

The Essence of Hope

"Hope springs eternal" is a well-known platitude, but, like all platitudes, it is true. Hope prods us on in life. To hope is to anticipate. At the threshold of a new year there is always that hope that it will be better than the year before. There will be a fulfillment of our desires and dreams. Yet hope seems to be of short supply in our society. Young people worry about job, prospects. They see their hopes for material advances vanish. The unprecedented crises of our day - growing poverty, cutbacks, downsizing, unemployment, violence and environmental destruction - leave many people resigned and hopeless. The constant barrage of the terrifying realities broadcast via the radio and television has a numbing effect on mind and spirit. And one wonders, "Is there still any spark of hope left in a world torn apart by nationalism, greed, egotism, corruption, power struggles, and lack of political leadership?" But when hopelessness overwhelms the physique, one becomes robbed of energy and gets sucked down into apathy and misery. We can live several weeks without food, a few days without water, but not a day without hope. Someone wrote:

Take a man from his wealth, and you hinder him: take from him his purpose, and you slow him down. But take man from his hope, and you stop him. He can go on without wealth, and even without purpose, for a while. But he will not go on without hope.

Life without hope is life without meaning. There is nothing to look forward to. This was the philosophy of the influential playwright and philosopher Jean- Paul Satre. Man is adrift in a boat without a rudder or compass, on an ocean that has no bounds. It makes no difference which way he rows, Satre denied the existence of God. For him God is dead. There is no truth, no eternal purpose, no rational universe. Each individual stands alone without understanding or love or anything that can give life purpose. Satre quotes Dostoyevsky: "If God is dead then anything is possible." Satre, a man without God had nothing to hope for. Death ends all.

But what keeps a young athlete working with great determination month after month? The answer is, hope: he becomes a winner. Hope is the daily bread of survival. Hope gives the strength to endure against all odds. Concentration camp survivors firmly believed that the Germans would lose the war, though they were daily reminded of Germany's brutal strength. Solzhenitsyn, who experienced the horrors of a Soviet camp, wrote, "All that the downtrodden can do is to go on hoping. After every disappointment they must find fresh reason for hope." And they did. The prospect of freedom kept them going. Hope gave them purpose for living.

On what shall we base our hope? On our political pundits? Change in the hearts of people? New government structures and programs? Our society has been so

caught up in immediacies that it has lost sight of the eternal God. Christian hope is something different from naive optimism or pure fantasies of the future. It does not put its trust in public opinion or economic forecasts, Hope is a Christian virtue grounded in God's sovereign majesty and power. God alone is in control. Our hope is based on the firm belief that He has the course of history and our own destiny, firmly in His hands.

Christian hope is not based on a feeling or a sentiment. It is squarely based on what God has revealed about Himself in Jesus Christ. He is the focus of our hope. "He is our hope," affirms the New Testament. This is, says the apostle Paul, because in him all the promises of God find their fulfillment. (Romans 15:8; 2 Corinthians 1:20) Hope in the Christian sense is not longing for an uncertain future. It is anchored in Jesus who was victorious over death. He has promised us a new future with Him. And when we know Him we are already secured in some measure in His perfect rest. Through our personal union with Him we have eternal life already now and enjoy a foretaste of the glory awaiting all the twice born of God. As the apostle John testified: "God has given us eternal life, and this is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:11f). Our hope reaches beyond the grave. Hamlet said in his pessimistic way that no traveler has ever returned from the borders of that country with any news. I beg to differ. Because Christ has risen "death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54). For the Christian, death is not the end of life but the beginning of a new and perfect one in the presence of God. In the 1860's a young girl about twelve years old when her father died, wrote, "Today Dada has left us. He has gone into the glorious liberty of the children of God." How many of us can write like that? Do we have this sure hope?

But there is more. The Gospel teaches that Christ is going to return in glory. Our Lord said; "I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3). This means that history is not adrift. It is going somewhere. All cruelty, injustice, and unfairness will be sorted at His return. The hope of His return in person has brought strength and consolation to Christians in all ages. Their faith may be summed up in the words of the Psalm: "My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning" (Psalm 130:6). Christians have their eyes focused on the world yet to come.

Someone may say, "This Christian hope is impractical." The opposite is true. Christian hope is focused on Him who entered into the suffering of this world, Who was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Hope in Christ leads to action. When a person is heavenly minded, he is also earthly good. As C.S. Lewis aptly observed, "If you read history you will find that the Christian who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next." Hope is active, cheerful in the reality that despite all the adversity the best is yet to come for all who have learned "to rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:2).