

THE CHRISTIAN HOPE

"Wherefore, girding up the loins of your mind, be sober, and set your hope perfectly on the grace that is being brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." I Peter 1:13.

This verse begins with that familiar word "wherefore," which means that what the apostle is about to say is based on what he has just said. What has gone before furnished the reason for what follows. In the preceding verses Peter has been talking about salvation that has come through Jesus Christ. He says that the prophets of old, while they prophesied concerning this salvation, did not fully understand it, and searched diligently that they might get some conception of the blessings they foretold. Even the angels desired to look into these glorious things, and were not permitted to do so. But the Christians had the unspeakable privilege of experiencing that salvation. Wherefore, in view of this unspeakable privilege, Peter urges Christian people to live up to their high calling.

Christianity has transfigured hope and invested it with a new importance, by giving it a new world in which to expatiate and new guarantees on which to rest. Like all our faculties, it is ennobled by coming in touch with Jesus Christ, then ceases to be a mere dream of uncertain pleasant possibilities and becomes a certain anticipation of certain good.

Hope is the mainspring of life, the one thing that keeps us brave and determined when circumstances go hard with us. The man who is always looking backward, regretting a golden age that is past, mournfully asking what is the reason that the former times were better than these, will soon be jostled off the scene. The man likely to do things is the man whose eyes are toward the future, and who believes that for himself and others the best is yet to be. Alexander the Great, before starting on his grand expedition, gave away his chief possessions to his friends. An acquaintance asked him: "But what have you left for yourself?" He answered, "My hopes." Hope, then, is good. Life would be unendurable were all hope to die. But hope is scarcely a virtue till it is laid hold upon, ennobled, transfigured by Christian thought and Christian forces, and it is THE CHRISTIAN HOPE about which I am asking you to think.

Much is said in the New Testament about this hope, the hope inspired by Jesus Christ, the hope which grows out of experience and maketh not ashamed but rather bold and proud. But we need not go beyond the exhortation of our text, which is rich in direct teaching and suggestion. Let us, therefore, examine this statement in detail.

I. The Quality of the Christian Hope.

1. It is rational.

"Gird up the loins of your mind." That is a figure of speech based on a familiar custom of the day. The people wore long, flowing robes. When they were about to do something that called for the free use of the limbs, they girded their robes about their loins. Peter calls on Christians to gird up the loins of their minds. They have a journey to make, a warfare to wage, a race to run, and a work to do. In preparation for these things, they are to gird up the loins of their minds. All the thoughts and feelings must be brought under control.

2. It is temperate.

"Be sober." Intoxicants produce a foolish exhilaration, a glow of animal spirits,

an artificial hopefulness. They blunt the senses and cloud the mind, while they loosen the springs of emotion. They create around one an unreal world full of brightness and color, a world which is really a dream world. When their immediate effects have passed away, the world in which one lives is sadder and duller than ever. The Christian hopefulness is not of that kind, not the shallow optimism founded on illusion, but the tranquil and assured confidence which is strong enough to face all the facts of life. It moves about, not in a make-believe, but in a real world. It thinks not with a dull, narcotized mind, but with a clear and healthy mind. It gazes forth on things not with bleared and distorted eyes, but with steady, healthy vision.

To "be sober" means to keep the mastery over ourselves. When we speak of one as being sober, we usually mean that he is not under the influence of strong drink, or that he is grave and serious in his manner. The word which Peter uses carries the idea of self-control. The sober man is the one who, by the grace of God, is master of himself, controlling all the forces of his being.

3. It is steadfast.

"Set your hope perfectly," that is, nourish in your hearts a steadfast hope, a hope that is defiant of changing circumstances. Although we may find it difficult in all circumstances to be hopeful, we can in all cases cherish a brave and determined hope.

II. The Object of the Christian Hope.

The object of the Christian hope is "the grace that is being brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Christian hope is based on the grace that is being brought to us believers now during the progressive revelation of Jesus Christ, for He is continually revealing Himself to loving hearts according to His own most definite promises, "He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me; and he that loveth Me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him and will reveal Myself unto him." It is a present blessing that grows in wealth and wonder from day to day.

In our conventional religious phraseology we are in the habit of pitting grace against good, but here the two things are like two triangles superimposed one upon the other and covering precisely the same ground. Grace is set forth as the fullness of the future Christian possession. It is the very same thing as the praise and honor and glory which are to be found at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

"The grace that is being brought to you" implies that it is already on the road; the motion is already begun which will land it here. It has started already and is coming nearer every instant. Peter urges us to turn away from outward things and set our hope perfectly on the grace that is being brought to us as Christ becomes more and more real and precious to us. As Christ reveals Himself more and more during the Christian life, it is a constant and continuous unfolding of grace. It is the privilege of the Christian to have an ever-widening vision of Jesus Christ and to enter more fully into the blessings of His grace.

The Christian hope is personal and present. The all-sufficient grace of God is not something that awaits us in the distant future (after death and the resurrection); it is being brought to every believer now. Through this grace we may live triumphantly today and more triumphantly tomorrow. We should ever remember that the glorious culmination of blessings of His grace will be experienced in the return of Christ to this earth.

Nowhere in the New Testament is there to be found an uncertain note concerning the fact of Christ's return. There is much uncertainty about the time of His return, but none at all about the fact. He promised His disciples that He would come again and exhorted them to live in readiness. He said: "Let your loins be girded about, and your lamps burning; and be ye yourselves like unto men looking for their Lord." Luke 12:35-36. The Bible closes with the assurance of the living Lord that he is coming again. "Behold, I come quickly."

Christ Jesus is now behind the veil, and no one can see Him. But the day is coming when the veil will be drawn back, and every eye shall see Him. This is the event to which Peter refers when he exhorts Christians to set their hope on the grace that is to be brought at the revelation of Jesus Christ. It will be the culmination and consummation of all grace, the full inheritance of the saints of God. That is the glorious object of our hope, a grace that glorifies. The grace which we experience now is but a foretaste of the grace which shall be revealed at the coming of our Lord.

"Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!

Oh, what a foretaste of glory Divine!"

What are the contents of that glorifying grace? A full answer to that question will be to await the coming of Christ. But the Word of God has revealed some things about them.

1. A glorified body.

When we take the dead body of a Christian and bury it in the earth, it decomposes and goes back to the dust whence it came. But that is not the end of it. When Christ returns, the body will be raised, but it will be a changed body, a glorified body, suited for the redeemed spirit.

2. A glorious victory.

When Christ comes, the power of Satan will be forever broken, and God's people will be freed from the very presence of sin.

3. A glorious likeness.

At the revelation of Jesus Christ, we shall be like Him in body and in character. Dr. Lyman Abbott, in a message on "Beloved, now are we the children of God, but it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know, that, when it shall be manifested, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is," said: "Of all scripture promises, the one that stretches my faith most is this: to think that poor, sinful, fallen man can become like Christ -- that we who are unholy, impure, selfish, can become like Christ, holy, pure, unselfish, is beyond human comprehension. The how of it I cannot fathom, the fact of it I accept as one of the blessed promises connected with the Saviour's coming."

4. A glorious fellowship.

One of the first things a Christian thinks about in connection with life in the world to come is the privilege of seeing his loved ones again. Heaven is a place where broken ties of earth will be knit together again. But there is something even better than that -- fellowship with our Lord. "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

5. A glorious service.

As John described the glories of the Eternal City he wrote, "And His servants shall serve Him." Toil that tires the body and grinds the spirit will be no more, but glorified service will be the privilege and joy of all.

The night before Dr. Ray Petty died, his physician and his wife were talking with him. He asked the physician if death was near. When his friend told him he did not have much longer to live, his face lighted up with a smile and he said, "I am soon going to be with mother and brother, and when I get there, I am going to salute and say, 'Lord, I am ready for the next job.'" Life on the other side means promotion to larger service. All these things, and much more, belong to the grace which is to be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Years ago when Protestantism was waning in Scotland, an invitation was sent to John Knox, who was in Geneva, to come back to Scotland and carry the banner of Protestantism. He accepted the invitation. When he landed, the cries arose all over the land, "John Knox has come!" The people left their homes and their businesses and crowded the streets. Old and young, rich and poor, mingled together. Couriers went throughout the land shouting, "John Knox has come!" Soon the victorious cries were ringing throughout the land, and the friends of Protestantism rejoiced while its enemies shrank back in fear.

If that was the effect of the sudden presence of a man like ourselves, what will be the effect when the news is flashed over earth and sea, "Jesus Christ has come!"?