

Hope and Hopelessness

Elaine Nikula

Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation, continuing instant in prayer. – Romans 12:12

Today, I hold on to hope like a precious gem, because I lived through times when hope faded. I suffered for years with chronic fatigue. Imagine doing the washing, cooking, shopping and cleaning and giving eleven children time and attention when all you want to do is take another nap. It was thirty years before I saw a change for the better in energy. It was discouraging to say the least. I cried into my pillow at times, wondering if I would ever find my way out of the molasses of fatigue.

My despair over unbelieving loved ones also left me stuck in sadness. I needed time to grieve, but eventually it became an unpleasant place to be, and I knew that I did not want to live there. By God's grace and an encouraging husband, I put away sad thoughts and began to count my blessings. It did not come quickly. I slowly shifted my thinking, reminding myself there is always hope for those who left faith.

One Can Always Hope

How important it is to hope! Hope is a powerful force in the world. Not only do we feel its uplifting effects very intimately, but it can mean the difference between survival or not. It takes hope to hang on with your fingernails when you are falling over a cliff. Doctors who must give patients poor prognoses attempt to leave those patients with hope. Patients who hope may experience better outcomes.

Is it always easy to hope? The world around us, with continuous updates on civil unrest, pandemic statistics and moral deterioration, can cause anxiety and fear. There is much we cannot control, and feelings of hopelessness for the future can overwhelm. It's refreshing to turn off the news and social media and turn on hopeful songs of Zion or sermons that feed our soul.

Hope Can Feel Impossible

Nonetheless, it can be difficult to be hopeful. Sometimes hope can feel impossible. Depression, addiction and other illnesses can affect one's ability to hope. It can feel that one is locked behind a door without a key. It is a dark tunnel that sucks out confidence, motivation and happiness. Sufferers cannot see a way out. It may require therapies under the guidance of healthcare professionals to once again open the door to joy and hope.

Hope thrives in soil that is watered with happy, encouraging thoughts and actions. The shift to positive thinking provides the foundation of hope. We can strive to create the atmosphere in our home and life by what we think, say and do.

Start at Home

If we wish to cultivate a hopeful atmosphere in the world, we need to start at home. A home with a spirit of hope is a delightful place. Children are sensitive to whether adults project a positive or gloomy demeanor.

Parents are mirrors to their children. What do children see when the family faces disobedient teens or a financial crisis, for example? Is the reaction anger, bitterness, blame and despair? Or would children learn to live in hope if parents reacted with uplifting words? What kind of difference could it make if parents and children together lifted their sorrow to God in prayer?

Prayer is communication to God of one's hopes; prayer seems futile without hope. After all, hope requires trust in something or someone outside of oneself. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:13).

Does Hope Guarantee Results?

Despite the power of hope, it does not offer guarantees. No matter how fiercely we hope, there is no assurance that God will grant our desires. God knows exactly what we need, and that is not always what we think. Thus we pray, "Thy will be done." Nonetheless, hope is one thing that others cannot take away from us. If all else is gone, hope can carry us through the darkest times.

Today, I face new challenges, but I'm grateful for those experiences that have given me a hopeful spirit. Hope is a bird that lifts its voice in song at the hint of dawn. It adds a happy sparkle in life. It's fun to reminisce about the past, but it's exciting to dream and plan for the future. Martin Luther stated, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree."

The Special Hope of a Child of God

How wonderful it is to hope as a child of God! How comforting it is to trust that our almighty God is in control. When we continue putting sin away in the living gospel of forgiveness in Jesus' name and blood, we stand in God's grace having a beautiful hope of heaven.

The enemy of souls, however, often preaches a sermon of hopelessness: "it isn't worth it. You can't make it. You will never get to heaven." We might begin to believe these hopeless sermons, but remember: satan has lied from the very beginning. Hope is present even if we don't see it.

If you find yourself doubting or without hope, be assured that God's promises are true. As children of God, we can look ahead with contentment, joy and peace...and a powerful hope that anchors our souls to God's living congregation and carries us home. We can remember, as did the writer to the Hebrews, that hope has been set before us, "hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast" (Heb. 6:19).

Addiction: Learning to Cope and to Hope

Leanne Niemela

The disease of addiction has caused me to lose the husband I knew and my children their father as they knew him. When we began to recognize that we were dealing with addiction, a professional laid out the treatment plan and the work involved in recovering. He said it took about five years of solid recovery work for someone with addiction to be completely healthy again. I remember thinking: not us. We love each other! How could this break our home and our marriage? Love has not been enough to save my marriage and family from addiction.

Addiction Is a Disease

I have since learned that addiction is a chronic relapsing disorder of the brain that impacts behavior and choices. The substance that is used affects the reward circuitry of the brain, causing a release of the neurotransmitter dopamine, which produces a pleasurable feeling. This causes the individual to want more and repeat the behavior.

Initially, an individual has made a choice to use drugs or alcohol or to engage in another addictive behavior. Once the reward circuit is activated, the addiction cycle begins and the behavior in question no longer becomes a choice, but rather a compulsion or obsession. This causes addiction to be recognized medically as a brain disorder. No one gets to choose how their body responds to using a substance or addictive behavior, and no one chooses to suffer from addiction.

Learning about the disease of addiction has helped relieve sorrow, hopelessness and fear. It helps to know that no one chooses to destroy their life through drugs or other addictions. It has helped me depersonalize the choices that have been made and instead view them as symptoms of the disease of addiction.

Sources of Hope

Educating myself has offered hope; I have learned that while addiction is not curable, it is completely treatable. Many people with addictions have learned to manage their disorder through self-care, self-awareness, therapy and group support and gone on to live healthy and happy lives. Knowing this gives me hope, and it drives a desire to stay connected to my husband, to remind him of things his addiction has convinced him he is not worthy of.

God's Word also provides hope. The thirteenth verse of 1 Corinthians 10 teaches, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." God promises to help provide a way out of difficulties and to give strength to endure the battles we face.

Healthy, Helpful Ways

Support groups help by teaching healthy ways to cope, how to be a healthy support for the loved one with an addiction, and helpful ways to communicate. This support comes from people who have been impacted by their loved ones' addiction.

I have learned that family can positively influence when a person's recovery is activated, so that has made it important to learn as much as I can. My loved one is still alive, even though the person he has become is no longer familiar. The thought that he might never recover, or that he might never be in our lives again or that his addiction could cause him to lose his life all cause great grief. Only the willing heart of the one who is addicted – with the help of God – can bring one back from the depths of addiction.

It brings peace when I remember that God's ways are above my ways. He knows and sees all. He will continue to care for me, even if addiction creates a permanent hole where my loved one used to be. Psalms 34:8 says, "O taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him."

Fellowship and Forgiveness Ward off Doubts

It has been helpful to be among the believers during this trial. Addiction is complex and it involves behaviors that are so easy for the family to take personally or to get angry over. It has been important for me to be in the fellowship of family and friends and to attend services as often as I can. I find that when I do not do this, I am most vulnerable to doubts and temptations and start questioning God regarding the purpose of my pain. There the devil finds me at my weakest.

God has blessed me with a loving family and with friends that carry my family and me in love. This is the greatest blessing of all: they can forgive my sins and doubts. Without their love and forgiveness, it would be difficult to find reason for joy and to trust that God will continue to provide strength and to

care for me. Psalms 34:15 brings much comfort: “The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry.”

Carried by Prayer

Shari Byman

In April 2020, my mom and dad were on the road, trucking in Texas. A sibling told me mom and dad were not feeling well. I called my dad to ask how he was doing. He told me both he and my mom were not feeling so well, but that he would probably feel better in the morning.

We ended the call with God’s peace, but I was left with a feeling that something wasn’t right – I sensed my parents were very ill. I believe that God guided me to ask my dad to call for an ambulance. They were far away from other believers and since COVID was spreading, I felt it would be better if they got evaluated at a hospital.

My dad went to the hospital, and my mom stayed in the truck as she felt she was not as sick as dad. A believing friend heard about the situation and contacted someone she knew near Plano, Texas, to bring my mom necessities and food to make it through her quarantine.

My dad was diagnosed with COVID-19 on April 20 and immediately began treatment. However, his health continued to worsen. He was put on a ventilator, and the healthcare staff did not think he would survive. Through lying in a prone position and receiving a plasma treatment, my dad was carried by the prayers of believers and began the slow, uphill journey of recovery.

During my dad’s hospitalization, none of us were allowed to visit him due to COVID regulations. He was brought to rehab alone also. He dreamed of seeing his family, and he wanted to be outside, watching the ocean waves.

My mom recovered quickly at home in Arizona, and she was eventually allowed to visit my dad through a window. This helped him recover even faster. When he was allowed one visitor, my mom finally got to see my dad in person.

After a harrowing trip back to Arizona, which included an emergency stop at a hospital in New Mexico, my dad was finally able to come home. Through a period of physical therapy, my dad gained his strength back, a day at a time.

It is difficult when a family member far away becomes so ill. I felt heavy sadness when we could not be with my parents and comfort them and each other in person. However, we truly felt the love of God’s kingdom – the helping hands of angels. We have been uplifted by the prayers of other that have given us

strength to continue each day. We will never forget the love and support we received from God's kingdom.

Two Months in Texas

Clint Makela

In April, I was on the job driving truck, and my wife Alice was with me. As we drove toward Dallas, Texas, I started feeling like a flu was coming on. In Dallas, I started feeling very sick. I don't remember much of that part of the trip, but somehow I was able to deliver the load. I made it to the truck stop in Terrel, Texas There I asked Alice to call the ambulance because I felt like I was going to pass out.

In the ambulance, I drifted in and out of consciousness. Little did I know that I would stay in Texas for two months with COVID. I remember that I saw myself lying there and I wondered why I hadn't died yet. Then, I saw a small light glowing next to me, so I knew I was still alive. I could feel then that God was with me.

When I awoke from the coma, the nurses said, "Welcome back!" The doctor told me I'd been so sick he didn't think I could survive. This reminded me how fragile life is and how quickly one's life can be taken. It's been a long road to recovery, and I'm feeling pretty good now. Thank you all for your prayers. F

Quite the Journey

Alice Makela

After my husband Clint was admitted to the hospital on April 20, I was flooded with emotions. He suffered so much, and he had great struggles with his oxygen levels. Clint was placed in a Rotoprone bed in the hope that it would help him breathe better. He was rotated onto his stomach quite often. A plasma treatment was suggested, and we gave consent.

Around the fifth day of his hospitalization, his oxygen levels were down to 50 percent, and he was still sedated and prone. Doctors ordered another dose of plasma treatment. Clint's labs started improving. Hopelessness ran through me. Due to COVID restrictions, I could not be by his bedside, and that was so hard. I just prayed to God that Clint would pull through.

On April 29, Clint started showing signs of improvement. They tried weaning him off the ventilator, and he breathed on his own for thirty minutes. Over the next days, he progressed to two-hour trials of breathing without the ventilator. On May 7, he was taken off the ventilator altogether.

As days went by, Clint grew stronger. On May 26, I was able to visit him in Texas. I visited him through a window, talking to him on the phone. He was transferred to a rehabilitation center on June 1. He stayed there two weeks and regained his ability to walk and breathe. He was released on June 15, and we were soon homeward bound.

Clint has progressed very slowly, but he is home now. God has heard everyone's prayers. We give thanks to God for bringing Clint back to us. It's been quite the journey.

Two anonymous letters reflect hope for their children who have left faith.

Because I Love You

My dear child, because I love you, I write to you.

Narrow is the way which leadeth unto life. – Matt. 7:14

I am sorrowful for your sake over what you have given up. You have chosen the broad way.

God gave you special gifts. He gave you the gift of life. He gave you the gift of faith. He gave you a conscience. He gave you a believing home and taught you how to remain in faith. He taught you how to wash the sin away. So many blessings.

Dear child, your mother bore all of you, the family that God planned. You children showed such love for each other. You learned prayers, you heard the same teachings, you all attended services. You heard the gospel, and you were all part of our small home congregation.

God's Word teaches us that this life will one day end. There will not be time to ask for forgiveness, as the end will come in the twinkling of an eye. There will be two in the field, one shall be taken and the other left. Jesus said, I go to prepare a place for you. I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there ye may be also. We want to have our name in the Book of Life so we can go to heaven with Jesus.

The broad way is the way of unbelief. The fruits of faith are not present there; they are only found in God's kingdom. Love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith.

My dear child, God loves you. He offers grace and forgiveness. Remember the Father's house, and today if you hear His voice, harden not your heart. The gospel can wash away the greatest sin of unbelief.

Because I love you,

Father

Open Letter to My Child

Dear loved one,

How I loved having you home this Christmas, your smile warming our home again!

Although this Christmas holiday was difficult with the pandemic restrictions, I was glad you decided to come and be part of the family pod again. As you return to your apartment, please know that our thoughts are with you every day.

Among the rush of cooking and wrapping, it was great to talk with you. However, there are some things that didn't get said. I wish to say them here, in this open letter, hoping that any child who has left faith may read this and know that mom loves you and will always love you. Someday, you will chance to read this and know that your mom wrote this to you, each wayward child from a loving mother.

First of all, I am sorry that when you told me that you no longer believe, I talked about my sadness. Of course, I was sad and I still am sad, but this decision impacts you most. It is you I should have focused on, not my pain nor any other family member's hurt feelings.

I also insinuated that you made a hasty decision and were swept away by friends. This was not fair to you, and I am sorry. My response to you was my own emotional release. It was human, sure, but as a parent I should also regard your feelings and respect your decision.

You are certainly sad too, since leaving faith is a major departure from your home life and church environment. You probably feel a bit homeless, and maybe you feel depressed too. Still, it was right to tell us the truth. It was honest. Honesty is a central principle of your upbringing and of the moral code that sustains a coherent society. Dad and I appreciate that you follow this principle. We also strive to respect your choice, which was probably made over a period of time and hours of contemplation.

I need you to know that no matter what decision you made or will make in the future, I love you. You were given to us by God and your life has been and will always be a blessing to us. You have delighted us with your love and generous personality. That will never change.

I wish for you to find happiness. I want you to succeed in your chosen career, to have friends, perhaps a spouse and children. If you have children, I want to be a loving grandparent to your children. Those wishes are firm and honest from me to you.

You know that this same love I have for you extends even into my prayers to God on your behalf. I pray for your safety, success, happiness in this life. Because you know me so well and you have known faith, you understand that I will continue to pray that God will call you back to His kingdom. As a parent, I will always be waiting for that return, and I long to bless you.

Even this issue is in God's hands.

Loving you always,

Mom

Discussion Questions

1. What do you hope for in life?
2. What things in life have dimmed your hope? What has helped restore a hopeful outlook? What do trials of life teach us about the power of hope?
3. How has God shown you that He knows what you need in this life?
4. How can we approach and encourage one who seems to have lost hope? What are good things to say to this person? What should we avoid saying?
5. How can we foster a hopeful atmosphere among our family and in our home?
6. How does God remind us that He is our hope?