

“WE TOIL AND STRIVE BECAUSE WE HAVE OUR HOPE SET ON THE LIVING GOD”: GOD’S LIFE AND THE PASTOR’S HOPE

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God’s life/immortality is an important theme throughout 1 Timothy. According to 4:10, the Christian’s (and therefore the pastor’s) hope is placed on God as the *living* God. How does knowing God as the uniquely *living* one give us hope? In this essay I will show how our hope and God’s life repeatedly interweave in 1 Timothy, then turn to the seventeenth-century Reformed scholastic Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706) for help in understanding why these are so closely related, and finally end with some implications for pastoral faithfulness and perseverance today.²

I. LIFE AND HOPE IN 1 TIMOTHY

In 1 Tim 4:6, Paul shifts from a discussion of wider ecclesial matters (prayer, male and female conduct, leader qualifications, false teachers) to a discussion of Timothy’s own ministry, before returning again in chapter five to wider ecclesial matters such as the treatment of widows and then elders. At 4:6 Paul says that if (or perhaps “as”) Timothy places these things before the church, he will be “a good servant of Christ Jesus,” that is, a servant who is “being trained by the words of the faith and of the good teaching which [he] has followed.” Pastors can only train *with* the word insofar as they are already being trained *by* it. At 4:7 Paul slightly shifts his imagery to athletic training: avoiding false teaching, Timothy must “train [him]self for godliness; for while bodily training is somewhat beneficial,

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² Petrus van Mastricht was a quintessential pastor-theologian in the Reformed tradition of the Netherlands and Germany. His ecclesial vocation ranged widely, with him serving at different points as both a pastor and a theologian, across multiple churches and universities. On top of this, even his scholarship ran the gamut, with him being a professor of both Hebrew and theology. Reflecting the sweeping nature of his own life and ministry, his *Theoretical-Practical Theology* is famous for combining rigorous scholasticism with warm practical application, all undergirded by straightforward exegesis on selected passages. The later pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards was deeply influenced by and enthusiastic about Mastricht’s *Theology*.

godliness is beneficial for all things, [because] it has a promise of life now and of [life] future.”³

To ensure that Timothy (and we) do not miss the point, Paul somberly underscores that this is a “trustworthy saying, deserving of full acceptance” (4:9). Indeed, at verse 10, Paul says that this godliness-onto-life is the very point of Christian life and ministry (cf. 1:5), continuing the imagery of athletic and strenuous effort: “We toil and strive for this thing, because we have hoped upon the God who is living.”⁴ Godliness—the posture of appropriate devotion and fear toward God, rooted in God’s mighty acts of salvation in Christ⁵—holds promise not just for *this* life (like bodily training) but also for the *eschatological* life to come. And hope, which is part of what it means to be godly,⁶ is oriented toward God as the *living* God. Indeed, at 3:14–15 Paul has already framed Christian/ecclesial ethics (as well as the purpose of the letter itself) in terms of God’s life: “I am writing these things to you so that . . . you may know how one ought to behave in God’s house, which is the *church of the God who is living* (ἐκκλησία θεοῦ ζῶντος).”

Paul has already described and praised God in terms of his vitality and immortality and will return to them again at the end of the letter. Having opened the letter by describing God as “our savior” and Jesus as “our hope” (1:1), Paul gives his first “trustworthy saying, worthy of full acceptance, that ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’” (1:15). Paul then rejoices that God showed mercy toward him—the chief of sinners—so that he would be an example “to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον, 1:16). At 1:17 Paul now bursts out in praise to God—the “King of the ages” (βασιλεύς τῶν αἰώνων), the immortal⁷ one, to whom belongs glory “forever and ever” (εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων). While the *word* “hope” does not appear here, the *concept* does, as we can see a clear association between God’s life/immortality, kingly rule, and eschatological salvation.

But at the end of the letter, Paul *does* explicitly link them, as he did in 4:10. As previously mentioned, in 6:12 Paul charges Timothy to “take hold of . . . eternal *life*” before charging him “before the God who is *giving life*⁸ to all things” to keep “the command” free from reproach “until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:13–14). As before, Paul now praises

³ Γύμναζε δὲ σεαυτὸν πρὸς εὐσέβειαν· ἡ γὰρ σωματικὴ γυμνασία πρὸς ὀλίγον ἐστὶν ὠφέλιμος, ἡ δὲ εὐσέβεια πρὸς πάντα ὠφέλιμός ἐστιν ἐπαγγελίαν ἔχουσα ζωῆς τῆς νῦν καὶ τῆς μελλούσης.

⁴ Εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ κοπιῶμεν καὶ ἀγωνιζόμεθα, ὅτι ἠλπίκαμεν ἐπὶ θεῷ ζῶντι, ὅς ἐστιν σωτὴρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων μάλιστα πιστῶν. I take the first person plural to speak generically about believers, as in 2:2; 6:8, 17.

⁵ See 3:16: “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit . . .” While the death of Jesus is far from absent in 1 Timothy (e.g., 2:6; 6:13), notice how Paul focuses in 3:16 on his eschatological *triumph* that has arrived and is proclaimed and believed in the *present*.

⁶ See 6:11, where Paul charges Timothy to pursue godliness (among other virtues) before charging him in 6:12 to “take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.”

⁷ I.e., “imperishable” - ἀφθαρτος.

⁸ ζωογονέω.

God for his immortality and sovereignty: he who is the "only sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords . . . the only one having *immortality* (*ἀθανασία*) . . . To him be honor and eternal dominion (*κράτος αἰώνιον*)" (6:15–16). At this point Paul suddenly shifts to exhorting rich Christians, perhaps because a soaring view of God's glorious sovereignty is necessary for escaping Mammon's many dangers (cf. 6:9–10). Paul says that Christians who are rich "in the present age" (*ὁ νῦν αἰών*) must be charged not to "hope upon (*ἠλπικέναι ἐπί*) the uncertainty of riches" but "rather [to hope] upon God (*ἐπί θεῷ*)" (cf. 4:10!), who richly provides us everything to enjoy (6:17). In other words, the immortal God is the one who gives and sustains our very lives and all that they entail. The rich must do good and be generous, thereby storing up treasures for the future (*εἰς τὸ μέλλον*; cf. 4:8b) "in order that they might take hold of real *life*" (6:19).⁹ To summarize this section: since God is the living, immortal, and life-giving one (6:13, 16), the rich must not hope upon wealth (which is by definition uncertain and transient), but rather they must hope upon *him*, who not only gives wealth *now* in the present life (the realm of "bodily training"), but especially gives wealth in the "real" life to come.

First Timothy is clear then that we do not hope in God abstractly, but rather we hope in him as the living and immortal one who gives (but never receives) life. Like Job, whose life was the only thing God left him (Job 2:6), Paul shows that we must defy despair; we must *hope* for God to *live*, and therefore to *resurrect*, at the end of history. As Job declared in hope: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God . . ." (Job 19:25–26). But what does it mean to say that God is alive, and what does this have to do with the formation of hope? I turn now to Maastricht for help.

II. MAASTRICHT ON GOD'S LIFE AND IMMORTALITY: DOGMATIC AND PRACTICAL MEANING¹⁰

After treating *what* God is (spiritual, independent, simple, immutable) and then how *great* he is (one, infinite, great), Maastricht shifts to consider what qualities God *has*, i.e., "those attributes by which he is conceived by us to work."¹¹ He begins with God's life since "all God's remaining attributes are active by his life";¹² if he were *not* alive, he *could* not be majestic, blessed, knowing, willing, etc. He then argues that when Jesus says that "just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26), he is indicating two things: (1) with reference to

⁹ ἵνα ἐπιλάβωνται τῆς ὄντως ζωῆς. Therefore the rich must be *unlike* the self-indulgent widow, who is "dead while she lives" (5:6), but *like* the "real (ὄντως) widow," who hopes upon God (*ἠλπικεν ἐπί θεόν*) and therefore prayerfully depends on him and serves others (5:5, 10).

¹⁰ Petrus Van Maastricht, *Faith in the Triune God*, vol. 2 of *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2019).

¹¹ Van Maastricht, *Faith*, 229.

¹² Van Maastricht, *Faith*, 233.

divine *substance* (οὐσία), God's life does not come from any other (something true for all three divine Persons); and (2) with reference to divine *relations* (ὑπόστασις) between the Persons, the Father's life does *not* come from any other, but he eternally communicates his life to the Son (generation).¹³ The main point here is that God is uniquely alive in that, unlike all creatures, he does not derive life from another. It is not just that "God lives," but that "God lives *preeminently*"; moreover, "he is the source of all life, for he is the one who communicates life, not only to the Son through generation [i.e., through the divine nature], but also to all living things [creatures] through grace."¹⁴ Mastricht argues that this is what Scripture means when it calls God "the living God" (e.g., Deut 5:26; Acts 14:15), and why he is called "life" (1 John 5:20; Col 3:4) and "the fountain of life" (Ps 36:9; Jer 2:13), the one "in whom we live, move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God is "living" *par excellence*. This is why he is fundamentally different from idols (Jer 10:8, 10; Acts 14:15)—and so can actually save. And this is why he swears by his own life (Deut 32:40; Isa 49:18)—and so can actually be trusted to do what he promises.¹⁵

What makes God's life different than the creature's? Mastricht first gives five contrasts: (1) God's life coincides with his essence, our life and essence do not;¹⁶ (2) we live dependently on God, he has life in and from himself; (3) we possess life from him, he possesses his own life; (4) our life is finite (there was a time when we did not have life), his life is infinite so that "when we say that he has life, we always speak in the present tense"; and (5) our life is in flux, God's life is at once boundless, whole, and perfect.¹⁷ Later, in treating God's immortality, Mastricht points out that God cannot die because God cannot change, and death is the greatest of all changes.¹⁸

Mastricht explains later how God is pure act (he has no potential, i.e., he never "becomes" something more or less), while we are composed of potency *and* act.¹⁹ Furthermore, God "operates by himself," while all creatures, in all acts, are never truly independent of God (let alone the rest of his creation) but can only act "in a secondary and dependent manner."²⁰ In his treatment of God's immortality, Mastricht lays out three kinds of immortality to show how we are similar to and different from him: (1) Immortality by God's grace toward that which is naturally mortal, i.e., being able not to die (what Adam possessed in Eden and what we will

¹³ And, by implication, the Father and the Son eternally communicate life to the Spirit (procession).

¹⁴ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 232.

¹⁵ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 232. Cf. Heb 6:13: "For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself."

¹⁶ E.g., because my childhood pet rat did not have an essence that coincided with its life, it tragically ceased to exist once my dad started the lawnmower under which it had recently hidden. Unlike my rat, God cannot not live.

¹⁷ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 234.

¹⁸ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 246.

¹⁹ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 240.

²⁰ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 241.

possess in glory); (2) Immortality through nature, though a nature still subject to change or destruction by the Creator's absolute power, and so is still in some sense "mortal" (what angels and the human soul possess); (3) Immortality through the "omnimodal independence" of one who therefore *cannot* change or die (what God alone possesses). Even so, with all these differences between our life and God's life, from creaturely life we can still speak analogically (not merely equivocally) about God's life.²¹

A. MASTRICHT'S PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

What does God's life and immortality mean for us practically? Why and how does knowing God *as the living God* foster hope in us, particularly in the pastoral vocation that must submit itself to "the words of the faith and the good doctrine" (1 Tim 4:6) by which Timothy and we must continually be trained?

1. Worship

In line with Paul's doxologies in 1 Timothy (1:17; 6:16), Mastricht's first applications of God's life and immortality deal with glorifying and worshipping him. God glories in his own life (e.g., his oaths), and so should we. Indeed, the songs of the saints and angels in Revelation repeatedly praise and describe God in terms of his vitality: "Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, *who lives forever and ever*, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him *who lives forever and ever . . .*" (Rev 4:9–10).²² Hope, like godliness, is primarily about knowing and relating to God (John 17:3 says that eternal life *is* knowing God), and so we cannot have or grow in hope without knowing and worshipping God as the *living God*.²³

2. Humility

Mastricht also focuses on various ways that God's life should humble us. First, knowing him as the living God should make us *grateful*, since we derive all our life from him: both natural life *and* spiritual/eternal life.²⁴ We cannot take credit for any aspect of our lives; like the "real widow" of 1 Tim 5:5 we are entirely dependent upon him and so must gratefully set our hope upon him.

Second, Mastricht argues that knowing God's immortality should underscore our own *mortality*. This is particularly salient in the recent

²¹ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 246–47.

²² Cf. Jesus's description as the living/resurrected one in Rev 1:5, 18, etc.

²³ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 242, 247.

²⁴ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 243, defines "spiritual life" as something we possess in the present, and "eternal life" as that life which we will possess at the consummation. I would argue that these are two sides of the same coin—we are already experiencing the (partial) invasion of future eternal life into the present.

and unprecedented cultural moment, in which most governments in the world (with wide support) radically weakened, shamed, and/or criminalized fundamental social, economic, and even religious realities because so many people were (and still are) terrified of suffering and dying from a virus that (nevertheless) continues to evade our attempts at controlling it. In the West we live longer, wealthier, and healthier lives than nearly anyone else in the world (let alone our ancestors),²⁵ and yet Covid-19, which has overwhelmingly killed those who were *already* close to death through age and/or ill-health, has revealed a long-standing and deep-rooted refusal to face our creaturely mortality.²⁶ But Mastricht reminds us that we need to be humbled in the face of God's immortality—we “who carry our breath in our nostrils . . . who are exposed to all kinds of death—natural, spiritual, and eternal—who can be deprived of life by the most trivial causes.”²⁷ Facing God's life and immortality should cause us to realize that we are merely “dust and ashes” (Gen 18:27) and that we (and everything else) are short-lived and fleeting (Ps 39:4-5).²⁸

Third, Mastricht argues that knowledge of the living God should *rebuke* us. How easily people live as if God were “lifeless and senseless, a God who neither sees, nor hears, nor observes, nor understands, nor rewards or avenges whatever they do on the earth.” We think he does not and cannot really act, and so we do not act rightly toward him. Insofar as we function as if he were lifeless, we also refuse to “love, seek, fear, revere, call upon, or

²⁵ For a recent sermon on 1 Timothy 5 (widows), I did a bit of research on ancient Roman vs. modern American female mortality. (Paul says that Timothy's church should only enroll widows older than 60.) Based on my research, I figured that in the first-century, a 60 year-old Roman woman had outlived ~85% of other females (with about 50% of girls dead by 10), while in America (2019), a woman needed to reach 93 to have outlived 85% of females; at 60 she has outlived only 14%. See CDC WONDER database (<https://wonder.cdc.gov>), and Walter Scheidel, “Demography,” in W. Scheidel, I. Morris and R. Saller, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 43.

²⁶ This is not a new problem, of course. Calvin points out that even though many people like to pontificate about the fragility of human life, “there is almost nothing that we regard more negligently or remember less. For we undertake all things as if we were establishing immortality for ourselves on earth. If some corpse is being buried, or we walk among graves, because the likeness of death then meets our eyes, we, I confess, philosophize brilliantly concerning the vanity of this life. Yet even this we do not do consistently, for often all these things affect us not one bit. But when it happens, our philosophy is for the moment; it vanishes as soon as we turn our backs, and leaves not a trace of remembrance behind it. . . . Who, then, can deny that it is very much worthwhile for all of us, I do not say to be admonished with words, but by all the experiences that can happen, to be convinced of the miserable condition of earthly life; inasmuch as, even when convinced, we scarcely cease to be stunned with a base and foolish admiration of it, as if it contained in itself the ultimate goal of good things. But if God has to instruct us, it is our duty, in turn, to listen to him calling us, shaking us out of our sluggishness, that, holding the world in contempt, we may strive with all our heart to meditate upon the life to come.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.9.2.

²⁷ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 247.

²⁸ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 248.

worship" him. This functional dead-God-ism also appears as despair, that is, the opposite of hope: "Those who, set amidst whatever difficulties, despair for their souls as if they did not believe that God in heaven is the one who lives, who sees and knows their lot, and who can bring them help."²⁹ The apostle Paul set his hope on the living God, in spite of his suffering-filled life and ministry, because he saw in the resurrected Jesus that the living God really does give life to the dead: "He was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4). God's life rebukes our despair.

3. *Consolation and Hope*

Mastricht also repeatedly considers God's life in terms of consolation and hope. God's vitality is "a foundation for solace, in whatever difficulties of all our life, that God our Redeemer lives (Job 19:25) and that he is the strength of all our life (Ps 27:1)," whether these difficulties concern natural life (e.g., disease, poverty, violence, dying), present spiritual life (e.g., discouragement about the presence and power of our sin), or future eternal life (e.g., anxiety about final judgment).³⁰ Similarly, under his treatment of God's immortality, Mastricht argues that knowing him as the immortal one "conveys to the godly, even in the horror of death, the sweetest solace, that they have God covenanted to them," the living God who for our sakes "delivered his Only Begotten over to death, that he might abolish death and bring life and immortality through the gospel (2 Tim 1:10)." Because the living God has sworn to us the promises of the gospel by his own life, the corruptible *must* put on incorruptibility (1 Cor 15:53).³¹

The flip side of this consolation is eschatological hope. Mastricht says that contemplating God's life should give us a "zeal for blessed immortality." The desire for immortality is universal, though it manifests in various ways. He says that, beyond actually desiring to live beyond our deaths, humans also seek immortality through having children and through seeking fame. We strive for immortality not only with natural works (e.g., food, medicine, safety) but also with heroic, virtuous, or even criminal works. Everyone wants to be immortal because we all have immortal souls. But how do we attain to true hope? Mastricht gives three elements for its pursuit: (1) Its *source* is the uniquely immortal God, who is "united to us by burning love and desire" (Ps 42:2); (2) its *agent* is Jesus, "to whom the Father granted to have life in himself, that he would be the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), indeed life itself for his own (Col 3:4)"; (3) the *instruments* by which we find God's life through Jesus are the knowledge of God and Christ (John 17:3), faith in them both (John 14:1), a "burning desire for blessed immortality" (2 Cor 5:2–4), a good life in all things (Phil 3:20–21), and a good death in faith (Rev 14:13). "And after all these things cannot but

²⁹ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 243.

³⁰ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 244.

³¹ Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 248–49.

follow a blessed deathlessness.” Knowing, believing, and obeying God as the living one draws us deeper into the hope of the resurrection, not only because he is uniquely alive (and therefore the source of life), but especially because as *this kind* of God he has committed himself to *us* so that we can trust him in the present to do what he has promised in the future.³²

III. TOILING AND STRIVING WITH HOPE IN THE LIVING GOD TODAY

Here I will extend Mastricht’s points in a couple of directions for today. First, on worship. As pastors, it is our job to lead God’s people in worship, but of course many of us find it easy to just go through its motions, even without the congregation (or ourselves!) noticing. Contemplating God’s vitality and immortality can warm the pastor’s cold heart. In a world of such overwhelming busyness and suffocating efficiency, we must slow down to worship God as the only one who is truly self-existent. We are totally dependent upon him, no matter how well-educated we are or how large our ministries might be. Every facet of our lives comes from him as a gracious gift. No matter what disappointments and frustrations we face, let us join the apostle Paul in praising the living God for his rule over all things, not least death itself!

Second, on humility and dependence. How easily we like to think (or act like) that the living God *needs* us to be serving him. How mindlessly we come to function as if church, ministry, and kingdom were riding on our shoulders, carried along by our talents and diligence. But we need to be humbled by God’s life and immortality. We always depend on him; he never depends on us. Like Paul’s “real” widow in 1 Tim 5, we need to express our dependence in prayer. (Not just talk or preach about prayer.)

We also need to be humbled in the face of our mortality; some day a pastor will preach at *my* funeral. Are we pacing ourselves appropriately, so that we do not run ourselves into an early grave (or, worse, moral failure)? Or are we living as if we are immortal, making excuses and exceptions for ourselves as we tell ourselves how important and irreplaceable we are? Similarly, do we remember that in the end even we “professional” Christians are really nothing but vapor? In spite of our degrees, books, or memberships, in a hundred years it is almost certain that nobody on the planet will remember who we were. God’s immortality should underscore our own frailty, which should severely limit our estimation of our abilities and importance. As Mastricht points out, we need to be “rebuked” by the reality of God’s life, for we often act as if God were actually dead by our failing to trust him to do what he has promised in his timing and in his way.

Third and finally, savoring God’s vitality and immortality should foster eschatological hope in us: “we toil and strive *because* we have our hope set on the living God” (1 Tim 4:10)! In the face of our and our ministries’ vaporous vanity, what else can sustain us other than God’s promise (sworn by his own life!) to mightily resurrect us and our flocks and this world at the

³² Van Mastricht, *Faith*, 249.

end of history? For "just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26). And *because* the Son has life in himself, he really is the one who "gives life to whom he will" (5:21), and we really can believe his promise that "an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out" (5:28–29). God forbid that we become *Sadducean* pastors, functionally scoffing at the resurrection because we have failed to heed the lesson of the bush (Mark 12:24–27)! For the fundamental reason that God *is* the God of Abraham is not only that the patriarch is currently looking forward to his resurrection, but that God is the *living* God, that is, YHWH—the self-existent "I AM" (Exod 3:14–15). Do our hearts and ministries reveal that we really believe that he is the God of the living?