

Defining Hope For The Creation

by James Beaubelle

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“For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope.” —Romans 8:20

Here is an interesting thought for consideration. It introduces an idea that is difficult to quantify in an empirical manner (which would satisfy the world’s scrutiny), but it is nonetheless worthy of contemplation.

Everyone alive is—or soon will become—damaged goods. In a sense, we are all just broken or defective machines. We are damaged in various ways, physically and spiritually banged up, if you will, by forces that dictate, control, and corrupt the environment we live in day by day. Some of us are damaged more than others, but it includes everyone, regardless of any religious affiliation or calling.

A few of us arrive in this world in a damaged state, while most of us develop our “impairments” over time, much like an appliance or a lawn mower or a car. Whereas some people, just like some machines, have defects that are easy for anyone to recognize, others are more difficult to see, but in time, when we get to know someone—just like that appliance or lawn mower or car—we learn they have defects too.

The apostle Paul, though, discusses the concept in Romans 8:19-25 that we, as creations and children of God, are subjected to our frailties in hope—in essence, hope for the repair of all our defects and the renewal of our damaged bodies upon our adoption and redemption. But he also implies in verses 20-22 that the “whole creation,” seemingly the entire physical world around us—the rocks, the vegetation, and the animals—all have this same hope:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the *whole creation* groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. (Emphasis ours)

Was the apostle suggesting that the earth, the trees, and the animals could and should hope for their redemption as well? Just what is this hope that he writes of and to whom or to what does it apply?

Sin Separates

Since Adam and Eve were sent packing out of Eden, mankind has been separated from God, and along with the physical creation—the environment—has been subjected to the ravages of time, and with it, endless decay.

We all know that sin separates and that sin has consequences. Romans 3:23 tells us, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This includes all of mankind who now are subject to death, but also impacts the created universe that was not exempt from the consequences of man’s sins. Romans 8:20 reads: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who

subjected it in hope.” “Him,” of course, is our Creator—the same Being who cursed the ground because of the rebellion of the first man (Genesis 3:17).

Does it not seem odd that Paul would use the word “hope” with reference to the *whole creation*? How can a mountain or a cow or the moon or trees have hope? Is hope not something only people can have? Does the Bible not teach us that having hope is a virtue? How can a rock or a tree or a dumb animal be virtuous when virtues deal with a person’s behavior and his or her desire for moral or ethical actions?

Many in the world believe Paul is telling us that the earth and all the animals are waiting in hope for the revelation of the children of God just as we are waiting. But while they are sharing in the fallout from man’s sins, and in that sense are certainly in bondage with us, we go astray in our thinking if we start putting moral and theological objectives into the lives of animals or the existence of rocks.

Obviously, Paul is connecting hope to the physical creation metaphorically, and he is also linking God’s ongoing spiritual creation within each of His children with the hope that His creative work provides in a literal sense.

Romans 8:24 begins: “For we were saved in this hope.” It becomes clear that the parts of creation referred to by the word “we” are the children of God. They are the ones who are earnestly expecting the good things that only the promises of God can supply. Hope for salvation is a gift to each of His children as they suffer the ravages of time and trial in a world desperately lacking hope.

Defining Our Hope

Verses 24-25 provide insight into what biblical hope is: “For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.”

This hope implies a measure of faith inside the one who is hoping. It is a necessary quality or virtue he needs for the salvation process. But, without perseverance, his hope can quickly turn into the anxiety of impatience. He hopes for something he cannot see with his eyes, for this hope is spiritually discerned. His hope is placed not in something he can do but in what God is doing for him.

Paul’s words help us to distinguish our definition of hope from that of the world. Many people define hope as something more akin to desire or wishful thinking. But desiring or wishing for a future good never takes into account if what is wanted is even possible. Nor does it look much at the difficulty involved in obtaining what is hoped for.

But godly hope originates in our belief—our faith—in something seemingly impossible for us to accomplish, but that *is* possible for God. Like any virtue, we must work to hold onto it. It involves more than just ourselves. It is born within the framework of our relationship with the Father and the Son.

I Peter 1 provides additional insight into other special qualities of our hope:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. . . . Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope

fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. . . . who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. (1 Peter 1:3, 13, 21)

Peter tells us that we have a living hope and that the goal or object of our hope is Jesus Christ. In a sense, they are one and the same. Because Christ is alive, we have a sure anchor for our hope. Having ourselves been figuratively raised from the dead at our baptism, we can fully place our hope in Him with complete confidence, and we do so by our faith. This is absolutely necessary, for it is through and by His efforts that our hope is justified.

Christ Is the Key

Colossians 1:5 informs us that our hope is “laid up” in heaven, and Colossians 3:1 admonishes us to “seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.”

What we find, then, is that Christ holds two key points for the application of our hope. First and foremost, He is the goal of our hope, and secondly, He is the One we depend upon to realize our hope. It is through His good office as our High Priest, with the atoning work He has done for each one of us, that our hope will find its fulfillment.

We cannot save ourselves. If we were ever hopeful that we could be good enough, or that we could please God often enough and move Him to give us eternal life, then we would have a hope based on our own efforts. This is nothing more than a religion based solely on our own works. Many people think this way, but they are wrong. Others believe they are already saved. These people have no need of hope at all, for why would one hope for what one already has? That would be pointless.

But because God has called us and desires to save us, and also because He possesses all the power necessary to bring us into a life with Him eternally, we can have a sure hope in the gospel we believe and the ongoing work of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

Having Faith in Our Hope

We may not see all the details of what eternal life with God will be. But by faith (another virtue given to us by our Creator) we trust that the hope He has given to us is true and at some future point will be realized. From this, then, we realize our need to let patience have its place in our lives so we do not become discouraged and possibly lose so great a gift.

Our faith should remain absolutely certain in the power and willingness of God to bring His children into the Kingdom. It is this faith that strengthens and informs our hope. By faith, we know that nothing is lacking on God’s part nor in His desire or ability to complete His spiritual creation in each of us. Our hope should be anchored in this truth.

While the promises of God are great, we often find our faith lacking. And because of our weaknesses, we repeatedly allow a sense of doubt easy entry into our thinking, which not only weakens our faith but also our vision of hope that Christ is willing to help us. This can also happen when sin enters into our lives, and our focus is more on our desires or our guilt than on the redemptive power of God.

But this view, allowed into our minds by our negative emotions and our broken or damaged nature, does a disservice to God. We are focusing on the ugly influence of the Satanic realm rather than the goodness and power of God and His promise to get us through all our trials (I Corinthians 10:13).

We need to remain mindful of the Parables of the Lost Sheep or of the Prodigal Son of Luke 15, and of God's powerful promise delivered to each of us in Hebrews 13:5-6: "I will never leave you nor forsake you. . . . The Lord is my Helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

Our hope can remain strong as long as it is solidly based on the works and the love of Jesus Christ, who, having suffered for us, now sits at the right hand of God the Father and makes intercessions for us (Romans 8:26-27). What more could we ask for? What more could we ever need to bolster our sure hope?

Faith Strengthens our Hope

We must learn that our faith and our hope are like interlocking gears helping to power our walk with God. Just as faith without works is not a true living faith, so faith without hope is also meaningless. James 2:19 says: "Even the demons believe there is one God, and tremble." They tremble so much because they are without hope—they know they have no future good to look forward to. But we do!

Notice how Paul ties faith and hope so closely together in Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence [or *confidence*] of things not seen." Our faith strengthens our hope, and our hope is realized by our faith. These two virtues are so inseparable—both have Jesus Christ as their end view—they seem interchangeable at times. In other words, our hope strengthens our faith with the desire to believe in God's promises, and our faith underpins our hope with that very belief.

Our hope motivates us to right actions toward our future good, and it becomes key in supporting the vision we have of life eternal in the Kingdom of God.

Proverbs 29:19 reads, "Where there is no vision the people perish." Without a future hope, without even an imperfect vision of our future with God, nothing good happens. We end up standing still when we need to be preparing for the future. Godly hope always looks toward a future good, and that motivates us to work harder to strengthen our relationship with God, which allows us to develop our patience and resolve to stand fast in the faith.

Some will say that this hope is nothing more than self-centered thinking and not really virtuous at all. What is virtuous about hoping for one's own good? But the answer is quite simple: Because our hope has a prophetic vision within it and because it is a desire placed in us by God, it makes the object of our hope, not ourselves, but Jesus Christ and the work that He does. When we realize the good works and the love for others that we become capable of when we submit to God, then the hope that springs us forward becomes a genuine virtue for all to admire.

There is an old Johnny Rivers song, written by Smokey Robinson, titled "Tracks of My Tears." He mournfully sings of a lost love and a fading hope of ever finding his way into her life again. For many in the world, this fading hope has become an all-too-familiar refrain for their future. But for us, the children of God, along with the earth that groans under the weight of our sins, the hope we have draws closer to its promised fulfillment with each passing day.

God teaches us in Isaiah 11:9 that one day the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of God. No longer will we be broken or damaged machines. But until that great day, let us be mindful of our need for God and the abiding hope that He provides us via the good works of Jesus Christ on our behalf, “that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:7).