

WISHFUL THINKING OR CERTAIN HOPE?

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure...

Hebrews 6:19

Our first pastorate was a tiny Methodist Church near Crab Orchard, Kentucky. Next to a tobacco field, the little white church had two tiny Sunday School rooms, one old piano (out of tune) and no indoor plumbing. I was a seminary student at the time and twice every week Katy and I would go to be with our congregation. We loved it! But I'll never forget my first funeral. I had been there only a few months when the call came. The deceased did not go to our church but had a cousin who did. Somehow that qualified *me* to do the burial. As the funeral approached I discovered that Hiram (pronounced with one syllable in Kentucky) had been a bootlegger and was known all over Lincoln County for his sinful and reprobate ways.

I can't recall what I said in my funeral message but I do remember this: the wailing. I'd never heard anything like this before... or since. The memory of the sound haunts me still. I tried to preach Good News but the message was drowned out by the loud moaning. Hiram's family knew he had died without Christ. They knew what future destiny awaited him. Nothing I could say seemed to offer any consolation for that!

Since leaving Crab Orchard I have attended other funerals and seen other forms of grief. Our post-Christian world tries valiantly to offer consolation to those facing the Last Enemy. "Comfort" is sought today from four main types of belief, none of which correspond to Biblical teaching. Some believe in *annihilation*. "When you're dead, you're dead! The lights go out and you cease to exist." Others opt for *reincarnation*. What was once a Hindu teaching has now spilled over into popular thinking. Death is not the end but a door that ushers us to new life in some other form. Others put their faith in a fuzzy *nature religion* that pretends we live on beyond the grave in nature: the wind, the trees, the seasons, etc. Many others choose to believe in a vague *universalism* that assumes everyone goes to heaven. If hell exists, it is only for people like Hitler, Pol Pot and child molesters. But everyone else gets to live happily ever after.

To be honest, when I look at the contemporary alternatives, I prefer the wailers in Crab Orchard! At least they had the courage to face reality and voice the truth about human destinies. Many today would benefit greatly from pausing to listen to their wailing.

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. (John 5:28-29)

Funerals have a way of revealing what we really believe!

Pastor Stan