

A Living, Transforming Hope

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It is reported that several years ago researchers did a study to determine the effect hope has on those undergoing hardship. Two sets of laboratory rats were placed in separate tubs of water from which they could not escape unaided. The researchers left one set in the water and found that within an hour the exhausted rats all drowned. The other rats were periodically lifted out of the water and then returned. These animals swam for over 24 hours. Why? Not because they were given rest, but because they had hope! They had come to believe that if they held out just a little longer, someone would reach down and rescue them. Without defending what seems to have been a rather cruel experiment, we simply observe that if this is the effect of hope on unthinking rodents, what must its power be in the lives of human beings? There is nothing so critical to the success of gospel teaching as that it gives genuine hope to sincere hearers. Any supposed teaching of Christ which drives honest searching hearts to despair is a subversion of God's gracious purpose. "Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who had fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us" (Hebrews 6:17-18). We do not speak here of the proud, the insincere, the worldly hearers. The gospel is designed to cause them to stumble in their lusts. But genuine and humble souls should be made to rejoice at the implications of the story of the cross. However much tempered with sobriety, the response of such people to the preaching of Jesus should always, at last, be joy. This is not to deny that the gospel begins with a profoundly painful indictment of sin, but it is easy to say that such should not be the final impact of the message. If the preaching of Christ begins by driving us to our knees in repentance, it must end by lifting us to our feet in confident faith and hope. Paul says that we are saved "in hope" (Romans 8:24) and truer words were never spoken. It is the confidence we feel in God's gracious promises and the assurance He gives us of our power to obtain them by faith that keeps us going and growing, serving God through good times and bad. Indeed, it is this living by hope alone, having seen none of those blessed things which are the driving influence of our lives, which causes us to be so profoundly changed in character and attitude. We have to do right when not only is the reward for right nowhere in sight, but when punishing consequences for doing it are very near and very tangible. So is faith deepened and hope brightened (1 Peter 1:3-9). And there is every reason that those who have trusted in Christ should have a bright and confident hope. The most wonderful thing has already happened. God, in the cross, has demonstrated His love for us so powerfully that we can never again have cause to doubt the depth of His commitment (Romans 5:8; 8:31). As Paul wonderingly asks, if that is what God is willing to do for His enemies, what would He be willing to do for His friends (5:10-11)? It is beyond imagining! But it is not just God's overwhelming love for us that gives us hope, but the immensity of the power that works that loving purpose. Some have love, but no power. Others have power, but no love. God has both. "Now to him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all ages, world without end. Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21). One March 5, 1979, scientists noted what was then called the most powerful energy burst ever recorded. This burst of gamma radiation picked up by satellites lasted only one-tenth of a second, but in that brief instant it emitted as much energy as the sun does over a period of 3,000 years. That kind of energy, coming from our sun, would have vaporized the earth. We marvel at the power that God sends pulsating through the universe, but it is dwarfed by the power that a loving God has exercised to save a lost humanity. Even the power that created the world is small by comparison to the enormous energy which God wields to produce spiritual rebirth in a single human being. That power, Paul says, beggars our wildest imaginings, and it is working in us! How great, then, our hope should be, and how powerfully such a hope should affect how we live our lives and how we face our troubles and our failures. If we should grasp even a measure of this truth, would it not revolutionize us? Lord, increase our faith — and our hope!