

A HOPE THAT PRODUCES ENDURANCE

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Series: The Marks of a Maturing Church

We have been looking at three forces that are operative in the Christian life, and the characteristic effects that each produces. First, we saw Paul's word about faith as an attitude of dependence upon a mighty indwelling Lord—a faith that produces works that count, in God's estimate. Then we took a look at God's quality of love -- love for unlovely people who do not naturally draw love from His; love that labors on behalf of other people, that sets aside self and seeks the very best for others; love that builds into lives. Today we want to look at the third force which Paul calls "*the steadfastness of hope*" in our Lord Jesus Christ, or, the hope that produces endurance.

We should begin with a brief word of definition, because the word "hope" has come to have a different meaning today than that which was originally used in the New Testament. Today it indicates something of contingency; an expectancy that something will happen, but there is some question as to whether or not it will really occur. We say, "I hope it doesn't rain," or, "I hope I can make it through this quarter in school," indicating some uneasiness or uncertainty about the future. But this is not the New Testament usage. In the New Testament it indicates an absolute certainty about the future, an attitude of eager expectancy, of confidence in God and his ability to do what he has promised. It is an attitude that says, "I have the resources in Jesus Christ to meet the world head-on."

Now behind this concept is the realization that God is in business. He is not dead; he has not abandoned us.' we are not left in our predicament like rats trying to find their way through a maze. God has a plan in progress which will eventuate in his glory and honor. In spite of the prevalence of evil in the world today, God is winning on all fronts. But when you look around at the world today it does seem like the other side is winning. There is a vast amount of evil loose in the world. The prevailing attitude is one of fear and futility, of personal disintegration and chaos; the feeling that God is just not running the world right. But the believing Christian, the Christian who really understands the principles by which God operates, has no need to be caught up in this attitude. We have the knowledge of God's purposeful activity in the world, and this liberates us from despair. Those of us who are identified with God, through Jesus Christ, have the prospect of sharing in his victory. Hope, then, is the attitude that God is in control. He has not abdicated his throne. He has the world in hand. Now this gives confidence, the assurance that everything is moving toward the goal that God has intended.

Paul says that this hope results in steadfastness, or endurance. The word that is translated "steadfastness" means, literally, "to remain under, to stand under pressure. I suppose the modern equivalent would be, "to hang in there," despite the pressures that may come. We do not have to give way to gloom, to despair, because this hope gives stability to life. Despite the blight and the decay of our society, despite the evil day, we know that we can stand, that we can endure, because we have this hope. We can have a positive, expectant attitude that God is in control.

This is a desperate need among Christians today. I know that there is a real need in my own life to constantly remind myself that God is on the throne, that he is alive and operative in everything and is moving purposefully, because I see in my own life and in others' certain reactions to the pressures of our world. One reaction is a spirit of complete intimidation. The world is on its way to ruin and we wring our hands and bite our nails and tear our hair and cower in fear -- this does a very effective job of neutralizing any influence that we could have on the world. Or we write off the world as a dead loss, and retreat. Usually we withdraw into Christian circles and find our comfort there and refuse to venture out into the world and face it head-on. We are

either driven to excess, or we are driven into a hole in the wall. We see that the world is running amuck and the only rational course is to move along with it, adopting the Christian counterpart of the Epicurean philosophy. "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow we can appropriate I John 1:9 and confess our sins."

Now I see these reactions, and I see the need for a corrective. which is always the *truth*. Our knowledge of every situation is superficial, at best. But as we look at the Word, we see that there is an Omnipotent God at work, who quietly but inexorably is moving toward a point of triumph. He is winning on every front.

God is bigger than anything that is happening. I sit down to read the newspaper and I see nothing but ruin and disorder and I am tempted to despair. But I think, "No, God is bigger than that." Or I experience things in my personal life and I'm tempted to get discouraged but I think, "No, God is bigger than that." For everything is part of his overall operation and he is moving toward the establishment of his righteous rule in the world. He is firmly planted on the throne, and this plants our feet firmly. We have the confidence that he is in control. Now that is the *hope* that *endures*.

I think this is a great concept. Turn to I Thessalonians 4 and look at this in depth. because I want us to see what our specific hope is. We are often rightly charged by non-Christians with being vague, and so I would like to pin this down in detail. What is our hope, the hope that gives endurance? Let us read this section in chapter 4, starting with verse 13 and continuing to the end of the chapter.

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from the heaven with a cry of command, with the arch angel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

The first thing I see in this passage is the *hope of eternal life*. Paul writes to Titus and refers to the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised ages ago. This is the answer to the great dilemma of man.: If a man dies, will he live again? This is a question that many people are asking themselves because death does not seem to fit into our program. It seems to be an alien, it does not belong. It is not a natural part of things as we know them I picked up a quotation some weeks ago, written by a psychiatrist.

Man cannot understand his death. To him the thought is intolerable that this whole world of life and friendship, this world of work and devotion, should be simply wiped out to fall by the wayside, while others go on chattering as if nothing happened. May God pardon me, but I cannot understand death existing in this world.

But this passage in I Thessalonians solves that dilemma. Paul says, without question. that death is nothing to be feared. Man has been set free from the tyranny of death, and that this event is nothing more than a springboard into a much richer, closer fellowship with Jesus Christ. Now that is our hope, eternal life. Let me read a couple other passages. In Philippians 1:20-21 Paul says,

. . . as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death, For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

And in II Corinthians 5:6-8, Paul writes,

So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are *away* from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

That is our prospect-moving from this life into a face-to-face relationship with Jesus Christ, the One who said,

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die." Now that is quite a confidence, having nothing to fear in this life because we know that death merely means moving into a personal one- on-one relationship with Jesus Christ.

I set a second hope in this passage, one which Paul merely alludes to here but refers to in more detail in I Corinthians 15. It is the fact of the *resurrection of our body*. Now let me lay a little foundation here. The Scriptures say that, basically, man has two parts. He has a body, the material part that we can observe, and he has an inner life, the immaterial life. And it seems the Scriptures divide this immaterial life into two parts: the soul, which is our personality, the behaving part of man; and the spirit, which is the animating force in man. The spirit comes from God. It is the means by which life is imparted and sustained. Now it is obvious that God has a plan for the immaterial part of man. We saw in the passages read earlier that physical death means that the soul moves instantaneously into God's presence. But what about the body? The Scriptures say that God has a purpose for the total man, not just the immaterial part of man. And his purpose is to give us another body, a new body. The body now is a vehicle for expressing our personality. And it is also the instrument by which God's personality is manifest.

The words that are inscribed behind me on the wall read, *"You are not your own; you are bought with a price. So glorify God in your **body**,"* (I Cor. 6:20) Or in Romans 12, Paul says, *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your **bodies** as a living sacrifice . . ."* God wants a body available to him through which he can display his character and life. But the problem now is that the body is weak and frail, a second-rate instrument at best. It gets tired, it breaks down, it balks, it is resistant to our desires to serve God in full strength—in Christ's words, *"The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."* God's plan is to raise this body, the body that Paul calls a body of humiliation, and create a new body that is equal to the demands of the spirit. A body with infinite capacity to serve. Love wants to serve; it is frustrated when it cannot serve. We have all had the experience of wanting desperately to do something, but just not being able to perform because of some physical limitation. But Paul says that God will lay this body aside for a time, as he did in the case of Jesus and then raise it a transformed, incorruptible, immortal body.

Paul uses a very apt simile for this process. He says that the body sleeps, and refers to those who "sleep through Jesus." Now he is not talking about the sleeping saints at the back of the auditorium, he is talking about something that transpires at death. And he is not referring to the spirit, because we know from other scriptures that the spirit goes immediately into God's presence. It does not sleep. But the body sleeps. The Greek word that is translated "sleeps" literally means, "lie down." He is talking about the position of the body. When we die, the body lies down in sleep. In fact, our word, "cemetery" comes from a similar Greek word, "koimeterion," a sleeping chamber, a place where the body sleeps. And the word for resurrection literally means "to stand up." This is our hope, this is what God is going to do. We are going to have the same resurrection body that Jesus Christ has; God is going to raise up this body that we now have and make it just like Christ's. His resurrection is the testimony and a witness to the kind of life that we will have. Paul says, in writing to the Philippians, that God will change this body of humiliation and make it like his glorious body. This must have been exciting to these men, many of whom had either talked to people who had seen the Risen Lord or perhaps had seen him themselves. Here was a body that had been laid in a tomb, broken and battered beyond recognition, his heart had been pierced by a Roman spear, and yet he broke out of the tomb with power. He did not have to limp on pierced feet to the place where the disciples were gathered, he was not weak from loss of blood. He was not bent over in pain. He stood before them in power and in authority, in a body that was equal to the demands of his spirit, and they thought, "To be like him! To have that kind of life!" That is our hope, strength, infinite health and reserve.

There is a third hope in this passage in I Thessalonians 4: Jesus Christ is *coming back again*. There is the repeated statement through this paragraph, "He is coming again." I find it hard to believe. I have to remind myself constantly that he is coming back. He could come back today. In Acts 1:8-II, our Lord is speaking,

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

I would love to have been there when that event took place. I am sure that the disciples were never surprised at what the Lord was going to do next, but this must have dismayed them. One moment he was with them, and the next moment he was gone. And they must have been standing there in bewilderment, looking up into the sky, because of the statement of the angels, "Men, why are you standing around looking up into the sky? He's coming back." And this was the eager expectation of these from this point on. They thought that he could come any time, perhaps in their lifetime. It was the hope that spurred them on, that any moment he would be back to take them to himself and set things right in the world.

Now according to this passage in I Thessalonians, there are two aspects of his coming. One is his coming to claim his own; the second has to do with the restoration of order in a sin-cursed world. There is a bit of a problem here, in the timing of these two events. Many believe that these events are simultaneous, that he will come and take those who belong to him, and judge the world at that moment. Others feel that there will be a period of time of some seven years between these two events. This is one of those areas where the Holy Spirit has been a bit ambiguous, and therefore it is hard to be definitive. Fortunately, we do not have to solve that problem this morning. It is enough to see that there are two things that are accomplished when he comes.

The first is that he is coming to take his own. This is seen from the standpoint of two groups: some believers will be alive; others will have died. The dead in Christ, Paul says, will be raised first. Then those of us who are alive when he comes will be taken up to meet him in the air, one great reunion, with all the saints who love Jesus Christ. Now Paul uses a very graphic expression when he refers to our being taken up, or the "rapture," as it is frequently called. Literally, it means to tear something away by force. Now I am sure you feel as I do, that you are not going to resist this event. We are not so attached to this world that we are going to be firmly rooted, and God is going to have to tear us away. I do not think this is his point. What he is saying is that evidently there is some power that is at work to impede God's program, and resist his taking us away. There is a suggestion here that Satan, who is the prince of the power of the air (and Paul refers here to the air as the sphere through which we will be taken), will make one last ditch stand against God, but that Jesus himself will snatch us out of Satan's hand and take us to be with him.

Now what will it be like to be with him? Frankly, I do not know. All Paul says is that we will be with the Lord. And I know enough of life with Jesus Christ right now to know that it will be indescribable. That is why Paul does not try to delineate, in detail, what this will be. We will be with the Lord. That is the first aspect of his coming. The second aspect is his coming in judgment, and in chapter 5, verse 1, of I Thessalonians, Paul says,

But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape.

Sudden destruction for those who have resisted Jesus Christ. The word here is not annihilation, but ruination, the taking away of everything that gives worth to life. In II Thessalonians Paul says that essentially what happens is that they are excluded from the *power* of God, and the presence of *God* for eternity. Now that is a very grim prospect, and there is not one of us who can rejoice in that picture. It is incredible that God would set people aside like that. The only explanation is that God loves man so much that he lets him have his way. If he insists on shutting himself away from God's power and presence, he can have that choice, but then God lets him alone to suffer the consequences of that choice. He will not violate his will. If he insists on living in rebellion, God will let him go. God will not badger or pester a man to respond to his love. But the inevitable result of that choice will be a judgment. He must live with that decision and all eternity will be spent shut off from God's presence and power.

In what sense is this a bright hope for the believer? For there is not one of us who could face that prospect

knowing that there will be some who are excluded from God's presence and power. Who could rejoice in that? The point that Paul is making is, that God is going to insure that the world will run right. It will be the kind of place that he intended it to be.

The world is like a smoothly functioning machine that got out of alignment and is beginning to shake itself to pieces. The mechanic must remove the malfunctioning parts to put it back in alignment, so that it operates smoothly. Of course, the analogy is poor, because the world is not a machine; it is people. And God is not a mechanic; he is a Father. He loves people, but he will not coerce them, and it becomes necessary for him to move in (and he will move in) in judgment to set things right.

Now what is our response to this great revelation, our hope of eternal life, the hope of a resurrected body, the hope of his second coming to bring us to himself and deal in judgment with a sin-cursed world? In verse 4 of chapter 5, in I Thessalonians, Paul writes,

But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who deep sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation, For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, . . .

Our first response is to *stay awake*, be alert, be ready, because he could come at anytime; he could come today. It is a strong incentive to righteous conduct, and the Scriptures so use it. He could come back at any moment. There is always the temptation to put off until some future time doing what we know is right, but we must act now. We must stay awake, be alert, be ready, because we are all going to face Jesus Christ. Secondly, Paul says, *stay sober*, be clear headed, don't panic, don't throw in the towel, don't withdraw from the world. Be calm, because he is coming back. He is going to set the world right, he is going to establish his righteous rule. And third, he says, *be armed* for the conflict. Put on the breastplate of faith, and rest upon the mighty power of God. We are to put on the breastplate of love. We draw from God for this, to love people despite the cost or consequence to us. And we are to wear the helmet of the hope of salvation, which is the hope of our ultimate salvation, the knowledge that God is working out the process that will consummate in his glory, both in the world and in our lives. Now that is the hope that endures. That is what stabilizes us in the world today.

Catalog No. 183
1Thessalonians 4:13-18
Third Message
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