

# The Virtue of Hope

BY JOHN E. HARE

Hope in the final full actualization of the kingdom of God can sustain our commitment to improve life here on earth. C. S. Lewis said “It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one.” But the virtue of hope must be rooted in faith in God, not mere optimism about human beings’ capacity for self-improvement.

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**I**s it true that we Christians are so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good? We are so fixated on heaven, the complaint goes, that we do not have the energy or commitment to improve life down here on earth. This is why Marxists see religious faith as “the opium of the people.” They think that Christians submit to the status quo as though a drug had tranquilized us. I think the opposite is true. Hope in the final full actualization of the kingdom of God sustains the commitment to improve life here on earth. C. S. Lewis said, “It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one.”

## BEYOND OPTIMISM

The virtue of hope cannot be based on the thought that we can pull ourselves up by our own moral bootstraps. This is obvious when we recall the tragic fruits of such optimism in recent history.

As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth century there was a great burst of confidence in human progress through education and technological know-how. While in England in 1895, American urban reformer Albert Shaw wrote:

The conditions and circumstances that surround the lives of the masses of the people in modern cities can be so adjusted to their needs as to result in the highest development of the race in body, mind and moral character. The so-called problems of the modern city are but the various phases of the one main question: How can the environment be most perfectly adapted to the welfare of urban populations? And science can meet and answer every one of these problems.

But as the twentieth century went on, it became clear that it was going to be the most brutal and bloody century of human history. And this was despite the increases of general education, extraordinary technical advance, and the wide spread of high culture. The Germans who gassed Jews in the concentration camps first had them perform Bach. I am not saying that all the people who believed in progress were ready to use such means. Many well-meaning citizens just before the outbreak of World War II authored the Humanist Manifesto, which says, "man is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement." But much of the misery of the twentieth century was caused by people who were optimistic that they could marshal techniques to produce this better world, whether by the removal of impure races, the forced collectivization of agriculture, and permanent revolution; or more gently by new moral education curricula at school, urban planning models, and guidelines for the mass media.

What we should have learned from the century we have just gone through is that moral improvement is *not* something we know how to produce. We know how, in several ways, to produce opportunity for such improvement, by removing a few of the obstacles to it. But some people will take this opportunity and others will not. You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. Plato asks in the *Meno*, the Western world's first discussion of whether virtue can be taught, whether virtue comes through good families or by good teaching; he ends with the suggestion that it comes by divine gift.

#### OUR GROUNDS FOR HOPE

What we need is hope that is *not* based on human capacity for self-improvement. We have grounds in our faith for such a hope, both at the individual level and at the level of society. In the book of Revelation we are given a helpful picture of hope at the individual level in the letter to the Church at Pergamum: "To everyone who conquers . . . I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it" (Revelation 2:17). God has a name for each one of us, which will be given to us on a white stone when we enter the next life. This name will be like the name "Peter" which Jesus

gave to Simon. The name means “rock,” and Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Peter was not yet a rock. He had still to go through the denials of Jesus and the flight. But Jesus saw him already as he would become, and the name expressed this. Hebrew names express what a thing is, and are not merely arbitrary like English names. This is true even of the Hebrew name of God, which orthodox Jews will therefore not utter or write. Calvin says in his commentary on Genesis that when Adam named the animals, he named them according to their essence, or what each one truly is, and in the Fall we lost those names when we lost the natural capacity for uncorrupted knowledge. So each one of us has our own essential name on a white stone, and we have the hope that we will be able to become what is named by that name. What is our ground for this hope? It is the faith that God already knows that name and calls us by it. Faith is, in this case, the title deed to what we hope for (“the substance” in Hebrews 11:1). A title deed to a piece of property underlies both present enjoyment of ownership and future possession. God knows us already as we are in Christ and gives us faith as an earnest of our inheritance.

Does God’s knowing us by this name make us proud or does it make us humble? The answer is a kind of mixture. Think of what it is like for a person to become an American citizen. When the judge declares her a citizen, there is already a new status, even though she may not yet experience any change. She does not yet understand American baseball or feel at home with American popular music. But not all realities can be experienced as soon as they occur. Some philosophers have claimed that all things which are real can be experienced by the senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, or smell—or at least by introspection. But this is too narrow a view of reality, and there is no good reason to adopt it. The new citizen really becomes American when the judge declares it, and then she experiences this change gradually. After some years, perhaps in a moment of national tragedy, she may experience an overwhelming sense of solidarity that she had not expected. It is like this with our new identity in Christ. It is already real by God’s declaration, and of this reality we can be proud (though we did not produce it). This is the doctrine of justification. But the new identity is also not yet completely real in our experience, and this shortfall should make us continually humble. We gradually grow into our name and get glimpses of it as we proceed. This is the doctrine of sanctification. God holds together all the fragments of what we are called to aim at, so that they become a coherent magnetic force, pulling us towards the magnetic center, which is God. Again, it is the faith in this center that is the title deed to what we hope for, namely that we will finally enter into the love which is among the three members of the Godhead.

We have the same kind of hope at the level of society. We are saved not merely as individuals, but as a body of which we are members, the

church. Here, too, God holds things together in a unity. But what God holds together are not just our own aspirations, but those of all the other members of this body. The world could, after all, be the kind of place in which one person can only flourish if others do not. Sometimes our world looks that way. One person can only have power, prestige, or wealth if others do not, or at least have less of each of these. But in God's kingdom, the economy is different. We do not compete in that kind of way. God holds us together into a kingdom in which each of us, just because of who we are, provides just the right context for the flourishing of each of the others. God's names for us create a poem or a symphony of names in which each contributes to the beauty of the whole. No phrase of this poem or symphony can be removed without damaging the fabric of the whole piece.

Sometimes we get glimpses of this kingdom, just as we get glimpses of our individual names. We hear about fire fighters climbing into a burning skyscraper, or couples who receive into their homes and families Somali teenagers from refugee camps. These are glimpses of a world in which justice and peace, or *shalom*, embrace. It is not merely that in such a world people get what they want, but what they want is good for them and for everyone else. The importance of these glimpses is that they enable us to aim our lives in a coherent direction. We have the sense of destination, that the good of the whole will

in the end prevail over whatever is set against it. Aristotle says, of the chief good for human beings, "if we know it, we are more likely, like archers who have a target to aim at, to hit the right mark." We need not only a sense of what a good final destination for the world would be, but a sense that we can reach it (even if not by our own devices); and we need not merely

the sense that reaching it is possible, but that we are going to reach it. This is not true with all our individual aspirations. A person can aim at a Ph.D. without already having assurance that she will get it. But she has the moral freedom to aim at a particular project like this because she identifies it as good for her, and she has the conviction that if something is good for her, it will also be good for others.

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We need this kind of hope because we see so many traces of the opposite of the good that we long for. I used to work as an ethics consultant at a hospital where I would spend one day a week. When I got to within about a mile of the place, I experienced a grayness falling over me, a sense of all the suffering and the moral compromise that I was about to encounter. Once I actually got there and started into the routine, I usually was

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able to shake the gloom. But I still have a vivid memory of what it felt like. It felt hope-less, like being lost in a fog at sea. The virtue of hope can sustain us through this kind of test, allowing us to be honest and clear-eyed about the suffering and evil, but also to persevere and have courage. If we hear God's call, we can have the conviction that what we are doing

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#### RESURRECTION FAITH

How is it that we can sustain the virtue of hope? Faith is again the vehicle. When I was writing my book *The Moral Gap*, I interviewed a survivor called Eva from the concentration camps of World War II. She told me that her experience had been that those people who went into the camps with a strong faith in God, came out (if they came out at all) with their faith stronger than when they went in. She did not claim to have an answer to the question of why God should have allowed his people to suffer in this way. Her report is in this way like that of Elie Wiesel, who went through the camps as a boy and saw his father killed. Wiesel was angry with God, but especially in his later writing he has said that he has grown closer to God through the anger. For Eva, it was her faith in God that kept her through the experience of the camps. She was Jewish, and my sense is that she did not have faith in an afterlife. But she did have the confidence that the good would in the end prevail, that it was, so to speak, more fundamental to the destination of the world than the evil in it.

This confidence is not based on optimism about human nature left to its own devices. People like Eva have ample evidence of the great evil that humans are capable of doing to each other. Perhaps if we were *already* morally good, we could bring in a kingdom of justice and peace by ourselves.

We would all be aiming at each other's welfare, and perhaps we would be able to care for each other through the effects of natural calamities like hurricanes and diseases. Perhaps Immanuel Kant is right that if we were all good we would all be happy. But my point is that the world as we know it is *not* like this. Serious moral evil is pervasive and we do not have the resources by ourselves to put a stop to it. This is why we need to have a hope that is more than optimism.

How can we have such a hope? One ground is the Resurrection, which we believe by faith. Christ gives us a pattern of how life in the kingdom is supposed to go. It is a life that shows what the kingdom is like. Jesus serves his disciples and he communes with his Father. More than this, his life shows how kingdom-people are to dwell in the world that does not yet live this kind of life. We are to love our enemies, forgive them when they harm us, and do good to them in return for the evil they do to us. Now it is true that this life did not prevail in Judaea of the first century. Christ was crucified, and the forces opposed to this kind of life had the triumph they expected. But then he rose again, "the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15:20). So our hope is like hope for the harvest, when the first fruits have already been gathered in. To someone who has the eyes to see, the merit of the rest of the crop is already clear, as it would be to an experienced vintner examining the early grapes from his vineyard.

Our status on earth is that of pilgrim. We are on the way. The status of pilgrim ends when we reach our destination. When we reach union with God, as individuals and as a body, we will no longer need the virtue of hope. We also will not need the virtue of faith, because we will see Christ face to face. We will still, however, love. This is why Paul says that of the three virtues—faith, hope, and love—the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

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