

The Hopeless Case

Father Abraham -- Part VII

Romans 4:18-19

Introduction

You may have heard the fictional story of Teddy Stallard before. It has been e-mailed to me at least a dozen times over the years.

Teddy Stallard was a boy who was not really cared for by his teacher, Miss Thompson. He was not interested in school and sat with a blank expression on his face and a glassy, unfocused appearance to his eyes. When Miss Thompson spoke to Teddy, he would always answer in monosyllables. His clothes were dirty and his hair was unkempt. He was not an attractive boy and was not well liked by the other students either.

Miss Thompson should have known better and, because she was a Christian, she should have cared more. She had Teddy's records and knew more about him than she wanted to admit. The records read:

- 1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but has a poor home situation.
- 2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.
- 3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy, but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.
- 4th Grade: Teddy is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows little interest in him, his school, his world.

Christmas came and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought Christmas presents for her. They piled their presents on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. Among the presents, was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he had brought a gift for her, but he had. Teddy's

gift was wrapped in brown paper and was held together with Scotch tape. On the paper were written the simple words, "For Miss Thompson from Teddy".

When Miss Thompson opened Teddy's present, out fell a rhinestone bracelet, with half the stones missing, and a bottle of inexpensive perfume. The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddy's gifts. However, Miss Thompson, at least had the sense to silence them by immediately putting the bracelet on and applying some of the perfume to her wrist. Holding up her wrist for the children to smell, she said, "Doesn't it smell lovely?"

The children agreed. At the end of the day, when school was over and the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother . . . and her bracelet looks real pretty on you too."

When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked the Lord to forgive her. The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a different person. She was now, not just a teacher, but an agent of God who was committed to loving her children.

Miss Thompson began to pay attention to the slow learners, and especially to Teddy Stallard. By the end of the school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He had caught up with most of the students and was even ahead of some.

The next year, Miss Thompson did not see much of Teddy. Months blended into years, and then, one day, she received a note that read,

Dear Miss Thompson:

I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating from high school second in my class.

Love, Teddy Stallard

Four years later, another note came that said,

Dear Miss Thompson:

They just told me I will be graduating with highest honors. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I enjoyed it.

Love, Teddy Stallard

Four years later, one more note came that read,

Dear Miss Thompson:

As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. Oh, and I'm getting married next month, the 26th to be exact. I would like you to come and sit where my mother would have sat if she were alive. You are the only family I have.

Love, Teddy Stallard

So, Miss Thompson went to the wedding and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat. She deserved to sit there, because years earlier, she had given him the one thing he needed the most – she had given him hope.

Hopeless?

According to a national survey, conducted in the fall of 2001 by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, only one out of five participants responded that they feel hopeful about the future. The same survey had been conducted ten years earlier, and at that time, three out of five felt hopeful about life. Yet, ten years later, barely one in five had hope.¹

John Maxwell tells about a small town in Maine that was the proposed site for a hydro-electric plant. A dam was going to be built across the river and the town would be submerged in water as a result. When the project was announced, the people were given many months to arrange their affairs and relocate. During these months, a curious thing happened. All improvements ceased. No painting was done. No repairs were made on any of the buildings, roads, sidewalks, or homes. Day by day, the entire town got shabbier and shabbier. A long time before the waters were supposed to sweep through the town, it looked abandoned and uncared-for, even though the people had not yet moved. One citizen explained, "Where there is no faith in the future, there is no power in the present."

The town was doomed with hopelessness because it had no future. It knew that its future was hopeless . . . and it lived that way.

An author once penned the words, "We can live forty days without food, eight days without water; four minutes without air, less than one minute without hope."

I spent some time, this past week, thinking about things that seem to rob us of our hope. I thought of things such as:

- unmet needs,
- unwanted circumstances,
- unrelenting pressure,
- unexpected trials, and
- unfulfilled promises.

I believe all of the reasons for losing hope can be boiled down to one statement, "*A loss of hope begins when you realize that you are not getting out of life what you thought you would, and it culminates in the conviction that you never will.*"

In other words, if enough losses, reversals, difficulties, or disappointments are strung together, a person will eventually come to the conclusion that life will never produce. That person is one who could be called, hopeless.

Every person who hears this today, will have plenty of reasons to calculate life to be hopeless; unless that is, something outside of themselves happens. For that small town in Maine, the water came; for most of the people polled in that national survey, if left alone by themselves, they might come to the conclusion that life is hopeless.

There is Hope!

However, for Teddy Stallard, there was a teacher. In our discussion today, I want to unveil a teacher for us all. This is an inspired teacher, by the name of Paul. Through his teaching, the Holy Spirit whispers into the hearts of us all, "There is hope!"

I want to simply point to Paul's lesson plan in Romans, chapter 4, where he teaches by merely retelling the story of a hopeless case. That hopeless case was a man named Abraham. If you talk about unmet needs, unwanted circumstances, unrelenting pressure, unexpected difficulties, and, most importantly, unfulfilled promises, he had them.

Let me remind you, the unfulfilled promise was not a promise that his wife, Sarah, made to him and then, did not keep; it was not a promise that his father,

Terah, made and then, never came through with; it was not a promise that his nephew, Lot, made and then, did not fulfill. No, this was a promise from God.

If there was ever anyone who had a right to calculate life as hopeless, it was Abraham. And, perhaps the reason that Abraham is the greatest example of living faith is because his case did indeed seem hopeless; absolutely, undeniably hopeless. Yet, from his life story, the things that create, foster, fertilize, cultivate, promote, develop, and nurture hope are discovered.

Speaking of Abraham, Paul writes in Romans, chapter 4, verses 17 through 19,

(as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "So shall your descendants be." Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb

Ingredients of Hope

These verses provide several powerful ingredients which, when mixed together, create the sweet manna of hope.

Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase, *The Message*, put it this way,

When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway. [How?] He decided to live not on the basis of what he saw he couldn't do, but on what God said He would do.

The resolution to believe without clearly seeing

1. The first ingredient of hope is the resolution to believe without clearly seeing.

Let me quickly say, do not think that there are some easy ingredients from which you can concoct the salve of hope. I must tell you, hope is not like a diamond lying on top of the ground, it is deep in the ground; it is an ancient treasure that must be diligently sought after.

The question is not, "Do you want hope?"

Everyone will answer, "Yes!"

The question is, "How badly must you want it?"

I am reminded of the young man who approached Aristotle one afternoon, and asked, "How can I have wisdom?"

Aristotle got up and said, "Follow me."

He walked down several streets, until they arrived at a shallow pool in the town square. Without pausing, He gathered up his robes and began wading into the water. The young man stopped, then pursued after him. When Aristotle was in the middle of the pool, he suddenly turned, grabbed the young man by the neck, and pushed his head under water. The student flailed with his arms, but to no avail. Finally, at the last possible moment, Aristotle pulled the young man up, dragged him over to the edge, and sat him down. The boy was gasping and sputtering his amazement. Aristotle simply asked him, "Young man, when I held you under the water, what did you want more than anything in the world?"

The young man said, "Air, sir, air!"

Aristotle said, "When you want wisdom that badly, you will find it."

And he walked away.

Everyone wants wisdom, but most can live without it. Everyone wants hope, but most do not care to find it.

Ladies and gentlemen, hope is discovered by those who cannot live without it! It is discovered by those who want it so badly that they are willing to believe the promises of God, even if they never see them come to pass.

Go back to verse 17a and notice the human absurdity of the verb tense,

... A father of many nations have I made you ...

This verb tense refers to something that is already fact; already actualized. From God's perspective, it was already done!

Yet, Abraham never saw it happen! "Where are your nations, Abraham? Where are they that number as the sands of the sea and the stars in the sky? The truth is, you don't even have one child!"

Before his name was Abraham, it was Abram. When God made His promise to him, His name was Abram, which meant, "father of many". He was not the father of many, he was the father of none!

Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote,

The servants of Abram took good care of the needs of the camels and of the servants of

the traders. Food was sold to the travelers. And in the evening time the merchants would have come to Abram's tent to pay their respects. The questions would have followed a typical oriental pattern. "Who are you? How old are you? How long have you lived here? What is your name?"

It must have happened a hundred times, a thousand times, and each time more galling than the time before. "Oh, Father of many! Congratulations! And how many sons do you have?"

"None."

And, many a time there must have been the half concealed snort of humor at the absurdity of the name and the fact that there were no children to back up the name. Abram must have steeled himself for the question and the reply, and have hated the situation with bitterness.

I once knew a man whose last name was Wrench. He told me that he divided all of his acquaintances into two classes: those who did not make wisecracks about his name and those who did. He said that he automatically cringed when someone would hear his name and begin one of the wisecracks which he had already heard, "was he related to monkey wrench; was he the left handed wrench?"

I once knew a Mr. Meek who had been asked a thousand times if he had inherited the earth. Abram would have understood it well.ⁱⁱ

It does not stop there, my friends. In Genesis, chapter 17, God meets with Abram again. It has been thirteen years since the birth of Ishmael, whom Abram fathered through Sarah's servant girl, Hagar. He has become the father of one!

Then, God meets with Abram to reiterate His promise of a multitude of nations coming from him. In that meeting, God changes Abram's name.

Barnhouse adds, with humor, these words,

I cannot help but think of what must have happened when Abram broke the news to his family that he was changing his name. They all knew the thorn of his former name, Abram, "father of many". So we can imagine the stir of interest and curiosity when he announced, "I am going to change my name."

Were there some who said to themselves with a laugh, "The old man couldn't take it. It

finally got under his skin. After all, to be father of nobody for eighty six years, and then to be the father of only one, with a name like he has – father of many – must have its rough moments. So, he is going to change his name after all. I wonder what it will be."

And then the old man spoke, "I am to be known as Abraham – father of multitudes."

We can almost hear the silence of the stunned moment as the truth breaks upon them. Father of multitudes. Then the laughter broke forth behind the scenes. "The old man has gone crazy. He had one child when he was eighty six, and now at ninety nine he is beginning to get ideas. Father of a multitude! How ridiculous."ⁱⁱⁱ

So it seemed.

Let the news slip out on that campus; in that dorm room; in that office complex, and hear, "You believe what? You believe that God created everything there is? You believe He's going to take you to a literal heaven one day? You believe that He's really going to recreate the earth and sit on the throne of David? You believe God is in control of this world? You believe that everything in your life is going to work out according to some divine plan and purpose? Are you crazy?"

It is in the heart of a person like that, who believes without clearly seeing and, may I add, without completely understanding, that the ancient treasure, called hope, is discovered.

The choice to trust without corresponding evidence

2. The second ingredient of hope is the choice to trust without corresponding evidence.

Look again at Romans, chapter 4, verse 19a,

Without becoming weak in faith . . .

Wait a second! If I read the record right, Abraham had many moments of weakness. However, in His graciousness, God seems to forget all the stumbling along the path of obedience and rewards the act of faith.

Notice that this verse says, "without becoming weak in faith . . .". But, surely, he did. He agreed to have relations with Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar, who bore a son, named Ishmael, as a result.

At one point, Abraham asked God to count Ishmael as the son of promise, but God refused. Ishmael was the decision of faithlessness, not faith. He

was Sarah's idea, not God's. The son of the covenant promise to Abraham would be the result of God's miraculous intervention. Abraham had to learn to trust God's word alone.

He did have moments of weakness, but the graciousness of God summarized his life in light of his ultimate faith in God's sovereign plan. He speaks of Abraham from that perspective.

This is just as He will, one day, speak to all who have placed their faith in Christ. He will, one day, say to all who did not always do well; who were not always good and faithful, "Well done, good and faithful servant . . .".

How? Because of His incredible grace and eternal perspective, by which, even now, He views all who are in Christ as perfected already. To Him, their records have been swept clean by the blood of Christ.

So, He speaks of Abraham, in this text, through the perspective of his relationship by faith in God. This reveals that, from His perspective, the record of Abraham has been swept clean.

Now notice the evidence that does not seem to correspond with the promise. Continue to verse 19b.

. . . he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb.

If the first ingredient of hope is the resolution to believe without seeing it fulfilled, then clearly, the second ingredient is to trust without corresponding evidence being supplied.

It is as if Paul emphasizes Abraham's dilemma. "Just look at the evidence. My body is as good as dead. I'm one hundred years old. And Sarah's no spring chicken either."

How do you trust in the face of such evidence?! Is this not the stumbling block of faith? Is this not the reason why so few have hope? Will you trust Him without evidence?!

In John, chapter 14, Jesus is speaking to His disciples. Their hearts were losing hope, as He had told them of His impending death. He said to them, in verse 1,

Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.

In translating that wonderful verse, so that the tenses of the Greek verbs are exposed, Jesus Christ said emphatically, "Stop letting your hearts be in anguish; keep on believing in God; keep on believing in Me!"

Now, this has nothing to do with believing in order to go to heaven; this has to do with believing in order to make it through life.

Why would the disciples face a great test to their belief in Him? Because of the evidence they were about to see.

Jesus had claimed to be eternal God, robed in flesh. He said He was the Messiah; the King of Kings. But what about the evidence?! The evidence is:

- Judas,
- Caiaphas,
- Pilate,
- burly Roman soldiers and a whip,
- a crown of thorns,
- an inability to walk up a hill carrying the cross beam,
- the crucifixion,
- a dead body,
- a tomb!

Now, do not misunderstand. Faith and hope do not ignore the evidence. They just stand in awe of what God will do to fulfill His promise, in light of the evidence.

Hope does not ignore the evidence, it just does not stop there. And hope does not minimize the difficulties and challenges of life either!

In the book of Numbers, Joshua and Caleb, along with ten other spies, entered the promised land to spy out their challenges to possessing the land, as God had promised they would. They came back and ten spies reported, "There are giants in the land and we are like little grasshoppers!"

That was the evidence.

Joshua and Caleb said, "We can overcome the giants."

That was the promise.

While the ten spies calculated their evidence; Joshua and Caleb calculated Providence. The ten spies were preoccupied with giants; Caleb and Joshua were preoccupied with God.

Hope happens to be a matter of preoccupation! And, when you are preoccupied with God, nothing within His will is impossible. Even His most outlandish promises will come true.

When you believe without fully seeing, and trust in the face of evidence to the contrary, you will have

the necessary ingredients, when mixed together and baked in the oven of fiery trials; such as, unmet needs, unwanted circumstances, unrelenting pressure, and unexpected difficulties, for the sweet bread of hope.

Conclusion

Thousands of Christians in North America have learned one of Don Moen's praise songs which affirms God's sovereign involvement in their lives. Most who sing this song, however, do not know the kind of hopelessness from which the lyrics came.

Several years ago, Don was awakened in the middle of the night. His mother-in-law called to tell him, and his wife, of a tragic car accident that would impact their entire family. Don's wife's sister, Susan, her husband, and their four little boys, were on a trip, when tragedy struck. They were involved in a car accident, in which all of them were seriously injured. Their eight year old son would die from his injuries.

As Don and his wife grieved and poured out their hearts to the Lord, they felt helpless at communicating any kind of hope to Susan and Craig. Don recalls asking the Lord to help him express hope, in some way, to his family members. In a very short time, Don scratched out some lyrics and composed the music for a chorus that, to this day, gives believers a deep sense of hope in the midst of difficult times. The lyrics are:

God will make a way,

Where there seems to be no way

He works in ways we cannot see

He will make a way for me

He will be my guide

Hold me closely to his side

With love and strength for each new day

He will make a way, He will make a way.^{iv}

This song reminds me of Jeremiah's inspired lyrics, in chapter 29, verse 11, which sound similar,

“For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.”

To put it simply, the only way to have hope, is to have Him. The only way to possess hope, is to pursue after Him.

What kind of life is the life of hope? Is it all just waiting and wondering?

Near the end of his letter to the Roman believers, in chapter 15, verse 13, Paul promised to those who would live like Abraham, in faith and hope, this kind of life,

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What kind of life is that? The Abraham-life, which is the only life worth living!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/27/2002 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Marilyn Elias, "Proud to be American," USA TODAY Online (Oct. 11, 2001).

ⁱⁱ Donald Grey Barnhouse, Romans Vol. 2 (Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), p. 312.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 316.

^{iv} Don Moen, God Will Make a Way (Integrity's Hosanna Music/ASCAP, 1990).