

WHAT CAN WE HOPE?

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

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 the three theological virtues. In the last two weeks we have talked about love and faith. Today I want to speak to you of hope - the most neglected of the three virtues. Somehow hope seems, then, without foundation, perhaps just wishful thinking, at least wish-projection. It seems to me, however, on reflection, that hope is intimately bound up with faith and love, that it is 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 8:24, “We are saved by hope.” or “We are saved in hope.” The text is ambiguous, but either reading indicates the priority of hope 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: what can I know? What ought I to do? And what can I hope? In some way, I think these questions and his answers adumbrate or typify the theological virtues and their interrelationships. I don't propose a philosophy lesson this morning. Kant's answers involve three large books, but an outline of his answers is relevant to what I want to say.

Briefly, it 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. But we cannot know what transcends our sense experience. “I have found it necessary,” said Kant, “to deny knowledge of God, freedom and immortality to make room for faith.” It is not knowledge in the moral sense, the sense of duty, which brings us to God. Religion is the recognition of duty as divine command. Its basic rule is love - to treat humanity always as an end and never as a means. God is a necessary presupposition of the moral sense, reached by a moral faith in a kingdom of ends that are the purposes of God to which the sense of duty relates.

His answers to the first two questions, “What can I know?”, and “What ought I to do?” leave us with a world of physical fact we can know and a world of moral purpose we can reach only by moral faith. But what of hope? Kant suggests there is a way of sensing 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. 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 an arrangement of colors - it suggests a glory, majesty, harmony, that gives a sense of a higher meaning. The beauty of a symphony is more than a sense of sound; the glorious music from this pipe organ suggests meanings, images, dreams, purposes that far transcend the physical sound. The beautiful and the sublime represent then the noumenal realm of God in the phenomenal world of sense and this is the basis of hope. We sense God in the world directly. No particular purposes of our own making are to be found in the beauty of the world - but a general sense of significance, a purposiveness

without a specific purpose. In the same way, no personal desire is involved in the aesthetic appreciation. It is disinterested in the sense of not involving self-interest. That is why it calls out to be shared - and we all know the urgency of saying, "Oh come and look at the moon - it's really beautiful tonight." And the curious thing about aesthetic satisfaction is that we feel satisfied without being aware of a particular desire to be satisfied. This is evidence of a transcendent value sensed, a deeper meaning felt, awareness of a higher purpose; this is a way to begin to sense the purposes of God, and have hope that God is in the world with us. We have direct evidence of his purposes.

This suggests then, how we might be saved by hope, how hope brings together the world of knowledge that leads to faith, and the world of moral duty, the law of love, the kingdom of ends that express the purposes of God. The purposes of God are already visible.

Hope rests then on a conviction of the purposes of God in the world. It is thus related to faith. The Scripture lesson from Romans indicates very clearly the world view on which this hope was based. Quite simply put, it was this. There is the present age which is corrupt and an age to come to be ushered in by the Messiah when all our hopes will be fulfilled.

The present age is pictured as sharing in the original sin of man. Paul suggests that involuntarily nature is subjected to sin because of man. After Adam's fall, God said to him, "Cursed is the ground because of you." Instead of rich fruits, the niggardly earth will give forth thorns and thistles. This is a very oriental idea, incidentally. Ancient Chinese religion taught that there was a way of heaven, a moral order, a way of earth, a natural order, and a way of human affairs. When man follows heaven, nature is bountiful and peace and plenty reign. But when man violates the way of heaven, then nature is subject to plagues, drought, or floods and misery prevails. Nature, then, is affected by human affairs and sin.

But the renovation of the earth, the revitalization of the world was a favorite Old Testament theme also. "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth," said Isaiah in the name of the Lord. The new world of Old Testament prophecy is one in which the wilderness will blossom as the rose, where rough places are made plain, where the lion shall lie down with the lamb, men forge their swords into pruning hooks and all shall proclaim the authority of God. Thus the shining hope of a new world fed their faith.

In the intertestamental period when the Jewish people were oppressed and persecuted and enslaved they dreamed the dream of a new world in especially vivid ways. As one of those pseudepigrapha puts it. (The Syballine Oracle):

"The trees shall yield proper fruits and there will be rich flocks, and kine, and lambs of sheep and kids of goats. God will cause sweet fountains of milk to burst forth. And the cities shall be full of good things, and the fields rich; neither shall there be any sword throughout the land or battle-din; neither shall the earth be convulsed anymore with deep-drawn groans. No war shall be any more, nor shall there be any more drought, or famine, or hail to wreak havoc on the crops."

The hope of a renovated world so dear to the Jews, Paul is now proclaiming as a result of the redemptive work of God through Christ. And he imaginatively portrays nature as waiting expectantly for the new order and already expressing the creative power of God in working toward that new heaven and new earth.

And this of course is still true of man. Man has caught a sense of the redemptive power of God in Christ. In the experience of the Holy Spirit man has a foretaste of the world that might be, a kingdom ruled by the love of God. Now he longs for the realization of the promise revealed by God through His Son.

The hope is an old one - but nonetheless valid for all that. Perhaps it began with Noah. When God saved Noah and the ark from destruction He made a covenant with him that there would never be that kind of total destruction - and He set His seal with a rainbow in the clouds. 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.

The Christian hope that Paul reflects ties in with this ancient Biblical conviction, that there is God at work in the world, that His purposes are worked out in history, that there is the rainbow of promise and hope to illumine the darkest storms of life when we seem overwhelmed by a flood of troubles. But now, says Paul, with the revelation of Christ, there is a new hope, an exciting expectation of imminent fulfillment. What we have learned of the love of God makes us confident and hopeful of His purposes in the unknown events to come. So the believer can truly say all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purposes.

We are saved by hope. 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 His purpose.

We are saved by hope, says Paul. At least now we can see what hope is not. It is not a placid expectation that something will happen. The common practice of misusing the term "hopefully" suggests this. Hopefully the weather will be nice, we say; - and, of course, the weather can't be nice in a hopeful way. Hopefully, I'll see you tomorrow. I'll be hopeful when I see you? Hopefully this, hopefully that - it's like the phrase "you know." Indiscriminately used, it becomes meaningless. "You know!" "Hopefully" simply stands for a blank expression for the future, not even a clear expression of what you hope or whether you hope.

Hope does not mean, either, a detached expectation that somehow something better will turn up or happen. If we are saved by hope, we must be actively involved. Hope is not simply wishing for something better, and hoping it will happen. Hope involves our active participation in the purposes of God. Hope is not a bland form of "wishing makes it so"- hope is willingness to act on the belief in a future eventuality.

There is a famous modern play called "Waiting for Godot." The action or inaction centers around the expectation that everything depends on the appearance of Godot. Godot may be God. The

playwright suggests this. The point of the play however is that nothing happens because they are waiting for Godot, and as the play ends the characters clearly do nothing. We cannot just wait for Godot, wait for God to change things. Hope is not detached, placid, expectation that somehow the future will be different, better.

Hope is actively associated with the other virtues of faith and love. Faith can be seen as believing what one desires to believe - but faith 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, based on the experience of that redemptive purpose we have already shared in our lives.

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 cannot just hope to attain a higher quality of life - we must affirm the creative powers we have and under the compelling example of Christ and with His spirit, work with the creative power of God to find all things work together for good. 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. And 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, no matter what. Always the power of faith and the hope of God's ultimate triumph in us and through us

Now abide faith, hope, and love. The greatest is love. But love must be undergirded by faith and hope is that which illumines and gives the promise of the fruits of love.

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

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 inspired by hope.