

Hope and Our Present Suffering

1 Thessalonians 3:2-4

October 22, 2023

We are talking about the theme of hope that appears in First Thessalonians. Last week David unpacked the nature of the hope we have. This week we will narrow the focus and look at how this hope gives us endurance and strength to face our current struggles.

Statistically speaking, most people live with the hope that a better day is coming. Yes, there are some terrible things going on right now, but things are going to get better. This hope is essential. If it is lost, we slip quickly into despair.

I heard the struggle in the voice of an Israeli woman who was cleaning up the aftermath from the October 7 attack. She said, "I used to think that things were improving and that humanity was heading toward a better day. I can't think that anymore and I don't know what I am going to do."

We all need hope that tomorrow will be a better day and so most people place their hope in something. It may be societal improvement, better laws, scientific and medical breakthroughs or any of a host of other options.

The question is not, do we have hope. The better question is, in what have we placed our hope?

The apostle Peter praises God for giving us a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. There is something about the hope Jesus brings that is living, it is not dependent on something else, it endures, it cannot be stopped, it will prevail.

This does not discount the benefits of societal improvements, political strategies and scientific and medical breakthroughs. These have all brought beneficial change over the years. The problem is that none of these can bring a full solution to the suffering and injustice we see in this world.

The hope that God gives us in Christ is not wishful thinking. It is a certainty and something that is qualitatively different than anything any human can offer.¹

Romans 15 refers to God as the God of hope who fills us with all joy and peace as we trust in him so that we might overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christian hope comes from God, is sustained by His Spirit and fills us with joy and peace. It is a qualitative difference.

There are two primary parts of the hope we have. There is the return of Christ and our heavenly inheritance. Time does not allow us to unpack what these two statements contain. In short, it is the promise of enjoying God's direct presence, with each other, in His new creation, forever.

It will be a day when the lion lays down with the lamb. A day when humanity and all of creation are restored and work in concert to give God all glory. A day when God Himself will live with His people, when the old order of death, weeping and pain passes away as all things are made new. It is the promise of receiving from God all that He said would be ours in Christ.

But this is not something we just sit around and wait for. Because God's kingdom is already present but not yet fully complete, our lives are expected to reflect the truth of what is currently present and one day revealed in full.

When circumstances become challenging it is easy to start drifting from the hope we have received (Heb 2:1). Paul knew this and so he sent Timothy to them for a very specific purpose. Look at 1 Thessalonians 3:2-4 (NLT).

We sent him [that is, Timothy] to strengthen you, to encourage you in your faith,³ and to keep you from being shaken by the troubles you were going through. But you know that we are destined for such troubles.⁴ Even while we were with you, we warned you that troubles would soon come—and they did, as you well know.

These new disciples were experiencing some troubles. The word Paul used here includes a wide variety of possibilities. I think he had in mind the "trials of various kinds" that James and Peter wrote about.ⁱⁱ

It helps me to place all these options into one of two categories. There are the troubles handed to us by others who oppose the message we carry. This would also be called persecution, something that has yet to fully break out in our country.

At the same time, there are also the troubles come to us through the circumstances around us. This is the suffering found in a fallen world. Accidents happen. Relationships go sour. Disease strikes. Nature gets violent. We are most familiar with this kind of trouble.

While the context of the letter implies Paul primarily had persecution in mind, the fact remains that whether troubles come from persecution or circumstances, we need to be strengthened in faith if we are to hold fast to the living hope we have received.

We need to be strengthened in our faith. While persecution has not yet been a big factor in our experience, it doesn't mean it won't be. Jesus and Paul told us to expect it, and there is a reason why we should.

Ours is a divided world and while there are countless examples of fragmented groups, we can say that this world is divided into only two kingdoms. Scripture calls one the kingdom of light and the other the dominion of darkness (Col 1:12-14).

Our culture is changing so rapidly that I could see a day when anyone holding to a moral standard other than the one espoused by the culture could be considered offensive

and hateful, much like the first century when Christians were thought of as bad citizens because they would not worship Caesar or honor their pantheon of gods.

Yet for us, the testimony of Scripture is clear. Jesus told the pharisees and the crowds, "You are from below; I am from above. You belong to this world; I do not. [there is the two kingdom theme again] That is why I said that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I AM who I claim to be, you will die in your sins" (John 8:23). He told Nicodemus that He came from heaven to tell us heavenly things (John 3:12-15). The Father spoke from the cloud to say, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him" (Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:35). And when Jesus asked the disciples if they were going to walk away like everyone else, Peter replied, "Where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69).

Jesus was declared with power to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead and it is His resurrection from the dead that gives us new birth into this living hope we speak of today.ⁱⁱⁱ This living hope is the only hope that will bring about the change most people long to see.

While we have yet to truly experience persecution, it is possible that in our current generation the church will be pushed out of its safe neutrality. Gordon Fee wrote that the church's prolonged comfort in society has led "to the overlay of a less than radical Christian worldview [which] allows God's people to "coast" rather than to experience the kind of expected discipleship Paul speaks of here" [to the Thessalonians].^{iv}

Knowing the certainty of what has been promised to us gives us the strength to do what Jesus said to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. It helps make it possible for us to do what Paul told Timothy, "the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful."²⁵ Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth...." (Mt 5:43-44; 2 Tim 2:24-26).

Hope plays a key role in how we respond to the troubles that come from opposition. It also plays a key role in how we respond to the troubles that hit us through our circumstances.

At the start of his letter Paul spoke of their endurance which is inspired by hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. Tony Ragheb will be the first to tell you that the word Paul used for endurance here is the word *hupomone*, which has to do with patient endurance in the face of trial, difficulty or persecution.

This is the patience Jesus expressed with those who arrested and crucified Him and it is the patience we are to express as we suffer through the struggles from opposition and this fallen world. *Hupomone* has a special relationship with hope.

Our fallen world is perfectly tuned to test this kind of patience every day.

In our country, a tragedy strikes. A chronic disease embeds itself in your body. The stroke steals your ability. The seizures take away your freedom. Someone's choices rob you of your security or of one you love. It is a clear hope in Christ that will grow the patience to persevere in faith.

In other countries, a band of thugs attack your congregation while you are at worship, killing your loved ones and burning down your meeting house. The government has no safety net for you or your family—no unemployment payments, no food stamps. Your daughters are kidnapped, your children are hungry. Will you continue to believe?

Paul uses *hupomone* again in Romans 12:12. "Be joyful in hope. Patient in affliction. Faithful in prayer."

This word's special relationship with hope is what allows us to patiently endure with expectation. We know that God will bring a new day of justice and right relationships tomorrow. It feels like it will take a thousand years, but in light of eternity, it really is just tomorrow.

As followers of the Christ, our *ultimate* hope is not fixed on a politician or breakthrough or organization or any other human-made institution solving our problem for us. It is fixed on Jesus, the author of our faith and source of our living hope. And it is fixed on Him for a good reason.

Yes, Jesus is God who came to us in human flesh and, yes, Jesus' resurrection does validate as true all He said, did and promised, but there is something deeper and more personal that I want to mention.

Jesus knows what we are going through. He knows we are weak, that we are made of dust, He knows what is in our hearts,^v and He has deep compassion for us.

While the circumstances may not be exactly the same, as a human being He's been where you are. Jesus understands what you are going through and wants to meet you in the middle of the storm and the mess.

When his father, Joseph, died, Jesus likely had to take on the responsibility of providing for his family. He's lost a family member to death. He's cared for a family and knows what it is like to make ends meet on a meager income.

To be born as a human required Him to give up His divine privileges (read Philippians 2:1-11). What He gave up means that He knows what loss is like. He knows what it is like to have Parkinsons, Alzheimer's or other degenerative diseases. I would go so far as to say that Jesus knows what it is like to live with an intellectual or developmental disability.

When you think about the last week of His earthly ministry you clearly see the relational pain. He experienced what it is like to be betrayed by a trusted friend, abandoned by all friends, rejected by the crowd, disrespected by leaders, accused of heinous wrongdoing

and considered an abject failure as he entered the worst possible public humiliation. Are you in a relational storm? Is your reputation on the line? Jesus knows what that's like.

He knows about physical pain. The word *excruciate* literally means, "out of the cross."

He knows emotional pain. His tears at Lazarus' tomb and over Jerusalem are worthy of our meditation.

He knows what it is like to receive a terminal diagnosis. Like someone with a terrible disease, He knew he would die before his friends and had to live with this knowledge.

Hebrews 5:7 tells us that Jesus often prayed with "loud cries and tears." When I add this detail to the story of Christ praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, I think it tells us that He understands our mental anguish too.

If you think I am taking this too far, I respect that and humbly encourage you to give this some more thought. Jesus is our living hope. As the writer of Hebrews says, He is our great high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because He has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin (Heb 4:15).

He was tempted *in every way*. Was He tempted to drift from the hope? Was He tempted to think that His Father would leave Him? Was He tempted to....? Tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.

He knows what you are going through. He knows you are weak and made of dust. He knows what is in your heart and He loves you anyway. He is with you always and will not let you go.

Our ultimate hope is in the certainty that one day Jesus will come and do what no one else can do. He will make all things new and right. He will restore the creation that is broken. He will usher in that new day.

Until then, we wait in the pain. You and I know what it is like. We have carried relational, physical, mental, financial and other trials for a very long time. We have all asked the questions that come from living in a broken, fallen world.

Most of you know our story. It was 30 years ago that a child who was missing part of his fifth chromosome was born into my family. I can't count the number of hard questions I've asked the Lord over the years or the prayers we offered with loud cries and tears. But I can tell you that this ongoing challenge has deepened my faith, has solidified the need for and certainty of my hope and has changed me from the inside out.

I can also tell you that the questions haven't stopped. And the situation has not gotten easier. If anything, it has gotten harder. But you know what I am talking about. Your situation is not exactly like mine, but your path is. Your trial remains, it generates questions, and it doesn't get any easier.

The trials we all face require us to die in little ways. To die to the dream, to die to the expectation, to die to ourselves and what we want as we learn to surrender, again, to the Lord and His love.

We must experience death before we can experience resurrection and it is these little deaths that God uses to bring new life. One incremental step at a time we begin to experience the front edge of the truth and promise God has given to us. As Paul said in 1:3, it is hope that leads us to respond with endurance.

Scripture says that our current trials and suffering will fade into the background when we compare them to what God has promised us. For this reason, we are instructed to set our hearts and minds on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. For we have died, and our true life is currently hidden with Christ in God.

Our true life is now hidden with Christ in God. It is there. It exists. But it is not yet fully seen. Right now that life is only experienced in incremental steps. But when Christ, who is our life, appears, we also will appear with Him in glory. On that day, the life that was promised will be fully revealed for all to see and for us to fully experience.

So, what is this Christian hope? It begins with God's grace for it is only by grace that we have been saved through faith. Once we've responded to God's grace in faith, we find that Christian Hope is:

- alive, it grows in us as our faith deepens. Peter called it a living hope that flows out of Christ's resurrection. It is not dependent on something else, it endures, it cannot be stopped, it will prevail.
- anchored in the steadfast love of the Lord of creation. This is about God's promise but we know God will keep His promise because of His love for us. He won't change His mind. He will fulfill what He promised and what He promised is not just for us. It is for all creation.

From the earliest days of the Church, our hope in Christ has been symbolized by an anchor. Think about an anchored boat. Like a boat held in place by an anchor, hope grabs and holds fast to something that truly exists but is currently out of sight. As one puritan put it: "The cable of faith casts out the anchor of hope and lays hold of the steadfast rock of God's promises."

- built on faith, the assurance of things hoped for, and the certainty of things not seen.
- exercised in waiting, if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.
- expressed in action, as we express the truth of the coming day by living out the reality of that coming day, today.

The hope that flows from faith is what opens the way for us to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is what helps us naturally bless those who persecute, cheat or berate us. It is

even part of how we can experience a growing freedom from anger or envy or discontentedness or humiliation or the feeling of condemnation.

The hope that flows from faith reveals what is really going on as two kingdoms collide and as creation groans waiting for the day when Christ returns and it is liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:18-25).

This is the hope that sustains us through the trials and persecutions of this world today and gives us the endurance and strength to persevere in faith until tomorrow.

Prayer

You tell us that we have been transferred out of the dominion of darkness and into the kingdom of light. You have adopted us into your family and promised an inheritance that is beyond our ability to fully understand.

Lord, teach us what it means to be a citizen of heaven, yet living in this country, what it means to be in the world but not of the world, living in the world but not setting our hopes here.

We live here. We love here. We seek your peace while we are here. But help us hold nothing as of value here. May the words of Psalm 73 become true for each of us.

Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth.

Lord, we need you. Every hour, every day. Our flesh and our heart may fail us, but you are the strength of our hearts and our portion forever. Amen

ⁱ It is interesting to note that in Paul's day this idea of hope in a future event was not something many held. The word "hope" is not often used in extra-biblical writings. When it does appear it speaks of something illusory and fictional—wishful thinking.

ⁱⁱ See James 1:2 and 1 Peter 1:6

ⁱⁱⁱ Rom 1:4; 1 Peter 1:3

^{iv} Fee, G. D. (2009). [*The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*](#) (p. 119). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

^v Psalm 103:13-14; John 2:24-25