

Empowered “Helpless or Hopeful”

October 17/18, 2020

Digging Deeper

Empowered: “Helpless or Hopeful”

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Romans 15:13; Colossians 1:11; Ephesians 3:16-19; and others throughout.

Introduction

Writing in the 18th century, the philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that people have deep interest in three questions:

1. What can I know?
2. What ought I to do?
3. **What may I hope?**¹

The last of these inquiries concerns the future, and has to do with “what can be” and opens to human beings the world of possibilities. Kant, thereby, conceded the place of God in the future life.

Ours is a generation marked by challenges to hope. Powerful forces compete to write the story of the world, and among them are the familiar faces of politics, economics, and religion. Power, sex, and money are harsh task masters wanting to dictate the shape of the future. How do we retain our humanity in competition with them? Uncertainty about personal security, whether economic or political, robs human beings of hope.

The Greeks once told this fable. Zeus gave the human race a vessel full of all good things, but that human beings, filled with curiosity, lifted the lid so that all the good things escaped to the gods. When at last the lid was replaced, only "hope" was trapped and became humankind's only present comfort.

How fragile and precious they regarded this human quality! Even Pindar warned his readers that hope may easily deceive and become the most dangerous of human qualities, as people constantly err in their expectations and discover their hopes to be uncertain. The philosopher Democritus warned about the "hope of fools," an imagination based on chance, not on science. To the ancients, human hope lacked the ground of confidence reserved only for the gods. The most it might offer, suggested Homer, was a "comfort" for difficulty in the present.

Along these lines, I recently jotted down some common statements in our modern language of hope:

"I hope he gets well"

"Not exactly what we had hoped for"

"Presidential hopeful"

"I hope you know what you are doing"

"The situation is hopeless"

"Hapless and hopeless..."

"He gave her a hope chest for their anniversary"

"I hope and pray things improve"

"I hope to God he's not hurt!"

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965 [1781], A 805/ B 833.

In some cases, hope is about "wishing" or "wanting." People want things to improve. Here is moral intensity ("it *ought* to turn out this way") or a simple expectation ("it would make me happy if ..."), wanting a certain outcome.. They are saying, if only we had our way, this is how things would be! These are "hopeful persons" who "keep hope alive." Not uncommonly, the environment around such persons comes to resemble their good will, as others come on board and take up their cause that things improve.

Another sense of this word moves in a different direction. It illustrates the difference between the "weak" and "strong" senses of hope. "I hope you know what you are doing" betrays doubt about the outcome. For example, parents may suspect their young people just don't have enough experience to handle something well. Hope, in this instance, shows its frail side: that it is not quite as strong as it imagines, and suffers from rashness. Children have expectations, but they exceed knowledge. Parents have hope, but desire wisdom. The child is earnest. The parent is serious. The child has intensity. The parent requires confidence.

This confidence is a bit more pronounced in another common phrase "hope and pray." Implied here is that "hope" by itself is just not enough. While it may set the agenda for how things should turn out, it doesn't have what it takes to make it happen. And so we hope "and pray". Hope requires an anchor to sustain it.

Judging the future through the eyes of the past and present is a common practice among us. David Hume, in the 18th century, however reminded us that the future does not *necessarily* resemble the past, although the reason we think it must is our habituation to the way things are. For the way things are cuts a deep furrow in the soil of our experience making an alternative way of seeing the future psychologically impossible for us. We are, after all creatures of habit, both when habit serves us well (e.g. I brush my teeth twice a day) and when it serves us poorly (too many bad habits to enumerate). Seeing the future with persistent pessimism, despair, and helplessness is one of the maladies of the soul.

By contrast the Creator Lord who made us in His image gave us the aspiring capacity of *imagination*, His creative gift *to see* the world other than it is so that He might equally empower us *to make* it other than it is. When we receive this gift for newness, hope is possible, hope is born.

Hope becomes important to us when the world we have come to know *ends*, and we need to let go of it, and the world we face now requires us to receive it and to face it as God's gracious gift. God does not wait for us in those cases. His sovereignty is a powerful source of hope. God *is* and God *wills*, and His governance displaces the old order and generates a new one. We are called upon to embrace the future in obedience and to celebrate the future in worship. The church has a vocation to the world — and not only to itself — to free both itself and the world from fatigue, despair, and cynicism. That means the constant movement and negotiation between *grief* and *hope*.

The dominant theme of the Bible is exile and return home. How people get into exile and how they get out of it. When they go into exile, they must relinquish the past and turn their faces to a new and uncertain future. *God owns the future* as the free, transcendent and holy *other*. Old Testament prophets like *Ezekiel* imagine God as one who does not allow Himself to be mocked, manipulated, exploited, compelled or bought! Instead, God is honored, glorified, adored and properly feared. His grasp on the future is therefore firm and secure, and in Him we may have genuine hope.

Human beings see the future as a place of risk where commodities are traded and fortunes are won or lost. God is not a commodity, and we cannot press Him into our needs. He does not stay where He is not honored (Ezekiel 8:6), but freely leaves town when He chooses (9:3; 10:15-22). He will not be *housed*, but instead moves about on "wheels" (1:4-28). He refuses to be merely *useful*, but in His presence every human being stands in *jeopardy*. Every human being can also face *possibility*, properly related to this God of hope.

The companion to hope is *holiness*, and holiness summons us to righteousness, and thereby to *repentance* — that radical change in light of the future (14:6). If we want to live, we must be willing to “turn” (3:19; 18:30-32) — to change in light of God’s holiness. When we embrace the future on God’s terms, we discover ourselves within the embrace of God’s holiness. Ezekiel wrote chapter 18 as God’s comprehensive response of holiness to the hopeless moral path of His people. Idolatry (18:6a), illicit sex (18:6b), and failed economics (7-8a) appear on the prophet’s radar. From these, Israel must *turn*, and toward God Israel must hope.

Several comprehensive visions of the hopeful future appear in Ezekiel 34-37 and 40-48. At the center of these we encounter 36:22-32, a passage which begins with God’s resolve to bring about a hopeful future, not for our sake but for His (36:22-23, 32). With dogged determination, God repeatedly asserts, “I will...” in the face of Israel persistent refusal to follow the way of holiness (36:24-30). God cannot and must not wait for His people to be good enough for Him to act in their favor. He must take the decisive initiative, doing for His people what they failed to do for themselves. “I will...” drives the tent pegs of our hopeful future. “I will...” promises to create a new heart and endow a new Spirit on God’s people. In all of this, Lord Yahweh (“Sovereign Lord”) acts for the good of His own purpose. God’s future does not depend on us but on Him. It remains for us to accept the future He has made that we might receive the hope that He has promised.

Character and Hope (Romans 15:13)

Our emphasis this week will be on the nature of hope while acknowledging the temptation to hopelessness that springs from a sense of helplessness. A few texts orient our thinking as we open a fresh chapter about the possibility of a new future.

¹³ May the God of *hope* fill you with all joy and peace in *believing*, so that you may abound in *hope* by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13).

Consider this the “trigger text”! *Hope* (Greek: *elpis*) happens because we believe in the *God* of hope. Hope happens because we “may abound by the power of the Holy Spirit.” God inspires our hope by transforming our nature with the virtues of *joy* and *peace*, commonly identified among the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23) and also among the habitual actions of *agapē* Love (1 Corinthians 13). *Joy* and *peace* are, then, qualities of character *supplied by God through the work of the Spirit*. They are both a *product* and a *process*. As a *process* they are constantly being exercised, developed, and formed within us. As a *product* they become part and parcel of who we really are. They make us reliable in who we are and what we do. Together, joy and peace make possible the orientation of hope; they orient the center of our lives toward the future in ways that elevate our hope, that lead us to believe that the future need not resemble the past or present, but exceed them instead.

What then are these essential virtues for hope, these empowerments to imagine the world other than we see it and then to change the world other than we have it? Briefly, joy and peace might we understood on the follow way.

“Joy” translates the Greek word *chara*

Classical Greek uses of *chara* referred to “contentment”, and the ability to find the “mean” between the extremes (Compare Aristotle’s *Ethics*). The result was the “happy” life. However, in the Christian setting, happiness and joy are clearly distinct. Joy is not mere pleasure or contentment, but the overwhelming sense of celebration and hope. Joy is associated with the coming day of resurrection and the Messianic feast when God’s people celebrate the fulfillment of God’s kingdom together. Joy is felt when the lost son has been found (Romans 5:2, 11; 14:17; 15:11). Paul refers to “joy in the Holy Spirit” in Romans 14:17. Joy and peace are connected in Paul’s letters, and their appearance back-to-back in this passage is by design.

“Peace” translates the Greek word *eirēnē*.

Though Paul writes in *Greek*, he also thinks in *Hebrew*, and that would imply the idea of *shalōm* behind this Greek expression. Wholeness, well-being, health and completeness are all summed up in this idea. Whereas the Roman world prided itself on “order” as the basis for the *pax Romana* (“peace of Rome”), such order was stifling and ruthless. By contrast, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”, and in turn celebrate this wholeness together in vital, healthy and nurturing community. God is the “God of peace”, and we as His children should be like Him (Romans 15:33; 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews

13:20). "Blessed", says Jesus, "are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:9). "My peace," Jesus says, "I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled or afraid" (John 14:27).

To expand our understanding of hope, Paul also uses the verb form of "faith" when he writes about "believing," which, if the word actually existed, could be translated "faithing"! It just so happens that "faith" belongs to the virtues in Galatians 5 with the following meaning.

"Faith" translates the Greek word *pistis*

Because this word is laden with special meaning in relationship to receiving salvation from God, it's difficult to isolate a separate meaning as an expression of the Spirit's fruit. Obviously, those who bear the "fruit of the Spirit" are those who have received God's gracious gift of His Son by faith. However, used as a virtue, the word comes closer in meaning, not only to the idea of "faith", but to the idea of "faithfulness", the consistent and steadfast loyalty of human beings to God and to each other. The New Testament repeatedly reminds us that God is faithful (1 Corinthians 1:9; 10:13; 2 Corinthians 1:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:24; 2 Thessalonians 3:3). Our faithfulness is engendered by the faithfulness of God; it is our suitable response to His loyalty to us.

Within the New Testament writings, the book of *Hebrews* adds its own special flavoring to the relationship between *hope* and *faith*:

Now *faith* is confidence in what we *hope* for and assurance about what we do not see. – Hebrews 11:1

Faith, being our steadfast and reliable trust in the God who gifted us with Jesus, produces within us both *confidence* and *assurance* about the future: our future and the future of the world. Faith fastens itself to the future known by God Himself, and from that future He comes back to meet us in our present. Indeed, God keeps coming at us from the future, laden with the gifts of hope inspiring us with the capacities of joy and peace.

Empowerment for Hope (Colossians 1:11-12)

¹¹ May you *be made strong* with *all the strength* that comes from his *glorious power*, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has *enabled* you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. (Colossians 1:11-12).

Our first supporting text pays particular attention to the language of *power*. Paul pulls out his Greek thesaurus and treats his readers with some enhancing variations on the idea of power. Consider:

"Be made strong," "with all the strength": *dunamis, dunamoō* (strength, act of power, miracle, power of God)

"From his glorious power": *kratos* (might, dominion, powerfully effective, executive power).

"Enabled you": *ikanoō* (make capable, make fit)

Although the word "hope" (Greek: *elpis*) does not appear in the Colossian text, yet there are implications of hopefulness contained in other words. "prepared to endure" is a decidedly future oriented phrase especially when coupled with "patience" and "inheritance" in the words which follow. To prepare is to anticipate something that will happen in the future. To endure with patience assumes a series of experiences a person encounters on their way into the future. An inheritance is what heirs of estate will receive at some time in the future. Paul writes about these future eventualities with considerable confidence and positive orientation. He is able to write so favorably about the future because he believes that some form of "power" or empowerment will come from God to make them possible.

Three different Greek terms (see above) build out the robust form of this empowerment, emphasizing the divine origin of this power, its strength and wonderment, the source within the dominion (rule) of God's executive action to govern the world (i.e. "glory, majesty"), and finally the transference of this power from God to us in the form of His *empowerment* — enabling us to patiently endure and joyfully anticipate what He will make possible for us as we walk into the future with Him. The promise of our place with "the saints in light" — that is, "the communion of saints" — is especially poignant since our hope for the future is tied to the hope of every redeemed person, past, present, and future. In this grand vision of the future, we are by no means alone, but surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses" whose faithful presence encourages our journey. And so the writer to the *Hebrews* fills out the framework of Christian hope with these majestic words of hope and the kind of future we can anticipate:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is *set before us*,² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of *the joy that was set before him* endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3).

The language of hope scintillates in words like “perseverance,” “race set before us,” “joy set before him,” and “endured.” However, this supporting text also sobers our thinking by remembering the problem of the “weary or lost heart.” What the writer of *Hebrews* encourages is a new orientation of our vision, fixed as it must be on the person and work of the earthly Jesus. In his humanity, Jesus became one with us and thereby knew the tension between present and future, between what is true right now and what might be true later on. The Father knew the end from the beginning and together with the Son and the Spirit in their eternal life purposed the salvation of the world. When Jesus entered the human life-stream, indentifying fully and authentically with our humanity, he accepted the limitations of time and space in the course of his ordinary human life. In short, he suffered the loss of divine majesty while yet participating fully in divine reality. Or, as the great creeds express it, “He was fully God and fully human.” The limitation of time meant that Jesus knew the factual experience of past, present, and future as lived reality — as any of us would know them. Therefore, hope would have been part of his life in the flesh. The writer in this text speaks of “the joy that was set before him,” a lovely restatement of hope’s essential meaning. Jesus, going to the cross, accepting the shame, still looked to the future with hope because he saw the future “at the right hand of God’s throne.”

We are, says the writer, “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” — persons who now live the future after having endured beforehand the severest and most trying of circumstances, past and present. That they *surround us* means they are the community which embraces us, supports us, cheers us on, and wants the best for us. The stories of the witnesses, told in Hebrews 11, bring them close to us through the Word of God. Their stories are the means by which they surround us. Hope is not alone, but is present in a new social order which the church calls “the communion of saints.”

The imagery of this text is taken from the public games of Greece and Rome, as suggested by the example of the runner and his race. We are, says the writer, in the arena, the Coliseum, with hundreds of spectators who once raced before us, and are now observing the race we are running. The whole of our life is that race, and the goal is to finish as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. We trained for this race under the guidance of our example and coach, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” Jesus the Son of God. He ran the race before us, and so his hope can then be our hope if we keep our eyes on him. We see him run by reading the testimony of the Gospels where his story is told from four different perspectives. We see him run in the lives of biblical characters that consistently followed him. We see him run in the brothers and sisters of his Church whose testimonies strengthen our resolve.

The loss of hope and the loss of joy share a common table in the drama of human existence. Our text here keeps them together. As noted in a previous section, joy and peace unite within our character development so that hope might become possible for us. So also here, joy becomes a synonym for hope in the example of Jesus. Without joy, the life of a Christian can quickly slip into weariness where we lose heart. Too much work without time for rest; too many conflicts without resolution; too unfulfilled the promises made; too far behind we fall in whatever needs to be done on time. To all of these sources of weariness and loss, the writer addresses his words about the joy of Jesus and his future, how he fixed his eyes on the joy, and how we must fix ours on him. Our race is, realistically, for the long-term, and we are long-distance runners. It is true that we do not know how much longer because we didn’t sign up for only one tour of duty but for a lifetime of service to Christ and his kingdom. There is much to look forward to. There’s never a dull moment in kingdom work! Look forward, look up, and look at Jesus. See the joy unspeakable and full of glory.

The Fulfillment of Hope (Ephesians 3:16-21)

¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded

in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:16-21).

Once more Paul takes up his pen and more fully elaborates the promise of the future by using the language of empowerment: “riches of his glory,” “strengthened with the Spirit’s power,” “Christ in your hearts,” “rooted and grounded in love,” “power to comprehend,” “fullness of God,” “power at work within us,” “able to accomplish,” “abundantly more,” and “glory in the church and Christ Jesus.” These phrases burst with the supreme energy of empowerment, even as they rise with crescendo into a grand vision of God’s future. That future is spoken of as “to all generations” and “forever and ever.” This text climaxes with a great *benediction*, a well-wishing prayer over the congregation at Ephesus and over ours! He begins “I pray that...” and he ends with “Amen” — “so let it be!” Paul’s prayer and his poetry complement each other in this heart rending and heart rendering anthem of hope. His prayer envisions one united people, a single community from all creation, where not a single soul is lost but instead is incorporated into the universal sovereignty of God’s eternal kingdom.

What Paul purposes for the letter he sends to Ephesus is *a new vision of the future*. He wants his readers to imagine this future, but he also knows that they cannot see what God intends for the future without new eyes. God must reveal the vision of His glory, His bright and life-giving majesty, brighter than the sun; glory to transform the eyes of his audience and of the church in every age. This glory must strengthen the “inner being” by the power of the Spirit. This glory must dwell in every heart through faith by the risen Christ. This glory must root and ground us in His love. This glory is without limit, from riches without limit, and the gift that keeps on giving. Hope must have the empowerment of such glory in order to capture the imagination of God’s people. And yet this is not a private experience, but it is a personal one, shared “with all the saints.” Hope cannot be solitary but lived within community. *We need each other to hope*. Our togetherness consolidates the power of the Spirit, the presence of Christ, and the riches of the Father’s Glory. The whole Triune God empowers the people of God so that they might move with hope into the future of God.

There is a thickness to the experience of hope, described in our text in terms of spatial *dimensions*. Using a lovely comparison, Paul speaks of breadth, length, height, and depth. His choice of four terms intrigues us since we might expect only three dimensions: *dimensions*, simply, dimensions. That is what Paul prays to see in his readers' lives. What thrills the heart of the gardener is to see his plantings "fill in and fill out and grow up"! What encourages the contractor is to see his building "take shape, rise upward, expand outward"! Space in all its dimensions gives substance to roots and foundations. And it is so with the Christian experience. Signs of life yield to foliage and fruit. Foundations support superstructure and square footage. Roots and foundations hold a promise. Paul wants to see that promise fulfilled, and so he prays: *platos kai mēkos kai hupsos kai bathos*. Spoken aloud, even by someone not knowing Greek, these words are melodious and assume form, shape, size, and consequently, dimension. Wide and long and high and deep--adjectives applied to the love of God as expressed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Hope for the future!

The life of the church can be rooted and grounded, but still be entirely flat and without dimension. We can hold all of the correct doctrines, observe the sacraments, keep the doors open, and the lights on. We can sing all of the right music, performed in all the rights ways, by all of the right artists. We can preach the word and teach theology. But at the end of the day, the most we show for our labors is roots and foundations, but no growing plants and no rising buildings. Roots are for fruit and foundations are for buildings. Paul was grateful for the solid foundation, but now urged his audience on to greater heights and *grander hopes*.

If the love of God is "greater far, than tongue or pen can ever tell," how does that love give form and shape to our lives and our churches? In what does “the breadth and length and height and depth” consist? For Paul, they were...

1. *Wide* enough for Jew and Gentile.
2. *Long* enough for the present and the future
3. *High* enough to sit with Christ in the heavenlies
4. *Deep* enough to encompass all of the visible creation.

All of these words are united with the phrase "together with all the *saints (hagioi*, Paul's newly favored way of talking about *all of Christ's followers*, Jew and Gentile, though he, at one time, applied it only to the Jewish people)". Growth can never be a private affair. Within the church there must be a delicate balance maintained between *self-feeding* and *shared-feeding*. None of us subsists alone--or should. Consider the contribution of God's people across the whole of human history. Every time we pick up a Bible, we are standing like pygmies on the backs of giants who came before us: Bible translators who made sense out of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, and then placed the words of those languages into our own. A mutual debt of love surrounds the history of God's people, and our "ability" to "comprehend" the dimensions of God's love is shared with countless other believers across the ages. In this, we dare not break the commandment: "Honor your father and your mother...", for history is filled with fathers and mothers of our faith.

Although the language of "dimensions" satisfies the requirements of time and space, Paul was not satisfied to end his prayer with these. Knowledge of these things was insufficient: "love which surpasses knowledge" (Greek: *huperballousan tēs gnōseōs*). When Paul prayed that his readers might "know" the love of Christ, he did not mean intellectual awareness alone. There were plenty of false teachers, bottom-feeding the Lycus valley near Paul's churches in Asia Minor, who were scamming the religious world with their self-help philosophies and their claims to "know secrets" only a few were privileged to share. These were the proto-Gnostics, soon to blossom into Christianity's mortal enemy, and robbing the Gospel of its simplicity and power. Knowledge (*gnosis*) does not save; Jesus does. And it is the love of Christ which must *fill the lives of his followers*. Cleverly, Paul steals the thunder from his Gnostic rivals when he uses the word "fill", from *pleroma*. His earlier language of dimensions coalesces with this idea of "fullness", stressing the grandeur, scope and immensity of God's plan to fill the world with nothing less than Himself.

This is *not* pantheism, which teaches that *God is equivalent to everything*. Instead, God blesses everything He has made with His presence, and He chooses to begin this remarkable plan by inhabiting the lives of His people, His family, those who bear His Name. When the Christ community grows through worship, prayer and obedience, not only is the Temple of God enriched, the whole of Creation reverberates from the effects until one day it, too, will be filled "with all the fullness of God" (3:19). That God through Christ and the Spirit intends and purposes to accomplish all of this becomes the root and ground of Christian hope, a new orientation for the future.

The prayer for Paul's readers then moves to the petition that they might "be able" to grasp the dimensions and fullness of Christ's love, thereby growing and building their churches and their lives. As if to take a deep breathe, and stand back from his own words, Paul shifts his focus from "asking" to "praising", from petition to doxology. What is a doxology? From the Greek *doxa* and *logos*, it is an expression of the glory of God; it is giving words to the felt sense of God's overwhelming greatness, majesty and character. When the Greeks spoke of someone's character or an estimation of that character, they used the word *doxa*. It's actually a metaphor on the brightness of the sun's light, and was applied to the radiant portion of the sun. When something is seen in light of the sun's brightest rays, it is truly understood and appreciated. God's character, as expressed in His many attributes, is His "glory". The word may also apply to the "honor of God". If we revere God's character, we seek to honor it as well. Honoring God is giving Him His "due", that which rightfully belongs to Him and to no one else. This too is His glory. In His role as King of all Kings, God is majestic--He radiates His power, and provokes awe in His subjects.

God's people are said to "give God glory". This means they say and do that which most clearly emphasizes and underscores the true nature of God. If others see the outline of God's character in our lives, it brings "glory to God". When we are opaque to ourselves, we become transparent to God's light. This, too, "glorifies God".

Giving God glory may seem a Herculean task? Who is adequate for these things? These questions lie behind Paul's dramatic flourish in 3:20-21. Several points bear underscoring. *Paul focuses attention on God by identifying specific qualities in His character in order to inspire hope for the future.*

1. *"Who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine."* To achieve the depth of this idea, Paul chains together the Greek expressions *huper panta* and *huperekperissou* which are basically synonyms in meaning, and form what Greek grammarians call a "paronomasia". Between them, these two phrases combine ideas of "above", "out of" with the notion of "overflow". The verb form appears elsewhere in 1 Thessalonians 3:10 and 5:13. Scholars note it is the highest form of comparison imaginable, and so it is often translated "exceedingly, infinitely, very far in excess". Paul acknowledges the limitations of both his own prayer and his own imagination (Greek: *nous*, the highest form of thought). Once we think we have figured out what God is up to, He surprises us with His own plans. The recent popular film *Bella* began with the line, "If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans." That is precisely Paul's point. God's vision for the church, His people and the world is more immense than our understanding of it.
2. *A power already is a work in us, but it points into the future where God's glory is destined to shine forever.* Recall Paul's earlier remark in Ephesians 1 that the Holy Spirit is God's down-payment on future blessings. His doxology echoes that sentiment.
 - 1) The "glory" lives in "the church" and "in Christ Jesus". That is a present reality, something that is already true. However, the glory grows brighter.
 - 2) "For all the generations, of the age of the ages.". Scripture is never abstract when it speaks of eternity, but employs compounded word forms to express the idea of "God's time". When we encounter the language of 3:20, we must be careful not to read too much technical detail into otherwise qualitative and highly suggestive words. Put simply, Paul uses stock-in-trade language to write about the future in its endless and limitless possibilities. He writes in ways to let his readers know that God will surely continue doing in Christ and in the church what he has begun to do in his own time. Did Paul imagine that we, 2000 years later, would be studying and seeking to make sense out his little letter/sermon, sent to the little colonies of heaven scattered throughout Asia Minor? Probably not--after all, he just told us that God can do "above all we ask or think", including the prolonging of church history for more than two millennia. But then of such stuff doxologies are made. And this one is no exception.
 - 3) *"Amen" – the One who will make it so!* Interestingly, this word can be translated in Greek or transliterated from Hebrew. As a good Hebrew word (*amēn*) it connotes affirmation and certainty, an idea also present in the Greek notion: "let it be", or "may it be so". Commonly used in worship as a term of agreement, it also implies confidence that God will do what He has promised. By saying "amen", we are, in effect, saying, "Yes, *it will be*". And Paul believes the roots and foundations will become a living Temple where God will fill, not only His people, but the whole world. Amen. Here's hope's best word, the promise and confidence about the future: what God plans to do *He will make it so!* Every time the church at worship or the individual at prayer utters the word "Amen," they are in effect saying, "If any of these words I/we have spoken are going to happen, "He will make it so!" Amen.

Conclusion

Personal determination to see the future as open and rich with possibilities is the essence of *Empowered Hope!* But not just any future will do. Hope is not wishful thinking or sentimental yearning. Rather hope grasps the God who is taking history forward to a grand climax and fulfillment. Moreover, *Empowered Hope*, as we are conceiving it, casts its lot with this God in the deepest personal way. As goes God, so go we! Through Jesus Christ, his followers bind themselves to a new destiny in which the world is transformed, and all things are made new. In this regard, theologian Jürgen Moltmann has written:

... in the Christian life faith has the priority, but hope the primacy. Without faith's knowledge of Christ, hope becomes a utopia and remains hanging in the air. But without hope, faith falls to pieces, becomes a fainthearted and ultimately a dead faith. It is through faith that man finds the path of true life, but it only hope that keeps him

on that path. Thus it is that faith in Christ gives hope its assurance. Thus it is that hope gives faith in Christ its breadth and leads it into life.²

Hope keeps the harassed human being from fleeing the world with resignation and escapism. Again, Moltmann:

Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present ... [The] Church is committed to “answer for the hope” that is in it (1 Peter 3:15). It is called in question “on account of the hope and resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6). Wherever that happens, Christianity embraces its true nature and becomes a witness of the future of Christ.”³

Further,

If it is hope that maintains and upholds faith and keeps it moving on, if it is hope that draws the believer into the life of love, then it will also be hope that is the mobilizing and driving force of faith’s thinking, of its knowledge of, and reflections on, human nature, history and society. Faith hopes in order to know what it believes.⁴

A powerful text in this regard is found in Romans 8:19: “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.” The phrase, “eager expectation” (Greek: *apokaradokia*, “”). Paul uses the same Greek term in Philippians 1:20 where it is tied with “hope” (Greek: *elpis*). It carries the idea of *intense desire* which looks forward to something happening. This is not mere “looking forward” but the more passionate act of expressing enthusiasm while turning attention to the future. Creation, Paul writes, deeply wants to have the same hopeful future which individual Christians expect for themselves. Hope, thus regarded, is a comprehensive experience of the whole cosmos.

Paul imagines the whole universe watching, amazed, at the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and then hearing that his followers will one day also be raised, Creation itself desires the same reality for itself. Hope is, then, the sign of New Heavens and New Earth. But hope begins with Christ, and then with us who place our hope in him (1 Corinthians 15:9; Ephesians 1:12).

Empowered Hope is intensely *personal* hope; not in the sense of being *private* but in being about *persons*; not in isolation from the whole world but in intimate expectation that the whole world will one day share hope with us.

And the church is immersed in hope through common worship and great hymns which remind us how the language of hope becomes the rhythm of our hearts. In 1834 Edward Mote, a Baptist minister, penned these lyrics as a personal confession of faith to be sung by congregations for generations.

1 *My hope is built* on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

Refrain:

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand,
all other ground is sinking sand.

2 When darkness veils his lovely face,
I rest on his unchanging grace;

in ev'ry high and stormy gale,
my anchor holds within the veil. [Refrain]

3 His oath, his covenant, his blood
support me in the whelming flood;
when all around my soul gives way,
he then is all my hope and stay. [Refrain]

4 When he shall come with trumpet sound,
O may I then in him be found,
dressed in his righteousness alone,
faultless to stand before the throne. [Refrain]

Glory to God! Amen.

² *Theology of Hope*, tr. James W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1967), 6.

³ *Op Cit*, 7.

⁴ *Op Cit*, 18, 20.