

The Prisoner of Hope.

Zechariah 9: 12.

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There are two leading principles in the soul of the Christian, which make God the special object. These are "faith and hope." There is a marked distinction, and yet an intimate connection, between these two principles. Faith takes what God has given; hope expects what He has promised. Faith rests in holy tranquility in God's statements about the *past*; hope goes forth in active longings after the *future*. Faith is a recipient; hope an expectant. Now, it will be found that, in proportion to the vigour of faith, will be the vigour of hope. If we be not "fully persuaded that what God has promised, He is able also to perform," we shall know but little of the power or energy of hope. If faith be wavering, hope will be flickering. On the contrary, if faith be strong, hope will be strong also; for faith, while it nourishes and strengthens the persuasion, imparts strength and intensity to the expectation. Thus, the soul, in the happy exercise of the above principles, is like a climbing plant which, striking its roots downward into the soil, sends forth its tendrils along the nearest wall or tree. So the soul finds its root in the eternal record of God, while it sends forth the tendrils of an imperishable hope to grasp tenaciously the faithful promise of God; and, we may say, the deeper the root, the stronger the tendril.

The patriarch Abraham was a happy exemplification of all this; his "faith and hope" were truly "in God." Circumstances added nothing to him. He had been promised the whole land of Canaan, where he had not so much as to set his foot on; he had been promised a seed like the stars of heaven, or like the sand by the sea shore, when as yet he had no child. Thus, neither his faith nor his hope could have drawn any nutriment from circumstances, for everything within the range of mortal vision argued against him. But the promise of "the Almighty God" was quite enough for the man of faith. With nought but that, he started forth as a pilgrim and a stranger, having no foundation for his hopes that could at all be recognised by "flesh and blood." Abraham had heard a voice which the children of this world could not hear, even the voice of "the God of glory," calling him forth from the midst of his worldly circumstances to be "a prisoner of hope." The Lord had directed his thoughts upward — He had called him from earth to heaven — from the earthly Babel to the heavenly Jerusalem — from the baseless city of man, to the well-founded city of God.

Thus was it with all the patriarchs and witnesses whose honoured names the Spirit has recorded, for our encouragement, in Hebrews 11. "They all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." They died as they had lived, "prisoners of hope." An unbelieving world might scoff and sneer at them, and wonder why they had given up the apparently substantial realities of earth to live and die without anything. But their "faith and hope" were in God, and not in circumstances. Faith enabled them to rest with tranquillized spirits upon the record of God, while hope carried them onward into the future, and converted it into the present.

But the verse which stands at the head of this paper presents the believer in two most interesting aspects, viz., as the recipient of *grace*, and the expectant of *glory* — as one safely lodged in a "stronghold," but yet as "a prisoner of hope" — as one in the enjoyment of perfect peace, and also living in the blessed hope of better things. These two points may afford matter for profitable reflection, through the Lord's mercy.

There is only one thing that can render the soul happy in looking forward into the future, and that is the knowledge of God's redeeming love in giving His Son to be a perfect sacrifice for sin. Until this is known, the mind will never reach beyond the question of mere individual salvation, which, after all, is but selfishness. The human heart is, in a measure, conscious that all is not right with it, and hence it is ill at ease at the thought of the future. "It is appointed unto men once to die, and after that the judgment." Death and judgment form a gloomy prospect for man to contemplate. Death draws aside the curtain and reveals the terrible future — it launches the poor soul forth into the boundless ocean of eternity, without anything to sustain or guide it. But "the one offering of Jesus Christ" brings the soul into new ground, alters its point of view, and removes the clouds from the prospect. "So," says the apostle, "Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation" (Heb. 9: 28). The sinner must get at the other side of the cross ere he can happily or peacefully look forward. In other words, we can only study prophecy with a purged conscience. It is when we know, through the Spirit, the value of the sufferings of Christ, that we can joyfully contemplate the glory that is to follow. The unconverted, therefore, have nothing to do with prophecy. To them the throne from whence Jehovah reveals His deep counsels is surrounded with thick clouds and darkness, and sends forth nothing but thunderings and lightnings. The prophetic book is sealed with seven seals, and none but the *Lamb* can open it.

If, then, it be true that a purged conscience is needful ere prophecy can be rightly studied, we need not wonder that so little is known about it by those who consider it the highest point of Christian attainment to be able to feel that the conscience is cleansed from every stain. Until the grand doctrine of forgiveness — full, free, and eternal forgiveness — is known as the unquestionable portion of the soul, through the finished work of the Lamb of God, no marvel that every other question, be it ever so important, should be held in abeyance. The value and efficacy of *grace* must be known ere *glory* is thought of. That grace which brings salvation must first be received before "the blessed hope" can be enjoyed.

All this leads us to see the distinction between the work of the evangelist and that of the teacher. The evangelist should lead the sinner to see that the work on which his soul is to rest has been accomplished, and that he cannot, by any possibility, add thereto. He has to convey a simple message concerning an accomplished work, which work must be the basis of the poor guilty sinner's peace. He does not assume anything with respect to those to whom he speaks, but that they are dead in trespasses and sins — dead as Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, and as unable to live or move. The evangelist is privileged to stand in the midst of a ruined, self-destroyed, guilty world; and there to offer salvation, in the name of his Master, to all who will believe the word concerning the cross. It is of the utmost importance that all who occupy the position of evangelists should clearly understand the nature and limits of their work, and the terms of their commission. It too often happens that preachers of the gospel mar their work by intruding upon the province of the teacher. They think it incumbent on them to press upon the attention of people the fruits that result from the reception of the gospel, lest they should be suspected of antinomianism. This is, properly speaking, the work of the teacher, who has to do only with those who have passed under the hand of the evangelist. The teacher has no more to do with *sinner*s than the evangelist has to do with *saint*s. *

{*Of course, we may often see the gift of an evangelist and a teacher developed in the same person. Where they are thus combined, great care is needed not to confound them in their exercise}

Nor is the teacher to confine himself to the matter of pressing upon the conscience of the believer his responsibilities; he has also to instruct him in the nature of his hope, he has to expound to him the book of prophecy, according to the wisdom of the Holy Ghost. The evangelist has to speak of what God

has done; the teacher, of what He *will* do. The former calls for the action of faith; the latter, for the action of hope — the former points to the stronghold; the latter speaks to the prisoner of hope. If these things be confounded, the effect will be most pernicious. It is as wrong for the unbeliever to be addressed on the subject of the hopes of the Church, as it is for the believer to be confined to the question of the forgiveness of sins. The enemy of souls may often work much mischief by leading the unregenerate to exercise their intellects on the subject of prophecy. He is doing so at the present day, seeing he has not been able to prevent Christians from searching into their Father's testimonies concerning the future. The devil will endeavour either to suppress or corrupt the truth of God. For ages he succeeded in keeping the Church of Christ from the perception of the precious, doctrine of the coming of the Lord; and now that attention has been awakened on the subject, he is maliciously seeking to nullify it by causing unhallowed lips to proclaim and teach it, or by causing Christians to differ about it.

Now, the remedy for both these dangerous evils is the simple understanding of the Christian's place, as a prisoner of hope. It is not to amuse the intellect, nor to please the fancy, that the Spirit of God has spoken of the Church's destinies. No; it is for the purpose of comforting the prisoner, by giving him a well grounded hope. Nor is it for any, save those who find themselves within the stronghold of the blood-stricken door, that the prospect of rest and glory has been painted in the distance. Looking at the believer in one aspect of his character, he is like the Israelite within the blessed circle of peace which redemption had described around him, feeding on the lamb whose blood had secured his peace, with girded loins, waiting for the first beams of the morning, to leave the land of death and darkness to proceed on his way toward the land of rest. So the believer, resting in the atoning efficacy of the blood of Christ, is privileged to look forward to "the morning without clouds," not that he may then know, for the first time, that he is accepted in the Beloved, but that he may enter into all the rich and ineffable fruits of redeeming love. Thus, the believer is a prisoner of hope. His faith reposes on the cross — his hope feeds upon the rich pastures of God's prophetic record. His spirit travels over a course of which the cross is the starting-post, and glory the goal. He finds it

"Sweet to look back and see his name
In life's fair book set down;
Sweet to look forward and behold
Eternal joys his own."

The two points are inseparable. It is only when we find it sweet to look back, that we also find it sweet to look forward. We must see our names in the fair book of life, written there in indelible characters, before we can understand our title to eternal joys. It is impossible that any one can rightly enter upon the investigation of the doctrine of the hopes of the Church, until his spirit has been perfectly tranquillized by the blood of atonement. To the unwashed soul the prospect is unspeakably dreadful. "Enter not into judgment with Thy servant, O Lord, for in Thy sight shall no flesh living be justified." Prophecy conveys a twofold message; it tells of unmitigated judgment to the man who is yet in his sins; and it tells of incorruptibility and eternal life to the man who has believed in the love of God as displayed in the gift of His Son. Hence, to the former, it must be a most unwelcome messenger; to the latter, the bearer of most gladsome tidings: to the former it speaks of the complete shipwreck, to the latter, the glorious consummation of all his hopes.

The children of this world are not prisoners of hope, they are prisoners under condemnation; they wait, not to be emancipated, but to be executed; it is not endless rest, but endless torment, that lies before them. Miserable prospect! O ye men of this world, what will it be when your cup of pleasure

shall be dashed from your lips for ever? when the world, that idol for which you have lived and laboured, and at whose altar you have sacrificed everything, shall pass away into everlasting destruction? What would you not then give to find yourselves in a stronghold — even in the stronghold which faith finds in the sacrifice of Christ? It is nothing but the blindest infatuation to give up God's future for man's present — to sell the coming glory of Christ for the present glory of the world. Far better to endure the temporary privations of a prisoner's life here, than to suffer an eternal imprisonment with Satan and his angels. Poor sinner, the crucified Jesus calls upon you to "turn to the stronghold;" to take refuge, by faith, beneath the shadow of the cross, and there to wait, as a prisoner of hope, for the glory which shall speedily be revealed from heaven. And you, Christian reader, who have, through grace, found rest for your wearied spirit, do you seek to know more of what is involved in that title, "a prisoner of hope."

We can form some idea of the intensity of a prisoner's longing for the day of release; we may imagine how eagerly a prisoner of old would long to hear the soul-stirring note of the trumpet of jubilee, announcing his complete deliverance from captivity. We know full well that it is not with the gloomy and crumbling walls of his prison-house that the prisoner engages his attention; he seeks not to decorate or render them stable. No; he groans and sighs for deliverance. Just so should it ever be with us. We should unceasingly "groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body." "We," says the apostle, "that are in this tabernacle, do groan, being burdened; not that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life."

Here is the proper language of a prisoner of hope. It is not merely groaning to be set free from the cage in which we are pent up, but "to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven." Doubtless, we feel the sorrow and trial of our present position; we are made to taste the irksomeness and roughness of the journey; we are called to enter into the painfulness of being imprisoned in a body of sin and death. In a word, "we groan, being burdened." Nevertheless, the putting off of the earthly tabernacle would not perfectly remedy the case. To be unclothed as to our spirits would not make us perfectly happy. Very many Christians err in their thoughts on this subject. They think that the moment the spirit escapes from its prison-house, it enters into perfect bliss. That such is not the case, the passage just quoted most fully proves. Nothing can fill up the measure of the believer's joy, but his being clothed upon with his house which is from heaven; for, until then, whether he be imprisoned in the tomb, or in a body of sin and death, death and mortality bear sway, so far as the body is concerned; but when he appears in his resurrection garments of glory and beauty, death shall have been swallowed up in victory, and mortality swallowed up of life. To speak of perfect bliss, while the spirit is unclothed and the body mingled with the dust is a contradiction.

There are, I believe, but four places in the New Testament where the state of the unclothed spirit is spoken of, and in none of these have we anything approaching to a full description of that state. When contrasting, it with our present painful and trying condition, the apostle says, "*it is far better.*" Yes, truly, it is "far better" to be at rest from our labours than toiling here — far better to be away from a scene of strife and turmoil, where everything tends to draw out the vileness of nature. But all this would not constitute the summit of blessedness. How very differently the Holy Ghost speaks of the resurrection state! It would be out of the question to think of citing, or even referring, to, the various passages in which this glorious subject is treated of. The New Testament abounds with them. Nor is there any mystery or vagueness in the manner in which it is put before us. No; we are clearly, explicitly, and simply taught that the resurrection and the glories connected with it will constitute the very consummation of the believer's joy and blessedness; and, moreover, that, until then, he is but a prisoner of hope. The patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, the noble army of martyrs — all our beloved

brethren who have gone before us — yea, and the Master Himself — all wait for the morning of resurrection. "These all, having obtained a good report, through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better things for us, that they, *without us*, should not be made perfect." God must gather His family together — the grave must let go from its grasp every redeemed one — every scattered member of the flock of Christ must be gathered into the heavenly fold ere the festivities of the kingdom can commence.

Thus we see the vast importance of being rightly instructed as to the nature of our hope. When we know what we are hoping for, we are able to give an answer; yea, our lives answer. *A man's life is always influenced by his genuine hopes.* If a man be an heir to an estate, his life is influenced by the hope of inheriting it; and if we knew more of the power of the Spirit as "the earnest of our inheritance," instead of disputing about the time or manner of our Master's arrival, we should, as "*prisoners of hope*," be anxiously looking forth from our prison windows, and saying, "Why is His chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the wheels of His chariot?"

Oh! that all who have found a stronghold in the Cross of Jesus may say more earnestly, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly."