

Originally published in *The Plain Truth*, September-October 2002

The Power of Hope

By Stephen Lim

Faculty Member, [Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, www.agts.edu](http://www.agts.edu)

If Cinderella had remained an abused stepchild, would you still like the story? Could the *Star Wars* trilogy have been so popular, if the evil Empire had won? Of course, Cinderella married the prince, and Luke Skywalker and the good guys triumphed. We like happy endings to our stories because we want life to be that way.

The anticipation of positive outcomes can overcome anxiety, discouragement, crises and even drudgery. Without hope, the human spirit shrivels. When cynicism, defeat despair stain our lives, they hardly seem worth living. Theologian Emil Bruner observed, “What oxygen is to the lungs, hope is to the spirit.” The quality of our hope determines the quality of our lives.

The Basis of Our Hope

On what do we base our hope? First, many people place blind hope in erroneous beliefs. For billions, for example, communism proved a vain hope. Second, others hope in human means, but these remain uncertain. We hope that our employer will treat us fairly, but this may not happen. Nor can we guarantee that our investments will continue to grow. Third, some hope in the assets that they have accumulated—such as degrees, positions and wealth. With these, however, the best we can hope for is security and partial satisfaction, while true fulfillment eludes us.

In contrast to these inadequate sources of hope, the Bible offers *living hope* (1 Peter 1:3-4). Christian hope is strong and vibrant because it rests on the reality of God's character—his love, power and faithfulness—and his promises. Because he is in control of our lives and the future, we have assurance that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him”(Romans 8:28).

The Power of Christian Hope

God created us to enjoy his love, and to respond to him in faith and love. He also calls us to love and serve others. Hope forms the environment in which we fulfill these purposes. It has the power to lift our spirits and empower our lives in eight ways.

Hope Sustains. Without hope, problems and crises defeat us. My wife and I received devastating news on our younger daughter's first birthday. Medical tests revealed that she had a genetic blood disorder which prevented her body from producing enough red blood cells. Even with treatment, this could affect mental and physical development and shorten her life. She would need monthly transfusions and medications slowly pumped into her daily for the rest of her life. For weeks we despaired.

But certain biblical truths birthed hope, which gradually restored and sustained our spirits. The story of Joseph encapsules these:

- First, God *delivered him through* years of hardship by providing strength and grace.
- Second, in his own time, God *delivered him out of* his predicament.
- Finally, Joseph recognized that God used his trials and suffering to *accomplish his purposes*. "You intended to harm me," he said to his brothers, "but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). What God did for Joseph, we believed he could do for us.

Hope Encourages. Moral chaos, broken relationships and an epidemic of mental health problems generate legitimate concern about our children's future. We may also worry about the status of our jobs, the adequacy of our retirement funds or the safety of our neighborhoods. Whatever situations we will encounter, God promises to provide. "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness," Jesus said, "and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). Consequently, we do not have to "worry about tomorrow" (Matthew 6:34). God's grace is always sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Hope Offers a New Beginning. "I violated a trust and hurt those I love."

"I've broken God's law."

"What a mess I've made of my life!"

The sense of moral and spiritual failure spawns guilt and remorse. God offers the hope of forgiveness and a new beginning. "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation," the apostle Paul declares. "The old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Televangelist Jim Bakker indulged in a lavish lifestyle and had an affair with an employee. For overbooking time shares for the living units at his Heritage USA theme park, he was convicted of fraud and sent to prison. A storm of publicity splattered his disgrace upon the cause of Christ throughout the nation. Yet Bakker experienced God's forgiveness. Released from prison after four years, he began a new life by humbly serving the poor and needy in Los Angeles.

Hope Stimulates Healing. Growing up in an imperfect world, every person develops emotional cracks in their lives. With little hope of improvement, we resign ourselves to living with the pain of our brokenness. The staff at the Menninger Clinic state that the single most important ingredient in the healing of mental disorders is hope—the attitude that you don't have to be what you've been.¹ Christian hope rests in the confidence that God desires to heal our brokenness and restore us to wholeness. Jesus, the Bible tells us, "healed those who needed healing" (Luke 9:11).

Hope Claims Ultimate Victory. A troubled world creates despair. Many endure prejudice and injustice, while others suffer from want. Still others struggle to survive tyranny and war. Even those who have been spared from harsh injustice and suffering are not immune from grief. The

failure to receive a deserved promotion, the estrangement of a friend or the death of a loved one remind us that we, too, are part of a fallen creation.

Christian hope sees a day when this painful world will be no more, and God will create a new heaven and a new earth where justice, peace, abundance and love will prevail. "Our present sufferings," writes Paul, "are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

Many early Christians were enslaved and sent deep into mines in North Africa. Chained together, they were forced to live and dig for ore—hunched in semi-darkness—never again to see the light of day. Many years later explorers found carved on the walls of these mines the words, "Viva, Viva, viva"—or "Life!" Without hope in this world, these believers rejoiced in God's presence and the hope of a better life in the world to come.

Hope Energizes. God wants us to live significant lives that make a difference for him. If divinely inspired goals continue to elude us, however, frustration mounts. When we repeatedly experience unrealized hopes, humanly we shrink them to ease the pain of disappointment.

Hope energizes us to renewed efforts. Christian hope has the confidence that "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13). In the face of hostility, imprisonment and assaults, the apostle Paul persisted in proclaiming the gospel, believing that he would accomplish what God had given him to do.

Hope Anticipates God. Most people live gray lives of routine, drudgery and boredom. No wonder they seek artificial stimulation in the form of entertainment, gambling or drugs. The hope of Jesus' presence (Matthew 28:20), and his Spirit's infilling (Acts 2:4) transform our lives. We anticipate God's activity in our lives daily. What will he say to me? Whom does he empower me to bless? How will he shape my life today? In the midst of the mundane we expect the supernatural.

In Burma during World War II, the Japanese forced prisoners of war to build a railroad bridge over the river Kwai. Morale in the prison camp was dismal. Prisoners fought each other for the extra scraps of food that the guards threw at them for amusement. The sick were left to die, and their possessions snatched the moment they expired.

Gradually, however, prisoners discovered the reality of Christ. They began caring for one another, giving the weak their own meager portions. They organized classes and taught one another. They worshiped together in a makeshift chapel. The Japanese guards came to envy the quality of life that their captives enjoyed.²

Hope Sees Eternal Life. As a child lying in bed one evening, in my imagination I briefly glimpsed my grave and tombstone. The impression flashed through my mind, "Is that all there is? Do we simply live, then die?" This occurred only once, and for years I put aside further thought of death.

As we approach middle age, however, reminders sprout to confirm that the years remaining are fewer than those already spent. How quickly our pimples become wrinkles, our braces turn into bifocals and our muscles metamorphose into flab. For those without the hope of life beyond death, age is an enemy which gradually strips us of all we value.

At a seminar for medical professionals on the topics of death and dying,³ an Orthodox rabbi reported that the dying with whom he worked in convalescent homes—not having the hope of eternal life—gradually sank into depression and despair. "Most of my people die little by little," he said, "for a long time before they die." A Christian minister, on the other hand, found his people optimistic in the same situation. Many had a sense of growing joy and expectation. They looked forward to Jesus' promise, "I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life" (John 6:47).

Christian hope transforms the quality of our lives. For every circumstance, the reality of God's presence and activity, his grace and eternity with him give us hope. And hope has the power to overcome.

¹ *Bruce Larson, What God Wants to Know (San Francisco: HarperCollins 1993), p. 61.*

² *Ernest Gordon, Through the Valley of THC Kwai (Des Plains, IL: Bantam Books).*

³ *Anthony Campolo, Carpe Diem (Dallas: Word, 1994).*