



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

October 1985

HOPE

Picture a person with an incurable yet nonfatal disease. All this person has to look forward to is a life of more or less constant weakness and debility, which will affect not only his body but also his emotions. The symptoms can be controlled to some extent, but the disease will never go away. But even if it will never go away, neither will it kill. There is no end in sight.

What kind of hope is there for such a person? Not much. His hope for a cure is largely removed by the medical prognosis. It is out of the hands of the doctors. He may hope for an early death to put an end to the suffering. He may hope only that his suffering will not be great and that he will not become a burden to his family and friends. There is, in fact, no earthly solution to the problem, and thus his hope is all but cut off.

But what of Christian hope? Has the Christian no more hope than the pagan? Is he without hope when there is no apparent possibility of solution? We sense that Christian hope must be something more than the hope for a miracle cure of the incurable disease. But we are often at a loss to know exactly where that hope lies. This is true whether we are in the position of trying to console a friend with cancer or whether we find ourselves in a situation which seems to have no way out. We are also at a loss when we are facing the death of someone close to us, and cannot imagine how life will be possible in the other's absence. Most of the time, we hope for an earthly solution, because we can imagine how it can all be worked out. But sometimes there seems to be no earthly solution, and sometimes our hopes for a cure are repeatedly dashed. Then we are forced to question whether there is any hope left in us. Then we must face the need for Christian hope in our lives. Then we recognize that there is no substitute for it.

It is perfectly human to hope for resolutions to our problems. We all do it, and there is nothing wrong with it. In illness it is natural for us to hope for a cure, even if medical science tells us there is none. Even then we can still hope for a miracle, since we know that God does sometimes act in our lives in such ways. Since we believe in God, we flee to Him in our adversity, and ask Him to provide the solution which can come no other way. This is a Christian expression of natural, human hope.

There is also Christian hope, which is qualitatively deeper than natural hope. It is still hope. But its object is God Himself. We need to remember the difference between natural hope and Christian hope. In this age when medicine always seems to have one more thing to try, we sometimes think that our only hope is for a cure. The Christian has a much greater hope as well -- and we need to cultivate that hope, since it alone will never fail us. Medicine may finally fail, but God will never fail us.

Christian hope requires, first of all, that we believe that God always does what is best for us. If we believe that, then we will be willing to place ourselves in His hands, even in times of greatest adversity. When there appears to be no cure, then we can still flee to Him, give ourselves over to Him, desiring to accept whatever He wills for us. This is not easy, of course. We spend a lot of time telling God what He should want for us -- that is, what we want for ourselves. We naturally would like God to go along with our desires. In sickness, our desire is to get well; so we want God to do that for us.

The crux of the matter is how we desire it. On the one hand, we can call on God because we need His power to do something that cannot otherwise be accomplished. We do not want to have any real encounter with Him, we just want Him to make us well so we can go back to living on our own. We do not want Him to speak to us unless He is going to say what we want to hear. When we ask in this way, our motivation is largely that we want something from God, not that we love Him or want to live in Him. (Perhaps by God's grace that love will come from the adversity -- some of us need that desperation before we will put ourselves in His hands.) In other words, we want His action, but only on our terms. On the other hand, we can place ourselves in His hands ready to accept whatever He may will, whether it is a miraculous cure or not. Then we are accepting His absolute authority in our lives. We are demanding nothing, but trusting in His love. Whatever we ask, it must be asked in the trust that God will do what is best for us.

In spite of our experience of God's actions in our lives, doing more for us than we can ever deserve, we find it hard to believe that He wills always what is best for us -- perhaps because we never meet

anyone quite so altruistic. Nevertheless, it is God's nature to love us so thoroughly, and when we are in need of hope, we had best remind ourselves of the fact.

The second foundation for Christian hope is the conviction that God redeems evil. He does not just destroy it, nor does He ignore it, nor does He gloss over it. His plan is a much more magnificent one: redemption. Upon the Cross Jesus accepts the pain and suffering of death in order to redeem it. It is transformed from something entirely negative into the means to a greater good: from the penalty of man's sin into the means for man's eternal life with God. God's acts are so wondrous that it is hard for us to grasp them fully.

Our lives follow the same pattern of redemption. The material adversity is not removed. We do suffer from time to time. But if we let Him, God turns our material adversity to our spiritual benefit. In our pain we are led to depend more deeply on Him. In our failures, we learn our helplessness and His power. In our sickness, we learn that nothing can separate us from the love of God. In short, we learn to live more and more to God and less and less to ourselves and our worldly desires.

If we are to practice Christian hope, we must understand something of God's redemption in our lives. We must be convinced that what is really important is not the here and now but the hereafter. We must have enough love for God to desire that we will never be cut off from Him, whatever else may happen. Being sinners, our motives will no doubt be mixed. But we must make the most of the good desires that we do have, and pray God to increase them.

Hope is based on our knowledge of redemption, because that way it finds its proper object. We find a hope beyond the desire for earthly objects (cures and comforts and miracles). We fix our hope on God Himself. We desire to be with Him. That is the object of our hope. We know that we are not yet with Him -- for our hope is for things unseen. We also believe that that is our greatest good, to be with Him. Our goal is heaven, our true home, the only place we will be truly at rest. It is for this end that we were created, and for this end that we have been redeemed by Jesus.

So we will hope for God. Christian hope is the hope that He will complete that which He has begun in us, that we may be in Him and He may be all in all. He has taught us to love Him and desire Him; He will surely fulfill our desires. When we find ourselves in a hopeless situation (considered in earthly terms), then we must remind ourselves of spiritual realities, in order to balance our perspective. Otherwise we will see only the earthly problems, and despair. Our hope may not show us a way out of the predicament, but it will help us to see that the world is not all there is. It will give us

an anchor when we are most at sea. We will begin to see that what really matters is our union with God, and not our prosperity in the world.

Difficult as it is, we must try to raise our sights from the overwhelming problems, and see that there is still victory in store for us, accomplished by Jesus. If we can recognize and practice that truth, then we will be able to receive that peace which passeth all understanding. The difficulty will not (necessarily) go away. No miraculous solutions. Indeed, the external situation will not change at all. But how we look at it can change drastically. Our hope will enable us to face it with courage and peace. We will be ready to see how God will turn our adversity to be the means of our redemption. That may be immediately obvious, as we perceive that we need to learn patience or charity in order to be perfect and ready for heaven. Or it may take a while to become clear -- sometimes it will only really be clear to us in heaven. But if we believe that redemption is what is going on in the midst of the trial, we will be content. For we will rest in God's strong arms, and His strength will give us peace.

The pain will still be with us, as Jesus' was with Him upon the Cross. But through the pain we will have a glimpse of our redemption, our place in heaven. Christians, even in the midst of perfect hope, will still suffer. The Cross is the key to Christian suffering and its place in redemption. When we suffer, we must consider Jesus upon the Cross, pouring out His life's blood in order that we may live. This reality must sink deep into our hearts if we are ever to accept our own suffering. There is no substitute in Christian life for meditation upon the Passion of our Lord. It will repay us abundantly in times of suffering.

Redemption and trust are the twin foundations of Christian hope. Christian hope will help us to deal with suffering because the Cross of Jesus leads to His resurrection. Redemption in God's hands leads through suffering and death to life, a life which can never be touched by suffering or death. It is Jesus' resurrection -- which He wills to share with us -- that enables us to hope. For therein we see a deeper reality than death, life which death cannot touch. We hope for that reality, which is for the present hidden from our eyes. But we know from His teachings, and we trust from His love for us that He will bring us through death to the resurrection and life with Him.

