

THE POWER OF HOPE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 1, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

One of the most familiar and best loved chapters in the whole Bible is the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians. The final verse in that chapter is one that each one of us knows by heart, "But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love." Certainly we would all agree that love is the central theme of the entire Bible. Our religion begins with the love of God for men, which eventually generates in man a love and respect for God. Certainly we would all agree that faith is a central, fundamental principle of Christianity. Without faith there is no possibility of being a Christian or of pleasing God. The other of these three words, the word hope, is one that we do not so often speak and do not rate as highly as we do faith and love. I should like in this study to hold the word hope before you and let it mean at least something of what the Lord intends for it to mean in the Christian religion.

A Dynamic Power

Now the word hope does not exclusively apply in religion. It is a very necessary ingredient in normal living, even among those who are not Christians. If you pause and think for a few moments you will agree that hope has served as a great dynamic motive power to drive many people into the achieving of many of the world's greatest accomplishments. Let me mention just a few. We all realize that when the pilgrims set out from Europe in that tiny little boat, the Mayflower, braving the dangerous North Atlantic, they were driven on by their hope of what could be found in the new world. When they struggled to survive in the strange new continent, again it was hope that led them to stick it out even in face of privation and death.

The history of America has largely been flavored by the hopes of the people. I have often thought about the pioneers who moved across the prairies and then through the rugged mountains to the west coast. They, too, were driven on by hope. Some of them hoped to find gold in California; some of them hoped simply a little homestead where they could be free of debt and free of domination. Hope played a large part in spurring them on. Many of them died, but their dreams led others on. Many of our greatest inventions and discoveries have also been results of man's ingenuity and man's extensive toil which grew out of his hopes for accomplishments. Hope is basic in our American way of life. A boy works hard because he dreams of some day owning a home, having a car, and being able to provide for a family. Hope spurs us on in many, many ways, too numerous to name. If it were not for our dreams, if it were not for our hopes, we would not do many of the things that we do.

Hope Sustains

From an entirely different point of view, hope sustains people when they face some great emergency or when they face some difficult situation in life. You have seen, as I have, those who have been stricken with polio, paralyzed almost entirely, but through the weeks and months that follow you have seen them fight constantly, moving the muscles at great physical cost, in the hope that they might someday walk again. There are valiant battles in the sick room that largely go unnoticed. There are those who by the same spurring on of hope have been led to the best of a bad marriage situation. Maybe it is a husband who drinks. The wife, because of her hope of what may be, lives with him, helps him, and often times is successful in helping him regain his equilibrium, and master the habit of drink. Our hopes help us when we are down, they help us when we are discouraged. I can hardly do justice in the few minutes that we have to the tremendous driving power, the motivating force that is in that little word hope.

There are many kinds of hope. Some people hope for financial reward, or for some recognition, or for some achievement. They hope for victory. Or, perhaps, they hope simply to better their lot in life. There are many, many avenues through which hope operates. But as you certainly must know, my concern in speaking to you now on the theme of hope, is that hope is a central principle in the Christian religion. The word hope appears 150 times in the Bible and 83 of those times are in the New Testament. The New Testament is only about one-third as big as the Old Testament yet the word hope appears in it more times than in all that broad expanse of the 39 books of the old Bible. Hope is a central part of the Christian religion.

These Three

I began a few moments ago by reading to you I Cor. 13:13, "But now abide faith, hope, love, these three, and the greatest of these is love." We certainly do not wish to take anything away from love or faith, but we do want to emphasize the great value of hope. There are two other passages that I found in my study for this particular lesson that link those same three qualities--love, and faith, and hope. For example, in Paul's I Thessalonian letter, chapter one, verses 2 and 3, "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; remembering without ceasing your work of faith and labor of love and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Later, in that same I Thessalonian letter, chapter 5, verse 8, "But let us, since we are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation." The fact three times in his writings the apostle Paul linked hope with those primary of faith and love is an indication of how important it is.

Incidentally, this past phrase, “for a helmet, the hope of salvation.” has a special meaning. There are going to come many blows, many temptations, many pressures against us, and the helmet that protects our most vital part, the head, is crucial. It is significant that Paul says that the helmet is the hope of salvation. I think he means this: that in the many temptations and pressures that will come, our determination to go to heaven will be a great and powerful protection. If we see heaven clearly enough and want it badly enough, it will serve as an armor to protect us from the temptations that would pull us aside to be lost.

There is a passage in the New Testament that includes the word hope along with some other very significant parts of Christianity. I refer to Eph. 4:4-6, where we have a passage that lists seven unities, and hope is one of those unities. “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father.” Just as there is one God, one Lord, one Holy Spirit, and one church, there is also one hope. Hope is emphasized by being placed in this list.

Christ In You

One of the passages that means most to me in this theme of hope is in Paul’s Colossian letter, chapter 1, verse 27. It is just a phrase, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Now there is some value in having knowledge and information us; we go to school a good while to acquire these. There is also a value that comes from having wholesome, constructive experiences of many kinds, but when it comes right down to it, the only thing that has any value for eternity is Christ in us. It is not some skill, or some special training, but Christ in you that is the only hope you have of eternal glory.

Think of Paul’s emphasis in other passages. We have read several from Paul already. On one occasion near the end of Paul’s life he stood before king Agrippa and in making his defense he spoke of hope. “And now I stand here to be judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers ... And concerning this hope I am accused by the Jews, O king,” (Acts 26:6-7). You see, Paul is, in a sense, equating all of our religion, the faith of Christ, with this word hope. “I stand here to be judged for the hope.” Paul wrote several letters, and two of them began by mentioning hope in the first sentence. I Tim. 1:1 says, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the commandment of God our Savior, and Christ Jesus, our hope.” That is certainly a beautiful phrase--“Christ Jesus, our hope.” He is our only hope. Then the beginning of his letter to Titus, chapter 1, the first two verses, has these words, “Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God’s elect, and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised before times eternal.” In effect he is saying to Timothy, “I am writing to you concerning Christ, our hope.” And then to Titus, he says, “I am writing to you in hope of eternal life.”

The word hope occurs often in these writings of Paul. In Romans 5:2, he says, “We rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” Let us think back to the times when we have most deeply rejoiced. Is it not true that these occasions were directly connected with the hope that we have in Christ? The things in which you and I invest our lives, the things for which we pray, and the things for which we work are tied up with the glory of God. We are concerned about the church and the Cause of Christ more than anything else, and it is in that that we rejoice. Later, in the Roman letter he puts it this way, “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the scriptures we might have hope.” (Romans 15:4). Hope comes through our reading of the scriptures, through our hearing of the message of God. The greatest hope you have on earth, certainly the greatest hope you have in the broad expanse of eternity, comes through your reading of the scriptures.

Peter and John

Not only did Paul emphasize hope, the other apostles did likewise. Peter, for example, in I Peter 1:13 says, “Wherefore girding up the loins of your mind, be sober and set your hope perfectly on the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Set your minds perfectly on this hope. Later, he added in I Peter 3:15, “Being ready always to give answer to every man that asketh you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear.” We are to be able to give an answer for the hope that we hold. And the word hope, as we said earlier, can be used as a kind of equation, an equal to our whole religion--the hope that is within you, the Christianity that is within you.

The apostle John, in I John 3:3 adds this, “And everyone that hath this hope set on him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.” That is a very meaningful scripture. If we really hope for a life to come, then we purify ourselves. We live different, purer, cleaner, more wholesome lives because of that hope. We are going somewhere; we have no time to be enamored of the things of the world; we are on a journey, and no journey is satisfying until the destination is reached. Those who have hope purify themselves as Christ is pure.

When I began to think of this theme, my first thought was of Hebrews 6: 19,19. This is the first scripture that came to mind: “By two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have a strong encouragement, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us: which we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast.” Our lives are buffeted about by many pressures and influences, many of which are negative, secular and evil. This hope in God and in Christ, this anticipation of living with them through eternity, anchors us so that we are not pushed about.

I also thought of I Cor. 9:10, where the apostle Paul says, “He that ploweth ought to plow in hope.” You see a farmer planting corn. He plows first and plants a crop and anticipates a harvest. Actually, Paul’s sentence goes on, “He that thresheth, to thresh in hope of

partaking.” So we live, we work, we sacrifice, we give, we visit, we invite, we pray, we read, we worship, and all of it is done in hope. This is not the end; this life looks forward to another life. We are plowing in hope; we are threshing in hope.

Having No Hope

I must not let this lesson close without sounding a different note. The tragedy of tragedies is that there are a great many people who do not have this hope. It was of these that Paul spoke in Eph. 2:12, “Ye were at that time separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” There are a great many people who have no hope of eternal life, because they have not come to Christ. It is only for Christians that there is any really meaningful hope. In the Thessalonian letter Paul said, “We would not have you ignorant concerning them that fall asleep; that ye sorrow not, even as the rest, who have no hope.” Christians do not worry and sorrow when loved ones die; we are not like those who are not Christians and who have no hope.

In Matt. 7:21, Christ said, “Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast our demons, and by thy name do many mighty works? and then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.” One of the most disturbing things I know is that there are many relatively good people who have never come to Christ, and therefore mistakenly think they have hope when they do not have any right to hope.

If a man has never confessed the name of Jesus before men, if a man has never deeply repented of his sins; if a man has never been buried with his Lord in baptism, I know of no passage in the Bible that gives him hope. If a man has not become a Christian, no matter how honest and honorable he is, I know of no passage that gives him hope. For the millions beyond the sea who are not Christians, I know of no passage that holds out hope, only passages to stir us to carry the gospel to them that they may have hope.

No Wedding Garment

There are many who think themselves Christians who have never obeyed the Lord’s commands. Like the wedding guest mentioned in Matt. 22:11-13, they have come to the feast, but are not properly clothed. Let us make sure--by obeying the Lord’s commands, by righteousness of life, by Christian attitudes of heart, and by the services that we render-- that we have on the proper wedding garments.

As we close this lesson, let us apply it to ourselves. Have we done the things the Lord asked us to do? If not, let us do them now, that we may have hope, that we may read our title clear in God’s book. The invitation of our Lord is extended. Come accept him; obey his commandments and go home a Christian.