

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

The God of all Grace: The God of Hope

It was GK Chesterton who said that "Hope is patiently waiting expectantly for the intangible to become reality." Often in the lab where I work a colleague will express the hope that he will win the lottery, and so not need to return to work! Strangely enough, it hasn't happened yet! Is this what the Christian hope boils down to? A whimsical desire to escape to something better, based more on desire than reality. Not at all! As we shall see this morning, the believer's hope is absolutely certain. It is for us to patiently wait for it to become a reality, and live as though it already were. In the New Testament hope is viewed as a positive looking forward to something that is favourable. A condemned man may confidently, patiently look forward to the bullet as he faces the firing squad. That, however, is not the thought behind the Christian hope. There is the eager anticipation of good to come. Of the three eternal values faith, hope and love, we can see that the essential character of God is love. We shall also see this morning that God is the author and guarantee of all that we hope for in Christ.

It might prove useful, as we approach this vast subject, to focus our thoughts on five aspects of hope. Let us, then, begin by looking at the first of these.

An absent hope

"That at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." (Ephesians 2:12)

Here we see the dreadful condition of the person without any knowledge of God. Paul could say to the Ephesian believers that, before they came to Christ, they had no part in the blessings that God had promised. Throughout the majority of the Old Testament, God had dealt in grace with mankind through His chosen people, the Jews. As Gentiles then, these recent converts in Ephesus had had no claim upon God. But, one might ask, were they not religious people? For sure! They were fervent believers in the great Diana (see Acts 19). However, religious belief is not sufficient to make something true, and so Paul says that they were without hope. What a dreadful condition to be in! We live in a world today that has so many gods, with fervent believers. The gods of materialism and self fulfilment, of position, politics and personality. Of these, attractive and alluring though they may be, Paul would say that they lead to no hope. It is interesting to note that the first mention of hope in the Bible comes in Ruth 1:12, and underlines the no hope that the individual has without God. There, Naomi had departed from the best that God had intended for her. Following her husband away from the Promised Land, she had gone to live in Moab. There her sons had married foreign wives, but later died. Her husband also died, and humanly speaking, she was left with no hope to offer her daughter-in-laws. There was no possibility of her having further sons to provide them with husbands, able to secure their inheritance back in Israel. It took the intervention of God, expressed in the faith of Ruth, before hope returned, lasting and permanent.

I am reminded of the story of the much loved king, and his court fool. The king ruled his vast kingdom wisely, and was loved by his subjects. However, when the affairs of state became too much for the king, he would call for his fool, who would come and entertain him with a juggling act, or riddle. One day, as a sign of his affection, the king summoned the fool to the palace. The king gave the fool a golden wand, and asked the fool to travel throughout the kingdom. When he found a greater fool than he, he was to return with him to the palace, where the fool could then retire, to rest permanently in the presence of the king. Many months went by, as the fool travelled from town to village, asking questions of all. Then one day an urgent message came from the palace summoning the fool back. The king was gravely ill. As the fool returned to the king, he saw that the old king was plainly dying. For the first time in his life, the fool spoke seriously to the king, asking him of the journey he was about to go on, and the preparations he had made for that journey. The king shook his head bemused, having given no thought to what lay beyond death. With tears in his eyes the fool gave the golden wand to the king. "You are the greatest fool in all the kingdom, sire, if you have given no thought to the journey you are about to make!" The Psalmist could say that "the fool has said in his heart, 'there is no God.'" Dear listener, have you come to put your trust in the only true God? If not then your position is literally without hope. Today, accept Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord, and find Him to be the God of hope.

An object hope

“If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.” (1 Corinthians 15:19)

I believe that what Paul is saying in this verse has a twofold meaning. The verse comes in the middle of the great chapter on resurrection. If Christ is not risen from the dead, Paul argues, then Christianity is a lie. As such, we are the most pitiable of men. Why? Because we have believed a lie; we are utterly deluded. If Christianity could be proved to be a lie, would we still believe? Of course not! To build your life on a patent falsehood is foolish. However, Christianity is absolutely true and so demands our obedience. But Paul is saying something more here. If Christ was not risen, then our faith would be just for this life on earth, as we would not live after death either. Again this is a pitiful state. I would not be a Christian if it were not for the prospect of life beyond death. That is not to say that there are not very good advantages to Christianity here and now. Far from it! A lower incidence of mental illness, the ability to recover from serious disease, the stability of the marriage bond and the family unit, and the ability to cope with difficult circumstances have all been shown to be better in those with a strong religious conviction. Yes, Christianity is beneficial for this life also. Our real hope, however, lies beyond death. It is the prospect of never ending glory with Christ, at home in His presence which makes all the suffering and sacrifice of the normal Christian life worthwhile. In Romans 8:18, Paul writes, “For I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 4:17, he adds, “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” Throughout the terrible persecutions that Paul endured, he never lost sight of the fact that they were to be viewed with an eternal perspective. What could fifty years of hard labour compare to an eternity of blessing in the presence of God? Some years ago we visited a butterfly farm. We watched as several butterflies emerged from their cocoons. What a struggle! The temptation to just give a little poke, to help free them was enormous. And yet it would have been a cruelty. It is the very struggle that dries the wings and prepares the butterfly for flight. Surely this must be the way to view the present life that we live. Those of us that would, in any way, try to live a godly life, will suffer, as sure as day follows night. But those sufferings are momentary as they prepare us for an eternity with Him. All that we are to learn of His sufferings we do so now by suffering. So let us not give up if today we face hardship, for we believe in the God of hope.

An abiding hope

“To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Colossians 1:27)

In the New Testament, when we read of a mystery, we are not thinking about something that is strange or a little scary. A mystery is something that was previously hidden, but has now been made clear. What a tremendous mystery this is to be made known to us, that we can experience day by day – Christ in us! Think about this for a moment. The God of the universe, creator and sustainer of all things, in me! You will remember that the message to Joseph was that Mary’s child would be Immanuel – God with us. That was good. That God would in any way want to be with those He had created is wonderful. But what if He was full of anger at our sinfulness? The fact that He was with us then would only mean our utter condemnation. So then Paul adds that God is for us, in Romans 8:31. That is better. This same God who wants our time and presence is also on our side. So now it is God and me against anything that the world can throw against me. But oh! I am so easily distracted. What if, like a little child in a busy shop, we become separated, and I find myself alone? So we have here Christ in us, absolutely inseparable, and that is best! As those that know Jesus as Lord, we have this abiding hope, that He indwells us, for He will never leave us, nor can we ever leave Him, though sadly we may backslide. It is this that acts as an absolute guarantee of the glory that is to follow. Things will not always be as they are now. As CS Lewis wrote in *“The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe”*, “Wrong will be made right, when Aslan comes in sight. At the sound of his roar, winter will be no more” Who can begin to imagine what will be made right when Jesus reigns? All that is so wrong now will be a past memory. What a joy to see His face, to hear His voice, and to know it will not end!

I believe this appreciation of Him is something that grows the more we spend time considering Him. We maybe see something of this in the three occasions that Paul recounts his conversion. In Acts 9:3 Paul recalls seeing a light from heaven. In Acts 22:6 his recollection is of a great light, and in 26:13 it is a light “brighter than the sun”. Normally as one gets older, the eyes see more dimly, but with Paul the reverse occurs in his recollections. Perhaps the sufferings he had endured had focused his vision on the One who was able to keep him from falling. We have an abiding hope within us but that is not to say that it is a static hope. Quite the opposite is true. We need to spend time daily enjoying the person of the Lord Jesus, focussing on all that he has done for us. As a young man approaching marriage, I was sure that my fiancée was the right girl for me. I felt I knew so much about her. Sixteen years later she still surprises me, making me realise how little I know. How much more, then, will the Lord surprise us with Himself as we take time out to get to know Him. Whether we have known Him for a day or a lifetime, we have an abiding, never ending hope within us, a confident looking forward to all that will soon be, because He is the God of hope.

An abundant hope

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

We have in this verse the two characteristics of an abundant hope. As we are occupied, in increasing measure, with all that God has in store for us, then our lives will be characterised by joy and peace. This is not even left to us to work out. It is in the power of the Holy Spirit. It has well been said that we do not need more of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit needs more of us! We do not need to pray for another Pentecost, for God to send the Spirit again. But we do need to pray that the Holy Spirit would have free access to my wallet, to my T. V. control, to my workplace and to every other aspect of my life. I was humbled years ago when a young sister told me she would pray before she bought some new clothes, that the Lord would show her which to buy. About such seemingly small things the Holy Spirit should have full control as well as what we might consider the "big things" in life. That young sister's life was a life full of the Holy Spirit. In Romans 5:5 Paul adds, "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." Our hearts are not so big that the Holy Spirit is poured out fully and still there is room left over. No, it is more that, once full, and overflowing there is still an ocean left still to come. And this hope does not disappoint!

I remember putting my son to bed last Christmas day. It was 10:00 pm and we had had a great day. As the lights went out and quietness descended for the first time, I heard him sobbing. He seemed to have enjoyed himself, and had got all he wanted so I was a bit confused. As I asked him what was the matter, he managed to get out that it was all over, and he didn't want it to end. The bitter pain of a disappointed hope! Who of us has not felt it? Perhaps we get too old for all the magic of Christmas in our teens, or it just becomes a trial in adulthood. Or perhaps in love, or at work, in the family, with our children. Almost inevitably, there is a disappointed hope. But like a great palm tree in a desert, the Holy Spirit would remind us that the hope that God gives will never disappoint. Just when we think that we have come to an end of all that He has for us, then we shall realise that we have hardly started exploring the limitless inheritance we have in Him. God is the author of all our hope, and He would have us preoccupied with Him. The more our mind is filled with heavenly matters the more we will be filled with His joy and peace, and the more earthly good we shall be, coincidentally. What an example Stephen was in this! As the stones were breaking his body on the outside, they never touched him on the inside. Who could be at peace in such a violent situation? Who could find joy under the weight of a stone? Only one who was occupied with Christ, standing at the right hand of the majesty on high. What Stephen saw is there for each one of us, if we will only look at Him rather than the latest football score, bank balance or trouble in Iraq! As Stephen died, he did so full of hope, for he saw the God of hope.

An active hope

"And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." (1 John 3:3)

Here we have the last mention of hope in the scriptures. We do not read about hope in the Revelation, perhaps because there the Church is largely viewed as in heaven, already experiencing the reality of the hope, which she had patiently expected. It is fitting, then, that John reminds us that this is not all just pie in the sky! No, the individual who is really focussed on the hope that is in Christ, will be most strenuous in applying it to life now. In the previous verses, John has considered the love that God has lavished upon us in bringing us into the family. He has brought before us that we shall see Him face to face. So then, in view of this we are to live pure lives. We live in an impure society. Look at the adverts, or rather don't! Listen to the foul language in the mouths of children, taught by their parents. Read about the latest boardroom scandal in the papers. At every level, we are surrounded by impurity. As we live our lives we inevitably become soiled by our exposure to the world. Like Peter, and the other disciples, we need to let ourselves be washed by the Lord. Since He is no longer here in person, I'm sure He carries this work on through fellowship with other believers and by our reading His word. There also needs to be an active avoidance of situations we know will do us no spiritual good. Joseph ran from Potiphar's wife, rather than stay to try to witness to her. We need to be equally energetic in avoiding situations, when we can, that we know will trip us up. If the hope of the Lord's soon return, and the enjoyment of His presence does not burn very brightly in me, then perhaps it is because some impurity is allowed to thrive in my life. Some wrong thought, some wrong action something to take the place of hope. And why do we purify ourselves? It is because we should want to be more like Him, and He is pure. Wonderful Man, He mixed with publicans and sinners, but always brought them up to His level! He never shared with them in their impurity, but loved them enough to want something better for them. We are not called to a stone cold purity that exists because it has no contact with impurity. We are called to a purity that is so full of hope in Him, that there is no room left over for any impurity to get a foothold. We believe in a God who is altogether pure because He is the God of hope.

In closing this morning, I would like to read a poem called 'The pilgrim'. I don't know who wrote it but have always found it to be full of hope. It recounts a conversation that a dispirited pilgrim has with God, and how God then answers each question.

*“The way is dark, my Father. Cloud on cloud
Is gathering o’er my head, and loud
The thunders roar above me. See, I stand
Like one bewildered, Father! Take my hand
And through the gloom, lead safely home THY CHILD.*

*The way is long, my Father, and my soul
Longs for the rest and quiet of the goal.
While yet I journey through this land,
Keep me from wandering, Father. Take my hand
And, quick and straight, lead to heaven’s gate THY CHILD.*

*The path is rough, my Father! Many a thorn
Has pierced me, and my weary feet are torn
And bleeding. Mark the way. Yet Thy command
Bids me press forward, Father! Take my hand
Then safe and blest lead up to rest THY CHILD.*

*The cross is heavy, Father. I have borne so long
And still do bear it. Let my worn
And fainting spirit rise to that blessed land
Where crowns are given, Father! Take my hand
And reaching down lead to thy crown, THY CHILD.”*

The Father answers:

*“The way is dark my child! But leads to light.
I would not always have thee walk by sight.
My dealings now, thou canst not understand
I meant it so, but I will take thy hand.
And through the gloom lead safely home MY CHILD.*

*The way is long my child! But it shall be
Not one step longer than is good for thee
And thou shalt know at last, when thou shalt stand
Close to the gate, how I did take thy hand
And quick and straight, lead to heaven’s gate MY CHILD.*

*The path is rough my child! But oh! How sweet
Will be the rest for weary pilgrims meet
When thou shalt reach the border of that land
To which I lead thee, as I take thy hand
And safe and blest with Me shall rest MY CHILD*

*The cross is heavy child! Yet there is One
Who bore a heavier for thee. My Son,
My well beloved, with Him bear thine. And stand
With Him at last, and from thy Father’s hand
Thy cross laid down, receive thy crown, MY CHILD.”*

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