



Relationships

A MESS WORTH MAKING



Hope in the Middle

We often like the beginning because there is a sense of hope and potential; we can be dreamers. Or we like the end because we feel relief, gratitude, and a sense of accomplishment; the sacrifices and difficulties seem worth it. Usually the middle of something is the most difficult because that is where the true work lies. Dreams and expectations morph into a desire to just survive. We hear most of the complaints and make most of our compromises in the middle of something.

The problem with relationships is that they all take place right smack dab in the middle of something, and that something is the story of redemption—God’s plan to turn everything in our lives into instruments of Christlike change and growth. You and I never get to be married to a fully sanctified spouse. We will never be in a relationship with a completely mature friend. We will never have self-parenting children. We will never live next to a neighbor utterly free of the need to grow and change. We will never be near people who always think, say, desire, or do the right things. And the reason for all of this is that our relationships are lived between the already and the not yet.

Living Between the Already and the Not Yet

ALREADY

- Jesus has provided salvation.
- The power of sin is broken.
- We are a new creation.
- We have come through difficulty.

NOT YET

- God’s full saving work is not complete in us.
- Presence of sin has not been removed.
- We are not all that we will be in Christ.
- We still have trials to go through.
- God’s kingdom is not fully come.

Relationships in the Middle

Everyone who lives between the already and the not yet will experience four things. As we consider each of these areas, we'll also note the hope that we can have in response.

1. Our relationships will never work according to our plans. Our relationships don't work according to our plans because they are part of God's plan. This often means God will take us where we have not planned to go in order to produce in us what we could not achieve on our own. He will lead us through the hardships of relationships so that our hearts will be revealed, our character strengthened, and we will become more and more like him.

Even though our relationships will never work according to our plans, what is the hope we have in Christ?

We know God is in full control and has a plan that is for our good and for his glory, that God will not give us more than we can bear (1 Cor. 10), that God is our Shepherd and will guide us.

2. Our relationships will never live up to our expectations. Our expectations often can follow closely from our dreams. And when it comes to relationships, we dream of unchallenged unity, unfettered romance, unobstructed communication, mutual cooperation, blanket acceptance and respect, shared decisions, intimate friendship, or an absence of conflict. Our expectations tend to forget that our relationships are being lived out in the middle of the already and the not yet. This side of eternity none of us gets to be with the person of our dreams, and none of us are ready to be the person of someone else's dream! At some point in every relationship, we are required to accept graciously who the other person is.

Even though our relationships will never live up to our expectations, what is the hope we have in Christ?

Though people are flawed, Jesus is not and we can have a relationship with him; Jesus is faithful and will not give up on us or the other person; we can expect to live in harmony in the fulfilled kingdom of God.

3. Our relationships will always grapple with some kind of difficulty. Building relationships is like threading a needle while driving on a bumpy road! No relationship will be completely successful in avoiding the difficulties that are a normal part of life. Sometimes the difficulty will be the other person—pride, selfishness, greed, anger, bitterness, or impatience. Sometimes the difficulty will reflect the reality of a fallen world—racism, persecution, injury, disease, war, mechanical failures, or an imperfect government, culture, and economy.

Even though our relationships will always grapple with some kind of difficulty, what is the hope we have in Christ?

Even difficulty is sent and used by God for our own good in order to refine and mature us (James 1), God is an ever-present help in times of trouble, we can pray, and Jesus is an advocate on our behalf.

4. Our relationships will always need to improve. No matter how good even the best relationship is, room for improvement exists. Because we have not yet escaped our sin, our relationships will require difficult work and continued growth.

Even though our relationships will always need to improve, what is the hope we have in Christ?

God gives us grace to do his will; the fruit of the Spirit can increase as we remain in Christ (John 15).

The Hardship of Relationships in the Middle

The hardships of relationships are not only that they don't ever meet our expectations or follow our plans, or that they can just be difficult. The hardship includes the fact that God calls each of us to minister to the people God, in his wisdom, has placed in our lives in the midst of the difficulties. We are not called to only survive and bear with the weaknesses of others but to actually be used as instruments of grace in their lives. For this to occur requires humility to live with a sinner in a world of difficulty, gentleness to be part of what God is doing in someone's life and not get in the way, patience to deal with the sin and weaknesses of those around you, perseverance to not give in as change takes time, forgiveness, and forbearance to respond in love even when you are being provoked.

How do you feel about being called to be an instrument of change in another person's life?

Many of us feel overwhelmed or as if we can't do it. Actually this is how God planned it. Relationships will take us beyond the boundaries of our strength, beyond our natural abilities, beyond our acquired wisdom and will to succeed. Relationships will push us beyond the limits of our ability to love, serve, and forgive. Relationships will challenge our faith, exhaust us, and in certain situations leave us disappointed and discouraged. This is exactly as God intends it. When we begin to give up on ourselves, we begin to rely on him. When we abandon our own little dreams, we begin to get excited about his plan. When our ways have blown up in our faces, we are willing to see the wisdom of his ways. Our relationships are not simply designed to make us interdependent with one another but to drive us to him in humble personal dependency. When we discover and confess how weak we are, we reach out for his grace.

Encouraging Others in the Middle

Life in the middle of the already and the not yet is difficult. Therefore, the skill and practice of encouragement is essential for a biblically healthy community. It is rare when encouragement is not timely, but even when we want to encourage someone, our encouragement can fall short. We tend to make two mistakes.

1. We think encouragement is primarily about making the other person feel better.

What kinds of things might we say that focus on making the other person feel better?

"Hang on, you can make it,"

"It's not really as bad as you think,"

"You're not the only one who has to face this,"

"It's going to be okay,"

"This too will pass."

Such statements are not always true; they often provide only temporary comfort but never lead to lasting change—they can produce a temporary change of mood that melts away once the person faces the difficulty again.

2. We try to encourage the person by explaining what the problem is and why it is happening.

We think that if the person understands what is going on, he will be less anxious and more able to do things that are helpful and constructive. There are occasions where this is true and when it is important to gain insight and understanding, but explanation does not always comfort. Sometimes, the more accurate our understanding the more discouraged we become—once we had a superficial understanding, but now we know how deep the problem is and we are more overwhelmed than ever. Encouragement must go deeper than providing understanding.

Real Encouragement. Real encouragement is more about sightedness than it is about explanation—not seeing with our physical eyes but with the eyes of our heart. Spiritual sightedness is about seeing unseen spiritual realities. The reason we get overwhelmed and discouraged in relationships is not because we don't understand what is going on. We are discouraged because we don't see Christ. When the eyes of our heart don't focus on Christ, we end up focusing on the immediate difficulties. We see the husband who barely communicates. We see the friend who has been consistently disloyal. We see the child who rebels against every command. We see the boss who is unrelentingly critical. We see the relative who breaks every promise she ever makes. We see the wife who is bitter and angry. We see neighbors who are more concerned about boundaries than community. And the one thing that can give us the hope and courage to go on becomes obstructed by the looming problems. That one thing is Christ.

As we live with one another in the middle of the already and the not yet, we need more than elevated emotion and accurate understanding. We need eyes to see this one amazing reality: that we are Christ's and he is ours. This is the encouragement we all need to hear and be refocused upon. We need to help others see three things so that they do not give up and lose hope in the middle of relational difficulties:

1. Christ's Presence: Your goal here is to help people develop a "Christ is with me" mentality.

*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the
mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and
foam and the mountains quake with their surging. (Psalm 46:1–3)*

Even when cataclysmic things are happening, we can have peace because we know our powerful and glorious God is with us. Our hope does not rest on the shoulders of our own strength, wisdom, and character but on his. God is here and able to do what we could never do.

2. Christ's Promises: Though people may react negatively to hearing how Christ's promises speak to their situation—seeing them as spiritual trickery to make them feel good about something that is bothering them—those promises are the true identity of the believer. Christ's promises are not mystical, pie-in-the-sky unrealities but accurate assessments of the true resources we have as God's children.
3. Our Potential in Christ: When we struggle, we often begin to measure our potential. We assess ourselves to see whether we have what it takes to get through the difficulty. The problem is that most of us are poor personal accountants. When we add up the things that define our potential, we leave out the most important asset: Christ.

The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20b)