

Hope: An Action Word

Annual Council of the General Conference

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October 9, 2005

Introduction

The Sahara, the largest desert in the world, fills nearly all of Northern Africa. It measures approximately 3,000 miles, or 4,800 kilometers, from east to west and between 800 and 1,200 miles from North to South and has a total area of about 3.5 million square miles, or nearly 9,000,000 square kilometers. The Sahara is classified as one of the harshest environments known to human kind. Many areas of the Sahara are considered too hot and dry to inhabit. The majority of the people living in this desert are nomads who continuously move from region to region in search of better living conditions, particularly in search of food.

However, there is little to offer for food, since any vegetation found in the Sahara must be able to adapt to unreliable precipitation and excessive heat. Few plants can tolerate the climate. I read that temperatures there can reach well over 130 degrees during the hottest seasons and that the Sahara receives less than three inches (7.6 cm) of rain a year. Even in its wettest areas, rain may arrive twice in one week, then not return for years. Interestingly, I found that Sahara means not only Desert, but also Ocean.

A few years ago the World Press Review carried a quotation from the National Concord of Lagos, Nigeria. That paper reported that twenty-six lakes have been found beneath the Sahara Desert. The American space shuttle, Columbia, determined by echoes it received that there are miles and miles of underground rivers beneath that arid land also. It is sad to think of the people who are starving and dying of thirst there for lack of life-giving water because those hidden resources—those underground lakes and rivers—have not been tapped. Likewise, there are people all around us today in desert places in their life's circumstances who thirst for the life-giving waters of hope for their arid souls. But seeing none, they die of their thirst. Are we like those underground lakes or those hidden rivers, full of life-giving water, rushing to and fro, but just out of sight, inaccessible to those who are most in need? Are there times when we fail to share the hope that is within us?

Background

Ellen White says that the churches need to have their eyes anointed with the heavenly eye salve, that they may see the many opportunities all about them to minister for God. Repeatedly God has called upon His people to go out into the highways and hedges, and compel men and women to come in, that His house may be full; yet even within the shadow of our own doors are families in which we have not shown sufficient interest to lead them to think that we cared for their souls. It is this work that the Lord now calls upon the church to undertake (6T 294).

God's messenger says that, "When Christ saw the multitudes that gathered about Him, 'He was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.' Christ saw the sickness, the sorrow, the want and degradation of the multitudes that thronged His steps. Among the high and the low, the most honored and the most degraded, He beheld souls who were longing for the very blessings He had come to bring... Today the same needs exist. The world is in need of workers who will labor as Christ did for the suffering and the sinful. There is indeed a multitude to be reached. The world is full of sickness, suffering, distress, and sin. It is full of those who need to be ministered unto--the weak, the helpless, the ignorant, and the degraded" (6T 254). These need hope if they are to survive.

We Adventists love to talk about, to preach about, to consider our blessed hope, and we say it that way, our "blessed" hope. It is an essential element of our identity; indeed it is a defining element, for we are advent people, that is to say those who believe in and wait for the second advent of Jesus. We look for Jesus to return to this earth, and though that surely would be gloriously sufficient, we have the blessed hope of Jesus returning to this atmosphere to gather us up to take us away from this turmoiled place. Our hope contains within it the promise of new bodies, renewed minds, new homes, and literal eternal life. We have a hope that would make a difference in the lives of the hopeless!

Context

Let us take these moments together to examine the concept of hope from a few perspectives. Hope is a major theme in scripture, appearing in the New Testament alone 318

times I am told. However, hope is defined often very causally as a wish or dream, or as desperation, or even a matter of defying the odds. Someone has said that faith and hope are closely linked, but should be distinguished; that faith has work to perform today, that hope cheers faith along the way and points to the rewards of service. A certain writer asserts that faith comes by hearing the Word (Romans 10:17), and hope by experience (Romans 5:3-4). Faith accepts the gift of promise, while hope confidently expects the fulfillment of the promise (Cook; Haines). Our hope is a certainty and we should be the most hope-filled people in the world, for our hope is centered in the certainty of the return of our Savior to this earth.

Bible scholars have shown that in the Old Testament hope is closely related to the character of God. Those who hope in God, trust God and His promises. Because God is the hope of the righteous, they can expect good things from God and wait patiently for his help and deliverance. This patient hope is firmly anchored in the history and narrative of Scripture. The God who has fulfilled his promises to Israel in the past will continue to be faithful in the present and the future. This is the hope we must share with others.

The New Testament concept of hope is rooted in the Old Testament; Christian hope includes trust in God, patient waiting and confidence in God's future. Hope is an essential characteristic of the Christian life and a central feature of Paul's theology. Every statement Paul makes about Christian hope is also a statement about what God has given the believer in Christ. In his letters, especially the letter to the Romans, Paul explores the ground of Christian hope, what it means to live in hope and the Christian hope for the future. He addresses the church as a community of hope: grounded in God's act of salvation in Christ, living in the power of the Holy Spirit and moving toward the full realization of the purposes of God.

Yes, we Seventh-day Adventists have a hope that is the core of our faith; it is the foundation of our belief system; it is the essence of our outlook; it is the overarching perspective of our worldview; it is the sustaining truth of our blind trust. It is what lifts us up when we are down. It is what settles us down when we are overwrought. It is what keeps us going when we are weary. It is what balances us when we are out of control. It is what gives us power and at the same time humbles our spirit. We know without doubt that Jesus is coming again and *that* hope makes it possible for us to endure all things as we wait in hope.

Hope is an encouragement to believers—indeed, to anyone—in the midst of suffering, but it also prevents us from being content with present circumstances. Hope insists that we wait with eager longing for the great day when all of God’s promises are fulfilled. Hope’s statements of promise stand in contradiction to present reality; hope leads reality toward the promised transformation. Christians, therefore, who live in hope, are “coworkers” with Christ, living and striving for the glorious kingdom and waiting patiently for it. The masses of this world exist without hope, longing and searching for that which will sustain them. As His coworkers we must do the work that Christ did as our example on earth.

Ours, then, is not the luxury of just experiencing hope, nor the joy of simply talking about hope, or even the thrill of preaching hope. Rather, we have been reminded that we have a greater responsibility. Our responsibility as the repositories of hope in this world is to share hope with the hopeless masses—that is with those who, are desperate, discouraged, doomed to failure, useless, pathetic, inept, clueless, in despair, despondent, downhearted, forlorn, and miserable. Isaiah, in the 61st chapter, issues a challenge for God’s anointed to preach the good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom to the captives, release from darkness the prisoners, and to comfort all that mourn. We must take this charge seriously.

And if that is not clear at a level of application—a charge for action, I declare to you this morning that we are under a call today that is even greater than before, for these last days will demand more of God’s people, the people of hope. As surely as we are called to the work we do, to the positions we hold, to the places where we live and labor, we are called by the God of Heaven to go beyond our typical ways of sharing the gospel of hope. We find the words of Jesus in Matthew 25 in His exposition on His second coming and His pronouncement of blessing on the faithful, where in versus 35 and 36 He says, ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

Projections on world conditions for the 15 year period we are now in from the year 2000 to 2015 are almost startling. Without going into specific detail we find expectations for increases in droughts and shortages of potable water all over the world, increases in famine in more and

more world regions, increases in catastrophic diseases such as HIV/AIDS in all places in the world, increases in natural or weather disasters, increases in crime, strife, terrorism, and war in every land, with decreases in the adult populations and increases in orphaned children worldwide, along with decreases in supporting relationships at all levels in all places (The National Intelligence Council). Despair and hopelessness will abound predictions indicate. This world is going to need our total involvement in ways not considered before this age. We must increase our ministries to the people of the world at very personal levels.

Ellen White admonishes us not to look with indifference and contempt upon those who have laid the temple of the soul in ruins. These are objects of divine compassion. He, who created all, cares for all. Even those who have fallen the lowest are not beyond the reach of His love and pity. She says, if we are truly His disciples, we shall manifest the same spirit. The love that is inspired by our love for Jesus will see in every soul, rich or poor, a value that cannot be measured by human estimate. She urges us to let our lives reveal a love that is higher than we can possibly express in words (6T 279).

This, brothers and sisters, is as much a part of sharing the gospel of hope today as is the preached word, not in terms of a social gospel, but as the living example of our Lord. In these last days we must actually **BE** hope to those who have no hope. We must be hope personified in every aspect of our daily walk. We must be the icon that appears on the computer screen of the minds of all who come into contact with us when they need to pull up hope.

Application

Researchers conducted an experiment with rats in water. This was a cruel experiment, but effective for developing theory—theory that may transfer to understanding human behavior. In this experiment the scientists placed rats in containers of water that measured far over their heads. To stay alive the rats had to swim or tread water, for there was no way out of their containers without help from the outside. The experiment produced an interesting phenomenon. The desperate little rats kept their heads above water as long as they could, but one group of rats was able to stay alive while others perished in the deep water. The researchers found that rats

that were left on their own in the water did not last as long as those who were lifted out of the water periodically by the scientists and then placed back into the containers of water.

The difference they reported was not related to this second group being able to catch their breath or refresh while out of the water. These who were lifted out of and returned to the water periodically swam and treaded water longer between rescues than those that perished (Today in the Word, May, 1990). Now, I hate rats. It's good that they did not have to rely on me to pull them out of their predicament. They all would have died if they waited for me to reach in there. There is no way that would have happened. I hope I do not respond to people that way, that there are no people in situations that are too disgusting, too deplorable, too detestable for me to reach in and help a person in need. The researchers concluded that it was the hope of being rescued that enabled the second group of rats to hang on longer. Just knowing that they would get a hand to lift them out of harm's way was enough to strengthen and sustain them. The same is true with people. People can endure most anything if they believe that relief will come at some point. They need hope.

As we consider the ground of hope we see in scripture that Paul understands Christian hope as a fulfillment of God's promises to Israel and delineates this aspect of Christian hope in his discussion of Abraham in Romans 4. We know that story so I won't rehearse it here. The point is that our hope is directed to the same God who fulfilled his promise to Abraham and who raised Jesus from the dead.

We as members of an eschatological community living between the resurrection of Christ and the ultimate realization of the eternal kingdom of God live in hope because God's promises in Christ stand in contradiction to the reality around us. We are sustained by a different reality of a future that has already begun, but is still awaiting its final consummation. We have more than God's faithfulness in the past and promises about the future to give us hope. God's gift of the Holy Spirit provides an experiential basis for hope in the present. In Romans 5 and Romans 8, for example, Paul writes about what it means for Christians to live in hope.

He says in versus 1- 5 of chapter 5, Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by

faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.

We, as believers, in this age live in hope because we know that we will eventually enter into an inheritance of glory (Col 1:5). This future glory exerts influence on our present through the hope it awakens. As we hope we anticipate the future and bring it into the present. For us, hope is not defined by present realities, but by God's purposes for the future.

When Paul writes about the Christian's future, it never becomes detached from the present experience of life in Christ, however (Col 1:27). The future Christians anticipate is a consummation of activity that began in Christ's death and resurrection and continues in the present. What is now the ground of Christian hope will then be fully manifested. The object of Christian hope is explicitly mentioned in Titus 2:13 as "the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." An agonizing and dying world needs this hope.

Ellen White says that we must work to bring sunshine back to souls from whom hope has departed. She says, God calls not only for our benevolence, but for our cheerful countenance, our hopeful words, the grasp of our hand. As you visit the Lord's afflicted ones, you will find some from whom hope has departed; bring back the sunshine to them (6T 277). We must be hope walking throughout our neighborhoods and our nations.

The Lord's messenger also cautions us in this service, she says: In trying to help the poor, the despised, the forsaken, do not work for them mounted on the stilts of your dignity and superiority, for in this way you will accomplish nothing. Become truly converted, and learn of Him who is meek and lowly in heart. We must set the Lord always before us. As servants of Christ, keep saying, lest you forget it: I am bought with a price (6T 277). Perhaps if we remember a time when we too were lost or off course without hope we will be more apt to seek out the lost and offer the hand of hope.

The spirit of the Good Samaritan, Mrs. White asserts, has not been largely represented in our churches. Many in need of help have been passed by, as the priest and Levite passed by the

wounded and bruised stranger who had been left to die by the wayside. Someone must fulfill the commission of Christ; someone must carry on the work which He began to do on earth; and the church has been given this privilege. She says where selfishness, greed, and oppression rule, even among our ranks, many of the Lord's true children are in need and in affliction (6T 255).

Appeal and Conclusion

There was a little boy who came into a church one cold wintry morning to get out of the snow and blustering wind. He had been trying to sell newspapers, but not a single customer had passed by. He sheepishly entered the auditorium and hoped to pass an hour unnoticed on the back row. Though the crowd was slim for that service the preacher delivered a stirring message on Jesus' sacrifices for us, and when the sermon was finished, he called for an offering.

The deacons went from row to row, and one drew near to the little newspaper boy. He stopped right in front of the little boy and held out the offering plate. The boy's eyes were fixed upon it, and after a long pause the little boy made an odd request of the deacon. He asked the deacon to place the offering plate on the floor. Then the little boy did something even stranger, yet it was something beautiful. He literally stepped into the offering plate. As he slowly looked up with big tears streaming down his little cheeks, he said, "Preacher I don't have any money; I haven't sold a single newspaper today, but if Jesus did all you said just for me, I will gladly give my life to Him." (Unknown)

Paul urges us to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God, holy and pleasing to Him, as an act of spiritual worship. Surely this includes using our bodies as instruments of good deeds as those who, as Jesus instructed, love God supremely and others as ourselves. Won't you with me step into the offering plate today? It will be worth our while. John the Revelator paid us a very convincing visit at our service here yesterday. Can we hear with John that sound like the roar of a great Heavenly multitude shouting hallelujah! For one day very soon we will hear what sounds like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah, for our Lord God Almighty reigns."

We will see Heaven standing open and there before us a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True, with eyes like blazing fire, and on his head many crowns, dressed in a

robe dipped in blood, with the armies of heaven following him, and on his robe and on his thigh the name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

It will not be long before we will see a new heaven and a new earth, the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, with God coming to dwell with His people who have been faithful. At that time He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away. We will hear Him say, It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. Jesus surely is coming for us very soon. Let us touch the world with this hope, while we wait for the culmination of our blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Won't you this morning and every morning with me step into the offering plate?

Resources

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