

## ***GAP BETWEEN PRACTICE AND PRAISE***

**Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**

Faith...What is it? Hope, luck, good wishes...how do these relate to faith? Are they all the same?

According to the writer of the Book of Hebrews, "Faith is the assurance of things HOPED for, the conviction of things not seen." First, we must be reminded to whom this letter was written. The Book of Hebrews was addressed to a beleaguered, wrung-out band of Jewish Christians who wrestled deeply with concerns of faith and doubt. It was written partly to combat melancholy and to encourage Christians who were having trouble holding onto hope when Christ had not returned immediately after his resurrection.

In chapter 11, the writer gives this valuable definition of faith, using the Greek word, *hupostasis*, meaning "stand under," that is to be a foundation. Faith is the foundation on which all our hopes for the future are built. Faith, rather than being something ultimately dependent upon us, comes to us at God's own initiative which, mediated by God's Word, engenders a hope-filled response to the promises of God. In other words, Faith is stepping out into the unknown with nothing to guide us but a hand just beyond our grasp.

You see, ultimately we cannot see the fullness of God's kingdom yet. As we discussed in the writings of Paul in his Letters to Colossae, God sees the whole picture, while we see only a snap shot of what is, not what is to come. Since we cannot see that larger picture, we hope for something that is yet to come, this is what drives and inspires us. That is the origin from which our hope comes.

Sometimes things take longer, and like the audience of the Book of Hebrews who were waiting for Christ's return, we are still waiting for an answer from God. We, like the early Christians to whom this Letter was written, find it difficult to follow God when we are not sure where God is leading. When we do not see evidence of action, we begin to wonder whether God is even there, is really watching over us. Thus we begin to question, doubting God's presence. However, faith really does matter. It is our faith that gives assurance that God has our best interests at heart, that God knows what we hope for, and holds our future.

We can hope, but in faith we often have to trust God and other people with our future and find our assurance outside ourselves. Hope in the final full actualization of the kingdom of God can sustain our commitment to improve life here on earth...But the virtue of hope must be rooted in faith in God, not mere optimism about human beings capacity for self-improvement.

In one episode of "Peanuts," Lucy is in her usual position in right field when suddenly a batter hits a fly ball to her. She looks up to catch it, only to have it drop behind her. She picks up the ball and saunters to the pitcher's mound to give it to Charlie Brown, saying, "Sorry I missed that one, manager, I was hoping I'd catch it! Hope got in my eyes."

The story of Lucy and her missed fly ball is appropriate because it reveals our human confusion over what hope really is. Lucy confuses hope with wishful thinking. Wishful thinking looks for that which has never happened before. Wishful thinking anticipates that for which there has been no effort, no improvement. But Lucy is not the only one who is confused by hope. For example Voltaire called hope: "A mania of maintaining that everything is right when it is wrong." Samuel Johnson has written that hope is "the chief happiness which this world affords."

And so, the question remains, what is hope? More specifically, what does the Bible say about hope? In St. Paul's Letter to the Romans the 8th chapter we read these verses: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed to us, for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. The creation was subjected to futility not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope. And again we know that all things work together for good to those who love God who are called according to his purpose."

We see that wishful thinking is not what Paul has in mind when he writes of hope. The text begins with an honest acceptance of what is real. Paul understands that the world is not what we would like it to be. Surely this is a world which we can recognize. Far from being an ideal world, Paul knows that this world is filled with pain and tragedy; he doesn't say that is all there is, but he knows that realism demands that we acknowledge it. And we too understand for we hear daily of tragedies. The text declares that authentic hope comes from a realistic view of the world. However, such a view of the world is only possible through faith. We can do that only because faith demands that we see the world with open eyes and yet discover God acting within it. Faith gives birth to hope, for hope, when it sees the world as it is and comprehends the presence and activity of God, dares to reach into the future believing that this same God of grace is already there preparing the future for us.

In those majestic words of the writer of the Book of Hebrews, this realistic hope is presented: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1) This biblical hope is very real for us as Christians because we know what God has already done in Jesus of Nazareth - and our hope dares to believe that God will do in the future what God has promised. No matter how dark the present, God will bring the sun of the resurrection into our lives!

So hope is very different from wishful thinking. But how does hope compare with optimism? Alexander Solzhenitsyn tells of a moment when he was on the verge of giving up all hope. While a political prisoner in the Soviet Union, he was forced to work 12 hours a day on a starvation diet; and he became gravely ill. The doctors, in fact, predicted his death. One afternoon, while shoveling sand under a blazing sun, he simply stopped working. He stopped working even though he knew that the guards would beat him severely, even to death. But he felt he just could not go on.

Then he saw another prisoner, a fellow Christian, moving toward him cautiously. With his cane that man quickly drew a cross in the sand and then erased it. In that brief moment, Solzhenitsyn felt all of the hope of the gospel flood through his soul. It was a renewal of Christian hope, even though the situation had not changed. It gave him courage to endure that difficult day and the months of imprisonment that followed.

This is the difference between Christian hope and optimism! Optimism is born of the human spirit. Its strength is the strength of one person's spirit. Unlike wishful thinking, optimism often sees the situation clearly and yet clings to the notion that good will triumph somehow. Hope is like optimism in the sense of clinging to confidence in the triumph of good, but it understands what that good is – how that triumph shall finally occur.

Hope is founded in God. And, like faith, hope is finally vindicated because God is faithful. For the Christian, hope is not dependent on the strength of our own spirit, but in fact functions precisely when our optimism fails, when our emotional and spiritual strength leaves us broken and vulnerable.

That is exactly what Solzhenitsyn discovered. When he had nothing left in himself, the building block of faith was still there. And that building block awakened within him that second great cornerstone of Christian spirituality: the gift of hope.

This building block of hope opened life up to him again. Our Faith grounds us in God; hope opens us to God's future. No wonder St. Paul places Hope second in that great abiding trinity of Faith, Hope and Love. Our Lord would have us build our lives solidly on faith, but God would also have us boldly accept the future which Jesus has won for all who believe in Him and that can only happen through the spiritual gift of hope. Hope empowers us for life by reminding us that God is in control and God will get it done.

General Ron Griffith served in the US Army during the Desert Storm War in Iraq. As the battle neared, Griffith was apprehensive (worried) about how many causal ties in the 24,000 troops he commanded would suffer. In New Man magazine, Gene Bradley and Wes Pipert wrote this:

“Griffith had estimated between 1,000 and 2,000 casualties during a war that might last between 4 and 6 months. After all, Iraqis, at least on paper, probably outnumbered the American forces by 2 or 3 to 1. Worse, the intelligence showed the Iraqis had moved chemical weapons into position and Hussein had given his commanders authority to use them.”

A Christian, Griffith spoke about his concerns with Chaplain Dan Davis. “Let me tell you something.” Davis said. “Before we left Germany, we had a prayer group that met every morning in Stuttgart as the war drew near. We prayed there would be no war. But once it became clear there would be war, we prayed that the air war might be successful and that we would not have to put ground forces into this potential cauldron. We prayed that God's will be done; whatever that was.

Now, I want to tell you something that is not an instinct. This is not intuition. It is full assurance from God. I can tell you the attack will be hugely successful, more successful than anybody has envisioned. The war will be short, very short, and the casualties will be few, very, very few.”

Until this conversation, Griffith had not finished his work before 1:30 each morning. Even when he went to bed, he couldn't sleep. But after his talk with Davis, Griffith went back to his van, zipped up his sleeping bag and slept for five hours - the best night's sleep he'd had in six weeks. A great sense of calm fell over him.

“I felt God's presence with me. I took Dan's words as absolute truth. More importantly, that great calm stayed with me.”

The Americans attacked on February 24, 1991. The war was over in four days! Only four soldiers gave their lives. Griffith said it was a miracle.

Assurance, even in the most trying circumstances, is one of Gods greatest gifts to his children. But first you must have faith that cultivates hope. Receive these gifts from a loving God and know that we can count on God to be present in all times and places. We must KEEP THE FAITH.