

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Holding on to Hope

Hebrews 10:19-25

Introduction:

A. Our discontent in everyday life and our despair in trials raise the question, “How can we hold on to hope?”

It’s easy in everyday life to let discontentment creep in. Comedian Louie CK shares such a story. A few years ago he’s on one of the first flights with wireless internet. He’s sitting on the plane and they encourage folks to open their laptops. He does and the internet is fast and he’s just amazed by the idea of flying through the air and watching Youtube clips. After a while the wireless breaks down. The guy next to him cusses in frustration, and Louie CK thinks to himself, how quickly the world owes you something you only knew existed ten seconds ago.

He goes on to talk about how all our discontent with flights is silly - we say things like, “It was one of the worst days of my life. First, we didn’t board for twenty minutes, and then we had to sit there on the runway, for forty minutes.” Well what happened next, did you sit in a chair in the sky, and fly through the air, like a bird? He says it used to take years to get from New York to California and a bunch of you would die on the way and you’d have babies and it’d be a whole different group when you got there. Now, he says, you watch a movie, make a stop by the bathroom, and you’re home... everything’s amazing right now, but nobody’s happy.¹

Isn’t it easy to let discontentment creep in? It is for me. I can struggle with discontentment even when things are going pretty well. Maybe for you discontentment comes in the form of an annoying co-worker or student, or a frustrating stage that your child is going through, or an unexpected financial expense. Now if you’re like me, and can struggle with discontentment in fairly good times, what will happen when you enter a crisis? When your health fails, when an important relationship falls apart, discontentment can turn into despair. Some of us are dealing this morning with heavy burdens that have lead to despair. And all of us are vulnerable, even later today, to receiving a dreaded phone call or having a car wreck that plunges us into despair.

¹ From a 2009 Conan O’Brien interview of Louie CK.

So, that's why we're going to consider this morning, how can we hold on to hope? How can we hold on to hope? The book of Hebrews covers this subject. So if you've got a Bible, please turn to Hebrews chapter 10, verses 19-25. Hebrews chapter 10, verses 19-25.

B. Two caveats before we begin

Before we begin, I just want to say that I know some of you have endured far, far more pain than I have, and are way more qualified to talk about holding on to hope. Although I can't fully understand your pain, I hope you're willing to consider whether what I say are truths from God's Word that can help you and honor Him. I've been praying this week that all of us, and especially those in crisis, can hold on to hope.

Additionally, I want to clarify that Christian hope sometimes includes tears of grief. Paul makes this point in 1 Thessalonians 4. He says our grief can be different because of our hope in Jesus, but that we still grieve our painful losses. We see the same idea in the Psalms, our faith's prayer book. There are tears shed over difficult circumstances in many of the Psalms. And while many of those Psalms express hope in God as well, there are a few places, like Psalm 88, where the prayer ends on a note of lament. Further, if Jesus, the perfect expression of humanity, wept over the death of his friend Lazarus, than you can shed some tears as you seek to hold on to hope. Please don't listen to anyone who tries to tell you otherwise.

C. Background on the book of Hebrews

With those caveats being said, let's cover the background of Hebrews so we can better understand our passage. Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who had endured some hardships and had experienced some persecution for their Christian faith. As a result they were tempted to lose hope and at least some were considering leaving Jesus to return to Judaism. So the author exhorted the readers to endure and mature in their Christian faith. Obviously the readers would need to have hope in the superiority of Jesus if they were to endure and mature in their faith. In chapter six, the author describes our hope in Jesus as an anchor for the soul. No matter what the storms of life, we can drop the anchor of hope to help us hold on. This morning we're going to consider three ways to hold on to hope, by embracing God's open arms, embracing believers, and embracing our future.

I. Hold on to hope by embracing God's open arms (vv. 19-23)

A. The Old Covenant had limited access to God

First we'll talk about embracing God's open arms. Hebrews 10, verses 19-23 - please follow along with me on the screen or in your Bible. "19 Therefore, brethren, since we have

confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and since *we have* a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;”

If you look at verses 19-22, you see that the main idea is “since we have confidence (up in verse 19)...let us draw near to God (in verse 22).” The material in-between provides reasons why we can confidently embrace God. The book was written to a primarily Jewish audience. So the author makes connections between the Jewish faith and our better hope in Jesus. Let me explain. When Adam and Eve sinned, our access to God was cut off. We were guilty of treason against Almighty God. But God, in His grace, had the Jews set up a temple where God would dwell so that His people could connect with Him. However, there were limits on how close they could approach the Holy God. The Gentiles could only go in the outer courts of the temple. The Jews could go in further, but only so far. There was a large veil, from floor to ceiling, that separated the Holy of Holies, where God’s presence dwelled, from the rest of the Temple. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies. And he could only do it once a year on the Day of Atonement and only after making significant preparations. It was a weighty thing for the high priest to enter the place where the Holy God’s presence dwelled and make a sin offering for God’s people.²

B. Jesus’ superior saving work shows we can embrace God’s open arms

Now after hundreds and hundreds of years of this practice, Jesus comes to earth. He lives the perfect life we should have lived, and then He gets on the cross and absorbs all of God’s wrath for all our sins, past, present, and future. Do you know what it says in Mark 15 right after Jesus breathed His last breath on the cross? It says, “And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”

Now look at verse 19 - before we couldn’t get close to God, we couldn’t enter the holy place. Now those who believe in Jesus can draw near to God’s open arms. Look at verse 20 - before there was a veil that kept us away from God. Now in Jesus we have been brought through that veil. Look at verse 21 - before the high priests had to keep doing sacrifices year after year. Sacrifices that couldn’t even really take away our sins, as Hebrews 10:4 says. Now in Jesus we

² See Leviticus 16 for additional information.

have the perfect high priest who sacrificed Himself so that we can always live in the house of God. Look at verse 22 - before we had a guilty conscious and we were unclean, unholy. Now our hearts are sprinkled clean - we can be free from guilt. Now our bodies are washed, we are pure in Jesus. When God looks down on those who believe in His Son, God does not see the shameful things we have done. He sees the perfect righteousness of His Son Jesus. It's why we can draw near to God with a sincere heart.

Further, no matter how deep your despair, Jesus can relate, for He literally took the weight of the world on His shoulders. And when you compare what we deserve in our sin and what we get in Christ, we are truly favored. Pastor CJ Mahaney describes it this way, "I don't know what tomorrow holds, but I do know this: Because of the cross I'll be doing much better than I deserve."³ With that in mind, as verse 23 says, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." Seeing all that God has done for us in Jesus gives us hope that God's arms will always be open to us.

II. Hold on to hope by embracing believers (vv. 24-25)

A. Embracing believers is essential to our faith

That is a glorious way to hold on to hope, and yet God has provided us even more. We can also hold on to hope by embracing believers. Please follow along with me, starting in verse 24. "24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*;"

I don't think it is a coincidence that right after calling the audience to hold on to hope in verse 23, the author brings up Christian community. Christianity is so much more than just a personal time of prayer and Scripture reading. God created us to be in community with Him *and* people. In Genesis God said it was not good for man to be alone even before the Fall. That's why we have to keep assembling together, as verse 25 says. We need each other, which can be hard to remember in our culture. As Pastor Adam McHugh describes it, "The story of individualism and self-determination that our culture tells us cannot be reconciled with the Biblical story of community and interconnected relationships." Embracing believers is essential to our faith.

B. Embracing believers requires great activity

Look with me at verse 24. The word "stimulate" there is a very strong term. It's used in Acts 15 to describe the sharp disagreement that led to Paul and Barnabas splitting up. Obviously

³ *Living the Cross Centered Life*, p. 156.

in our passage the term is used in a positive sense, but it still a strong word. One Greek lexicon defines it as a “rousing to activity, a stirring up, a provoking” in this verse.⁴ This helps us to see that embracing other believers is a very active thing. It’s so much more than just saying hi on a Sunday morning and telling everyone that you’re doing fine. It means really being in the lives of other believers, warts and all. Around here we often describe this kind of relationship as “masks off” relating. But it is even more than just authenticity. After all, to do what verse 24 is suggesting, we have to think about how to repeatedly provoke each other to love and good deeds. We need each other for this, and to hold on to hope, to actively encourage each other, as verse 25 says. And this is especially true when we go through dark times.

Do you have this kind of Christian community? The kind where you can admit you’re despairing, the kind where you can be encouraged to keep going when you’re ready to throw in the towel. If you do, thank God and seek to encourage someone close to you this week. After all, because of our brokenness, we’re not going to naturally drift into authentic, hopeful relationships. It takes effort. If you haven’t been making that effort, please don’t put off developing Christian friendships. When you’re so deep in despair you don’t even feel like getting out of bed is not the ideal time to try to form new friendships.

If you don’t know where to start in getting into community, you could consider joining one of our church small groups, which we call care groups. As the pastor in charge of care groups, I’ve had the opportunity to visit nearly every group. Now I don’t want to burst anyone’s bubble, but the care groups are made up of imperfect people, so they’re not perfect. However, I have seen people share real struggles and I’ve seen people comforted by the encouragement of others. And I’ve heard testimonies of people describing their care group as the place that helped them literally keep their sanity as the world fell apart; as the place that helped them start to see a tiny ray of hope again. Whether you do it in a care group or elsewhere, if you want to hold on to hope, it is so important to embrace believers.

III. Hold on to hope by embracing our future (v. 25)

A. We are to watch for the return of Jesus

Not only has God provided us His people and Himself, He invites us to hold on to hope by embracing our future. Please follow along with me for the last part of verse 25 - “and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” The day that is being described here is the day Jesus

⁴ *BDAG*, 780.

returns. As we embrace God and believers, we are to keep an eye on the future. We are to lift up our eyes and see the day of Jesus' return drawing near.

Now there are times when I really sense and am blessed by God's presence. And there are times when I'm blessed by other Christians. But there's still dysfunction in me and in others, and we still live in a broken world. There are times when God feels distant, and there are times when believers let me down. That's why it's so important that we hold on to hope by embracing our future, by watching for the return of Jesus. Dr. Lanier Burns, one of my seminary teachers, described hope as "Believers' cherished expectation of the fulfillment of God's promises."

B. We are just a shadow of our future selves

Do you look forward to the fulfillment of God's promises? To the day when Christ returns and sets things right. Things are not right now. One way we see this is when we watch someone decline in health. My Grandpa was a man with an abundance of energy, always on the go, doing business, and serving in missions, just go, go, go. The kind of person you thought would live to a hundred and still be taking care of himself. But because of exposure to asbestos, he contracted Mesothelioma. His energy level plummeted, he constantly coughed, and eventually every breath became a struggle. Grandpa became a shadow of his former self. I'm sure most of you can picture it. You've seen a loved one's health fail as he becomes a shadow of his former self. How can we have hope in those circumstances? A truth that's encouraged me comes from Bishop N.T. Wright. He notes that if you are in Christ, you are now just a shadow of your future self.⁵ And I'm *not* talking about the deathbed version of you being a shadow of your future self. I'm talking about your best times. When your health was great and you had an abundance of energy. When God's love was so real you could touch it; when you laughed with friends so much that your cheeks tingled; when you excelled at work. When you had a blast on vacation; when everything was really clicking with your family; when God used you in powerful ways. Even in these moments, you are just a shadow of your future self.

When I get home, and my 9 month old son Grant sees me and gets a big smile and kicks his legs in excitement and starts crawling to me. Stephanie gives me a big kiss, and I pick up Grant as he makes excited noises. We start playing and soon we're all three laughing together. As sweet as those times are, they're just a shadow of what's in store for my future self.

⁵ I heard this in a N.T. Wright sermon entitled *After you Believe*.

Are you embracing that future, when Jesus sets everything a right? When your despair leaves forever; when you pulsate with love and joy and energy that you can't even imagine; when we have the ultimate after party, as we see God face to face and celebrate together, as brothers and sisters, for all eternity. Holding on to hope means embracing our glorious future.

Conclusion:

A. Hold on to hope by embracing God's open arms, believers, and our future

Pastor Matt Chandler has had some glorious times. He leads a great church that has grown exponentially, he's an acclaimed speaker, and he has a loving wife and three good kids. But as some of you know, on Thanksgiving Day 2009, Matt suffered a seizure and was diagnosed with brain cancer. He underwent severe brain surgery and rounds of radiation and chemo. I'd like to share two things I've read online about Matt's experience. The first is from an interview. Matt shares about how his two closest friends from church, men who had seen him at his worst and loved him anyway, supported him in his crisis. Matt says,

“Over the next 3 months they were constantly by my side, driving me to radiation treatments, bringing me meals, praying for me, celebrating with me when radiation was over, going to MRIs and doctor's appointments with Lauren and me. They were steadfast in their love for me despite the workload they all had to bear with my absence... When I was afraid, they reminded me of His promises; when I was angry, they reminded me of His goodness. It truly has been a group effort.”⁶

What a beautiful picture of holding on to hope by embracing believers. Please don't put off pursuing that kind of community. I'd also like to share from a blog post Matt made one year after his surgery, as he reflected on what he had learned.

“When we were prepping for [brain] surgery, they went over this long list of things that were “possibilities.” I could lose the ability to speak, walk and lose short-term or long-term memories.” [Imagine you're about to be wheeled into brain surgery, wondering if you'll be able to speak or remember your family afterwards] “The list was much longer, but I think you get the point. I am primarily known as a pastor and preacher, but here's the truth that slammed into me when I was wrestling with God over this surgery. One day I am not going to preach or pastor; one day I am not going to be Lauren's husband or my kid's father. All the things that define me here will be gone, and I will simply be His. I'm still meditating on that. That's all I really am...His.”⁷

A man doesn't just naturally get that perspective. Those are the words of a man who's made a habit of holding on to hope, a man who has embraced God. Who has spent hours

⁶ Interview found at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2010/11/01/one-year-later-an-interview-with-matt-chandler/>

⁷ Post found at <http://www.thevillagechurch.net/the-village-blog/one-year-later/>

and hours communing with Him and wrestling with Him over his situation. And Matt's a man who has clearly embraced our future. "All the things that define me here will be gone, and I will simply be His... That's all I really am, His." If you've trusted in Christ, that's all you really are, His. You are the child of the Father who always welcomes you with open arms; you are the brother or sister of Jesus. And there's not a better brother to help you in your despair than the one who looked the deepest despair in the face at the cross. The one paid the ultimate price for you, so you can hold on to hope.

Let's pray...