

When all Hope is Gone, God is Not

If I asked...

“Are you are in a situation right now where you’ve given up hope?” I wonder how many of us would say, “yes, that’s me”? A British pastor from the 17th century observed “If it were not for hope the heart would break” (Thomas Fuller). Perhaps, explaining why so many people around you and me seem broken.

TV interviews, the skyrocketing number of people in psychotherapy, and the despair that leaks out in everyday conversations, suggest Americans may be the least hopeful people in the entire world. Listen to *Lost Hope* by Amanda Harris:

*I'm so tired of being lost in a world,
Where no one can find me.
I want to break free of the cage,
That has been enclosing me for too long.
I know that I am alone and no one will save me,
So I am to escape for myself.
I wander down a path,
That will go on for eternity.
I shall never reach the end,
I am trapped no matter where I go.
Though I finally manage to reach the end,
I must fight the monster inside of me to pass.
It is filled with so much anger, hate, and despair,
The only antidote is love, courage, and hope.
The three things I do not have,
And never will.
It is there that I give up,
I have nothing left but myself.
So I lay down forever,
Never going to get up again...as I fade away from all existence.*

Why do you think sadness, sorrow, despair of such magnitude stalks the landscape of so many hearts? Probably because of things that happen: sickness, failures, death, rejection, abandonment, accusations, poverty, legal problems, getting fired, traffic accidents, being ridiculed. Yet, if hope is a casualty of bad circumstances, why is it that not *all* people dissolve in bleak circumstances? Some actually radiate with light while their counterparts are consumed by inky darkness.

The title of my message is *When Hope is Gone, God is not*. He is the antidote to “I have nothing left but myself.” Find Acts 27:1-44. Let’s use this story as something of a case study for hope in God. READ. PRAY.

Story:

Governor Felix ordered soldiers to take Paul to Italy for the audience with the emperor he requested. His escort was a considerate centurion named Julius. The journey would take him some 1800 miles, nearly every one by sea. The first leg ended at Lycia where they chartered another ship that would take them the rest of the way to Rome—or so they thought.

They docked in Crete's harbor of Fair Havens. They had to find a place to spend winter which was right around the corner. All shipping stopped Nov. 11- early February and calculating the date based on the Day of Atonement (9), if it was the year AD 59, it was already past October 5. And while shipping between mid-September and November 11 was done, it too was risky.

Paul warned Julius not to keep going but the ship's pilot and owner disagreed. Not surprisingly Julius took their counsel and decided to chance it. Bad move. A typhoon-like (τυφωνικοῦ) wind barreled down from Crete and on board concerns about schedules changed quickly to concerns about survival. Desperate, the crew's best efforts, it looked like the worst. READ v.20.

Nothing they had done with their own hands could save them; they were going down. All hope was gone. Apart from Paul and friends Luke and Aristarchus, presumably all on board were unbelievers. But if we're honest, many of us who *know* Christ have lost hope too. Whether for a day or a year, we know what it's like to look out on the brown, muddy, muck of life convinced the sun's never going to shine again. And, with us it's perhaps worse because we know there *is* a God, one whom we believe loves us. So why doesn't He deliver?

In anguish Job blamed *God* for his loss of hope. *"...He uproots my hope like a tree..."* (Job 19:10). Even in his complaint Job understood this foundational truth: even when my hope is gone, God is not.

As the wind screamed across the port bow, Paul stood and addressed men preparing to die (21b-26): "You should have listened to me and stayed at Fair Havens. Even so, God has told me every one of us will live."

A few sailors were unconvinced and tried to sneak away in the lifeboat. Paul warned of dire consequences if the men left. The soldiers cut the boat loose. (I'm not sure where the line is to be drawn between trying to create our own hope and doing what God expects us to do. But these men were depriving their passengers of their seamanship in a desperate moment worried about nothing more than their own skin.)

After 2 weeks of being battered, Paul again reminded the men that they were going to live. READ vv.33-36. There was still one more moment in this disaster when it looked like the worst would happen. READ vv.42-44. And everyone reached land in safety.

When all hope is gone, God is not. When King Nebuchadnezzar threw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into the blazing furnace, not only were they not incinerated, but a fourth man had joined them that Nebuchadnezzar described as *a son of the gods*. Hmm... When Gideon took just 300 men to fight several hundred thousand Midianites and Amalekites, God showed up and 120,000 of the enemy were killed.

Whether the threat is a boat sinking in the storm (*even the wind and waves obey him...[Matthew 8:27]*), or fear of some unknown future (*do not fear for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God [Is.41:10]*). When hope is gone, God is not.

Listen, when we read these stories in the Bible of God's deliverance, we can make two mistakes:

1. We dismiss it with, "Well, God doesn't do that anymore." Says who? He doesn't always, but he does sometimes (by the way, he didn't always in Bible times either).
2. Or, we make God's deliverance the grounds of our faith instead of God's presence. When all hope is gone, God is not. You see, if you lost at sea, or pinned beneath your car in a desolate spot or your parachute does not open, God may—or may *not*—deliver you. If your husband or wife left you ,

they may or may *not* come back; your boyfriend may or may *not* come back. Is your faith in God's deliverance, or in God's presence? Do you trust Him *only* if he works things out the way you'd like, or do you trust *Him*?

When the men were about to be tossed into Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, they said, *If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.*" (Dan.3:17-18)

Their hope was in God, the maker of heaven and earth, not in what he would or wouldn't do for them. Is that true of you, of me? In what have we put our hope?

Concl:

In April, 2003 a young outdoorsman was trapped in Canyonlands National Park in Utah. Despite being a veteran climber with an excellent knowledge of wilderness rules, Aron Ralston was traveling by himself and hadn't notified anyone where he was going or how long he'd be gone. He parked his truck at one end of the rocky slot of BlueJohn Canyon, bicycled the 15 miles to the other end, and began his trek. A

About midway through, he was on the last rappel, trying to get over an 800 lb. boulder wedged in the 3 foot opening. As he made his way down the other side, it shifted, trapping his right arm.

If you know the story, you know that after 5 days, he amputated his arm with a dull multi-tool. In his book *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, he describes what happened on day 3, April 28, 6:30 PM.

A subtle stirring tells me it's time to pray. I haven't tried that yet. I close my left hand in a loose fist, shut my eyes, and lower my forehead onto my hand. "God, I am praying to you for guidance. I'm trapped here in Blue John Canyon—you probably know that—and I don't know what I am supposed to do. Please show me a sign."

I slowly tilt my forehead back until I'm looking up through the pale twilight. Nothing. What was I expecting? A swirl in the clouds? A petroglyph showing a man with a knife? I start again.

"OK, God, since you're apparently busy ... Devil, if you're listening, I need some help here. I'll trade you my arm, my soul, whatever you want. Just get me out of here."

For the unbeliever, hope is dependent upon God's *deliverance*. For the believer, it's dependent upon presence and character of God. What about you? What about me?