

## Our Hope in Christ

Are the words hope and faith the same or different? It has been said before that faith begins our spiritual lives as Christians, and hope continues our Christian lives. In other words, the word hope has a futuristic aspect to it.

When we think of the word hope, we think of things in the future. In many ways, hope takes our minds off present circumstances and refocuses us on a better place in the distant future. Hope is looking outside the context to something better, firm and dependable. Hope keeps us going amid troublesome times. Hope anchors itself in something objective and apart from the hopeless present circumstances.

Our First Reading for today, Lamentations 3:22-33, is all about the idea of hope. If you were to spend the afternoon reading through the Old Testament Book of Lamentations, you would find it a depressing, hopeless, and heavy book. It was written 600 years before Christ came to us in the manger. It was written right after the nation of Babylon destroyed the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was in ruins. The Temple had been destroyed. The majority of her people had been led away into humiliating exile, displaced to live in a foreign country named Babylon. Those that were left were experiencing complete impoverishment and a terrible famine that led to cannibalism (Lamentations 2:20). Nobody would've been able to say, "Things could be worse!" Things couldn't have been worse. There was no glimpse of the sun in the complete stormy chaos in Jerusalem. The Book of Lamentations means what it sounds like. It is the lament and tears of Jeremiah the prophet over his current circumstances.

In the opening chapters of Lamentations, we read that judgment had come upon Jerusalem for its sins. Jerusalem's spiritual leaders were spiritually bankrupt and heretical, and the people were in constant rebellion. Thus, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was a judgment against them for their sins; it was God disciplining the people of Jerusalem.

Amid the chaos, destruction and violence, we come upon our verses in our First Reading today. These 12 verses are like clean and fresh water amid a sun-scorched desert. Amid the lamenting, the agony, the pain and the loss, we read these 12 verses that speak of hope. They speak of hope not found in Jeremiah's current surroundings. They speak of hope that isn't found in the abilities of the Israelites. They speak of hope that isn't found within the feelings and cultural ethos of Jerusalem. They speak of hope that steers our eyes away from Jerusalem to almighty God's faithfulness.

It seems to me that we often judge hope on our present circumstances or the possible positive circumstances of the future. Still, if we look for hope in how things are going in this life and how we believe things will be going in the future or try to derive hope from our past, we can end up hopeless. Hope is then attached to things that are temporary and fading. Look around you. We see how our nation is spiralling out of control. We hope things get better, but what if Australia doesn't improve and fails like many of the other great world empires of the past? What if your present circumstances, finances, health, burdens, and problems don't get better but get worse? What happens if crop market prices fall and we face major drought or disastrous flooding? What happens if the cattle market plunges? I am not trying to be a defeatist. Rather, I am attempting to show that placing hope in life's events is typically a 50/50 gamble. Not only is it unstable, but we tread dangerously close to being ensnared in idolatry when our hope becomes misdirected. Our hope is only as good as the desired and realistic outcome of what our hope is in. Typically, history has shown us that the future is uncertain regarding the events of this life. Therefore, we cannot put hope in the events and situations of the present or future, for they shift and change just like the weather. Furthermore, placing hope in the things of life other than God means breaking the First Commandment and creating an idol.

Hope is also not found in our abilities. Oftentimes, we attempt to find hope in the way that we can respond to hopeless situations. We say, "If life hands me lemons, I know how to make lemonade." It is easy to do this. Things look hopeless, and we respond confidently that we can make the best out of the situation. While having a positive outlook on life is good, the problem is that we are not always able. Furthermore, if we peel back the layers, we shall recognise that the source of despair typically arises from our own doings as humans. Why would we run to our own workings for hope when our own workings are often the source of hopelessness to begin with? What happens to hope when the situation is bad, and your abilities are even worse? What happens when health problems are out of control? What happens when you physically and mentally do not have the stamina to overcome? What happens when you are defeated, beaten by the world and sin?

It is a good feeling to have hope. One walks with a smile, the world seems lighter, and one walks with a skip in their step. However, we must remember that hope is not found in our feelings; neither is hope a feeling. Hope is not found in how good or bad you feel about yourself or the world around you. Often, we judge things on how good we feel. If we have excitement or enthusiasm about an idea, we say we are hopeful. Like the current circumstances of life and our own abilities, feelings can come and go. Feelings of hope rise and fall like the waves of the ocean.

Christian hope arises only from the fact that God has mercy upon us and instils hope in us. Christian hope never has any other object or matter or foundation than the simple mercy of God, not our works, not our abilities, and not our feelings. Hope must always have an object that it can anchor to. Hope needs a source, and hope is only as good as the source that it is in.

Jeremiah expresses hope not in his sadness or the current events of his time but rather in the faithfulness of God. His hope was in God's steadfast love, God's unending grace. Think about this for a moment: Jeremiah had it bad, far worse than any of us can imagine, and the hope he was given was in God's faithfulness. The same can be said of all periods of time. There has always been sickness, greed, corruption, perversity, war, death and despair. And there has always been God's faithfulness and His enduring promises.

So are we to look away from the problems of life and man up to hope in God's faithfulness? Believe it or not, lamenting isn't necessarily a bad thing. It can be. Our laments and agony about the pains of life can become quite sinful, slanderous, and "gossipy," but lamenting faithfully is precisely how God created us to be. Jeremiah lamented over the hopelessness of his circumstance and the people's inabilities. He confessed his people's sins and life's problems and pain. He lamented to God; He cried out for mercy. When bad things happen in life, Jeremiah puts it best: "He should sit alone and keep silent. For the LORD has laid it on him. 29 He should put his mouth in the dust. Perhaps there is hope" (Lam. 3:28-29). We get to lament the hopelessness of our circumstances to God, and we also get to hear the hopefulness of God's faithfulness to us in the midst of the hopelessness that we face.

Hope must have an object, which is God's faithfulness, shown to us in the person and work of Jesus. We have salvation because of God's faithfulness to us in the person of Jesus. In Him we have the promise of the resurrection. In Him, we have the promise that everything will be refined.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul confesses that he is a mere and weak fragile jar of clay, but the Lord's power is greater than him. Paul confesses that he is hard-pressed on every side but not crushed. He confesses that he is perplexed but not in despair. He confesses that he is persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed. Paul says that even though the outer nature is wasting away, he does not lose heart. In other words, Paul does not lose heart because he knows it isn't this temporary life from which we derive hope. Rather, we derive our hope from what is eternal and sure. Jesus is sure. God's promises are sure in the midst of uncertainty. Your identity and worth are in Jesus. Nothing in the events of today or tomorrow can change what Jesus has done for you. God's love is steadfast for you because Jesus' salvation still stands for you. There is hope in the midst of despair for you and me, and that hope is in Christ Jesus our Lord.