

Keeping Hope Alive

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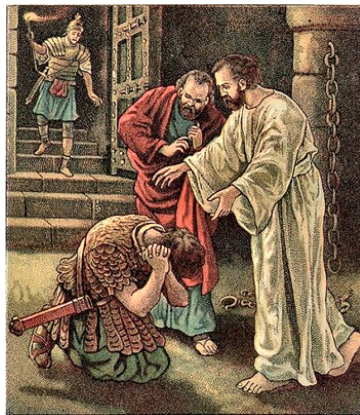
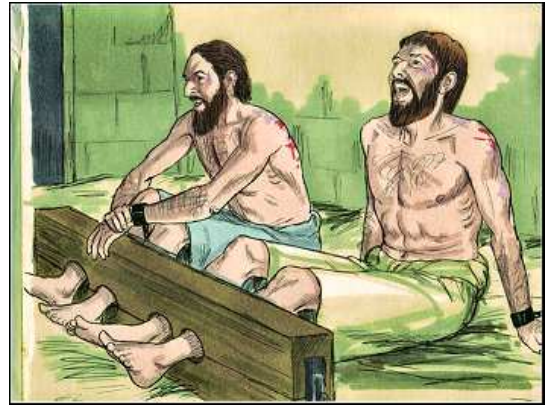
Acts 16:16-34 NIV

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days.

Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her. When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped.



But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.

At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God — he and his whole family.

Philippians 4:4-14 NIV

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

Did you ever find yourself in a situation when it seemed you were without hope? Many situations in life can cause us to feel hopeless, wondering whether we can go on, or how we can possibly get out of the jam we're in.

Perhaps you've had to face a serious or even life-threatening illness, or the illness of a loved one, and no amount of prayer or medical attention has seemed to help. Or you've experienced the loss of a loved one, and you face a future of uncertainty without that person at your side. Or family issues seem intractable; a member of your family — their attitudes, choices, and behavior — are disappointing you in some way, and in spite of all your efforts to deal with the situation nothing ever seems to change. Or perhaps you've encountered a financial reversal; expenses are piling up and you don't see any way to get the resources you need to handle them. Or, if you're like me, you look at the world situation and the trends in our nation, and the future looks bleak. I lose sleep over politics, and the stupid and corrupt policies of our government, and the spread of a militant Islam determined to wipe out all who refuse to adopt it.



We can lose hope over many things. And sometimes we just kind of feel like everything's hopeless, although we can't pinpoint any specific cause for how we feel. Discouragement settles over us for no apparent reason. Sometimes I've awakened in the morning just feeling sad, as though all was hopeless, yet nothing has really changed from yesterday and I wonder why I have such a feeling that all is lost, nothing has any point to it.

I wonder whether the apostle Paul was tempted to allow hopelessness to creep over him because of the persecution he encountered as he spread the gospel of Messiah Jesus throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. He did tell the Corinthians that he had a "thorn in the flesh," a "messenger of the satan" that harassed him. There's been a lot of speculation about what that was, but given the severity of the travel conditions Paul encountered, and the energy he applied to his missionary work, it probably wasn't any kind of physical disability. Most likely it was the persecution he endured, and the spiritual and not-so-spiritual, opposition he encountered, as he fulfilled the call Jesus has placed upon him to "carry his name" to the Gentiles, the people outside the Jewish homeland.



Paul pled with the Lord to take away this "thorn in the flesh," and the answer he got was, "My grace is enough for you." And, of course, God's grace was sufficient, because Paul — in his letters at least — never gave voice to hopelessness. As he told the Corinthians, speaking of his work as an apostle, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body" (2 Corinthians 4:8-11).

Paul encountered many seemingly hopeless conditions in his travels. Take the incident at Philippi that Luke relates in our reading from Acts, chapter 16. After being arrested on false charges, Paul and his associate Silas find themselves in stocks, and perhaps chains, in prison. Being a prisoner in the Roman Empire was not fun. For one thing, there was no food service; if you were in prison your friends or family had to bring in food for you and provide for other basic needs. Those convicts who escaped from the prison in New York State didn't know when they had it good. Our son Derek, a professional chef, works for the New York State Department of

Corrections in the food service of that very prison at Dannemora from which those men escaped; it's only twenty miles from Plattsburgh where he and his family live. But there was no food service in a Roman prison. If hope depends on eating, Paul certainly had few grounds for hope there!

Moreover, Philippi was a Roman colony, founded by ex-Roman soldiers, and loyalty to Caesar was especially strong in that city where many residents took pride in their Roman citizenship. Yet Paul had proclaimed the gospel, "Jesus is Lord!" throughout Asia Minor and had now brought that gospel to Philippi. Since "Lord" was a title the Roman Emperor claimed for himself, Paul's work in Philippi must have put him under special suspicion even before the incident that brought about his arrest. Things didn't look too good for Paul and Silas.

Well, we know how their story turned out. A midnight earthquake shook up the prison, and brought the jailer to his knees wondering how he could get out of that mess. That's what the jailer meant when he cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" He wasn't thinking about his "spiritual" condition, he was thinking about what the authorities would do to him if his prisoners escaped. The jailer got "saved" not only by believing in Jesus and being baptized, but also because Paul kept the rest of the prisoners from taking advantage of the earthquake damage to do what those New York convicts did — sneak out of the "big house." And then, when Paul pulled his own Roman citizenship out of his hip pocket, the authorities themselves got nervous because of how they had handled his case, and personally escorted him and Silas from the prison.



Paul had passed through an apparently hopeless situation in Philippi, but the church he established there still had to deal with the hostility the Christian faith always encounters when loyalty to Messiah Jesus conflicts with the prevailing values of the surrounding culture — the same sort of hostility Christians are now encountering in our own nation. Paul moved on to other fields of evangelism, but the Philippian church he

left behind still needed to be strengthened in their witness. So, some time later, Paul wrote to the Philippians the letter from which we read a portion. When Paul wrote this letter he was again in prison, this time probably in Rome awaiting his judicial appeal to Caesar — an imprisonment that may have ended with his death. Again, in what to a lesser man would seem a hopeless situation, Paul takes the initiative and writes back to the Philippian Christians a message of hope and encouragement. Let's look at some encouragement for ourselves.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near."
— Philippians 4:4-5

Paul's first word is this: *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near"* (4:4-5). Sadly, rejoicing isn't something we often see in some churches. People in our culture — especially men — are sometimes reluctant to show much enthusiasm for the faith. I think that's why Paul said, "Rejoice, and again I say, rejoice!" He knew he'd have to tell some of us twice. Why is that? I think it's because rejoicing — in whatever form it might take for you or me — is a sign of *commitment*, of being *invested* in something. If you're invested in your grandson's progress, you will cheer at his football game. If you're invested in Jesus, you might want to throw yourself a bit more into singing, and prayer, and testimony, and receiving Communion — the things we do during worship (and, I must say, the singing in this church seems to be getting better from week to week).

Rejoicing in the Lord's presence is a witness against those powers of darkness that want to steal your hope. Philippi, as a pagan city, was full of festivals to the local gods; rejoicing and celebration in the streets were

common events. When Paul urges the Philippian Christians to “rejoice in the Lord,” in the Lord Jesus, he’s advising them to take up a weapon against the false values of their surrounding culture. They’re to rejoice with “gentleness,” he says — not with the violence and gore of the pagan animal sacrifice to the city’s idols, but with the witness of a life of doing good, of showing compassion to all.

And Paul gives the Philippian church a reason for rejoicing: “The Lord is near.” I don’t think Paul is saying here that the “second coming” is about to occur. I think he’s saying that Jesus is *always near*, with his people at all times in the Holy Spirit just as Jesus told his disciples he would be: “I am with you to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). To rejoice, as Paul is advising us, may require us to adjust our concept of God. If we think of the Lord as remote, far away, and not normally involved in the life of this world — so that we have to implore him, in prayer, to get involved — then we may find it hard to rejoice. If, on the other hand, we develop that sense that the Lord is *always near* — through exposure to his Word, through feeding on his presence at the Lord’s Table, through the fellowship of other believers, through looking for his hand in every event of our life and in the operation of the world about us — then we will have reason to rejoice, and to keep hope alive. As David says, in Psalm 16, “I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and *my tongue rejoices*; my body also will rest secure” (Psalm 16:8-9).

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanks-giving, present your requests to God."

— Philippians 4:6

Second, Paul goes on to say, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God"* (4:6). In a way, this is just an elaboration on what Paul has already been saying. Stay in touch with God by conversing with him. Our prayers are not just requests, asking the Lord for his help. Our prayers are also our thanksgiving to him for what he has done. “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits” (Psalm 103:2). As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). When we give thanks to the Lord, acknowledging him as our healer and provider — when we present to him our joys as well as our concerns — then hope springs to life in us.

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things."

— Philippians 4:8

Paul is going to “flesh this out” as he goes along. His third word to the Philippians, and to us, is this: *"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things"* (4:8). Keep hope alive by thinking about positive things, and that doesn’t just mean “Christian” things. Paul was a man grounded not only in the biblical faith of his Jewish heritage, but also well versed in the philosophy and learning of his Graeco-Roman environment. He was from Tarsus in Asia Minor, a university town that he himself called “no mean city” (Acts 21:39). He understood not only the

ignorance and depravity of the culture around him, but also its elements of nobility and beauty, which he understood as gifts from the providence of God. As he said to the Athenian philosophers on the Areopagus, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:24-25).

It’s good for Christians to find pleasure not only in what we sometimes call “the things of God” in a narrow sense, like the Scriptures and worship and prayer, but also in “the things of God” in a wider sense: the fine arts, literature, science, technology, industry, athletics, skills and talents of all kinds that haven’t been

corrupted by the degenerate tendencies of a godless culture. When Paul says “think on these things,” he doesn’t just mean to remember that they exist. He means *think them through*, involve yourself in them. Thinking about these things, and being adept at them, may give our Christian witness credibility with people who are involved in those aspects of culture but who don’t know the Lord. Paul’s knowledge of Greek poetry and philosophy stood him in good stead when he spoke to the Athenian intellectuals, for in that speech he quoted both one of their poets and one of their philosophers. And we can find hope through involvement in whatever is honorable and praiseworthy. Shirley Anne finds encouragement through her work as editor of a poetry magazine, and I find refreshment through wide exposure to symphonic and other types of music. Each of us will find the appropriate opportunity to take Paul’s advice and “think on these things.”

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

— Philippians 4:9

Paul, in our passage from Philippians, then adds this: *"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you"* (4:9). One of the best ways to be hopeful about life is to follow the example of a contented person. If we spend all our time with a grouchy person who constantly complains about this or that, the effect will rub off on us. We need peaceful people in our life, people who are models of hope and contentment. If the people you live with aren’t very encouraging, find more positive people — especially fellow members of the body of Christ — to spend some time with, and follow their example. Paul wasn’t afraid to offer himself as a mentor and model, a man who knew the secret of contented living, as we’ll see in a moment. He wasn’t afraid to tell the Corinthians, for example, “Be imitators of me, as I am of the Messiah” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

— Philippians 4:12-13

Paul then elaborates on the secret of his contentment, and his hope: *"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength"* (4:11-13). Perhaps, as Paul writes to his friends in Philippi, he’s recalling that time when he and Silas were in prison there, victims of an evil plot against them because of their witness to the lordship of Jesus. What was their secret of being content in that difficult situation?

Well, what were Paul and Silas doing at midnight when the earthquake struck the city and set them free? Luke records that they “were *praying and singing hymns to God*, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” Instead of commiserating with one another about the fix they were in, they were offering praise to the Lord. Worship is a powerful way to get our focus off our problems and unto the majesty of the living God, the Creator of all things. And sometimes, as in Paul’s case, God uses that opportunity to bring about a solution to the difficulty. Paul knew, too, that Jesus gives his servants the ability to do whatever he calls them to do; “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” That was his secret: the knowledge that the risen Jesus was with him, giving him the ability through his Holy Spirit to endure whatever he had to endure, and to find hope through it all. Contentment, and hope, don’t come from external circumstances; they arise from within, from our membership in Jesus: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).

Paul adds one final item to his list, in a kind of roundabout way, when he tells the Philippians, *"Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles"* (4:14). Compared with some of the churches Paul had established, the

church in Philippi was reasonably well to do. He and Silas had been invited to stay there in the home of Lydia, a woman who was a dealer in purple cloth — an expensive item in the ancient world. Evidently the church in Philippi met in her home, and this little group of early believers was equally generous to Paul and supported his work as he went on to other parts of Macedonia and Greece. They had been his partners in ministry, and in the beginning of his letter he thanks them for that support. Now, Paul thanks them once again for sharing in his difficulties. The Philippian Christians had followed his advice, repeated earlier in the letter: "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (2:4).

The way to hope is to avoid being isolated from other believers. Instead, stay connected to them and *take an interest in their needs*. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

. . . As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:2, 10). Indeed, that's the purpose of our church: not only to focus on the Lord and give him the praise due him, but also *to be a family*, offering support and encouragement to one another.

So let's review Paul's checklist for overcoming discouragement and depression, and living in confidence and hope:

- Rejoice in the Lord's presence.
- Stay connected to God through prayer.
- Focus our thinking on positive things.
- Follow the example of a contented person.
- Rely on the strength of Jesus within.
- Stay involved with other believers.

The ground of our hope is the resurrection of Jesus, who is Head over all things. Knowing that Jesus is near, and that we belong to his family, is what banishes discouragement and keeps hope alive.

"Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles."
— Philippians 4:14

"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."
— Philippians 2:4

Keeping Hope Alive

- *Rejoice* in the Lord's presence.
- Stay *connected to God* through prayer.
- Focus our thinking on *positive things*.
- Follow the *example* of a contented person.
- Rely on the *strength of Jesus* within.
- Stay *involved* with other believers.

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