

# Hope in God

Acts 24:1–27

May 19, 2002

“This I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets, having a hope in God which these themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward God and toward men.” What a defense! Having refuted the charges brought against him, Paul takes up the offense articulating what is happening in terms of the faith. In so doing, Paul outlines for us today what matters in the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the Christian faith.

Paul admits that he believes and lives in accordance with the Way, the very early church of Jesus Christ, at that time still a part of Judaism, but beginning to be defined as a distinct entity. Even his accusers acknowledged the Way as a sect of Judaism. So would we do well, in our faith and life, to follow in the way of the church. We would, for instance, do well to learn the faith articulated in the Apostles’ Creed rather than try to imagine our own. Today we have baptized John Ryan Mustanski in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. His parents have committed him to the way of Jesus Christ, and we have committed ourselves to helping them. So let us all fulfill our vows.

What is involved in this Way? The first thing Paul says is, “I worship the God of our fathers.” This is what Paul does. This is who is. Paul worships God. From this we learn that the worship of God is primary. It is the reason for our existence. It is the purpose of our lives. We were created and redeemed to worship God. Nothing is more important. This is what we do. This is who we are. We worship God.

“I worship the God of our fathers.” Notice that this is not generic worship. This is not diffuse or unfocused worship of the force or of the powers that be. This is not worship for the sake of worship. Instead, this is worship in line with, and in continuity with, the worship practiced by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and David. Paul did not depart from the ancient faith. Jesus Christ did not come to create a new religion. What he did was in fulfillment of the faith of the fathers. So it is today that we continue to worship the God of our ancestors in the faith. We do not invent a god whom we worship. We are not free to manufacture idols and to pretend that they are God. We cannot make up something and call it Christian faith. Instead, we have received a goodly heritage of faith and truth. We are responsible for what we have received, both for ourselves and for those who will come after us. We worship the Creator of the world, the God of our fathers, the God of the Exodus, the Savior of Israel, the God and Father of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world. Thanks be to God!

“I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets.” The second thing Paul says here is that true worship consists of believing. God is worshiped by faith. It is faith that honors God. It is faith that appropriates the gospel. It is faith that receives Jesus Christ. Worship does not consist, primarily, of outer actions. In Paul’s day, that might have meant sacrifices in the temple. Today, it might mean something else. And yet, worship does not consist of outer actions. This is not to say that faith does not lead to outer actions. But it is to say that there is a danger of going through the motions without believing. And going through the motions is not worship. Worship is believing in God. Worship is

believing in God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Worship is acknowledging God as the Creator and Sustainer of the world. Worship is trusting in the God and Father of Jesus Christ, come what may. Given that faith within, we gladly worship God with the outer actions of song, praise, prayer, preaching, offerings, and so forth. And these even help build up faith. But without faith, these are not worship.

“I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets.” The third thing that Paul says here is that the word of God is the authority for our faith. We are not free to believe anything we want to believe. We are not free to make up a faith. Instead, God has told us what he wants us to believe in the Bible, in the scriptures, in what Paul called the law and the prophets. Paul accepted everything he found there. This is faith that honors and worships God: faith that is grounded in the revealed word of God. Faith based on human philosophy is not sufficient. Faith based on national interests is not sufficient. Faith based on race or economics is not sufficient. Faith that honors and worships the God and Father of Jesus Christ is faith that is based in the Bible. That is as true today as it was then. Are you seeking faith? Do you want to believe? Do you want to honor and worship God? Turn to the scriptures. Turn to the written word of God to hear the living word of God today. This is the basis for our faith, which is our true worship.

“I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets, having a hope in God which these themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.” Having looked back at the God of the fathers, having looked back at the law and the prophets, now Paul looks ahead, and the fourth thing he says is that he has a hope in God. He has a hope in the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Because of the faithfulness of God in the past, Paul has a good hope for the future. This is where faith is headed. It is not primarily about the past. It is not primarily about what has already happened. Good hope for the future is about what has not happened yet. It is based on the past, but it will far exceed the past. We learn from the past, but we hope for even more.

What is the content of Paul’s hope? Paul has a hope “that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.” Based on the scripture of the past, believing in the God of the present, Paul has a good hope for the future “that there will be a resurrection.”

He even argued that he shared this with the Jews. They were looking for the resurrection. Our reading from Isaiah 25:6–9 promises that God will defeat the power of death. Paul understood that the resurrection had already begun in Jesus Christ. God had raised Jesus Christ from the dead as the first fruits of a large harvest of resurrection. The Jews did not accept this about Jesus. But they could not, in good faith, say that Paul’s teaching about the resurrection was alien to their faith. What Paul taught about Jesus Christ, what Jesus did, in suffering, dying, and being raised, was in fulfillment of their greatest expectations. For some reason, they could not see it.

Paul’s good hope for the future is still our good hope for the future. The God who made us for himself, the God who redeemed us for himself, will also raise us to new life for himself. More than any possible reward we could receive here, this makes us brave to live this life in faith. Paul was standing before a high official of the same government which had crucified Jesus. It was as if he were saying, “Even if you kill me, God will raise me to a new life. It may appear that you are in power over me, but God is in power over you and over the power of death which you wield.” What a defense! Paul took the opportunity of his trial to articulate and proclaim the

gospel of Jesus Christ and to teach the faith of the church of Jesus Christ. We would do well today to learn from him both his faith and his courage.

What is our Christian hope today? Dr. John Leith has had this to say about hope, quoting from the documents of the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Evanston, Illinois, in 1954, which had as its theme "Christ: the Hope of the World."

When we stand at that place where the Son of God died for our sins, all our human desires are judged by Him. We are stripped naked of all our claims and pretensions and clothed afresh with His mercy. We are dead and made alive again. In the words of the apostle, we are begotten again to a living hope. This act of God himself is the beginning of our hope that the Creator and Lord of all has come forth in wrath and loving kindness to shut up every false way, and to bring us face to face with himself, the living Lord. He, by his own act, has put us in the place where we must hope and can hope only in him. . . .

God summons the Church of Jesus Christ today to speak plainly about hope. Jesus Christ is our hope. In all humility and boldness we are bound to tell the good news of the hope given to us in him.

The hope of which we speak is something different from what men usually mean when they speak of hope. In common speech 'hope' means a strong desire for something which may be possible but is not certain. What is spoken of here is something that we wait for expectantly yet patiently, because we know it can never disappoint us.

We have this confidence because our hope is based upon what we know of God, and because we know of him through what He has done. Our hope is not the projection of our desires upon an unknown future, but the product in us of God's acts in history and above all, of his act in raising Jesus Christ from the dead. That mighty event is faith's assurance that Christ has overcome the world and all the powers of evil, sin, and death; it is the beginning of a new life in the power of the Spirit; it is a guarantee of God's promise that in his good time his victory will be manifest to all, his Kingdom come in glory, and he himself be known everywhere as King. It therefore begets a living hope, an ardent longing for that glorious consummation, and an eager expectation of its coming" (John Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, pp. 288, 286).

In a world of terror, in a world of despair, in a world of hopelessness, today even more than fifty years ago, now more than ever, not only are we called to worship and faith, but also we are called to hope in God and especially to hope in the resurrection, both for the courage it gives us for this life and for the comfort it gives us for the next life.

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*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor  
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
1627 Monument Avenue  
Richmond, Virginia 23220