

Secured by Hope

Williamstown Church of Christ Sunday 24 January 2010

Bible Readings Hebrews 6:4-20; Galatians 5:1-7

The passage before us (Heb. 6:4-20) is a lengthy one, and so it is good that we treat it in terms of its big themes

The Heart is Created for Hope

The human heart cannot live without hope. We have not been created to live as self-referential or self-defining entities. The human heart has 'eyes' (e.g. Eph. 1:18) which are created to be fixed on an object of affection outside of ourselves. That which our heart loves will be that in which our heart places its hope. That which catches and holds the gaze of the eyes of our heart shapes the character of our heart. The object(s) of our affection and the hope(s) that our heart clings to, are inseparable from one another. We love what we put our hope in, and we put our hope in what we love.

In times of suffering in particular, the heart flees to the object of its hope. It clings to it for security, comfort and direction. The writer to the Hebrews is thus deeply concerned to establish his hearers in true hope and true affection. They are in danger of settling their affections on their traditional objects of hope, rather than on the hope of the gospel.

Hope is one of the most pervasive themes of the letter. The passage before us highlights this clearly (see, for example, Heb. 6:11, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19—where hope, God's promise and our inheritance are all of one piece). However, a general overview of the letter will let us see that the writer approaches the matter of hope from many avenues (e.g. the Lordship of Jesus; the present and yet promised rest that we are graciously called to enter; the promises of the New Covenant now fulfilled in Jesus; the theme of promise itself; the examples of the people of faith who looked for the promises to be fulfilled; the current standing of believers who have come to Mt. Zion, as the place where hope is fulfilled; the very structure of the argument of the entire letter...promise, fulfillment in Christ, and therefore guarantee of a the hope of the last day). Everything in the letter is designed to draw the eyes of the heart away from a false hope to the true. All is designed to settle the eyes of the heart on the One who has loved us, and thereby to love and be secured in him as the object of our hope.

God Has Defined Hope in the Person of Jesus

In this section of the letter, the writer is particularly keen to draw the eyes of his readers' hearts to Jesus Christ in his office as our Great High Priest. We can see this in the way in which the writer makes progression from Hebrews 4:14-16, through chapter five, into the final verses of chapter six and then opening up the theme in great fullness in Hebrews 7-10. In essence he says that our hope is nothing other than Christ himself. Specifically, our hope is in Christ as the one through whom atonement has been made and in whom we are reconciled to God. In Jesus, we have the one great High Priest who has finally and effectively made an end of all sin, and has settled us forever in the presence of the Father.

The hope that we know and share in as God's people has a name and a face. It has hands and feet (complete with marks of his atoning death!). Hope in Hebrews is spelled J-e-s-u-s.

This hope is an 'anchor to our souls' (Heb. 6:19), which is the security and reference point of our entire being. This anchor goes up into heaven, not down. It draws us forwards and secures us in a completed work that effective in its rule over all things in this creation. Jesus *reigns* as the High Priest, and he reigns from heaven, ruling over all things and interceding on our behalf. He is a priest forever, of a different order to the fallible and mortal priests of Aaron's line, and so as our High Priest now, we find our hope only in him.

Establishing Hope When 'hopes' Fade

We are all familiar with the fact that short term hopes (for material things, career advancement, or other such things) are easily dashed. We are also all familiar with the fact that we readily get them up and going again, and that if we cannot have that particular object of hope we will substitute another for it! There is a great resilience in the human heart in relation to these things. But the tendency to rebuild the things in which our hopes are placed is even greater in the religious and spiritual spheres. Here, hope is bound together with weighty questions of eternity. Our hopes in these areas are linked to issues like justification, holiness, eternal security, and our status before God. The law, the mind, the conscience and the flesh all work together to keep the human heart 'at it' in terms of religious observance. Fear easily enters. Faith falters. In times of suffering we can make (wrongly) a direct link between the suffering of our present circumstance and punishment for failure to be punctilious enough in our observance.

Now, the Hebrews had come to see that the whole of the exiting religious systems and structures in which they had been schooled were not obsolete. Jesus had made effective end to all forms of sacrifice, ritual devotion, religious observance of dietary laws and so on. His completed work left nothing undone. But it undid everything. Now they were being confronted with what that meant. Did they persist in the hope spelled J-e-s-u-s or did they return to the former manner of religious life in which their hope was secured by its very visibility and its seeming longevity? If they were being tempted to do so, it was because fear had entered. If they had begun to think that the relationship they had with God was dependent upon them keeping the old system going, and if that system afforded them protection from persecution, would it not be worth returning to?

While the vocabulary is different, Paul addresses a similar matter in Galatians 5:1-7, where the Galatian believers were being hard pressed to move back to a system by which they could present themselves before God on the basis of their religious observance. The issue there (as in Hebrews) is In whom is my hope based? Me or Jesus? Is my hope based in what I can or must or have done? Or is it based in what he alone has fully done? In this context, Hebrews 6:4-6 is actually descriptive. The 'falling away' is falling away from trust in Christ for righteousness (as is clear from Heb. 5:13). The writer is convinced that this, in fact, is not where they are or where they will end up (Heb. 6:9ff.), especially if they heed his exposition of Jesus as the High Priest in whom we trust! Our hope is confirmed in Christ, to whom we look with all confidence.