

The Right to Hope

by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. Paul Tillich preached this sermon at Harvard's Memorial Church in March 1965. Excerpted from *Theology of Peace*, a collection of previously unpublished articles by Tillich, edited by Ronald H. Stone and published in 1990 by Westminster/John Knox. This sermon appeared in the Christian Century, November 14, 1990, pp. 1064-1067. Copyright by the Christian Century Foundation; used by permission. Current articles and subscriptions can be bound at www.christiancentury.org. This text was prepared for Religion Online by John C. Purdy.

A few years ago the humanist and Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch became famous through a two-volume work about hope, the hopes of men in their, personal lives and as members of social groups and movements. He recognized to what degree hope is a permanent force in every man, a driving power as long as he lives.

We must agree when we look both into ourselves and at human history, and we may wonder why it is so seldom that philosophers and theologians speak about it, its root, and its justification. They don't ask what kind of force it is that creates and maintains hope, even if everything seems to contradict it. Instead, they devaluate hope by calling it wishful thinking or utopian fantasy.

But nobody can live without hope, even if it were only for the smallest things which give some satisfaction even under the worst of conditions, even in poverty, sickness, and social failure. Without hope, the tension of our life toward the future would vanish, and with it, life itself. We would end in despair, a word that originally meant "without hope," or in deadly indifference. Therefore I want to ask the question today: Do we have a right to hope? Is there justified hope for each of us, for nations and movements, for mankind and perhaps for all life, for the whole universe? Do we have a right to hope, even, against hope? Even against the transitoriness of everything that is? Even against the reality of death?

Our text -- "In hope he believed against hope" -- refers to Abraham's faith in the divine promise that he would become the father of a large nation, although he had no son in his and his wife's old age. There is probably no book in which the struggle for hope is more drastically expressed than it is in the Old Testament. The men of the Old Testament tried to maintain the hope for Israel within the many catastrophes of its history. And later on,

they struggled as individuals for their personal hope, and finally there grew a hope in them for the rebirth of the present world and a new state of all things. This double hope, for the universe and for the single person, became the faith of the early Christians, and it is the Christian hope up to today. It is the hope of the church for "the new heaven and the new earth" and of the individual to enter this new earth and new heaven

But these hopes, in both Testaments, have to struggle with continuous attacks of hopelessness, attacks against the faith in a meaning of life and against the hope for life's fulfillment. There are in the Old Testament outcries of despair about life. There is the despair of Job when he says, "For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease" -- but as "the waters wear away the stones [and] the torrents wash away the soil of the earth, so thou [God] destroyest the hope of man" (Job 14:7, 19).

There is also a tremendous struggle about hope in the New Testament. It went on during the whole lifetime of Jesus, but it reached its height when, after his arrest, the disciples fled to Galilee. Hopelessly they said to themselves, like the two in the beautiful story of the walk to Emmaus, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). They had hoped, but he was crucified. In order to regain hope; they had, as is said in I Peter, "to be born anew to a living hope," namely, by the spiritual appearances of Jesus which many of them experienced.

Later on, the church had to fight with hopelessness, because the expectations of the Christians for the early return of the Christ remained unfulfilled, year after year. So they became impatient and felt betrayed. To such members of his congregations, Paul writes (Rom. 8:24_25), "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." We wait. That means we have not; but in some way we have, and this having gives us the power to wait.

The Christians learned to wait for the end. But slowly they ceased to wait. The tension of genuine waiting vanished and they were satisfied with what they had, the Christ who has founded the church and given through it hope for eternal life. The expectation for a new state of things on earth became weak, although one prayed for it in every Lord's Prayer -- Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!

This has led to new attacks on hope, first from the side of the Jews who believe with the prophets of the Old Testament in the coming of a new eon, a new state of things in this world. They ask, How can Jesus be the Christ, the bringer of the new, if the world has remained as it was? The demonic powers which ruled the world in the time of Jesus are ruling it still today. Our own century proves this irrefutably. Not only the Jews speak like this, but millions of critics of Christianity everywhere, awakening anxious response in many Christians.

At the same time, the hope of the individual for participation in eternal life was more and more undercut by the present understanding of our world through science and philosophy. Imaginations of a heavenly place above and a hell below became symbols for the state of our inner life. The expectation of a simple continuation of life after death vanished in view of a sober acceptance of the seriousness of death and a deeper understanding by theology of the difference between eternity and endless time.. In view of all this, most people today, including many Christians, have experienced the attacks of hopelessness and struggle for hope against hope. They -- and "they" are also "we" -- have learned how hard it is to preserve genuine hope. We know that one has to go ever again through the narrows of a painful and courageous "in-spite-of." For hope cannot be verified by sense experience or rational proof.

This leads to something else that makes hope so difficult. Hope is easy for every fool but hard for the wise one. Everybody can lose himself in foolish hopes, but genuine hope is something rare and great. How then can we distinguish genuine from foolish hope?

We often feel doubt not only about others but also about ourselves, as to whether their or our own hope is foolish or genuine. We may clearly calculate the future and think our expectations justified; but they are foolish. And we may tenaciously hope against hope and begin to feel foolish about it. But we were right in our hope. There is a difference which does not remain hidden, if we search for it. Where there is genuine hope, there that for which we hope already has some presence. In some way, the hoped for is at the same time here and not here. It is not yet fulfilled, and it may remain unfulfilled. But it is here, in the situation and in ourselves, as a power which drives those who hope into the future. There is a beginning here and now. And this beginning drives toward an end. The hope itself, if it is rooted in the reality of something already given, becomes a driving power and makes fulfillment not certain, but possible. Where such a beginning of what is hoped for is lacking, hope is foolishness.

If, for instance, a daydreamer expects to become something which has no relation to his present state, externally or internally, he is a fool. And he remains a fool even if, by some strange accident, he gets what he has dreamed of, such as sudden success, wealth, power, beauty, love. Fairy tales know this. The beggar who becomes king is in the beggar's gown, but he is of royal blood. Those who dream without such present reality never attain their dream, even if they try, often by evil means.

But there are many things and events in which we can see a reason for genuine hope, namely, the seed-like presence of that which is hoped for. In the seed of a tree, stem and leaves are already present, and this gives us the right to sow the seed in hope for the fruit. We have no assurance that it will develop. But our hope is genuine. There is a presence, a beginning of what is hoped for. And so it is with the child and our hope for his maturing; we hope, because maturing has already begun, but we don't know how far it will go. We hope for the fulfillment of our work, often against hope, because it is already in us as vision and driving force. We hope for a lasting

love, because we feel the power of this love present. But it is hope, not certainty..

Hoping often implies waiting. "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him," says the psalmist (Ps. 37:7). Waiting demands patience, and patience demands stillness within one's self. This aspect of hope is most important in the hope we have within ourselves and our own maturing and fulfilling what we essentially are and therefore ought to be.

There are two kinds of waiting, the passive waiting in laziness and the receiving waiting in openness. He who waits in laziness, passively, prevents the coming of what he is waiting for. He who waits in quiet tension, open for what he may encounter, works for its coming. Such waiting in openness and hope does what no will power can do for our own inner development. The more seriously the great religious men took their own transformation, using their will to achieve it, the more they failed and were thrown into hopelessness about themselves. Desperately they asked, and many of us ask with them, Can we hope at all for such inner renewal? What gives us the right to such hope after all our failures? Again there is only one answer: waiting in inner stillness, with poised tension and openness toward what we can only receive. Such openness is highest activity; it is the driving force which leads us toward the growth of something new in us. And the struggle between hope and despair in our waiting is a symptom that the new has already taken hold of us.

Let us now in brief consideration, turn to the hopes for nations, movements and mankind in human history and let us ask, What gives us the right to hope for them? A great example is the history of Israel, from the exodus out of Egypt to the present day. There are few things in world history more astonishing than the preservation of hope for Israel by Israel and the continuous fulfillment and disastrous destruction of this hope. No fool's hope can give this power; if Israel's hope had been wishful thinking, Israel would have disappeared from history like all the nations surrounding them. But the people of Israel had a reality in every period, an experience in their past, a divine guidance which saved them through overwhelming dangers, bound them together as a nation through the gift of the law by the God who is not a particular God but the God of justice, whose justice shows itself when he judges his own nation and threatens to reject it, if it does not keep justice within itself.

For there was and is in Israel, as in every nation, much foolish hope; national arrogance, will to power, ignorance about other nations, hate and fear of them, the use of God and his promises for the nation's own glory. Such hopes, present also in our own nation, are foolish hopes. They do not come out of what we truly are and cannot, therefore, become reality in history, but they are illusions about our own goodness and distortions of the image of others. Out of what we truly are, the hope for what we may become must grow. Otherwise, it will be defeated and die. World history is a cemetery of broken hopes, of utopias which had no foundation in reality.

But there is also fulfillment of historical hopes, however fragmentary it may

be. The democratic form of life which has become reality is a fulfillment of old ideas about the equal dignity of men before God and under the law; it could become reality because there were social groups in which the idea was already effective, so that it could grow into reality. The social principle which is powerful today is the fragmentary fulfillment of the dreams of the poor: that they may participate in the goods of life. But the dreams could become genuine hopes only when a social class appeared whose nature and destiny were one with this aspiration and which could make a successful fight for it. The belief in the original unity of all human races became a matter of genuine hope for reunion in the moment when suppressed races arose with the will and inner power to fight for a real reunion. In these three great events of modern history, in the midst of one of which we live, the presence of a beginning became the power driving toward fulfillment.

Is there a right to hope for mankind as a whole? There is one idea which has grasped the imagination of Western man, but which has already lost its power because of the horrors which have happened in our century; it is the idea of progress toward the fulfillment of the age-old hopes of man. This is still a half-conscious, half-unconscious belief of many people today. It is often the only hope they have, and its breakdown is a profound shock for them. Is progress a justified hope for man? In some respects it is, because man has received the power to control nature almost without limits and there is daily progress in science and in technical production. But the question is: Does this progress justify the hope for a stage of fulfillment? Certainly. Progress is a justified hope in all moments in which we work for a task and hope that something better and new will replace old goods and old evils. But whenever one evil is conquered, another appears, using the new which is good to support a new evil. The goal of mankind is not progress toward a final stage of perfection; it is the creation of what is possible for man in each particular state of history; and it is the struggle against the forces of evil, old ones and new ones, which arise in each period in a different way.

There will be victories as well as defeats in these struggles. There will be progress and regressions. But every victory, every particular progress from injustice to more justice, from suffering to more happiness, from hostility to more peace, from separation to more unity anywhere in mankind, is a manifestation of the eternal in time and space. It is, in the language of the men of the Old and the New Testaments, the coming of the Kingdom of God. For the Kingdom of God does not come in one dramatic event sometime in the future. It is coming here and now in every act of love, in every manifestation of truth, in every moment of joy, in every experience of the holy. The hope of the Kingdom of God is not the expectation of a perfect stage at the end of history, in which only a few, in comparison with the innumerable generations of men, would participate, and the unimaginable amount of misery of all past generations would not be compensated. And it might even be that those who would live in it, as "blessed animals" would long for the struggles, the victories and the defeats of the past. No! The hope of mankind lies in the here and now, whenever the eternal appears in time and history. This hope is justified; for there is always a presence and a beginning of what is seriously hoped for.

And now we ask the question of our personal participation in the eternal. Do we have a right to hope for it? The answer is, We have a right to such ultimate hope, even in view of the end of all other hopes, even in the face of death. For we experience the presence of the eternal in us and in our world here and now. We experience it in moments of silence and in hours of creativity. We experience it in the conflicts of our conscience and in the hours of peace with ourselves, we experience it in the unconditional seriousness of the moral command and in the ecstasy of love. We experience it when we discover a lasting truth and feel the need for a great sacrifice. We experience it in the beauty that life reveals as well as in its demonic darkness. We experience it in moments in which we feel: This is a holy place, a holy thing, a holy person, a holy time; it transcends the ordinary experiences; it gives more, it demands more, it points to the ultimate mystery of my existence, of all existence; it shows me that my finitude, my transitoriness, my being, surrendered to the flux of things, is only one side of my being and that man is both in and above finitude.

Where this is experienced, there is awareness of the eternal, there is already, however fragmentary, participation in the eternal. This is the basis of the hope for eternal life; it is the justification of our ultimate hope. And if as Christians we point to Good Friday and Easter, we point to the most powerful example of the same experience.

The hope for participation in eternity is hope for a continuation of the present life after death. It is not hope for endless time after the time given to us. Endless time is not eternity; no finite being can seriously hope for it. But every finite being can hope for return to the eternal from which it comes. And this hope has the more assurance, the deeper and more real the present participation in eternal life is.

And a last remark: Participation in the eternal is not given to the separated individual. It is given to him in unity with all others, with mankind, with everything living, with everything that has being and is rooted in the divine ground of being. All powers of creation are in us, and we are in them. We do not hope for us alone or for those alone who share our hope; we hope also for those who had and have no hope, for those whose hopes for this life remain unfulfilled, for those who are disappointed and indifferent, for those who despair of life, and even for those who have hurt or destroyed life. Certainly, if we could only hope each for himself, it would be a poor and foolish hope. Eternity is the ground and aim of every being, for God shall be all in all. Amen.

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