

Easter Hope

Our generation is gripped by fear: fear of the future, the direction the world is going, and the increasing gathering of war clouds around the world. Many are struck with a sense of despair. They are convinced that today's problems are too overwhelming and nothing can be done. They wonder whether hope has bade the world farewell for a season. Yet in the midst of all the gloom there is still an almost instinctive hope that some day better times will come. A man who no longer hopes is, in a sense, no longer human. Each person values hope and expectation. The eighteenth century British poet, Alexander Pope, noted, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." The Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, said, "What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of life." Is there hope for the human race in our nuclear age? Let us look at what the non-Christian world has to offer. The hope it offers is without a solid foundation, without any assurance that it can fulfill the longings of the human heart. When the apostle Paul says in Eph. 2:12 that unbelievers are "without hope and God in the world", he means that they have no assured hope. Their expectations are in vain. Surely this is one of the most terrible statements in all of the Bible – having no hope! While there is life, there is hope, but, when hope is gone, there is nothing. Without Christ is, therefore, without God. This hopelessness is illustrated by Minucius Felix, a Christian writer of the third century. He described the hopelessness he saw in the "celebrations" by worshippers in pagan religions: "Consider the various rites of the mystery religions. You will find sorrowful deaths, sad fates, funerals, grief, and lamentations for the poor gods." Even Judaism, with its roots in the Old Testament and the rich Jewish traditions, cannot offer sure hope. It believes that God gave humanity the means for its own redemption, and its members will be judged by choices they make. The rabbis see the afterlife as a function of one's saving account, in which the extent of one's experience of the divine presence is determined by the value of the good deeds that he or she has accumulated in life. But how can one be assured of eternal life with God if everything depends on one's good behaviour and accumulation of good deeds? A well-known story from the Talmud tells the following: A famous rabbi, a contemporary of the apostles, was on his deathbed. His disciples came to receive a blessing from their dying teacher. They saw him weeping. When they asked him why, he replied. "For me there are two ways, one leads to the Garden of Eden, the other to Gehenna and I don't know on which road I will be led. Should I not weep?" This was the deathbed of a man who was called by his disciples the "light of Israel" and "strong hammer." He was without assurance in his hour of death. For the last twenty centuries non-Christian thinkers have looked for sure hope. But they have all been unsuccessful in their quest. In 1980, at the end of his life, the French existentialist Jean-Paul Satre wrote in his journal: "The world seems ugly, bad, and without hope. There, that's the cry of despair of an old man who will die in despair. But that's exactly what I resist. I know that I shall die in hope. But that hope needs a foundation." It does indeed: Satre was dead in a month. He died in despair. Whatever the world may hope in, with death all hope is gone. But here the Christian faith shows its power. It goes beyond death and the grave to the living Lord. It proclaims life eternal with Christ, and as heirs of paradise regained – the new heaven and earth. The foundation Satre needed is the empty cross and empty grave of Jesus Christ. These are

the signs that life will not go out like a light, and that history is not a tale without meaning, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. These are the signs of everlasting and assured hope! The resurrection of Christ is the victory over the power of sin and death which makes possible the resurrection of the dead. It is the key truth, the heart of the Gospel. The whole of the Christian faith stands or falls with it. No wonder the apostle said, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." And "if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Cor. 15:14,19). Paul argues. What if Christ had not been raised from the dead? We would be left in a sorry state. We have then only a pseudo-gospel, a message without life saving and changing power. Christ would be only one among countless other teachers, wise men and leaders. If Christ had not risen, He would no longer have any influence in this world. He would only be a memory, unable to hear our prayers or answer them. If there is no such thing as resurrection, much of Jesus' teaching would be without value. He would have been a liar. If he was not raised from the dead, he is not Lord of anything. If life here on earth is all there is, it makes no sense to base our hope on the groundless promises of one who made empty assertions about eternity. In other words, if the Christian faith is based on an empty gospel and a fraudulent Saviour, anybody is better off than the Christian.

But the Christian faith is not all pie in the sky religion. The resurrection of Christ is not a myth. It is a fact of history – as historical as the fact that the Lord was put to death between two criminals on Golgotha. It happened on "the third day" after His execution. God did the impossible, and brought Him back from the dead. Thus He demonstrates conclusively that Jesus was not an impostor. All Jesus' claims to be the Son of God were definitely vindicated, and His promises to return from the dead were surely kept. Now, therefore, we have a living Saviour and Lord.

The resurrection is one of the basic elements in Christian teaching (Heb. 6:1,2). Without it, there is no Gospel and hope. But thanks be to God! Our hope is now assured by means of the dying of Christ on the cross and His rising on the first Easter day. As Jack Clemo puts it in his book *The Invading Gospel*, "Truth did not forever remain on the scaffold. Truth came down from the scaffold, walked out the tomb and ate boiled fish." Christians know the final outcome of history already. This knowledge does not fail to take seriously the appalling problems in our world. But Christians can face the future with bounding optimism. Death is the beginning of a new future. Consequently, there is a whole attitude to mourning and bereavement among Christians. The departed believers have gone to be with the Lord! They are safe "with Christ, which is far better" (Phil.1 :23). The church father, Tertullian testified of Christians facing the end of their earthly life, "Our people die well."

When the Bible speaks of hope, there is no doubt or uncertainty. We have majestic, breathtaking hope. Hope that soars beyond what any human being can conceive or imagine. "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him – but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:9,10).

Hope abolishes darkness and despair. The Christ Who stepped out of the tomb on that first Easter Sunday is the living Light in this dark world, and the darkness has not overcome Him. Nor ever will! We rejoice in our hope. The apostle Paul declares, "Since we have been justified by faith through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:1,2). Death, our last enemy, has been defeated!

"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55). The deadly scorpion has lost its sting. The grave has been robbed of its victory. In our troubled world, then, we can be confident about the future. The prospect of eternal glory gives radiance to this life. The best is yet to come. The knowledge that nothing can separate us from Christ gives us a proper indifference to whether we live or die. In light of the prospect of being in heaven with the Christ he loved, Paul faced his own death with assurance (Phil. 1:25-26). That explains how Paul and Silas could lie in a stinking prison cell singing at midnight! (Acts 16:25). They knew the believing dead were not worse off than the living, but better.

For Christians, the ultimate Easter hope includes the anticipated return of the resurrected Lord in glory (1 Thess. 4:16). The certainty that Jesus has risen from the dead and will come again to take His own to Himself in His eternal Kingdom, gives us strength to carry our burdens and the sufferings of our time. We are encouraged to look forward with joyful anticipation to the glory that will be revealed. We can be sure that this "mortal" body shall be clothed with "immortality" (I Cor. 15:54). We rejoice in the "the certainty of fulfillment" for God does not lie. The prospect of this glorious future should influence our behaviour and attitude. The lifestyle of the early Christians is a ringing testimony to Easter living. They knew they were citizens of heaven with a mandate for godly living during their pilgrimage on earth.

When we live in hope, it should reflect on our lifestyle. We strive to become more like our Lord. Conversion is merely the beginning of spiritual growth, maturation, development, and increasing conformity to the person of Christ. From the beginning of the early church, converts to the Gospel turned from idols to serve the living and true God. They lived the resurrection life. They condemned the common Roman practices of abortion, infanticide, abandoning infants, and the degradation of women. The high moral standards of the early Christians are documented by non-Christian writers. In the words of Pliny's report to Emperor Trajan, the Christians "bound themselves by a solemn oath not to do any wicked deeds, never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust they should be called upon to deliver it up."

Do we reflect Easter hope in our daily lives? If we are as stressed out and worried about the future as non-Christians, we should look again at our living Lord. The cross and the grave are empty. Christ is King. We live in great expectation and assured hope. To the Christians suffering from persecution and untold hardship, the apostle Peter said, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (I Pet. 3:15). Are we prepared to give reasons for our hope?

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