

finding
hope
IN A
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world

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Published by the Bible Reading Fellowship
PO Box 380
Winter Park, Florida 32790-0380

www.biblereading.org
Printed in U.S.A.

The Bible Reading Fellowship was founded in Winter Park, Florida in 1971 as a non-profit, non-denominational ministry, with the primary purpose of bringing people into a greater knowledge of God through systematic reading of the Bible. BRF encourages and facilitates Bible reading for Christian growth by creating, publishing, and distributing Bible commentaries and related materials including *The Journey* and *Good News Daily*.

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“The present chaotic condition of our own lives and the world we live in is a product of our having to live in that confusing interval between the death throes of the old age and the birth pangs of the new. And yet we do so with the serene confidence that the new will triumph. Light has entered the world and the darkness has not overcome it.”

(See page 20, *Living by Promise*)

Preface

At a troubled moment in my own life I was challenged by a friend to explore my own understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. Was it only a metaphor for new beginnings, or a phrase in the Creed we recite without thinking too much about it? Or was it a real event, something that happened to a particular person, in a particular place, at a particular moment in time? I discovered that I was absolutely convinced of the historical reality of that cataclysmic event. And that discovery was more than an additional bit of information. The universe felt supernaturalized and my own difficulties of the moment and my apprehensions about the future became small by comparison. If God can raise the dead, there is hope and the future is secure.

I used to think that hope was a synonym for optimism. But I've learned that its roots go much deeper. Optimists usually have a rosy view of human nature, assuming that people—and circumstances—will ordinarily turn out all right. But hope depends less on wishful thinking and more on the nature and promises of God, and on God's faithfulness. God has done it in the past, God promises to do it again, and God keeps His promises.

Come along with me and explore the many ways in which a solid trust in God's power and His dreams for your life can create and magnify a fresh hope in your heart.

William C. Frey

A Living Hope

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

1 Peter 1:3

Hope is what keeps us alive. It’s a stimulant much more powerful than any mind-altering drug, and one whose effects are not limited to the mind or the spirit. Our immune system responds both to the presence and the absence of hope. Hopeful people are healthier people. Hopeless people are susceptible, not only to depression, but to other diseases as well.

True hope has the power to diminish the effects of adversity. We’ve all met people who, on the surface, seem to have little to live for, but whose lives are sparkling examples of joy, vitality, and hope. Phillips Brooks, a nineteenth-century bishop in Massachusetts who wrote *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, was once asked what he considered the greatest proof of the truth of Christianity. He replied, “An aunt of mine who lives in New Hampshire.”

We all know people whose personal circumstances, we imagine, would crush us if we were to suffer the same fate, and yet they give evidence of a remarkable inner peace and strength. Some of them triumph over material poverty, others over physical or emotional disabilities, and still others over unspeakable personal tragedies. But they all have one thing in common. They hope. And their hope is not a purely materialistic one. It isn’t a matter of the poor hoping that they will win the lottery, or of the paralyzed dreaming that they will walk again. It’s a hope of a different nature that keeps them so strongly alive.

Prayer: *Father, open my heart to receive a fresh infusion of the hope You offer.*

An Enduring Hope

“Though you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

1 Peter 1:8-9

The testimony of people with hope says, “No circumstances, internal or external, will be permitted to define who and what I am, nor will they have the last word about what I may become.”

Sometimes it’s a defiant challenge, like Job wrestling with his less-than-helpful friends: “I know that my Redeemer lives and that at the last He will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (Job 19:25-27). And sometimes it’s simply a peaceful surrender to the will and purposes of a loving God, as in Jesus’ words from the Cross: “Father into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Whatever the form, hope carries with it a triumphant vitality.

And what of those without hope? In *The Inferno*, Dante tells us that the sign above the gates of Hell says, “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.” And Erich Fromm says that the “person who has given up hope has entered the gates of Hell, whether he knows it or not, and has left behind his own humanity.”

Hope is the conviction that in the final analysis, those things that matter the most will someday be better. Or as one theologian put it, “whatever happens, the future is secure.” And all because of the resurrection of Jesus, the source of our new birth!

Prayer: *Lord, grant that I may know him and the power of his resurrection (Philippians 3:10).*

The Hope of Israel

“Although our sins testify against us, O Lord, do something for the sake of your name. For our backsliding is great; we have sinned against you. O Hope of Israel, its Savior in times of distress... You are among us, O Lord, and we bear your name; do not forsake us!

Jeremiah 14:7-9b

By almost any definition, hope is directly related to our convictions about the nature and purposes of God. Nothing less than that provides a strong enough foundation on which to stand. Confidence in our own abilities or our personal goodness fail to take into account unforeseen circumstances or the intervention of others. The people of Jeremiah’s day had no difficulty in relating a natural disaster (a severe drought) to their nation’s sin. Yet their response is one of trust. Remembering God’s faithful love in times past convinces them that the judgment is not a rejection, but a call to repentance. Hence they can call upon God as the “Hope of Israel.”

Our modern reluctance to draw straight lines between natural disasters and our corporate sin may easily tempt us to regard our nation’s corporate sins as inconsequential or to assume that because we may not be personally guilty, we can’t be blamed. It’s a sophisticated form of denial. But things such as the high rates of violence and dishonesty in our society, the eroticizing and sexualization of almost every aspect of life, racial and ethnic suspicions, and the gross inequities that mar our culture are serious sins with serious consequences. Our hope lies, not in a denial of our involvement, but in our view of the nature of God. Can we trust God enough to call Him “our Hope?”

Prayer: Help me, Lord, not to hide from my complicity in the sins of my society.

Forgiven, Not Faultless

“Therefore, since we have been justified 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.”

Romans 5:1-2

In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Cassius says to Brutus, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves.” I used to have a cartoon that showed words coming out of a TV: “This just in! The fault is in our stars!” A man is leaping up from the sofa and saying, “Hooray! We’re off the hook!”

How much time and energy we humans waste in trying to avoid blame! We seem to have a repertoire of dozens of variations on the theme, “It’s not my fault.” Why is that? Is it something we learn as children to avoid punishment? Things like, “He made me do it,” or “The dog ate my homework”?

“Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God,” and, “While we still were sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:8b),” says Paul. Our hope as Christians lies not in being faultless, but in being forgiven. In his letters Paul seems to delight in telling people how bad he was before he met the risen Christ. It’s as though he were saying, “If God can forgive me, a terrorist, he can forgive you, too.”

An aide, who thought Abraham Lincoln was too soft on his adversaries said, “You must destroy your enemies, Mr. President.” Lincoln replied, “Do I not destroy them when I make them my friends?” I’ll bet he was familiar with today’s Scripture.

Prayer: Father, help me get rid of those things!

Prisoners of Hope

“Rejoice greatly, O Daughters of Zion! Shout, Daughters of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey... Return to your fortress, O prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.”

Zechariah 9:9, 12

We usually hear the first part of this passage on Palm Sunday. The message is Messianic, reflecting the confidence that when God finally acts on Israel's behalf, He will do so in a peaceful fashion. The contrast between the donkey and the war-horse is clear. God's *shalom* will not be produced by the violence that is its polar opposite.

I think it was Dorothy Sayers who advised would-be authors to set aside the Christian faith if they wished to write true tragedy. Ultimate tragedy dissolves in the presence of the Gospel. Resurrection hope has a way of lifting itself up and sneaking through the thickest covering of darkness and despair. Hence Zechariah's striking phrase, “prisoners of hope.”

Despite the violence reflected in our world today, personal, family, national, verbal and physical, terrorism and threats of terrorism, those who have been touched by the reality and resurrection of Jesus find themselves to be captives of a hope that will not die. That hope says simply, “This isn't the way the world is designed to be run, and someday, by God's grace, things will be different.” When our daily prayer for God's kingdom and God's will to be made manifest on earth as they are in heaven is answered, our hope will be clearly vindicated. And the hope, that cynics dismissed as naïve optimism, will be seen to be the truest form of realism.

Prayer: Lord, help me see through the curtain of circumstance and ponder Your promises.

The God of Hope

“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

Romans 15:4

Paul says that Scripture was written to teach us that we might have hope. This is not in the nature of a command: “Have hope!” It’s a simple statement of fact. The Scriptures are the living record of the wondrous deeds of God. One of the greatest gifts we Christians can offer the world is a fresh infusion of hope and, in a very real sense, our family history. God’s faithfulness in the past is a promise of that same faithfulness in our generation. Result: hope.

And the hope is not just for us, but for others who so desperately need it. Perhaps the greatest gift that we can offer the world is hope. Our society’s supply is running very low. Our use of anti-depressants is at an all-time high. And some people are actively trying to undermine the only thing that can combat cynicism and despair. As of this writing Richard Dawkins’ book, *The God Delusion*, is on the *New York Times* bestseller list. In it Dawkins treats religious belief as a toxic virus that must be eliminated from a rational society.

On the other hand, both Madison Avenue and the politicians are peddling hope by the bushel. “Buy our cola, our car, our cosmetics, and your life will be great.” “Vote for me and our nation’s woes will disappear.” And the sad thing is that our need for hope is so great that we fall for these promises over and over again. But homemade hope is an illusion. Only the God-given form is up to the task.

Prayer: *Father, fill my heart and mind with a powerful thirst for Your Word.*

The Serious Business of Hope

“Blessed is he whose help is in the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God.”

Psalm 146:5

Among other things, the Church is a business. After all, we have structures, officers, budgets, and “customers.” What then is our business about, and what is our product? If, as C. S. Lewis said, “Joy is the serious business of Heaven,” then hope must be the serious business of the Church.

In my ministry as a bishop, I once confirmed the head of the religion department at a major university, a man who had for years taught the course in comparative religions. I asked what led him to narrow his options by making such a radical commitment to Jesus. He said that he had a child with *spina bifida*, and that only the Gospel made sense out of suffering. By “making sense” he seemed to be bearing witness to the power of the Gospel to transform and transfigure events that would otherwise be intolerable. In other words, to offer authentic hope.

Christian hope is not a promise of a trouble-free life. The “prosperity Gospel” is a cruel hoax. Suffering of one sort or another is simply a byproduct of living in a fallen universe. Problems are not the problem, but how we face them and the degree to which we permit them to define us are the real problems.

“Blessed is he whose hope is in the Lord his God.” The psalmist, whose heart and mouth overflow with praise, is not one who has not suffered, but one whose life experience has convinced him to focus, not on himself, but on God’s trustworthiness.

Prayer: God, help me to keep the main thing the main thing.

The Real Gospel

“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”

Mark 8:34

A distressed woman came to visit me one day. When I asked her how I might help her, she told me a sad story: “My husband left me and I’ve had to go back to work,” she said, “but I can’t keep a job. I’m always the last hired and the first fired. My teenage son quit school to get a job just so we could eat.” I thought she was asking for financial assistance, but she continued, “Bishop, we go to our little non-denominational church every Sunday. I go to the Wednesday evening Bible study and the Friday night prayer group and we tithe what little money we get. What am I doing wrong?”

I said I didn’t understand the question. She replied that her pastor had told her that if she got her life right with the Lord, she wouldn’t have any more troubles, that Jesus would prosper everything she did. “What am I doing wrong?” she repeated.

I said, “You poor woman! You’re the victim of clerical malpractice. Somebody has taken the devil’s temptations to Jesus, gift-wrapped them, and handed them to you as though they were the Gospel. Let me tell you what the *real* Gospel says: “Give yourself to God completely, follow Jesus every day, play all your cards right, and, with some luck, you’ll get crucified.”

She began to laugh, “Oh, thank God! I can handle my little problems all right, but I just couldn’t do it with a load of guilt, thinking I was doing something wrong.” Score: Gospel 1, Devil 0.

Prayer: Forgive me, Father, for always expecting a reward when I do nothing more than obey.

As of First Importance

“For what I have received I passed on to you of first importance; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”

1 Corinthians 15:3-7

Some truths can only be communicated through the use of metaphor, and the Bible is full of them: “The Lord is my shepherd,” “You are the light of the world,” “I am the bread of life,” “Your word is a lamp to my feet,” “I am the vine and you are the branches.” The list could go on and on.

But to reduce the resurrection of Jesus to a metaphor for new beginnings or for the coming of spring after winter’s death, is to trivialize the Gospel story and to mock the very heart of the Christian faith. The same must be said of attempts to “explain” it as something that happened *only* in the minds of the disciples as they came to a deeper appreciation of their dead leader. Such efforts succeed in preserving a Christian vocabulary at the expense of emptying the words of their true meaning.

“If you don’t believe me, then check it out with some of these people,” Paul seems to be saying. This is fact, not fancy. And it is of first importance. Our hope rests, not on wishful thinking, nor on uplifting thoughts about springtime, but on God’s unique act of raising Jesus from the dead.

In his *Seven Stanzas at Easter*, John Updike expresses true Christian confidence:

*Let us not mock God with metaphor,
Analogy, sidestepping transcendence:*

*Making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of
earlier ages:*

Let us walk through the door.

Prayer: *Lord, make my life a witness to the reality of the risen Christ.*

Walking Through the Door

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.”

1 Corinthians 15:20a

Jesus once said that there were some people standing by who would not die before they saw the kingdom of God coming with power (Mark 9:1). The empty tomb stands as a silent yet thunderous witness to the fulfillment of that promise.

Simply put, the whole of the Christian faith stands or falls on the reality of the resurrection. All our hope depends on the historicity of that event. If Jesus was raised, then our lives are more than “an unruly swarm of random events.” They have both direction and purpose. If he wasn’t, all bets are off. Thomas Jefferson didn’t believe in miracles. Hence, his private edition of the New Testament ends with the death of Jesus. How sad! In that case Jesus would simply join a long line of failed saviors and messianic pretenders.

For the apostles, the resurrection changed nothing—yet it changed everything. They still had to face their internal fears and external persecutions, but they did it energized by a fresh and unshakable hope.

At a time of great personal crisis many years ago, I became aware of the fact that my own conviction about the resurrection was stronger than I had imagined. And I was able to see my own problems, as serious as they were, in a totally different light. If God could, by a word spoken in the darkness of a tomb, convert a corpse into energy and that energy into a new form of matter that we describe as a resurrection body, my difficulties were small by comparison.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for “the means of grace and the hope of glory.”

Rescue

“For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

Colossians 1:13-14

I have a close friend who for a number of years lived a drug-energized life of larceny. But if you ask him about that part of his life today, he will tell you that it seems so remote that it is as though it happened to another person.

Unless our conversion was recent and dramatic, we’ve probably forgotten what it was like to live in the “dominion of darkness.” Once the Gospel soaks into our consciousness and informs our daily choices, the memories of our former way of life can begin to fade.

On the one hand, this sort of spiritual amnesia is a blessing. The burden of sin and guilt is literally lifted from our shoulders. We needn’t carry it any longer. But on the other hand, it can be a problem. It can lead us to underestimate our current blessings and to be deficient in gratitude to our Rescuer.

For example, most of us take our church life for granted. But have we ever given thought to the great blessing of having daily or weekly companionship with those who share our hopes, ideals, and values—people whose support and love we take for granted?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Between the death of Christ and the last day it is only by a gracious anticipation of the last things that Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians. It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God’s Word and sacrament.”

Prayer: *Lord, open my eyes to see Your many blessings.*

Whither Shall I Go?

“O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.”

Psalm 139:1-2

For some people, this psalm is very bad news. If you're running away from God, if you know that you have chosen deliberate disobedience, it can sound like a threat. Many years ago I spoke with a priest who was engaged in an adulterous affair. He told me he had not prayed for six months. “I'm afraid to open the conversation,” he said, “because I know exactly what God will say.” Darkness cannot hide us, for to God the night is as bright as the day.

On the other hand, for the seeker, this is very good news. This is a psalm you can climb up into and rest. All my striving to connect with God, to “find God,” can be abandoned in the assurance that God has already found me. It's a reminder of a fact, a fact that's much stronger than my feelings. Regardless of how I *feel* about it, God *is*. All my techniques designed to conjure up the presence of God are useless and unnecessary. God is here, right now, never more than arm's length away. God may be invisible, but God is never absent. Brother Lawrence reminded us to *practice* the presence of God, but the loving presence of God cannot be, and doesn't need to be, manufactured.

Prayer: Father, I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are Your works.

The Seeker

“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

Luke 15:7

As a bishop I get to extract serious vows and promises from those who come to be baptized or confirmed. But I always remind them that God would not require promises *from* them if He had not already made promises *to* them—like Jesus’ stories about the lost sheep and the lost coin (Luke 15:1-10).

Of course Jesus has table fellowship with us sinners, as he did in the telling of these stories. We’re the very ones he came to save. And we’ve heard enough sermons on the subject to know better than to fall into the same trap the Pharisees and scribes did by imagining ourselves to be non-sinners.

But let’s not miss the vital message about God’s activity. God doesn’t simply mingle with us sinners; He seeks us out and pursues us. That’s God’s promise—to search for us when we’re lost. God is the great Seeker. Francis Thompson imagined God as *The Hound of Heaven*:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from him...*

G. K. Chesterton, whose priest-detective, Father Brown, was relentless in pursuing his prey, remarked that God is like a divine detective relentlessly pursuing sinners, not to punish but to forgive them. What a marvelous ground for hope it is to know that whether we ignore the Lord or even flee him, He will come after us!

Prayer: *Lord, I want to present myself each day to Your loving gaze.*

The Father

“This brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

Luke 15:32b

In the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7), the shepherd searches for one in a hundred, and in the story of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), the woman searches for one in ten. In this most well known of Jesus’ parables—of the lost boy or prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)—the ratio is one in two. The point, however, is the same: God seeks the lost. But here the methodology is different. The Father doesn’t leave home to pursue the wandering son. The seeking is accomplished in a different way.

That’s because sheep and coins are different from children. The former must be actively sought, but with this son, the seeking was done before he ever left home. The Father’s love, planted deep within the heart, is the only searching mechanism needed. The son only had to come to his senses, or “come to himself,” to know that he was being pursued. And knowing that it was love that was doing the chasing, he had the courage to surrender.

God’s love is strong enough to honor our choices, good and bad, constructive and destructive. He doesn’t prevent our attempts to escape, but makes it so easy to return. And note that returning causes joy for others as well as for the one who returns. In the first parable, there is joy in heaven; in the second, joy in the presence of the angels of God; and in the story of the Prodigal, joy in the Father’s heart: “This my son was dead and is alive, was lost and is found.”

Prayer: Father, show me how I can bring joy to Your heart.

Living by Promise

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

John 1:1

Which one of us doesn't need a new beginning? And which one of us doesn't need the reassurance that the best is yet to come? In stunning fashion, the Gospel offers both.

A theologian wrote that the Old Testament contains “an excess of promise.” There's more promised in the Scriptures than has yet been accomplished. Another theologian puts it this way: “There is an overdose of hope in the history of promise that drives both Israel and the church to be moving forward restlessly with an incurable case of messianitis.”

Our hope is ultimately grounded in the fact that we are currently living in the early stages of a completely new creation. John telegraphs that message with opening words borrowed from the first line of Genesis, “In the beginning.” The creative Word of God has entered human history to create a totally new set of circumstances which will lead to a glory as yet unseen by human eyes but universally longed for and guaranteed by the “excess of promise.”

The present chaotic condition of our own lives and the world we live in is a product of our having to live in that confusing interval between the death throes of the old age and the birth pangs of the new. And yet we do so with the serene confidence that the new will triumph. Light has entered the world and the darkness has not overcome it.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to see the evidence of Your new creation.

Power to Become

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

John 1:12-13

The TV program, *The Super Nanny*, revolves around a modern day Mary Poppins who routinely visits a home where somewhat clueless parents are trying unsuccessfully to cope with rebellious children. The children lie, cheat, and steal, they fight both siblings and parents, and generally make life miserable for everyone. The Super Nanny observes, enforces discipline, makes changes, and theoretically they all live happily ever after.

The first time I saw it I thought, “Those children are experts in destructive behavior. Where did they learn such skills at such an early age?” Then I remembered that they didn’t have to learn it. It comes naturally. Among other things, newborns are five to eight pound bundles of original sin. Totally self-centered, they want their needs met, complain loudly when they’re not, and care nothing for the child in a neighboring crib. And unless something intervenes to change that, that’s the way they’ll live the rest of their lives.

“But, Bishop,” someone says, “they’re so cute.” Don’t be deceived. That’s simply their disguise. Self-absorption is a powerful disease that requires a powerful remedy. Birth alone will not make us children of God, but rebirth. *Rebirth* offers power to become something new—children of God who exhibit the family characteristics of loving care for those around us. That’s hope. No Super Nanny needed—the Holy Spirit is already taking care of business.

Prayer: *More power, Lord, more power!*

The First Sign

“Jesus said to the servants, ‘Fill the jars with water’; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, ‘Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.’”

John 2:7-8

The first sign of the new creation is the changing of water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. On the surface this is a strange way for Jesus to begin his ministry and “show his glory.” Wouldn’t a public healing be more appropriate?

The major Old Testament metaphor used to describe God’s relationship with His people is that of marriage. God is the bridegroom, and God’s people are the bride. John is apparently saying that the first action of a new creation must be the healing of a broken relationship and the renewal of the marriage vows.

A Middle Eastern custom sheds additional light on the story. Wedding feasts might go on for days, but when the host decided that the guests had been there long enough, he would signal the end of the festivities by serving them water instead of wine. The servants probably thought that the party was ending when Jesus ordered them to draw from the pots they had just filled up with water. In reality, they were witnessing a new beginning.

In the new creation those events and circumstances that we believe are endings are often fresh opportunities and new beginnings. But vision to see and recognize them comes from our obedience to Jesus. Often what he tells us to do looks strange or foolish, but we won’t know the outcome until we’ve said, “Yes.” The caterer or steward of the feast didn’t know where the wine had come from, but the obedient servants did.

Prayer: Help me to hear Mary’s words, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5).

Water to Wine

“Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”

John 2:10

*Water Awakened one day
From the drowsy daily task
Of washing hands and feet
At Cana, heard
The long forgotten voice
Of One who calls with authority
And from scullery scrubbing
Found herself, Cinderella-like
Invited to the feast
By the Guest turned Host.
Dressed in her brightest red,
She pranced into the house
To delight and bewilder.*

The Great Thanksgiving in our liturgies begins with a prayer but quickly becomes the recitation of a story: “On the night before he died for us, etc.” We remind the common elements of bread and wine of what they can become in God’s hands. We tell them the story of what happened to them when Jesus gave them a new identity at the Last Supper. “Once you were just bread and wine, but you can become vessels that bear the very presence and power of God.”

The purpose of the biblical story is to do the same thing for us—to remind us of what we have been and what we can become, to bring to the altar the common elements of our lives—the broken fragments of our failures and the fleeting pleasures of our successes—where they can be transformed into hope, hope for us and hope for a hopeless world.

Prayer: Lord, I offer You the fragments of my life that they may be transformed and transfigured.

Hearing the Voice

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”

John 10:27

Some people, hearing the words of Jesus, “Follow me,” respond with eager abandon. Others, hearing the same words, don’t respond at all or even run in the opposite direction. I can’t explain it. It’s a simple fact of life. “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

One Sunday, after I had preached on forgiveness, a woman approached me and said, “For the first time in forty years I feel forgiven.” And I marveled at the tenacity of a person who could keep worshipping for so long without knowing something so basic. How often we live in unnecessary fear of being rejected, forgotten, or unforgiven. “My sheep hear my voice.” You are one of those. The very fact that you are reading this devotional is good evidence that you belong to the flock of Christ. And you have the astounding assurance that no one can snatch you out of Christ’s hand.

Naturally, that doesn’t mean that we’ve heard everything we need to hear or that we have understood everything we have heard, but it means that we’re part of that pilgrim community that follows the Good Shepherd. It’s worthwhile to be reminded of this from time to time. I once asked a friend how he felt. “Don’t ask me how I feel,” he replied, “Ask me how I am.” So I said, “How are you?” “I’m ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,” came the reply, “but I don’t feel that way today.”

Prayer: Father, help me to keep clear about the difference between my feelings and the facts of my identity in You.

Abba

“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”

Romans 8:15

We preachers like to remind our congregations that the Christian life is lived between the “already” and the “not yet.” There is so much that we have already. Already we have experienced the forgiveness of our sins; already we know something of the nature and purposes of God; already we “have shared in the Holy Spirit and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Hebrews 6:4-5); already we call upon God as “Abba, Father.”

But it’s more than evident that something is still missing. God’s will is not yet being done on earth as in heaven. We still suffer, we still grieve, and we still long for better days, for that time when all the promises have been fulfilled. We still “groan inwardly.”

Paul understands all this. But he insists on looking beyond our present reality to a glory which has been promised and of which he seems to have had a momentary glimpse. Our sufferings are not worth comparing with what God has waiting for us. Some people say this is just wishful thinking, but there’s a huge difference between wishful thinking and trusting the promises of God. “Hope is the ability to hear the melody of the future, and faith is the courage to dance to it today.” Trusting the promises doubles our options. We can emulate the future just as we so often replicate the past.

Prayer: Father, give me ears to hear the melody of the future and courage to dance to it today.

The Lord Be with You

“The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.”

Romans 8:26

While watching the *Star Wars* movies, more than a few Anglicans were heard to reply, “And also with you” whenever a character said, “May the force be with you.” The liturgical reply to “The Lord be with you” has become so automatic that we rarely wonder where it came from and why we say it.

I believe it all originates in today’s reading: “We do not know how to pray as we ought.” But the Holy Spirit comes to our aid. And thus the familiar salutation acknowledges our need and asks for help before we begin.

At the same time, the fact that the formula makes no sense unless several people are involved is a reminder that prayer need not be a solitary undertaking. We always need company. Few of us are reluctant to ask friends or colleagues to pray for us or for one of our concerns. And many of us have special friends whose prayers we feel, perhaps secretly, will be more effective than the prayers of others. Some people seem to have a special connection, we think, and perhaps they do.

But how comforting it is to know that the Holy Spirit is also interceding on our behalf. And that our great High Priest, Jesus, “always lives to make intercession” for us (Hebrews 7:25). We may not know how to pray well, but what a blessing it is to know that we have help in high places. Small wonder, then, that we should seek that help before we dare to blunder into God’s presence.

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for ministering to our weakness.*

More Than Conquerors

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Romans 8:28

This is not theory; this is fact. The affirmations are not the product of some ivory tower speculation. They come from one whose life experience justifies his conclusions. Romeo said of his friend, Mercutio, “He jests at scars that never felt a wound.” Paul had many wounds, physical, spiritual, and psychological. Yet he can still affirm that “all things work together for good....”

These words come from a man who first had to be convinced that his deepest convictions were leading him to oppose God’s purposes. They are written by one who had to relearn a lifetime’s study of Scripture and theology and, consequently, to turn from friends, family, and community. As a result he suffered severe persecution. Jailed, beaten, rejected, falsely accused, betrayed, hounded from town to town, he nonetheless comes to the same conclusion. For those who are called according to God’s purpose, all these experiences are the raw material from which God can manufacture something good.

Christian hope is a wonderfully defiant affirmation. Firm in its conviction of the constancy of God’s love, it spits in the eye of despair, difficulty, and doubt. “In all these things we are more than conquerors” (Romans 8:37). Before Jesus enters the picture, the old bumper sticker is right; “Life is hard, then you die.” But when we dwell in him and he in us, life may be hard but behold, we live!

Prayer: Lord, give me the same sort of confidence that Paul had.

Confidence

“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 1:6

One of the recovery groups used to use a slogan to encourage its participants: “God don’t make no junk.” What it lacked in grammar, it made up for in sentiment. Obviously it was directed at those with low self-esteem, and those who were afraid that the job of recovery might be too tough.

“I am confident,” says Paul. “The one who began a good work will bring it to completion.” This is a powerful encouragement, another promise of glory. But notice that the confidence is not placed in our capacity to improve ourselves. It is placed in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit who began the “good work” of transformation in the first place. Left to my own devices, I would surely fail. My faith would turn out to be one of those short-lived enthusiasms like dieting or trying to learn Chinese.

But the open secret of our faith is that it isn’t about us. It’s about the only gift that God has to give, the gift of Himself. “In the beginning God...” describes the whole of our life in Christ. God always initiates. “You did not choose me; I chose you” (John 15:16). And what God begins, God finishes.

Ending our prayers, “through Jesus Christ our Lord,” is much more than liturgical rhetoric. It’s a reminder of our confidence that we can and must rely on the grace of God, and the proclamation of the fact that, despite the problematic spiritual weather, God will indeed bring in “a harvest of righteousness.”

Prayer: Lord, grant that “my love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight.”

This Treasure

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”

2 Corinthians 4:7-9

It’s fairly easy to speak about hope in our affluent Western culture. But what about those people in the developing world for whom, realistically speaking, there is no relief in the foreseeable future for their miserable living conditions?

At a conference in 1978 a Sudanese bishop told a remarkable story. Christians in southern Sudan were being persecuted by a Muslim majority in the north. They were being hounded from town to town and were often forced to take refuge in the bush. They had no certain dwelling place and their suffering was great. Nonetheless, said the bishop, God had been very good to them. He’d given them new music, new songs and hymns with which to praise Him. “Since we didn’t have access to printing presses, we wrote the words and music down in school children’s copy books and passed them around.”

I thought of today’s passage: “afflicted, ...but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” “We have this treasure in earthen vessels,” says Paul. But it is still treasure, and it has the same power today that it had two thousand years ago. It still has the power to breathe new life into broken and trampled hearts. “For this slight momentary affliction” is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure. People who praise and hope may suffer greatly, but they cannot be defeated.

Prayer: Lord, give me the steadfastness of those who are persecuted for Your Name.

The Mystery

“God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Colossians 1:27

Novelist Walker Percy wrote, “This life is much too much trouble, far too strange, to arrive at the end of it and then be asked what you make of it, and then have to answer, ‘Scientific humanism.’” Then, with a playful audacity, he added, “That won’t do. A poor show. Life is a mystery, love is a delight. Therefore I take it as axiomatic that one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight, i.e., God. In fact I demand it. I refuse to settle for anything less!”

The deepest longing of the human heart comes from the fact that though we’ve been cast out of Eden, the memory of Eden hasn’t been cast out of us. We long for wholeness, for the complete restoration of the image and likeness of God in our inmost being.

C. S. Lewis said, “The sweetest thing in my life has been the longing to find the place where all the beauty came from.” In fact the beauty comes from the future, from that “hope of glory” that Paul refers to. We identify ourselves by what we have been in the past and what we are at present. But our identity is incomplete until we add what we *shall* be. “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him” (1 John 3:2). That’s where God is taking us.

Prayer: *I thank You, Lord, for “the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.”*

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