

# Hope

There's a fundamental thing we need to understand about hope: hope is always associated with life; it is never associated with death.

- *"Who ever is joined to the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion" Ecc9:4*

- *This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live. Deu 30:19*

- *Hizbollah's secretary, Hassan Nasrallah, said in an interview after a recent prison swap between Israel and his group: "We have discovered how to hit the Jews where they are most vulnerable. The Jews love life, so that is what we shall take away from them. We are going to win, because they love life and we love death."*

## 1 The Creation & Hope

The Lord Jesus often spoke about God's creation, for example when he pointed to the beauty of flowers or birds of the air as illustrations for us. The creation can also give us a picture of **hope**. Take a look at ants for example. We know something of their intricate homes and busy activity, but what happens when there's a real threat of floods or fire? There's no mindless scattering in panic. Instead there's an urgent roundup of forces to gather up their eggs and march with them to safety.

Stop one of the ants along the way and ask it why it's doing this and of course it would look at you with bemusement and say, "Excuse me, I've got work to do." And off it goes with its mates. The whole thing is written into their colony. As a unit, they're protecting their progeny. Life means something.

Of course there's a kind of Darwinian idea of *survival* in all of this, and evolutionists may say that it's a kind of 'mother-love' thing; a Gaia mother earth thing, seeing each colony has a queen over-all and somehow the *queen* is directing the works. Bee colonies also have a queen, **but who institutes the queen?** If a queen gets old and dies, how do they get a new one?... If their queen dies, bees can actually choose female eggs and relocate them into bigger cells and then feed them richer food than normal - royal jelly. So, **who's in charge?**

- Back to the ants in a fire thing. Why *are* they marching off with their eggs? What for? Why would anyone want to survive a forest fire - or survive at all? What is it in creation, in us, that flees death? OK, we may say it's a pain thing and we don't want to suffer, so why not leave the burden of the eggs behind? What is it in us that yearns?

- The story of Noah and the ark isn't a naturalistic story about the survival of the fittest; it is a story of how important the future is. Noah wasn't only looking after his own skin or even his family's skin: under God's instruction he was ensuring a future for all. Whatever we make of that story (archaeological research does show there was a massive flood in the region south of Mt Ararat), the account is there, and it's a story full of moral purpose, promise and new life. It's the same with the story of Joseph. In that story there are dark and murderous undertones; but meaning and future run through it all: God is at work, and as Joseph said at the end: God meant it for good.

## 2 Israel & Hope

**Right through Israel's history there have been promises.** You'll remember when Jacob went north to look for a wife after deceiving his brother Esau. He came to a place and stayed there all night and while sleeping he had a dream about a ladder which reached up to heaven and there were angels of God ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood above it and said:

*"I am the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."* **Gen 28:13-15**

Also, as we read in Deuteronomy, the Lord had said to Israel, "I am your life."

- The promises to Israel were to be faithfully remembered. **Can you remember the things that they had to do to remind them?** They were to lay up the Lord's words in their heart and in their soul and bind them as a sign on their hand, a frontlet between

their eyes. They had to teach them to their children, speak about them at home and on the road, when they lay down and rose up, write them on their doorposts and gates ... and this was so that *their days and the days of their children could be multiplied in the land of which the LORD swore to their fathers to give them, like the days of the heavens above the earth* (from Deut 11).

**The story of Israel, then, is really a story of hope ...** but something else comes out of this story. Lasting hope, as we look at the history of the Jews, was born through grief, and true **hope has to transcend death**. There was always the curse of death.

- Jacob suffered when he thought he had lost his precious son Joseph and even his youngest, Benjamin;
- Israel suffered in Egypt;
- they suffered through their own disobedience in the desert;
- they suffered defeat and exile from their promised land to Babylon;
- later they suffered under the Romans;
- and then even later persecuted in Europe - even by Christians;
- they suffered under Hitler and the Nazis.

Tragedy, but always there was hope.

When the Allies on liberation day at the end of WW2 got to the concentration camp Belsen, among the piles of shocking corpses that confronted them, they met a group of the living prisoners - all in their ragged starkness. The prisoners were sobbing openly with the joy at being freed - but obviously also sadness as they stood among their dead colleagues. ... And then unexpectedly they began to sing the Hatikvah ...

*As long as in the heart, within,  
a Jewish soul still yearns,  
And onward, towards the ends of the East  
an eye still gazes towards Zion;*

*Our hope is not yet lost,  
The hope of two thousand years,  
To be a free people in our land,  
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.*

- Despite all their nation's suffering, how come such a strong sense of hope?

Of course there's such a thing as false hope. Did those concentration camp victims have a false hope? ...

According to Viktor Frankl, now a famous Jewish doctor who was incarcerated in another Nazi concentration camp, Auschwitz, there were those that gave up hope, and it was as if life ebbed from them and they soon died. The men that kept their dignity were obviously the ones that kept their hope. **Why does life thrive under hope but die without it?**

It all tells something of the mystery of the Judeo-Christian hope: **it doesn't depend on circumstances.** There was the promise, but at the same time, there was always the shadow of death. There was hope, but there was also to be grief and suffering.

A foretelling of this is the haunting passage in Genesis 15. You remember how the Lord took Abraham out into the night sky ... But the chapter goes on to tell more; a picture of promise through death ...

Gen 15:7ff He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." <sup>8</sup>Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" <sup>9</sup>So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon."

<sup>10</sup>Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. <sup>11</sup>Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

<sup>12</sup>As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.

<sup>13</sup>Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. <sup>14</sup>But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. <sup>15</sup>You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup>In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

<sup>17</sup>When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

<sup>18</sup>On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates-

**What do you make of this story? ...**

Sacrifice plays a major part in Israel's history, and the sacrifices haven't been in vain; there was always promise involved. Eg, the Passover and the Day of Atonement.

This would be the story of Israel: a story of suffering and hope. The Law, which had been given to them, revealed not their righteousness, but their sinfulness. It was a seed of grief rather than hope. Perhaps the classic personification of their burden are these verses from Lamentations chapter 3:17-26

You have removed my soul far from peace:  
I forgot prosperity.

<sup>18</sup> And I said, My strength and my hope  
is perished from the LORD:

<sup>19</sup> remembering mine affliction and my misery,  
the wormwood and the gall.

<sup>20</sup> My soul has *them* still in remembrance,  
and is humbled in me.

<sup>21</sup> This I recall to my mind,

**therefore have I hope.**

<sup>22</sup> *It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not*

consumed,  
because his compassions fail not.

<sup>23</sup> *They are new every morning:*  
great *is* thy faithfulness.

<sup>24</sup> The LORD *is* my portion, says my soul;  
therefore will I hope in him.

<sup>25</sup> The LORD *is* good to them that wait for him,  
to the soul *that* seeks him.

<sup>26</sup> *It is good that a man should both hope  
and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.*

Jeremiah, who wrote these words is a prophet who represented and suffered God's grief over his children Israel.

**Ted Grimsrud, in an article in "Theology of Peace" writes:**

"Jeremiah's God is not a distant God. God is **not** most centrally concerned with purity and having rules followed and just waiting to vent anger and vengeance. No, Jeremiah's God is one who grieves at ancient Israel's fall. "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick" (Jer 8:18)."

"It is precisely in this grief", he continues, "that **hope** is found for healing. It is in this grief that a profound basis for peacemaking is found. We find **hope** more so in God's grief than in principles of justice or in rules outlawing violence or in promises to snap in two weapons of war. God's grief is crucial because here we see the depth of God's caring for human beings. God's grief is crucial because here we see the point of any command or law that comes from God, the reason God tells people the way to go. **The reason is solely because God cares for people.** The commandments are for the sake of life. When these laws are violated, suffering and brokenness result, as God promised they would. But when God's ways are rejected, God does not gain pleasure seeing rebels get their just desserts. No, God suffers too." (*Jesus grieved over Jerusalem.*)

But the book of Jeremiah doesn't leave it like that. In the second half of Jeremiah we again read the words of wonderful hope. God will not abandon them.

*“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” Jeremiah 31:31-34.*

You know what it reminds me of: that smoking firepot with a blazing torch that appeared and passed between the pieces of Abraham’s sacrifice.

The second half of Isaiah tells of the same hope: *“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid.”*

Also this promise:

*Thus says the LORD:*

*“If heaven above can be measured,*

*And the foundations of the earth searched out beneath,*

*I will also cast off all the seed of Israel*

*For all that they have done, says the LORD.*

- They were a peculiar people and, as we read in Deuteronomy, the least of the nations, but they were chosen for a purpose. When God blessed their father Abraham, he said, as he later promised Jacob, ‘through you, all nations will be blessed’. In the book of Isaiah the prophet, they are called the servant of God (*But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham My friend*). It becomes clear in Isaiah’s prophecy that, as Abraham had heard, all nations would be blessed through the servant-hood of Israel.

And, as we know, Isaiah 53 speaks of the true Servant who would come and bear in his own body all the sin and suffering of Israel... and not only Israel.

**Discuss:** 1. Can you think of any passages in the NT that speak of God grieving over his people Israel? (**Mtt 23:37 ... Ro 9:1-2**)

2. Do you think God’s grief is for the world as well? (**John 3:16**)

3. What signs of resurrection can we see in the OT?

– **Ps 16:10** You will not allow your servant to see corruption

– That blazing pot that appeared to Abraham in his darkest moment

# 3 'Hope' & Jesus Christ

We've just celebrated Christmas ... and why not? The day before Christmas I gave one of our housing complex staff a lift home to Masiphumele. We spoke about Christmas, and he genuinely knew nothing about it. He didn't know whose birth or what the meaning was or even who the man Jesus was. And yet he enjoys the whole celebration thing. Why is it always such a big and world-wide celebration? I stood in our mall on those Christmas days and you could hardly find a seat to sit down and rest; the parking was closed - no more space - children were there in full force and the shop tellers were exhausted. News blitzes showed Christmas morning dawning in Sydney, Australia and then lighting up westwards across the world. Why is it so big?

- People love holidays, so that's one reason. Another is the party thing. Kids love the presents - we all do. But there's something more; there's a deep, soul attraction to Christmas, and not only amongst evangelical Christians. The carol service at Kirstenbosch was packed again. Across the world, 100s of thousands of families would have sung together the songs that answer the question, 'Why?'

For example these words from 'O little town of Bethlehem' are universal...

*The hopes and fears of all the world are born in thee tonight.*

So are these from O Holy Night ...

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining  
Till he appear'd and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!*

And then the Christmas readings ...

**Isa 42:1ff** "Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him  
and he will bring justice to the nations.  
He will not shout or cry out,  
or raise his voice in the streets.

A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.  
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;  
he will not falter or be discouraged  
till he establishes justice on earth.  
In his law the islands **will put their hope.**"

¶ Of course there have been many Messiahs. Mao Tze Tung for China was, or maybe still is one. China has just with much excitement celebrated his 120<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Kim Il Sung of N Korea is a messiah figure too, even though he is dead. Joseph Smith of the Mormons is another one, Mohammed too.

But none were or ever could be like Jesus, and that's the attraction. He was different - An innocent baby is born, and as the carol goes: *He appear'd and the soul felt its worth.*

- Christmas is universally seen as a time of celebration. It's all about life, isn't it? A baby is born into the world with angels heralding his coming.

¶ **But we celebrate Christmas from a different angle now.** The baby grew up and entered a hostile world.

Here's a different take on the wise men's visit to the stable. It's written by T S Eliot and it's the second part of his poem, *Journey of the Magi...*

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt.  
I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching at their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

Over the 30 years following that Christmas night, Mary's joy would turn to a terrible sadness; after his baptism Jesus did things that disturbed an established order and on his head would fall all the enmity of the devil & the world.

**What are the things that Jesus did?**

Well, let's first look at his given names:

- *Jesus ~ Saviour*

- *Emmanuel: God with us*

We're all familiar with the teaching that Jesus went around doing good ... healing, caring, calming storms, even raising the dead. We learned those things when we were little. Those are wonderful and mostly miraculous things. But what was Jesus' real

work? It was far greater and wider and deeper than any of those - and it's wrapped up in his name Jesus/Saviour.

Let me read something from Jeremiah's Lamentations to show something of the terrible depth of the work that Jesus faced. The chapter concerns the city of Jerusalem and the Jews - how deep they had fallen into sin - and remember that they were God's chosen people.

**Lam 11ff** My eyes fail with tears,  
My heart is troubled;  
My liver is poured upon the earth,  
for the destruction of the daughter  
of my people,  
Because the children and the infants  
Faint in the streets of the city. ...

<sup>13</sup>How shall I console you?  
To what shall I liken you,  
O daughter of Jerusalem?  
**What shall I compare with you,  
that I may comfort you,**  
O virgin daughter of Zion?  
For your breach is great like the sea;  
Who can heal you?

<sup>14</sup>Your prophets have seen for you  
False and deceptive visions;  
They have not uncovered your iniquity,  
To turn away your captivity,  
But have seen for you false prophecies  
and delusions.

<sup>15</sup>All who pass by clap *their* hands at  
you;  
They hiss and shake their heads  
At the daughter of Jerusalem, saying,  
"Is this the city that is called  
'The perfection of beauty,  
The joy of the whole earth'?"

Two terribly sad things are revealed here:

- The horror and depth of their sin, and then also ...
- The seeming impossibility of deliverance from it. "**What shall I compare with you, that I may comfort you, Who can heal you?**" in vs 13

Where was hope then?

I'm sure Handel was filled with the Spirit when he composed and wrote The Messiah with its words, Comfort ye, Comfort ye, O my people. But how *would* Jerusalem be comforted?

*Isa 52:14ff Just as many were astonished at you,  
So His visage was marred more than any man,  
And His form more than the sons of men;  
So shall He sprinkle many nations.  
Kings shall shut their mouths at Him;  
For what had not been told them they shall see,  
And what they had not heard they shall consider.*

- There must have been many blind and deaf and lame people in Jerusalem at that time of their terrible shame, but if a miracle worker had gone into the city then and healed the crippled and blind, the root problem of the nation would still have remained. It was that root problem that the redemption story in the Bible is all about. When the time was right, Jesus had a far greater work to do than those miracles, and there are hints of that work right through the gospels.

¶ In reformed circles we like to talk about man's corruption and depravity, but we so often miss the other side. Man was captive. It was as though he had pawned himself and did not have the ransom to redeem himself with. We were captive to sin, which means there was a captor involved. As Stuart Townend wrote in his and the Getty's hymn, "O Church Arise", *Our call to war, to love the captive soul, but to rage against the captor; and with the sword that makes the wounded whole we will fight with faith and valour.*

The captor had to be defeated; the *strong man* spoken of by the Lord. The strong man had to be bound - the liar who kept the world captive; captive, not against our will but because we had all wilfully sinned. Jeremiah's prophecy: "*The LORD has ransomed Jacob and redeemed him from the power of one stronger than he.*" 31:11

Jesus' battle didn't only happen on the cross, it started in the desert during the temptations the devil levelled at him. It continued throughout Jesus' ministry as he spoke with authority, refuting even what the Pharisees accused him of. The accuser was being exposed.

As to the holy law ~ Jesus fulfilled it perfectly. **The final victory was on the cross when Jesus could at last cry, "It is finished!"**

- Perspectives are so fundamental to the fact of hope. The Islamic concept of the cross is that it is an abomination. When Turkey invaded Cyprus in the 70s they desecrated many Greek cemeteries, breaking the little crosses. For them the cross is an absolute shame. How could God possibly let such a righteous and holy man like Jesus go through the terrible indignity and shame of being hoisted up on a rude cross and made a laughing stock for the whole world to see? This explains their story that

God looks *not* at our suffering but rather at our righteousness, and rewards it with paradise. I can only imagine the hopeless confusion going on in the M/East now - with all that suffering. The fundamental thing of salvation through the saving death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is totally absent. Here's a poem written by Turkish poet Ahmet Diranaş

*All things are far away,  
The sea, the sky are far away,  
The shadow which runs behind us all day,  
The longed-for harbour, the burning star,  
Mothers and daughters – all things are far,  
Only death is always here,  
Everywhere at all times near.*

¶ When the gospel went out into the nations, it wasn't a message of "Peace, peace! Stop fighting among yourselves; all is well, let's work together and it'll be alright." It was the message of Christ and him crucified; and all who received and believed the word, the gospel of Jesus Christ, received the Spirit of God and were adopted into Christ. A Seed had sprung and **hope was born in them.**

**More below**

## 4 Hope within the Church & Christian Community

Someone read Psalm 84:1-7

I once had to travel the long dusty road from Colenso in Natal to Weenen. I knew Colenso, because it's on the main road between Durban and Johannesburg, but I had never been to Weenen before. I only knew the name as being part of Voortrekker history. Something bad had happened there and so the name means 'place of weeping'. I also knew it had something to do with a Zulu attack.

Anyway, there I was, travelling a long this dusty road towards a place I had never seen before. As I drove, I noticed how desolate the countryside was. It was dry and empty and full of dongas. "Nothing good here", I thought. After a long, hot journey, I drove over a hill and there was the town - Weenen. What a difference from the desolation I had driven through! There were windmills and fruit trees orchards and neat fields of mielies. The whole place was green and lovely. In the middle of the town was a high church steeple.

I remember Samson's riddle: *Out of the strong came forth sweetness*. No matter how sad the occasion was that caused the Voortrekkers to name the place Weenen, good had come.

The story behind the name, I've discovered, is this: after the Zulu chief Dingaan had treacherously and horribly murdered Piet Retief and his sixty-six Boer volunteers and also their English interpreter Thomas Halstead, he (Dingaan) sent his army to hunt and destroy all the Voortekkers, men, women and children back at the camp. When the Zulus got there, not everyone was at the camp. The Zulus massacred all who were there and took most of their belongings and cattle and began their return to the Zulu capital, Ginginhlovu. The date was 16 February 1838.

Meanwhile, the Voortrekkers who were not at the central camp, but camping in the area, had heard the shouts and screams of the battle. Once they were able to take stock of the situation, they grouped together and chased the retreating Zulus. They could easily catch up because the Zulus were loaded with loot and, of course, the

cattle. Many of the Zulus died and most of the Voortrekkers' belongings were recovered. But it was still a very sad time. Four hundred and eighty of their beloved had been slain; wagons had been destroyed and belongings strewn across the veld. They called the place Weenen.

●Some thoughts on this story ...                      ... (community)

When I was small - 9,10,11 - in the story of Joseph, when he was in prison after Potiphar's wife's treachery, I imagined *that* prison, not to be dark, but to be lightless. I can't explain that but that's how I saw it. When I read these histories of Dingaan's and Shaka's Zulu kingdoms, I get that same sense. BUT when I read of the Voortrekkers - and I'm not Afrikaans - I get a sense of light and fellowship.

Do you know their recorded prayer before their next great battle against the Zulus, the Battle of Bloed Rivier?

Here we stand  
Before the Holy God of heaven and earth  
To make him a vow that  
If He will protect us  
And deliver our enemies into our hands,  
We will observe the day & date each year  
As a day of thanks, like a Sabbath,  
And that we will erect a church in His honour  
Wherever He may choose  
And that we will also tell our children  
To join us in commemorating this day,  
Also for coming generations  
For His name will be glorified  
By giving Him  
All the honour and glory of victory.

Incidentally, how was Joseph a blessing to the Egyptians? How was Daniel a blessing to the Babylonians (Wisdom), How were the Voortrekkers a blessing to SA? (taming and replenishing the land). **C o m m e n t...**

¶ If we study the life of Simon bar-Jonas, later called Peter by the Lord Jesus, we can be sure of a simple fact: it is that we can't possibly be justified in the flesh. Peter's life shows this clearly. He was so willing: he found the Messiah; his fishing world was turned upside down when Jesus said simply, 'Cast your net on the other side'; he saw a great Galilean storm brought to calm by two simple words; he walked on water; he was made aware of his sinfulness; he was the one who recognised that Jesus was indeed the Christ; he heard great promises about himself from the Lord; he was so willing that he boasted that he would even die with the Lord ... And then he denied him three times.

You'll remember in the garden of Gethsemane during the time of the Lord Jesus' temptation how Peter couldn't even stay awake when the Lord asked him to, and the Lord saying to him, '*The spirit is indeed willing*' - Peter's life shows this - but as the Lord continued, '*the flesh is weak*'. That's really the same as what the apostle Paul was saying when he said of himself, "*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*" And hope seems to run a different course to what we might expect. **Peter's hope certainly seemed dashed on that dark day we call good Friday.**

That's the best of humanity's lot in life.

"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher;  
"Vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity."  
What profit has a man from all his labour  
In which he toils under the sun?  
One generation passes away,  
and another generation comes;  
But the earth abides forever.

Later, after his resurrection when Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" He never said, "Peter, do you love me, he said "Simon, son of Jonas, do you love me?" Three times - never once 'Peter'. It tells us simply that we are just flesh. 'Born of the Spirit' happened at Pentecost. **Hope, which was kind of always in Peter, was made real at Pentecost: a *living hope*, as we read in the first verses of the apostle Peter's first letter.**

**Peter's whole life changed that day. He was born again.**

It wasn't just that Peter had discovered he wasn't an expert in life: he couldn't trace fish like Jesus could, he couldn't calm the Galilean storms like Jesus could, he couldn't walk on water like Jesus could, he couldn't even heal his own mother like Jesus could. It was that his own moral problem was exposed as well.

Forgiveness and reconciliation is the key. We can't fathom how big this is, but Peter would have had many clues. First of all, his own sin had been shown up for others to see, and then forgiven, secondly the whole thing of forgiveness for others had been clearly explained to him. "How many times must I forgive my brother; seven times?" "Seventy times seven", the Lord Jesus answered.

In the epistles, it is Peter who uses the word '*precious*' again and again ~ eight times more than any other apostle. For example, in his second letter, he tells the Church of the *exceedingly great and precious promises* given to them through the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's wrapped up in what Peter wrote in his first letter, "*He bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*"

So Peter, in his first letter, calls our hope a living hope; the sins of believers have been forgiven.

The cross of Jesus is central. On it, Jesus forgave; God forgave. "Forgive them, Father, they don't know what they're doing."

How can we criticise? How can we judge? How can we condemn? Right now the world is full of judgement and condemnation. Sadly, Christians are often at the forefront. "Forgive them," Jesus said, "they don't know what they're doing." It wasn't just pity, it was redeeming pity. **Of all people, it is the Christians who have hope.**

¶ On the mountainside behind Antioch is a one and a half century old little chapel. It has been dug into the side of the mountain. It's called St Peter's and the local people revere it.

Antioch was really the gate for the gospel's entry into the Gentile world. Paul and Barnabas were set aside and sent from there into Cyprus and then Asia Minor. Later, Paul into Europe proper. What happened over the following years was amazing. The whole order of things was turned upside down. **Hope was born in the Gentile world.**

Philip Schaff, the Church historian wrote that the early Cappadocian Church fathers, notably Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil the great - also spoke of the reconciling work of God. *"The descriptions of natural scenery among the poets and philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome can be easily compressed within a few pages, whereas in the work of these church elders occur pictures of nature such as we seek in vain in the heathen classics. There is the reference of earthly beauty to an eternal and heavenly principle, the glorification of God in the works of creation.*

1300 years later, Martin Luther would somersault out of his pulpit when the truth of the gospel entered his heart. **The gospel and it's effects changed Europe.**

### **C o m m e n t s** on the effects of the gospel on the world...

¶ *I can't explain all the mysteries why you have hope and I have hope, but we do have hope. It's what sets us apart from the world, and I believe it's because we've been forgiven - we were washed; we were sanctified; we were justified by the word of the Lord. God loved us. But as all believers could say, "It's not only what Jesus has done for me, but who he is for me. He is my Saviour, my comforter, my hope, my life my all."*

And God's word says 'always be ready to share the hope that is in you', so that's what we do. Think of the testimonies you've heard: people telling why they have hope. I told you about the Jewish woman who survived the Nazi holocaust but lost most of her family including her mother, husband, brother, son and daughter. At one point, when 16 members of her family had disappeared, she decided to end it all. In her book, *I Stepped into Freedom*, she tells what happened:

I walked out into the night, feeble with hunger, half crazy with fear and fatigue, and made my way down to the river Neisse. In a few hours all would be over I told myself. What a relief! And there it happened. Across the dark river I saw the Cross and Jesus Christ on it. His face was not the face of a victor; it was the face of a fellow-sufferer, full of love and understanding and compassion. We gazed at each other, both of us Jews, and then the vision disappeared.

Hope was reborn.

- That's not to say things don't perplex us and would even get us down. Paul the apostle spoke about his conflicts within, Martin Luther discovered that Christians do not approach God through a logical *therefore* (as the Scholastics had done), but through a *nevertheless*. Luther learned from Scripture that Christians must look beyond their own experiences, feelings, and thoughts in order to contend for the faith. In other words, he said we shouldn't assume that, because God loves us *therefore* we should all be happy and carefree, but rather, when we're unhappy, we should pray and turn to the Scriptures and be able to say, *nevertheless*, God has promised. *For God does not deal, wrote Luther, nor has he ever dealt, with man otherwise than through a Word of promise. We in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise.*

- Ps 31: *I said in my haste, 'I am cut off from before your eyes': nevertheless you heard the voice of my supplications when I cried to you.*
- Ps 73: *So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was like a beast before you. Nevertheless I am continually with you: you have held me by my right hand. You shall guide me with your counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory.*

Some, especially the sensitive, live with daily troubles, but our heavenly Father is not ignorant of these distressing things. Think of the godly men and women of old: Abraham, of whom Paul wrote, who against hope believed in hope; Esther, in the time of dangerous Haman, Habakkuk, living in a time when his own people the Hebrews were completely lawless, and violence and injustice prevailed, and then hearing from God that he would send the Babylonians as punishment! Destruction and captivity would come, *but* it would be at God's hand. Habakkuk's hope revives. Why? Because for those who are called and love God, all things work together for the good.

I remember Bernard Cartledge coming back from a lecture at BI by the well-known American theologian and author, James Montgomery Boice. The room had got into a discussion about faith, and Bernard was getting insistent that it was all of God and it was even God's faith involved. Mr Boice looked calmly at Bernard and said, "So, did God believe for you?" That was the end of the matter, as Bernard later humbly shared it with me.

The hope God has given us is not subject to a worldly sense of well-being, or our emotions or even our triumphs and failures; it is something God has given us that is inviolable and based on his immeasurable gift in Christ to us and also on his love for us. You can see that way back in the call of Israel: *The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you ...*" (Deut 7) and also in Jeremiah 31, "*I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with loving kindness I have drawn you.*" And the love of the Father for his beloved Son, "*The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand.*" And the love of the Son for his Church, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" How could such love ever die? Israel suffered terribly; the Church has suffered terribly, and still suffers - and that is because the Church is, as was Israel, separate from the world.

Hope isn't killed by trouble, but needs faithful kindling. **Psalm 42:1-5**

As the deer pants after the water brooks,  
So pants my soul after thee, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When can I go and meet with God?  
My tears have been my food day and  
night,  
while men say to me all day long,  
"Where is your God?"  
These things I remember  
As I pour out my soul:

How I used to go with the multitude,  
Leading the procession to the house of  
God,  
With shouts of joy and thanksgiving  
Among the festive throng.  
Why are you downcast, O my soul?  
Why so disturbed within me?  
Put your hope in God,  
for I will yet praise him,  
My Saviour and my God.

Rom 15:13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wonderful merciful Savior  
Precious redeemer and friend  
Who would have thought that a lamb could  
Rescue the souls of men, Oh You rescue the souls of men

Counselor, comforter, keeper  
Spirit we long to embrace  
You offer hope when our hearts have  
Hopelessly lost the way, Oh we hopelessly lost the way

You are the One that we praise  
You are the One we adore  
You give the healing and grace our  
Hearts always hunger for, Oh our hearts always hunger for

Almighty infinite father  
Faithfully loving Your own  
Herein our weakness You find us  
Falling before Your throne, Oh we're falling before Your throne