

Passover and Hope

A Ray of Hope Beyond Our Troubles

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I have to admit to you that over the past month or so I have been a bit down, not that anybody would notice because I tend to be the optimistic type, however it has been enough to make me, in my quiet times, despair a bit because conditions in this country do not ever seem to improve, and there is nothing in sight to indicate that they ever will.

In my personal life, things are going along just fine, thank you. Although, the past year—2005—seems to be the worst year we have ever been through. And, many of you know the things that I have gone through. I will not take the time to talk about them again. Frankly, I would like to forget them.

But, out there, out in the world, and even in some cases in the church of God—the near out there—things seem to be going to hell in a hand basket quickly. In my limited view, I try to see light at the end of the tunnel, but as the joke goes—it is just an oncoming train.

Just think about it.

In America's political situation, both foreign and domestic, there are very few encouraging signs. No political party has the wherewithal—the spine, or guts—to tackle the hard problems and questions of the day.

Think about the latest with the immigration. It just boils me. It is a problem that has been festering for decades. I should clarify. It is illegal immigration which bothers me. Immigration is fine and great. It is one of the things which built this country.

But, the illegal problem is seemingly unsolvable. It is not! Rather, we just do not have what it takes—the intestinal fortitude—to enforce our own laws. And why is that? Because, the political parties and their supporters want to pander to these groups—either the illegals already here, or the ones across the border who are not here yet, or the families of those who may be legally here, but who have relatives who are illegally here—all to vote for them in the next election or two.

And it is not just the political class, but the business class also. They want them here so that they can enlarge their bottom line—profit. And, even if we are not in either of those two classes, we are in the consuming class, and we want them here for cheap goods, and cheap labor. So, we are willing to allow illegality by the millions to occur, and this country faces a very serious crisis; a crisis which could get to the point where the American culture and way of life is threatened because immigrants these days, and too many of them maybe, do not want to integrate into our culture. They do not want to become American. They just want what we have—the freedoms, money and wealth we are seemingly able to produce. They want, to put it more biblically, the blessings of Abraham with out having to join him!

Why not just follow the law? Why can we not agree what is best for this country?

On the international scene, it is not much better. America is hated universally. To put it bluntly, the media will never tell you the real reason why that is. They put all the blame at the feet of President Bush. President Bush is Satan incarnate. Or, if America is the Great Satan, then President Bush is his chief lieutenant. He wears horns, and has a tail, and carries a pitchfork, and wears cowboy boots. He is a terrible person and is going to bring the whole world in to World War III.

The secret is that it could be just about anyone sitting in that Oval Office, and we would receive the same enmity from the people of this world. And, that is because we are powerful, and we are wealthy. And the people of this world are envious. They covet what we have. That is why they hate us. It is because we are successful; it is because we are powerful; we are influential. They want what we have, and are cursing us for not having it. In their eyes, we are the problem because we have gobbled up all the resources.

We have done some good. I mean, if you look at the charity by nation, and the speed of our charitable acts around this world, we are unmatched. Just take the tsunami event from December 2004. We had our navy warships there within about a day or two. And, we were helping them with fresh water, and whatever the navy could do to bring order to that area. It took *weeks* for the United Nations to get there. They had somebody on the ground in about a couple of days, but they wanted to go there just to assess the situation; whereas we were putting food and help on the ground in just a few days.

Now, I am not asking to pat us on the back. But, even for the good that we do, we get criticized. We are hated for our ability to do this! Because, they want what we have. It is so sad. We cannot do anything right. We cannot step properly anywhere.

Now, I should mention also that we deserve some of this enmity because we have not dealt very well with the nations within our position of power. We have actually been very arrogant for a long time, probably since the Kennedy Administration. We have been very arrogant with the way that we have dealt with other nations. Perhaps before then, going back to Truman, or FDR, or Teddy Roosevelt; but we have been very arrogant with how we have used our power. We have been very selfish. We have thrown our money and power around like a drunken lottery winner—always self-interestedly. We have made friends where we should not have, and made enemies where we should not have, but we think that just because of who we are, we can get away with these terrible blunders. And someday, our profligate ways will come back to bite us.

That can get you down too, because you know that the storm clouds are approaching.

The situation in the church of God can give us little cheer either. You look around and see things happening, and you look at trends, and you wonder. I can see from my experience over the past 15 years or so, that things have settled down a great deal in the churches of God. People are basically where they have decided to be. But, settling down has a negative side to it. Rather than settling down, because one is confident of the teaching, people settle on their lees. They are becoming complacent. They do not listen as hard as they used to. They are not active enough. They, frankly, are drifting into Laodiceanism by settling in.

And you know, and we mention every week prayer requests for people who have great trials of disease and other afflictions. We have had quite a bit of unemployment in the churches of God. There are marital problems that continue. There are problems with the teens and our young adults getting into trouble, and making stupid decisions.

All these things continue, and they never seem to get any better. Well, at least, if you have a negative attitude, they can never seem to get any better.

Many members, we have noticed, many ministers too, have died recently. We see the ministry aging rapidly. The average age of some of these ministers in some of these churches are in their sixties. And, the next generation or two do not seem to want to fill those positions. And this is happening in the general population of the membership too. The lay members are aging and dying, and there are very few new converts coming in to replace them.

It can make one rather depressed. It can make one throw up his hands and say, "What is the use?" I have not gotten to that position yet, but it could happen depending on one's mood or attitude.

And then we have the pre-Passover trials every year that seem to clobber us on the head; and then God tells us to examine ourselves on top of this. We see all our crud inside, and that can really make us despair that there could be any improvement. We may see how little we have progressed since conversion, which for some of us was decades ago! I think about this myself. I was baptized in 1984. That was 22 years ago come May 12. That is a long time. Two decades plus! Am I really that much better than when I was dunked under the water? To be honest. I would say, "No."

There have been improvements in some areas, but there are other sins that I keep doing. We wonder, "How can God accept someone as rotten as me? Why would He bother?"

Maybe a pessimistic person can see failure everywhere in himself, in the church, in the country, in the world; there is very little good news. We can focus during this season on so much sin that we could just absolutely be overwhelmed by the weight of it, and feel like it is all on our shoulders. There is just so much sin, and so many things going wrong. There is no hope.

But, and there always is a "*but*," behind all the depressing news, and behind the perverse culture that we slog through, behind all the perceived lack of growth in the church, behind the personal feelings of spiritual inadequacies, there is *an absolutely blinding ray of hope!* It has got to be blinding to get through all the muck!

Passover is a time of hope despite all that I have just said. We cannot let that fact that Passover is a time of hope get buried under the darker matters that we notice so easily and greatly at this season of the year; because, Passover and hope, believe it or not, go together hand in glove.

I would like to begin in Job 7. We are going to approach this much like I approached the introduction—by going back and looking at how bad things are from a human point of view.

Job is a very human book, especially the first 34 chapters where you have these four men arguing—giving their thoughts on Job. "*You are a sinner! Admit you are a sinner, and repent, and God will take mercy on you!*" And Job said, "*Look! I have not done a thing! I have not*

sinned. I am blameless, and upright! I have done all these wonderful things. Why is God cursing me this way?" And they all four come up with reasons for why this is occurring. And, all of their reasons are rather carnal. And, God has to finally step in and say, "*Boys! This is how it is, if you would be quiet and listen!*"

And so, what we have here in Job 7 is one of the human ideas that are exposed as sheer folly. It is folly because it is the result of ignorance, from being cut off from God. These are just human ways of thinking. They are not revealed wisdom. They are just human, carnal nature coming out in terms of a philosophy of life. And even in the end, Job admits in chapter 42 that he spoke without real knowledge or understanding. That is what started his real repentance; he figured out that he did not know anything. He admitted it to himself. The world, cut off from God, still thinks, speaks, and acts this way.

There is a great deal of wisdom in Job, first from the human point of view, and then God smashes is all down, and says that this is the way things really are.

Job is talking in Job 7:1-4:

Job 7:1-4 *Is there not a time of hard service for man on earth? Are not his days also like the days of a hired man? Like a servant who earnestly desires the shade, And like a hired man who eagerly looks for his wages, So I have been allotted months of futility, And wearisome nights have been appointed to me. When I lie down, I say, 'When shall I arise, And the night be ended?' For I have had my fill of tossing till dawn.*

He cannot even get rest in sleep. His life is just full of servitude and hard work. He might as well be a slave. He goes to bed, and all he does is toss and turn on his mattress wondering when dawn is going to come so he can wake up and get back to it. And then:

Job 7:5 *My flesh is caked with worms and dust, My skin is cracked and breaks out afresh.*

This man's chin was on the ground all the time, he was so depressed.

Job 7:6 *My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, And are spent without hope.*

That is how he looked at life.

Job 7:16 *I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone, For my days are but a breath.*

He saw no hope in life whatsoever. All he saw in it as was toil and struggle. This is a common

refrain of mortal man. Life passes swiftly and hopelessly from one trial and trouble to another; and then we get old and decrepit, break down, and die.

The 17th century English philosopher, Thomas Hobbs, sums it up best. He was well known for his ideas that men cannot be trusted; men are evil through and through, they need a wise king to govern them—that was the best form of government. He wrote:

The life of man: solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Wow! Would you not want to have him around? But, people commonly think that there is no hope in life.

In chapter 17, we will see another common, human hope. This is a corollary of the last one:

Job 17:10-16 [Job is speaking] But please, come back again, all of you, For I shall not find *one wise man* among you. My days are past, My purposes are broken off, *Even* the thoughts of my heart. They change the night into day; `The light *is* near,' *they say*, in the face of darkness. If I wait *for* the grave *as* my house, If I make my bed in the darkness, If I say to corruption, `You *are* my father,' And to the worm, `You *are* my mother and my sister,' Where then *is* my hope? As for my hope, who can see it? *Will* they go down to the gates of Sheol? Shall we *have* rest together in the dust?"

Basically, what he is saying there is that he hopes for death. There is no hope in life, so he might as well hope for death. Some people just want to end all their suffering and perhaps find rest in death. So, they hope in death, and in so doing, they put to death all hope. When you die, what hope is there? In Job 4, Eliphaz is speaking, one of Job's so-called friends. He brings out another common hope of men:

Job 4:1-2 Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said: *If* one attempts a word with you, will you become weary?

"If I talk to you, Job, are you just going to get all disturbed, and grieved?"

Job 4:2 But who can withhold himself from speaking?

Job was just so down; his friends were listening to his despair coming out in his words. Eliphaz asks, *"Ok. If I give you an account, are you going to get upset with me? Am I just going to grieve you further?"*

Job 4:3 Surely you have instructed many, And you have strengthened weak hands.

He admits that Job has done great things and good things.

Job 4:4-6 Your words have upheld him who was stumbling, And you have strengthened the feeble knees; But now it [the struggle, or calamity] comes upon you, and you are weary [grieved]; It touches you, and you are troubled. *Is not your reverence your confidence? And the integrity of your ways your hope?*

This is very interesting. This is a very common hope among men cut off from God, and that is hope in one's personal goodness. Hope in one's integrity. A lot of religions are built around this hope. They hope that if they live a life of good character as they define it—if they believe that they are good; if they do good deeds; if they exhibit some sort of moral integrity—they will be rewarded now in this life, and in the here-after, however they envision it.

But, they think that they just have to be good people. For good people, good things will come. This is the extent of their hope. This is hope in a religion of personal works or personal integrity. In a way, this is what Judaism became in Pharisaism. They believed that if they did good things, God was bound to reward them properly because they had done all these good things, and God had done so little. He owed them, so to speak. This is, of course, another human way of looking at hope—a human hope.

But, there is a little bit brighter part to the book of Job. It appears in chapter 14. It is a bit positive, but it is not a certain thing. It is merely a speculation. I also want you to notice as we go through this that Job is very negative about man's hope. He says in verse 7:

Job 14:7-9 For there is hope for a tree, If it is cut down, that it will sprout again, And that its tender shoots will not cease. Though its root may grow old in the earth, And its stump may die in the ground, *Yet at the scent of water it will bud And bring forth branches like a plant.*

So far, it has been positive for this tree. But now, we turn the corner.

Job 14:10-12 But man dies and is laid away; Indeed he breathes his last And where *is* he? As water disappears from the sea, And a river becomes parched and dries up, So man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens *are* no more, They will not awake Nor be roused from their sleep.

This is what he believed! This is what he knew at the time. The resurrection from the dead had not been revealed to him. That is why he is so confident, here, that this is what happens.

Now notice, Job begins to wonder, and begins to wish; and that is all that it ends up being.

Job 14:13 Oh, that You would hide me in the grave,

Remember, he is suffering, and going through all this misery, and pain—boils that he scrapes with a broken piece of pottery. His children have died. His wife is telling him to curse God and die. His friends are babbling at him, accusing him of all this sin.

But, none of these righteous deeds that he did seemed to account for anything. He is sitting in a heap of ashes. Nothing is soothing. But then he gets this hope, a wish or speculation:

Job 14:13 Oh, that You would hide me in the grave, That You would conceal me until Your wrath is past, That You would appoint me a set time, and remember me!

This is where he began to speculate.

Job 14:14-15 If a man dies, shall he live *again*? All the days of my hard service I will wait, Till my change comes. You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands.

Now this seems to be fairly positive. But, I do not think that the translators of the King James and the New King James did the Hebrew justice. Where it says: "If a man dies shall he live again?" it almost sounds positive does it not? The construction of the Hebrew, however, is negative. This means that though it is a rhetorical question, the answer demanded by the set up, is "no."

Remember, just a few verses before this, he said that when men die, they are in the grave, and that is it! But, Job has what you might call a glimmer of the truth, and it comes in as a wish. He has really nothing to base it on as far as God saying, *"Job! This is something new that you have not learned yet, but there is a resurrection from the dead."*

It is nothing like that. It is just, *"I wonder...If a man dies, will he live again? Probably not, but it would be neat if God would conceal me in the grave until things get better, and then He would raise me again in a better time, and then we can go forward from there."*

But, then Job adds something really interesting, and this is the basis of all Christian hope, "You shall desire the work of Your hand." Do you know what he is saying there? This is really interesting! He is saying, *"This idea that I have, this possibility is plausible because I know God, and God is a God who loves to have a relationship with His creatures. And God would not create mankind to go through life—this short, brutish, nasty life—and then be done with him. There is going to come a time when God desires those creatures again to have a relationship with Him"*

But, He does not know this for sure. He bases his speculation on what He knows of God. This God is a God who has friends, who likes friends, who wants companionship.

I do not know if Job had ever seen the works of Moses. There is some indication that Job is actually pre-Moses. But, perhaps he knew the stories about God saying that He was making men in His image, after His likeness. Maybe he knew some of these stories from Noah, and Shem, and others who had taught them about the relationship that God had had with various

ones: Seth, Abel, Enoch, Noah. And perhaps he understood from his own relationship with God over many years that this is how God was. God liked people. God likes companionship. He wanted to walk in agreement with His creation. He enjoys the company of men. And he yearns for men to become like Him so that they can enjoy the things that He enjoys, the life that He lives.

And so, from these little bits of information, and knowledge from the past, and his own experiences with God, he has this lightning bolt out of the blue: "*You know, perhaps it is possible—this thing called living again*"

But in this chapter, it is not positive at all. It is not something that is certain. It is only a flash of intuition based on his knowledge of God. Hope began to spring in Job because, he thought, "*You know this might be true.*" And then he goes on to other things.

Now, if you will remember in chapter 42, he said, "I have said things too wonderful for me. I did not understand." Could this have been one of them? Perhaps a bit of truth that he really did not understand, but talked about throughout as a possibility... But he really did not understand. When God came and gave him the instruction about just how powerful He really is, and how He can do anything—there is nothing too hard for God—maybe he began to see that this is probably so. And he repented before God for all the negativity, and the way that he approached it.

Perhaps... I am speculating too. But, it is an interesting thing to think about.

At this point, Job did not know for sure. But, what he did know was that he had a relationship with God, he yearned for God, and he knew God yearned for him too. And so we have the beginnings of the Christian hope, right here! Maybe not the earliest beginnings, but we have in Job himself a beginning of this idea.

So in Job's speculation, then, we have a glimpse of the underlying foundation of hope.

The Hebrew and the Greek words translated as hope throughout the Bible all have a root definition of "expectation." And they run the gamut from a mere wish, to an absolute certainty. You have to read the context.

There is a place in the book of Luke where it says that Herod hoped Jesus would perform some kind of miracle. That is a wish. But again, the same word can be used elsewhere to mean the absolute certainty of the Christian hope. You really have to look at it in context.

Theologically, hope is confident, enduring expectation. And, those two adjectives are very important. It is confident, enduring expectation. So, you have strength in the confidence, and you have length in the endurance—confident, enduring expectation. It is not a flash in the pan thing that comes and goes. The Christian hope is sure, and it is stable. It is a rock that we can grab onto regardless of what happens. Christians can trust God. Trust! That is the word. They trust God to bring to pass what He has promised to us.

The heart of hope is faith in God. If you get nothing else from the sermon, take that to the bank. The heart of hope is faith in God. That is found in Hebrews 11:1. Faith is the substance of things hoped for. Faith underlies—undergirds—what we have hoped for. We have hope because we know God, and trust Him. Faith is the heart of hope. If you do not have faith, hope is not

going to mean a thing.

The strength of our hope, then, depends on how deeply we know God, and believe Him. Our hope will be far stronger if our trust in God is invincible.

And this leads right into John 17: 3:

John 17:3 And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

Eternal life is what we are aiming for. And knowing God not only gives us the knowledge that we need, it gives us the faith that we need, and the hope we need; and of course, the love we need which we reflect from what He has done.

And those three major virtues, then, all come from knowing God. They are bound together in our knowledge of God.

So, what this means is that hope is relational. Hope is based in our relationship with God. If we know God, if we believe God, we will trust God. And thus, we will hope strongly for the things that He has promised to us.

Now, David understood this basic concept.

Somewhere between the time of Job, and the time of David, things were taught and passed down; and David began to understand things.

Now, we would probably say that the one who knew God the best of all the figures in the past is Abraham. But, David had a pretty close relationship with Him also. All those things that happened through his 70 years beginning early on when he was asked to help with King Saul—actually a bit earlier than that when God chose him through Samuel out of all the brothers. He knew God for years and years, and God worked closely with him. David had a penchant for getting in straits—scrapes—getting in trouble. Things did not go smoothly for him for much of his life. And so he began to know God in a very intimate way as God was setting things up for the dynasty of David, and the Messiah to come through him.

But, it was very important that this relationship be started, and strengthened throughout the years.

Psalm 38:15 For in You, O LORD, I hope; You will hear, O Lord my God.

Such a very simple statement: "In You, Oh Lord, I hope!" That was the basis for his hope—God; because he knew God, David could have hope. There is no hope for anything truly good unless it is based on what we know about God. Anything else is not worth hoping for.

David had this ongoing lifetime relationship with God. He knew Him intimately. He knew he could trust God to deliver him from whatever predicament he found himself in—facing Philistines, or King Saul, or any enemy, or his own son who was rebelling against him. It did not matter. He knew God would get him out of the scrape whatever it was.

And God did! David died an old man in his bed after 40 years of reigning over Israel and Judah. All through that time developing this relationship with God, he came to know God and trusted Him to do what needed to be done.

He had his ups and downs, obviously. But, especially at this point of his life, he knew "where his bread was buttered." His hope was in God and God alone.

As far as I know, Psalm 33 is not a psalm of David. But, whoever the psalmist was, he set up a comparison among things that one could hope for.

Psalm 33:16-20 No king *is* saved by the multitude of an army; A mighty man is not delivered by great strength. A horse *is* a vain hope for safety; Neither shall it deliver *any* by its great strength. Behold, the eye of the LORD *is* on those who fear Him, On those who hope in His mercy, To deliver their soul from death, And to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD;

By the way, whenever you see the word "wait," here, it is often one of the words that is also translated hope in the Old Testament.

Psalm 33:20-22 Our soul waits for the LORD; He *is* our help and our shield. For our heart shall rejoice in Him, Because we have trusted in His holy name. Let Your mercy, O LORD, be upon us, Just as we hope in You.

Can we really trust an army to save us? Our strength? That is pretty feeble. How about the speed and strength of a horse? "High Ho Silver—Away!" and that sort of thing. "Let's get out of here!" None of these potential helps are a sure thing. An army, in these biblical days, could be scattered. An army could get disease. Another army might come up and defeat this one. What good is an army?

Of course, our own strength is nothing to write home about. And, a horse may lose a shoe. For want of a nail the shoe was lost, for want of a shoe the horse is lost, etc. Then the kingdom is lost. And where are you then? It is gone!

But with God... He is a different story. For one thing, God has our best interest at heart. (Romans 8: 28) He is going to bring good out of any situation that there is for those who love Him, and are the called according to His purpose.

And perhaps the more important point is that He has unchanging righteous character. That comes from that phrase there, "because we have trusted in His Holy Name (verse 21)." We understand what His name represents; all the wonderful attributes that He has are bound up within His Names. His names define for us what He is like in many respects.

So, we are instructed by His Holy Name. We trust in those things because they describe His nature. He will not go against His own Holy righteous nature. He will always do the things that

are within His nature to do. And they are always good. And so we can be confident that if we trust in His name that there is always going to be hope because He has promised, He has spoken, and He has said things to us that we can take to the bank. He is going to fulfill them perfectly every time.

We trust in Him, and thus we have hope. The heart of hope is faith in God.

So, like it says here, they rejoiced. Whatever it was—oncoming death or sickness, famine, surrounded by an army, in a deep pit—it did not matter. They could rejoice even in the midst of these severe trials, even in death, because hope is always in play because of God's eternal nature; because He is, and because He has revealed himself to be what He is—holy, righteous, unchanging, eternal.

We can be confident, joyous, and hopeful. We can have the confident enduring expectation of deliverance.

Now Paul acknowledges this in the New Testament in I Thessalonians 1:2. He is telling them the things that he prays about concerning them. This is just after he opens the book, gives his salutation there, and acknowledges God; then he says:

I Thessalonians 1:2-3 We give thanks to God always for