

THE SUSTAINING POWER OF HOPE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on June 22, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

One of the most meaningful sentences that the apostle Paul ever wrote is that found in II Cor. 4:17-18, where he said, "For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."

Man has always been disappointed with life. Life seems to promise so much and often seems to deliver so little. This is no pessimistic complaint against life, for we are satisfied with whatever God sends us. However, everyone who has lived very long knows that many of his dreams and ambitions never materialize. Often, he must settle for much less than he had expected. No matter how successful a life may be, it also has its disappointments and failures.

Writing from a Roman prison, fully aware of the problems and disappointments of life, the apostle Paul wrote to the Philipppians, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know also how to abound: in everything and in all things have I learned the secret both to be filled and to be hungry, both to abound and to be in want. I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me." (Phil. 4:11-13). Oliver Cromwell, the noted reformer in England, once said that this particular passage saved his life. It was after the sharp, unexpected sorrow in the loss of his beloved two-year-old daughter that he had to lean heavily on this passage, or else he would have taken his own life.

In all our lives there is often a deep longing for something better. The innocence of childhood is shattered by the stark reality of the adult world. Many of the psychological problems that are so common in today's society come from man's inability to face the real, disappointing world. He sometimes retreats from life. The frustrations and disappointments of life explain much of the behavior of man.

Biblical History

Man has always dreamed of a better existence. In the Old Testament period the Hebrew prophets looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. They spoke of a highway that would stretch across the dessert on which the captives might return from Babylon. They even told how the dessert itself would rejoice and blossom as a rose. Sorrow and sighing would flee away.

In the New Testament period Christians have longed for Christ's return---a day of perfect bliss with no death nor sorrow. In fact, certain groups have even dressed themselves in white robes and awaited his coming on the tops of the hills. This has been in connection with their literalizing certain Biblical prophecies and has always led to disappointment. However, it does show clearly man's longing for the better world. Others have longed for it in their hearts.

Sir Thomas Moore, in the difficult times after the War of the Roses in England, dreamed of Utopia, a distant island, where all economic problems would be solved. Sir Francis Bacon pictured his ideal society in his New Atlantis. It, too, was a distant island on which everything would be idealic. Earlier Plato had writtn of the first Atlantis, which he described as an island which had been engulfed

by the sea. Man has always dreamed of a perfect existence somewhere, another evidence of his disappointment with his existence here and now.

Another Difficult Period

We today are living in another difficult period of history. Ours is a time in which there seems to be a growing gulf between parents and children. The lines of communication seem to be down. Many of the finest minds and most talented young people of our day are deeply disturbed about the purposelessness of life and are showing it in their campus riots and rebellions. Life doesn't seem to be going anywhere. The goals are not worth the effort. In their state of frustration and confusion they are often destructive and profane. How different it might have been if we as a people had really accepted Christ's goals for life and had worked diligently in pursuit of those goals.

Ours is a day in which there is greater race tension than before. There is a sharper conflict between those who have and those who do not. As a result the inner-city of our metropolitan areas is often like a jungle.

War is another of the blights of our age. Families in this congregation are suffering under the heavy burden of having sons in Viet Nam. Others have had members of their family wounded. While far away in one sense, the war is near at hand in another sense. For all of those involved in the war and for the termination of this unfortunate war let us all diligently pray.

In still another part of the world there is the devastation of famine. A new name has been added to our vocabulary--Biafra. We have all seen the pictures of malnourished children and we have read the accounts of widespread suffering in this province of Nigeria. Not so well publicized are the famine-stricken multitudes of China and India.

If we only knew the problems which the members of this congregation are facing, it would be amazing. Financial worries, tension between the members of the family, the usual strain of sickness and the problem of ageing are undoubtedly present. I have been especially impressed in recent days as I have visited the hospitals with the feelings of discouragement and depression which accompany growing old. In many instances there is little if anything to look forward to in this life. There is no real possibility of ever being well again, or even of being better physically. It is obvious to every thoughtful observer that life is often disappointing.

Our Only Real Hope

Christ holds out the only real hope for the disappointments and discouragements of our world. Instead of trying to hide his face from the reality of the problems in our world, as many do, the Christian faces reality strengthened by an inner power that comes from his faith in Christ. When life tumbles in many resort to drink, or drugs, or other numbing devices to dull the hurt. There are some who plunge head-long into the pursuit of happiness, attending one sporting event after another, watching one movie after another, hurrying from one entertainment to another. There are others who seek to forget the unpleasant at home by traveling, endlessly traveling. Some endeavor to forget the unpleasantness of their home and family relations by longer hours at work. Numerous are the methods which men endeavor to use to avoid the facing of unpleasant reality.

The Christian, however, accepts unpleasant reality, making the best of it through his inner spiritual strength. Despondency filled the early disciples immediately after Christ's death on the cross. Peter and the others went back to their

lodging, uncertain, defeated, and despondent. Three days later, after the Lord's resurrection, their attitudes were very different. Everything was changed. They had seen the Lord die; they had seen him alive again. Now they were strengthened and ready for any emergency in life. They had confidence that he would see them through. They had faith in the future. They had hope.

Gospel Of Hope

Something of this resurgence of life can be seen in the writings of the apostle Paul. To the Corinthians he wrote, "Now I ~~make~~ ^{make} known unto you, brethren, the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye received, wherein also ye stand, by which also ye are saved, if ye hold fast the word which I preached unto you, except ye believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures; that he appeared to Cephas; then to the twelve; then he appeared to above five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain until now, but some are fallen asleep; then he appeared to James; then to all the apostles; and last of all as to the child untimely born, he appeared to me also..."

"Now if Christ is preached that he hath been raised from the dead how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? For if the dead are not raised neither hath Christ been raised: and if Christ hath not been raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most pitiable. But now hath Christ been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of them that are asleep. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; then they that are Christ's, at his coming.

"Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin; and the power of sin is the law: but thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." (I Cor. 15:1-8, 12, 16-23, 54-58).

In similar vein Paul wrote, "Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory: while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens." (II Cor. 4:16--5:1).

The same apostle wrote to the Thessalonians, "But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that are fallen asleep; that ye sorrow not, even as the rest, that have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort ye one another with these words." (I Thess. 4:13-18).

What I have been endeavoring to say is suggested in part of a sentence in the book of Hebrews. The writer puts it in these brief words: "We have an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast." (Heb. 6:19). It is this hope in Christ that gives us strength to face the unpleasant realities that sometimes come in life. Life has many mountain-peak experiences, which are pleasant and enjoyable. It also has valleys which are difficult indeed. Our hope is our anchor that sustains us in these difficult periods of life.

Conclusion

When some loved one or friend is taken to the hospital as a result of some accident or sudden illness, we anxiously await the doctor's verdict. Standing in the hallway, or sitting nervously in some waiting room, we eagerly await the first word from the doctor. When he appears our question, sometimes unspoken, sometimes uttered audibly is simply "Doctor, is he going to be all right?" We hang on every word that the doctor speaks. When the doctor tells us that the patient is going to be all right we are greatly relieved. How much the doctor's reassurances mean. We do not mind the cost, nor the pain, nor the trouble, if "he's going to be all right." Christ reassures us, here in the midst of a disappointing world of sin and death, that everything is going to be all right.

When George Peabody, the British educator, was staying at Sir Charles Reed's house, he shared the evening worship with the family. He heard the father dispatch the youngest child to another room and then saw him bringing in the large family Bible to be used in the evening devotional. Peabody remarked, "Ah, my boy, you carry the Bible now; but the time is coming when you will find the Bible must carry you." That is essentially the message of this hour.

In each of our lives there inevitably will come a time in which the great promises and assurances of our Lord will have to carry us through the difficulties of life. It is through our faith in Christ and through his assurance that all things will be well for his children that we find the strength to carry on. It is our "hope in Christ" that enables us to continue on to ultimate victory.

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