

HAVE YOU SEIZED THE HOPE?

We are not all on the same wavelength, but it would not be a bad idea to get on the same wavelength for a while. It does not steal our individuality to be part of a community. It enhances it. Who is going to notice the wonders of your individuality if you are not part of a community? Who is going to benefit from all you know, go through, strive for, and become – if you are not part of a community? Commitment is *not* signing up for loss of freedom; it is signing up for participation, for effectiveness, to know and be known, to do something about it. Hey, why am I telling *you*? You are all here! Yes, well, you are here; I don't know about "all here." It is my impression that we all struggle with the "hang back" syndrome. We are "in," but not all the way IN. We talk about the Christian WAY, the love of Christ, and the unseen Kingdom. And we call it an invitation – an invitation to a NEW PATH, a new Way to live our lives – and it opens up into endless dimensions of adventure and discovery. And lots of the time we are incredibly grateful. We call it an "invitation," and yet – still, and from time to time – we act, think, and even talk as if it were a TRAP.

Whose trap? MY trap? I could not come up with such bait in a billion years. Or maybe it is the whole secret structure of the church, hidden somewhere just out of sight, and if you let your guard down – really jump in all the way – suddenly the trap will spring! Some group of us – or some nameless mesmerizing force – will jump on you, wrestle you down, and force you ... to what? To give an extra buck a week? Make you spend two extra hours a month serving on a committee? "A fate worse than death!" And the terrible engine of slavery and destruction that hangs over your head – the diabolical scheme to entrap you – is called "a covenant": a covenant only you can write, only you can change, only you can keep. Oh, the anguish of it!

I am deeply convinced that what we really fear, yet do not name, and try to blame on many silly and irrelevant outer things is our own soul's hunger to turn and head for HOME: to turn and give to our God everything we have and are or can ever be. "Deep is the hunger." "Spirit calleth unto spirit." And sometimes it feels like we are driving this team of incredible horses down this very logical, safe street called "Expected and Responsible." And the horses are just dying to dash off to where there are beautiful mountains and lakes and tall, lush grass. But we have been training them since childhood and keep them on a very tight rein. Instinctively we know that if we ever lower our resolve – let them

HAVE YOU SEIZED THE HOPE?

take even a few steps in that direction – it will all be over. We will be streaking toward the mountains, wind in our face and joy in our heart. And all the years we have spent walking the street called “Expected and Responsible” will be lost. Is that not precisely what happened to Paul and Peter and Moses and Jacob – and maybe to some friends we have known, whose patterns do not seem very appealing?

Same wavelength? We are not far from Easter. We never are, actually, if we only knew it. All the trappings aside, Easter is not primarily a promise about a distant future. It is an invitation to come live with God NOW: to take the shields and barriers down; to trust God’s personal love; to let the Holy Spirit be an intimate and integral part of everything we do from now on. You have always lived that way, you say? I flat-out do not believe it. I have tried to live that way off and on, but mostly *on*, for over fifty years. It is wonderful, even in the attempt. I would much rather fail trying to live this WAY than to succeed living in any other way. But am I confused about how well I have actually managed to live with the Spirit in charge of my life? Hardly. Am I unaware that Jesus could have done a lot more with my life if I had been more consistently willing and obedient? Hardly. Some days I try really hard to be confused and unaware, but the veneer is too thin. I just want to make sure we really *are* on the same wavelength. To live with the Holy Spirit as an intimate and integral part of everything we do, every decision we make, and every plan and effort and purpose of our lives really is a NEW WAY. The horses really would be streaking for the mountains. God has so much more to show us, to do with us, and to invite us into – if we will cooperate and allow it. *“We are strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us.”*

But we really do put it all upside down most of the time, don’t we? “We really are bad and God wants us to be good, and conversion means we *have* to be good. Yet we either don’t want to be good or are afraid we can’t be.” Isn’t that how it goes? Only, some people are already pretty good – nice, decent, kind, and all – so they don’t need God, right? That’s how it goes – or so people tell me all the time, and with a straight face. And if you are already pretty good, you certainly don’t need the church. Why would good people want to associate with a bunch of sinners and hypocrites? Everybody knows the church is for sinners. And if you believe even half as much as any neophyte Christian believes, how can you possibly keep from being a hypocrite? Just because I love Jesus and want to be like Him does not put me on His level. It *does* mean I have found the light that draws me. It *does* mean I am willing to receive the love He pours into us. But it takes a long time to fill some of us up. The cup runneth over a lot sooner than the heart.

HAVE YOU SEIZED THE HOPE?

Let's try to get it right-side up: You do not need God because you are bad. Some of you are so good you cannot see straight – so busy being good you have no time to be faithful. You do not need God because you are bad; you need God because you need love. You need God because God made you and understands you – and you did *not* make you and do *not* understand you. You need God: to find out who you are, why you are here, what you are capable of, how to get on the Path that God has designed you for. You need God because the creature cannot fulfill the design without the Creator. You need God for the courage and patience and endurance to stay on the Path after you once get a glimmer of it, because the world is sure not going to help or make it easy for you. The world just wants what it thinks it can get from you. Frequently it is not even close to knowing what you are really good at or good for, or what you are truly able to give. It doesn't know who you are and wouldn't have time to ask, even if it did care.

Let's try to get it right-side up: Our problem with God is not that God wants us to be good and we want to be bad. Our problem with God is that God wants us to be who we really are. God wants us to come into our own. God wants to see the design and purpose he built into us come to fruition. And we want that too – so much it scares us to death – so we start to bury it and hide from it. It seems too good to be true. It seems too high to be possible. So we hang on to the reins to keep sane and safe according to what this world wants and expects of us. You know just as sure as you're sitting here that if you let up on those reins, the horses would be streaking for the mountains. That is why we are afraid of conversion. That is why we are afraid to really pray. That is why we are afraid to turn our wills and our lives over to God or to commit ourselves to the spiritual disciplines, even if on the inside we really want to. It would loosen the reins. The horses would bolt. The reasons and rationalizations and fears we feed to ourselves are very seldom what's really holding us back. That is why it is so hard to get past them! They are not the real problem. They are only the smoke screen.

You tell yourself that you are greedy. And you are. But *that* is not your problem. Your problem is that you are so incredibly generous. *That* is what you are afraid will bolt if you loosen the reins. I do not know why we all assume that the Holy Spirit is stupid – that our generosity will be more out of control under the Spirit's orders than it is under our own orders. But that is part of the smoke screen.

HAVE YOU SEIZED THE HOPE?

You tell yourself that you are selfish, or lustful, or angry, or envious. It is all true. We are all of those things. But those are not the real problems. We make them into bigger and bigger problems because we hang on to the reins so tight. The horses cannot run like they were designed to run or for the reasons they were created to run, so they get more and more unruly. The real problem is that we were designed for love, not lust; for determined effort and accomplishment, not anger; for appreciation and encouragement, not envy. And those are the things that truly terrify us. If the Spirit grabbed the reins and gave them their head – oh! What would become of us?!

We are not afraid of God because we are so bad. Who do you think made us? That is just a little spiritual con game we play. Why we think it fools God as much as it fools us, I don't know. But the truth is, we are afraid of God because of all that is truly wonderful within us – and we know that God knows who we really are. If we let the connection be known and sealed, what happens to all the excuses, all the safety valves, all the chances to turn back? That was Moses' problem, back on the mountain, as he twisted and turned to find every reason, every excuse, every loophole he could think of to get away from God. And how bereft he would have been had he succeeded! Walk the sheep around the wilderness for the rest of his life, without rhyme or reason, without destiny or purpose. Well, he could always make up a few reasons: it puts food on the table; lamb ain't bad; it's really about Zipporah and Gershom (so famous most of you have never even heard of them). Zipporah and Gershom *were* important, but if that were all Moses' life was about, it sure would have taken the zing out of Passover.

Okay, so we are not far from Easter, an invitation into a very NEW WAY of Life. Then last week we talked about "Damnation." I get sick of people being afraid of all the wrong things. I also worry that we are frequently oblivious to the real dangers. I did not say there was no Hell; I said it was not hot, it was not a place, and it is not God who throws you there. Hell is a *condition*, and it is about lonely. It is about being where we do not know any love, coming or going.

So lots and lots of people have asked me: "Well, then, what happened to the guy without the wedding garment?" Do we really want to listen and learn from Jesus? I thought the story made it really clear. He was thrown into the outer darkness: "*Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*" (Matthew 22:13)

HAVE YOU SEIZED THE HOPE?

Why are you asking me what happened to this man? Did I read it too fast? Did I mumble? The bulletin gave the passage's designation. You have Bibles at home. You can look it up. What happened to the man without a wedding garment? He was thrown into the outer darkness.

But that is not the problem, is it? I spent a whole sermon telling you that the modern concepts about Hell are nonsense, and not even biblical. That Jesus came to save, not to throw us into Hell. And that Jesus is not going to change personality or purpose or method just because some people cannot understand the message of Revelation. God loves you, and love is not going to throw you into everlasting punishment. You would like to think that I got this part right, but then what about the conclusion of the story?

You do remember that it is a story – a story Jesus told to illustrate truth? Just checking. It sounds to some of you like the man was thrown into Hell. Well, that's right! Only, he went back into the real one: loneliness, alienation, outer darkness – out of the light of love, out of the love feast. The man would not put on the wedding garment – the New Life. He would not accept or receive love or walk in the Way of love. If he would not accept or receive love or walk in the Way of love, what could be the outcome? He went back to where he was before, back to where he came from. Outer darkness is what is left if you are not at the great wedding banquet of the King. Outer darkness is where everybody is who is not at the wedding feast of the King. You are in the Kingdom of God – or you are in the outer darkness. That is the point of the story. We are not thrown into Hell; we are invited *out* of Hell – out of aloneness and meaninglessness. If we refuse to change, we stay where we are. The story “throws him out” to make it poignant that he had this wonderful chance for love and light but ended up back where he started. Why bound hand and foot? Out of God's Kingdom – out of the banquet hall – you cannot use your gifts: you do not get to accomplish what you are here for. It is like being shackled. No *vocatio*. You cannot accomplish anything worth anything.

So we all have the tendency to swing from one extreme to the other. There is no Hell of eternal flames, and God does not punish his children by throwing them into a lake of fire. Therefore we have nothing to worry about, spiritual disciplines are unnecessary, we are all going to Heaven, and we will all end up perfect – whether we ever lift our little finger to respond to God's love or not. Wouldn't you call that going from one extreme to the other? Like going from being a fundamentalist Christian to becoming a liberal Christian.

HAVE YOU SEIZED THE HOPE?

The wedding garment does us no good unless we put it on. If we are unwilling to receive the love, the guidance, the strength, and the purpose of the New Way, it is not forced upon us. It will never be forced upon us. We can stay in the outer darkness for as long as we choose to stay in the outer darkness. A person who does not pray every day is in the outer darkness in comparison to a person who does pray every day, unless that person's prayers are just rote – a going through the motions instead of truly turning will and life over to the Spirit's influence.

Some of you would quickly reply, at least inside your head, that you are maybe at least as good as I am, even though you do not pray every day. Ain't it the sad truth? Yes, and a lot better than me, some of you. When I was twenty-three years old, I made a promise to God that I would never try to be good ever again. As far as I know, I have never broken that promise. If so, it was not on any important issue, and not for very long. So if you are winning the race against me, it has been a long time since I was running. On the other hand, if you want to know Jesus – if you want a real relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – you can only have it if you pray. I don't care who you are and it doesn't matter what you think is fair or just: if you do not pray, you cannot have a real relationship with the Holy Spirit. If you will not put on the wedding garment, you do not know there is a marriage. And God will never *make* you put it on.

As an aside: Jesus does not treat any two of us in the same manner or ask from us the same things. He knows that we are not the same, so it would not be justice *or* love if He treated us the same. Treating everybody the same is not a good substitute for really caring. So you don't have to worry that He will make you like me. You only have to worry that He will make you like YOU.

The message that leaps out of the sixth chapter of Hebrews is this: *We have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us.* He is risen! We are not damned! We can refuse to put on the wedding garment, however often and warmly it is offered. We can stay in Hell awhile longer if we choose to. But we are not damned. We are not thrown into Hell as a punishment. There is never any problem getting out of Hell, if we decide we like weddings and wedding garments. We do have to get bold enough to ask for what we want and need. That was last week's message. Sometimes, of course, God sneaks gifts to us when we have not asked, and even when we are not looking. But on the growing edge and on the awareness level, God cannot give us what we want or need unless we are at a place where we can receive it. And the process of getting to the place where we can receive it requires asking on our part.

HAVE YOU SEIZED THE HOPE?

Are we on the same wavelength?

- 1.) Easter: He is risen, and we get to live with His presence as an intimate and integral part of everything we do.
- 2.) He comes to save: Throw away your fear of damnation. Put on the wedding garment instead.
- 3.) Be bold in asking Him for whatever you truly need or want.
- 4.) What's next?

We have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us.

If you remember how the reading began, the writer of Hebrews thinks it is time for us to move on into it: Claim the LIFE and go for it. “*Let us go on toward perfection,*” he says. Move on past the foundations. Do not just keep laying down the foundations over and over. It does not mean they are unimportant; it does not mean we can do without them; it does not mean we can forget them. But foundations are laid so we can build something on them.

Unlike me, he is getting impatient. How long are we going to be stuck here dealing with repentance, conversion, choosing our vocatio, trusting the Resurrection, talking about Heaven and Hell? That is what he is saying: Hey friends, let's go for it! Let's move it! Let's build it into our lives, practice it, try it out, take it everywhere we go. Let the horses run! *We have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us.*

Don't just size it up – seize it! We have all had plenty of time to figure out what we are able to figure out about Jesus and His promises. We have thought about it, doubted it, claimed the comfort, and taken the assurance. But is there really anybody here who could not give the Spirit a lot more say in their lives, a lot more free rein, a lot more willing obedience? Time is running out. Life here is short. Christianity is not really about theory or answers to questions. Christianity, like marriage – like the wedding banquet of the King – can only be known in the experience, in going with it, in putting it on. *We have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us.*

One more picture, to try to get it right-side up: We all grow up here learning rules – being taught how to fit in, how to survive, how to succeed. Then we run into Jesus, who invites us into a whole NEW Way of Life. Have you ever watched a young, well-trained child? I think we are starting

HAVE YOU SEIZED THE HOPE?

to see more of them around again. Anyway, have you ever watched a young, well-trained child waiting for permission to do something he was just fairly dying to do?

Four times every year, the family visits relatives. The whole clan gathers for a big barbecue and picnic out in the country. At the edge of the huge backyard, there stands a gigantic tree. It is a miniature of Tarzan's jungle all by itself. Fifteen kids could play tag for hours in that tree and never touch the ground. All the older children have played in the tree all afternoon. It has seemed like the most exciting game in the world.

For years that have seemed like forever, Daddy has said, "No, you cannot play. You are too young. I know you are a good climber for your age, but I'm afraid that in the excitement, you might fall."

Another visit has come around. The meal is over. The older children are already under the tree, making the rules and deciding who will be "it" first. The young boy does not even consider trying to disobey orders. He knows it does no good to beg. He lingers at the table, looking with great longing at the tree. He does not expect permission, but he cannot help wishing – longing – suspended somewhere between hope and parental authority.

It is time to go play with the younger kids, but he lingers. Finally he heaves a small sigh, tears his eyes from the tree, and gets up to go. But as he starts away, he steals one last look at his father. To his surprise, his father is looking straight at him, a smile on his face. There is no long lecture. There is no comment of instruction or admonition. There is only the smile on his father's face and a half-whispered word, "Go!"

There is a split second of disbelief, followed by a radiant look of joyful belief – and then a small explosion where a little boy used to be. He had received *strong encouragement to seize the hope set before him.*