

# CHRISTIAN HOPE

By JOHN H. WRIGHT

**A**t the very heart of the Christian life there lies a paradox: the paradox of joy through suffering, victory through defeat, life through death. 'He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it', our Lord teaches in the Gospel according to St. Matthew.<sup>1</sup> And he adds a further illustration of this paradox in the Gospel according to St. John: 'Unless the grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it remains just one grain; but once it has died, it bears abundant fruit. He who holds his life dear destroys it; he who sets no store by his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life'.<sup>2</sup> It is Christian Hope that illuminates this paradox from within and unites its seemingly incompatible elements into a meaningful whole.

Those who imagine that faith in Christ is designed to bring a kind of tranquil establishment of the *status quo* and to eliminate all struggle and inconvenience have failed to grasp the inner urgency of the Christian revelation. There is a fundamental connection between tribulation and triumph, between distress and blessedness, between suffering and joy. For hope, breathed into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, draws one from the other. 'Was it not necessary that the Messiah should undergo these sufferings and thus enter into his glory?', our Lord asked the discouraged disciples on the way to Emmaus.<sup>3</sup> The cross had staggered them; for in their way of thinking it was impossible that such crushing humiliation should issue in glory.

This is not to say that a Christian deliberately seeks to encounter obstacles, as if the difficult were desirable for its own sake. But mortal life is inseparable from suffering in one way or another; and Christian hope does not merely look forward to a time when such things will be no more, but even more profoundly transmutes the meaning of adversity at its core from one of sadness into one of blessedness and joy. Hence the Christian life abounds in optimism, in a dynamic expansiveness that knows all things are possible through the power and love of God at work in us.

<sup>1</sup> Mt 10, 39. Cf. also Mk 8,35; Lk 9,24; 17,23.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 12,24 -25.

<sup>3</sup> Lk 24,26.

St. Peter begins his first epistle with an unforgettable description of this power of our hope: 'Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Through his great mercy he has begotten us anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This hope is directed to the inheritance imperishable, flawless, unfading, reserved for you in heaven. God's power guards you through your faith for the salvation that is held in readiness to be revealed at the end of time. Because of this you experience steadfast happiness, even though now for a little while you must be afflicted by various trials, that your faith, more precious than perishable, fire-tried gold, after it has withstood the test, may be found worthy of praise, glory and honour at the moment of Jesus Christ's manifestation'.<sup>1</sup>

But we may well ask why suffering is the stuff of joy, and how it is that hope transforms the one into the other. St. Paul gives us an insight into the answer by an episode from his own life. He is writing to the Corinthians, telling them of the extreme hardships he had experienced in Asia Minor. 'We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction which befell us in Asia. We were crushed beyond measure, beyond our strength, so that we were not sure of even continuing to live. Why, we had within ourselves the sentence of death'.<sup>2</sup> One who reads in the Acts of the Apostles about the riots that broke out on the occasion of Paul's preaching, and about the stonings and beatings and fierce opposition from Jews and pagans alike, will know the extent of his distress. But how does he explain it? 'The purpose of that sentence was to bring us to rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He it is who delivered us from such deadly peril and is now delivering us. And in him I have put my hope that he will deliver me again, through the help of your prayers'.<sup>3</sup>

Within everyone's life there are two poles around which the forces of thought and action tend to concentrate: one is himself and the other is God. When a man tries to realize himself by organizing his life around the centre which is the self, he finds himself pitifully diminished and closed in. Far from being enriched and developed, he is impoverished and stunted. We recognize instinctively the misery of the truly selfish man, no matter how much it may be disguised in dissipation and pleasure. 'He who finds his life will lose it, — it is the first part of the Christian paradox. Man does not

<sup>1</sup> 1 Pt 1,3-7.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor 1,8-9.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 1,9-10.

have within himself the source of his own fulfilment, and thus the endeavour to wrest happiness from the conquest of things and persons must fail.

But when a man turns his life toward the centre which is God, when he allows the strength and love of God to pour into his innermost being, then his life grows and its branches tower into eternity. The centre of his preoccupation is no longer himself but God. And in God he finds the realization of all his capacities, the fulfilment of his deepest will to live. In a personal relationship with God, which is based on faith, grows through hope and is perfected by love, he finds himself in God. 'He who loses his life for my sake will find it'. It is the second part of the Christian paradox.

But the actual achievement of this 'unselving', God-centring process is not accomplished merely by recognizing that it is a good thing. It calls for an effort that is by its nature painful and uninviting; for it goes counter to a three-fold bond. There is first the natural weight of created being, by which every finite thing tends to rest in itself and its own perfection. There is further the bondage of original sin, which has so far weakened human nature that it becomes impossible for us, left to ourselves, to do other than centre our lives in the pursuit of our own satisfaction. Finally, there is the slavery of personal sin, which even when forgiven tends to draw us into old patterns of action away from God. Temptations, sufferings, and trials are all means God uses to arouse us and turn us to Himself away from the centre of selfishness. We must recognize the hand of the Father disciplining the son whom He loves, and take heart. 'It is to discipline you that you are exposed to suffering. God treats you as sons. Is there a son that is not disciplined by his father? . . . All discipline, it is true, for the moment seems painful rather than joyful, but later it produces the fruit of serenity in an upright life for those who have been trained by it. So stiffen your slack hands and tottering knees'.<sup>1</sup>

This, then, is the first step in the transformation of suffering into joy: to see behind affliction the guiding hand of God's love leading us through patient endurance to a life centred in Him, buoyed up by the confident expectation that His love will accomplish our ultimate well-being through the very ills we endure. And herein is revealed the essential meaning of hope: a confident expectation, not relying on ourselves, but on the power and love of God's merciful

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<sup>1</sup> Heb 12,7; 12,11-12.

omnipotence, that we shall surely succeed in the difficult task of achieving our destiny. St. Paul has expressed this movingly in a passage that shows all the Persons of the Trinity at work in our behalf: 'Having, therefore, been sanctified by faith, let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have found entrance into this state of grace in which we now abide, and exult in the hope of participating in God's glory. Not only this, but we exult in tribulations also, aware that tribulation produces endurance, and endurance proven virtue, and proven virtue hope. And this hope does not disappoint, because God's love is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given us. While we were still helpless, Christ at the appointed time died for us wicked people. Why, it is only for a worthy person that a man may, perhaps, have the courage to face death. But God proves his love for us, because, when we were still sinners, Christ died for us'.<sup>1</sup>

This leads to the second step: the transforming power of hope, which robs suffering of the cutting edge of anxiety, fear, and defeat, and shoots it through with a foretaste of the joy for which it is preparing. The central theme of the religious revolution begun by Christ was the truth that God is really our Father. And from this truth our Lord tirelessly drew the conclusion that we should banish all fear and anxiety. Even the ordinary care we must take to obtain the necessities of life should have nothing fretful about it. 'Look at the wild birds: they do not sow, or reap, or store up provisions in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them! Are not you more precious than they! And which of you by fretting can add one minute to his span of life? And as for clothing why do you fret? Observe the lilies in the field! How they grow! They do not toil or spin; and yet, I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory did not dress like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass in the field, which is there today and is thrown into the furnace tomorrow, will he not much more readily clothe you? What little faith you have! Therefore, have done with fretting . . . your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things'.<sup>2</sup> And when He was preparing the Twelve for the opposition and hatred that would attend their future mission and in the end put them to death, He once more exhorted to a fearless confidence in God their Father. 'And do not fear people that kill the body, but have no power to kill the soul; rather, fear him who has power to ruin both body and soul in the infernal pit. Do not

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 5,1-8.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 6,26-32.

two sparrows sell for a penny? And yet, not one of them can drop dead to the ground without the consent of your Father. As for yourselves, the very hairs on your head have all been numbered. Away, then, with all fear; you are more precious than whole flocks of sparrows'.<sup>1</sup>

The Christian knows clearly the depths of his own inadequacy; but this very knowledge opens him to the strength of God. What could otherwise be a source of timidity and anxiety, becomes the point of insertion where God's power takes over to accomplish more than we could dream of, and to deliver us from all fear. 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, then, under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he takes care of you'.<sup>2</sup>

If our Lord's teaching has robbed death itself of fearfulness, how much more is it true that other sufferings have no real power to terrify. St. Paul calls attention to this as he begins a magnificent description of the meaning of the Christian life: 'Whoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. Now you have not received a spirit of bondage so that you are again in fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons, in virtue of which we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself joins his testimony to that of our spirit that we are children of God. But if we are children, we are heirs also: heirs indeed of God and joint heirs with Christ, since we suffer with him that we may also be glorified with him'.<sup>3</sup> In the face of suffering the Spirit casts out all sense of slavery and fear through the sense of union with Christ in divine sonship.

The battles which even the most tranquil life involves can harm us only if they find us unarmed. What are our arms? Not the strength of our own resources, but faith, hope and charity, God's gifts to us, which link us to the strength of God. '... Let us put on the breastplate of faith and charity, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to gain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us in order that, whether we wake or sleep we should live together with Him'.<sup>4</sup>

This then reveals to us the source of the joy which hope gives even in suffering. For the goal toward which we strain we already possess in germ: life with Christ. What is one day to be fully achieved is now already really begun in us and is operating to bring us to the goal. Trials make this life with Christ grow in us and are utterly

<sup>1</sup> Mt 10,28-31.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Pet 5,5-7.

<sup>3</sup> Rom 8,14-18.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Thess 3,8-10

incapable of causing us any real injury, provided we allow God to lead us and cling fast to Christ in our hearts. 'And who is there that will harm you if you are zealous for what is good? Even if you should suffer for justice' sake, you are blessed. So neither fear threats, nor be troubled; rather reverence Christ the Lord in your hearts. Be ready always to give an answer to everyone who asks you the basis of the hope you cherish'.<sup>1</sup>

Hope, like faith and charity, is a participation in divine life. But, at first glance, it is not easy to see how this can be so. We recognize in faith a dim but true sharing in the divine activity of knowing, and in supernatural love a real participation in God's act of love. But hope seems to correspond to nothing that is properly divine in God; for it is concerned with a future good, difficult to attain, and for God nothing is either future or difficult. How then can hope be a participation in divine life?

Hope, because it relies with perfect confidence upon God's goodness and strength, is first of all a participation in divine joy. It is not the perfect participation which final possession gives, but it is the participation proper to one who is journeying surely and steadily to the welcoming embrace of God our Father. We know how much of our happiness is found in the anticipation of happiness to come, especially when the source of that future happiness is one we may rely on securely. Here the joy of everlasting union with God in heaven is begun in hope; for we trust, not in ourselves, but in Him to bring us there. Thus hope is also a participation in the divine power. For the more completely and confidently we place our trust in Him, the more abundantly does his strength operate within us to make us triumph in the struggles and difficulties we encounter. Hope mingles a genuine certitude of everlasting salvation with caution in the face of the forces hostile to us. There is certitude because the strength and love of God upon which we rely can never fail. But there is also caution, because in our fickleness we can fail to rely on God, as we do when through sin we seek to find happiness outside of him.

It is here that the beautiful doctrine of St. Paul on the Holy Spirit given us as a pledge has its proper setting.<sup>2</sup> The divine indwelling is God's presence within us as the personal term of faith, hope and love. The Holy Spirit is given to us to dwell within us illumining our faith, and pouring forth love in our hearts. But He is also a 'pledge'.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Pet 3,13-15.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 2 Cor 1,22; 5,5; Eph 1,14.

The word St. Paul uses is *arrabon*, a Semitic word meaning an initial part-payment made to close a bargain, one given as a guarantee of the full payment to come. It is more than just a promise, it is the beginning of the promise's fulfilment. The Holy Spirit is given to us as the real beginning of the eternal possession towards which we tend, and as the source of the strength and love that will bring us there. We place our hope in the indwelling Spirit given us as a pledge, the beginning of everlasting union with God.

We would, however, miss an essential dimension of Christian hope if we thought of it merely as concerned with our personal salvation. We do indeed trust in the power and love of God to bring us safely through the toils and troubles of this life to everlasting joy with Him; but we look for this in the broader context of the eternal kingdom of Christ and the redemption of the whole universe. What we hope for, what we look forward to . . . with confident, joyous expectation, in spite of all the forces that block the way, is the final glorification of Christ in all His members and in all creation. This affects us inasmuch as we are joined to Him. Thus, we do not await an isolated reward, but a participation, a sharing in the full triumph of our Head. St. Paul brings this out when he wishes to assure the Corinthians of the truth of their future resurrection from the dead. Some had tried to cause them doubts in this matter; resurrection from the dead, as Paul had found at Athens, was a notion particularly hard for the Greek mind to accept. Solidarity with Christ is the basic assumption of his answer. To deny our resurrection is to deny Christ's; for what has been realized in the Head must yet be realized in all His members. 'If the dead are not raised, Christ has not been raised. But if Christ has not been raised, your faith is groundless; you are still in your sins! It follows also that those who have fallen asleep in death in Christ are lost! If in view merely of this present life we have nothing but hope in Christ, we are more to be pitied than all other men. But Christ has been truly raised from the dead. He is the first fruits of those that have fallen asleep in death, because since man is the cause of death, so man is the cause of the resurrection from the dead. Just as in Adam all men die, so too in Christ all men are brought to life. But each in his own division: Christ the first fruits; then Christ's own, when he comes. Then the end, when he will hand the kingdom over to his God and Father . . .<sup>1</sup>

Even non-rational creatures are not excluded from a share in this

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 15,16-24.

triumph; and in them, too, is found an echo of our own hope. As God had made the whole visible world for man, so man's fall injected a note of frustration and purposelessness into lower creation. St. Paul calls this vanity, and pictures the longing and hope of creation to share in our liberation. 'All creation awaits with eager longing the manifestation of the sons of God. For creation was made subject to vanity not by its own choice but by the will of him who made it subject, yet with the hope that creation itself would be delivered from its slavery to corruption, to enjoy the freedom that comes with the glory of the children of God. For we know that all creation groans and travails in pain until now. And not only that, but we ourselves who have the Holy Spirit as first fruits – we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. As yet, our salvation is only a matter of hope. Now there is no hope when the object which had been hoped for is seen. How can a man hope really for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience'.<sup>1</sup>

From these numerous and somewhat extended quotations from the New Testament two facts emerge which might otherwise have been less easily seen. The first is that hope must be understood as an integral part of the life of grace, linked vitally with all the other elements of that life, and not conceived in isolation simply in terms of its own characteristic quality. The second is that Christian hope is centred in the person of Christ and draws all its richness from this personal relationship.

As for the first fact, we see that the specific activity of hope actually grows out of other spiritual activities. For hope is called for because of the special circumstances of difficulty and suffering and uncertainty arising from our frailty and weakness. The goal we tend towards is God Himself; but to attain Him many obstacles must be surmounted. In order to surmount them and to achieve our final destiny in union with others created by God, we cannot rely on ourselves but only on the unfailing mercy of God. Hope then grows out of faith and love. For by faith we believe in the revelation of God as saving redeemer, whose mercy tirelessly pursues the sinner to lead him to repentance and forgiveness. And by love we actually order ourselves, our lives and all we possess to God as our last end, to the bringing of all creation to the end which His merciful providence intends. If Christian living involved no effort, no risk from our

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 8,19-25.



weakness, no suffering from our selfishness, then faith and love could well describe our full personal response to God's revelation of mercy. But placed in these special circumstances of human weakness, we must put our confidence of success in Him and not trust in our own strength.

Hope exists and grows normally when rooted in faith and perfected by love. Without faith it cannot exist at all; for unless we accept the truth of God's salvific intervention in history, we cannot place any confidence in the promises which He made and the saving events He accomplished at that time. But while every mortal sin kills divine love, only those sins rob us of hope which are directly opposed to it, the sins of presumption and despair. Still, it must be recognized that to have faith and hope and not to have love is to be in a basically unstable situation. A person in this state must move either towards the regaining of love or towards the loss of hope and of faith as well. Hope, because it looks to the power and love of God to bring us to salvation, tends by its own dynamism to lead the sinner to repentance. Through it God can enkindle once more the full flame of the divine life in charity. It is only when a person resists this dynamism that he can continue in a state of sin. This resistance will mean either the unfounded assurance of presumption—that even though I do not submit my will to God's he will nevertheless save me. Or else it will mean the growing discouragement of despair, that sin has placed me beyond the reach of divine mercy. And so, through presumption or despair, hope will be lost. The loss of hope introduces error into one's convictions about God by distorting either His mercy or His justice. The consequence is that faith itself is attacked and may be destroyed. For the man without hope can no longer accept the truth of the divine economy of saving mercy as God has revealed it.

Though hope is seen to be placed between despair of God's mercy and presumption upon it, we should not think of it as a kind of mean between these two extremes, as courage is a mean between cowardice and rashness. Hope regards directly the fidelity and mercy of our almighty and loving Father. Hence, we cannot be excessive in our hope; one cannot have too great a confidence in the fidelity and mercy of God. Presumption is not too much hope; it is a gross caricature of hope which fails to recognize the need of allowing God's mercy to change and renew our whole lives.

As regards the second fact, the special personal relationship to our Lord, this is concretely realized in two ways. First of all, the

saving mercy of God is supremely revealed in the mysteries of our Lord's death and glorification. Here above all we see the love of God, who delivered His Son to death to redeem us. 'God's love was made manifest among us by the fact that God sent his only-begotten Son into the world that we might have life through Him. This love consists not in our having loved God but in his having loved us and having sent his Son as a propitiation for our sins'.<sup>1</sup> And in the resurrection of Christ from the dead God's love is shown as an almighty power, able to achieve the salvation He has promised to those who believe and trust in Him. 'Through him you are believers in God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are centred in God'.<sup>2</sup> For this reason St. Paul, reflecting on his mission as an apostle, calls Christ our hope: 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope . . .'.<sup>3</sup>

The second way in which our Lord in His person gives substance to our hope, is that He Himself is God incarnate, the loving, suffering, triumphant Saviour who shares His victory with us. St. Paul is an eloquent witness to the love with which Jesus offered His life for all men. 'For there is but one God and one Mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus, himself man, who gave himself a ransom for all'.<sup>4</sup> 'He loved me and sacrificed himself for me'.<sup>5</sup> Our Lord himself tells us to keep ourselves in peace and not lose heart amid affliction, because He has triumphed. 'I have forewarned you of this event, that you may find peace of soul in union with me. In the world, afflictions are in store for you. But have courage; I have overcome the world'.<sup>6</sup>

St. Paul has given expression to all these elements of Christian hope in a passage of matchless beauty and inspiration. As we prepare during Advent to relive in a spirit of faith the coming of Christ our Saviour, we can find no more vivid portrayal of the meaning of His redemptive coming and the response of love and confidence it should evoke in us: 'If God is for us, who is against us? He who has not spared even his own Son but has delivered him for us all, how can he fail to grant us all other blessings with him? Who shall make accusation against the elect of God? It is God who sanctifies! Who shall condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, and who rose again, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Jn 4,9-10.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Tim 2,5-6.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Pet 1,21.

<sup>5</sup> Gal 2,20.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Tim 1,1.

<sup>6</sup> Jn 16,33.

Who shall separate us from Christ's love for us? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or danger, or the sword? Even as it is written, for your sake we are put to death all the day long, we are regarded as sheep for the slaughter. But in all those things we are more than victorious through him who has loved us. I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature can separate us from God's love for us, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 8,31-39.