

A Hope and a Future

1.

Hope When You're Surrounded

September 13, 2020

It might be a crazy thing to say in the middle of a pandemic, but I am excited about the future. Really! I am I'm energized because I see God at work, and that he is letting me be part of it.

But for a couple months late last summer it was a very different story. Not many people know this, but for the first time in my life I was deeply discouraged and even depressed. I wanted to give up. Now, to the casual observer this didn't make sense.

Last summer, Crossroads' ministry was stable and anyone would say my life was good on just about every front. Today, on the other hand, circumstances don't look as good. The nation is in upheaval, nothing is certain, and we're worshipping in a parking lot. Why would I be so upbeat today and not last year?

One simple reason: Hope. Last year, I had lost it, but today I am filled with it. Last year I was struggling mightily because, for the first time in my life, I thought I had missed God's guidance and direction. For a variety of reasons, I thought that for the rest of my life I would live with the regret of what could have been instead of living at the edge of what God was doing. I was really low.

But then, God showed me that I hadn't missed out on his purpose. Hope for the future was reborn in me. New opportunities started popping up out of nowhere. Leading during a pandemic is no picnic, but I have been sensing his voice and direction each step of the way. And I am energized! I'm seeing disciples growing, and we're taking steps to multiply disciples like never before. I was asked to lead a team to design a strategy to plant thousands of churches globally. The best is yet to come!

And that is the essence of hope: *Hopeful people are convinced that the future will be better than the present, and that they can do something to make it happen.*¹

¹ *Making Hope Happen: Create the Future You Want for Yourself and Others* by Lopez, Shane J.. (p. 18). Atria Books. Kindle Edition.

1. Biblical hope is not just a wish – as in, “I hope it doesn’t rain on our service today.” Biblical hope is a confident expectation that God has better days ahead.² In the New Testament, “hope” is the expectation of something good. And it is anchored in Christ, not circumstances.

2. Right now, there are signs many Americans are running low on hope. Since March:

- alcohol and drug use: up³
- pornography use: up ⁴
- depression and hopelessness: up ⁵
- anxiety: up⁶
- fatigue and isolation: up
- marriage problems: up ⁷

3. We each need hope. Without it we give up. We lose the capacity to dream. Discouragement and despair sink in. Fear grows. Anxiety replaces prayer. We lose confidence.

*That is not the life God intends for us. Listen to what God says to his people in **Jeremiah 29:11** - For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

That’s God’s plan for you and me! God intends to *give us* a hope and a future. If your hope is running low, you are at the right place. Over the next six weeks we’re going to ask God to teach us how to lean into the hope he gives. And today I want to leave you with a very simple message: recognizing God is with us restores and strengthens our hope.

² *The Hope Quotient*, by Ray Johnston

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340961962_Pornography_use_in_the_setting_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic

⁵ <https://usafacts.org/articles/45-americans-are-feeling-down-depressed-or-hopeless-during-covid-19-pandemic/>

⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340961962_Pornography_use_in_the_setting_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic

7 *The Strain the Covid Pandemic Is Putting on Marriages*; by Ann Marie Chaker; *Wall Street Journal* Aug. 4, 2020

In 2 Kings 6 there's a story about how God gives hope when it seems like all is lost. A people called the Arameans were raiding Israel. They would swoop into a village, steal grain, destroy houses, and kill people.

The king of Aram was secretly positioning his army in Israel's territory to ambush the Israeli army. But each time they did Aram set up their army, God told the prophet Elisha where the enemy was, and Elisha would pass that information on to the king of Israel, so the Israelites always escaped.

This enraged the king of Aram. He demanded to know who was tipping off the Israelites. His leaders told him that a prophet named Elisha was hearing from God whatever he planned. So the king of Aram goes after Elisha.

¹³ "Go, find out where he is," the king ordered, "so I can send men and capture him." The report came back: "He is in Dothan." ¹⁴ Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city. ¹⁵ When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?" the servant asked.

Elisha's servant could see that they were in major trouble. They were surrounded by a hostile army that was out to get them. There was no way out. The Arameans wanted Elisha and his servant to give up without a fight.

Elisha sees his servant stressing and says, ¹⁶ "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." I can imagine Elisha's servant perking up, thinking; "Our army arrived? We have soldiers and chariots? Where are they?" But as he looks around, he doesn't see any reinforcements. He gets confused.

¹⁷ And Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. Elisha saw a spiritual army all around them; reinforcements from God. So he wasn't worried about some measly Arameans. Chariots of fire beat wooden chariots every time. But no one else saw God's forces.

The Arameans didn't see them. They had Elisha surrounded. They were sure they would intimidate Elisha into giving up. But he didn't, so the Arameans attacked. And then something unusual happened. ¹⁸ As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, "Strike this army with blindness." So he struck them with blindness,

as Elisha had asked. By the time the enemy army got to Elisha they couldn't see anything. They were just feeling their way forward by the time they reached Elisha.

¹⁹ Elisha told them, "This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for." And he led them to Samaria.

Star Wars fans are hearing Obi-Wan-Kenobi telling the storm troopers, "These are not the droids you are looking for." But Elisha said it first!

²⁰ After they entered the city, Elisha said, "LORD, open the eyes of these men so they can see." Then the LORD opened their eyes and they looked, and there they were, inside Samaria. And Samaria was where the king of Israel 's army was stationed. Elisha delivered the Aramean troops right into their hands.

Maybe you know what it's like to feel surrounded, like there's no way out...

...No way out of the financial vise.

Everywhere you turn there is more bad news and more debt.

...Maybe you feel surrounded by fear or low self-image

You've always been that way and it seems like there's no way out

... or you are surrounded by a family that is disintegrating

To your left, right, ahead of you, behind you, there's conflict everywhere you turn.

...or you're surrounded by self-harm, or addiction.

If you feel there's no way out – if you lose your hope --- you might feel like giving up. But don't do it!

Instead, when surrounded: Open your eyes to see God's presence and love. Our hope depends on what we see. When you look at your future, what do you see? Disaster or blessing? Will your future be better or worse than today?

a. Elisha's servant was afraid because he saw only an enemy army and figured he'd be slaughtered. Elisha didn't deny that they were surrounded by an enemy army, but he could also see an even greater reality: he saw that their enemy was surrounded by the army of God!

b. The servant could only see the *physical* reality, so Elisha asked God to open the eyes of his servant so that he also could see the *spiritual* reality: an angel army surrounding them. *It might have looked like they were surrounded, but actually they were surrounded by the army of God!*

When you are losing hope, get your eyes off the problems around you and focus on the power of Gods that surrounds you!

Our future depends on what we see.

If you look around and see only the physical reality of your trouble, you will lose hope. If you look into your future and see only loss and pain, you will want to give up. But if you are a follower of Jesus, there is a *greater* spiritual reality! That is: You may be surrounded by trouble, but the Lord's love and power surrounds you. *Can you see it?*

Notice how God fought for Elisha: he blinded the enemy. We can't fight when we're blind. We lose track of where we are going, our mission. I was so depressed last summer because I couldn't see what God had in store for me. Today I can.

If you could see the presence of God around you right now – the presence and power of God with you, you would be so encouraged. That's why in **Ephesians 1:18-19**, the Apostle Paul tells his friends, *"I pray that **the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe.**"*

When our eyes are opened to God's power for us, we have hope. You may look around and see only pandemic restrictions, but God's great power is for you. *Can you see it?*

You might feel distant from people and cut off, but God loves you and he will show you his love. *Can you see it?*

When problems crowd in on us and we need to see God's love and power more clearly, one of the ways to improve our spiritual sight is to **worship** him. When we worship we look up! We become aware of the presence that is always around us. All of our pain and trouble looks different in the light of his presence. That's when hope is reborn. That's why worshipping weekly is one of the three components of this Hope and Future series. When we're surrounded, we can worship.

Also, we're more likely to see God's presence and power when we **pray bold prayers**. Ask specifically for what you need... for the money you need, for the opportunity you need, for the guidance you need. Then when you look back and see how God answered that prayer you will realize that he is for you and surrounds you.

When you are losing hope, don't give up – open your eyes to God's presence! When you feel surrounded – ask God to show you how his love surrounds you.

Last week I read the autobiography of Benjamin Kwashi; who is the Anglican archbishop of Jos, Nigeria. For years, radicalized Muslims have been trying to drive Christians out of the northern part of Nigeria. There has been an on-going cycle of violence and vengeance and hundreds of people killed. Since the attacks began, the Archbishop and his wife have fostered hundreds of orphans on their property.

In March of 2009, an armed gang of people broke into the bishop's house to kill him. He wasn't home, but his wife was. They did unspeakable things to her; they beat severely her and left her for dead. She survived, but she spent most of the following year recovering. People from all over the world prayed for her to get better, and she did, although she was left partially blinded.

In March of 2010, a year to the day after this gang beat her, they came back. They broke into his home again, and this time they did find Benjamin. They dragged him out of his house, in order to kill him. They surrounded him with machetes and clubs. Benjamin asked for just a moment to pray before they began. So, he lay in the dirt and began to pray.

A moment later he felt someone holding his hand. He looked up, and it was his wife. She could have stayed hidden, but instead she broke through this line of the same people who had attacked her a year ago and lay down next to her husband to pray with him, knowing that her life was over as well. And then a moment later, he felt someone holding his other hand. He looked, and it was his teenage son. Benjamin begged his son to leave so that he wouldn't be killed as well. And his son said, "Father, they've all left. They're all gone." Benjamin said he has no idea why – except that God is powerful, and God was there.

When we lose hope, we want to give up. But don't you do it.

What if Elisha given up when "surrounded"? He would have missed the miracle of God's deliverance. What if I had given up last year? I wouldn't get to be part of what he's doing now! Don't give up just before your breakthrough! When you are surrounded, remember, God surrounds you!

God has a plan for you": a plan not to harm you, but to bless you. He wants to give you a hope and a future – but you must receive it.

We can have hope today because God has rescued us from our biggest problem of all: That's not our finances, or a lost marriage, or a health crisis.

Our biggest problem is that on our own, we don't have a hope or a future. We are born and we don't know why. And we are going to die and we don't want to think about what happens after that. That's a problem.

But God has stepped in to get you out of that problem! Our biggest problem is that when we live life our own way, it separates us from God forever. Every one of us has sinned, and that means we are cut off from God.

Romans 6:23 says "The wages of sin is death" – that's our problem, because each of us has sinned. "But" – the rest of the verse says, "the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Jesus Christ is alive and calling you to himself today. If you are willing to stop living life your way and allow him to lead you, he will forgive and give you hope for tomorrow and a future forever with him. He created you and he loves you and he is calling you to follow him into a bright future. Will you say yes?