

Light at the End of the Tunnel

Have you ever felt like life had you up against a wall, and there was no way out? Maybe you feel like that this morning. In his book *Growing Deeper* Chuck Swindoll tells an unforgettable story about Major Harold Kushner and a marine who was held by the Viet Cong for five and a half years:

Among the prisoners in Kushner's POW camp was a tough young marine, 24 years old, who had already survived two years of prison-camp life in relatively good health. Part of the reason for this was that the camp commander had promised to release the man if he cooperated. Since this had been done before with others, the marine turned into a model POW and the leader of the camp's thought-reform group.

As time passed he gradually realized that his captors lied to him. When the full realization of this took hold he became a zombie. He refused to do all work, rejected all offers of food and encouragement, and simply lay on his cot sucking his thumb. In a matter of weeks he was dead.

Why? The marine realized that his captors had lied to him. There was no hope for release. It didn't matter how he cooperated. All his hope was gone.

Hope is powerful. It's been said, "Hope sees the invisible, feels the intangible, and achieves the impossible."

That's what makes hope so meaningful. As long as there's hope we face the things of life with a sense of confidence. Without hope we lose the will to keep going.

Now, "hope," interestingly, is a favorite word in the Bible. It's used over 130 times. The Bible tells us that hope does not disappoint and that God is the God of hope. In the Bible we read about the hope of glory, the hope of the gospel, the hope of salvation, the hope of Israel, the hope of eternal life, and the hope of God's calling.

In the face of a world that's often hopeless, God presents Himself as the source of hope. In Lamentations the prophet Jeremiah declares: *This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. Through the LORD'S mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!"*

I don't know about you but I don't ever want to give up hope. I want to know what the Bible has to say about this most precious commodity.

What is hope like in the midst of pessimism, uncertainty and silence? Why do we need it? How does it make us strong?

Turn with me to Luke 2:21 Pg 992

Today we're going to check out the lives of two people - Simeon and Anna, who never gave up their hope in God. They waited for the Messianic promises, devoted themselves to God, and served tirelessly. Their hope in God was rewarded.

Begin with me in verse 21 as Luke sets the stage for the introduction of two totally unique individuals. **Read 21-24**

This chapter in the Christmas story picks up eight days after Jesus' birth. Joseph has apparently remained in Bethlehem after the census, deciding to make it their home. And on the 8th day since Jesus' birth, Luke tells us that, like all Jewish boys, Jesus was circumcised. It was also customary to give the boy his name on this day and Jesus was given the name the angel instructed even before His conception.

A little over a month later, Joseph and Mary took the infant Jesus and made the journey north to the temple in Jerusalem so that they might obey Jewish Law by observing two more important ceremonies:

(1) The first was known as THE REDEMPTION OF THE FIRSTBORN....according to Exodus 13:2 every firstborn male belonged to God.....because He had saved all first-born sons of the Israelites in Egypt---on that first Passover night. So all Jewish parents participated in this ceremony through which they could buy back their son from God at a price of about 5 shekels---paid to the priest.

(2)THE PURIFICATION AFTER CHILDBIRTH. According to Leviticus 12 when a woman had given birth to a child, if it was a boy she was permitted to go about her household duties and her daily business but she couldn't enter the Temple or share in any religious ceremony during this time period. When the required time period had passed she was to bring to the temple a lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon for a sin offering.

A lamb was a somewhat expensive sacrifice, and so the law said that if she couldn't afford it she could bring two pigeons. This was called THE OFFERING OF THE POOR.

Mary and Joseph chose the poor selection, for the mother who brought the Lamb of

God into the world could not afford to purchase a sacrificial lamb. But in time her son, Jesus, would be called by his cousin John, *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."*

Jesus was born into an ordinary home for His day - a home where there were no luxuries, a home where every penny had to be counted, a home where the members of the family knew what it was like to struggle financially.

Joseph and Mary, being Jewish, were living out their lives under the law of the Lord. Paul wrote in Gal. 4:4: *"But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons."* Later, Jesus would say to his disciples, *"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill it."* Jesus humbly submitted to the requirements of the OT law as a sign that he voluntarily took upon himself the obligations of his people as their Redeemer.

Do you ever have trouble meeting people? Don't know how to start up a conversation or how to approach people? Do you wish that people would come up to you rather than you having to approach them? Then let me share a sure-fire way to grant you your wish - have a baby.

Those of you who have had babies know exactly what I'm talking about, right? Your out in public with your baby and someone's always coming up to you to talk about the baby. Little old ladies in Wal Mart give you advise: *"You'd better cover that baby's ears. That baby's too young to be out in a crowded store. That's not the way you hold a baby!"*

Anyway, if we were in the temple at Jerusalem on a certain day some 2000 years ago we may have seen a sight like that: A young couple, obviously tired from too many night feedings, with their first baby - a son. And standing beside them is an elderly man with a big grin on his face holding the child. As he cradles the baby he seems to be singing, while mom hovers close, wondering if this old fellow might drop her precious bundle of joy. Right behind them is a senior-aged woman, also obviously delighted at the presence of this one month old infant.

If we were like most people of the day we probably wouldn't have recognized it, but this was no ordinary baby. This was no ordinary moment.

And these two older characters were no ordinary Israelites. These two teach us some powerful lessons about hope,

I. A Person With Biblical Hope Walks by Faith not by Sight **Read 25**

Sweeping across Germany at the end of World War II, Allied forces searched farms and houses looking for snipers. At one abandoned house, almost a heap of rubble, searchers with flashlights found their way to the basement.

There on the crumbling wall, a victim of the Holocaust had scratched a Star of David. And beneath it, in rough lettering, the message:

I believe in the sun - even when it does not shine;
I believe in love - even when it is not shown;
I believe in God - even when he does not speak.

Isn't it amazing that the same sun that hardens the clay softens the wax . The same events in life that cause one person to become hardened and bitter cause another person to draw closer to God.

Simeon was unique. What motivated Simeon? Captivated him? Or kept him focused?

Do you know how long the period of silence between the Old and New Testament lasted? The Jews were thinking, longing, wondering...for 400 years. Simeon never gave up that hope.

What kind of guy was he? Luke lets us in on some of his important character qualities.

a) He was *just and devout*. Here was a man who took his faith seriously. He didn't just show up in church occasionally and say, "There, I did my duty." His faith was real. He was committed to God.

When our faith is just an tack-on in our life there's not much to go on when life seems tough or God seems silent. We're stuck putting our hope in other people like the young Marine in the POW camp.

The problem with that is, people fail us. Even the people who are our side fail us. We all fail at times. Simeon was simply *a man* living in Jerusalem, but one who was

just and devout. He had faith.

b) He was patiently waiting for *the consolation of Israel*. That's an expression which summarizes the faith of the Old Testament believers in the promises of God concerning the restoration of Israel through the coming of her Messiah.

In other words Biblical hope isn't just faith. You could have faith in the wrong thing! Simeon didn't have a watered down, generic faith. He believed in the clearly stated promises of God. Biblical hope is based on the faithfulness of almighty God Himself.

c) The Holy Spirit was upon him. In fact **Verse 26 (Read 26-28)**

Luke has referred to the Holy Spirit 7 times so far. That in itself shows how important the Spirit is for Luke. And here God the Holy Spirit is in control of Simeon. He's not trying to run the show. Simeon has no agenda. He's just willing to be used by God for what ever God wants.

He had been placed in Israel to point out the Christ when He came. He was looking for the Lord's Christ and when he saw Him, Simeon realized that a great drama had been set into motion at last. I can imagine that every day as he went into the Temple area he must have looked around him to see if the Messiah had come. Is it this one? No...Is that the Christ? No....

I suppose that the temple officials....hurrying about doing what they thought was GOD's business considered Simeon to be an old fool...a nuisance. Blinded by their own self-righteousness they never dreamed that it was Simeon and not themselves that had a direct line to God!

Well one day after decades of looking, Simeon walked into the Temple and he saw a poor couple. A man who was a carpenter from Nazareth and his wife, both of them probably quite young. They had a child, a tiny one---just a little over a month old. Immediately the Holy Spirit set a little alarm off in Simeon's head....that's the one! that's Him!

Simeon didn't question by looking on the outward appearance. He didn't say, "But, God, how can THIS be Your Messiah? I expected somebody much more important than this!"

He humbly accepted the revelation as God gave it to him...maybe that is what it means to be "righteous or devout"... to have enough faith in God...to be so familiar

with His voice....that you can understand things from His perspective.... Imagine how he felt! Finally....this is the one!

So he took the baby in his arms, praised God for deliverance and announced his own retirement.

Read 29-32

This is the Song of Simeon, the third Christmas carol in Luke. there's 3 key words in Simeon's song; *salvation, revelation, and glory*.

I've known a few people along the way who have told me they sincerely believe that when they die, that's it. There's no heaven. There's no hell There's nothing but the ugliness of death and the cold tomb.

Now, I can't see in a person's heart. I have no idea if all of those people really believed what they were saying or just wanted it to be true because they didn't want to face God. All I know is, that philosophy is a philosophy of despair.

If a few short years of life with a few laughs and a lot of tears is all there is then we're hopeless. But, a person with Biblical hope walks by faith not by sight.

Of course then, so does the atheist. Atheists walk by faith not by sight too. It's just not a faith based on the Bible. There's no scientific proof that God doesn't exist.

There's no scientific proof for the spontaneous origination of life on this planet.

Prof. G. A. Kerkut (Dept of Physiology & Biology, Univ of Southampton, UK) in *Implications of Evolution* wrote: It is therefore a matter of faith on the part of the biologist that biogenesis did occur and he can choose whatever method of biogenesis happens to suit him personally; the evidence for what did happen is not available.

We all walk by some kind of faith. I prefer to walk in a faith that's supported by evidence. The evidence for the truth of the Bible is overwhelming. And here's part of it right here.

God's prophets wrote specific predictions over centuries that were fulfilled to the letter in the person of Jesus Christ.

They told what family he'd come through. That he'd be born in Bethlehem. That He'd be born to a virgin. That He'd be rejected by His own people. That He would enter Jerusalem in the triumphal entry. That He'd be betrayed by a friend for 30 pieces of silver. That He'd be crucified while soldiers gambled for His clothes. That He'd be buried in a rich man's tomb. The prophet Daniel even foretold the exact year of His death.

Simeon was responding to God's Holy Spirit as He pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment.

Jesus Christ came to be the saviour of the world. To lay down His life for sinful people like us. And he came for Jews and Gentiles alike.

Romans 15:13 calls God the God of hope. *Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

No wonder **Read vs 33**

- I. *A Person With Biblical Hope Walks by Faith not by Sight*
- II. *A Person With Biblical Hope Shares that Hope With Others*

Do you know how many people had blessed the parents of Jesus at his birth? The angels appeared to the shepherds, made their announcement, sang and departed. The shepherds arrived, saw the baby, praised God and told their neighbors the good news and left.

The wise men came, worshipped the child, brought gifts, and went home.

Simeon was the only one to give them a personal blessing. **Read vs 34-35**

You might say, "That's a blessing? It sounds pretty ominous to me."

Remember a person with Biblical hope shares that hope. Simeon speaks to Mary, possibly because Mary was the actual birthparent of Jesus while Joseph wasn't, or possibly because Joseph would pass away before the things spoken of here would come to pass.

Mary is going to see and experience a series of heartwrenching events when Jesus starts His ministry. It's hard to have hope when you see your firstborn child beaten, mocked, and murdered.

It's always tough to have hope when the ugliness and pain of life hits you head on. Hope comes from knowing that God is in control. Hope comes from knowing that God is working all things (ultimately) after the counsel of His own will.

The Atheist asks, "How can you believe in a God who allows pain and suffering in the world?" Eli Weisel, the Nobel prize winning author of *Night* and a number of other books about the Holocaust, is an Auschwitz survivor who turned to atheism because of what he experienced.

I don't claim to have ever experienced suffering and injustice as great as Eli Wisel. I pray to God that I never do. I don't speak this morning as his judge, but I do have a question.

If there is no God. If all simply happens by chance. What shred of hope is there for any of us? If God is not the sovereign Lord of all the earth. If He is not moving all of human history to a culmination point. If He does not work in the lives of people though suffering. Then what scrap of meaning is there to life? What morsel of purpose is there for us to grasp? What sliver of hope is there?

There isn't any. Then nobody's suffering and nobody's life has any meaning at all. If there is no God then who's to say that Hitler was wrong? If there is no God who sets the standards? See then wrong is what you want it to be.

We think it's wrong to slaughter 6 million Jews. Hitler thought it was right.

Hope comes from knowing that God promises, "I'm at work and ultimately *I make all things new.*"

When the time comes for Mary to see her son arrested on trumped up charges and presented to a mob who yells, "*Crucify Him. His blood be on us and on our children.*" Mary needs something to hold on to.

When the time comes for Mary to see her son beaten and bloody, stumbling though the streets of Jerusalem carrying His cross, Mary needs something to strengthen her.

When the time comes for Mary to see her son writhing in agony, hands and feet nailed to a cross, a crown of thorns pressed into his head, Mary needs something to grasp.

When it comes to that awful moment when she hears Him cry out from the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Mary needs something to fortify her spirit.

This is what Mary will hold on to. This is what will strengthen her when her own strength has evaporated: Its the purpose and plan of God that *this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against*

It’s the sovereign Lord working out His purposes when *a sword will pierce through her own soul also.*

A person with Biblical hope shares that hope. In this case Mary needed to have the assurance that her life and the life of her Son were in the Father’s hands. Mary had a peek at the baby’s nature, mission, and revelation - one that affected words, thoughts and hearts.

- I. *A Person With Biblical Hope Walks by Faith not by Sight*
- II. *A Person With Biblical Hope Shares that Hope With Others*
- III. *A Person With Biblical Hope Sees Their Value Before God*

Read 36-38

Anna was a tremendous woman of hope. She was an eighty-four years old lady whose husband died seven years into their marriage, and she had remained a widow.

Age, romance and status meant little to her in view of her value before God.

Have you ever thought what it was like to be eighty-four? We have a few in our congregation who know first hand. But for those of us who don’t here’s a description written by Bruce Bliven. Bliven was the New Republic for thirty years, lived with his wife in England.

"At 86, Rose and I live by the rules of the elderly. If the toothbrush is wet, you have brushed your teeth. If the bedside radio is warm in the morning, you left it on all night. If you are wearing one brown shoe and one black shoe, you have a pair just like it somewhere in the closet.

"Try not to mind when a friend tells you on your birthday that a case of prune juice has been donated in your name to a retirement home.

"I stagger when I walk, and small boys follow me, making bets on which way I'll go next. This upsets me children shouldn't gamble.

Like most elderly people we spend many happy hours in front of the TV set. We rarely turn it on."

For the past 40 years our culture has been more and more youth oriented. That's interesting because at the same time the population of older folks has grown tremendously and is expected to grow even more in the next decades.

Pr 16:31 *A gray head is a crown of glory* The Bible says honor those who are older because they have the wisdom of life experience. We don't do that as a society do we?

Anna valued who she was, what she did, and where she was. There was no bitterness, retirement, or inactivity.

Why? In God's eyes, Anna was valuable, not by her years of life, number of husbands, or places she had visited. Anna may have been old and even somewhat odd to others, but she was an extraordinary person who was separated for God, and obedient to God, and approved by God. She had a vital ministry of prayer.

She saw her value before God. Understanding that we have purpose strengthens our sense of hope. We were created to experience unconditional love and to have purpose in life. Both of those were lost in the garden when Adam sinned and both were restored by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christ came to pay the wages of sin and open the door of God's love to us. Christ rose again so that we could participate in His life by faith, so that every one of us would have purpose. 1Co 6:20 *For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.*

Have you ever felt like life had you up against a wall, and there was no way out? In the face of a world that's often hopeless, God presents Himself as the source of hope.

The prophet Jeremiah declares: *This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. Through the LORD'S mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!"*