

HAVE HOPE!

By Rev. Will Nelken

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An examination was being held in little Emma's class at school and the question was asked: "Upon what do hibernating animals subsist during the winter?" Emma thought for a few minutes and then wrote: "All winter long, hibernating animals subsist on the hope of a coming spring!"

Martin Luther wrote: "Every thing that is done in the world is done by hope."

Hope looks for the good in people instead of harping on the worst in them.

Hope opens doors where despair closes them.

Hope discovers what can be done instead of grumbling about what cannot be done.

Hope "lights a candle" instead of "cursing the darkness."

Hope regards problems, small or large, as opportunities.

Hope cherishes no illusions, nor does it yield to cynicism.

An old English proverb says, "If it were not for hope the heart would break."

The Russians have another proverb: "In the kingdom of hope there is no winter."

The greatest enemy of man is not disease—it's despair. Many people have lived well in the face of grave diseases, but who can prosper in despair?

Circumstances in our lives rise and fall like the tide, but when we see the ocean draining away we do not realize it is only the ebb of an advancing wave.

The Hebrew psalmist understood those tides and battled to hold his faith high.

Psalm 42:5 *Why are you cast down, O my soul?
And why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him
For the help of His countenance.*

God helps us in our despair with "His countenance." The friendship of His presence and the warm smile of His love can lift any gloom. Just a few verses later, the psalmist repeats his agony, but with another twist.

Psalm 42:11 *Why are you cast down, O my soul?
And why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God;
For I shall yet praise Him,
The help of my countenance and my God.*

God not only helps me with “His countenance,” but in doing so he is “the help of *my* countenance.” My God helps me to lift up my head and look forward to my future. His appearance changes my appearance! No matter how low I feel, His love reaches lower still.

A gardener is someone who believes that what goes down must come up. Out of my grief and perplexity rises a newness of life, because of my hope in God. Though the world is in upheaval, God is not shaken, nor is His purpose stymied.

Consider with me the apostle Paul’s words to the church in Colossae, where the new life in Christ was beginning to take hold. Paul was stirred to write to them because of the news he had received.

Morning News

Colossians 1:3 *We always pray for you, and we give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
⁴ For we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all of God’s people, ⁵ which come from your confident hope of what God has reserved for you in heaven. You have had this expectation ever since you first heard the truth of the Good News.
⁶ This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives, just as it changed your lives from the day you first heard and understood the truth about God’s wonderful grace.
⁷ You learned about the Good News from Epaphras, our beloved co-worker. He is Christ’s faithful servant, and he is helping us on your behalf. ⁸ He has told us about the love for others that the Holy Spirit has given you.

The church at Colossae was in the news. Paul was receiving the reports from Epaphras of their faith in Jesus and their love for all of God’s people and he pointed out that those qualities sprung from their hope and expectation in God’s promises. Without hope in God, faith cannot persist and love cannot overflow. Hope keeps faith and love alive. Hope reaches beyond this troubled and troubling world into Heaven, where righteousness and peace dwell consistently.

Have you believed the story of God’s loving purpose? Are you expecting to receive its fullness? Do you anticipate that day? The more you do, the more your faith and love will flourish.

Our Prayer for You

Colossians 1:9 *So we have not stopped praying for you since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰ Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better.*
¹¹ We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy, ¹² always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, ¹⁴ who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.

This news about the church seemed so good to Paul that it compelled him to continue praying for them. He prayed for the growth of their spiritual life. He prayed for their actions to be fruitful and bring honor to Jesus, knowing that their growth was inextricably tied to their increasing familiarity with God.

Growth doesn’t happen in a vacuum, but in the midst of the swirl of everyday life—its ups and downs. Trials come to stretch us, and if we choose to be stretched, God’s grace makes us grow.

So, Paul prayed that the Spirit's power would grant them the endurance and patience that they needed to succeed in every trial and survive every storm. This is the kind of success that fills us with joy and overflowing thanks. And it comes from Christ.

What Jesus has done for us—rescuing us from darkness and planting us in the Kingdom of Christ, freely forgiven—has radically changed our lives, on the inside first, and then also on the outside. This is our inheritance, our gift from Jesus. It is *He* who qualifies us (“enables us”) to be people of God.

Suddenly, as if transported by his own words, Paul's thoughts digress. Recalling what Jesus had done for us caused him to spontaneously reflect on the majesty of the person of Jesus. This was no ordinary man, who had accomplished all this for so many!

The Source of Our Hope

Colossians 1:15 Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,¹⁶ for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him.

¹⁷ He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. ¹⁸ Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. ¹⁹ For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, ²⁰ and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross.

Christ Himself is the source of every good thing in our lives. In fact, He is the Source of everything that is! He made it all, both the visible and the invisible. The structures of visible government—thrones, kingdoms, rulers—have all been established by Him. And the invisible hands that move them—the authorities in the unseen world—are also under His creative control.

Besides all “that” out there, He is also the Head of the church, for we are His body. And He is our Leader, for He first rose from the dead. This, after He reconciled us to God by His death on the cross. No ordinary man, nor even an extraordinary man—this is the God-man, the Living God in human form.

Our Expectation

Colossians 1:21 This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions.²² Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.

He became one of us so that He could rescue all of us from the sin that would ultimately destroy us. Sin had already destroyed our fellowship with God: we were distant enemies in mind and deeds. But Jesus changed all of that!

This is a done deal. These are dependable facts. Christ has done it! He has removed the sin that separated us from God and has arranged our reunion with the God who made us. It is because of Him, and Him alone, that we can recognize and enjoy the presence of God in our lives today.

And when we come into His presence—in prayer, in worship, in contemplation—we are welcomed. We are not forced to remain at the back of the room, but invited to a place at His side. He is not ashamed to call us His friends!

We stand before Him “holy and blameless, without a single fault”! Who could do such a thing? Not I. Not you. Only Jesus could achieve such a miracle. And being a miracle does not make it less than true. This is the truth about us in God’s world.

Others may think otherwise about you. You also may think poorly of yourself. The world will measure you by what it can see (and that is not unimportant). But the world can never see what God sees in you. Because of Jesus—because of his blood shed on the cross for you—God sees you as “holy and blameless, without a single fault,” and so you are, completely forgiven and cleansed.

And that changes everything! When I accept what God has said and begin to see myself as He sees me, my attitude is adjusted and my behavior is modified.

Don’t Drift Away

Colossians 1:23 *But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don’t drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News.*

We must not take this invisible reality for granted. We must actively trust God and “stand firm” in this new life. You will make mistakes, but it will not shake God—don’t let it shake you. Repent and let Him forgive and cleanse you, so you can continue to move forward.

Don’t drift away from this hope. I am convinced that no one who has tasted the amazing grace of God would simply pause and then turn away, as if to say, “I’m just not going to do this anymore.” It is our intention to love Him forever. Yet we are in grave danger of drifting. Carelessly, thoughtlessly, distractedly drifting. Caught by a side current and gradually moved in another direction. Don’t let it happen. Fight against slumber and stay spiritually alert.

Fix your heart on this hope. Reflect on it every day. Then your faith in God will rise and your love for all His people will spill over. Remember, I am praying for this very thing. Join me—and the many before us, reaching back to Paul himself—and pray these prayers for yourself and for your fellow faith-travelers.