

HOPE IN TIME OF NEED

Hebrews 10:32-11:1

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I asked God: "What is it that we need more than anything else in this time of need". The word "HOPE" kept coming to my mind, actually to my heart! Hope..."Hope springs eternal in the human breast"... "where there's life there's hope"... "Faith is the assurance of things HOPED for, the conviction of things not seen." HOPE...a good word!

What is hope? The dictionary defines it several ways: to WISH or WANT; a DESIRE for something; or "to desire with expectation of fulfillment." That last one is the hope we have as Christians...the CONFIDENT EXPECTATION of something to come.

For example, I can say, "I hope the Hogs will play better next year." You bet! But you also know that I am reasonably CONFIDENT that they will. Barring something utterly unforeseen, they will play better. HOPE in that context comes just short of saying I KNOW. And the only reason I DO NOT just come right out and say I KNOW is that every detail of the future has not been revealed to me. So I say, I HOPE.

And that is the kind of hope...not wishful thinking...not just wistful dreams...but confident expectation...that Christians have. It is the hope we hold in any contest between God and the world; it is the hope we have in any clash between the spirit and the senses; and it is a hope in the future whenever it is pitted against the present.

Consider it for a moment. We live in a messed up world: COVID-19 is our present enemy as all over the world continues with no end in sight. Disasters? Floods and Fires around the world, famine in Africa, the economy! If we would be honest about it, the only thing that we might be genuinely confident about is the fact that, as Job said so long ago, "human beings are born to trouble, just as the sparks fly upward." It does not seem to be God's world at all, and if it is, God must not care much about what happens to it. The cynic would happily say that he who would live on hope will soon starve to death. But it is hope that we need, the confident expectation of God's ultimate victory, to sustain us through these darkest hours.

You remember the story of Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego. They were three of Daniel's friends in Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar had set up a ninety-foot-tall, nine-foot-wide golden idol that he commanded all his subjects to fall down and worship, but these three men refused to do it because they were obedient Jews, loyal to the God of their ancestors who had said "Thou shall have no other gods before Me." The king was informed of their attitude and commanded that they be brought to him, calling on them to recant their position. When they refused, Nebuchadnezzar told them they would be thrown into a fiery furnace to pay for their crime. Listen again to what they said: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let Him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up. THAT, my dear friends, is Biblical hope. And, of course, their hope was vindicated: Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego were thrown into the furnace but they survived with not even a hair of their head singed. Their hope was that the God who had created them, was also the God who could deliver them, even from certain death...hope that rested in a God who overcomes the world.

Few of us are ever called upon for that kind of hope. And quite honestly, even when called upon, there are fewer still who would evidence such confidence. The shame of it is that if we did, our lives would be immeasurably better off. As it has been said, "The coward dies a thousand deaths; the brave man dies but one."

The writer to the Hebrews knew about that. In that short portion of scripture you just read, the early Christians were being called upon to exercise precisely that kind of confidence. It might be helpful to us if we knew exactly what situation was being addressed, but we do not. We do not know who wrote the letter, to whom it was written, when it was written or even just why. But despite all the questions about it, Hebrews contains so much magnificent material that it has proven continually useful to Christians for almost two-thousand years, especially when we come to questions about standing fast and maintaining a constant hope in the God who delivers us.

Listen to the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases it in The Message:

“Remember those early days after you first saw the light? Those were the hard times! Kicked around in public, targets of every kind of abuse--some days it was you, other days your friends. If some

friends went to prison, you stuck by them. If some enemies broke in and seized your goods, you let them go with a smile, knowing they couldn't touch your real treasure. Nothing they did bothered you, nothing set you back. So don't throw it all away now. You were sure of yourselves then. It's still a sure thing!

We do not know what that persecution was. It might have been under Nero some thirty years after the time of Christ; it could have been from Diocletian around the turn of the century. To be sure, it was a time of terrible trial, but the context of the passage would indicate that the darkest days were over, just a dim and distant memory. Now the danger was that the hope that had sustained them through their difficulties was beginning to wane because they did not NEED that hope so much. But the Word of God says; DO NOT LET IT SLIP AWAY; you WILL need it again, and it had better be there for you to call upon. God is in control...even during the good times.”

But there is more to the Christian hope than just the confidence that God runs the world. To let it go at that would make us fatalists. We have hope in OURSELVES, hope in the triumph of the spirit over the senses. After all, we affirm with Paul that "If anyone is in Christ Jesus, that person is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold all things are become new."

Admittedly, there is the temptation to put our hope in things that we can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. But, in these days of Pandemic proportions, we can't.

Our senses tell us to seize the moment. "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." But the spirit tells us that there is more to life than that, especially with these viruses.

If you think about it, we would certainly not have as good a world as we do...problems though there are...without people who have been discontented with just living in the here and now. In seventeenth century England, there were those who were being oppressed for their religious convictions. They had a hope for a better life so despite the dangers and hardships that they KNEW lay in wait for them, they set out for a new world, full of that confident New Testament expectation that says living only for the moment is not really living at all.

As time went along, the descendents of those early pilgrims came to feel their own kind of oppression. They felt like political nonentities in an empire that spanned the globe. They resented it and took their

destiny into their own hands, taking up arms against the king. Their hopes for political freedom resulted in the formation of a new nation that has become a model for representative democracy.

It was hardly a perfect democracy, as we are too painfully aware. Oppression and injustice simply operated on a different level, that's all. If you did not happen to be of the right color or economic condition, you were just as downtrodden and abused as the English Puritans or American colonists. But there were some who had HOPE, and that hope led to changes in our society.

In the spring of 1968, Dr. King was very much involved with organizing what was known as the Poor People's Campaign, but in the midst of that, he took time off to travel to Memphis, Tennessee to lead a demonstration in support of higher wages for the local garbage collectors of that city. At a rally on April 3rd, he said,

“I don't know what will happen now. We have got difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me, because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anyone else, I would like to live a long life. But I'm not concerned with that. I just want to do God's will and He has allowed me to go up the mountain. I see the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. I am happy tonight that I am not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

The next day, April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was struck down by an assassin's bullet while standing on the balcony of his motel room. Dr. King had HOPE, hope for a better life for his people and millions like them. He could have led a most comfortable life as an outstanding black preacher, but the hope, the confident expectation, that a better life was possible drove him to live for MORE than just the easy life that comes when the senses win out over the spirit.

Ultimately, of course, the Christian hope is centered around the thought that the future will be better than the present. In the long run, that is why we would be willing to acknowledge that our God is in control of this world (despite all the things which would try to convince us otherwise) and why we would be willing to forego the pleasures of the moment in pursuit of something greater and more worthwhile. We think the future is worth it.

A few moments ago I quoted something that has come to be thought of as the essence of Epicurean

philosophy: "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." It is true that Epicurus said that the chief end of life is pleasure, but to be entirely accurate, even he was willing to admit that there are times when the sufferings of the moment are most worthwhile because of the ultimate benefit, the eventual joy they bring. Christians do not think in those terms, but we do indeed believe that the future holds more joy for us than we can ever imagine right now. For that reason, Christians have been willing to endure even the most devastating hardships and persecution for their faith...they know that this life is but a moment in comparison to the joys that await in eternity.

Why do we have that hope? Because of Jesus...and what He had to say to us concerning what lies ahead. "Let not your heart be troubled. Ye believe in God; believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am, there ye may be also." We look forward to a time when we will reign with Him in glory, and that makes all the sufferings of this present age pale by comparison. Yes, we have hope...confident expectation...of life in a new dimension, one in which "eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him."

If you recall your ancient mythology, you will remember the name of Pandora, a lady endowed with every charm...the gift of all the gods. She was sent to earth with a little box which she had been forbidden to open, but curiosity finally got the better of her...she lifted the lid and out from that box escaped every conceivable kind of terror that is known to the mind and body and spread themselves over the face of the earth. Pandora made haste to close the box up again, but it was too late. There was only one thing left...HOPE. That was the ancients' way of giving preeminence to it. All was lost...except hope.

There are challenges that face us; there will be pitfalls in our road; there will be disappointments and discouragements. But because we know that our God has overcome the world, because we know that the spirit can hold sway over the senses, and because we know that the future holds far more promise than the present, we look on what lies ahead with that confident expectation that we call HOPE.

Amen!