

THEISM

God Gives Hope

Even though there are times when we may think everything seems hopeless, we probably have not seen our own situations as hopeless as what Jeremiah once described. After God had brought Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, to destroy the city of Jerusalem because God's people had forsaken him, Jeremiah vividly presented the city's plight as his own. In the Book of Lamentations, Jeremiah said that God had made him to "walk in darkness and not in light" (3:2), had "aged his flesh and his skin" (3:4), had hedged him in so that he could not get out (4:7), had shut out his prayers (3:8), had made him to become the ridicule of all his people (3:14), had filled him with bitterness (3:15), had moved his soul far from peace (3:17), etc. He said, "My strength and my hope have perished from the Lord" (3:18). Have you ever felt such hopelessness?

But then Jeremiah said, "This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I hope in him!' The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (3:21-26). Because Jeremiah believed that through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, and that because his compassions fail not, Jeremiah had hope. Like Jeremiah, our situations, however difficult they may be, are not hopeless, if we trust and obey God, because God is faithful in his mercy and in his compassion.

Yet, God's goodness and mercy are often not apparent. If we cry out in despair when ungodliness all around us seems oppressive, then our feelings may be no different than those of the prophet Habakkuk. When Habakkuk observed the ungodly around him, he cried out, "O LORD, how long shall I cry, and you will not hear? Even cry out to you, "Violence!" and you will not save. Why do you show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. Therefore the law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore perverse judgment proceeds" (Habakkuk 1:2-4). Are our situations ever worse than that?

Habakkuk did not doubt the goodness, mercy, or compassion of God. Rather, he wondered how long God would allow such ungodliness to continue. In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John tells about others who asked the same question (Revelation 6:10). God answered Habakkuk, saying "Look among the nations and watch; be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you" (Habakkuk 1:5). Being finite, we know not what God knows, see not what he sees, nor can we anticipate his plans. But, like Habakkuk, we may wonder why the wicked often seem to prosper and the righteous often seem disadvantaged. To that question, the Lord answered that "the righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4, ESV). Because Habakkuk recognized the great power and work of God (Habakkuk 3), he had hope. He concluded his prophecy by writing "Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength; he will make my feet like deer's feet, and he will make me walk on my high hills . . ." (Habakkuk 3:17-19). Habakkuk's hope came from his faith that in life God would make him as sure-footed as a deer – "he will make me walk on my high hills." When all seems to go wrong, our hope is made possible by our faith in God.

The concept of hope may be variously conveyed. To hope is to look for something with eager expectation; it is to rely on something reliable; it is trust that is grounded in faith. Biblical hope is based on God and his saving activity; it trusts God to fulfill his promises. Those who hope in God believe that what he has done in the past gives assurance that in the future he will do what he has promised. Because God had redeemed the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, preserved them in the wilderness, and led them in a successful occupation of the Land of Canaan, the Israelites had reason to hope that God would continue to be with them. Even when they sinned, those who returned to him could count on him to forgive. Through Malachi, God promised, "Return to me, and I will return to you" (Malachi 3:7). The Psalmist wrote, "Hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is abundant redemption (Psalm 130:7).

God gives hope (Romans 15:13). In his mercy, he is steadfast like a rock that cannot be moved (Deuteronomy 32:4, 15, 18; Psalm 18:2; 62:2). When Paul was burdened beyond measure and despaired even of life itself, he said he could trust only in God who raises the dead (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). On another occasion, he wrote that "we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men" (1 Timothy 4:10, NASB). Peter informed his readers that God raised Jesus "from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God" (1 Peter 1:21). Hope in God is the same as hope in Christ because "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). God's promises are fulfilled in Christ. "All the promises of God in him are Yes" (2 Corinthians 1:20). Thus, "the Lord Jesus Christ" is "our hope" (1 Timothy 1:1). "Christ in you" is "the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

In hope, we Christians believe that God has acted in Christ for our salvation. We trust in the divine promises regarding the coming of Christ and our resurrection to eternal life. The grace of God teaches us that we should look "for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:11-13). God "has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:3-4). Therefore, "we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13). We live "in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began" (Titus 1:2). We are not disappointed by this hope "because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:5). The Holy Spirit is "the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:14). Paul prayed, "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13).

Although we Christians may live in troublesome times, we can live with confidence, courage, and hope (Psalm 31:24), derived not from simple optimism, but from trusting God (Hebrews 10:23). We can "glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4). People who rely on God have a quality of hope that surpasses those who are without God. Christians "have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast . . ." (Hebrews 6:18-19). "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord" (Jeremiah 17:7).