

## **Steadfastness of Hope**

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Brothers and sisters, this afternoon we will share on this matter of hope. The first afternoon we shared on this matter of faith. Yesterday, we shared on love. As the saints in Thessalonica turned to the Lord Jesus and left their idols, they were waiting and longing for the coming of the Son of God. I am sure you agree with me if I say that the saints in Thessalonica were normal Christians. They had a good, healthy spiritual beginning in the Lord. Once they believed in the Lord Jesus, they turned away from idols and immediately served the living God. In their serving, they anticipated the return of the Lord.

In many of our cases, the end of our serving, so far as I know, is simply for what we shall get in this life, i.e. the blessing we can get. We hope the Lord will help us to solve our problems. But, the Thessalonian saints served God in view of the Lord's soon return. So they served with a purpose. They labored with a purpose. So Paul commented them very highly on their work of faith, their labor of love and their constant endurance in the faith of the Lord Jesus.

We shared on the first day that faith is foundational, because faith is God. God has faith in Himself, and He wants us to have faith in Him. Without faith, no one can please God. We oftentimes think that sin is simply we do something wrong. But, in God's sight, sin is simply unbelief. If we do not believe God is God, that is sin in God's sight. So we Christians begin our heavenly journey with faith.

Yesterday, we touched on this matter of love, about His love for us and how that love of Christ indwelling us can be expressed by

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one to another. I shared on this short phrase 'His own'. He loves His own. He loves His own who are in the world, and He loves them to the very end. He will take full responsibility of those who are really His own, because He loves them to the very end until God's full purpose is realized in them.

Brothers and sisters, where we stand is very important. Are we standing as His very own? Are we really a people possessed by Him? The problem is: we know we belong to Him, but we also belong to something else or someone else. Brothers and sisters, what is your attachment? Are we attached to the Lord, and to the Lord alone? Or, are we attached to some religious organizations? Or, are we attached to some teaching? Or, are we attached to some people? But, brothers and sisters, God is a very jealous God. When He redeems us, He wants us 100% to Himself. If we are attached to anything else other than Christ, it grieves God's heart. We call ourselves Christians, because we are those who belong to Jesus. We do not belong to anyone. We have no other name. We belong to Christ. When that is assured in us, then we know He will take full responsibility of us.

That evening when He washed the feet of His disciples, He washed the feet of His very own. His own are already clean, but sometimes they do get defiled. But He loves them; He will keep them clean for Himself. We have no power nor ability to keep ourselves clean. We are very earthly people. What we touch and what we love are all of this world. We are very prone to all the influences surrounding us. No one can guarantee to keep himself or herself pure for the Lord. But if we are really His own, attached to Him alone, He will see to it that we will be kept clean, for, as we mentioned yesterday, the Lord Himself initiated the act of cleansing. He knows our defilement. He knows our defilement more than we know ourselves. He is the means to cleanse us. He has the means to cleanse us, because He has the Word and He has the Holy Spirit. He is also our advocate before the Father. He assures the Father that He will be responsible for cleansing us day by day. But I want to emphasize that, to enjoy that cleansing, we must be sure that we are those He calls His own. This is why He said that these people are in the world but not of this world.

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I have touched on this difference between blood and the washing with water. I want to clarify one more time that blood has to do with our standing before the holy God. Washing of our feet has to do with our walk on the earth. Blood deals with our sin before our holy God. The washing of water with the word is to keep us clean as we walk so that our fellowship and our ministry before Him will not be hindered. To give our young people a good example: You can be enrolled in a university after you apply for admissions to the university. But your performance may not be acceptable by the university. So, the same spiritual principle applies. We are accepted by God, but He desires us to live a life acceptable to Him. Therefore, the washing of feet is a necessity. It is for fellowship, for worship, for our service, for our testimony, and for our spiritual growth, so that our walk with the Lord will not be hindered in any way.

Now, this matter of washing feet is not literal. It is spiritual. Anything that is of value to God is spiritual. I am sure that we have all experienced our feet being washed by the saints in a spiritual way. I remember when I was still teaching, one evening we had prayer time. I came home very, very weary. I had to face some bad students, and I had a very heavy heart. Yet, I felt I had to be with the saints and to pray together. Then the amazing thing happened. The moment I entered into the meeting place and saw my brothers and sisters, immediately and inwardly I was refreshed. That is washing. It keeps us fresh and alive before the Lord. So, we need to minister to one another so that we can keep ourselves fresh before the Lord and that we can receive something from Him and also minister to Him.

This afternoon, I shall touch on this matter of hope. I shared that hope has no meaning unless we are in a hopeless situation. God has a way to design our circumstances. If we rely on ourselves, we shall be in despair. We shall be greatly disappointed. But He is testing us to see where we put our faith. If our hope is placed on anything or anyone else other than God, then we will be greatly disappointed.

Let us turn to the Scriptures. 'For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with

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perseverance we wait eagerly for it.' (Romans 8:24 & 25) We can persevere because hope is assured for us. There is an assurance of hope. So, faith deals with the unseen. Hope also deals with the unseen. Spiritually speaking, what is seen is not real; what is unseen is real. For what is real is spiritual. Only those who have spiritual insights, those with spiritual eyes, can see the spiritual reality. It is simple to prove this. Just like these few days when we gather together. With our naked eyes we cannot see that the Lord is with us. But in our spirit, we know for sure that the Lord's presence is very real. That is faith; that is hope. This is touching the unseen reality.

Romans 15:13- 'Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit,' God is called a God of hope. I Timothy 1:1- 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the commandment of God our Savior, and of Christ Jesus, who is our hope.' In Genesis 1:1, we read 'in the beginning God'. So we shared that God is faith, and faith is God; the beginning is God, and God is the beginning. Faith begins with God. God is love. 'In the beginning God' is the same as 'in the beginning love'. God is love. All these virtues reside in God. We also shared that faith is not a thing; it is a person. Love is not a thing; love is also a person. Now, Romans 15:13 says God is a God of hope. So, 'in the beginning God' is 'in the beginning hope'. For God declares Himself to be a purposeful God. He is very positive. He is never negative. His purpose is positive. His design is positive. His power is positive. His faith is positive. Brothers and sisters, God is sure of Himself. He is sure of the outcome. Therefore God is a God of hope.

In the case of Abraham, God was not only dealing with him in the matter of faith, but also in the matter of hope. Faith and hope in a sense go together. When there is faith, there is hope. When there is hope, there is faith. But God was dealing with Abraham, teaching him the lesson that his hope could not rely on anything or anyone but God Himself. So, in dealing with Abraham, God removed all his earthly hopes one by one. We will only mention a few.

First, his own hope was gone. God promised him to have a son, but he could not have a son. His hope for his son was gone. His hope in his wife was also gone. Of course, his hope in Ishmael was

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gone too, because God said that Ishmael could not be his heir. Then finally God gave him Isaac. All his hopes were concentrated on Isaac. And now God tested him very severely to see where he laid all his hopes. So, the voice came, telling him to offer his son, his only beloved son, as a sacrifice to God. Isaac was Abraham's last hope. If Isaac was gone, every thing would be gone too. Here, we have the greatest test in Abraham's life. But he obeyed and offered up Isaac. Only when Isaac was offered that Abraham discovered that God Himself was his greatest reward.

Brothers and sisters, the Lord is testing us. Where do we as Christians living in this twentieth century place our hope today? I am sure we all have experienced how our Lord has removed our earthly hopes one by one until we discover that He alone is our only hope.

Faith brings hope, and hope always gives us rest. If hope is assured, we can be at rest. If that hope is assured, anything can go as long as we hold fast to that hope. But, every other hope will let us down. Yet God will never let us down. He is our sure foundation. Those who put their hope in Him will not be disturbed. The Lord Jesus not only came to give hope to a hopeless humanity, but came to be our very hope. So Paul could write to Timothy, 'Christ is your hope.' The Lord Jesus is full of hope. He is so positive. When He came to this world, He knew that this world was a very sinful and dark world full of unbelief. This world stands in opposition to everything that is of God. For this world has no faith. This world has no love. This world has no hope. Jesus came to this unbelieving world; He came to be faith. He showed what faith is like. In this loveless world, He showed us what is love. In this hopeless world, He showed us what is hope. He not only shows us hope; He Himself is our hope.

So, in the Lord's ministry, His message was a message of hope. The gospel is a gospel of hope. He was anointed and appointed to preach the gospel to the poor, to proclaim the release of the captive, to give sight to the blind, and to set free those who are oppressed. For the poor, the Lord gives hope so that they would be spiritually rich in Him. To those who are in prison, the Lord is their hope; He will free them. To those who are without sight, He comes to be their hope to give them sight so that they can see. To those who are oppressed, He

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will set them free. The Lord came so that we may know all about hope. He is the only hope in the world.

I am sorry that in this country many of our American brothers and sisters still rely a great deal on Washington D.C. to do something good for this world. Many still put their faith in the White House, hoping that Clinton can do some unusual things for this country. But, many are very disappointed with him now. There is no hope.

Only the Lord Jesus is our hope. He shows us what hope is like. In His life, when He was on this earth, He came to His home town but was rejected (ref. Matthew 11). They would not accept His teaching. They questioned Him. Yet, in the midst of so much disappointment, He looked up and praised His Father. For, hope is necessary in a hopeless situation. Hope only has meaning in a hopeless situation.

Let us share a little bit about the Lord Jesus when He was on the cross. He was hanged there. From what we read in the Gospels, we notice that, throughout the whole scene on Calvary when our Lord was on the cross, He was in full control. To men, it was a hopeless hour. But the cross is the symbol of our hope today. It was a place of humiliation. Nobody would want to see anybody crucified on the cross; it is a place of shame. It is a hopeless end of a person. Yet, when we read the Gospels, we view the Lord on the cross as a sign of hope. Brothers and sisters, spiritual hope is often found in the most unlikely places, like on the cross of Calvary. That is the place where lies our hope.

When He was hanged on the cross, the Roman soldiers were there. Yet the Lord Jesus was in full control of that event. He prayed for those who crucified Him; He prayed that their sins would be forgiven. I have no doubt that, after His resurrection, some of those who witnessed His crucifixion later became His disciples. He was very positive. He also took care of His earthly mother. He said, 'John, here is your mother; take good care of her.' There was nothing negative about the cross of the Lord; everything was positive. You remember there were also two thieves hanged on the sides of the Lord Jesus. One of the thieves was witnessing the Lord on the cross. He recognized

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immediately that this was not an ordinary person on the cross. This was a very spiritual being. He was witnessing all what the Lord did on the cross. So, while he was in his hopeless situation he saw that the one hanged next to him was his only hope. He then said, 'Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' In the hopeless situation, he saw hope in the One who was crucified. The Lord then assured him, saying, 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' He was hanged there, yet He gave hope to the hopeless. Brothers and sisters, there lies our hope in the crucified One.

Then, three days later, He rose from the dead. After His resurrection came His ascension. Paul said that this life is now our life. Before His crucifixion, that hope was in Him. But, after His resurrection, that hope comes into us. We find it true in His disciples. His apostles are men of hope, because they knew their Lord. They knew their Christ. And the Lord is their hope. That hope is not an objective thing, but subjective as it dwells in them. In Paul's biography in II Corinthians, he described how he went through hopeless disappointing situations, but, because of his hope in the Lord Jesus, he got through. The Apostles knew that hope of glory was really within them. When Paul and Silas were in prison, because of their faith in God, their hope in God, and their love for God, they could sing in the dungeon. This is not only true for Paul and Silas, but it is also true for many faithful brothers and sisters in mainland China at present. For this hope is not a thing; this hope is a person. So, Paul, towards the end of his life, during his second imprisonment, he knew that the time for him to depart was drawing nigh. He knew how he was going to die for the Lord. Yet, there was no despair in him. To the very end, he saw nothing but crowns of glory waiting for him. Paul was a man of hope, because the Lord Jesus dwelt in him.

Now, we are to be a people of hope. We are to be a testimony of hope in this hopeless world, because we know our God; we know our Lord Jesus. We are called apart from this world. We are called according to God's purpose. Our destiny is glory. We are a people of real hope. If we know what we are called to, we are people of hope. Brothers and sisters, are we this kind of people?

I have reminded you that hope has to do with the unseen. But

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the unseen is the real. Where do we put our faith? Where do we put our love? Where do we put our hope? If we put our faith, our love and our hope in anything other than Christ, we will be greatly disappointed. But if our faith is God alone, our love is for Him, and our hope is in Him, then, no matter what may come, He will get us through. The Lord Himself is our sure foundation.

Let me just share a little bit about the positive way the Lord is dealing with us. When God begins something, He begins right. He cannot help it but do what is right. We often think that when God begins with us He wants to repair and patch us up in order that we become good people. This is religion, This is reformation. But God never wants to reform us. He starts us brand new in Christ Jesus. He begins with us in none other ground but in His Son the Lord Jesus. We were chosen before the foundation of the world in Christ Jesus, because God began right with us. He began right, but somehow we have gone wrong.

Let us turn to the Scriptures to see how positive God is. 'For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.' (John 1:16 & 17) We begin with grace. Christ is God's grace to us. God always begins right, because He is God. We have to have this understanding: He always begins right. From grace we move to grace, and grace upon grace, because grace is unto God's purpose. Grace is for God's purpose. So, in Paul's Epistles we find at the beginning how he began his greetings in grace. At the end of his Epistles, he also concluded with grace. In between, you read about God's work of grace. So, to begin with grace and end with grace, we need the work of grace in between. Then, in the last verse of the last book, the Book of Revelation, you also find grace there. Brothers and sisters, these give us a great deal of comfort and real hope. God has a purpose He wants to achieve. You and I, by our own efforts, will never arrive. But His grace assures us that grace will bring us to the end. This is the work of grace. And, when we see that grace is available to us, and we see that hope lies ahead of us, then we can endure until God's hope is realized.

Brothers and sisters, we need grace. Grace gives us real

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hope. And hope can bring us to a place of rest, assuring us that sooner or later grace will bring us to God's end. What begins with grace will end in grace, if we remain in grace. So, our responsibility is not to fall from the grace of God. Our responsibility is to be strong in the grace of God. God is a God of all grace, and His grace is more than sufficient to carry us to the end. So, He begins with something positive, and He ends with the positive.

'For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith." ' (Romans 1:16 & 17) So we begin with faith. Our spiritual life begins with faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is something very positive: Faith in God; the faith of God; faith in God's Son. Our new birth comes about because of our faith in the Lord Jesus. That faith is not just for our initial spiritual birth; it is also for our daily living. Grace to grace is progressive. Faith to faith is also progressive. It is all for us to arrive at God's end. It is all for the increase of Christ in us. For God's purpose is Christ Himself. As we begin our walk in faith, and as we fix our eyes on the Lord, the author of faith, He will reward us with deeper faith and stronger faith to know Him, to love Him and to appreciate Him. So, we all begin with something very positive. Grace is for us to experience Him more and more. Faith is also for us to know Him more and more.

'Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.' (II Corinthians 3:17 & 18) When God put us in Christ, He put us in grace. That grace is unto purpose, for us to achieve, or to arrive at, God's goal for us. When God put us in Christ, He put us in faith, because faith is a gift of God. Christ is a God's gift to us. That faith is also for the same purpose so that we can reach God's purpose for His people. When His life comes into us -- I have to say in a very reverend way -- glory comes into us, because His life is a life of glory. You cannot separate God's life from glory, because glory is His life and His life is a glorious life. This is why I said God always begins right; it is

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wonderful. That glory is going to grow in us until there will be a fullness of His glory, so that we change from glory to glory as we fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus. This glory is really a reflection of the Lord Jesus in us. This glory is His very life. As His life grows in us, all the nature and character of the Lord Jesus incorporate in us; this is glory.

At this point, I want to share one thing which our two brothers already touched on. Grace is unto purpose. Faith is also unto purpose. But the end of grace and purpose is glory. We have to change from glory to glory. God's purpose is tremendous. Even when we arrive at His purpose, there is still no end to it. Glory has to do with His character formed in us. Glory has to do with sonship. Glory is when Christ is fully formed in us. It is through Him, the firstborn among the dead, that many sons are brought into glory. Yet, we are so unlike Him. This is why we need the work of grace. This is why we need to have faith. Even though we have touched something of that glory, we must allow that glory to ever increase and expand. The initial grace, the initial faith and the initial glory is given. But the end of grace, the end of faith and the end of glory is to be gained. This is where we often miss out. God initiated us into Christ. As one brother says: Christ is given to us so that we can gain Him. Just as our brother put it; Canaan was given to the Israelites but they had to possess it. What enabled them to conquer the land of Canaan, or for us to gain Christ, is to have that hope in God. That was what Paul told us that he would forget all that was behind and he was pressing on towards that goal, because that hope lies before Him. That goal, as Paul said, is God's own high calling; that is our hope.

Brothers and sisters, we all began right. We all began with grace. We all began with faith in the Lord Jesus, and when that life comes, glory comes into us. But, thank God, what is given is for us to gain holy. God is after fullness. Our problem is that we are satisfied with so little. God wants to give us so much. God wants Christ to be all in all. But when we have a little of Him, we think it is enough. Paul said, 'Christ in us is our hope of glory.' Glory already resides in us, but there is yet glory for us to arrive at. This is what our Lord is after, because in the end He will fill all things with Himself. In the end, all things will reflect Him and glorify Him. God's end can be achieved by sons, sonship. This is what we find in Romans 8: the whole creation

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is groaning and waiting eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. We have the potential. Grace has been given. Faith has been given. We all are on the way to glory. We need to gain Christ. We should never be satisfied with the little we have.

Thank God for these few days. We have had such a wonderful conference. I am sure most of us would say, 'Oh, we are full. I cannot take anymore. I am so richly blessed.' But the amazing thing is: if we have another conference, we will come back again. For, even if you are full now, when you go home, the Lord will create in you even a deeper hunger for Himself. In one sense we are satisfied with Him, but in another sense we are not satisfied. Why? Because He wants to bring us more into Himself. His desire for His people is fullness.

So, when the Lord Jesus comes, what will He be looking for? Will He be looking for some spiritual giants? Will He be looking for biblical scholars? Will He be looking for those who can memorize many chapters in the Bible? Brothers and sisters, when the Lord comes, He will be looking for Himself. He wants to see a true reflection of Himself in the Church. Our hope is Christ. What does that mean? All that is Christ is ours. This is our hope. What belongs to Him can be ours. This is our hope. Christ is our hope. What is of Him can be realized in us. When He comes back, He will be looking for Himself. How much of Himself can He find in us today? We have to confess there will be very little. Thank God for His grace! He will get us there. Thank God for faith. Faith will take us there. And the deposit of Christ, the deposit of glory, is already in us. But we need that glory to expand, not so much our growing, but His growing in us.

Brothers and sisters, in our fellowship in New Jersey in recent months, I have been telling the local saints again and again we need to examine ourselves before the Lord, to ask ourselves why we gather together. Why do we gather every week? What is the real purpose behind our coming together? Is it just for our blessing? If that is the case, we are very short-sighted. I keep saying to my brothers and sisters to make sure that we need, for no other reasons, for Him to gain us for Himself, so that He can get what He is after. If the Lord cannot get into us, what is the use of our meeting? In our local fellowships,

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when we meet, do we have God's purpose in view? Do you meet as His own? Is it just for Him alone? Are we detached from everything else but for Him? When we look around, things do not look encouraging. Here is a challenge for you. Where lies your hope? In some fellowships, there may be very few. You may feel you are not strong. You may feel very lonely. You may feel very weak. Here, your faith and your hope must rise up. When we know we are hopeless, then we realize the Lord is our hope. Then He will begin to do His work.

So, brothers and sisters, we should be a people of hope, especially we are going into this last phase of human history. Many, many things will disappoint us. Some of those we love and respect spiritually may disappoint us. The fellowships we attached to may disappoint us too. If you are honest with yourself, when you look at yourself, you may feel disappointed too. But, thank God. That is our beginning. It is when we become hopeless with ourselves, He becomes our all, our hope, because He wants to be all in all in us. This is why He brings us to many hopeless situations in order to teach us that He alone is enough.

Thank God for spiritual lessons. He is after sons. Those He loves He will discipline. The means by which God will fulfill His eternal purpose is through sonship. Those who have faith in Him till the very end, those who love Him not counting cost, those who fix their hope in Him in spite of everything surrounding looking so hopeless -- these are the kinds of people He is looking for. These have true sonship who can sympathize with the Father's heart. The creation knows them and groans for the display of the sons of God. The Lord is coming. But spiritual babes will not be able to usher in the kingdom of God. He needs sons to usher in His kingdom. May the Lord help us to be those who really hold on to Him, hold fast to Him and allow grace to work. Hold that faith to the very end. Fix our eyes upon the Lord Jesus. Then the Holy Spirit will do the changing from glory to glory. We cannot do it. His grace can do it. We cannot do it. His faith in Himself can do it. We cannot do it. His glory will do it. All we need is to fix our eyes on Him.

There are many things that we can turn our eyes to and

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say, 'They are good. They are good. They are good.' There are so many things when we look around us that we think we should do something about them. Brothers and sisters, are we going to allow things around us to determine our destiny? Or, are we going to allow the Lord Himself to determine our destiny? We need to be a people single-hearted, with a single eye fixed on no one else but the Lord Jesus. As the Book of Hebrews says: He is the author and finisher of our faith. Our eyes must be on Him, and Him alone. We are living in an age of confusion. Brothers and sisters, do not look around. Do not look upon one another. Just look at the Lord. He alone is enough. He is everything. May He become all in all in His people. And He is our only hope. He will not fail us. His faith will realize His hope.

Let us pray: *Father, once again we confess we are so inadequate. But, we thank You. Your work You alone can do. We thank You, for Your testimony You alone can maintain. Thank You, Lord. We want to trust You. We want to let You be the Lord. We want You to do all the work You desire to do in us, so that Your purpose may be quickly realized. Thank You, for You always begin right. We pray that we may end right for Your glory. We give You praise and glory. In the Lord Jesus' name. Amen.*