines for our eschatology in place, we must now consider more carefully what the Bible says about God's making of promises, what is involved in our response of hope and what this hope must look like as we pray.

## Promises, hope and prayers in the Bible

Before prayers can be offered, promises must be given and that action of God must be understood theologically. To make a connection between our prayers and the promises of God is hardly revolutionary. Calvin commented on praying in response to God's promises, 'among the duties of godliness, the Scriptures commend none more frequently'.<sup>30</sup> Still, in order to gain a stronger grasp on the everyday impact of the gospel's now-not-yet tension and to refine further the sense in which this must be understood as a theological issue, more needs to be said regarding the nature of God's promises and our prayers as the basic eschatological experience of them. Furthermore, the nature of Christian hope and significance of that hope for life in the Middle must also be taken into account.

### *God's promises for the Middle*

When individuals are drawn into the community of Messiah Jesus by his Spirit they gain perspective on life in the Middle through promises like these:

At the name of Jesus every knee in the heavens, on the earth and under the earth will be bent and every tongue will confess that Messiah Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:10–11)

When all things have been subjected to him, then the Son himself will be made subject to the one who subjected all things to him so that God will be all in all. (1 Cor. 15:28)

God's plans for all things, in heaven and on the earth, have been (and will be) revealed to be summed up in the Messiah. (Eph. 1:10)

The specifics of these kinds of promises will be addressed in the chapters that follow but for now a theological definition of promise-making will depend on what we learn about God and how he relates to his human creatures as a consequence of making promises to them. How God makes promises and then fulfils them is the key to understanding eschatology in the context of life in the Middle. Barth suggested that we should consider two key biblical promises: God's promise to be present in creation and his covenantal promise to perfect a people for himself. We shall start with these two fundamental promises because an eschatology derived from the whole Bible will be more 'holistic' than just a list of things to expect at the return of Christ.<sup>31</sup> To be theological, our eschatology must be a product of weaving together the actions of the Father through the Son and in the Spirit from creation to new creation.

*God gives himself to us through promises*

In discussing 'The Work of God the Reconciler', Barth sought to encapsulate 'the whole complex of Christian understanding and doctrine' on the subject (reconciliation) in the phrase 'God with Us'.<sup>32</sup> According to him, this is a statement that Christians in their community make to one another and to any who as yet do not, but should, belong with them in the community of God's people – 'God is the One who is with them as God.'<sup>33</sup> The phrase belongs most importantly to Matthew's Gospel, where the evangelist recounts Joseph's dream in which he is told that Mary, though a virgin, will give birth to a son, giving him a name that means 'salvation' (Matt. 1:18–25). Matthew then interprets the birth of this child of promise as the fulfilment of the promise made by YHWH through the prophet Isaiah: 'The virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel' (Isa. 7:14). This name, adds the evangelist, means 'God with us'. From the very beginning of the Gospel accounts Jesus is depicted as the one through whom God will bring salvation. The Isaianic promise is not just that in Jesus we are able to declare that 'God is on our side,' but that God will be personally present as our saviour in Jesus.<sup>34</sup> What is of significance for a discussion of God's promise-making is this central claim that when God makes a promise, he gives himself in it.<sup>35</sup> Barth wrote:

What unites God and us men is that God does not will to be God without us, that He creates us rather to share with us and therefore with our being and life and act His own incomparable being and life and act.<sup>36</sup>

Putting these two ideas together, without compromising his absolute otherness as the transcendent creator of all things, God's desire is to share himself – his life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and to be present with us as this God, and he achieves this in his promises and their subsequent fulfilment for us and among us.<sup>37</sup> This is what the prophet Isaiah foresaw, through God's word and by his Spirit, and what was subsequently fulfilled, or perfected, in Jesus; God not only promises to be present with his people but is in fact present in the promise through his word and by his Spirit. Whatever the contemporary significance of the prophecy was for Israel, the concept of God's sharing himself with his people is echoed in various places in the Old Testament where YHWH is referred to as 'the portion' of various people. Hence Moses is told that Aaron and the Levites will be given no part of the land because YHWH himself will be their 'portion' (Num. 18:20).<sup>38</sup> Likewise, the psalmist praises the promise-making God, 'You are my portion, Lord . . . my portion in the land of the living,' and the prophet Jeremiah referred to the Lord as 'the Portion of Jacob'.<sup>39</sup> What has been experienced from the time of Pentecost in terms of the Spirit of God among his people was foreseen by Ezekiel, through whom the Lord promises, 'I will place My Spirit within you' (see Ezek. 36:27; 37:14).<sup>40</sup> Life in the Middle must therefore be understood in terms of God's sharing himself with his people in his promises. God makes promises through his word and by his Spirit. He fulfils these promises through his Son and in his Spirit. This can be understood even more concretely when we look to the covenant promise 'I will be your God and you will be my people.'<sup>41</sup>

God makes promises and in them gives himself in order to perfect the relationship between himself and his creatures. As Barth wrote:

When (in Jesus Christ) we look into the heart of God – for in Him He has revealed to us: 'I will be your God' – we are permitted, indeed we are constrained, to look

at ourselves, that what is proper to and is required of us is: ‘Ye shall be my people.’<sup>42</sup>

The gospel of the Lord Messiah Jesus commands and enables us, in the power of the Spirit, to hear God’s gracious promise to us in the Lord Jesus, that we are the body of the Messiah, the fellowship of the Spirit and the children of God (cf. 1 Cor. 12:27; 2 Cor. 13:14; John 1:12). The writer to the Hebrews confirms this observation with his interpretation of the promises made through the prophet Jeremiah. In the context of explaining the superiority of the covenant that God establishes through Jesus over and against the old Sinai covenant, he cites Jeremiah 31:31–34, especially ‘This is the covenant I will establish with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord . . . I will be their God and they will be my people’ (Heb. 8:10).

The age-old formula of the promise finds its perfection through and in the person and work of the Lord Jesus.<sup>43</sup> In fact, John’s Apocalypse appeals to this promise as a description of the experience in the new creation: ‘God will dwell with them, they will be his people and God himself will be with them and will be their God’ (Rev. 21:3). Consequently, as has been suggested, God not only gives himself to us in his promises, but gives these promises in order to renew and perfect a relationship with him. Sin, death and evil are constant barriers to the creator God’s purpose to share his life with his creatures and the reason why the relationship requires renewal. However, in the Lord Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit God’s determination to fulfil his promises is indomitable, even if their achievement is not immediately obvious. This is where the creaturely response of hope to God’s promises becomes significant.

### *Hope as a passion for the possible*

If understanding the nature of God’s promise-making in the Bible is one key aspect for life in the Middle, theologically describing human experience of those promises as hope is another. Even if God gives himself in his promises and definitively in Jesus, Moltmann’s observation still holds: ‘fulfilment unexpectedly gives rise in turn to another promise of something greater still’.<sup>44</sup> There is always more to God’s promises even when it seems they have been fulfilled. For example, when the disciples came to the empty

tomb the angels said, 'He is not here; he has risen' (Luke 24:6). Yet the resurrection of Jesus and even his subsequent exaltation 'to the right hand of God' introduced a further 'until' for Jesus himself as he awaits the time in which God 'make[s] [his] enemies a footstool for [his] feet' (Acts 2:33, 35; cf. Ps. 110). As with Jesus, then, so also with us, on the basis of the promise that 'God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, Lord and Messiah,' we await the day when 'in the name of Jesus, every knee will bow – on earth and in heaven – and every tongue will confess that Messiah Jesus is Lord' (Acts 2:36; Phil. 2:10–11). We have to wait for God's promises to be fulfilled because of what Moltmann referred to as 'the overspill' of promise: 'The overspill of promise means that they have always a provisional character . . . Hence the history that is thus experienced and transmitted forces every new present to analysis and to interpretation.'<sup>45</sup> We shall construct a theological definition of hope within the context of 'living in the overspill of God's promises'.

It is a basic axiom of Reformation theology that we are saved by grace and through faith, so to propose that we respond to God's promises in hope needs some explanation. In relation to the promises of God Moltmann also wrote, 'faith is the foundation upon which hope rests, hope nourishes and sustains faith'.<sup>46</sup> One must trust the promises of God before there is hope, yet trust and hope are equally proportional and mutually constitutive.<sup>47</sup> There must be knowledge of and hence trust in God's promises in the Lord Jesus to ensure that hope is not confused with utopia. Yet faith without hope soon falls to pieces in the experience of a world frustrated by sin. Hope 'sees in the resurrection of Christ not the eternity of heaven, but the future of the very earth on which his cross stands'.<sup>48</sup> Paul Ricoeur, in conversation with Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, suggested that for hope to be meaningful it ought not merely to point 'to a specific object but to a structural change within . . . [our] discourse'.<sup>49</sup> His proposal was that the substance of hope ought to be understood in terms of a way of being in the world above and beyond acknowledging a particular historic event – like the resurrection. Ricoeur appreciated Moltmann's understanding of hope as 'nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith has believed to have been truly promised by God'.<sup>50</sup> That is, hope is a verb before (and more importantly than) it is a noun because it is our way of

participating in the divine dynamic of promise and fulfilment – along with love, hope is a personal engagement in God’s promises. Hence Ricoeur adopted the expression ‘a passion for the possible’ as a philosophical description of hope and our way of living in the Middle or in the context of the overflow of God’s promises.<sup>51</sup> In developing Moltmann’s concepts, Ricoeur also pointed to the significance of Paul’s ‘how much more’ meditation on the triumph of God’s grace in relation to sin (Rom. 5:12–20; see esp. Rom. 5:17). Here Paul juxtaposes the sin of Adam and its subsequent effects on humanity with the free gift of life in Christ Jesus and the vastly superior transformational power of God’s grace in perfecting the intentions revealed in the gospel. This ‘wisdom of the resurrection’, according to Ricoeur, implies ‘a logic of surplus and excess’ in Christian hope: ‘This wisdom is expressed in an economy of superabundance, which we must decipher in daily life, in work, and in leisure, in politics and in universal history.’<sup>52</sup>

So hope is living with a ‘passion for the possible’ in the ‘overflow’ of God’s promises. It is certainly a rich description and a fairly optimistic view of hope in the Middle. However, this definition needs to be qualified in a number of areas if only to distinguish our intentionally theological description from the aspirations of modern Romantic culture. First, while there is a degree of alignment between Moltmann and Ricoeur, the latter was drawn more to the symbolism of the resurrection than to the future of Jesus that the resurrection reveals.<sup>53</sup> Hence when Moltmann discussed the effect of promise on revelation in relation to the Easter events, promise is not *merely* ‘a word-event which brings truth and harmony between man and the reality that concerns him’.<sup>54</sup> The resurrection of Jesus does far more than give us a different way of establishing meaning and action in the world: with the objectivity of divine revelation, ‘promise announces the coming of a not yet existing reality from the future of the truth’.<sup>55</sup> Hence *possibilities* that arise from promise ‘[go] beyond what is possible and impossible in the realistic sense’.<sup>56</sup> God the Father’s intentions are revealed in the perfection of his promises and far surpass our imagination or intellectual intuition.

Second, and following immediately on from the above, using the perspective of the resurrection of the crucified Messiah, the

sense in which hope might be optimistic arises when ‘the man of hope’ endures suffering in a world contradicted by the promise of a new creation.<sup>57</sup> It is through suffering ‘participation in the mission and the love of Jesus Christ’ that individuals suffer ‘the passion for what is possible, for what is coming and promised in the future of life, of freedom and of resurrection’.<sup>58</sup> Moltmann appealed to Paul’s words to the Corinthian church, ‘As he was crucified through weakness, yet liveth by the power of God, so we also are weak in him, but we shall live with him by the power of God’ (2 Cor. 13:4).<sup>59</sup> *The passion of those who hope in the promises of God the Father is for vindication in the face of death through the power of resurrection.* Modern Romantic culture has, by way of contrast, elevated the power of human imagination or intellectual intuition to the point that art, in a wide range of technological forms, ‘has the power to create an entire world through imagination’.<sup>60</sup> It has this power, apparently, due to the creative potential of ‘intellectual intuition’ to rationalize facts that are not otherwise given to the senses. It is a view of art based on the conviction that ‘it [is] through the intellectual intuition of the infinite in the finite, the absolute in its appearance, or the macrocosm in the microcosm’.<sup>61</sup> As we shall come to see, modern culture invests the individual with a largely sentimental kind of passion for predominantly aesthetic possibilities.

The third qualification of the idea of hope as a passion for the possible was raised by Eberhard Jüngel, and it relates to the importance of understanding the possible as a free act of God as opposed to the human achievement just mentioned. In discussing history as eschatological, Moltmann drew attention to the way in which the event of the resurrection completely changes our view of what could or could not happen in history given the right circumstances: ‘The resurrection of Christ does not mean a possibility within the world and its history, but a new possibility altogether for the world, for existence and for history.’<sup>62</sup> For Jüngel the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is an *ex nihilo* event in world history – like the creation of the world itself – that must completely undermine any progressivist view of history, no matter how rational it may appear. Jüngel takes this basic idea of the resurrection and applies it to individual human experience. His chief concern is to point out the difference that justification by faith makes to our understanding of what is possible in human

existence. He argues that, thanks to Aristotle, the Western world view has always given priority to ‘the actual’ over ‘the possible’ when it comes to describing our existence.<sup>63</sup> At first glance this seems obvious: ‘the actuality of this world arises from its possibility not as from nothingness but as from a “not yet” which as such participates in being [existence] even though it is not yet’.<sup>64</sup> Hence the Romantic aspiration to discern the infinite *in the finite* or intuit the *Big Picture* of history from a specific number of particular events. However, Jüngel argues, this Aristotelian way of thinking is not the same as the ‘now–not-yet’ tension of the gospel. The New Testament apocalyptic description of the actions of God in the world ‘represent[s] a complete metamorphosis of both the apocalyptic material [of the Old Testament] and also the world view inaugurated by Aristotle’.<sup>65</sup> That is, the Gospel accounts of Christ Jesus’ resurrection introduce a *type* of event for which there is no precedent in the biblical story. To grasp the significance of this, the Aristotelian mindset must be deconstructed at the most basic human level. That, according to Jüngel, is found when we revisit hope’s complement that was mentioned above, the Reformation doctrine of justification by grace, through faith alone.

Using Luther’s criticism of Aristotle’s basic concept of the righteous person, Jüngel points to the prevalence in Western thinking of the idea ‘We are what we make ourselves.’<sup>66</sup> What Luther showed, from the perspective of the gospel, was the complete opposite. That is, what we attempt to make of ourselves is ‘the nothingness of sin’ as opposed to the ‘new creation’ (from nothing in terms of our own efforts) we are through the gospel. Jüngel points to Paul’s description of ‘the justifying God . . . who gives life to the dead and calls into being the things that are not (Rom. 4:17)’ as a warrant.<sup>67</sup> Hence the resurrection of Jesus completely changes the existence of the individual because ‘Jesus’ resurrection from the dead promises that we shall be made anew out of the nothingness of relationlessness [sin], remade *ex nihilo*.’<sup>68</sup> In relation to the idea of hope as a passion for the possible, Jüngel wanted to change radically the definition of the possible: ‘*Theology does this by establishing the distinction between the possible and the impossible as incomparably more fundamental than the distinction between the actual and the not-yet-actual.*’<sup>69</sup>

For hope to be a passion for the possible, it must be a passion for what God makes possible and declares to be impossible in the gospel of the Lord Messiah Jesus. It is in this fashion that ‘the Word of God occurs as a word of promise and judgement’.<sup>70</sup> Hope that grows from the gospel, according to Jüngel, cannot look to the actual for signs of the possible nor consider the possible as somehow already existing in the actual. Instead, hope must look to what God has made possible in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and what God has declared to be impossible – the world governed by sin: ‘the justified person hopes for the world, not as hope for any particular future worldly actuality, but only as hope in God’s creative Word’.<sup>71</sup>

To sum up, hope is a passion for the possibilities that are latent in God’s promises. It is grounded on God’s key achievements in the resurrection and anticipates the perfection of those achievements in the future. Given the overspill of God’s promises, such a hope will recognize an appropriate degree of openness concerning the future: ‘a hope which is seen is no hope at all’ (Rom. 8:24). This is primarily because the resurrection, though foretold, was an event that defied intellectual intuition. Therefore hope in God’s promised future powerfully contradicts an individual’s or churches’ present experiences of participating in the suffering love and mission of the Lord Jesus because ‘if we are hoping in that which is not seen, through perseverance we wait eagerly’ (Rom. 8:25). Nevertheless, neither suffering nor the lack of it will contribute to this future hope, as the life that springs from the promise of the gospel is always and in every way a gift of God’s grace.

To ensure that this hope that we have defined is not simply a baptized version of intellectual intuitions, it must be embodied in our responses to God’s grace, since ‘faith without works is dead’ (Jas 2:17). Hence we shall proceed to explore hope embodied in prayer as the quintessential eschatological response to God’s promises. Before we do that, however, we need to reflect further upon two aspects of the overspill of God’s promises. The first is our historical experience of the provisional nature of God’s promises, an experience that fashions our hope and refines our faith. The second is the sovereign activity of God by the power of his Spirit that perfects our history in fulfilment of his promises.

## The provisional nature of God's promises

I defined hope in the context of what Moltmann called the overflow of God's promises: 'The overflow of promise means that they have always a provisional character . . . Hence the history that is thus experienced and transmitted forces every new present to analysis and to interpretation.'<sup>72</sup> Our experience of history is directly related to the time that it takes for God's promises to be fulfilled. The provisional nature of God's promise-making establishes the broad contours and temporal direction of life in the Middle as part of the history created by God's promise to be present with his people. Hence, as human beings understand who they are and where they fit in history, they hope, as a consequence of remembrance and expectation, 'by the anamnesis [remembrance] by which he retains his past and the prognosis [anticipation] by which he lays hold of what is to come'.<sup>73</sup> The promises of the gospel come to us as both remembrance and expectation. We remember that Messiah Jesus was raised from the dead by the Spirit to sit at the right hand of God the Father. This fact has been an essential element of gospel preaching from Pentecost onward: 'God has raised this Jesus to life . . . [he has been] exalted to the right hand of God,' declared Peter (Acts 2:32–33). At the same time, and on this basis, we also anticipate the 'day when he [Jesus] comes to be glorified by his saints and to be admired by all those who have believed' (2 Thess. 1:10).

The 'known from the past' but 'looking to the future' experience of provisionality is the 'now-not-yet' tension of life in the Middle and it is also one of the key challenges to faith and hope: 'How long, O Lord?' is the oft-repeated call of the biblical writers, as in Psalm 13. It is a challenge in so far as it requires a careful understanding of what can be read in the Bible about God's making promises and fulfilling them; for example, the millennium in Revelation 20. The various genres of biblical literature reflect the provisionality of the promise given. Brueggemann from the exodus narrative identifies two distinct forms of the promise-making that emerged in the life of Israel. The first group consists of the prophetic and messianic promises.<sup>74</sup> The substance of these promises concerns 'the public, concrete prospect of peace, justice, security and abundance',<sup>75</sup> and points to YHWH's intention that public institutions will eventually conform to his

purposes. Hence the hope of Israel rests on whether YHWH is willing and able to establish these institutions. However, the promises are messianic in so far as they anticipate that God's future will be enacted via the medium of human agency. Now Israel must not only entrust herself to the word of YHWH but also the human agent commissioned by him. The second group of promises, far more on the periphery of the Old Testament, take on an apocalyptic form. These originate neither through public processes nor by human agency. Instead, 'by the sovereign incursion of Yahweh, whose newness is not extrapolated from the present, something utterly new will be given'.<sup>76</sup> These apocalyptic promises anticipate an unmediated action of YHWH on behalf of his people.

In terms of the first group of promises, certain of them are repeated throughout the Israelite drama and are often provisionally fulfilled, whether in possessing the Promised Land or kingship in Israel. Yet the promises are not subsequently eclipsed by these provisional fulfilments.<sup>77</sup> Provisionality means that biblical promises ought not to be understood as mere predictions that come to an end once the time and place has arrived: they invariably retain some future aspect, some overspill. König points to 'the day of the Lord' as a prime example.<sup>78</sup> Possibly quite old by the time it first appears in Amos' ministry (Amos 5:20),<sup>79</sup> the prophecy seems to have been fulfilled with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, as interpreted by Ezekiel (13:5) and Jeremiah (Lam. 1:12; 2:1, 22; cf. Isa. 13:6–9). Yet Malachi, after the return from exile, invokes the phrase in reference to a return of Elijah (Mal. 4:5) at some future 'day of the LORD'. A further variation on the theme is found when Peter invokes Joel's use of the phrase to interpret the events of Pentecost. Joel (Joel 2:28ff.) looked forward to God's pouring out his Spirit on 'the day of the Lord'. Peter (Acts 2:17) interpreted the day of Pentecost as 'the great and glorious day' to which Joel was referring. Nevertheless, even here, at what is a climactic event of the pouring out of God's Spirit in fulfilment of the ancient prophecy, Peter's sermon depicts the outpouring as an ongoing event ('In these last days') – the day of the Lord is projected into the future.<sup>80</sup> The one thing these promised 'days of the Lord' have in common is that he will appear.<sup>81</sup>

In reference to what has been said concerning God's giving himself in the promises, the provisional nature of the promises

through time and space *could* depend on the extent to which God gives himself in the promise. Barth offered something like this in his discussion of Old Testament promises: ‘God is present to man as the coming God. Present and coming are both to be stressed.’<sup>82</sup> Of course, there is a creaturely aspect or contribution to the provisionality of God’s promises. Calvin drew our attention to the transient nature of the promise receivers: ‘We hold that carnal prosperity and happiness did not constitute the goal set before the Jews to which they were to aspire. Rather, they were adopted into the hope of immortality.’<sup>83</sup> The implication here seems to be that because the promises (‘by oracles, by the law and by the prophets’) were so readily compromised by the experience of death, the promises must therefore be provisional in nature. In fact, Calvin argued, the very nature of the gospel promises reveals that they offer something far more necessary than creaturely institutions.<sup>84</sup> Since surely ‘the gospel does not confine men’s hearts to delight in the present life, but lifts them to the hope of immortality’,<sup>85</sup> the Old Testament promises must point to the future. As we shall see, the human condition does have some significance for the provisionality of God’s promises: ‘Between promise and fulfilment there is a whole variety of intermediate links and processes, such as exposition, development, validation, assertion, renewal etc.’<sup>86</sup> Such a process does not take away from the authenticity of any of God’s promises however, because ‘the guarantee of the promise’s congruity with reality lies in the credibility and faithfulness of him who gives it’.<sup>87</sup> God’s promises are not provisional because he is somehow unable to fulfil them or unreliable in making them. Instead, as we shall see, in spite of the human condition, God governs the course of human history by the power of his Spirit, who provides both the promises and the fulfilment.

## The Spirit of hope and the promises of God

If our passion for the possibilities of God’s promises for life in the Middle is a gracious gift, as described above, it is because the risen Lord Jesus ‘has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and poured out what you now see and hear’ (Acts 2:33). In this way God continues to give himself in his promises throughout life in the Middle. At Pentecost Peter proclaimed to the gathered crowd that the promise of God through the prophet Joel had

been fulfilled – ‘the last days’ had begun as seen in the power of the Spirit (Acts 2:14, 16–17). The church is now constituted by the power of the Spirit and into the history created by God’s promises. By the Spirit God acts to make himself present to his people – Jew and Gentile – through the Lord Messiah Jesus. Therefore a church is a new temple, the dwelling place of God (Eph. 2:21–22). A passion for what is possible during life in the Middle arises from God’s gift of himself through Christ and in the Spirit; as Calvin put it, ‘by [the secret energy of the Spirit] we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits’.<sup>88</sup> It is by the power of God’s Spirit, by whom Jesus was raised from the dead, that the Christians ‘can obediently take upon themselves the sufferings of discipleship and in these very sufferings wait the future glory’.<sup>89</sup> The possibilities of these benefits for life in the Middle will be explored further as the last aspect of responding to God’s promises – in prayer – is considered. In anticipation of that, we must add that the importance of the Spirit for life in the Middle is not confined to the church. All God’s activity in creation from the beginning is in the power of his Holy Spirit (Gen. 1:2; cf. Ps. 33:6).

Calvin, rightly, acknowledged a distinction between the way God’s Spirit particularizes the church and the way God works by ‘His second hand’<sup>90</sup> for the rest of creation:

Nor is there reason for anyone to ask, what have the impious, who are utterly estranged from God, to do with his Spirit? We ought to understand the statement that the Spirit of God dwells only in believers [Rom. 8:9] as referring to the Spirit of sanctification through whom we are consecrated as temples to God [1 Cor. 3:16]. Nonetheless he fills, moves, and quickens all things by the power of the same Spirit, and does so according to the character that he bestowed upon each kind by the law of creation.<sup>91</sup>

The Holy Spirit mediates God’s power in and over creation, thus ensuring that creation is distinct from God himself. This is not separate from God’s actions in creation through his Son but rather, as Basil of Caesarea suggested, we may understand the Holy Spirit as ‘the perfecting cause of creation’.<sup>92</sup> The Spirit

perfects, that is, gives ontological direction to everything in creation towards the Father, through the Son. This is not a static notion of perfection but rather a sense of having come through a state of fallenness by means of redemption in order to be what all are meant to be in ongoing relationship with the living Creator. Colin Gunton summarized it thus: ‘As the “perfecting cause” the Holy Spirit, the Lord the Giver of Life, gives reality to the world by perfecting what the Father does through his Son: originating what is truly other.’<sup>93</sup> The perfecting activities of the Spirit are focused most clearly in creation on the person of Jesus the Christ, for in him we have a preview of what will be achieved in the new creation. Again, Gunton summarized, ‘God the Father through his Spirit shapes this representative sample of the natural world [Jesus Christ] for the sake of the remainder of it.’<sup>94</sup> The full significance of these ideas will be explored in due course, but for now two things need explaining.

First, and as mentioned above, the Spirit incorporates a church into the *whole* history created by God’s promises. This action creates the continuity between those who received God’s promises through the Lord Messiah Jesus *and* those who were promised he would come. For, as Peter remarks, the prophets of the old covenant were serving the church when they foretold the things of Messiah Jesus that were subsequently preached by the apostles in the Spirit: ‘for though human, they spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit’ (1 Peter 1:11–12; 2 Peter 1:21). It is in the power of the one Spirit that all God’s promises are made. Yet it is in the power of the same Spirit that God’s promises are received and the passion for the possible – hope – is born. In terms of the experience of provisionality discussed in the previous section, which fashions hope and refines faith, all our experience of history is guided and governed by the perfecting Spirit towards God’s ultimate achievements for and in Jesus the Christ. The grace of God is revealed in that not only does he direct the history of the world towards his intended goal of the universal lordship of Jesus the Christ over sin, death and evil, but he also empowers his people by the same Spirit to hope in his promises despite their circumstances.

The second matter of importance concerning the eschatological work of the Spirit relates to some of the remarks made by Jüngel. While it is essential to uphold that ‘it is by grace [we] have

been saved through faith – and this not from ourselves, [but as] a gift from God’ (Eph. 2:8) there are theological difficulties inherent in adopting creation *ex nihilo* as a description of God’s *saving* actions. The resurrected Lord Jesus, though transformed by the power of the Spirit, is still the crucified Messiah – hence the reference to the scars of his passion in both the resurrection appearances and his apocalyptic glorification (John 20:25–27; Rev. 5:6–12). This continuity in the person of Jesus himself is not only essential to the gospel; from this foundation it is also essential to ensuring that God’s work in creation is not somehow isolated from his work in redemption. Any description of eschatology must ensure that the person and work of the Lord Messiah Jesus is not, somehow, God’s ‘plan B’ for creation. Hence to appropriate a perfecting work of God in creation to his Spirit is to make eschatology the direction to which God moves creation for his ultimate purpose. In this way the future direction or forward-moving aspect of history that makes it possible to speak of the ‘not-yet’ is a theological description of history and the key to understanding the provisional nature of God’s promises; especially when it is recalled that God’s purpose is the summing up of all things in the Lord Jesus, for ‘all things are for him’. Of course, it is a purpose that is at all times and in all places through him because ‘all things are through him’ and ‘in him all things hold together’ (Col. 1:16–17). The sum total of these ideas is that hope becomes a passion for the possibilities of the triune God’s perfecting work.

We must finally consider the last of the proposed aspects of life in the Middle, the embodiment of hope in prayer. To ensure that our definition of prayer is truly theological we must contextualize this basically creaturely experience within the focal point of the triune God’s perfecting work, the cross of Jesus of Nazareth.

### *Prayer and the promises of God*

So far the present description of eschatology has developed as a theological account of life in the Middle. The argument has focused upon God’s promise-making, how we interpret the Bible as the history of God’s promise-making and how, by the power of God’s Spirit, God’s promises give birth to hope – a passion for the possibilities of God’s perfecting work. If hope is the starting point of a theological description of human experience or a

response to God's promises, hoping and trusting need to be embodied in some kind of creaturely activity, because hope and faith are two sides of the same coin. The chief creaturely response to the promises of God, and therefore the quintessential experience of life in the Middle, is prayer. As Calvin said:

It is, therefore, by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches, which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father. For there is a communion of men with God by which . . . they appeal to him in person concerning his promises in order to experience . . . that what they believed was not vain, although he had promised it in word alone. Therefore we see that to us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers. So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.<sup>95</sup>

The ordinary human response to God's promises is prayer. As we pray, we look to the future – it is inherent in the promise–response dynamics of personal interaction. At the same time, the very notion that we can call on God as Father, through Jesus and by his Spirit, is evidence that God's fatherhood is open to us already. Therefore, in this sense, *prayer embodies the now-not-yet tension of eschatology*. For just as no one hopes for what he has, neither does he ask for it. Yet we call on God as Father only because God's Messiah, the Lord Jesus, has poured out his Spirit 'by whom we cry, Abba, Father' (Rom. 8:15). In the very act of praying we reveal what we believe and understand about the nature of God's promise to perfect a relationship between himself and his human creatures.<sup>96</sup> So, out of God's fatherly kindness towards us, his Spirit prompts us to pray in response to the promises God makes to us through his Son.<sup>97</sup> In order to make concrete the relationship between prayer and hope as a passion for the possibilities of God's perfecting work, this chapter will draw to a close with a meditation on the prayer of the Messiah Jesus. It is by his Spirit of sonship that we call out to God in prayer, and it is in response to God's promises to and through him that we pray (cf. Rom. 8:14–17). To guide the meditation we return to Ricoeur's essay 'Freedom in the Light of Hope'. There,

and by way of philosophical reflection on the issues raised by Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, Ricoeur seeks 'a philosophical approximation of freedom in the light of hope'.<sup>98</sup> Here he delivers three questions for us to take to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' prayer: 'What can he know? What must he do? For what must he hope?'<sup>99</sup>

## The Spirit of hope, the prayers of the Son and the promise of the Father

At some point in the middle of the night before he died, between his Passover meal with the disciples and his arrest at the hands of the temple guards, Jesus took the twelve to the garden called Gethsemane to pray (Matt. 26:36–46; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:39–46). The scene is shrouded in a darkness deeper than any evening: Satan has led the traitor to gather a posse of faceless antagonists, while despite Peter's passionate declaration of loyalty Jesus has responded with a shocking prediction of further betrayal and seems himself to be on the verge of being overwhelmed with anguish.<sup>100</sup> Within this context the first question is, *what can Jesus know?*

Jesus went to the garden to pray, knowing that he was the Spirit-anointed and therefore 'beloved Son, with whom [God] is delighted'.<sup>101</sup> As he prayed, he had the words of God's promise on his lips: 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me' (Matt. 26:39–42). The cup from which Jesus sought deliverance was a symbol of God's wrath or fury that God promised would be drunk both by sinful Israel and the pagan nations. So Isaiah said to Israel, 'you . . . have drunk the cup of His fury' (Isa. 51:17), and Jeremiah was commissioned to prophesy with, 'Take this cup of the wine of wrath from My hand and make all the nations I am sending you to, drink from it' (Jer. 25:15; cf. Jer. 25:28; 49:12; 51:7). The long-promised, and provisionally enacted, judgment of God was to be 'poured out' and Jesus believed that he was the one upon whom it had to fall. He believed this because he likewise knew that he was the promised Servant of the Lord who, empowered by God's Spirit, would announce the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:16–20; cf. Isa. 61:1–2) and suffer the punishment 'for the iniquity of us all' (Isa. 53:6). So, as much as Jesus seemed to recoil in the face of his death, as the royal and

eternal Son he anticipated wrath where there had only ever been blessing and joy.<sup>102</sup> The consuming fire of God's holiness was about to break out against sin, death and evil and the royal and eternal Son was determined to stand in the way for the sake of sinners (John 12:27) – an experience so dreadful that it distorted the creation, turning the midday sky to blackness and making the earth heave and quake. Thus he offered 'prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death' (Heb. 5:7).<sup>103</sup> Jesus knew that he was God's promised saviour and that God is faithful to his promises. Therefore *what must he do?*

Throughout his ministry Jesus lived with God's promises as 'the law of his being'.<sup>104</sup> That is, enabled by the Spirit, Jesus freely submitted to the 'authority of God's grace'<sup>105</sup> by consistently choosing to interpret his identity and mission through God's word. The wilderness temptation is a perfect case in point (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). Led by the Spirit into the desert, in response to Satan's offer to determine the nature of his sonship (If you are the son . . .), Jesus chose the way of discipline (suffering), he chose the Father's promised inheritance and he chose not to pre-empt the Father's promise to save him from death – all was 'as it is written'.<sup>106</sup> The Spirit would make effective the Father's promise to his messianic servant and would empower Jesus to face death. Later, and again in the power of the Spirit, Jesus returned to Nazareth to announce, via Isaiah 61, that he was the Spirit-empowered Servant of YHWH who had come to announce and enact the long-promised salvation of God. God endorsed Jesus' actions, as the narrative sews together the history created by God's promise-making. When Jesus went to Gethsemane to pray the narrative shows the same pattern of action: Jesus would do what he had always done.

As mentioned, Jesus had the word of God – the promise of God's judgment – in mind, and by the power of the Spirit Jesus freely submitted to his heavenly Father: 'Not my will but yours be done.'<sup>107</sup> Though clearly distraught at the prospect, Jesus entrusted himself to his 'Abba' Father, and God said 'Yes' to this prayer even while he said 'No' to Jesus' request that the 'cup might pass'. The Spirit was not merely 'with Jesus', but also ministering to him through the promises of God. In his later work *The Spirit of Life* Moltmann continues to promote the importance of the Spirit's

ministry to Messiah Jesus during Jesus' mission, especially during 'his experience of God's hiddenness', right through to the 'experience of God-forsakenness on the cross'.<sup>108</sup> Moltmann depicts the Spirit's enabling Jesus to submit to the will of the 'hidden, absent, even rejecting Father'.<sup>109</sup> Hence Jesus endures godforsakenness vicariously for a godforsaken world. Moltmann emphasizes this notion of godforsakenness in all his deliberations on the cross, beginning with *The Crucified God*.<sup>110</sup> 'God-forsakenness is the final experience of God endured by the crucified Jesus on Golgotha, because to the very end he knew he was God's Son.'<sup>111</sup> But rarely, if ever, does Moltmann attend to the importance of God's promises mediated to his Son by his Spirit. Instead, to develop a theology of God's suffering, he focuses entirely on the opening lines of Psalm 22 uttered by Jesus on the cross. So that for the Christian, the God who saves is the Father of Jesus the Christ, the Father who forsakes his Son for the godless and godforsaken. With Jesus' cry of dereliction ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', Mark 15:34) 'all disaster, forsakenness by God, absolute death, the infinite curse of damnation and sinking into nothingness is in God himself'.<sup>112</sup>

In contrast to Moltmann, I propose that the prayers of Jesus should be understood as a Spirit-enabled trust in the promises of God. We may even go so far as to say that God did not desert his Son but enabled him by the Spirit to achieve the salvation that God willed – *this was Jesus' passion*. Even in the infamous depths of the Golgotha event, when Jesus utters the opening words of Psalm 22 (and Matthew's Gospel especially proceeds to load his account of the crucifixion with allusions to the poem), may we not also allow the Spirit to minister the promises of vindication to Jesus?

For He has not despised or detested  
the torment of the afflicted.  
He did not hide His face from him  
but listened when he cried to Him for help.  
(Ps. 22:24)

At the very least, the Father has gifted his Son with a word of lament in order to face his trials. In Gethsemane Jesus responds, or is empowered by the Spirit to respond, to the promises of God

in prayer and in this we gain insight into his passion for the possibilities for God's perfecting work. Therefore *for what does Jesus hope?*

As Jesus kneels to pray in this garden the gospel story is fast approaching its climax, for the forces of darkness conspire together against God's Messiah.<sup>113</sup> Jesus knows that he is that Messiah – the one to bring the salvation of God – and he also knows that this salvation can come only through his death. Three times in conversation with his disciples Jesus predicts this to be the case (e.g. Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34).<sup>114</sup> Now, empowered by God's Spirit, the Messiah entrusts himself to his heavenly Father. Yet this act of submission is not one of resignation. For Jesus commits himself to God's will out of a passion for the possibilities of God's perfecting work for him (Jesus). I have already drawn attention to the prophetic possibilities involved in Jesus' self-understanding – and the Father underlined these through apocalyptic communications. If, as has been suggested, Jesus understood himself to be the suffering Servant of Isaiah, then not only does the prophecy anticipate Jesus' suffering, but also his vindication: 'After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied . . . I will give him a portion among the great' (Isa. 53:11–12 TNIV). Each of Jesus' predictions of his death contains a commensurate forecast of his resurrection; 'till we come to his resurrection, in which the power of the Spirit shines brightly . . . faith will find no encouragement or support'.<sup>115</sup> In addition, in his inspired analysis of Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter makes an explicit appeal to Psalm 16 as the means of interpreting the Messiah's death:

For David said about him, 'I saw beforehand my Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand I will not be shaken . . . because you will not abandon my soul in Hades nor will you permit your holy one to see decay.  
(Acts 2:25–28)

Thus it seems fair to conclude that Messiah Jesus' passion for the possibilities of God's perfecting work was grounded on God's promise of resurrection for his faithful messianic Servant.

The possibilities of God's perfecting work are, of course, far broader than the resurrection of his Messiah. As 'the pioneer and

perfecter' of our faith, Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, especially his inspired trust in God's promises, previews the goal of the gospel even as his death and resurrection will achieve it. For in Jesus, as Matthew's genealogy indicates, the whole span of the biblical drama of God's promise-making will be drawn together – from Abraham to Jesus (Matt. 1:1–24). Luke's genealogy goes even further and connects Jesus to Adam (Luke 3:23–38). Ever since Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden, God has faithfully been working through the history of the world – as shaped by his various promises – to arrive at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. In spite of, and because of, the sin of Adam that affected the whole world, God was working out his intentions so that his eternal and royal Son, Jesus of Nazareth, would pray the prayer 'not my will but yours be done'. In this history Jesus' words are the opposite of those implied by Adam. When Adam ate the fruit from the tree in the Garden of Eden he effectively said to God, 'Not your will but mine be done.' Now, outside the city of God in another garden, the sin of the world is on the verge of being undone because Jesus prays, 'Not my will but yours be done.'

In the end it was only Jesus who prayed this prayer – evidenced so painfully in the failure of his sleeping disciples. Nonetheless, it was the Spirit-perfected Son who prayed alone, and not only for the sake of the past but also for the hope of the future; for if Jesus had not so prayed, no others would ever have been able to. Thus, for example, the writer to the Hebrews emphasizes the fact that the Lord Jesus, as our high priest, 'entered, once and for all, the Most Holy place having found an eternal redemption' (Heb. 9:11–12). The words that Messiah Jesus prayed in Gethsemane 'Not my will but yours be done' become for us a basic response to God's promises. Furthermore, God's promise for us in the Middle is that the Lord Messiah Jesus 'is able to save completely those coming to God through him because he lives always to intercede on their behalf' (Heb. 7:25). As we shall see, regrettably absent from Moltmann's futurist eschatology is the significance of Messiah Jesus' heavenly session as the living promise of God's love for his creation. However, as Calvin so consistently maintained, 'it belongs to a priest to intercede for the people, that they may obtain favour with God. This is what Christ is ever doing, for it was for this purpose that he rose again from the dead.'<sup>116</sup> Critical

to *our* passion for the possibilities of God's perfecting work in the future is the promise of the Lord Jesus living for us now, in the Middle. There is much more to be said regarding the everlasting mediation of Messiah Jesus for us. For now, let me summarize the dynamics of life in the Middle.

In the power of God's Spirit we long for the possibilities of God's promise to perfect a relationship between him and us through the Lord Messiah Jesus at his return. We know that God has promised to give himself to us by the Spirit and through the Lord Jesus during this time. We express our hope in prayer as a Spirit-enabled response to what God has achieved for us in the death and resurrection of his royal and eternal Son. In praying, we participate in the passionate struggles of the Spirit-empowered Messiah against sin, death and evil, even as his resurrection in the power of the Spirit stands as God's achievement that contradicts our present plight and guarantees Christ Jesus' (and through him our) future. What remains now is to construct an eschatology grounded on God's promises as they are revealed in Scripture so that we may discern a theologically informed yet modest set of possibilities for our passion. Most importantly we need to be taught how to pray in response to the promises that God the Father makes through his Son and by his Spirit and it is to this task that we turn first.