

When Hope Disappoints by Pastor Marty

When I went to college, I became friends with another student named Hope. During that time and afterward, we attended the same church for several years. This meant that, as can be imagined, there were an ongoing and unending number of jokes, puns, and comments related to her name: when she was leaving, we were all left “hopeless”; when she finished eating, things were clearly “hopeful”; and if she was late, we all had to deal with “hope deferred.” The dialogue was even more involved when her friend Ruth was around. Not having a name that easily lends itself to puns or other literary devices, I cannot guess how often she hears similar sentiments or to what extent she finds them to be annoying or tedious. My closest experience with that is someone I met in graduate school who has one primary joke, which he simply revises for all occasions; it also involves a play-on-words. (To be honest, he has made other jokes in my presence, but they comprise such an exceedingly small percentage related to his primary joke that they are hardly worth counting). When this joke raises its head, all who know him respond with eye-rolls and groans, sometimes silently, sometimes audibly. The reason puns and similar jokes affect us, either to laughter and respect on the one hand or groaning and disdain on the other, is that as human beings, we are inherently inclined toward using language, with all of its symbolism and nuances of meaning, for processing our personal experiences and the events of life.

Human beings are made to use language and symbolism to process our life experiences.

In light of the political atmosphere in our country, I think it important to discuss our use of one word in particular: hope. This is a word that has extremely different definitions and nuanced meanings depending upon the context in which it is found. When we look at the Old and New Testaments, we find a variation in the way the word is used, but neither is as different as our common usage. Today, to hope for something does not differ much from the idea of wishing for it. We use “wish” in the context of something that we may fantasize about as being optimal, and we use “hope” in only a slightly more realistic way. For example, we might find ourselves saying “I wish!” if someone comments on what it might be like to live in a wealthy family, or to find a lamp with a genie to grant us three wishes. Our statement indicates we do not think it likely at all that such a thing will come to pass, or it indicates that which is beyond possibility. Regrettably, our use of the word “hope” is often not much different, for it often indicates something closer to wishing than expecting. We only have to hear people talking about hoping to win the lottery to realize how true this actually is. We probably use “hope” in nearly as many ways as we do “love” in our conversations, and the confusion of meaning does affect our hearts.

Our careless use of language has a direct and ongoing effect on our minds and hearts.

In the Old Testament, we find that hope is much closer to our concept of expectation—of some desire that we have every reason to believe will come to pass. Solomon tells us that “hope deferred makes the heart sick, but desire fulfilled is a tree of life” (Proverbs 13:12). In this context, hope is much more than a wishful fantasy of winning the lottery; it is something we not only strongly desire but also have a reasonable expectation it will come to pass. This is why the wise Preacher tells us that a delay in its fulfillment leads to depression, grief, despair, or other issues of the heart. Hope was not a certainty, but it was much more realistic than finding a magic lamp! The clearest examples are found with those women who experienced barrenness but then eventually had children, such as Sarah, Hannah, or the widow who provided for the prophet. They grieved deeply over their inability to have children because they had every reason to believe they should be able to become pregnant; it was a natural part of life.

We see them respond with great joy and gratitude when their desire finally manifested. In the context of how hope was understood in the Hebrew mindset, it was an expectation that connected to the core of a person's faith and life, and it led to great sorrow when it was unfulfilled; they felt truly hopeless.

In the Old Testament, hope was connected to the core of a person's faith and identity.

When we read about hope in the New Testament, we see it often described in terms that are as far beyond the Hebrew concept of hope as hope is beyond our concept of a wish. Hope is repeatedly described as being absolutely certain and steadfast because it is founded in the ultimate core aspects of our faith and identity as sons and daughters of God. This is the case because God has guaranteed to us that all our hopes will be fulfilled. How can this be the case? It is because every *true* hope—every hope that is based on real things and not illusory counterfeits—is promised by Him who cannot lie. For example, if we think about every good desire we might have, we can probably imagine what it would be like to have it. If Jesus Himself appeared to us and told us that we can have all of it if we simply took the next week and devoted ourselves to fasting, it would be a no-brainer. For some, fasting brings such a positive result that it is already a regular part of their spiritual life, so they would hardly notice it; for others, fasting is so unpleasant that they dread the idea, so it would be a week of misery. No matter how miserable we might feel about fasting, however, we would suffer through a week of being hungry and miserable if we knew with an absolute certainty that we would gain that life we desire. In terms of eternity with God in paradise, we are separated from all our hopes, dreams, and desires by moments.

In terms of ultimate reality, we are only separated from our hopes by mere moments.

Viewing our life in the context of eternity empowers us to recognize how any delay in receiving what we desire is extremely temporary. However, God does not leave us simply to flounder through this life without seeing hope fulfilled. Faith itself is defined as a sure expectation and absolute certainty of what we hope for (Hebrews 11), and Jesus makes it clear that faith in this life includes believing that the Kingdom of God has already come—at least in part. When the disciples failed to cast out a demon from the epileptic, Jesus rebuked them for their lack of faith; faith involves belief that includes changes in this life as well as the life to come. We run into problems when we lose sight of either aspect of our hope: if we focus only on this life, we are “to be pitied more than all men”; if we focus only on the next life, we are “lacking faith” to complete the works He called us to do. It is necessary for us to maintain a hope that sees eternity breaking into the present. In order to do this, we have to develop clarity in our own hearts about those things we desire in this life and how they relate to their fulfillment in the next.

We despair if we confuse temporal desires and eternal hopes as if they are the same.

This principle is extremely important in today's political atmosphere because we are living in a culture that is polarized and stimulated more than ever. Social media and instant communication has enabled people to attack others while remaining blind to the consequences of how it affects individual lives. The civil war itself primarily focused on the single issue of slavery; today, we have multiple issues that potentially can be just as divisive or destructive. When I was old enough to first vote, things were not like they are today. Although there were some radicalized extremists who viewed the other party as inherently evil and every election as salvation or destruction, this was not how the vast majority of people perceived it. Some would be unhappy, but it was not so extreme that they believed it was close to the end of the world. Today, our country is so polarized into seeing things black and white that there are no options that will not result in at least a third of our country feeling like Armageddon has begun.

Every available option will result in a third of our country believing the end has come.

As disciples of Christ, we are required to accept that morality is not relative. Before God gave us His Word, “everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” Considering how easily human beings can yield to deception, it is not surprising that this led to cultures so steeped in sin that they were beyond redemption. We now understand that there are absolutes: good and evil, right and wrong, holy and profane. However, we live in a culture today that is committed to the same relativism that resulted in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon, Babylon and Rome. Whether or not we like many of the things being taught in our schools, churches, and media is significantly less important than what God thinks about them. If He does not like something, we cannot support it without resisting and grieving His Spirit. This is serious enough that we are required to make a conscious decision to not base our approval or disapproval on how we feel about something, what we think about something, or even what we believe about something; instead, we must desire the truth more than we desire being right.

It is absolutely necessary that we desire truth more than we desire to be proven right.

As discussed in prior newsletters, the enemy of our souls has perfected his skills over millennia. If he succeeded in leading a third of the angels into rebelling against God, he certainly can make almost any sin look not only harmless but also beneficial. Hollywood did not invent the idea of contextualizing sinful lifestyles so they appear noble, tragic, sympathetic, or desirable; it began a long, long time ago in Heaven when angels forsook their proper abode. The writer of Hebrews advises us that those who are mature in Christ are able to train their senses to discern good and evil. This means that we can learn to discern spiritual realities with our physical eyes, ears, hands, etc. However, we need to recognize that if this is true in the positive, it is also true in the negative: if we yield our discernment to our feelings and choose to believe something is true because we feel it should be true or want it to be true, we actually train ourselves to equate truth with feelings. In other words, we begin developing self-deception as a habit—and bad habits are much easier to perfect than good ones. Like any vice, one step in the wrong direction makes the next step a little bit easier until we do not even remember leaving the path. In the Old Testament, Saul began by improperly offering a sacrifice to God and ended by slaughtering priests and consulting a witch; Solomon began by marrying Pharaoh’s daughter and ended by worshipping the idol-god Molech. It is a very serious thing indeed to decide we know better than what God has told us.

It is a very serious thing indeed to decide that we know better than what God has said.

Until we experience a great change in our country, there is no avoiding the reality that changes in laws and policies will result in large numbers of people feeling significant anger, depression, or fear on a constant basis. A good portion of this is due to the dishonesty and corruption of those who desire to be in control; however, it starts not with them but with each of us. It might be easier if we claim that there are no insignificant issues, but this is simply not true: some issues absolutely come down to the choice between good and evil while others are entirely operational and preferential. It requires greater responsibility to recognize that we have to carefully evaluate which choices cannot be ignored without rejecting the truth that God has spoken to us. More than anything else, we have to consider how these choices play out in the long term instead of just in our immediate circumstances. Nevertheless, we still have to deal with situations that upset us. When those things happen, it is vitally important for us to remind ourselves that “hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts.” When hope seems deferred, we need to remember this is only a brief moment of fasting compared to an eternity of perfection. “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”