

THE SUBSTANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR

What is your hope? Most Christians would answer that their hope is to go to heaven when they die. N.T. Wright in his book *Surprised by Hope* writes: "I am convinced that people including most practicing Christians, are muddled and misguided on the topic of hope, and this muddle produces quite serious mistakes in our thinking, praying, our practice, and perhaps most particularly our mission to the world. What's more the non-Christian world is confused about what to believe on its own account, and it is confused too about what Christians are supposed to believe. Often people assume that Christians are simply committed to a belief in 'life after death' in the most general terms and have no idea how the more specific notions of resurrection, judgment, the second coming of Jesus, and so on fit together and make any sense, let alone how they relate to the urgent concerns of the real world." It is in the Hebrew writer's definition of faith that we can see the real meaning of hope. Anticipation, that is hope, is an intricate part of the Christian faith. "Now faith is the assurance (reality) of things hoped for, the conviction (evidence) of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). This "reality" and "evidence" is explained and understood in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The "not seen" item in Christianity is our resurrection and redemption of our body (Rom. 8:23) and is therefore what we hope for. In Christ's resurrection it is both the reality and evidence of what we hope for, because Jesus' resurrection guarantees our resurrection (John 14:19; I Cor. 15:20-22). It was in the context of the resurrection that Paul mentions those who "have no hope" (I Thess. 4:13; I Cor. 15:19). The word "hope" is used over 80 times in the New Testament and at least 65 times in the Old Testament, yet is given very little attention in Christian writings and sermons. When it is given attention it usually concerns going to heaven when we die and escaping the world, which is said to be destined for destruction rather than God's reshaping, restoring and resurrecting His creation. The Scriptures teach our hope is not to escape from this earth, but to the glorious day when God will make all things new.

The first thing we need to understand about hope is that it concerns the future, and that which we do not now have. Romans 8:24, 25: "For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope, for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it." Concerning what is ours now Peter wrote: "seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence" (II Pet. 1:3), and Paul states that God "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). This means the only thing that is lacking in the Christian life is what Paul calls "the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23). This, then, is our hope. It is then that we will experience that which "has not yet appeared what we shall be but when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is: (I John 3:2) and as "heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ, we will be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:17). God has given us His Holy Spirit as our

"deposit" or "down payment" of this inheritance (Eph. 1:13,14; II Cor. 1:22, 5:5). Our bodies have been purchased but have not been redeemed. That is our hope, that we will become conformed to the likeness of his glorious body. The Holy Spirit dwells in our body as an assurance of the promised redemption.

Hope is related to suffering. Although we have been justified by faith, have peace with God and stand in grace thus making us boast in the hope of the glory of God, we are beset by tribulation and suffering. However, we know that these sufferings brings about perseverance, and perseverance, proven character and proven character hope; and hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit which was given to us (Romans 5:1-5). Sweden theologian Anders Nygren in his *Commentary on Romans* states it this way: "Suffering is not something of which we must be ashamed. Hope makes it something positive, in which we can actually rejoice. If there were no suffering, hope would never have opportunity to attain to its full strength. It is by suffering that hope is tested and strengthened." Suffering and persecution produces hope and "hope does not disappoint us because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom. 5:5). This life is full of disappointments and we all face them every day, but the one thing that will never disappoint us is hope. The hope that "does not disappoint" is "hope in the glory of God" and suffering and persecution is the path to glory. Romans 8:18 declares "that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." It is this hope that enables us to "not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen, for the things which are seen are temporal but the things which are not seen are eternal" (II Cor. 4:16-18). This is a commentary on the statement of Paul in Romans 8:24, 25: "Hope that is seen is not hope, for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it." This is the value of suffering and tribulation.

Hope is related to God's promises. The faith of Abraham in that he believed God was able to do what he promised is Paul's illustration of the power of hope when related to faith as recorded in Romans 4:18, 21: "In hope against hope he believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken...being fully assured that what He had promised He was able also to perform." Abraham believed when there was no hope, yet in hope against hope he believed. In his essays *Soldier On* Leroy Garrett in commenting on this verse states: "This is the measure of our own faith and hope. Are we fully persuaded that God is able to perform all that he has promised. Do we even know what those promises are?" He does not answer that question, but if it is important that we have hope in what God has promised it is important that we know what His promises are. Peter calls them "His precious and magnificent promises" (II Pet. 1:4). It would be impossible to list all the

promises God has given us, but we need to know some of His important promises in which we must have hope. Some of these promises are so great that we must, like Abraham, “hope against hope” and “not stagger in unbelief” (Rom. 4:18,20). Paul summarizes the promise God made to Abraham in these words: “For the promise to Abraham or his seed (singular) that he would be heir of the world was not through law but through righteousness of faith” (Rom. 4:13). In Galatians 3:16 the “seed” of Abraham is identified: “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds’ as referring to many, but rather to one ‘and your seed,’ that is, Christ.” He then states: “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise” (ver. 29). If the promise to Abraham was that he would be heir to the world, and if we are Abraham’s seed, then the promise for which we hope is that we will be heirs of the world. Jesus had said “blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt.5:5). But why would anyone want to inherit this earth, and why would God promise us such a hostile and unfriendly earth? Isn’t His purpose to get us out of the earth? This earth is now under the curse of sin, but this curse will be lifted: “For the creation was subjected to vanity, not of its own will but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:20-21). Peter states it this way: “But according to His promise we are looking for a new heaven and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (II Pet. 3:13). If we want to know when God made this promise Peter is speaking of read Isaiah 65:17-25. This redemption of the earth is connected to “the revealing of the sons of God” (Rom. 8:19-21). It is in that context that the Apostle speaks of our hope: “...hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it” (Rom. 8:24,25). This is just one of the great promises of God which is related to hope.

Another promise relative to our hope is the hope of eternal life. I John 5:11-13 states: “...God has given us eternal life and this life is in His son, he who has the son has life, he who does not have the son of God does not have the life. These things I have written that you may know that you have eternal life.” John further states: “And this is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life” (I John 2:25). Our hope is that the eternal life we have outlasts the grave, because “if we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most to be pitied” (I Cor. 15:19). It is only in Christ that this hope of eternal life is realized: “Christ in you the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). This promise will be completely realized when “this perishable will have put on imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (I Cor. 15:54).

Other magnificent promises He has given are: The crown of life to those who love him (James 1:12); the kingdom (James 2:5); the new heavens and new earth (II Pet. 3:13); the confession of our hope (Heb. 10:23); the promise that He would dwell in us and be our God (II Cor. 6:16-7:1); an inheritance which is imperishable and reserved in heaven for you (I Pet. 1:3,4); and hope of the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6) These are a few promises related to our hope.

Hope is related to the purity of life. I John 3:3: “Everyone who has this hope (of being like Christ when he appears) fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” Our hope is that when Christ “appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (ver 2). Knowing the truth of the revelation that Christ will appear is not guesswork for the Christian. There is the confidence that his hope is not in vein. This is the incentive for purity of life and noble living. George Walker in “*The Ideals of Christian Ethics*” makes this observation: “The Christian hope which anticipates the progress and final advent of the kingdom, has acted at all times as a powerful stimulus to Christian practice.” It is the purpose of God that we “be conformed to the image of His Son, that he might be the first born among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29) and that we “might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust” (II Pet.1:4). This will not fully take place until “the trumpet shall sound...and we shall be changed” (I Cor. 15:52). After Paul quotes Scripture from the Old Testament concerning purity of life and clean living, he gives this admonition: “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (II Cor. 7:1). It is our hope of what lies ahead that should inspire us to purity of life.

Hope is related to the power of the Holy Spirit: “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” (Rom. 15:13). This is the only instance in the Scriptures that the term “God of hope” appears. This is Paul’s benediction that relates the life of hope to the power of the Holy Spirit. The word *abound* used here means “to be present over abundantly”. It is used in Luke 15:17 when the prodigal son realized that his father’s hired servants “have *more than enough* bread”. After the feeding of the 5,000 the word is used to describe the fragments left over (Matt. 14:20; Luke 9:17; John 6:12,13). It is used to describe the *more abundant* life Jesus gives (John 10:10), and describes the number of souls added to the church in Acts 2:41. The meaning of the word is best seen in Ephesians 3:20: “now to Him who is able to do *exceeding abundantly beyond* all that we ask or think, according the power that works within us.” The “power that works within us” is the power of the Holy Spirit which brought Christ from the dead (Eph. 1:19,20; Rom. 8:11). It is this power of the Spirit that is both the cause and sustainer of our hope. Christ was raised from the dead by the power of the Spirit and became the “first fruits of those who are asleep” (I Cor. 15:20,23). The “first fruits” means there is a harvest to follow. He is “bringing many sons into glory” (Heb. 2:10). This gives us hope that as Christ was raised from the dead by the power of the Spirit we too by the power of the same Spirit will “be in the likeness of his resurrection (Rom. 6:5) because “we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is” (I John 3:2).

John Stott says in *Romans, God’s Good News for the World* that “Christian hope is not uncertain, like our ordinary everyday hopes about the weather or our health; it is a joyful and confident expectation which rests on the promises of God and the object of our hope is the glory of God.” The Hebrew writer says “we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast” (Heb 6:18,19).

