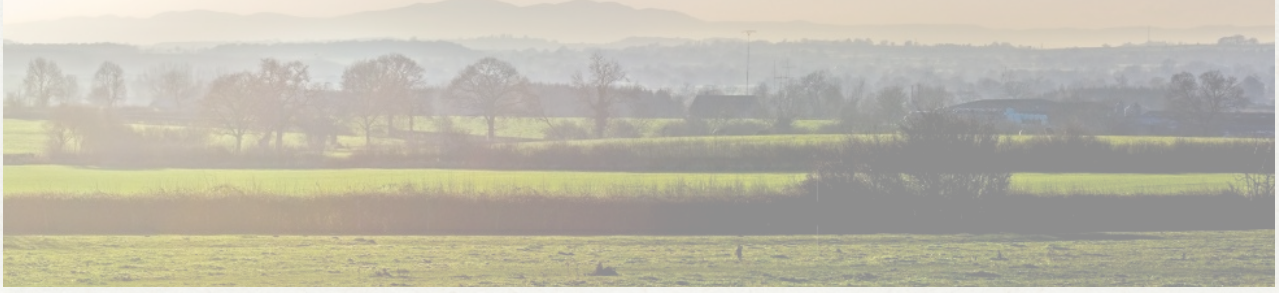




# Malvern Mashal 104



## Overweight Part Three:

### The Power of Hope

The early Church used three main symbols to epitomise the Christian faith: the fish, the dove and the anchor. Of these three, the anchor is the least spoken of today, yet Hebrews 6:19 reminds us that *we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.*

Hope is a fundamental psychological necessity – especially when we are facing circumstances beyond our control – or when something (or someone) we have placed our hope in is shown to have been fallible.

Biblically, hope stands for both the act of hoping (e.g. 1 Cor. 9:10) and the thing hoped for. Hopelessness darkens our whole outlook on life, but ‘everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself.’ (1 John 3:3) – which is why Paul prays that we will not ‘drift away’ from the hope held out in the gospel (Col. 1:23 NLT) but rather ‘that the eyes of our heart may be enlightened in order that we may *know* the confident hope He has given to those He called—His holy people who are His rich and glorious inheritance, and His incomparably great power for us who believe.’ (Eph. 1:18-19).

You will be familiar with the reminder in Hebrews 11:1, that hope is a firm assurance about things unseen. Paul subdivides the great three qualities somewhat in 1 Thess. 1:3: ‘We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ. They are all great qualities to pray for! We are *meant* to ‘rejoice in the hope of the glory of

God’, because Christ ‘the hope of glory lives within us’ (Rom. 5:2, Col. 1:27) There is nothing passive therefore about waiting for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. (Tit. 2:13)

The word *hope* in Hebrew (*tiqvah*) originally meant to *wait or look for, or to stretch like a rope*. Rahab was told to tie a tiqvah (cord or rope) to her window so she could be spared when Jericho was taken (Josh. 2:18,21). It is God’s loving desire to rescue us from many tear-filled (Baca) dangerous valley situations, and to give us the grace to see the Lord turn the Valley of Achor (Trouble) into a door of hope so that we can go from strength to strength. (Hos. 2:15, Ps. 84:6-7).

### A walk and a parable

A few weeks ago I went on a lovely walk through wasteland. A narrow path cut its way through brambles that were too high to see over. I could not see where I was going, but I was perfectly safe as long as I stuck to the limited vision I had following the path.

The other night, (during the incredible heat wave we had last week) I felt the Lord calling me to walk over a different set of fields away from town. He told me not to switch my flashlight on, but to travel blind. I could just make out the grey outline of a narrow strip of path ahead, with the dark green of the grass on either side. There were no trips or falls, but rather a very profound time of stretching out the rod of authority over all sorts of issues in prayer. At the end there were amazing views back towards the Malvern Hills, which were looking particularly beautiful, silhouetted in



the dark, with lights dotted about up and down the hillsides.

We are often called to 'travel blind' in hope. Biblical hope is much more than a sunny optimistic outlook on life, let alone mere wishful thinking. It is rather confident expectation based on solid certainty, resting on God's promises – particularly those relating to Christ's return. So certain is the future of the redeemed that the New Testament sometimes speaks of future events in the past tense, as though they were already accomplished. Hope is never inferior to faith, but is an extension of

faith. Faith is the present possession of grace; hope is confidence in grace's future accomplishment.<sup>1</sup> This really is travelling blind – and there are times when it feels as though we are walking through thick fog or darkness. If

we stick to the path the Lord is showing us, however narrow, it will lead us further into the Lord's purpose. But it is dangerous to stray off it! The important thing is not to manufacture your *own* vision at such times, but to continue trusting in God's name and nature. He does not let His servants down!<sup>2</sup>

### **Bitter or Better?**

Someone once said, 'Suffering colours life, doesn't it?' to which his hearer instant retorted, 'Yes, but I propose to choose the colour!'

It is a well observed fact that those who cope best with sudden and complete reversals of circumstances are those adapt to them fastest. A prime example would be the many who experienced extreme humiliation and suffering at the hands of their Japanese captors during the

<sup>1</sup> Hayford's Bible handbook, Thomas Nelson, p. 647.

<sup>2</sup> *Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God. But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment. (Is. 50:10-11)*

Second World War. Those without hope usually wilted and died; those with a stronger hope often managed to survive simply because they adjusted better, even to the most inhumane conditions.

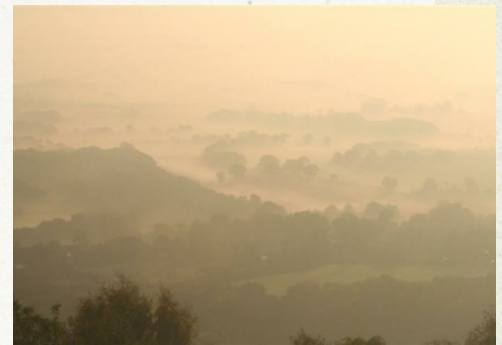
You will have heard it said that people become either bitter or better through what they suffer. If the former, then you are still left with the original problem, and have merely made it worse by responding badly to it. No wonder Paul tells us to get rid of all bitterness. . .

There is undoubted evidence in the New Testament that suffering *rightly* handled has the ability to release the finest qualities. This is so counter intuitive for our suffering-averse generation to take on board that many assume it simply cannot be the case. But how else explain verses such as Romans 5:4? 'We *boast* of our troubles, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance brings God's approval, and His approval creates hope – and this hope does not disappoint us.' (Or as the NIV puts it: 'we *rejoice* in our sufferings . . .') Such an attitude hints at something far richer than a purely stoical approach!

There is a real need for discernment here to be able to recognise a problem that needs praying away, and one we need endurance to overcome.

*Specific* hopes (in the sense of holding on to promises from the Lord) are a somewhat different matter. These come as and when the Lord gives them to us, – and there may be little we can do at a given moment to see them fulfilled. It is a great sign of maturity if we are able to keep going in hope without the 'carrot' of seeking particular goals fulfilled there and then.

Think of people you know who have modelled Christ-likeness precisely as a result of the challenges they have successfully overcome in Christ. Do you not find yourselves wanting to



spend time with them, rather than with people who offer little more than platitudes and clichés?

Those whose lives are largely untouched by suffering tend to have little to offer those who are experiencing severe trials (See Job 12:4-5). There is a divine perspective in all this. Pray that the Lord will lead you to people you can help in the very areas where you have been tested yourself.

### One example amongst many

In the course of exercising his ministry on behalf of the underground church in the Soviet era, Hans Kristian met a pastor who had lost everything at the hands of his persecutors. He writes,

*'We had expected to find a man with misery and bitterness written all over his face. There was reason enough: the prison terms he had endured, the loss of his pastorate, the humiliation and insult a qualified engineer who could speak six languages fluently must feel at being forced to sweep the streets . . . and on top of all this, to have his wife leave him because she could no longer endure the persecution, the long imprisonments, the horrible living conditions, the discrimination and psychological pressures, the sense of shame.*

*Yet sitting beside him on the bench, I was sure I had never looked into a happier face. He was radiant with the joy that Christ gives to those who trust and obey – a man whose one ambition was to tell his countrymen about Jesus Christ, and to let God's love be revealed through his life.<sup>1</sup>*

Hope springs up as we remember His kindness towards us, and turn our thoughts to the ways and places in which He has shown His faithfulness. Such memories renew our trust and lead to more thanksgiving.

### Isaiah, Hezekiah and Hope

It has been said that whilst the book of Isaiah denounces the sins of the nation in great detail, and warns the nations against pursuing

<sup>1</sup> Mission Possible Hans Kristian, Hodder and Stoughton 1975, p. 104

ways opposed to the Lord, the deepest message the book named after him brings is one of hope. Towards the end of the first part, the focus is all on one individual: the godly king Hezekiah, who worked in close partnership with the prophet, and saw the Lord's miraculous intervention as a result – not only against the all conquering Assyrians but also in his own life.

Chapter 38 opens on an apparently hopeless note. Hezekiah has fallen seriously ill, and Isaiah tells him that he is going to die. (Is. 38:1) The king had an overwhelming sense that his life was being prematurely snuffed out (38:10) The images he uses are intense ones of things being suddenly removed: a house being pulled down; and of his life being cut off from the loom (38:12).

We see him at this time as someone who is still alive – just – but for whom life is at an all time low. In his acute vulnerability he feels intensely how feeble his attempts at prayer are in the face of so overwhelming an assault. He had his life planned one way, but the Lord has brought him up short and he is heading fast towards a place he does not want to go to (38:12). Natural law will undoubtedly take its normal course unless the Lord intervenes!

Under the intensity of the pressure, Hezekiah does his best to 'compose himself,' (the literal meaning of the word 'waited' in 38:13). Then he 'cried out' to God (38:14). The word 'cried' is literally 'kept chattering on'. Like the birds around him some of the cries are shrill, others quiet, while others still are mournful. Hezekiah is acutely aware of how pathetic his attempts to seek God feel – mere birdsong in the midst of the battle. Even worse, it feels as though he is wrestling against *God*, not just enemy forces!

Bearing in mind that we enjoy a *better* hope than Hezekiah (Heb. 7:19), we can admire the king's faith in continuing to look to the power of God, asking Him to make the need His own. Just as there are 'hinge points' in many of the Psalms when lament gives way to praise, so the mood of the account changes suddenly (how I love that word!) from petition to answered prayer. Hezekiah's prayers may have

felt like nothing more than feeble birdsong to him, but God has been listening attentively and takes decisive action – so powerfully that it impacts Hezekiah at the deepest level (38:15-17). Henceforth, the king declares, he will walk humbly [thoughtfully, carefully, watching his step.] So far as he is concerned, all the anguish he has been through is worth it a thousand times over because it was all intended for his shalom, his wellbeing and wholeness. (38:17)

The Hebrew at this point literally says, ‘You loved my soul from the pit’ encompassing in one phrase, as Alex Motyer points out in his splendid book *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (IVP) ‘both the fact of deliverance and the motive of love.’

In 2 Kings 20:7-8 the action recommended by the prophet and the king’s desire for a sign are an integral part of the narrative. Here they are presented separately.

Although the Lord had spoken His promise to him, Hezekiah asked for a sign that this really would happen. The sun going ten steps back up the steps is symbolic; just as the sun had been about to set in his life so now his times are being extended by a further fifteen years. In no way is Hezekiah criticised for asking for this sign. Given the seemingly contradictory nature of Isaiah’s words to him, the king was really seeking *clarification* as well as confirmation of precisely what the Lord was saying.

The testing Hezekiah has been through has served a profound spiritual purpose – perhaps a sort of Old Testament equivalent of Paul’s thorn in the flesh. It has illuminated his mixed motives and made him all the more determined to praise the Lord with all his heart. It is one of the tragedies in Scripture that Hezekiah wasn’t quite as far advanced in the fear of the Lord as he thought he was. When the test came, in the form of envoys from Babylon sussing him out, he foolishly showed off his wealth and power, thereby demonstrating his willingness to side with a revolt against Assyria.

Without seeking the Lord to check he was doing the right thing, Hezekiah felt

his hopes rising. Perhaps it was the opportunity to play with the big boys of Premier League politicians that allowed pride to cut in. After all, many of us find success harder to handle even than failure. God’s dealings with us are designed to keep us looking to Him first and foremost so that we *can* move safely in the fullness of His authority (see Exousia [Part one](#)).

If we handle the word of God as if it was ours to command, however, rather than submitting ourselves to the Lord who speaks the Word, we may be in more danger than we realise. Hezekiah’s complacent siding with Babylon certainly led to enormous suffering for his nation in years to come. It is a serious reminder that the best of us are capable of yielding significant ground to the enemy when we are careless in what we say, and arrogant in what we do. Hezekiah was at his finest in a spirit of prayer and tears, rather than when he thought he had made it big.

The beauty of the following chapter (see for example Isaiah 40:27-31) is that we see the Lord going to enormous lengths to restore and foster hope for His people after the trauma of the Babylonian exile (see esp.v. 41). He gives divine strength and inner resources to keep us from falling over the in the face of life’s many demands – and He will not cease to do so in the perilous times the world is entering into.

We will no doubt continue this theme in a subsequent edition. God bless,

Robert & Ros

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