

Bible Studies for Adventists



These studies are NOT produced by or connected to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

April 11–17, 2009

Commentary on “Hope”

MARTIN CAREY

Day 1: Sabbath Afternoon, April 11, 2009

This week’s lesson looks at modern progress which was founded on reason, and expressed in technology and moral improvement. Even though western society has been optimistic about the future, there is abundant evidence that human progress is an utter failure. The author lists wars, terrorism, and environmental degradation as evidences of this failure, and concludes that mankind has no basis for optimism in anything he can accomplish. The author rejects optimism in man’s capabilities, and exchanges it for hope in what God has promised us through Jesus.

Problems

We can wholeheartedly agree that human progress has been a failure; our only hope is in God. However, what is lacking at the beginning of this week’s discussion is a definition of hope. We need to know what hope is before we can take comfort in it. The common understanding of hope includes the desire for some future event with a belief in its possible occurrence. Our desire may be irrational. We may have the smallest expectation of the desire being met, but we cling to the belief anyway. Perhaps that is why politicians are so fond of invoking it. The common understanding of the word “hope” includes the element of uncertainty. This could be expressed as,

Desire + uncertain fulfillment = hope.

The lesson states that our hope is based only on Jesus and his promises to us. How certain can the Christ follower be that these promises will be fulfilled for him as an individual? Does God want us to have certainty in our future with him, or is having assurance of salvation wishful thinking and presumption? The biblical hope doesn’t just indulge the cautious confidence of Christians, but those who belong to Christ are commanded to seize hold with “full assurance of hope.” That is how we will endure. Heb. 6:11

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Heb. 11:1 Hope is faith’s confident possession of the future, and this brings assurance. Anything less than full assurance shows a “sluggish” lack of faith in God’s word. We might say that biblical hope can be expressed as:

Desire + God’s Word = Full Assurance

As we study the Guide this week, we will learn how we can avoid sluggish uncertainty, and seize hold of God’s word with real hope and joy.

Summary

1. The lesson does not define its object of study.
2. The common usage of the word “hope” contains the element of uncertainty about the outcome of one’s desires. However, the Bible commands us to hope in a future based on his word, which allows no uncertainty.
3. Saving faith gives confident hope in God’s promises and he who is faithful will give endurance to the end.

Day 2: Sunday, April 12, 2009

This lesson looks at problem of fear that we see in our world, and how Jesus prophesied that there would be much distress and terror right before his coming. Luke 21. 25, 26 Terrorism is given as an example of this widespread apprehension which confirms prophecy. Ellen White is quoted, saying that God's people should prepare for what is about to suddenly break upon the world. Christians will not be terrified or surprised by end time calamities because the Bible predicted them. The calamities will give them more confidence in the truth of God's word. Christians will not fear, because they hope in their Lord's soon coming.

Problems

The events around the Time of Trouble are fearful for unbelievers, but the actual coming of Christ will be absolutely terrifying for those who are not ready. Jesus will come as Judge and Executioner, and it will be "a fearful thing" to fall into his hands. Heb. 10:31

"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Mt. 10:28

Having a thorough knowledge of prophecy will not eliminate the fear of judgment. Ellen White spent her life telling the Adventist church to get ready, by affliction of soul and perfection of character. She also forbade believers from saying, "I am saved." And yet who can say that by following her counsel they will be able to stand on that day? Fear of judgment remains. Our most pressing need is peace with God.

To avert fear of judgment, it is not enough to learn the signs, expect Christ's coming, and desire that we will be "fit for heaven." The standard of fitness is merely this, all the righteousness of God. Perfection of our characters for heavenly fitness brings hopelessness. So, our hope must have this Rock solid foundation:

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Rom. 5:1

We have access through him. We stand in grace through him. And we boast, celebrate, and exult in hope of glory through him. When you are at peace with God, Jesus Christ is your very life. You are not only fit for Heaven, you are already seated in heavenly places. Eph. 2:6

When the Judge appears, Romans 5:1 will be no less true. Between now and then, we will have tribulations, which will have taught us patient endurance. Our characters will be proven. Rom. 5:4 But the righteousness which gives us peace is a gift from the judge, already completed by Him. That is why, when others are fainting from fear, he could tell us to "straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Luke 21:28 With saving faith, we have that redemption now.

Summary

1. There is one way to conquer fear. We need to make peace with God before we can feel confident in the return of the righteous Judge.
2. Knowledge of end time events and character development is not enough.
3. When we have been justified by faith, we have that peace, and can boast in hopeful assurance of God's glory.

Day 3: Monday, April 13, 2009

Today's lesson divides the Christian hope into two aspects, what is offered by God in the future, and the benefits of salvation now. The future aspects include the resurrection, the New Earth, and eternity with God. The present benefits of salvation include knowing we have a meaningful life with a possible eternal future, and having a relationship with Christ.

Author Jon Paulien is quoted saying that although the word "life" in the gospels is primarily about eternal life, "life" in the book of John refers especially to "the present reality of what Jesus does for those who believe in Him..." Two examples are cited of how Christians have hope right now—The abundant life Jesus promises in John 10:10, along with having "passed from death to life" in John 5:24. Believers can appropriate Jesus' life into their lives by keeping a relationship with him, and living "life at its best."

Problems

The separation made here between life with Christ now and eternal life in the future is artificial. Since we have been brought near through the blood of Christ, and have passed from death to life, we have eternal life now. The present benefits of salvation are only available to the believer because he presently possesses eternal life. If we do not have the son, we do not have life.

The lesson asks us to consider the radical change that happens when we hear Jesus' word and believe in him (Jn. 5:24). The question assumes that "passed from death to life" means a here and now change within the believer. However, when we read the whole text, the believer also "has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." Eternal life and the judgment refer to our ultimate status before God.

When Jesus offers life, he does not offer something partial, temporary or provisional. He said,

"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" Jn. 6:35.

Those satisfactions are permanent.

What did Jesus mean by abundant life in Jn. 10:10? Look at verse 9:

"I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture" Jn. 10:9.

The abundant life is nothing less than being saved, and that is eternal. That is what makes it abundant. We belong to him now and forever. So to have life in Christ is to possess salvation, right now.

He is not waiting to see if you will become good enough to call you his own. "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me..." Jn. 10:14

Jesus says,

"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" Jn. 10:28.

When you believe and are born again, you receive the whole benefit package.

Summary

1. Though most of our inheritance is unseen, we possess it fully, by faith.
2. As we saw from Hebrews 6, anything less than full assurance in our salvation is to become "sluggish."
3. These simple, pure statements of our Lord dispel a lot of nuanced arguments that try to rob us of the exultant, exuberant, boastful joy he commands us to have. We have his word on it.

Day 4: Tuesday, April 14, 2009

There are two certainties that are dealt with in today's lesson. Firstly, death is all around us as a constant reminder of our fragile mortality, and no man escapes it. Secondly, Christians take heart in knowing there will be a resurrection of the dead, and this is essential to our faith. Without the resurrection, as Paul said, we would be "most miserable," and our hope is in vain.

How God accomplishes our resurrections is a mystery, the author states, but he doesn't need to "safeguard the material substances of our bodies" to bring us back to life. After we die, he will preserve our identities within his divine memory and recreate us on resurrection day.

Problems

Paul made it clear that the Christian's hope is in glorification by resurrection. We will not be satisfied with only life on this earth, or as a disembodied spirit. However, the lesson states that to resurrect us, God must safeguard our identities in his divine memory. This needs to be examined. There are a number of assumptions implied here:

Human life is only material substance, a well-organized collection of chemicals and interactions. This includes our faith, our characters, and even our relationship with God. All we cherish is only chemical.

At death, it all disintegrates, including our faith and characters, for our brains disintegrate. These are then preserved in God's memory.

At the resurrection, those patterns are recreated and implanted with our past memories, along with consciousness. This new being is then an enhanced version of what we were. "We" are a new creation.

A material resurrection of this kind is the creation of a duplicate. There is no actual "you" that is continuous or preserved alive. A clone cannot be "you" no matter how close it matches your genes or thinks like you. Most important of all, there is no scripture that states that at death, God preserves our identities in his memory and recreates us at the resurrection. This imposes a materialist philosophy on God's word.

God's word is more hopeful, for as Jesus said to Martha after Lazarus' death, "Whoever believes in me, though he

die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (Jn. 11:25, 26). Just as we learn we have assurance of salvation, we can also know that once we are given life, we will never lose it. "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (Jn. 10:28).

Jesus' promise of eternal life becomes real when we realize he is speaking of the new, spiritual life he gives us through the Holy Spirit in the new birth. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (Jn. 3:6). The Spirit never leaves us (Jn. 14:16). The Holy Spirit does not create some new kind of holy flesh, for the life of the new birth is spiritual life. With this new spiritual life in us, we can truly worship him, for "true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:23). Chemical interactions cannot worship God.

One of the most detailed passages about life after death is given in Philippians 1, where Paul speaks of his own dying. "My desire is to depart and be with Christ...But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account." This would be an odd way to talk of resurrection, "to depart" and be with Christ, vs. remaining in the flesh (Phil. 1:23, 24). We know that at the resurrection, we will see Christ in our new bodies, so Paul is talking about being with Christ right after death.

This is supported by II Corinthians 5, where "we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord...we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (II Cor. 5:6,8). Paul is not celebrating the Platonic contempt for the material body, and hoping for a vapid, non-material existence in a spirit realm. To possess a body and spirit together is to be a whole person, for he longs to "be clothed" (II Cor. 5:4).

Summary

1. The Study Guide assumes that because there will be bodily resurrection, our lives are therefore only physical entities without a non-material, spiritual component. Resurrection is then only a creation of a duplicate of us, and not a continuation of our real selves. Jesus promised that if we believe in him, we will never die, for the life he gives is eternal, and no one will take it away.
2. The Holy Spirit gives us a living spirit which is not part of our fleshly body, and that is given eternal life. This is our real self which can love and worship God, who is a spirit. When we are resurrected, we will have a body which is a "spiritual body" like Christ's body. We will still be "us," because Jesus keeps his promises that we will never die. That is better by far than a duplicated, but well-behaved batch of chemicals.

Day 5: Wednesday, April 15, 2009

Eternal life is a difficult thing to imagine, given that there will be a new earth, new bodies, and there will be no end to it. We must be content for now, the lesson states, with having just a glimpse, a taste of what that will be. Now we "see in a mirror dimly, but then, face to face" (I Cor. 13:12).

We can learn something of our glorified existence from the resurrection of Jesus, in his body and appearance before and after his death. There was "continuity," the author tells us, from one state to the next, so that after rising from the dead, he appeared and sounded like the same Jesus to his friends. In the same way, we can have continuity between our lives now and eternal life then, by the presence of the Holy Spirit, who is a pledge of our eternal salvation (Eph. 1:13,14).

Problems

This lesson is focused on the physical aspects of eternity. However, the only continuity that carries from this life to the next is not physical but is of the Holy Spirit. The reality of the Spirit's work in us must be stated in much stronger terms. He not only enters us, he comes to take over, to indwell (Rom. 8:9), and stay forever (Jn. 14:16). His presence within us is a strong guarantee:

"When you...believed in him, [you] were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:13, 14).

Believers do not have to wait until the end of time to be sealed; the Spirit seals the believer when the gospel is believed with saving faith. Paul also speaks of sealing in definite terms to the Corinthians:

"And it is God who...has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" (II Cor. 1:21, 22).

The Spirit's presence with us also creates new life within us (Jn. 3:6), a living spirit that desires and responds to God. The new life comes in God's own time and God's own way. You don't just sit down some afternoon and decide it's time for new birth. We cannot, for by nature we are hostile to God and cannot submit to him. Rom. 8:7, 8 "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (Jn. 6:44).

Neither is our new life part of our bodies, as John makes clear. It has nothing to do with diet or exercise, or a new attitude. The children of God are born:

“...not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:13).

The new life is also called our “inner man” or “spiritual man,” and it is not physical but spiritual. I Cor. 2:14, 15 So the Christian believer has two sides, his fleshly outside, which desires sin, and his new, living spirit, his inner man that desires the things of God, and hears God. Rom. 8:16 As we saw yesterday, this new life does not die, just as Jesus promised in John 6 and 10.

Summary

1. We have strong continuity, then, between our mortal lives now, and our spiritual lives in eternity. What continues on to eternity is not a physical change in our bodies or anything we can see. Better yet, our spiritual life begins now when the Spirit comes to live in us, and creates within us a spiritual “new man.” This new life never dies and continues to eternity.
2. With the Spirit’s ruling presence, we have a solid guarantee, a pledge that seals us until we are given our full inheritance. This is no human achievement; it is all of God, from beginning to end. That is why we can have strong assurance of its fulfillment.

Day 6: Thursday, April 16, 2009

This lesson looks at how believers are to hope and wait for that day, remembering Christ’s words, “the time is near” (Rev. 22:10). Two thousand years have passed since Christ promised to come back, and we still wait, as he told us to do. The lesson asks how we are to understand the time aspect in II Peter 3:8,9, when Jesus told us he is coming soon:

“...with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

The lesson makes the point that although the events of Christ’s coming are important to know, it is more important “that we are sure of the One we expect.”

Problems

The lesson misses the opportunity to be confident on how Christians can understand God’s appointed times, and how we can be “sure of the One we expect.”

It is helpful to understand Peter’s statement that with the Lord long and short periods of time are the same, so from his perspective, all things are “soon.” We also know from Peter that God wishes to save as many as possible, because of his great mercy and patience.

What is missing in this lesson is God’s sovereignty over history. Habakkuk’s conversation with God about the timing of his justice is timely for us. He asks God, “How long?” In Habakkuk 2, God answers him with these assurances:

“The vision awaits its appointed time...” God has set the day and hour, he is in control of the timing, he is Lord of history. Paul told the Athenians, “He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31).

“It hastens to the end—it will not lie.” There is no delay, God is not waiting for anything or anyone. History is progressing as planned, the time will be right.

“If it seems slow, wait for it.” Patience! For, “It will surely come; it will not delay” (Hab. 2:3). Do not try to set dates yourself, it only shows your lack of faith.

God then gives the answer to the question, how can we be sure we will stand on that day? There will be two kinds of people. The one who’s “soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him,” and “the righteous” who “shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4). Justification by faith alone is our surety now, and at the judgment when we appear before the one who is “of purer eyes to see evil and cannot look at wrong...” (Hab. 1:13). The justified man’s faith is a gift of the Spirit, also working the fruits of the Spirit. But his righteousness on judgment day is alien, in Christ, by faith.

The prophet later reminds God, “In wrath remember mercy” (Hab. 3:2). God is just and merciful, we can be confident of both, the Cross is proof. We can only stand before God empty handed and contrite. Paul asks, “What have you that you did not receive?” Indeed, what else will we offer the One who cannot see evil? Only what we receive from His mercy.

Summary

We wait for Jesus to come with patience and trust, knowing that he is Lord of history. He is not waiting for us, we are to wait on him with trust. We live by faith alone, knowing that he will act at the appointed time that he has determined. "It will surely come; it will not delay."

This is my Father's world.

O let me ne'er forget

that though the wrong seems oft so strong,

God is the ruler yet.

Day 7: Friday, April 17, 2009

Coming!