

# **Is there a Reasonable Hope for Humanity?**

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A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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This text has been edited from a transcript of a talk given by David Gooding to the Christian Dental Fellowship in Belfast, N. Ireland, in October 1979. It is made available for you to read or print out for personal or church use. However, you may not publish it either in print or electronic form.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust  
PO BOX 2216  
Belfast, N. Ireland  
BT1 9YR

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Myrtlefield catalogue no: apl.013/jf

## Is there a Reasonable Hope for Humanity?

I have chosen to talk to you on this question because I thought that you might conceivably be interested if a fellow mortal should be courageous enough, you might think brash enough, to bare his own heart and state on what grounds he bases his own hope for himself and for the future of the human race.<sup>1</sup> So now, when I turn to the task of addressing you on this topic, I might well find the prospect too daunting if I did not reflect for a moment on the nature of your profession, and on the skill and the gracious tact with which you are accustomed to go about your professional duties.

### *The uncomfortable task of a dentist*

You see, in the course of my remarks here this afternoon, I shall be obliged to touch on gloomy topics, to probe some sore places. I shall be obliged to refer to the evil and cruelty of our world, to speak of our sense of guilt and alienation. To talk, for instance, of the end of the world, and on such unpopular topics as the final judgment. You may well find such topics irritating and unpleasant, if not positively painful, and I run the risk, therefore, of being decidedly unpopular. But then I reflect on the nature of your profession. You too, I remind myself, have to probe behind the fair surface of things sometimes to expose unpleasant decay. You too, in spite of your astonishing dexterity and professional skill, have on occasion to hurt people, or at least to give the impression that you are about to hurt them, with the result that, in the public eye (I think I tell you no news at this point) the image of dentists is not always surrounded with the aura of the highest popularity. You have, of course, I know, very nobly disregarded the shallow unpopularity in which sometimes you are held. You run ahead with your healing ministrations, for which, of course, all of us are profoundly grateful. As I reflect on that, I reassure myself with the thought that I have your sympathy and understanding if I am obliged at certain moments in the course of my remarks to touch on sensitive and painful topics.

My chief worry is not that I may appear to you to be too gloomy as I discourse on the future of mankind, or too pessimistic. As I present the grounds which the Christian faith gives me, at least, for hope for the future of mankind, my worry is that I shall appear to you far too optimistic, far more certain and hopeful, far more buoyantly joyful, even, than I have any right to be. You may, in the end, be worried that I am naïve.

Now, your worry will be, perhaps, in part because I shall not attempt to rehearse all the massive and detailed evidence that the Christian faith is true. I do not have the extensive time

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<sup>1</sup> The terms *humanity*, *mankind*, *man* and *the human race* are used interchangeably throughout this talk at various points for the whole race of human beings.

that would be necessary for that. What I wish to do, however, is to argue that, to be reasonable, any hope for the future of mankind must be able to answer satisfactorily certain basic questions. As I consider these basic questions, it seems to me, at least, that Christianity and Christianity alone, ultimately, is able to answer these questions satisfactorily.

*Where did it all come from?*

The first question that we must ask, if we are to have any reasonable hope for the future of our world, is the question of the origin of our planet, and of our universe and of ourselves upon it. For one thing, at least, is incontrovertibly clear; man is not the source of his own existence. We derive our being from a source outside of ourselves. Man is a derived being. We are not self-existent. Can we then turn our hearts to some rational, self-existent Creator, and say with the Jewish psalmist, 'It is he who has made us, and not we ourselves,' (Ps 100:3 NKJV) or say with the Christian apostle's record, 'Thou didst create all things, and because of thy will, they are and were created' (see Rev 4:11)? Or, are we inescapably driven to believe that our universe, and we ourselves in it, are the chance result of blind forces working purposelessly on blind matter? Are we simply a magnificent accident of chance? You see, if this latter is true, if we are simply the blind results of blind accidental chance, then we must certainly abandon all rational hope for the future of mankind, for the obvious reason that what blind chance has blindly produced, blind chance may equally well blindly destroy. We may hope that, by some fortunate stroke of luck, the human race may survive. Such a hope cannot be reasonable if the whole affair is, from the very beginning, merely the result of blind forces working by chance on blind matter.

It is the fact, however, is it not, that many people feel that they are driven to take this gloomy view of things—that blind chance controlled our beginning and will determine our end. Some indeed find it preferable to believe that, rather than to believe in a rational Creator to whom, one day, conscience would then tell us, we might be answerable. But many others are driven to this gloomy view of the future because there weighs heavily with them the burden, the massive burden, of suffering in the world. They cannot reconcile the existence of this suffering with the idea of a rational and a loving Creator. They find it easier to believe that everything has come about by blind chance. So all the imperfections, the evil, and the suffering are simply the accidental results of accidental chance.

I see that problem. I trust I have humanity enough to feel it, as well as seeing it. I do not profess to have the answer, the full and complete answer, of the grievous problem of human suffering. But I do observe this, for my own part. If you abandon faith in a rational Creator, you will certainly get rid of the problem of suffering, but you won't get rid of the suffering. You will get rid of the problem because now you don't have to reconcile the evil around the place with the existence of a loving, rational Creator. You can attribute it all to the vagaries of blind, and therefore unfeeling, chance. You will get rid of your problem; you will not get rid of the pain. But you will, of course, by getting rid of a rational Creator, make the burden of that pain infinitely more intolerable. For, if there be no rational Creator, then ultimately our pain is meaningless, as are our joys. Our suffering is pointless. No good can conceivably come of it. The heroism and dedication of the nurses and the doctors that tend the sick, noble

as that may be, will itself ultimately be meaningless, as blind chance once more reduces all their joys and their sorrows to oblivion.

If there be a God, a rational Creator, while we may not understand here and now the mysterious reasons for all of our sufferings, we have adequate reason for hoping, as St Paul puts it, that, 'Our light affliction, which is but for the moment and temporary, is somehow working for us an eternal weight of glory' (see 2 Cor 4:17). God will use the very sufferings of this world and work them together for good, for them that love God, that are the called according to his purpose—using even the fires of suffering to perfect the diamonds of our character (see Rom 8:18–28).

What grounds, then, have we for believing that there is such a rational Creator, and what grounds have we for trusting that such a rational Creator is not only rational but loving? I answer as a Christian. You will already have perceived that we have abundant such grounds, and supremely and chiefly in that self-revelation of God that we find in Jesus Christ, his Son. I do not stay to develop the evidence for that. I move to my next question, the next question that our hope for the future of mankind must be able to answer satisfactorily, if our hope is going to be reasonable.

#### *Are humans evil by nature?*

Let it be firmly said: man is, and obviously is, evil and cruel. In saying so, I am not being rude to any particular man or woman, nor am I overlooking the vast amount of kindness and altruism and compassion in the world. But alongside of that love and compassion and altruism, there exists an evil and cruelty in humanity that we would be blind not to see. And who of us has not been appalled as, from time to time, he has caught sight of the lamentable selfishness and cruelty and peevishness of his own heart? Who of us would not give much to undo the damage we have done, sometimes to those we love most, by our ingratitude and thoughtlessness and positive cruelty? I haven't yet spoken of the cruelty that comes from the power blocs into which men organise themselves for the sake of politics.

Our question therefore must be, as we face the realities of man's evil and cruelty: If man is cruel and evil, is he essentially so? Is it part of his nature, as it is the nature of fire to be hot? Or, does man's evil stem from some primeval *fall* of the human race, and from man's consequent alienation from God and from his fellow human beings? We will see, if man's evil does indeed stem from some primeval fall and alienation, that there is hope for humanity: hope that the alienation shall be overcome; that man shall be reconciled to his Creator; that the prodigal may return to the father's home, and find his true self, and be reconciled both to his Creator and to his fellow humans.

But I am aware that, in many quarters, the doctrine of the fall has gone out of fashion, as though it were some primeval superstition from medieval times. It seems to some people, at any rate, that the doctrine of the fall is appallingly unfair. 'Why should I be blamed', they say, 'for what some remote Adam did?' But, of course, the Bible, by its doctrine of the fall, isn't blaming anybody for what somebody else did. It is merely diagnosing whence our basic trouble comes. In fact, the Bible doctrine of the fall is exceedingly kind. It tells that our nastiness, while in part our own fault, isn't totally our own fault but is to be traced to that

primeval fall that changed the very nature of humankind and altered his relationships with God.

I say therefore, again, the Bible is not blaming us by its doctrine of the fall. What it is doing is giving us a profound diagnosis that prepares us for a treatment of the salvation that shall be reasonable and realistic. For a good deal of popular religion along this line is unintentionally cruel and unrealistic. 'Pull up your spiritual socks,' my would-be advisors tell me. 'Do your best, old fellow, to improve yourself, and give yourself a chance for the future,' as though my last innocent evil could be accounted for easily by the simple fact that I accidentally let my spiritual socks fall down. As though, by giving attention to the matter like some schoolboy under the eye of his mother, I could, by my own effort, pull up my spiritual socks and make for myself an adequate salvation.

That is unrealistic. It is cruel to load heavily both me, and all humanity, with a total responsibility for the present chaotic state of the world. We are in part responsible, but the Bible, it seems to me, is merciful when it points us to the fact that we, as a human race, have long since been estranged by this primeval rebellion against God. The Bible is exceedingly kind when it, in consequence, informs us that if we have been ruined by what somebody else did, then we can also be saved by what somebody else did. The Bible puts it this way: 'That if through the disobedience of one [that is, our forefather], the many were constituted sinners, so, not by their own effort, are by the obedience of one other [namely our Lord], shall the many be made righteous' (see Rom 5:19).

I am aware, however, that many people reject this idea that human evil is to be attributed to some fall. Some people reject it vigorously. They hold that it is an insult to man, his dignity and to his endeavours. So they reject this doctrine and base their hope in some kind of scientific humanism. They will tell us that man had his origin by blind chance working on matter. But, by some incredible stroke of luck, chance has accidentally produced human intelligence and mind and reason. Of course, there are many defects, which would be bound to happen if all is the result of chance. 'There are many defects in man's psychological and physical make-up,' they will tell us, 'but if humans will only learn to grasp the opportunity and use this chancy gift that chance has given them, namely reason, they may have hope to mend the defects. They may hope to master their psychological mechanisms and biophysical processes, to eliminate human cruelty and evil, to master the world and the universe, and so bring in the longed-for paradise.'

This hope, it seems to me, is unrealistic on at least two counts. Just suppose now we could succeed and perfect ourselves by our own effort and master our universe. Without a self-existent Creator to serve and worship, we should remain forever unsatisfied and unfulfilled. Man, for all his self-improvement, would remain a derived being, his existence derived from some other source. I recur to my observation that man is not a self-existent being. We did not make ourselves and, though we improve ourselves out of recognition, it remains true we didn't make ourselves. We do not carry within ourselves the purpose and reason for our existence. And it is evident that all of us search around *for* purpose for existence—some adequate purpose that will give meaning to life. We look outside of ourselves simply because one's self is not an adequate goal and purpose that can give a person adequate reason for existence. Simply to fulfil themselves, to give meaning to life,

people set up other goals outside of themselves. They will set up their family, their career, success, their race, their ideology, their education as goals to serve and so find meaning for their existence and endeavours. As subsidiary goals subservient to the supreme goal of serving God, and subject to the criticism of an all-wise and moral creator, these subsidiary goals can be, in their way, satisfying. But when set up apart from a Creator, set up now as substitute gods, history has shown that these substitute gods prove to be false gods and not seldom become tyrants that, instead of improving mankind, destroy him amidst much cruelty. Ideologies that have been set up as absolute gods, pride of race that has been set up as an absolute god, mere success in one's profession or business set up as an absolute end in itself, even one's family and how much more oneself made absolute goals and gods—all these prove to be not only unsatisfying, but quite commonly productive of competition, and selfishness, and aggressiveness and cruelty. Our world, at this present moment, seems likely to be destroyed and pulled in pieces as thousands of men adopt ideologies and make of them absolutes in the place of faith in a self-existent Creator.

And, there is another reason why this atheistic, humanistic hope seems to me to be unrealistic, and that brings me to my next question.

*Is this world going to last forever?*

The answer, of course, you are more qualified to tell me than I to tell you. It is a most definite, 'No.' Not only is it true that individuals die; our very world will one day die. That is not a story invented by Christians to scare people into being religious. That is a truth of the same nature as the truth that the sun shines because it burns, and because it burns, it will one day burn itself out; and our world, in the process, must be destroyed. It matters not how remote in the future you place the end of our world. Philosophically, it has an exceedingly important implication for us. It reminds us that human life on this planet is a temporary phenomenon. Perfect it if you can, and it is certainly the biblical command to man that he shall attempt, and seriously attempt, to improve his world and develop its potentials (see Gen chs. 1 and 9). But, in the end, we must recognise that the thing is temporary, and human life in the form we have known it will cease. That would be a gloomy prospect from which I do not see how we could rescue ourselves, or have any rational hope, without faith that behind this temporary world there lies an eternal Creator.

The Bible itself, then, preaches the end of the world, but it does so without excessive gloom and certainly with very few tears. For it tells us that the world was never meant to be anything other than temporary. It informs us that the point in God's creation of this temporary world was that he might put man upon it as his creature so that, in the course of man's temporary stay in this temporary world, he might have the opportunity of developing into something infinitely higher, namely a child of God.

But, at this moment, as I use that term a *child of God*, I'm aware I must rescue the term from the fate it has suffered at the hands of popular religion. Popular religion very sincerely reminds us that we should be kind one to another, and very frequently is inclined to urge its exhortation upon us on the ground that, 'After all, we are all children of God.' But that isn't true, at least not in the biblical sense of that term. In the sense that we are creatures of God, the Bible will describe us as the offspring of God—as creatures of God. All people, therefore,

are creatures of God, and we must treat them with that dignity and love due to a creature of God. What the Bible means by 'a child of God' is something different. Men are automatically creatures of God, not automatically children of God. A child of God is something that we have to become. As Professor Lewis never tired of reminding us, there is a difference between a statue that a sculptor makes and a child that the sculptor begets.<sup>2</sup> We come into this temporary world as creatures that God made. It is Christ's magnificent claim, unimaginable in its implications, that he has the authority to give us creatures of God the power to become children of God, to be born of God with that life that the Bible describes as the very life of God—eternal life.

You perhaps say to me, 'But look, if it was God's purpose to have what you call "children of God", why did he not proceed to produce them at once? Why go this roundabout way of first producing a temporary planet and putting upon it creatures that are temporary? Why not proceed at once to produce children of God?'

We might as well ask, 'Why not arrange for people to be born married?' Oh, I know, some of my clever colleagues in biology or genetics may arrange it one of these days: that people should be born already married. But if they do so, this much will be certain—marriage will not mean then what marriage means now. One essential part of marriage now is that two independent personalities shall, of their own free will, consent to cede their independence and become joined one to the other. None can do it for us. It must be done by our own free will. So it is, I understand, with God's purpose. God can produce a creature and give the creature free will, without asking that creature's permission. Nobody asked us whether we would be born or not. But not even almighty God can get us to use our free will without our consent. Therefore, this planet is temporary, and our life upon it as God's creatures is temporary, so that we might have the opportunity, of our free will, to respond to God's gracious advances in Christ, personally to receive Christ, and from him to receive that gift of eternal life by which creatures are turned into children of God. This, I know, is a far cry from mere *do-goodism* that Christianity is often reduced to. To me, at least, it makes adequate sense of the dimensions of our temporary world.

You may object that my emphasising that the world is temporary has the result of belittling man's endeavour, of belittling our scientific endeavour, our efforts to improve the world and our lot in the world. But that is not so. Some Christians may indeed have run away from life and got themselves in a corner waiting for the end of the world. But they have misunderstood their faith. School, for most people, and university for others, is only temporary. It does not mean that it is not to be taken seriously on that account. Indeed the other charge that is levelled against Christianity is more likely to be true. It is the charge that the Bible attaches too much importance to this life, that in making this life the preparation for eternity, Christianity takes our efforts here too seriously. For if life is a preparation for eternity, then that invests all of life with eternal significance.

And there is another point. Our Lord taught us to pray, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt 6:10). This world, for all its temporariness and evil, remains God's world. I fancy, when God fulfils that prayer, he will astonish even the most

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. London, 1952; rev. edn with new introduction and foreword by Kathleen Norris, New York: HarperCollins, 2001, p. 160 (see also p. 157).



ardent believers by the literalness with which he fulfils it. We are told that, before this world finishes, creation itself shall be delivered from its bondage to corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God (see Rom 8:19–22). When I go to the dentist in bondage to my corrupt tooth that is giving me toothache, and he undertakes to deliver me from my bondage to this corruption, it does not normally mean that he gets rid of me. Rather he destroys the corruption and leaves me intact. When God promises us that creation itself shall be delivered from its bondage to corruption, I understand him not to mean that he will destroy creation, but that he shall destroy the corruption, and creation will be delivered from her bondage to it.

*Is hope any use to me in the present?*

Is there a hope, then, for the future of mankind that can offer hope for the individual now? There are many ideologies that hold out hope for the future but assure us in the same breath that we of this generation shall not be there to see the paradise when it comes. Thus do our communist friends encourage us, for instance. Is my life now nothing more than the life of some little cobble insect, so that, when I die, along with myriads and myriads more in all the generations past, we shall together form some coral reef for the future on which may be built a paradise for some future Elizabeth Taylor to drive her gold-plated Rolls-Royce over, and I not be there even to see her drive it past and enjoy the sight of it?

We talk glibly of humanity, but humanity is an abstraction. What there is in reality is simply individuals, and if hope for the future means merely hope for a generation or two of very favoured individuals in the future, that is scarcely hope enough for us individuals now. It is here, I confess, that I find the reasoning of the Christian gospel so satisfying. It assures us that the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord validates our hope, that they who trust him shall one day likewise be bodily raised to take part in that paradise that God prepares for them that love him. Not for nothing do we recite over the Christian dead the words of 1 Corinthians:

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is thy victory?

O death, where is thy sting?

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (15:54–56)

But this brings me to my last two questions.

*Does our guilt matter?*

Is there a way of releasing man from his sense of guilt without implying that the wrong he has done does not matter? Whatever you may think of the Bible's hope for the future, it is no fairy tale. The age to come is really connected with this one. There is no long wand that can be waved over a person who has chosen to live his or her life without God and, somehow by magic, give them a new start in the life to come. That coming age is connected to life now. Our past matters. What we do matters. Our sins matter: they cannot be brushed under the

carpet. To tell me that I can escape the guilt of my sins by telling myself that I am not really responsible is to reduce me to an animal.

How then can we find forgiveness and release, without saying our wrong deeds do not matter? The only answer I know is to be found in Christ, who came primarily, not to teach us to be good, but to release us from the chain of guilt. Christ, by his atoning death, solves that problem, in that he by his suffering maintains the standards of God's law, and its values, upon which our happiness depends. At the same time, he makes it possible for God to remain righteous and to justify those who have faith in Jesus.

*How do you define hope?*

Finally, what kind of a hope is it that a Christian may have? I have talked about hope, and perhaps what I should have done at the beginning, I must do hurriedly now. I must define what I mean by *hope*. When we say to one another, 'I hope the weather will be fine on holiday,' it is generally an expression of fear that it will rain almost every day. When Christians talk of their hope, alas too often they make it sound as if it were some uncertain thing. I think, perhaps, if a layman may say it, that the Church has been inordinately afraid of being presumptuous, and certainly, if our hope is presumptuous, then it is not only sinful, but it will let us down.

I am reminded of the story told me about King's Cross Station in London, how a businessman one night missed the last train to Peterborough but, hoping to get to Peterborough, he discovered that there was another train run for railway workmen. There it was at the platform, and he got in it. The officials told him he couldn't ride in that train, it was only insured for railway personnel; it was going to ride over certain parts of the track that were not insured for the general public. He couldn't ride that train, they said. He insisted on defying them, entered the train and went to sleep in the hope that he would arrive in the morning at Peterborough. In the night, they uncoupled the carriage. He awoke the next morning, full of hope, to find himself in King's Cross, and what a fool his hope now made him look as he stepped out on the platform.

What kind of a hope is it that Christ offers us? Not presumptuous hope, certainly, but neither some uncertain, faint, dismal wish. This kind of certainty is based in the very logic of the love of God. It argues that, if God loved us while we were still his enemies, and Christ died for us while we were still his enemies, if then we make our peace with God through Jesus Christ our Lord, we may be utterly certain and unshakeably confident—in the logic of the consistency of the love of God (Rom 5:8–11). Having pardoned us for Christ's sake when we were sinners, he will not leave us until he has brought us to humanity's true destiny of glory (v. 21).

That, at least, is my hope, and as I thank you for your patience in listening to me, allow me, humbly, to commend my hope to you.