

Hope Perfectly

by Alexander Maclaren

The sermon emphasizes the importance of cultivating perfect hope, which is characterized by certainty and continuity, and is essential for a vigorous and life-dominating Christian experience.

Scripture: Romans 8:24

Topics: "Christian Hope", "Cultivation of Hope"

Description

Alexander Maclaren emphasizes the transformative power of hope in Christianity, presenting it as a vital element that shapes a noble life and is essential for salvation. He explains that Christian hope is not a mere wish but a certain anticipation of future grace and glory, rooted in the revelation of Jesus Christ. Maclaren outlines the duty of Christians to cultivate this hope, highlighting its qualities of certainty and continuity, and stresses the importance of mental discipline and sobriety in nurturing it. He encourages believers to focus their minds on eternal truths rather than earthly distractions, thereby elevating their hopes to align with God's promises. Ultimately, he calls for a perfect hope that is actively pursued and deeply rooted in the grace that is to be revealed.

Transcript

Christianity has transformed hope and given it a new importance by opening to it a new world to move in and supplying to it new guarantees to rest on. There is something very remarkable in the prominence given to hope in the New Testament and in the power ascribed to it to order a noble life. Paul goes so far as to say that we are saved by it. To a Christian it is no longer a pleasant dream which may be all an illusion, indulgence in which is pretty sure to sap a man's force, but it is a certain anticipation of certainties, the effect of which will be increased energy and purity. So our Apostle, having in the preceding context in effect summed up the whole Gospel, bases upon that summary a series of exhortations, the transition to which is marked by the "wherefore" at the beginning of my text. The application of that word is to be extended so as to include all that has preceded in the letter, and there follows a series of practical advises, the first of which, the grace or virtue which he puts in the forefront of everything, is not what you might have expected, but it is "hope perfectly."

I may just remark before going further in reference to the language of my text, that, accurately translated, the two exhortations which precede that to hope are subsidiary to it, for we ought to read, "Wherefore, girding up the loins of your mind, and being sober, hope." That is to say, these two are preliminaries or conditions or means by which the desired perfecting of the Christian hope is to be sought and attained.

Another preliminary remark which I must make is that what is enjoined here has not reference to the duration but to the quality of the Christian hope. It is not "to the end," but as the Margin of the Authorized and the Revised Version concurs in saying, it is "hope perfectly."

So, then, there are three things here?the object, the duty, and the cultivation of Christian hope. Let us take these three things in order.

I. The Object of Christian Hope

Now that is stated in somewhat remarkable language as "the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." We generally use that word "grace" with a restricted signification to the gifts of God to men here on earth. It is the earnest of the inheritance, rather than its fullness. But here it is quite obvious that by the expression the Apostle means the very same thing as he has previously designated in the preceding context by three different phrases"an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled," "praise and honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ," and "the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls." The "grace" is not contrasted with the "glory" but is another name for the glory. It is not the earnest of the inheritance, but it is the inheritance itself. It is not the means toward attaining the progressive and finally complete "salvation of your souls," but it is that complete salvation in all its fullness.

Now, that is an unusual use of the word, but that it should be employed here, as describing the future great object of the Christian hope, suggests two or three thoughts. One is that that ultimate blessedness with all its dim, nebulous glories which can only be resolved into their separate stars when we are millions of leagues nearer to its luster is like the faintest glimmer of a new and better life in a soul here on earth, purely and solely the result of the undeserved, condescending love of God that stoops to sinful men and instead of retribution bestows upon them a heaven.

The grace that saved us at first, the grace that comes to us filtered in drops during our earthly experience is poured upon us in a flood at last. And the brightest glory of heaven is as much a manifestation of the divine grace as the first rudimentary germs of a better life now and here. The foundation, the courses of the building, the glittering pinnacle on the summit with its golden spire reaching still higher into the blue is all the work of the same unmerited, stooping, pardoning love. Glory is grace, and heaven is the result of God's pardoning mercy.

There is another suggestion here to be made, springing from this eloquent use of this term, and that is not merely the identity of the source of the Christian experience upon earth and in the future, but the identity of that Christian experience itself in regard of its essential character. If I may say so, it is all of a piece, homogeneous, and of one web. The robe is without seam, woven throughout of the same thread. The life of the humblest Christian, the most imperfect Christian, the most infantile Christian, the most ignorant Christian here on earth has for its essential characteristics the very same things as the lives of the strong spirits that move in light around the throne and receive into their expanding nature the ever-increasing fullness of the glory of the Lord. Grace here is glory in the bud; glory yonder is grace in the fruit.

But there is still further to be noticed another great thought that comes out of this remarkable language. The words of my text, literally rendered, are "the grace that is being brought unto you." Now, there have been many explanations of that remarkable phrase which I think is not altogether exhausted by nor quite equivalent to that which represents it in our version?namely, "to be brought unto you." That relegates it all into the future; but in Peter's conception it is in some sense in the present. It is "being brought."

What does that mean? There are far-off stars in the sky, the beams from which have set out from their home of light millenniums since and have been rushing through the waste places of the universe since long before men were, and they have not reached our eyes yet. But they are on the road. And so in Peter's conception, the apocalypse of glory which is the crowning manifestation of grace is rushing toward us through the ages, through the spheres, and it will be here some day, and the beams will strike upon our faces and make them glow with its light. So certain is the arrival of the grace that the Apostle deals with it as already on its way. The great thing on which the Christian hope fastens is no "peradventure" but a good which has already begun to journey toward us.

Again, there is another thought still to be suggested, and that is, the revelation of Jesus Christ is the coming to His children of this grace which is glory, of this glory which is grace. For mark how the Apostle says, "the grace which is being brought to you in the revelation of Jesus Christ." And that revelation to which he here refers is not the past one in His incarnate life upon earth, but it is the future one to which the hope of the faithful church ought ever to be steadfastly turned, the correlated truth to that other one on which its faith rests. On these two great pillars rising like columns on either side of the gulf of time, "He has come," "He will come," the bridge is suspended by which we may safely pass over the foaming torrent that else would swallow us up. The revelation in the past cries out for the revelation in the future. The Cross demands the throne. That He has come once, a sacrifice for sin, stands incomplete, like some building left unfinished with tugged stones protruding which prophesy an addition at a future day, unless you can add "unto them that look for Him will He appear the second time without sin unto salvation." In that revelation of Jesus Christ His children shall find the glory-grace which is the object of their hope.

So say all the New Testament writers. "When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory," says Paul. "The grace that is to be brought unto you in the revelation of Jesus Christ," chimes in Peter. And John completes the trio with his "We know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him." These three things, brethren?with Christ, glory with Him, likeness to Him??are all that we know, and blessed be God! all that we need to know of that dim future. And the more we confine ourselves to these triple great certainties and sweep aside all subordinate matters which are concealed partly because they could not be revealed and partly because they would not help us if we knew them, the better for the simplicity and the power and the certainty of our hope. The object of Christian hope is Christ in His revelation, in His presence, in His communication to us for glory, in His assimilating of us to Himself.

It is enough that Christ knows all, And we shall be with Him.

"The grace that is being brought unto you in the revelation of Jesus Christ."

II. The Duty of the Christian Hope

And now notice the duty of the Christian hope. Hope a duty? That strikes one as somewhat strange. I very much doubt whether the ordinary run of good people do recognize it as being as imperative a duty for them to cultivate hope as to cultivate any other Christian excellence or virtue. For one man who sets himself deliberately and consciously to brighten up and to make more operative in his daily life the hope of future blessedness, you will find a hundred that set themselves to other kinds of perfecting of their Christian character. And yet, surely, there do not need any words to enforce the fact that this hope full of immortality is no mere luxury which a Christian may add to the plain fare of daily duty or leave untasted according as he likes, but that it is an indispensable element in all vigorous and life-dominating Christian experience.

I do not need to dwell upon that, except just to suggest that such a vividness and continuity of calm anticipation of a certain good beyond the grave is one of the strongest of all motives to the general robustness and efficacy of a Christian life. People used to say a few years ago a great deal more than they do now that the Christian expectation of heaven was apt to weaken energy upon earth, and they used to sneer at us and talk about our "other worldliness" as if it were a kind of weakness and defect attached to the Christian experience. They have pretty well given that up now. Anti-Christian sarcasm like everything else has its fashions, and other words of reproach and contumely have now taken the place of that.

The plain fact is that no one sees the greatness of the present unless he regards it as being the vestibule of the future and that this present life is unintelligible and insignificant unless beyond it and led up to by it and shaped through it there lies the eternal life beyond. The low, flat plain is dreary and desolate, featureless and melancholy when the sky above it is filled with clouds. But sweep away the cloud-rack and let the blue arch itself above the brown moorland, and all glows into luster, and every undulation is brought out, and tiny shy forms of beauty are found in every corner.

And so if you drape heaven with the clouds and mists born of indifference and worldliness, the world becomes mean, but if you dissipate the cloud and unveil heaven, earth is greatened. If the hope of the grave that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ shines out above all the flatness of earth, then life becomes solemn, noble, worthy of, demanding, and rewarding our most strenuous efforts. No man can and no man will strike such effectual blows on things present as the man, the strength of whose arm is derived from the conviction that every stroke of the hammer on things present is shaping that which will abide with him forever.

My text not only enjoins this hope as a duty but also enjoins the perfection of it as being a thing to be aimed at by all Christian people. What is the perfection of hope? Two qualities, certainty and continuity. Certainty; the definition of earthly hope is an anticipation of good less than certain, and so in all the operations of this great faculty which are limited within the range of earth, you get blended as an indistinguishable throng, "hopes and fears that kindle hope," and that too often kill it. But the Christian has a certain anticipation of certain good, and to him memory may be no more fixed than hope, and the past no more unalterable and uncertain than the future.

The motto of our hope is not the "perhaps" which is the most that it can say when it speaks the tongue of earth, but the "verily! verily!" which comes to its enfranchised lips when it speaks the tongue of heaven. Your hope, oh Christian, should not be the tremulous thing that it often is which expresses itself in phrases like "Well! I do not know, but I tremblingly hope," but it should say, "I know and am sure of the rest that remaineth, not because of what I am but because of what He is."

Another element in the perfection of hope is its continuity. That hits home to us all, does it not? Sometimes in calm weather we catch a sight of the gleaming battlements of "the City which hath foundations," away across the sea, and then mists and driving storms come up and hide it.

There is a great mountain in Central Africa which if a man wishes to see, he must seize a fortunate hour in the early morning, for all the rest of the day it is swathed in clouds, invisible. Is that like your hope, Christian man and woman, gleaming out now and then and then again swallowed up in the darkness? Brethren! these two things, certainty and continuity, are possible for us. Alas! that they are so seldom enjoyed by us.

III. Cultivation of This Christian Hope

And now one last word. My text speaks about the discipline or cultivation of this Christian hope. It prescribes two things as auxiliary thereto. The way to cultivate the perfect hope which alone corresponds to the gift of God is "girding up the loins of your mind, and being sober." Of course, there is here one of the very few reminiscences that we have in the Epistles of the ipsissima verba of our Lord. Peter is evidently referring to our Lord's commandment to have "the loins girt and the lamps burning, and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord." I do not need to remind you of the Eastern dress that makes the metaphor remarkably significant, the loose robes that tangle a man's feet when he runs, that need to be girded up and belted tight around his waist as preliminary to all travel or toil of any kind. The metaphor is the same as that in our colloquial speech when we talk about a man "pulling himself together."

Just as an English workman will draw his belt a hole tighter when he has some special task to do, so Peter says to us, make a definite effort with resolute bracing up and concentration of all your powers, or you will never see the grace that is hurrying toward you through the centuries. There are abundance of loose, slack-braced people up and down the world in all departments, and they never come to any good.

It is a shame that any one should have his thoughts so loosely girt and vagrant as that any briar by the roadside can catch them and hinder his advance. But it is a tenfold shame for Christian people, with such an object to gaze upon, that they should let their minds be dissipated all over the trivialities of time and not gather them together and project them, as I may say, with all their force toward the sovereign realities of Eternity. A sixpence held close to your eye will blot out the sun, and the trifles of earth close to us will prevent us from realizing the things which neither sight, nor experience, nor testimony reveal to us, unless with clenched teeth, so to speak, we make dogged effort to keep them in mind.

The other preliminary and condition is "being sober" which, of course, you have to extend to its widest possible signification, implying not merely abstinence from or moderate use of intoxicants or material good for the appetites, but also the withdrawing of one's self sometimes wholly from and always restraining one's self in the use of the present and the material. A man has only a given definite quantity of emotion and interest to expend, and if he flings it all away on the world, he has none left for heaven. He will be like the miner who spoils some fair liver by diverting its waters into his own sluice in order that he may grind some corn. If you have the faintest film of dust on the glass of the telescope or on its mirror, if it is a reflecting one, you will not see the constellations in the heavens; and if we have drawn over our spirits the film of earthly absorption, all these bright glories above will, so far as we are concerned, cease to be.

So, beloved, there is a solemn responsibility laid upon us by the gift of that great faculty of looking before and after. What did God make you and me capable of anticipating the future for? That we might let our hopes run along the low levels or that we might elevate them and twine them round the very pillars of God's Throne; which? I do not find fault with you because you hope but because you hope so meanly and about such trivial and transitory things.

I remember I once saw a seabird kept in a garden, confined within high walls and with clipped wings, set to pick up grubs and insects. It ought to have been away out, hovering over the free ocean, or soaring with sunlit wing to a height where earth became a speck and all its noises were hushed. That is what some of you are doing with your hope, degrading it to earth instead of letting it rise to God; enter within the veil and gaze upon the glory of the "inheritance incorruptible and undefiled."

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