

HOPE BEGINS HERE

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Regardless of where we live, we will encounter people who need to hear a message of hope. We all need that message! The body of Christ (His Church) is strategically distributed around the world to share a message of hope everywhere we go.

I have two friends, a man and wife, who serve as chaplains for large businesses back east. A chaplain's role is to interface with the people who work in the business, looking for opportunities to serve their spiritual and emotional needs.

On one such tour, the wife met a visibly troubled woman in her early 30's, a new hire in a plastics plant. Here is how she recalled that day:

"I could see by her sad countenance that the new employee was very troubled. Knowing that she was hired as a temp I realized it might be my only opportunity to reach out to her, since she would likely be gone next week. I felt an urgency in my spirit to find out where she stood with the Lord and what brought on such sadness.

"I asked about her family life and she didn't answer right away, except to tell me that she had no husband. After a long pause, she lowered her head and told me softly, 'I did have four children.' I picked up on the word 'did' and wrongly concluded that she had lost custody of her children and was broken up about not being able to care for them.

"She kept her head low and said nothing for a little while. I eventually asked her if her children were in their father's care and she shook her head.

"No,' she said in almost a whisper, 'they're all dead.' They had all died in a fire and she was carrying both grief and tremendous guilt, since the fire had been intentionally set by her feuding ex-boyfriend in a messy love triangle. In addition to the tremendous loss she felt from her children's deaths, her family had completely disowned her, so she now had no one.

"I immediately recalled the high profile story from the newspapers and media months earlier. I also remembered reading that she had collapsed in grief as the caskets bearing her children, aged 4 to 11, were loaded into the hearse. No wonder this woman was so terribly troubled and seemingly without hope! She'd lost her own children, and she'd also lost the family of her youth.

“I was able to pray for her and give her a hug along with the assurance that Jesus still loved her. It was the only time I saw her, as she was gone the next week and I was unable to make contact with her again.”

We live in a world where so many people face various degrees of hopelessness. But today, let's consider a Scripture text that refers to a condition of universal hopelessness.

Without Hope

“Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.”
(Ephesians 2:12)

The Apostle Paul reminded the believers in Ephesus where they had come from spiritually. As we read it, some two thousand years later, it describes where we all came from: outside of a relationship with Christ as Savior and Lord.

One Bible commentator made this observation about this passage: we were characterized spiritually by five “less attributes”—we were Christ-less, country-less, covenant-less, hope-less and God-less! That's where we've all come from.

The phrase “*without God*” translates the Greek word *atheo*, which is the foundation for our English words “atheist” and “atheism.” And this is the only occurrence of that word in the New Testament.

Today, let's just consider two words from this passage: “*without hope.*” That is a most pitiable condition.

Earlier (2:1-3), Paul wrote, “*And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.*”

It's not a pretty picture. It's a terrible diagnosis! It puts me in mind of what we read last Sunday from Paul's Letter to the Romans, how people stumble down into the depths of darkness, because they refuse to acknowledge God in their lives.

Darkest Moments

Job was a man who lived about 4,000 years ago, a contemporary of Abraham. The book bearing his name describes a series of unexpected and horrific tragedies in Job's life, threatening his health and his sanity.

When his friends challenged his integrity and his wife advised him to kill himself, he fell into even deeper despair. Then, there arose in him a despondent and desperate question: "*Where then is my hope—who can see any hope for me?*" (Job 17:15).

Curiously, apart from the Book of Psalms, hope is mentioned more times (16) in the book of Job than any other book of the Bible. Job's real-life experience sets an example for all who face apparently hopeless situations.

Sometimes we may teeter on the brink of hopelessness, but let's resolve not to stay there! Job's developing sense of hope was expressed when he said, "*Though [God] slay me, I will hope in Him*" (Job 13:15).

Perhaps Job's greatest declaration of confidence was this: "*I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!*" (Job 19:25-27).

The final chapter of the book reveals a wondrous resolution to Job's losses, but he made this faith statement *before* he saw that outcome.

Paul taught us that "*everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope*" (Romans 15:4). Job is a powerful example of that endurance, and it was written for your encouragement, so that you might have hope!

The late Bible teacher James Montgomery Boice noted, "The God of the Bible is not weak; He is strong. He is all-mighty. Nothing happens without His permission or apart from His purposes—even evil. Nothing disturbs or puzzles Him. His purposes are always accomplished. Therefore, those who know Him rightly act with boldness, assured that God is with them to accomplish His own desirable purposes in their lives."

Good Reason to Hope

We have good reason to hope in God (even when we cannot rely on our fellow man, and when we cannot overcome our immediate circumstances)!

The terrible diagnosis of human death, captivity, and wrath, that we read of in Ephesians 2 is followed by this glorious prognosis in that same book: *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us... made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Ephesians 2:4-5).* That's an outcome to anticipate!

The Great Physician not only knows our condition in detail, but He also knows its root cause. Therefore, He also has the cure we need!

Just think of the inheritance God has graciously given us because of what Jesus has done for us: Our past is forgiven, our present is abundant life in Christ, and our future is heaven, forever with Him. What could be greater than those blessings? And they are available to everyone, including those whose lives have been wrecked! That is hope!

Paul has written, *“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer” (Romans 12:12).*

Many versions render the first phrase of that verse, *“rejoicing in hope.”* The Amplified Bible says, *“constantly rejoicing in hope [because of our confidence in Christ].”* J.B. Phillips' translation reads, *“Base your happiness on your hope in Christ.”*

Robert Morgan has written, *“When we can't rejoice in circumstances, we can rejoice in the anticipation of what God's going to do with them, in them, through them, despite them, and because of them. On cloudy days the sun still shines as brightly as ever in the center of the solar system; and when we rejoice in hope, we're saying, 'Despite current conditions, the Son (of God) is shining for me as brightly as ever with healing in His rays.'”*

A Certain Hope

Again in Romans we read, *“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).*

A dictionary defines hope as a feeling of expectation, or a desire for a certain thing to happen. Hope is an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life or the world at large. As a verb, its definitions include: *“expect with confidence”* and *“to cherish a desire with anticipation.”* However, in reality, when we speak of hope it is often no more than a wishful thought.

But the word for hope in the Bible carries the sense of an absolute certainty!

It's interesting to me that the word "hope" is not found in either of the traditional accounts of the birth of Christ in Scripture (Matthew and Luke). In fact, it's only found a few times in any of

the Gospels. Why? I think because Old Testament hope was the anticipation of Messiah's First Advent. And once He had come... *"Who hopes for what he already has?"* (Romans 8:24).

Hope In His Name

Once, when Jesus was teaching, He quoted from Isaiah's prophecy concerning Himself and ending with the powerful phrase, *"In His name the nations will put their hope"* (Matthew 12:21).

The fulfillment of this prophecy has already begun! The Great Commission of Christ was to *"go into all the world and preach the Gospel."* The church, made up of redeemed people from every culture and language, surely has many flaws, but thank God for those who have taken this Commission seriously.

Today, all around the globe, in virtually every nation, men and women are placing their hope in Christ. There is not a single geopolitical nation where Christ does not have a representative.

So, let's all agree to spread the Good News of the Savior who loved us and gave Himself for us. Let's take Him (or send Him) to a broken, hurting world and tell them of this hope!

There is no life so broken that God's healing grace can't restore it. What seems impossible to us is possible with God!

A Thrill of Hope

Do you remember this line from a well-known Christmas hymn, "A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices"? Do you know the name of the hymn? That's right, "O Holy Night."

*A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn*

*Fall on your knees, oh, hear the angel's voices
O night divine, O night when Christ was born*

Jesus Christ brings that thrill of hope to every spiritually hungry heart. For many, it is yet a longing, but for every child of God it has already become a reality.

I pray that you may truly rejoice in this hope, which began to be released the moment that Jesus was born. May His hope abound in us and be broadcast through us to the people in our world. That will make it Christmastime every month of the year!

Have you put your hope in Christ?

Have you trusted Jesus to bring you into fellowship with God the Father?

Have you put your life in His hands?

Do you call Him Savior and Lord?

If not, begin right now. Talk with Him. Tell Him what you want to do. And listen, deep in your heart, for His answer.