



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 **The Virtue of Hope**
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 18-23)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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The Virtue of Hope

If we are to pursue our moral life seriously, then we need a *transcendent* 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.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Romans 8:18-30; Revelation 2:17

Reflection

Everyone, it seems, struggles to do the right thing. Moral scandals of political, business, and religious leaders, not to mention entertainers and sports figures, are constantly in the news. Is it even possible to be morally good in our society?

A “moral gap” certainly yawns between what we morally should do and become, and our meager human capacities. All of us “fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Sometimes we know what we ought to do, but fail to do it; and at other times we don’t even know what we should do. We cannot bridge this moral gap on our own. The Christian virtue of hope is a deep confidence that God provides encouragement, guidance, and assistance in becoming the people God calls us to be.

Pergamum, a city notorious for its idolatry (“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is.... where Satan lives”), must have been a terribly difficult setting in which to be morally good. To the beleaguered Christian church in Pergamum, the prophet John offers this strange vision of hope: God has a name for each one of us that marks what we truly are, and it will be given to us on a white stone when we enter the next life (Revelation 2:17). What is the meaning of this good news?

▶ *Hope, at the individual level, to become what God has called us to be.* Our hope is grounded in how God sees us, not in what we accomplish. This is the meaning of the white stone, on which our true name is written. “God knows us already as we are in Christ and gives us faith as an earnest of our inheritance,” writes John Hare. That faith is “the title deed to what we hope for (‘the substance’ in Hebrews 11:1).”

Does God’s knowing us by this name make us proud or humble? We can be proud (though it is not our own production) because our identity in Christ is already real by God’s declaration. This is the doctrine of justification. We are humble because our new identity is not yet completely real in our experience; we 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.”

▶ *Hope to be the body of Christ.* Sometimes we get glimpses of the economy of God’s kingdom, in which we do not compete for wealth, prestige, or power, but each of us contributes to the flourishing of one another. “We hear about fire fighters climbing into a burning skyscraper, or couples who receive



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into their homes and families Somali teenagers from refugee camps,” Hare says. “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.” These glimpses of the kingdom enable us to aim our lives coherently, knowing that the good of the whole will in the end prevail over whatever is set against it. Jesus’ resurrection, which we believe by faith, gives us hope that his life truly reveals how life in the kingdom of heaven is supposed to go.

Study Questions:

1. What recent events, either in our culture or in your personal experience, might lead you to despair that you, or those whom you love, will not be able to live morally?
2. In what sense might a person become “too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good”?
3. What sort of “heavenly-mindedness” does John Hare commend?
4. How do you respond to John Hare’s view that “much of the misery of the twentieth century was caused by people who were optimistic that they could marshal techniques to produce [a] better world” (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 19)?
5. According to the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:18-30, how is the presence of God’s Spirit a ground of hope, both in our individual lives and in the world as a whole?

Departing Hymn: “My Life Flows On In Endless Song”

The Virtue of Hope

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Discuss Rom. 8:18-30	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To identify those things in our culture or personal lives that can lead us to despair of living morally.
2. To distinguish between (a) optimism concerning human capacities and accomplishments, and (b) the grounds on which the Christian virtue of hope is based
3. To define a proper sense of “heavenly-mindedness” that enables us to pursue our moral life seriously.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Heaven and Hell (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. The hymn text “My Life Flows On In Endless Song” is reprinted in *Heaven and Hell*, pp. 68-69. Locate the tune for “My Life Flows On In Endless Song” in your hymnbook, or print copies of this public domain tune from the Web site www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Share the story that John Hare tells about Eva, a survivor of the concentration camps of World War II (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 22). This story is about a desperate situation that could make people lose all hope in moral goodness, either in their own lives or in the world. Yet even in the concentration camps, Eva recalls, many people found that their faith in God sustained their hope.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Ask members to confess to God those desires and actions that can lead them to despair of living morally. Voice a prayer of thanksgiving that God’s Spirit intercedes for us with “sighs too deep for words” when we do not know how to pray.

Scripture Reading

Arrange for group members to read aloud Romans 8:18-30 and Revelation 2:17 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Begin by mentioning situations in our society or personal lives that lead us to despair that we cannot be morally good. Major scandals at Enron or in the White House are demoralizing, but closer to home we worry about pressures we face at work, situations our children endure at school, or distorting images of a good life which are advanced in the popular media. Sometimes our cultural setting can seem, like Pergamum, to be a place “where Satan lives.”

“Justification” and “sanctification” might seem to members to be large theological words with little relevance to their lives. Help them to understand how these two doctrines offer hope to us that, because

of God's work in our lives, we can grow into people who know and desire moral goodness.

How can we keep struggling to do what we believe is morally good? We need a sure faith that what we are doing makes sense for the good of the whole in the long run, even if we do not yet see how it is all going to work. We need confidence that we live in a world in which we need not compete for scarce goods, but each of us can contribute to the flourishing of one another. As Christians, we can believe firmly that, despite contrary appearances, the kingdom of heaven is the ultimate reality. Discuss how your church community can offer glimpses of this reality.

Study Questions

1. Members may mention national or local scandals, or events of human evil in the news. They might mention things in our culture that are sources of temptation for them, members of their families, or other people.
2. Persons might be "heavenly-minded" in the sense of being unaware of the serious suffering and evil around them, or unconcerned and unprepared to respond to it because they misunderstand the thought that "God will take care of everything."
3. John Hare describes the Christian virtue of hope, a deep confidence that we can and should continue our struggle toward moral goodness. This hope is grounded not in our own capacities or accomplishments, but in the fact that God already sees the persons that we are in Christ and draws us toward being these persons. If we are aware in this way of our inability to be morally good on our own capacities, will we be more sensitive to the suffering and evil around us?
4. Members may mention the great social projects of the political right (Nazism, fascism) and left (Marxism, communism). Closer to home they may identify attempts to create a "melting pot" by forcefully denying traditional cultures (Cajun, Native American, Irish, central European, Hispanic, Asian) in various parts of the United States. They may think of laws passed to enforce moral standards in Hollywood, or to enforce abstinence from alcohol, for instance. Do members think that these movements produced morally better people?
5. Discuss the promise in verses 26-27 for our individual lives: the Spirit helps us to know our weakness, and the Spirit expresses before God all that we know and more. Discuss how verse 28 applies to the church (the "large family" in verse 29) and the entire creation: as God transforms us to be like Jesus, the church and all creation begin to embody God's purposes and enjoy God's goodness.

Departing Hymn

Distribute copies of the tune "My Life Flows On In Endless Song." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.