

FROM THE FRAY

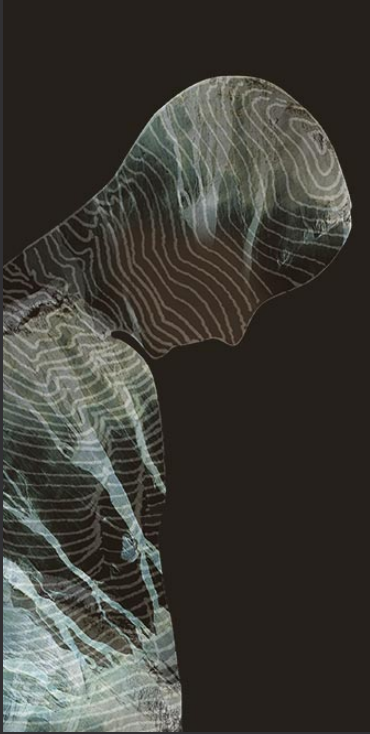
THE HOPE PROJECT

WAGING WAR ON HOPELESSNESS

CHAPLAIN KORY M. CAPPS



WHY THE HOPE PROJECT?



Hope is rebellion. It defies the pain of today and refuses to give it the the last word.

Hope pulls the future into the present, it changes today with tomorrow.

Augustine made an insightful observation about the family of hope. He said, "hope has two beautiful daughters; they are named Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that things do not remain as they are" (*The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, 1996).

Hopelessness walks into my office every day. Over the past 20 years, I have served in some challenging places.

My work has taken me behind bars in the prison system, on the stand in the court-room, by the bed-side of the sick, in the homes of sexual abuse victims, at the grave-side of the dead, and on the front-lines with our uniformed military men and women.

Despair is a fixture in these contexts; trauma is sadly normative and darkness can be pervasive. Walking in these spaces leaves no one unscathed.

Hopelessness leaves residue on the soul. Seeing pain, hearing suffering, and knowing trauma in fellow human-beings changes you.

I can still hear Sarah's blood curdling cry at the news of her husband's murder.

The black bruises around Logan's neck from his father's strangle attempt is etched in my memory.

I can still see the terror in Sheila's eyes after learning of her husband's suicide.

I will never forget the father who asked me to help him with his tie before he buried his twenty-year old son.

I recall the young Airman so overcome by emotion that he asked for a pen and paper to write out his thoughts. He

etched these words onto a notepad and handed it to me: "I am a disappointment to everyone, because I have no ability or future." I can't shake the sight of his quivering hands as he gave his despair to me.

I know the absence of hope and I know it well, not only in others but in my own soul. There is a common strand in those who know despair, they have moved hope from the category of want to need. We need hope, like air we can't live without it.

In life's wreckage, we need to know where God can be found. We need to know what to do with despair and we need to know if hope is possible in such spaces.

I am deeply invested in waging war on hopelessness in my own soul and fostering hope in yours. I don't know of a better way to do that than to explore what God says about it.

To my reader, no matter where you are or what you have been through, it is my prayer that hope will penetrate into your life with staying power.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13)

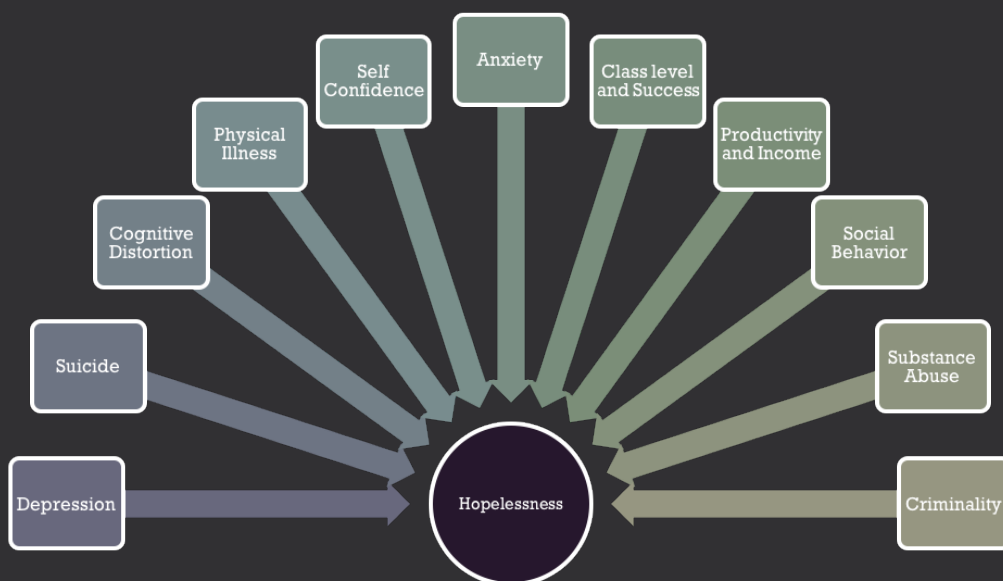
Kory M. Capps
CHAPLAIN

*For confidentiality, real names from stories and clients have been replaced.

ISN'T IT THE MOMENT OF MOST PROFOUND DOUBT THAT GIVES BIRTH TO NEW CERTAINTIES? PERHAPS HOPELESSNESS IS THE VERY SOIL THAT NOURISHES HUMAN HOPE; PERHAPS ONE COULD NEVER FIND SENSE IN THIS LIFE WITHOUT FIRST EXPERIENCING ITS ABSURDITY.

Hopelessness is all around us. We can't get away from it. We see it in our families, we recognize it in our friends, and we discern it in ourselves. It's a fixture in this life. Researchers have

explored the far-reaching impact of hopelessness on human flourishing and well-being. They have found that hopelessness is a force, a devastating power to be respected.



RESEARCH ON HOPELESSNESS

Drill down into many of our problems and you will find hopelessness. Many studies have identified hopelessness as the driving force in depression, suicidal ideation, suicide, distorted thinking, physical illness, lack of self-confidence, anxiety and dysphoria.

The research has linked hopelessness to poor mental health, social class status, low income, lack of success, poor problem solving skills, lack of productivity, negative social behavior, criminality, and substance abuse.

A brief sampling of the literature on hopelessness communicates the power of this intangible reality. Many symptoms can be traced back to this root.

It is the engine that drives destructive behaviors and the lingering cloud behind many painful experiences.

The reach of hopelessness is breath-taking when you consider its ability to stretch into every area of our lives.

(D. Duggal, *Impact of Hope and Resilience*, 2016. S. Cakar, *Effects of Hopelessness*, 2014. R. Liu, *Hopelessness Theory of Depression*, 2015. K. Kandarís, *Moderating Effect of Hope*, 2013. P. Halama, *Hope and Positive Mental Health*, 2007).

"We are all heirs of hopelessness; that is the human predicament."

Hopelessness is a force to be reckoned with. The research is correct, but it only touches the surface of the problem.

Why does hopelessness feel so common to us? Why does it seem so familiar?

Hopelessness is embedded into the story-line of this world. It is our story. We are born into it. It is our inheritance.

The first sun rise lit up a world that knew only hope. Eden was the place that literally defined paradise.

Abundance surrounded our first parents; a perfect place to live; a unique partner to enjoy; A meaningful job to do. And above all, a gracious God to worship and enjoy.¹⁴

As this study will show, to know the Triune God is to know hope. Adam and Eve knew hope, they walked with Him. They also lived with the reality that their perfect situation could remain forever.

We live on the other side of that reality. Hope was among the tragic losses of the fall. One forbidden act ruptured the world and dislodged our connection to the Triune God. It ripped us from paradise and left us homeless. Our parents were driven into the land of despair, the only place you and I have ever known.

"Despondency and despair are sin -- indeed they are the origin of all sins. It is not so much sin that plunges us into disaster, as rather despair," said John Chrysostom.



EPHESIANS 2:11-12

"Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called 'the uncircumcision' by what is called 'the circumcision,' which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, **having no hope** and without God in the world."



HOPE'S OPPOSITE

Paul provides the clearest biblical description of hope and its opposite in Ephesians 2:11-12. As he reminds the Gentile Christians of their origins, he develops a concise theology of hope. Here is the passage:

"Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called "the circumcision," which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:11-12).

When you determine what something is not, you also move toward grasping what it is. Here, Paul gives us a description of hopelessness, and in turn provides us with the biblical definition of hope.

Paul teaches us that hopelessness is the absence of four critical things:

1.	<i>God's Son</i>
2.	<i>God's People</i>
3.	<i>God's Promises</i>
4.	<i>God Himself</i>

Paul uses the phrase "having no hope" to summarize life without these four things; to lack these is to lack hope.

Hope is God-Centered

Hope comes from belonging to the Triune God, having his promises, and being connected to his community.

Hope is a God-centered reality, remove the Trinity from the discussion and you are immediately in the realm of hopelessness. Ed Love's *Pursuing a Theology of Hope* gets it right.

"The difference between optimism and hope is this: optimism is rooted in humanity's capacities while biblical hope is entrenched in God's nature."

In the next few pages, we will unpack these four areas as we explore hope and hopelessness.

THE GOD OF HOPE

We know that God is characterized by peace, love, grace, and justice because he tells us those things true about him (1 Jn 4:16, Rom 16:20, Ex 34:6-7).

It is no different with the topic at hand, he wants us to know that he is "the God of hope" (Rom 15:13). This means he is far more invested in our hope than anyone else in our lives, including ourselves.

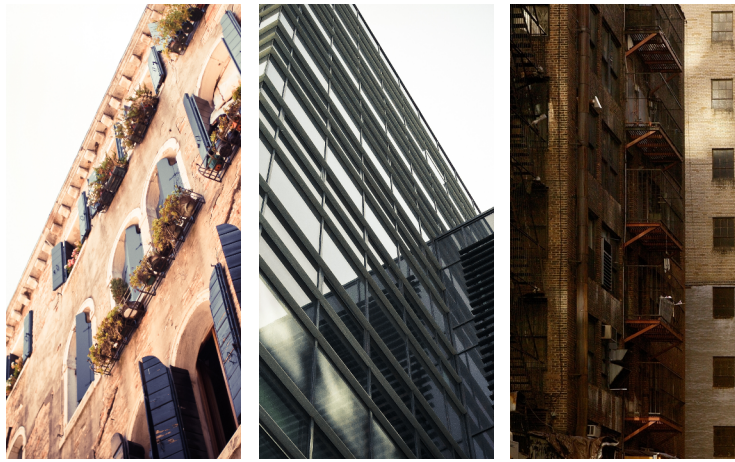
His passion to bring hope into a hopeless world is staggering. If you look underneath the birth of Christ you will find a commitment to hope. You will find the same underneath his life of service, his death and his resurrection.

Jurgen Moltmann in his *Theology of Hope*, argues that the resurrection is God's weapon against despair. In his view, the resurrection was not seen as a "private Easter for his private Good Friday, but as the beginning and source of the abolition of the universal Good Friday, of that god-forsakenness of the world which comes to light in the deadliness of the death of the cross."

In other words, the God of hope assaults our hopelessness through a bloody cross and an empty tomb.

"It can be said that living without hope is like no longer living. *Hell is hopelessness*, and it is not for nothing that at the entrance to Dante's hell there stand the words: 'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.'"

-Jurgen Moltmann



"What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of human life. Take oxygen away and death occurs through suffocation, take hope away and humanity is constricted through lack of breath as despair supervenes."

-Emil Brunner

WITHOUT GOD'S SON

Hope is a person, his name is Jesus. If you have Him, you have hope. If you don't have Him, you don't have hope. It is devastatingly simple.

Hope is not found in people, it is not found in ourselves, it cannot be attained through positions, possessions, or status, nor does it come from our own effort.

Hope will forever evade us if Christ does not break into our lives and confront our hopelessness.

Being "separated" from Jesus describes the rupture of the fall and the condition we find ourselves in before God. Alongside Adam and Eve, we have willfully disconnected from our life source and created the chasm between us.

Scripture has many names for this: rebellion, iniquity, sin, unbelief, wickedness, evil, transgression, disobedience, and foolishness.

From different angles, these

terms convey the brokenness in our relationship with Jesus, which leaves us without hope.

Hopelessness is our current state, we are born into it, and without Christ, it will become a permanent state.

The unpopular biblical term for extended hopelessness is

"Hope is a person, his name is Jesus. If you have him, you have hope."

hell. Scripture speaks of hell as a certain, endless, "separation" from Jesus Christ for all who reject him.

Hell is a terrifying existence with no hope. Tomorrow never gets better there, the darkness never lifts there, things never improve there, pain is never assuaged there, and sorrow never ceases there.

There is no plot, no story, no character development, no joy, and no purpose there.

The slightest ray of hope will never shine on that dark, lonely place. It is unmixed, and unending despair. Even the hope of hope, is banished from such a place.

This is why hell is described as "black darkness," "eternal fire," and an "everlasting punishment," (2 Pet 2:17, Jude 7, 13, Matt 25:46).

To be without Christ is not only deadly, it's tragic. This is the reason Jesus speaks so often about this awful reality; he's filled with compassion and he desires that "none should perish, but all would come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9).

This is the good news, in Jesus Christ hope has come (1 Tim 1:1), and through his perfect life, sacrificial death and powerful resurrection he goes to war against our despair, he strikes at the heart of our hopelessness.

The gospel means we have Jesus, which is the definition of having hope.

The purpose of the community of faith is to remember, worship, and help each other obey Christ. To put it another way, it's how we focus on hope and foster it among ourselves.

Our connection to hope is sustained and deepened through the people of God. Further, the community of faith is entrusted with proclaiming the message of hope to a world that desperately needs it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says our connection to Christ forms the foundation of our connection to one another.

"What determines our brotherhood is what a man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done for us" (*Life Together*, 2009).

Rescued out of darkness and despair, Christ brings us into his "marvelous light" and fills our lives with hope (1 Pet 2:9).

Because Jesus is the "God of Hope" and our lives revolve around him, hope is central to fellowship with him and one another (Rom 15:3).

If anything makes despair worse, it's being alone. Not only does Jesus rescue us from our hopelessness, he ensures us that pain will no longer be solitary.



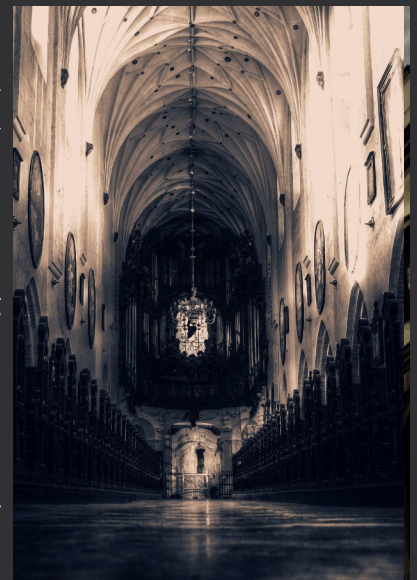
THE ABSENCE OF GOD'S PEOPLE

We are made a community of faith through the God of Hope and for hope. Bonhoeffer argues that the community of faith should be engaged in three key disciplines.

1) Preaching the good news of hope to each other; 2) Preaching the good news of hope to the world; and 3) Preaching the good news of hope to ourselves.

God works hope into our souls through the people of God and sustains that hope through one another. The church was built to be the light of the world, a city set on a hill, a fellowship of hope.

The church exists to wage war on hopelessness. It is through the message of the gospel that we are pulled from despair and transferred to the kingdom of hope. It is our task to bring this hope-giving word to the world around us. The church, not a place but a people, is a bastion of hope; it is God's chosen vehicle to diffuse his hope to a dark world.



A PROMISE IS A DECLARATION WHICH ANNOUNCES THE COMING OF A REALITY THAT DOES NOT YET EXIST. PROMISE SETS MAN'S HEART ON A FUTURE HISTORY.

Scripture tells us that God is not a "man that he should lie" (Num 23:19). He is not like us, in fact his nature makes it "impossible for him to lie" (Tit 1:2, Heb 6:18).

This means that God's promises never fail, he stays true to his every word. Consider the goodness of these promises.

I will forgive you (Ps 51:7-9). I will rescue you from judgment (Jn 3:18). I will hear your prayer (Ps 91:4-6). I will give you

eternal life (Ps 16:11). I will provide you daily bread (Matt 6:11). I will not punish you (Lam 3:22-24). I will be gracious to you (Rom 5:1-2). I will be your God (Gen 17:8). You will be my people (Ex 6:7). I will be with you (Matt 28:20). I will never leave you (Jn 14:6). I will not forsake you (Heb 13:5).

How life changing and hope giving are such words. It is no surprise that such statements are called "precious and very great promises" (2 Pet 1:3).

WITHOUT GOD'S PROMISES

When you consider the content and the certainty of God's promises, it makes perfect sense that hopelessness would result from not having them. Without God's promise of salvation, there is no salvation. Without God's promise of forgiveness there is no forgiveness. Without God's promise of a future, there isn't one.

When God speaks, it is true. When God promises, it is certain. Hope is directly tied to our relationship with His word. If his promises are not for us, despair is inevitable. If his promises are ours, then hope is guaranteed. If God's promises always produce hope, the inverse is equally true.

The promises of God are not cheap, they come with a tremendous cost. When God promises something, he swears that he will do it even if he must bleed to make it happen. In biblical terms, we call such sacrificial commitments, "covenants."

This is exactly what we see in Jesus; he took the cross and vacated the tomb to ensure the efficacy of God's word to us. Because he bled, every single promise God has made is "yes and Amen" in him (2 Cor 1:20). God works hope in us through his promises. In fact, the whole of Scripture is written with the intent of our endurance and encouragement "that we might have hope" (Rom 15:4).

BEHIND THE HEROIC, SET FACE OF MAN LIES THE WHOLE TRAGEDY OF A CHILD WHO HAS LOST HIS FATHER. IT'S THE STORY OF HUMANITY WITHOUT A FATHER.

WITHOUT GOD

Hope is God-shaped. We have already seen that hope happens in proximity to Jesus. Here, we direct our attention to the hope-giving relationship with God the Father and our certain despair in life without him.

God the Father is the God of all hope. He is hope's true source, the giver of all true hope, the very hope of hope. Hope is eternally elusive without him. Helmut Thielicke articulates a painful angle on being apart from God.

"Behind the heroic, set face of man lies the whole tragedy of a child who has lost his father...doesn't the world seem a dreadfully "unfatherly" place? Ever since men have walked on earth; have they not always been terrified by the fatherlessness of the world? The history of the world, taken as a whole, is a story of war, deeply marked with the hoof-prints of the apocalyptic horseman. It is the story of humanity without a Father-so it seems" (*Our Heavenly Father*, 1960).

What a vivid way to capture the pain of living in this world without God. Framing things this way helps us see that hopelessness is the offspring of fatherlessness.

The Hope of the Gospel

To recap, the garden expulsion left us fatherless, it left us homeless, it left us hopeless. This is the fray into which the Triune God enters.

We have to grasp the backdrop of despair before we can understand God's gift of hope to us.

Hopelessness sets the stage for hope. Scripture is clear, the situation is dire. We have seen that we are utterly lost without four main things in our life.

To be without hope is to be without God's Son, the one Lord, the one Savior whose name is Jesus Christ.

Hopelessness is to be without God's people, to be separated

from the community of faith that is connected to the one who is Hope.

Hopelessness is to be without God's promises, to know the absence of his covenant-keeping faithfulness.

Hopelessness is to be fatherless., to be without God in this world, separated from the source and fountain of all hope.

God's remedy for our despair is to give himself to us, to provide his Son, to give his promises, and connect us as to his people. This divine remedy for our despair is rightly called, "the hope of the gospel" (Col 1:23).



We must pause and ask the all important question: so what? Why does this matter? How does this help us at all?

We must move from theoretical to practical, as Moltmann says, "as long as hope does not embrace and transform the thought and action of men, it remains topsy-turvy and ineffective."

So how does a theology of hope and hopelessness help us practically? To get at this question, we will focus on the nuanced ways hopelessness shows up in our lives, the role of the cross in understanding despair, the resurrection and hope, the hope against hope tension in which we exist, and the evidence-based outcomes of hope.

Hopelessness puts a name to what we know and feel in our souls. God, like a talented surgeon, uses his word to assess, diagnose, and provide saving care to us. When he peers into our souls, his diagnosis is hopelessness.

That diagnosis puts words to the unrest in our souls and pinpoints the aftermath of our sin. It captures the wreckage within us and speaks to the pain around us.

God puts his finger on a core problem when he speaks about hopelessness. It is a deeper issue than we thought and more pervasive than we imagined.

In fact, the nuances of hopelessness in our lives are profound and unexpected. Take for example, Jurgen Moltmann's suggestion that there are two sides of hopelessness.



THE TWO SIDES OF HOPELESSNESS

"Hopelessness can assume two forms: it can be presumption, and it can be despair. Both are forms of the sin against hope. Presumption is a premature, self-willed anticipation of the fulfillment of what we hope for from God. Despair is the premature, arbitrary anticipation of the non-fulfillment of what we hope for from God. Both forms of hopelessness, by anticipating the fulfillment or by giving up hope, cancel the wayfaring character of hope. They rebel against the patience in which hope trusts in the God of the promise."

-Jurgen Moltmann (*Theology of Hope*, 1993)



THE NUANCES OF HOPELESSNESS

Moltmann shows us that hopelessness has multiple faces. It shows up in active rebellion as it strives to rip prerogative from the hands of God and fulfill his promises with our own human strength.

We see this in the Abraham-Sarah story. The promise of a miracle baby to a century old spouse was more than a stretch, it was impossible. Instead of taking God at face value and resting in the promise, Abraham took matters into his own hands.

The root of his action was hopelessness in the promise of God. However, this hopelessness took the form of active, prideful rebellion.

Hopelessness also shows up in despair, this is its inactive face. It curls up into a ball, crawls into a hole, throws its hands up and simply quits.

Like active hopelessness it gives up on the promises of God. The only difference, it lays down instead of rising up.

We see this in the story of Elijah. God does mighty things through the prophet showing his power through fire and rain. Moments later, his life is threatened and Elijah despairs of the promises of God. He flees, hides, lays down and pleads with God to die.

It's not difficult to see ourselves in Abraham and Elijah; they show us concrete hopelessness.

Overt and Covert Hopelessness

To Moltmann's distinctions, Douglas Hall adds another: overt and covert despair (*Hope of the World*, 2001). Overt despair is discernible hopelessness, often found in the dispossessed of our world.

Covert despair, relevant to our context, is a quiet and repressed hopelessness. In subtle desperation, covert despair masquerades under the guise of well-being, activity, and consumption. In other words, agony becomes our engine and our mask.

THE CROSS AND DESPAIR

H. Russel Botman argues that there are rich resources in the cross when it comes to facing our hopelessness (*Hope of the World*, 2001).

"We have not yet learned the deep meaningless, and hopelessness that comes with the cross," he states.

Further, he explains, "in the stark reality of the death of Christ, we meet the terrible hopelessness that entrapped the disciples. The cross is the end of their Christianity and, yes, of their hopes."

Botman drives further, "the cross of Christ is our most real exposure to the meaning of the words *end, fear, hopelessness*. In the cross, we meet the limits of all being and doing, the final defeat of hope in the world."

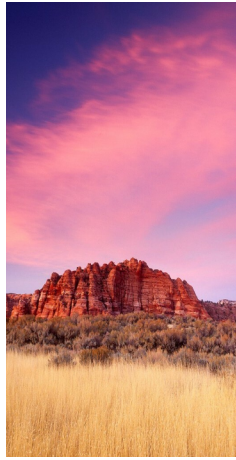
There are two practical implications that follow.

First, if the disciples encountered the essence of despair, then the gospels narrate how they navigated that terrain and provide us a guide to battling hopelessness.

Second, Jesus knows the full scope of despair, which is solace for us. As Martin Luther says, "God is present with us in our sufferings, even at the deepest pitch of our desperation" (*Romans*, 2003).

"The most casual reader of the New Testament can scarcely fail to see the commanding position the resurrection holds in Christianity. It is the creator of its new and brighter hopes."

-E.M. Bounds



"The great gift of Easter is hope--Christian hope which makes us have that confidence in God, in his ultimate triumph, and in his goodness and love, which nothing can shake."

-Floyd Tomkins

HOPE'S ADDRESS: THE EMPTY TOMB

In Emil Brunner's words, "the resurrection of Jesus means the worst thing is never the last thing" (*Eternal Hope*, 2014). Hopelessness will not have the final say.

The New Testament tethers hope to the resurrection (1 Pet 1:3, 21, Acts 23:6, 24:15). If death is the embodiment of despair, then the empty tomb is the final word on hope.

Paul captures the unmatched power of the resurrection when he speaks of the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17).

You see, Easter hope is designed for the most impossible of circumstances. In this verse, Paul likens the resurrection power to the creative power exerted when God fashioned the world (ex-nihilo "out of nothing").

His point, God specializes in transforming darkness into light, chaos into order, impossible into possible and of course, and hopelessness into hope.

Practically speaking, we wage war on hopelessness by making Easter more than an annual celebration. When we allow Christ's resurrection to invade our most challenging circumstances, hope is sure to follow. Sometimes, even the hope of hope---it's very possibility can still our anxious hearts.

HOPE AGAINST HOPE

Paul summarizes the whole of the Christian journey with the phrase: "hope against hope" (Rom 4:18). The promises of God and the experience of the believer stand in opposition.

Moltmann captures this tension, "present and future, experience and hope, stand in contradiction to each other in Christian eschatology, with the result that man is not brought into harmony and agreement with the given situation, but is drawn into the conflict between hope and experience" (*Theology of Hope*, 1993).

What do we do when God's promise contradicts what we see?

God says, "I will forgive you." You say, "not possible for me, my past is too freighted. No one knows what I have done."

God says, "I will hear your prayer." Our emotions say, "not true, the heavens are brass to me. You are not listening."

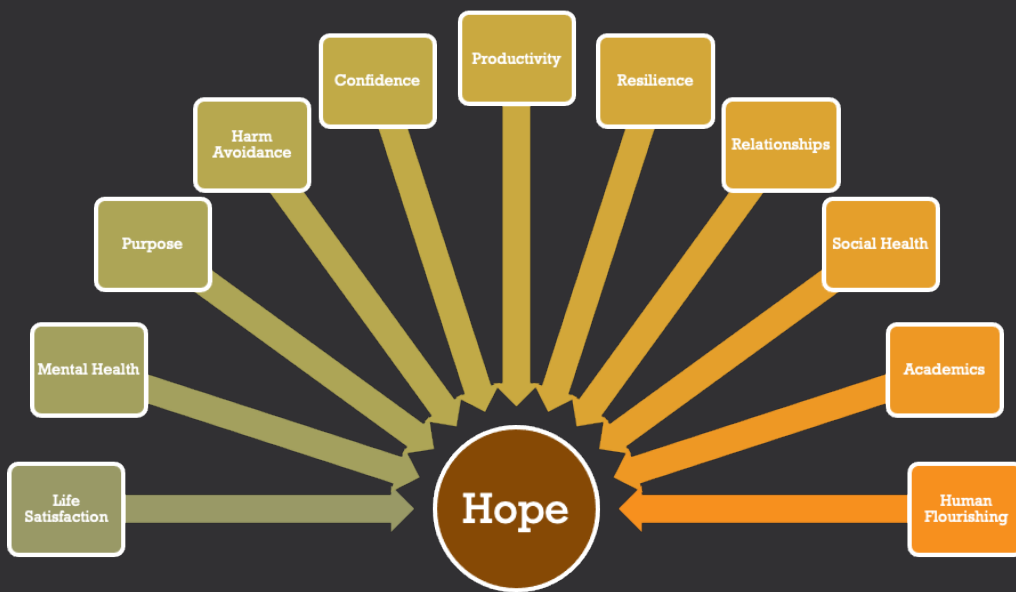
God says, "I will be with you and I will never leave you or forsake you," but God feels a million miles away and you feel utterly forsaken.

God says he has a plan and future for you, but your circumstances look bleak, how can his plan be good?

What we see, what we feel, what we think...these challenge the validity of God's promises.

Do you feel this tension in your journey? This is the normal Christian life and the place where hope must prove its power. This is why walking with God is called a "fight of faith" (1 Tim 6:12).

Lord, I believe help my unbelief. God, I have hope, help my hopelessness. This is what fighting for faith and hoping against hope looks like.



HOPE IS A SOLDIER, IT FIGHTS AGAINST SUFFERING AND DESPAIR AS IT WAITS FOR BETTER THINGS TO COME.

God is deeply invested in battling our despair. He assures us, "a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench" (Matt 12:20).

In other words, in our most vulnerable moments, he will come to us with compassion. He won't add to our pain. Instead, he will infuse hope where we need it most.

The impact of this hope is wide-reaching. Earlier, we discussed the research on hopelessness and saw its staggering impact on every facet of our existence.

Unsurprisingly, the same is true of hope research. Hope is a game-changer for our physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and social health. Consider the research.

Chaplain Kory M. Capps

Chaplain Capps is currently stationed at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida where he serves as an Active Duty military chaplain. Prior to joining the military, he served as a chaplain in the correctional system. He is married to his wife of 20 years, Elizabeth and has four children. He holds a Doctorate of Ministry (DMin) in Military Chaplaincy, a Masters of Theology (ThM) in Practical Theology, and Masters of Divinity (MDiv) in Theology and Missions. He is the co-founder of From the Fray Ministries.



RESEARCH ON HOPE

Researchers have identified many significant benefits of hope. Studies show that hope leads to life satisfaction, positive mental health, sense of purpose, harm avoidance, confidence, productivity, and resilience.

The positive outcomes related to hope stretch into inter-personal relationships, social health, psychological adjustment, and academic achievement.

The wellness effect of hope does not stop there. Research shows shocking physical health outcomes. Higher levels of hope have proven to have positive effects on adjustment from brain injuries, spinal cord injuries, breast cancer recovery, and even pain tolerance.

In summary, the evidence and verdict on hope is clear; it is a formidable weapon against despair and provides the essential ingredient in human flourishing.

So, "may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13).

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