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# The Christian Hope and Our Fellow Man

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THE New Testament is a book of hope, an eschatological book from beginning to end, from John the Baptist to John the Divine, the Seer of Patmos. And this hope of the New Testament is throughout a "practical" hope; it is always related to life and action; the eschatological future indicative is never without its here-and-now present imperative. When John the Baptist announces that the long-foretold and long-awaited reign of God has drawn nigh, that God has laid bare His arm in these last days to interpose finally and definitively in history in the Person of the Mightier One, who shall bring catastrophic judgment in consuming fire and shall bring the creative afflatus of the Spirit of God, that herald's cry is but the causal clause to his prophetic imperative: "Repent ye!" Since God's reign is drawing near, John calls upon all men to turn to the God who is turning to them, to turn in absolute aversion from all sin, self-assertion, and pride, to turn in obedience, trust, and total devotion. "Let God plant you," John cries, "and bring forth fruit in keeping with His planting."

As for Jesus Himself, He echoes the Baptist's call to repentance as He echoes and intensifies His announcement of the Kingdom; the great promises of the Beatitudes are followed by the most drastic summons to repentance in the whole Bible, by the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus lays claim to the whole of the living and acting new man and demands of the new man sole and whole committal to Himself and to God, committal in action. And Jesus' eschatology, His announcement of the Last Things, is all a call to action: How few and sparse the hints, in Jesus' words, of "what heaven will be like"; how insistent in their recurrence the demands: "Be sober! Be vigilant!" "Be ready!" "Keep your lamps lit!" And this sobriety, this readiness, this vigilance, are no

mere temper of mind; they spell responsible action. "That one talent which is death to hide" dare not be lodged useless with those who call Jesus Lord. "Ye have done it unto Me," shall be the word at the Great Assize.

The disciples of Jesus learned their lesson well; the merely curious questioning "When shall these things be?" died from their lips and in their hearts. They learned not to ask, "What are the times and seasons of His coming?" For Peter the lively hope and the fadeless heritage laid up in heaven mean, "Gird up the loins of your mind"; his τελείως ἐλπίζατε (1 Peter 1:13), "Hope to the hilt," means obedience, holiness "in all manner of conversation"; the approaching cosmic catastrophe is for him no spectacle, no subject for shuddering aesthetics: "What manner of *persons* ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?" (2 Peter 3:11.)

"We shall see Him as He is," says John, "*and every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as He is pure*" (1 John 3:2, 3). For Paul, the Apostle unnaturally and violently born "out of due time," *the* great eschatological fact, *the* magnitude of hope is love, ἀγάπη. We know, he says, what hour has struck; God's chimes have rung in the dark, in the sleeping and drunken world, and we have heard them though the world has paid no heed. "The night is far spent, and the day is at hand"; it is high time to awake out of sleep, to walk honestly as in the day, to *act*, to pay the never-ending debt of love (Rom. 13:8, 11-14). Love is all hope, as it is all faith (1 Cor. 13:7); love never faileth (1 Cor. 13:8); in it the new world of God has begun even now. And the last book of the Bible is set off from all other apocalyptic writings by the insistent seriousness with which it calls to holy action: "Repent, and *do* the first works. . . . To him that *overcometh* I will give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Rev. 2:5, 7).—"I come quickly; and My reward is with Me, to give every man according as his *work* shall be" (Rev. 22:12).

This nexus between hope and life, between eschatology and action in the New Testament, is not confined to generalities like "holy living." An epistle like 1 Corinthians gives us a vivid picture of how the Christian hope permeated and informed every area of life in the church: the eschatological note is sounded from

the very beginning in this most practical epistle, in the opening thanksgiving (1:7,8); both the feckless factionalism of the Corinthians and their complacent sense of having arrived (their feeling that they "had it made," as it were) are set right eschatologically: "Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come . . . then shall every man have praise of God" (4:5). "Now ye are full, now ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings without us; and I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you" (4:8). The incestuous person is disciplined that his "spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (5:5); the "saints who shall judge the world"—how dare they go to law before the unjust of this world (6:12)! Fornication is unthinkable for men whose bodies are "for the Lord," for "God hath both raised up the Lord and will also raise up us by His own power" (6:14). Marriage or celibacy, that is a penultimate question: "The time is short; it remaineth that both they that have wives be as though they had none and they that weep as though they wept not . . . for the fashion of this world passeth away" (7:29-31). We are God's athletes and run for an incorruptible crown (9:25), a fact which we dare not forget when a brother's conscience imposes the necessity of self-denial and self-discipline upon us; we are men "upon whom the ends of the world are come," men confronted, therefore, with the ultimate rigor of decision (10:11). The church's worship is midway between the Incarnation and the return of our Lord; at Communion we show forth His death "until He come"—the bright shadow of the Christian hope falls over our eating and drinking (11:26). The gifts of grace given to the church are as empty as the noises of the cymbals of Cybele or the rattling tambourines of the Bacchantes unless they be borne and directed by the love which never faileth, the love of God's future world (13:1-3). Without hope, there is no church, no new people of God—"If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (15:19). "Therefore"—because God has given us the victory over death through our Lord Jesus Christ—"be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the *work* of the Lord" (15:58). And the closing cadence of the letter, after all the business of collection, travel plans, and greetings, is *Maranatha!* "Our Lord, come!" (16:22.)

To treat fully a topic like "Hope and Life" — and it is under this rubric that we shall see "Hope and Our Fellow Man" in its true perspective — would be to write a whole New Testament eschatology. And it is partly to delimit a halfway workable section of the New Testament proclamation that I have chosen to concentrate on the Epistle of St. James; partly also out of the timidity of the exegete, to stay within the comforting shade and foliage of a specific text and not to have to venture out bare, naked, into the glaring noonday sun of systematics. Perhaps this exegetical timidity will pay a kind of dividends. James is certainly a writer who is close to life; an inquiry into the relation of the hope of James to life is therefore a promising one; and perhaps in James, just because he is so intent on the practical, so intensely concerned with living, we shall see more clearly some aspects of the Christian hope which we might miss in more luxuriant domains in the New Testament, such as those of Paul or Peter. James is a barley-bread, rugged Scotland kind of epistle; but his sparse highlands have a most clear atmosphere.

### I. THE CHRISTIAN HOPE IN JAMES

The great eighteenth-century interpreter of the New Testament, Bengel, says somewhere of the certainty of the Christian hope: *Spes erit res*; hope will become reality. Bengel would consent, I am sure, to a slight modification of his dictum to express another aspect of the New Testament hope and let us say, *Spes est res*; the hope is a reality. For this, too, must be said if we are to speak adequately of the distinctively New Testament hope. For the hope of the New Testament is a reality which has in part, and that the decisive part, become an experienced reality in the church. The New Testament hope is both a hope realized and a hope hoped for, both *res gesta* and *res sperata*. Paul puts both aspects side by side in hard juxtaposition when he says, "In this hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:24, RSV).

#### A. *Hope Fulfilled in James*

The first words of the Epistle of St. James indicate that for James and his readers the hope fulfilled is a dominant reality: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the

twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting" (1:1). The fellow countrymen whom he addresses are twelve tribes scattered abroad, in the Dispersion; they have become the Diaspora in this world, uprooted, transplanted with a new center given to their existence. And James has a Lord, Jesus, to whom he stands in the same relationship as that in which he has heretofore stood to God alone; he is His slave. There is a continuity here with the past. There is the God of Israel, and there are the twelve tribes; but they are no longer the usual "twelve tribes of Israel" — there is also a sharp break with the past. What has given James a new Lord and made the new people of God a Diaspora here in the midst of this old world?

1. *New Revelation.* — Something eschatologically new has happened, something for which the New Testament uses, quite consistently, a particular adjective, *καινός*, "new" in the sense that it is contrasted with the old, succeeds and supersedes the old, and is superior to it. A new revelation has taken place, and this new revelation is in the Person of One whom James calls "our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory" (2:1). A man with the common Jewish name Jesus is the object of faith for Jewish men who know but one God, one Lord; this Jesus is *κύριος*, and He is the Anointed of God, *Χριστός*, and He bears a designation which for Jewish ears unmistakably spelled Deity, *δόξα*. The ultimate revelation has taken place; God Himself has entered into mankind. God has spoken the ultimate Word of Truth and has broken forever the power of the lie (1:18); He has declared and evinced Himself as the "Giver-God without reserve and without reproaching" (1:5); He has planted among men a Word which can *save* — "save" in the radically divine sense which the word has in the Bible, can deliver and rescue from judgment, wrath, and death (1:21). The fact that the Righteous One, the Anointed of God, died unresistingly at the hands of the men of this world is part of that Word and gives it its delivering power (5:6).

2. *A New Status for Men.* — This new revelation of God's is an act of God done to mankind; the fact that Jesus, the man, is *κύριος τῆς δόξης* (2:1) means that in Him mankind has achieved a new status before God, a new position. There is possible in mankind a new being-rich in faith, possible even for the beggar

and the outcast (2:6); there is a new people of God, a new twelve tribes (1:1); the hope of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel has become a realized hope. The old world of sin and death has become a place of sojourn only for this new people of God; they are in the Dispersion (1:1).

3. *A New Nature.*—But it is more than a new status merely that has been given, that man can now enjoy; it is something fuller, more dynamic, and more personal than merely a new status. There has been a *new birth*, that birth from above without which no man can "see" the kingdom of God (John 3:5); "Of His own will He brought us forth" (1:18). God's creative power and His will of love are the ingredients of our new making; we are therefore new creatures with wholly new potentialities of devotion, obedience, and *love*. God's great promise of the crown of life is to "those that love Him" (1:12); the mind of the flesh (Rom. 8:7), the enmity toward God which is the mark and signature of man born into this world a son of Adam, this mind has been recreated and turned to love of God.

4. *New Powers.*—This new birth is birth from the living, willing, active God; the new children of God who love Him are living, willing, active children, rich even now in faith (2:5), endowed with new powers: God has made His Spirit to dwell in them (4:5), that is, He is in and with them in sustaining and creative presence and gives them the greater grace for the greater need (4:6); He gives them power to evince themselves as sons of God even now, as peacemakers (Matt. 5:9), who sow the seed from which shall spring the harvest of righteousness, the full and perfect realization of God's will (3:18). He gives them wisdom, the ability to discern, to know, and to do His will even in the midst of trial (1:6), a meek wisdom from above that seeks not its own (3:13), that supersedes and overthrows the old, self-seeking, earthly, demonic wisdom, a wisdom that has upon it the marks of Christ, for it is "pure, peaceable, with royally condescending grace (ἐπιεικής), open to entreaty, full of mercy and good fruits, unswerving, unfeigned" (3:17). God has brought forth and endowed men capable of doing His new work in the midst of the old world, men capable of a worship which transcends the frustrate "purity" of the old cultus, a worship pure and un-

defiled in God's eyes, since it performs God's own work of mercy to the widow and the fatherless (1:27).

5. *A New Intensity and Certainty of Hope.*—This hope fulfilled, this *res-gesta* hope, looms large in James; therefore faith looms large in James, for faith is the full assent and the total self-committal to the way that God in Christ has gone with man in these last days. And the fact that hope is a hope which has been in large and decisive measure fulfilled, quickens and intensifies the longing and the certainty that all may be fulfilled, that God will go the rest of His way with man. For "Dispersion" is not God's last word to His people; "I will gather you" is His promise, and His promise is sure (Is. 11:11 f.).

#### B. *Hope Hoped for in James*

God will for His great name's sake gather in His scattered people, His Diaspora (Ezek. 29:21-29). Jesus, the Anointed of God, He who is called the Lord of Glory, must be and shall be the Lord of all (2:1); at His name every knee shall bow in heaven, in earth, and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess Him Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:11); the name "Lord" has in it the promise of absolute universality and of eternity.

The Word which is at work, implanted in mankind, will do the work it has the power to do—it will save in the full sense, the divine sense (1:21; cf. 4:12). And that deliverance issues in life, the crown of life, full and positive life, triumphant, splendid, royal life (1:12), life such as God has and can give, life in His kingdom, whereof we are heirs; those that mourn in Zion shall be comforted, with all tears wiped forever from their eyes; the hungerers and thirsters after righteousness shall be fed full at the breasts of consolation in the new world wherein righteousness dwelleth, for the new world shall be all God's and therefore all ours—the meek shall inherit it. Mercy shall triumph over judgment; the pure in heart shall look upon the Judge of the world and see Him unafraid, and those who now do God's own work of peacemaking shall be called by Him His sons.

God's purposes are ripening fast; the Sower has gone forth to sow the seed, and the grain is even now ripening toward the harvest under the early and the latter rain (5:7); the righteous



shall shine as the sun (Matt. 13:43), they shall joy before their God "according to the joy in harvest" (Is. 9:3). The second coming of Christ is very near; the Judge is at the door who shall set all right (5:9) with His judgment under the law of liberty, that judgment in which mercy shall triumph.

The scattered children of the new Israel shall return home in triumph, and with them God's creation shall come home to glorify God, the Creator. God of His will brought us men forth that we should be a first fruits, as it were, of His creatures — our new birth is both the beginning and the pledge of the full and universal consummation, the upbeat and the beginning, the thematic announcement of a greater music whose thunderous finale is, "Behold, I make all things new!" (Rev. 21:5; cf. Romans 8; Eph. 1:10.)

This hope, at once hope fulfilled and hope hoped-for, *res gesta* and *res sperata*, makes of us men set in motion, set in God's great motion toward the consummation of all things, and this being in God's motion leads to *a new, unheard-of detachment* on our part and to *a new, unheard-of, intense involvement*.

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(To be concluded)