

*THE CHRISTIAN "NIL DESPERANDUM": A
STUDY OF ST. LUKE VI. 35.*

A COMPARISON of the rendering here of the A.V., "hoping for nothing again," with that of the R.V., "never despairing,"¹ indicates an agreement as to the variant, and a difference as to the translation of the participle. Both points deserve notice. First, are we to read *μηδέν* or *μηδένα*? The canon as to the *brevior lectio* would predispose the student in favour of the neuter; and though the masculine is not without support, it is slender in comparison with that given to *μηδέν*,² which may be with good reason accepted as the true reading. More hesitation will be felt as to the rendering of the participle. One feels a reluctance to part with the familiar translation "hoping again." It fits in with the sense of the passage, and supplies the expected antithesis to "doing good and lending," but it must be abandoned in favour of "despairing," for the idea of expecting repayment has been already condemned as sinful. The verb *ἀπελπίζειν* is used here only in the New Testament.³ Some light may be thrown upon its meaning by St. Paul's famous passage in praise of love in the phrase *Ἡ ἀγάπη πάντα ἐλπίζει*.⁴ Both the Master and the Apostle are drawing pictures of a loving heart. Christ sees its outcome in conduct and action, and here negatively warns His own against pessimism. St. Paul marks one of its tenderest and most characteristic features, and declares positively that "love hopeth all things." The conclusion, however, that the preposition in *ἀπελπίζειν* is a negative is much strengthened by references outside the New Testament. The verb is not in use by the best authors. It belongs to Greek of the transitional period between the

¹ R.V. margin "despairing of no man." ² So A B D L Δ.

³ The variant *ἀπηλπικότες*, Eph. iv. 19, has no good support.

⁴ 1 Cor. xiii. 7.

classical and the so-called Hellenistic. Polybius not only uses the verb not unfrequently but also the noun *ἀπελπισμός* in the sense of "despair." It may be added that the classical equivalent to the later *ἀπελπίζειν* is one which resembles it in prefix, viz. *Ἀπογινώσκω* = to give up as useless, to abandon; and it is singular in this context to note that this verb is found linked with *τὴν ἐλπίδα* as with *τὴν σωτηρίαν* in Aristotle.¹

From these considerations the pregnant meaning of the formula comes out more fully. The presence of the variant is not doctrinally significant, it scarcely affects the thought. Here then is perceived a weighty caution from the lips of the Master against despair either of circumstance or of persons. He will not allow a pessimistic attitude in His followers. For every enterprise upon which His Name can be invoked, for every individual on whom His love rests, there is Hope. In His hands hope does not merely lie at the bottom of every cup—rather it fills the cup.

It is sometimes urged in depreciation of the Christian ethic that undue prominence is given to the merely passive virtues. The objection may hold good if the student only glances hastily at the catalogues of Christian graces given in the New Testament. But from the nature of the case it was imperative that the members of the Early Church should be taught the duty of a wise passiveness. On the other hand, the characteristic hope with which the Gospel message was and is charged prevented and still prevents those who accept it from that pessimism which spells inaction and sterility.

The hope which is so pathetically expressed by prophet and psalmist in the Old Testament is confidently and exuberantly proclaimed in the New. The Incarnation, Resurrection and Ascension are enough for Christians; they "cannot be disappointed of their hope." The promi-

¹ Arist. *Nic. Eth.* iii. 6, §11.

nence of hope in the literature of the New Testament is striking in regard to frequency of employment, the limits of its localization, and its spiritual and ethical significance. The noun, and verb *ἐλπὶς*, *ἐλπίζειν* occur just a hundred times in the New Testament. The noun never occurs in the Gospels; and though the verb is found five times in the Evangelic record, it is never employed in a religious reference. Both verb and noun are absent from the Apocalypse; and while the verb is used twice in St. John's letters, it is the noun only which is employed in a religious sense.¹ Neither is found in the Epistle of St. Jude. The noun is used but six times by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Hence the employment of verb and noun in a spiritual application is nearly confined to Pauline or Petrine literature, for it is a singular fact that when met with in the Acts it is St. Paul who is the speaker. These facts—not uninteresting in themselves—point to the conclusion that hope received a new birth at the new dispensation. The Hope which Israel shared² was at once purified and intensified by the whole action of human redemption. St. Paul and St. Peter taught an unquenchable hope in God manifest in the flesh, crucified, risen, triumphant, pleading for men in heaven. With them our Lord's sentence against despair became a passionate plea for waiting still on Him. He was their Hope;³ they scarcely needed words from Him to tell them it was so. Through Him and His completed work lay other happy expectations, their calling, their righteousness, their salvation, and life eternal. This hope was characterized by security of possession, by happiness, and by joy.

That which was forecasted dimly in the Psalter, as St. Peter declared,⁴ was in a true sense applicable to Chris-

¹ 1 John iii. 3.

³ 1 Tim. i. 1.

² Acts xxviii. 20.

⁴ Acts ii. 26.

tian believers on earth, they tabernacled in hope. The figure of hope in its spiritual aspect, as portrayed in the New Testament, is a splendid and exhilarating one. Like Sir Joshua Reynolds' famous design in the window of the ante-chapel at New College, Oxford, it has the Excelsior look about it; but while it looks to the things that are above, all that lies on the earthly plane appears transmuted—transfigured.

For those that are possessed of this radiant expectancy, no cause and no individual can be reckoned as lost. For the Christian, despair is impossible because it must be a mistrust of the Omnipotent.

Much then is directly revealed as to the nature and strength of Christian hope in the New Testament; but if we pass from the letter to the spirit of its pages, the devout student will see its rays everywhere. Hope as well as joy penetrates such a letter as that to the Philippians. Hope was the great sustaining power of the Church under persecution, hope made the expectant proto-martyr's face beam like that of an angel. And ever since that age the Church has been in herself, and to the world, precisely what she is through this eternal hope.

Yet the question arises, Is despair as a mind and temper plainly pagan? With these words of the Master before His disciples the answer must surely be in the affirmative; for not only here are the purest morals taught, but He shows how opposite ideas and contrary actions are base and sinful, and thus that to despair, whether of a situation or of an individual, is an attitude not of His own but of the Gentile world. And what wondrous knowledge in Him does this reveal of the tendency of pagan sentiment before and since His Incarnation. Any careful and competent student of Greek or Latin literature will have but one answer to give as to the testimony which each furnishes on the issue.

Take Latin literature: with the standing exception of his Pollio, Vergil's message to his countrymen, in striking contrast to his greater follower Dante, was not a message of hope; and who can really hear it even when Horace is in his gayer moods? It is much the same with the greater prophets of Greek literature. Euripides cannot be cleared of melancholy, even if it is not permanent in him; while most critics would regard Sophocles as frankly pessimistic. Pessimism was in the air, and these great writers, feelers after God as they might be, not only sympathized with it, but expressed it, and in expressing it gave it what nobility it could receive, but a nobility only of diction and phrase.

Hope, then, is at once the symbol and safeguard of the Christian life. It is to the soul what good health is to the body; when its possession is fitful and precarious, then decay has set in.

Nor must it be supposed that the acute and final state of despair is reached in a moment. It has its preliminary stages both for individuals and nations. It is not at once wild, passionate, suicidal. In normal experience it is precluded by a thousand haunting doubts and uncertainties, by misgivings, suspicions, by those *μερίμναι* against which the Master also warned His own. Gradually resistance against these forces becomes weaker and weaker until the pessimist drifts into the backwater of a sluggish and stagnant morbidity, and this way lies despair. Hence the motto for Christians in this regard must be *obsta principiis*. They must needs set a watch not only upon lip, but upon mood and temperament. They must look to springs of thought and will, and shun as a fatal and ominous sign what they flatteringly describe as religious depression. They have also to beware of the surroundings and influences of an age which to-day is once again pessimistic, and whose most fatal note is an increase in suicide. Modern thought is tinged with pessimism. If it is too negative to serve as a

doctrine, it is insinuated as an idea. Modern fiction, by which people to-day learn at once so much and so little, is largely pessimistic. It is so with the two chief novelists still with us. Life and character in the North of England and in Wessex have been severally delineated for us by them with a power which rivals, and now and again transcends that of George Eliot; and while the one writer exposes, as with the hand of a man, the weakness of human nature, the other as pitilessly sets out its evil passions. Where in either is the fair vision of hope? It is the same in the poetry of the day. Critics describe it as decadent, but they are not to be blamed for so doing. Pessimism, like a creeping paralysis, has caught hold of our singers, and their listeners love to have it so. They pass by the lark; it is only the raven to which they are responsive. It is a happy thing for the welfare of our national existence that the patriotic feeling, in the present sorrowful crisis of English history, has come upon us, acting like an antiseptic upon these maleficent influences.

The rendering of R.V., "never despairing," wisely covers the possibility of either variant in this passage.

It remains, therefore, to consider whether Christians worthy of the name act up to the Master's command. What doubt, what gloom often besets them as they reflect upon themselves, on their influence with others, on the great cause which is not theirs but His!

Upon themselves. The inward monitor, when permitted to speak out, declares to them shortcomings, inconsistencies, faults and sins. All imply failure to advance, and then, instead of nerving themselves to further struggles onward, knees become feeble and hands slack, the gloom of despondency settles about them; hope is no longer sure and strong, they are on the edge of despair.

So in regard to others. We often give up others, not only because they sometimes seem to us hopelessly bad,

but because they are often to us hopelessly uninteresting. Thus the area of our influence narrows to a smaller and yet smaller radius.

So in regard to Christian enterprise. It is so often that Christians imagine that the general success of the great cause of the Lord is to be measured by the personal success at their command. Rather it is their single title of honour, whether success comes or goes, to be fellow-workers with Him. Meanwhile, how is a dark and dismal pessimism consistent either with a full belief in His message or with His Divine Person, for the one is the word of hope, and the other is the Hope Himself?

Now when they were gone over the stile, they began to contrive with themselves what they should do at that stile, to prevent those that shall come after from falling into the hands of Giant Despair. So they consented to erect there a pillar, and to engrave upon the side thereof this sentence: "Over this stile is the way to Doubting Castle, which is kept by Giant Despair, who despiseth the King of the celestial country, and seeks to destroy His holy pilgrims." Many therefore that followed after read what was written and escaped the danger.

So wrote the immortal author of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. It was Hopeful who this time saved his brother. One of Bishop Westcott's last utterances was, "I am full of hope." The spirit of all whose faces are set to the Celestial City must be the same, and their battle cry a nobler one than any dreamt of by the poet's imagining.

NIL DESPERANDUM, CHRISTO DUCE ET AUSPICE
CHRISTO.

B. WHITEFOORD.