

Faith And Hope

1 Peter 1:20-21

20 He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you 21 who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. (1 Peter 1:20-21 (ESV))

Probably the most simple and most basic of all the questions that each believer must ask himself or herself is “Do I have “faith” and “hope”. And if I do have “faith” and “hope”, in whom or in what do I place my “faith” and hope”?

That question might seem a bit too basic for us here in this church because, most of us have been coming through these doors and learning about God for a long time now. But as these words of today’s passage remind us, even the most learned and the most devout of believers are subject to error and are especially subject to wander in their faith and in their hope, that there is an essential “connection” that our hearts, our souls and our minds must make and must keep, else all our efforts, no matter how concerted they may be, will be in vain.

What do I mean by that? It is this! As my dear wife and I traveled through Florida on our recent trip to attend her 50th high school reunion, we visited with and encountered several old friends and family members, some that we have not seen in a very long time, others very dear and up-close friends and beloved relatives.

As we observed their behavior, and engaged them in conversation, my mind often went to this very concern, do these dear ones in front of us have “faith and hope”, and if they do, what is their “faith and hope” centered within.

As I have thought through such things, I’ve been reminded that God is always faithful to do His part! I quickly remember such promises as those of the Lord Jesus when He said, “no one comes to me except my Father draw them”. And that is a truth that is absolute. God is continually at work within the hearts and minds of most everyone to do exactly that, to draw them to Christ for salvation so that their “faith and hope” will be in God and in Him alone.

As for those that we spent time with, I am confident that God has been faithful to do His part, to draw each of them to the Lord Jesus. But unfortunately it seems that for many of them, they have resisted God’s “drawing” and have chosen to instead place their “faith and hope” in some other provisions, most often not even knowing what that

source of provision might be. I grieve for those dear ones. Some of them will probably be eternally lost.

Again, there were many that we encountered and that I am so very concerned about, but may I share with you about two of those families.

The first is a woman, a fellow graduate of my wife's high school, who lived in my wife's neighborhood and whom she has known most all of her life. This dear lady is of the Catholic faith. And as I engaged her in conversation about her faith, she expressed that her faith was in what she referred to as "the church", meaning the Catholic Church, and in all that her "church involvement" brings to her soul. She obviously believes in God, or at least about God, but her "faith and hope" seemed much more to do with the workings of the Church rather than in the Person of God.

And in one of our conversations, she also mentioned that she was a "God-parent" to a particular child. I asked her what that meant, and what her responsibilities were regarding that relationship. She probably thought that she knew the answer to my question, but she was not able to articulate it very well.

When I asked her about her role in the biblical upbringing of the child, she quickly responded that she left that to "the church". In other words, as the "God parent" of this child, other than being at her baptism, she intentionally did not involve herself in the "God" portion of the child's up-bringing, but rather instead left that to "the Catholic church".

As I engaged her further in conversation regarding the Catholic Church and in its teachings, though being a life-long Catholic, she admittedly knew very little about the actual teachings, saying that her husband would know more because he had attended a Catholic school, while she herself had attended a public school.

The point in all that I am saying is that to some degree this dear lady has "faith and hope", but to what degree and in whom? Is her "faith and hope" enough to save her soul when she stands before Christ in judgment?

I do fear that this dear one is very typical of those who have "faith and hope" but do not really know who or what their faith and hope is in.

And may I say that this condition of soul is not just common to the Catholic faith, but is also true, "in practice", for most Protestants that I have met! We take our children to Sunday school and to church, and we involve them in all sorts of church activities. But

too often we rely, almost solely on the preacher and the Sunday school teachers and the youth leaders to bring our children to “faith and hope” in Christ. We, as fathers and as leaders of our family do not daily engage our wife and our children in personal teaching and admonition of the Lord. And if that be so, are we any different than our Catholic friends? Are we not simply trusting in “the church” to be doing what we ourselves should be doing? Have we not put our “faith and hope” in the “church organization” rather than in the Person of God?

Another dear family, one that is probably very typical of many Protestant families is one that I love dearly and am so very concerned about. This family, a wonderful family, a very involved church family, is one in which all the members were intensely involved in many of the activities and outreaches of their church, from teaching, to faithful giving, to soul-winning and every other effort their church pursued, but even so, something was still able to go very wrong, a devastating occurrence that drove them from their beloved church and left them at home each Sunday wondering what they were to do next.

What could have gone so terribly wrong in the lives of these dear “on-fire” church members to bring them to such grief, to a deep and difficult spiritual crisis, confused and wondering what to do next? In their situation, it was the church leadership that failed them, and terribly so! It was discovered that the Pastor, a very, very close personal friend, had for some time been engaging in immoral sexual behavior, that while he was standing in the pulpit each Sunday preaching solid gospel messages, He was also sinking deeper and deeper into personal sin.

And this Pastor was a very likeable man who had drawn many in the congregation to him in friendship and comradery, a man who could get his fellow church leaders to invest themselves and a lot of their money in activities and projects that he favored. And the church grew quickly under his leadership, with many coming to know Christ under his teaching. But then, without much forewarning, his immorality was discovered and everything fell apart within his church, and especially within the hearts and minds of some of his closest church friends.

As I listened to this account being spilled out with tears and great pain, it became clear to me that these dear despondent church members had put their “faith and hope” in a preacher and in the workings of the church. Yes, they believed in God, and devoutly so. But their greater “faith and hope” was in the Pastor and in the workings of the church. And right now, everything is in a mess for them, a real mess.

But this story actually has a further ongoing drama to it. After a year or more of grief and broken hearts, this family began attending another church, but only to have a

similar thing take place in the new church. That Pastor also got caught up in immoral behavior. And now, this dear family is staying home on Sunday morning, wondering what to do next.

And in my conversation with them, they also mentioned how Billy Graham's grandson, pastor of one of the oldest and most trusted churches in the City of Fort Lauderdale, had just recently been found to have participated in similar immoral behavior and has had to resign his position.

As I have pondered the crisis of this dear family and have grieved for them in their circumstance, these few words from our passage in 1st Peter 1 keep resonating within my mind.

21 . . . so that your faith and hope are in God (1 Peter 1:21 (ESV))

As our minds and hearts and emotions are flooded with these deep and difficult realities of life, what are we supposed to do with our brokenness? Especially, how is this dear family that has suffered so much supposed to respond. What are they to do next?

My thoughts first go to the standard, almost "cookie-cutter" answers that so many people try to offer. And they are good and right answers, answers such as, "all men and women are sinners" and "all men and women are tempted". "We just have to forgive their transgressions and get on with our walk with the Lord." And again, those are exactly right responses, and those things should be said. But they are of little comfort to a broken heart.

This Christianity of ours is not just a matter of which church we will attend, if one pastor goes astray, we just find another church. Yes, that may have to take place, but most often, something far deeper has been damaged. That pastor and his misdeeds often have put a stain upon the very image of God Himself, causing hurting church members to distrust the trustworthiness of God Himself.

In the few minutes that we have left, may we go back and reexamine some of the basics of who we are as believers, and further, how so many good and well-intending pastors and church leaders can wander so far astray. And perhaps by doing that, we can take a step further than just "cookie-cutter" answers.

First, as we studied only a few months ago in the Book of Ephesians, these behaviors that we have been talking about here are part of the common warfare that comes to us out of the "spiritual realms", those realms of darkness all around us where the powers

and principalities and dark forces of evil reside. Listen again to the words of Ephesians 6,

12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12 (NASB))

Each Sunday as devout church members gather within what they hope to be the secure walls of their churches, hearing and being fed by the bread and the water of life, that other side of the spiritual warfare is also busily at work. As disconcerting as it may sound to us, it can probably be said of many, many of our churches, that the enemy, “the world, the flesh and the devil”, are just as actively at work right within the same sanctuary as is the Spirit of God. Does that mean that those churches are corrupt? Not always, but sometimes.

The circumstance that allows the presence of those principalities and powers of darkness to have sway within a church resides within the hearts and souls of those who go there, the pastor, the church leaders and all those sitting in the pews.

“The world, the flesh and the devil”, are real enemies of our souls. The scriptures tell us so, the world with all of its tempting and beguiling enticements and allurements, the flesh, especially our own flesh and its “fleshly” ways of being so easily beguiled is a prime target of the world and the devil. And folks, the devil really is real. We say that we know that, but few of us really live as if he is.

All these realities of this life are real and they are always busily at work, doing their wicked tasks with great zeal and fervor. But recall also the truths that we have learned regarding them, especially that you and I are not given the privilege of blaming the enemy for our struggles with sin. The world, the flesh and the devil do tempt us, but God has ordained that you and I are ever and always personally accountable for the sins that we involve ourselves in.

The ultimate reality is that those pastors and church leaders exercised their “free will” and they foolishly treaded upon the precious blood of Christ, crucifying Him all over again by their wretched sin, trashing both their own Christianity and the Christianity of the members of their congregation? You and I need to know that because tomorrow the same kind of reality may visit our home or our church.

And what of the broken and discarded church members, those who sat in the pews each Sunday, listening and trusting everything that the pastor was saying to them, some literally hanging on his every word, carefully taking notes so as to learn and to worship

God. What of them? What are they supposed to do with all of this that is now pressing so heavily upon their Christianity? How do they pick up the pieces of their Christianity and go on with Christ? How can they now sit in their next church pew and fully trust the next pastor?

I must confess that as this dear family spoke to me about their circumstances, I had no easy answer for them as to how they could somehow get back to where they once were in their “faith and hope” in God.

All I know is that this dear family and all the other dear families within those churches are going to have to bury themselves deeply within the loving arms of Christ, force out all the other thoughts and memories about how they got to where they are in their mess, and simply and devoutly focus their “faith and their hope” in the Person of Christ. He is the only relief from their suffering.

One last thought . . . what about those pastors and church leaders that failed their church members so badly. What is to become of them? The scriptures are in many ways clear. They must “repent”, just as King David did in Psalm 51. And there will probably be much “weeping and gnashing of teeth” ahead for them. God is just! He will require much of them, because much had been given to them. I pity their souls.

My counsel to all that have been broken by those behaviors is the same counsel that I must give to myself and to you. And that is, “each day, every day, faithfully put on every stitch of the “full armor of God”. That is all that will stay us through these storms from our enemies. And as we wear our armor throughout the day, we must stay hunkered up as closely as we can in the crook of our Heavenly Father’s arm, fixing our “faith and hope” in Him alone. It is there that we will find peace for our troubled souls.

Praise be to God!