

A Hope That Brightens Up Our Days! Hebrews 12:18-24

I read an interesting article this week on the power of hope. It was written by Paula Davis-Laack and appeared in the online version of *Psychology Today*. The article was entitled *5 Ways Hope Impacts Health & Happiness*.¹ Referencing a variety of scientific studies, the author highlighted five ways hope influences the way we live and work to include: reduced absenteeism, increased productivity, greater happiness, improved health, and longer life spans! With benefits like those, who here wouldn't like to have a little greater hope?

But what is hope? Well, hope is the strong expectation of some future good. And it is this expectation of some future good that brightens all our days and especially our darkest times.

If ever there were a people in need of hope, those people were the first recipients of our text. You see, the book of Hebrews was most probably written to Hebrew Christians living in the first few decades following the resurrection of Jesus Christ; in other words, they were Jews who believed in Jesus as Messiah. And it seems these Hebrew Christians fell victim to persecution from various unnamed sources.

They may have been persecuted by their fellow religionists. We know from reading the New Testament book of Acts that most of the early Christians were converts from Judaism, and they were sometimes persecuted by other Jews who felt threatened by the Christian claim that Jesus was, in fact, Israel's long awaited Messiah. On the other hand, the recipients of our letter may have been persecuted by Roman authorities as there were several Roman persecutions of the early church, most notably by the Emperor Nero, who blamed Christians for the burning of Rome in the year 64 A.D.

Whatever the origin of their persecution, the recipients of our text had suffered and were still suffering persecution when they received this Letter to the Hebrews. We know this from internal evidence found in the letter itself. For example, in Hebrews 10:32-35 the author wrote these words to those Hebrew Christians: "Recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward." And then again, in Hebrews 13:3, our author admonished his readers saying: "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were

¹ Posted March 5, 2013 at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/pressure-proof/201303/5-ways-hope-impacts-health-happiness>. Viewed August 22, 2019.

in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.”

Yes, the recipients of this letter were living through dark days and they were wavering in their faith as a consequence of their difficulties. They were not only wavering in their faith but they may have been thinking about abandoning Christ and returning to the Judaism from which they had come. And we know this is true because of evidence found, once more, within the book itself. You see, five times in this letter the author encourages his audience to endure their sufferings, and he warns them against abandoning their faith during their dark times. He does this by suggesting that Jesus is better than the Jewish religious system they once held. Now this doesn't mean he discounts that religious system. Quite the contrary! He believes God's covenant with Israel was the highest and best of all the world's religions but Christ came to fulfill that covenant – in other words, he was the one toward whom that wonderful covenant pointed. And because he had come, they should not only embrace him, but they should remain true to him because he is the best of all!

So in Hebrews chapter one, our author says, Jesus is superior to the angels! In Hebrews chapters three and four, he says Jesus is greater than Moses and Joshua! In Hebrews chapters four through ten he argues that Jesus is better than the Jewish priesthood, the Jewish tabernacle, and the Jewish sacrificial system. He's better than all of those things because all of those things were temporary and were meant to point to him! You see, he's better than the best! He is the fulfillment of Jewish expectation. But more than this, he is the true fulfillment of all spiritual expectations, wants, and needs because he is the Savior of us all! So argues our author.

Now if this is true, and I believe it is, then it is a compelling argument to inspire faithfulness to Christ during difficult times because Christ is the fulfillment of all our spiritual wants, the provider for all of our spiritual needs, and the Savior of us all! But sometimes we need more than an argument – even a compelling argument – to keep us in the fight. We need hope – the strong expectation of some future good – a good that surpasses the difficulties of this present hour – a good, the anticipation of which, encourages us to hang on. And that's what today's passage does. It inspires hope!

Earlier you heard me say that five times in this letter our author encourages his audience to endure their sufferings and warns them against abandoning their faith in Jesus Christ. Well today's reading is part of the fifth of those five encouragements and warnings. He has already argued that Jesus is superior to angels, and to Moses, and to Joshua, and to the priesthood, and to the tabernacle, and to the sacrificial system. Now he sums it all up by comparing the Christian system located in Christ to the Jewish system inaugurated on Mount Sinai where God established his covenant with Israel by giving them the Ten Commandments. And this is what our author says: “You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the

sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.' Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.')

(Heb. 12: 18-21) With these words our author describe what happened on Mount Sinai when God established his covenant with Israel and gave them the Ten Commandments to guide their relationship with him.

And then our author goes on and says this: “(You have not come to any of those old things.) But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word...” (Heb. 12:22-24) And here, our author holds before his suffering readers a vision of the glory that lies around them and the glory that lies before them.

He reminds them that “Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” lie just before them if they only carry on. He reminds them that they’ll someday join “innumerable angels in festal gathering and the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” if they only hold fast in faith. He reminds them that very soon they’ll be in the nearer presence of “God, the judge of all” as they gather around his throne with all “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” if they don’t give up before that day! And above all else, he reminds them that they’ll see “Jesus, the mediator of (this) new covenant” who sprinkled his blood to make all these blessings come true! And so he held this hope before them to encourage them on their way!

My friends, this is the good that lies before us, also! And seeing this good should inspire our hope because hope is the strong expectation of some future good. It is the expectation of this future good that should brighten all our days, especially our darkest days, and keep us going on with God!

Well my friends, this is the fourth in a series of sermons on *Life With God*. As we’ve seen, *Life With God* begins in *A Love That Will Not Let Us Go*. It continues with *A Faith That Follows In The Dark* and *A Trust That Holds No Matter What*. And now we see that it is sustained by *A Hope That Brightens Up Our Days*.

You and I may live in different times and under very different circumstances than those experienced by the first recipients of this letter – the Letter to the Hebrews – but the race of faith is still long and sometimes we grow tired. And sometimes we suffer – whether by persecution, or hardship, or sickness, or some other cause – and we need hope to carry on. We need to believe that something better lies beyond whatever suffering we experience in between. We need a hope to brighten up our days. Fortunately, we have just such a hope! This is the hope that lies before us – the hope that brightens up our days: a heavenly Jerusalem, innumerable angels waiting, a festal gathering with loved

ones gone before, God the merciful judge of all to greet us, and Jesus Christ our Savior waiting to welcome us home! Remembering these things inspires our hope and gives us strength to carry on! In the words of the old hymn:

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

And all God's people said: Amen!