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**THE IMPORTANCE
OF A
HOPEFUL LIFE**

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By: Aaron Armstrong

There's a storytelling trope that I absolutely despise in popular media: the "just believe" pep talk. Sometimes it seems like you could watch almost any movie—especially an action one—and find it there. At some point, the hero is faced with a choice. He can give up and admit defeat, or he can muster up the strength that will lead him to victory. *If* he believes, that is.

I remember this clearly in the 2005 movie *Serenity*, which was based on the short-lived TV series *Firefly*. Despite its overall excellent storytelling, there's one scene that comes close to ruining the movie—for me, at least. You guessed it. It's a "just believe" scene.

At a pivotal moment in the film, the lead character, Mal, is with Shepherd Book, the movie's main religious figure. Shepherd is dying because of an attack by those aligned with the film's villain, the Operative—a devout believer in "a better world, a world without sin." With his final breath, Shepherd tells Mal, "I don't care what you believe—just believe."

This is apparently the key to defeating the Operative. It's intense. It's dramatic. And I argue that it's complete nonsense.²

The obvious question is this: Believe in *what*, exactly? Believe that the sky is blue? Believe that it snows too much in Canada during the winter? Believe that it's way too late at night as I write this?

Just *believe*. Because believing in something—anything—will give you the strength you need to [overcome any obstacle](#). Your belief, no matter what it is, will give you hope.

But there's a problem: we don't actually know what hope is.

What the World Thinks about Hope

Like belief, hope has become rather amorphous in our day. We hope we don't get sick. We hope we get the job. We hope we can pay our bills, maintain our friendships, and raise good children.

WE MUST ASK: WHAT IS HOPE?

We hope for things we'd like to have or events we want to see happen. We use hope to describe how we feel about things we want or desire. It's something akin to wishful thinking. When we think about hope in this way—as a vague sense of "maybe someday things will be better," or "eventually I might get this thing I really want," is it any wonder we are such a hopeless people?

This reality is not lost upon marketers. The ads we see are no longer just trying to sell us a product or service. They are selling us the promise of a better life—the answer to our despair. They're trying to sell us *hope*. But we're still coming up empty.

¹ *Serenity*, directed by Joss Whedon (2005; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2007), DVD.

² I previously published this concept at "Just believe

and other nonsense you hear in the movies," *Blogging Theologically*, June 30, 2014, <http://www.bloggingtheologically.com/2014/06/30/just-believe/>.

The problem with popular media and advertising isn't that they have the diagnosis wrong. The problem is that they are trying to fix an issue that is simply beyond them. We might get a pleasant sugar buzz from a bottle of Coke, but we're not going to find the solution to what is wrong inside of us.

Hope: The Essence of the Christian Life

To do that, Christians say, we need to [turn to the Bible](#). We must ask of God's Word: What reason do we have to hope? Even more than that, we must ask: What is hope?

**WE ARE A HOPEFUL PEOPLE
BECAUSE OF THE OBJECT OF
OUR HOPE.**

Because of my work, I've had the privilege to travel to a number of different countries in what many would consider the "two-thirds" world. These are nations that have not yet achieved higher economic development. What amazes me every time is the dignity with which men, women, and children carry themselves despite their often desperate circumstances.

Recently I spoke with a man—the son of a minister—who makes atole (a corn-based beverage) and sells it in his neighborhood in order to provide for his family. He makes about \$165 a month. What I saw in this man as he shared his story was not a sense of despair because of his circumstances, but a profound sense of confidence and hope.

Speaking with him reminded me that biblical hope is not wishy-washy. Biblical hope is neither wishful thinking nor a mere desire for something we'd like to have happen. Instead, the Bible consistently presents hope as a confident expectation, an assuredness about what is to happen in the future, and even an anticipation of that future. In other words, hope is the *essence* of the Christian life.³

**WE HOPE IN GOD BECAUSE OF
WHO GOD IS AND WHAT HE
HAS DONE.**

Thus, hope is one of our deepest virtues as Christians. Christians are to be a hopeful people. We are to find joy in hope,⁴ overflow with hope,⁵ boast in hope,⁶ hold firmly to our hope,⁷ and even give defense for our hope.⁸ We are to endure trials because trials produce character, which in turn produces hope.⁹

According to Scripture, then, Christians ought to be nothing less than hopeful. Indeed, we ought to be the most hopeful of people—not because we are holding to some vague sense that things may get better, but because we are certain of what is to come and confident in the one who has promised to bring it about. We are a hopeful people because of the object of our hope.

³ See Martin H. Manser, *Dictionary of Bible Themes: The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies* (London: Martin Manser, 2009).

⁴ See *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Romans 12:12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Romans 15:13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Hebrews 3:6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Colossians 1:23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1 Peter 3:15

⁹ *Ibid.*, Romans 5:3–4.

The Object of Our Hope

So what—or rather, who—is [the object of our hope](#)? God.

“For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth,” the psalmist wrote.¹⁰ This is the God whom the prophet Jeremiah called the hope of Israel.¹¹ This is the God whom the Apostle Paul called the God of hope¹² and described even more pointedly as *our* hope.¹³

But why do we hope in God? We hope in God because of [who God is](#) and what he has done. He is the Creator, the maker of the heavens and the earth.¹⁴ He is “the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”¹⁵ He rescued a people not simply from human slavery, but from sin and death. He most fully revealed himself in his son, Jesus Christ,

who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!¹⁶

Our God is a God of hope, for he is the object of our hope. This is why theologian Charles Spurgeon could say to those burdened with guilt and [depression](#), “Mountains, when in darkness hidden, are as real as in day, and God’s love is as true to you now as it was in your brightest moments.”¹⁷ We have hope in God because of the love with which he has loved us. He did not “spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all,” and we can be sure he will give us all things for our good.¹⁸

**GOD IS THE ANSWER TO OUR
DEEPEST PROBLEM, OUR
GREATEST NEED.**

As theologian Richard Sibbes wrote, “Whatsoever our condition be, let us never limit God. God’s people should never be better, the times were never worse. Where we be bad, God is good. Times are bad, God is good. He can alter all. When there is no hope of escaping, no likely issue, God can make it good.”¹⁹

This is but a small taste of our great God and savior. His love is unfathomable. His compassion is beyond measure. “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning.”²⁰

Our Need for God

Is it any wonder that the Bible uses incredibly provocative language to describe our need for God? We desire him; we long for him. We desperately need him. “My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you,” the prophet Isaiah wrote.²¹ The psalmist declares, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.”²²

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible*, Psalm 71:5.

¹¹ See *The Holy Bible*, Jeremiah 14:8; 17:13.

¹² *Ibid.*, Romans 15:13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1 Timothy 1:1. Paul refers to Jesus Christ, specifically.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Genesis 1:1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Exodus 34:6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Philippians 2:6–8.

¹⁷ Charles Spurgeon, as quoted in Elliot Ritzema and

Elizabeth Vince, eds., *300 Quotations for Preachers from the Modern Church*, Pastorum Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013).

¹⁸ *The Holy Bible*, Romans 8:32.

¹⁹ Richard Sibbes, as quoted in Ritzema and Vince.

²⁰ *The Holy Bible*, Lamentations 3:22–23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Isaiah 26:9.

²² *Ibid.*, Psalm 73:25. See also Psalm 42:2 and 143:6.

God is the answer to our deepest problem, our greatest need. We run after wealth, sex, and personal freedom, thinking these will satisfy us. Perhaps they do for a little while, but they will always fail to satisfy permanently.

We listen to messengers who overpromise and underdeliver, who fill our minds “with false hopes.”²³ We pursue all the wrong things for all the wrong reasons, hoping they will bring us the joy we long for, all the while ignoring our true source of joy. For as Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst again. Indeed, the water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”²⁴

We hope in God—we hope in Christ—because he is the only one who can satisfy our deepest needs for love, purpose, and redemption. This is why we are not merely encouraged but *commanded* to hope in God. “Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore,” the psalmist wrote.²⁵ “Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.”²⁶

Likewise, Paul tells us we are not to “put [our] hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put [our] hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”²⁷ The book of Hebrews tells us to “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”²⁸ God is the only one worthy of our hope, for he is eternally faithful.

Redemption and the Hope of Future Glory

An infinitesimal understanding of God and his plans is sufficient to produce infinite hope in his people, for we know that there is something greater awaiting us than what we currently see. We cannot see it now but we can be sure it is coming, because the object of our hope is trustworthy.²⁹

**WE HOPE IN GOD—WE HOPE
IN CHRIST—BECAUSE HE IS THE
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OUR DEEPEST NEEDS FOR LOVE,
PURPOSE, AND REDEMPTION.**

So what do we hope for? What is this unseen thing that we wait for? It is the hope of eternal life—the redemption of our bodies and of this world. It is the hope of future glory.

Consider the emphasis the apostles placed upon the resurrection and the redemption of our physical bodies. Paul wrote to Titus that we live in “the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time.”³⁰ And in defending himself before Felix in Caesarea, he said, “I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way. . . . I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and *I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.*”³¹

²³ Ibid., Jeremiah 23:16.

²⁴ Ibid., John 4:13–14.

²⁵ Ibid., Psalm 131:3.

²⁶ Ibid., Psalm 130:7.

²⁷ Ibid., 1 Timothy 6:17.

²⁸ Ibid., Hebrews 10:23.

²⁹ Ibid., Hebrews 11:1.

³⁰ Ibid., Titus 1:2.

³¹ Ibid., Acts 24:14–15, emphasis added.

**WE HOPE FOR ETERNAL LIFE—
THE REDEMPTION OF OUR
BODIES AND OF THIS WORLD.**

Indeed, Paul felt so strongly on this point that he said that if there were no **resurrection**, if our hope in Christ were only for a better life *now*, we would be among those to be most pitied.³² And it is not just us who await this redemption—it is the whole of creation.

Paul says that in every moment, creation longs to be freed from its bondage to corruption and futility. “The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”³³

In some sense that we cannot quite understand, the created world hopes for its redemption to be complete. “There is no element and no part of the world which, being touched, as it were, with a sense of its present misery, does not intensely hope for a resurrection.”³⁴

**IN SOME SENSE THAT WE CANNOT
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REDEMPTION TO BE COMPLETE.**

The redemption of the world, the inauguration of the new heavens and the new earth, and the coming of Jesus to rule and reign forever more—this is what Christians hope for. It is our blessed hope,³⁵ the hope that drives us to **bold proclamation of the gospel**³⁶ and great love for God’s people.³⁷ When we grasp this—when we “eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope”—it changes everything.³⁸

Hope Lets Us Stand Before Suffering and Death

In early 2015, the world was horrified when twenty-one Coptic Christians were kidnapped and beheaded by **the militant Muslim group ISIS**.³⁹ In the graphic propaganda video released by this terrorist group, several of the men can seemingly be heard calling to Jesus right up to the moment of death.⁴⁰ It seems that even when facing death, their hope did not waver. And they are not alone.

From the earliest days of the Church, Christians have faced trial, hardship, persecution, and death because of their faith. The book of Acts tells us of Stephen, the first martyr, whose death was overseen by Saul, who would eventually become the Apostle Paul.⁴¹ And the book of Hebrews, in its famous “hall of faith,” tells us of those who

were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.⁴²

³² Ibid., 1 Corinthians 15:19.

³³ Ibid., Romans 8:19–21.

³⁴ John Calvin, as quoted in Ritzema and Vince.

³⁵ *The Holy Bible*, Titus 2:13.

³⁶ Ibid., 2 Corinthians 3:12.

³⁷ Ibid., Colossians 1:4–5.

³⁸ Ibid., Galatians 5:5.

³⁹ ISIS is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The media

alternates between ISIS and ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

⁴⁰ “ISIS video appears to show beheadings of Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya,” *CNN*, February 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/15/middleeast/isis-video-beheadings-christians/>.

⁴¹ *The Holy Bible*, Acts 7:1–8:3.

⁴² Ibid., Hebrews 11:35–38.

According to tradition, Paul was beheaded in Rome. Peter was crucified upside down. The Apostle John is believed to have died alone in exile on the isle of Patmos. Christians such as Blandina, a Gallic slave girl circa 177 CE, were put on the gridiron, thrown to wild beasts, and impaled on stakes.⁴³ They were mocked, slandered, abused, and murdered. And yet they did not abandon hope.

IF OUR HOPE IN CHRIST WERE ONLY FOR THIS LIFE, WHAT GOOD WOULD IT BE?

They knew it was better to suffer at the hands of the world than to abandon hope in Christ. They could endure suffering and affliction, knowing their Lord had done so as well. Like Paul, they could “eagerly expect and hope” that they would not “be ashamed, but [would] have sufficient

courage so that now as always Christ [would] be exalted in [their bodies], whether by life or by death.”⁴⁴

If their hope were just wishful thinking—if it was not grounded in something sure— could any martyr stand? If our hope in Christ were only for this life, what good would it be? The hope of future glory, the hope of the return of Christ and [the coming of his kingdom](#) in its fullness, allows us to face suffering and death with confidence.

This doesn’t mean we do not fear, but it does mean that we can stand faithful to the end. Hope will not put us to shame. The Lord will not abandon us to death,⁴⁵ for as surely as God raised Jesus from the dead, he will also raise us from death.⁴⁶

Hope Helps Us to Live for Christ Now

But the fruit of our hope is not simply the ability to face suffering and death well, although we should certainly be thankful for this. Hope also allows us to live effectively for Christ *right now*.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT HOPE.

Hope encourages and strengthens us. It causes us to rejoice. “Through [Jesus] we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in hope of the glory of God.”⁴⁷ Our hope encourages us to be bold and to [share our faith](#)—we who have hope cannot help but offer that same hope to those in need of it!

Hope allows us to live godly lives. As the Apostle John wrote, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”⁴⁸ The psalmist likewise wrote, “May integrity and uprightness protect me because my hope, Lord, is in you.”⁴⁹

Without hope, godly living is impossible—[holiness](#) is impossible. The Christian life is impossible without hope. It cannot be done. We need hope if we are to pursue righteous living. And this is the pattern God has established in his Word.

⁴³ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970, republished 2003), 249.

⁴⁴ *The Holy Bible*, Philippians 1:20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Psalm 16:10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 Corinthians 6:14.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Romans 5:2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1 John 3:2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Psalm 25:21.

Seventeenth-century theologian Walter Marshall put it this way:

The sure hope of the glory of heaven is made use of ordinarily by God, since the fall of Adam, as an encouragement to the practice of holiness. . . . Christ, the great pattern of holiness, ‘for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame’ (Heb. 12:2). . . . The apostles did not faint under affliction, because they knew that it brought for them ‘a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory’ (2 Cor. 4:16, 17). The believing Hebrews ‘took joyfully the plundering of your goods—knowing in yourselves that you have better and more enduring riches in Heaven’ (Heb. 10:34). The apostle Paul accounts all his sufferings unprofitable, were it not for a glorious resurrection, and that Christians would be of all men most miserable, and that the doctrine of the Epicures were rather to be chosen: ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’ And he exhorts the Corinthians to be ‘abundant in the work of the Lord, knowing that their labor shall not be in vain in the Lord’ (1 Cor. 15:58). As worldly hope keeps the world at work in their various employments, so God gives His people the hope of His glory to keep them close to His service (Heb. 6:11, 12; 1 John 3:3). And it is such a sure hope as shall never make them ashamed (Rom. 5:5).⁵⁰

What Is the Hope That You Have?

The world’s idea of hope pales in comparison to what we find in the Bible. Biblical hope knows nothing of wishful thinking. It has nothing to do with empty desire or trivial belief.

**TRUE HOPE—THE KIND WE SEE
THROUGHOUT THE BIBLE—IS
LIFE-CHANGING.**

True hope—the kind we see throughout the Bible—is life-changing. It is a sure hope in God, because God is steadfast and sure in his love for his people and this world. It is a confidence that Jesus will indeed return, that his kingdom will come, that the groaning of this world will come to an end, and that redemption will not only be accomplished and applied but completed.

This is the hope that allows us to face trials and suffering. It is the hope that we long to share with others. It is the hope that drives us to pursue holiness and strive to become more and more like Christ. It is a hope that will never put us to shame. This is the hope that we need. It is the hope that the Lord offers.

What is the hope that you have?

⁵⁰ Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* (1692), Kindle location 355.

⁵¹ Photo Credit: [Pablo Heimplatz | Unsplash](#)