



Hope

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*This is a message to the sinners like me:
Those lost within whose struggles we do not see;
Those who were pushed so far away;
Those who can't seem to find a reason to stay;
Those who can't look past willful sins and mistakes;
Those who like what the world offers and makes.*

*The cares and the stress of this life weigh us down
It's hard to imagine a time worry will not abound
We stumble and fall; feel hurt and dismay
At the troubles and trials that come our way.
When hope seems lost and we know not what to do
We must remember our Creator; that His promises hold true.*

*Our God, He is gracious, loving, and kind
Willing to work with us and open our minds
So that we may envision the hope set before us:
Of a perfect land and loved ones risen from dust;
Of a time when heartache and grief are no more;
Of God's reverent glory that will expand across shores.*

*Now hope that is seen is not hope, not really
So we must remember that it won't always be easy
That hard times will come, we will feel lost and alone*

*But the struggle is never one that we face on our own.
God has made us a family, one to help and to guide,
To work through things together, side by side.*

*He loves with a love that knows no bounds
A love that builds up and does not tear down
A love that protects and a love that guides
A love that strengthens and always provides.
Our hope lies in Him; He is always near
And those who feel lost, by Him are held most dear.*

I wrote this poem to reflect how I felt at a time when I was incredibly lost. As one who has never had a good sense of direction in the literal sense, I have a lot of experience making wrong turns and then trying to figure out how to proceed in the right direction. I make a few more incorrect turns, acknowledge I don't know where I'm going, take a step back and gather my bearings. Try for the correct direction. Make it a decent ways in the right direction and then somehow end up losing my place and getting lost again.

We are so often taught that life is a combination of highs and lows. And it is. But what people tend not to mention is the messiness of the process as we work through the lows. The periods of time when you feel as if you have finally made it out, that you are no longer lost and have a good sense of where you are headed, and then the next day you've hit rock bottom again. And the waves knock into you and take you down again and again while you struggle to pull yourself out. And then just when you think you've made it through, the biggest one comes to knock you back down.

Enduring the Lows

I went from having an eager, unfaltering faith in God to questioning all that was before me. But everyone around me (my family, my friends, my ecclesia) had already seen that unfaltering faith, seen that dedication. So I couldn't let them know, couldn't let them see that someone who had once been so strong was now struggling. I didn't want to let anybody down.

There were expectations that I had to uphold and live up to. And they crippled me. I became lost within the ecclesia; and I know many others have been there as well. Some might even be in this position now.

What this looked like for me was taking on as many roles and responsibilities as I could, attending meeting and weekly Bible studies. And hating it as I went along. Hating that I was pretending like I was okay when I wasn't. Hating that I had to put up a facade with those I called brothers and sisters. Hating that I was adopting the mindset of the prodigal's brother: I have always served you, Father. Why have you not rewarded me?

I think it is important that we don't deceive ourselves by thinking that as long as we get back into a routine or start a million new spiritual things in the hopes of forming a new routine then at some point things will eventually become fine again. Because throwing ourselves into work doesn't always allow for the personal growth that's necessary. Ecclesiastes is often quoted:

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.*

What gain have the workers from their toil? (Eccl 3:1-9)

Meaningful work can become meaningless if it is not gone about correctly. When we are going through low points in our lives, it's important to keep this in mind and be open to the fact that it may take a combination of different things — some familiar and some unfamiliar — to help us through.

Finding Hope

When I was feeling lost and alone, at the most unexpected time, in the most unexpected place, God connected me with a handful of fellow believers who helped me see things differently. These brothers and sisters listened to me describe my struggles and voiced their own. We gave

each other a platform where we didn't have to pretend. And I can't speak for anybody else, but for me, it made all the difference. Sometimes our conversations were made with a Bible in hand and other times they weren't. On some occasions we prayed with and for each other — taking part in prayer circles where we opened ourselves up to each other and to God. And the majority of these conversations and prayers took place virtually. And while praying together virtually has its difficulties, it is certainly not impossible and is something I would encourage others to do. That type of openness between believers bridges the gap of physical distance and brings us closer together.

It was through these experiences during a time of difficulty and loss that I learned that not only are we never alone, but that confessing your struggles, shortcomings, and hurt to your brothers and sisters (as James tells us to do in James 5:16) is a pivotal part of the healing and growing process. It teaches us how to communicate with one another. It teaches us empathy. It teaches us that nothing is ever as black and white as we may believe. It teaches us how to pray for each other. It was through this that I was reminded that God is always working in our lives even when we feel so far removed from Him.

In realizing that we do not face these things alone, that our brothers and sisters are meant to be there to encourage us and to pray for us just as we are meant to do for them, that is where I once again found my hope.

Scripture records where we might find our hope:

- The LORD (Ps 31:24; 43:5; and many more)
- The mercy of God (Ps 33:18; 147:11; and many more)
- The word of God (Ps 119:81, 114; and many more)
- Jesus Christ (1Thess 1:3)

This certainly doesn't mean that we can't find hope anywhere besides these four things. It simply means that our hope will most likely stem from at least one of these four. Scripture gives us an even longer list of what we can hope for:

- Gospel (Col 1:23)
- Our brothers and sisters to be present with us at Christ's return (1Thess 2:19)
- Resurrection (1Thess 4:13)
- Jesus Christ (1Tim 1:1)
- Eternal life (Titus 1:2)

- Salvation (1Thess 5:8)
- The appearing of the glory of God and Christ (Titus 2:13)
- God’s mercy (Ps 33:18)
- Word of God (Ps 119:81)
- Redemption (Ps 130:7)
- The LORD as the hope of Israel (Joel 3:16) — their deliverance
- Promised land (Acts 26:6-7)
- Glory of God (Romans 5:2)
- Greater calling that He has given us (Eph 1:18)

After reading about so many things that God gives us to hope for, I was curious to hear what other people hoped for. I asked family and friends, brothers and sisters, and a few strangers who I encountered who were willing to share, “What do you hope for?”

I received answers like: hope for the healing of friends and good health for family; justice for the poor; an end to the suffering that humanity brings upon itself; to find a passion and love for God; and hope for Christ’s return to set the world right.

And while sharing what each of us hopes for is certainly good, I think something that may be a bit more beneficial is to hear how hope is strengthened. And so as a follow-up question I asked, “What strengthens your hope?”

Responses included: hope is strengthened through personal prayer and prayer with others; through reflecting on what God has given us, and understanding that God wants to be in a relationship with us; through understanding the character, righteousness, and mercy of God; through His creation; and through reading the Bible.

And there are so many more. So many more things that people hope for. So many things that can strengthen our hope. And our God works in mysterious ways, and often reveals hope in unlikely times and places. We see this throughout our own lives. And throughout Scripture as well.

Inspiration from Rahab’s story

I always find great strength in looking to some of the Biblical examples that we often read about. One example of someone who displayed such incredible hope is Rahab — a Gentile who took advantage of the little kindnesses offered to her at a time when she knew there was no

longer any hope for the city she lived in. The inhabitants of Jericho cast their hope on their strong walls and defenses — the things which they could see and touch and believed would hold fast; meanwhile Rahab cast her hope on a God she had only heard stories about. That’s amazing! It can be very difficult for me to focus my hope on the unseen and intangible, even though that is what we are told to do in Romans 8:24. But Rahab did just that. Her story and the events surrounding it are a beautiful example of the works God is constantly doing in order to grow our hope in Him.

Just taking into consideration the name of the camp from which Joshua sent the two spies to explore Jericho gives us a look into God’s thoughtful work. The Israelites were encamped at Shittim. The word “Shittim” means “the acacia trees”, a land of bush-like trees composed of scrawny, thorny, and gnarled trunks and branches. The same wood used to build almost everything in and around the tabernacle, the dwelling place of God. We are reminded by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:16 that we ourselves are God’s temple, bodies which are meant to manifest God’s glory. How seemingly odd that God would want the Israelites to fashion His dwelling place out of wood that was so difficult to work with. And yet, in this we see a beautiful parallel with us.

He is willing to work with us despite our flaws, shortcomings, and difficult nature. Why? Referring to the tabernacle, God says,

There I will meet with the people of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory. (Ex 29:43)

He works with our sharp edges, our thorns, our imperfect characteristics — in order for His glory to shine through. Though we may be hard to work with, though we may intentionally sin and hold the belief that we are beyond forgiveness, He still chooses to craft us into something that can be used for His glory. There is hope to be found in our imperfections because God sanctifies us by His glory.

We all know the story of Rahab and the faith she had that saved her family. I would like to take a look at two parts of her story that tend to be overlooked.

The first has to do with how she hid the spies.

She had brought them up to the roof and hid them with the stalks of flax that she had laid in order on the roof. (Josh 2:6)

In Biblical times, flax was used to make linen and most clothing was made from either linen or wool. Flax and wool to cover nakedness. God says as much in Hosea in reference to the people of Israel:

and I will take away my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness. (Hos 2:9)

Of course, nakedness is often used to refer to the sinful flesh that only God can provide a covering for. So it is interesting that Rahab has flax but no wool. So why might this be the case? In Isaiah we read,

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (Is 1:18)

Such wool is representative of the Lamb that was slain in order to wash away our scarlet sins. We see this beautiful foreshadowing in Rahab's story of the universal forgiveness of sins that Christ provided through his sacrifice.

The second thing I would like to note is what the spies gave to Rahab. Once Rahab had let the spies down through the window, they presented her with a scarlet cord for her to tie in her window when the Israelites had come into the land.

Behold, when we come into the land, thou shalt bind this line of scarlet thread in the window which thou didst let us down by... (Josh 2:18 KJV)

The word for "line" is the Hebrew word *tiqva*, which means hope. The two Israelite spies gave Rahab a hope of scarlet that would save her and her family. They provided her with something only God could give – forgiveness and salvation through the death of His Lamb. Hundreds of years before that sacrifice even took place!

Many of the things we are to hope for can be found in Rahab's story: God shaping us and working with us (which reflects mercy, grace, and the calling we are given); salvation and redemption; the hope of a promised land; and the hope in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice.

Remaining Open to Hope

Hope can be found in the most unlikely places. One of the most amazing things about Scripture is that the hope of what Jesus would one day do is constantly foreshadowed. These two little pieces of Rahab's story are just a small taste of all of the types and symbols of Christ that we see throughout Scripture. The writer of the Hebrews writes that,

*a better hope [has been] introduced, (Jesus Christ), through which we draw near to God
(Heb 7:19)*

So many died in the hopes that their Messiah and Savior would one day come. They had no tangible proof of him. And they went through hard times too. And now, even though we have proof in the form of the written word of God that Jesus is our savior and our king, I still find myself losing hope at times.

But if we keep our eyes and minds open to the fact that God is working in our lives, then we can always find hope. In people, in prayer, in little things and big things, in highs and in lows. The good times are made so much better because of the heartache we experience during the bad times. And that's okay because for everything there is a season. And regardless of the season, may you always look for the hidden hope that God is providing.