

STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 14

Hebrews 7:18-28

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Remember, now, our author is proving that Jesus Christ is a priest superior in his priesthood to those who descended from Aaron. He is, unlike they, an eternal priest in the order of Melchizedek. And while they could not make perfect those who were served by them in the ceremonial rituals of Israel, Jesus is able to make perfect those who trust in him. We are talking about two ways of salvation: not the way of Moses and the way of Jesus, as is often thought; for those two ways were the same; but the way of ritual and ceremony *by itself* and the way of living faith in Jesus Christ. The temptation is not that these Jewish Christians would rest content with the old Mosaic faith that Christ has rendered obsolete – that is never taught in the Bible! – but, rather, they would embrace a corruption of the true Mosaic faith, which was, after all the gospel, the good news of salvation by faith in Christ, as this author has already reminded us in 4:1-2, the corruption that was first century Judaism.

v.19 Now, here, really for the first time in the sermon, the great interpretative problem of Hebrews surfaces for all to see. How can this author describe the Mosaic ritual – the rites and ceremonies; the priesthood; the temple and its service – how can he describe all of this as “weak and useless”? That certainly isn’t the impression of these things given in Exodus and Deuteronomy. It certainly isn’t the impression the godly had of these things as anyone can tell who reads the Psalms. Remember, for example, David in Psalm 50:23: “How who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.” But, take notice: this author condemns the ritual as useless *precisely because it could not make the worshipper perfect*. Well, no believer ever thought they could! But the temptation to think they could was a persistent problem throughout Israel’s history. Really what Hebrews will say here is precisely what the OT prophets were always saying to generations of God’s people who had exchanged for living faith in God himself a confidence in ritual performance and outward conformity to the liturgy of the temple. What you get here in Hebrews 7 is exactly what you get in Isa. 1; in Amos 5; in Jer. 7 and in many other places in the OT. The rites of the OT are being attacked *under the view of them held by first century Judaism* not for what they were in themselves, for what purpose they had in the true, evangelical religion of Moses. First century Judaism had detached ritual from the covenant faith of Israel, that faith of which the ritual was only sign and seal.

One of many demonstrations of this interpretation of vv. 18-19 is the use of the term “better,” in the phrase “better hope.” As we noted once before, this word “better” is a key word in Hebrews, occurring 13x and often in phrases like this one here. Later we will read of the better covenant, of better promises, better sacrifices, better possessions, better country, and better resurrection. But, as will become still more clear as the argument proceeds, these better things are not solely the inheritance of believers who live after the incarnation of the Son of God, who live in the new epoch introduced by Christ and his apostles. The better things are those very things always looked forward to by true believers, from Abel onward, and those very things that no one has yet received and that

every believer will receive only in the world to come at the end of history. The better hope is not a hope better than that which believers had in the ancient epoch, it is the true inheritance of the saints as opposed to those false and worldly hopes entertained by those who have no true faith. It is what the true believer gets in heaven as opposed to what mere pretenders to faith get in this world. Everybody's got hope: but the followers of Christ have the better hope!

This view of what is being said is confirmed also by the fact that later the author will make it clear that the OT saints also *drew near* to God. All believers, past, present, and future, share in the same salvation. But, church folk who put their confidence in other things than Christ himself do not and will not draw near to God.

- v.21 Remember, he is proving the superiority of Christ's priesthood to that of the Levitical priests. The Lord Jesus was appointed a priest by God's own oath.
- v.22 Again, note the word "guarantee." The future-perspective is maintained. Christ has not brought the fulfillment of the new covenant, he has guaranteed to those who trust in him that it will some day be fulfilled. Characteristically, as we have seen, this brief statement, in 7:22, anticipates the development of this thought later, in 8:6ff.
- v.25 The superiority of Christ's priesthood is also proved by his personal eternity.
- v.28 The difference between the other priests and Christ is the difference between the imperfect person and the perfect – both the priest himself and the sacrifice he offers – between the sinful man and the sinless, between the mortal and the immortal, between the dead and the ascended to the Right Hand. Those are all big differences! Verses 26-28 serve to recapitulate the argument of the sermon so far. Christ does for believers what no earthly priest could ever do. That is why we must hold fast to him and let nothing come between us.

I want to consider with you this evening the "better hope" that we have in Jesus Christ. You know that "hope" is an important concept in the New Testament's presentation of the good news of salvation in Christ. But it takes some thought to enter into the NT's idea of hope. We use the word to mean "wish." That is, hope refers to a neutral expectation of something in the future. We "hope" that something will happen, which is to say we want it to happen, but we don't know whether or not it will. But the NT idea of hope is different. It does not mean "wish" or "longing," it means the certain expectation of what has been promised. It is the certain future viewed from the perspective of longing, desire, and eager expectation. It is another word for "faith," that is, "the confidence of things not seen." The second coming of Jesus Christ is referred to as the Christian's "hope." Paul says that the unbelieving world is "without hope (Eph. 2:12)." The world certainly has wishes, longings, but they do not have a Christian's hope. God is called the "hope" of his people in the OT (Jer. 14:8) and Jesus Christ himself is called the Christian's "hope" (1 Tim. 1:1).

All this is why Paul prays, in Romans 15:13, that we might “overflow with hope.” Christian hope, he says in Romans 5:2-3, enables us even to rejoice in our tribulations, because we know a glorious future awaits us and that puts life’s troubles in their proper place and perspective.

A year or so ago, our own Alice Seifert had, what they nowadays call an “episode.” She was at home alone, and she felt a shortness of breath come over her and weakness and an irregular beating of her heart, as I remember. She thought she was dying. She is an old woman and growing frail, so that would have been a natural thing to imagine. For all we know, perhaps she was dying. At any rate, in that moment, facing the very real prospect of death, thinking that her life had come to an end, she found herself wonderfully at peace. No, it was even more than that. She found herself delighted with the prospect that in moments she would be with the Lord. What might be thought to have been the most terrifying moment of her life, was in fact, as she later told me through tears, a moment of almost supreme pleasure and happiness. In fact, when the episode passed and she realized that she was not going to die, she felt a definite and keen sense of disappointment! That is a picture of biblical *hope*. A confidence in a happy future, a confidence in the certainty of everlasting life, so serene, so secure, so sure that one can look even death in the face with complete calm, even cordial welcome; that is Christian hope. And it is not hard to see how living in such hope must alter one’s perspective on life and give one a strength and a peace and a confidence that people without hope cannot have.

Human beings have been made for hope, because they have been made for the future. You have heard, I’m sure, C.S. Lewis’ famous argument, based on this universal fact of human life. It is found in a letter he wrote to Sheldon Vanauken and printed in the latter’s wonderful book, *A Severe Mercy* (92-93).

“A wish may lead to false beliefs, granted. But what does the existence of the wish suggest? At one time I was much impressed by Arnold’s line, ‘Nor does the being hungry prove that we have bread.’ But, surely, tho’ it doesn’t prove that one particular man will *get* food, it *does* prove that there is such a thing as food! I.e. if we were a species that didn’t normally eat, weren’t designed to eat, would we feel hungry? You say the materialist universe is ‘ugly!’ I wonder how you discovered that! If you are really a product of a materialistic universe, how is it you don’t feel at home there? Do fish complain of the sea for being wet? Or if they did, would that fact itself not strongly suggest that they had not always been, or wouldn’t always be, purely aquatic creatures? Notice how we are perpetually *surprised* at time. (‘How time flies! Fancy John being grown-up and married! I can hardly believe it!’) In heaven’s name why? Unless, indeed, there is something in us which is *not* temporal.”

Human life, Lewis is saying, is oriented to the future. It has been made that way because it has been made in the image of an eternal God. The prospect of their life ending is always an unnatural one, a strange one for human beings, because they have been made to think about their existence in a way that always assumes the future, more time, developments still to come. Life always is oriented to the future and in more ways than we often notice. Man always looks to the future as the prospect of something better, as the time when his longings will be fulfilled. Everyone does, however irreligious. Hope is a central fact of human existence and the loss of hope is the devastation of human life. Suicide occurs precisely at the point that the loss of hope

has become unbearable. You see this everywhere you look in the world: people who have hopes for the future and, to some degree, pin their hopes on the future. They hope for love, for weight loss, for a better job with a better income, they are hoping all the time. Daydreaming, which every human being indulges in constantly, is a form of hoping.

But, of course, many if not most human hopes are false. This future orientation, sinful human beings often turn into something frivolous or foolish, not serious and thoughtful. Human hopes are nothing but fond wishes for things that never come to pass. The medicine does not cure the disease as he had hoped. Love does not appear as she had hoped. A better job, which was hoped for, never arrives. The person never gets over certain problems, never gets past certain misfortunes, never sees his or her life come into its own happily and permanently. Old age is not successfully staved off as had been hoped. But these disappointments are, obviously, true of Christian life in the world as they are true of unbelieving life. So, what is the difference?

The difference is that there are some things about the future, some absolutely and supremely wonderful things of which Christians are sure and certain, things so magnificent that they make all of these other disappointed hopes or unfulfilled wishes inconsequential. These are the Christian's *hope* not his or her mere wishes. The worldly man, of course, tends to think that the Christian's hope is just a wish like all of his own wishes. Indeed, he often scorns the Christian's hope as "pie in the sky by and by." Modern philosophy since Feuerbach and psychology since Freud has seen Christian religious faith as the mere projection of wishes, an exercise in wish fulfillment. And even the modern layman has been taught to say that the Christian is so heavenly minded that he is of no earthly use. But that is pure bombast. To be confident of a happy and holy future has the purest and happiest effect on the fruitfulness of life in this world. As Lewis, again, put it:

"Hope...means...a continual looking forward to the eternal world.... It does not mean that we are to leave the world as it is.... Christians [in history] who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.... It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in'; aim at earth and you will get neither." [*Mere Christianity*, 118]

It would be easy to prove that statement from church history. And, in any case, with death looming, with eternity beckoning, the only vitally important question for any human being is *precisely* whether or not the Christians have a right to this confidence they have about the future and what it will bring. It is obvious that there can be no lasting hope for life in this world. That much we know. As Dr. Harris used to say to those who disparaged Christian hope as "pie in the sky by and by," "well, it's certainly better than no pie at all." After all, the worst false hopes that unbelievers entertain is the hope that they will be fine after they die even though they have made no serious effort to find peace with God.

But, of course, the argument of our text is that we have a reason to believe in the Christian future: the second coming, the vindication of God's people in the Judgment, the eternal happiness and fulfillment and satisfaction of life in heaven in the immediate presence of God. The life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the beginning of that future, the

guarantee of it, and the anticipation of it. He is, as we have already seen in Hebrews, our forerunner; he has gone into the grave ahead of us and up to heaven before us, blazing the trail, so to speak.

If it be asked, how do you know that there is life after death, our answer is that Jesus Christ who was dead, was alive again, and now lives forever. If it be asked, how do we know that our bodies will be transformed to live forever, our answer is that this is what happened to Jesus' mortal body. If it be asked, how do we know that there is such a place as heaven, our answer is that Jesus ascended to heaven from this earth and promised us that he would prepare a place for us there and come again to take us there.

You see how immensely important the historical character of our faith is. We are resting everything on the fact that Jesus Christ has guaranteed our eternal happiness. But, we are not asked to believe that as a bare assertion. Christ died and rose again. He made our eternal life not only possible, he made it entirely reasonable to believe.

Now, you and I know how easy it is to lose an active sense of our hope. Our attention can so easily come to be fixed on worldly things, on wishes we have for our life here, that we lose the strength, peace, and confidence that come from the Christian hope. In our day of creature comforts, long life, affordable entertainments of every kind, it is easy to become fixated on what we might obtain in this world and to forget the far greater, more wonderful rewards that have been promised to us in the world to come. Liberal theology tends to make that mistake in theory – to concentrate all its attention on this world and to pay little attention to the world to come – while evangelicals make this mistake, not in theory, but in practice.

Obviously, one way of keeping that powerful hope awake in our hearts is to remember what an important ministry that hope is to the unsaved around us. The church by its ministries and by its example is to bring “hope” to the world. You are to bring hope to the people that you know. You are to bring, by your life and your words, knowledge of that hope to those who have no hope. Still today, as in Paul's day, those without Christ are without hope. And we are to show them that hope. Hope for this world, to be sure: that the poor can prosper, that marriages can work, that children can grow up in happiness and goodness, that beautiful things can be created and endure, etc. But, still more, those without hope of eternal life need to see the evidence of the reality of that hope in the life of Christ's people. As one theologian put it, the church “is like an arrow sent out into the world to point to the future.” [Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 328]

Remember Julian the Apostate, the nephew of Constantine. He had been raised with both pagan and Christian teachers, but had chosen paganism for his faith. When he became emperor, he set out to win the empire back to paganism, to undo the full recognition of the Christian church that had been granted by his Uncle. But Julian was a thoughtful man. He had given some thought to the question: why did Christianity succeed so well in winning the minds and hearts of people? How was it that this faith no one had ever heard about 300 years before, was now clearly the wave of the future in the Roman world? And he concluded that the Christians had prevailed, they had triumphed for three reasons: their courage in the face of persecution; their generosity to the poor; and their treatment of the dead. But, don't you see: that is simply another way of saying that the Christians had a hope that no one else had and had lived in that hope. The reason

they were willing to face death rather than disown the Lord is that they were absolutely sure that death was, for them, because of Jesus Christ, nothing more than “one, short, dark passage to eternal light.” Anyone can face death who knows that, but moments later, he will be in paradise. The reason they treated the poor so generously was that, because of their certainty of the amazing wonder of the world to come, they didn’t have to hoard their property in this world and were free to be generous with it. And the reason they treated their dead so lovingly and buried them in ways that so powerfully suggested their expectation that they would see their loved ones again, was precisely because of this strong Christian hope. In their burial customs, the Christians beautifully embodied a confidence in a happy future that the pagans did not have.

Christians living in hope are a powerful recommendation for the gospel of Christ, powerful evidence of its reality. To live in this hope is to live in power and to live in joy – two things that the world craves but has great difficulty finding and keeping! But Christians are sure of this wonderful future because Christ has already gone to that future ahead of them. A piece of their own human nature is already up there in heaven.

Imagine yourself an apostle who had seen Christ after his death! Imagine that you had been in the Upper Room when he made his appearance to his disciples that first Easter night. Imagine that, forty days later, you were among those who saw him ascend from this world to heaven and had heard the angel say that Jesus would come back the way he departed. Imagine what you would think about the round of daily events and the struggles and the pleasures of life. Looming above it all would be your constant recollection that Jesus was in heaven and that you would be there with him very soon. No matter what your day was like, from time to time the memory of seeing him rising up out of this world and being lost in the clouds and hearing the angel say that he would come back as he left would crowd into your mind. Time after time your thoughts would go up to heaven and you would wonder what he was doing there in heaven at that moment. And time after time when life became difficult, it would occur to you that Christ was up there in heaven already, and you would soon join him. And think of how differently you would live your life and think about your life here with those recollections of the risen Lord Jesus constantly pressing themselves home to your mind and heart.

If anyone ever doubted your confidence in the future, if anyone ever poured scorn on your hope of eternal life, you would answer, kindly, I hope: I have a friend, a Savior, a high priest, who is already there. I saw him die, I saw him alive again, I saw him leave this world for heaven. The one thing I cannot doubt is the eternal life in heaven that is promised to all who believe in Jesus Christ.

Well, these folk to whom Hebrews was written, had not *seen* Jesus with their own eyes, though they had learned the gospel from people who had. They had seen powerful miracles that confirmed the truth of what had been taught to them. They had reasons enough to know that Jesus was, in fact, the guarantee of all that had been promised in the gospel. And, therefore, they had reason to live in hope, in the sure and certain expectation of surpassingly wonderful things to come. And so do you and I.