

HOPE AND NEW BEGINNINGS

by Lester J. Start

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First Baptist, Kalamazoo

“For we are saved by hope.” Romans 8:24

We read in that famous 13th Chapter of First Corinthians: “Now abideth faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.” Faith, hope and love are called the three theological virtues. They are often contrasted with the three classical Greek virtues — wisdom, courage, and justice — virtues taught by Plato and Aristotle. They may not be as far apart as many like to argue. For wisdom points to a transcendent source of Being and is akin to faith in God. Justice is not rejected but put in a new perspective in the Christian gospel of love. And hope, I would like to argue, is perhaps best understood as spiritual courage, akin to the classical virtue.

Somehow hope seems the most neglected of the theological virtues. We hear much of love and faith, but hope seems less basic, without foundation, perhaps just wishful thinking, or wish projection. But it seems to me that hope is intimately bound up with faith and love, and is therefore just as fundamental and that in some sense it is a shining light that directs our faith and gives strength to love. As Paul says in Romans 8: “We are saved by hope.” Then hope must be a priority in the life of the Christian.

Immanuel Kant, the great 18th century German philosopher, brought his great intellect to bear on three basic questions. They are these: What can I know? What ought I to do? and What can I hope? These questions and answers reflect, I think, the theological virtues and their interrelationships.

Briefly, his philosophy is this: We can know the world of sense experience because our minds have active powers to organize our world of sense experience into scientific knowledge. The mind is no blank tablet upon which experience writes. It is a computer that organizes and stores the data of sense experience. But we cannot know whatever might lie beyond or transcend our sense experience. We can compute only the data input, we might say. Kant said, “I have found it necessary to deny knowledge of God, freedom, and immortality (the three tenets of religion of reason) in order to make room for faith.” For Kant, then, knowledge of God rests on faith.

It is in the moral sense, which answers the question “What ought I to do?”, the sense of duty, that brings us to God. Religion is the recognition of duty as divine command. Its basic rule is to treat humanity always as an end and never as a means—the rule of love. This belief in a moral sense probably reflects Kant’s religious background in German pietism, a religious movement stressing moral insight as a revelation of God. It is the same background from which the Quakers sprang with their emphasis on “an inner light” which reveals the purposes of God.

But what of hope? The answers to the first two questions, “What can I know?” and “What ought I to do?”, leave us with a physical world we can know and a world of moral purpose we can reach only by moral faith. How can we hope to bring them together?

Kant says that there is a way of seeing purpose directly in the world, thus bringing the two worlds together and giving us the basis of hope. Our first experience of this is in the sense of beauty, the aesthetic sense. "Two things fill me with awe," says Kant, "the starry heavens above and the moral law within." And he saw a connection between the sense of beauty and the sense of moral purpose. For consider what we mean when we call something beautiful. We call attention to some meaning, some significance that transcends the sense experience itself. The beautiful sunset is more than a pleasing arrangement of colors-it suggests a glory, majesty, harmony that give a sense of a higher meaning. The beauty of a symphony is more than a sense of sound. The glorious music Karl pours out from the pipe organ and piano and draws from his singers, suggests meanings, images, dreams, purposes that far transcend the physical sound. The beautiful represents the transphenomenal realm of God in the phenomenal world of sense. And this is a basis for hope.

Many of you were present at the memorial service for Geneva Christensen recently. Those of you who could not attend that impressive tribute to that tiny person with such a huge spirit and influence should know that the service ended with something unusual-the showing of a few of the 23,000 slides the Christensens have taken over the years. They were artfully, skillfully done, but the effect was more than superficial enjoyment of pleasant scenes. There were impressive pictures of landscapes, seascapes, sunset and sunrise which reflected a serenity, a spirit, a purpose that far transcended the surface scene. And I suddenly realized, as others, too, that it was impossible to tell because of the lighting or something whether certain pictures were of the sun setting or of the sun rising. I never attended one of Geneva's slide presentations, but I felt at this time of sorrow she was showing the hope of immortality in her art.

"Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness," says the Psalmist. And there is reason for this. The religious and aesthetic have ever traveled together. For if there is a beauty of holiness, there is also a sense of the holiness of beauty. We sense God in the beauty of this world.

There are no particular interests or purposes connected with our enjoyment of beauty, just a general sense of significance, a feeling of a meaning, a purpose that goes beyond our immediate sensations. And another curious thing about the enjoyment of beauty is that we feel satisfied without being aware of a desire to be satisfied. There is a general sense that connects with our moral intuitions that God is in His world with us, working out His purposes in and through us.

We are saved by hope, says Paul. It is the sense of God in the world through the beautiful that connects with the sense of God in our inner lives of duty striving for the good that gives us hope. Hope brings together the world of knowledge and the world of duty aiming at a kingdom of ends that reflects the purposes of God. As such, it mediates between faith and love.

We are saved by hope, says Paul. What is the Christian doctrine of hope? It is not the placid expectation that there is inevitable progress written in the very nature of things. This has been a part of our secular culture, a product of the triumph of technology and evolutionary theory. Everything is getting bigger and better. But the world wars of this century, the continuing local wars, third-world disorders, domestic economic decline show the emptiness of this kind of

optimism. We see in America the first generation of those who realize their children cannot hope to have the same opportunities as they enjoyed. No wonder we lose hope.

But this has been our error-to confuse this kind of belief in inevitable progress with the Biblical doctrine of hope. Biblical hope never did mean inevitable progress. It is based on the possibility of renewal, of a new beginning with the help of God. "Behold," says Isaiah in the name of God, "I create new heavens and a new earth." The theme is "Behold, I make all things new". The Psalmist sings of a new song. If the eschatological belief in the future end of the world makes any sense, it is in its emphasis on new beginnings now. The message of the Scriptures from beginning to end is the possibility of new beginnings, a new relationship-not inevitable progress but the conviction of the purposes of God at work in the world to redeem it with the possibility of new beginnings.

Ancient Chinese religion taught that there was a way of heaven, a moral order; then a way of earth, a natural order; and a way of human affairs, a human order. When man follows the way of heaven, nature is bountiful and peace and plenty reign in the world. But when man violates the way of heaven, then nature itself suffers, subject to drought or floods or plagues, and misery is the condition in human affairs.

The Old Testament reflects a similar view. God intends peace and prosperity, the good, for His people. But this promise is contingent upon the people keeping their covenant with God, following His commandments. Deuteronomy warns about the people forgetting it was God who freed them from Egypt, led them to the promised land, and gave them the commandments. The problem is that when they prosper, they forget God and say, "My power and the might of my hand hath gotten me this wealth."

When the covenant goes and the law is forgotten and righteousness ceases, we hear the voices of the prophets inveighing against corruption and exploitation, pleading the cause of the widow and orphan and the oppressed. When the covenant is forgotten, then one trusts in horses and chariots - we'd say planes and tanks-force and political allies. Jeremiah's Lamentations are occasioned by such a failed trust and hope. Jerusalem had fallen to Babylonia and its people taken into captivity when corruption, not the covenant, ruled and Judah was swallowed up in power politics. But even here the prophet does not give up hope! God does not willingly afflict the children of men.

The Old Testament had a pretty good dogma about suffering-all of it is the result of human sin. It is a pretty good dogma as we look around us today. It is not rejected but transformed in the New Testament as Christ takes on the suffering of human sin to redeem man.

It is needful, I think, to take seriously the fact of evil and sin in our world and not disguise it with terms like "dysfunctional" or "alternative values". "Everyone has some kind of weakness," Thurber has a character in one of his stories say. "Everyone has some failing. Wickedness is mine." There is evil — but we get inured to it. The news media don't help. We see and hear so much of it. Alexander Pope has some lines in his Essay on Man that I find chilling. He writes:

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien

That to be hated needs but to be seen;

Yet seen too oft, familiar with its face,

We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

The news of a sex crime or a serial killer in the paper is soon followed by a TV movie. Violence becomes the expected pattern. No wonder there are copy-cat crimes. It took 513 days before there was a TV movie about the 1978 Jonestown mass suicide, only 34 days for the first TV movie about the fire at the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco Texas. It escalates -

Evil seen to oft, familiar with its face,

We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

But there is very little moral outrage.

The story of Noah teaches that God decided to destroy the world because of its total corruption, saving only Noah and his family and the animals of his kingdom. There are those who now speculate that a second cosmic flood has started in the Midwest. The rain is of Biblical proportions. It's already over 40 days and 40 nights-though not constant. And there are those who see it as punishment for the riverboat casinos, or the errors of settling on flood plains or trying to channel a river too huge to be turned into a canal. There is plenty of blame to pass around-and we need to find somebody or something to blame.

But there was still hope for Noah-the promise of the rainbow in the clouds that the rains would cease. And ever since, the rainbow symbolizes the promise of God to bring sunlight out of darkness, creativity out of destruction, and hope out of despair.

Today the remarkable thing is the admirable way in which flood victims work desperately sandbagging to preserve what they can, and look forward to new beginnings.

But all of this suggests some kind of response on our part. And this, I think, is where hope comes in. It is not a pious patience, nor a vague feeling that things will get better automatically. Aristotle called hope a waking dream. It is more than this. It is an active response to the new beginnings promised by God. It is a challenge to act. It is a decision for the shaping of the open future. It is spiritual creative courage working by faith in the spirit of love.

We are saved by hope, says Paul. By hope we believe in, share in, commit ourselves to the creative power of the love of God as revealed in Christ, knowing that no matter what, nothing can separate us from that spirit, once we are committed to it and called to follow its purpose.

Hope, then, is actively associated with the virtues of faith and love, and all three focus on the possibility of new beginnings. Faith is not just belief-it is not actual until it is a willingness to act on one's belief. Love is not nurturing tender emotions in one's heart; it is not actual until it spills

over in acts of redemptive love and concern. So hope is not nourishing genial visions of future blessings. Hope is active participation in the creative purposes of God in the spirit of Christ.

The lesson of our text is really simple. We are saved by hope. But our hope must be lived and attested to by our action. We cannot just hope that the future will be better than the past - we must work to create that future. We cannot just hope to overcome a failure or a fear-we must affirm the creative powers God has given us, catch some vision of the possibilities of new beginnings.

We cannot just hope that this church will flourish without our sharing in its creative life and doing what needs to be done as called by God. Just as our civic leaders did not just hope for a revitalized urban center, but caught and implemented a vision of new beginnings, so may we join our church in the center of urban renewal. All things are possible with God.

Above all, if we are saved by hope, we must never fall prey to the sin of hopelessness or despair. For there is always hope, no matter what. And what can we hope? Always God's love in Christ, no matter what-always the power of faith, always the courage of hope in God's ultimate triumph in us and through us.

O God, our help in ages past, be Thou our hope in years to come.

PRAYER

Eternal God, Thou who hast created this world in beauty and us in Thy love, make us sensitive to this beauty of the earth, the glory of the skies, and the love which from our birth over and around us lies.

Strengthen us in the confidence which is the heart of faith that the universe means good, that life and existence mean joy, that for those who love Thee, Thou dost work in all things, in the darkness as well as the light, in troubles as well as joys, to bring about that which is good. Because Thou art the Creator in the spirit of love, help us to know that the universe is not measured by our fears, that which is highest in our thoughts is deepest in the nature of reality.

Make us sensitive to Thy purpose for our lives. So may we catch a vision of Thy kingdom and become co-builders of it with Thee, undergirded by faith and inspirited by hope.

We pray in the spirit of Thy Son.