

A Crisis Needing Hope

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Has America lost faith? Or just hope?

As my father lay dying, my mother taught me the difference.

My father had been an alcoholic, enslaved to the bottle, when he found out my mother was expecting. He vowed he would not raise a child in the home of a drunkard. He tried to quit again and again, but each time he fell back into the addiction. One day, he had terrible chest pains and felt he was experiencing a heart attack. In desperation, he cried out to God.

The Lord delivered him from the pain – and set him free from alcoholism. From that day forward, my father honored God with his whole life. I was raised in church, and by the time I was 8 years old, my father was the pastor. He was an amazing preacher, teacher and caregiver for his flock. He became a wonderful man of God.

So when he was stricken with Alzheimer's disease, it did not seem fair to me. He had served the Lord so faithfully. It was an agonizing seven-year struggle, leaving him in a pitiful state, his body and mind destroyed. Finally one day, I received the call to come quickly; my father was certain to die. As I rushed to his bedside, his doctor was leaving the room.

"Your dad for all practical purposes is not with us any longer," the doctor told me. "His upper brain function is gone, his lower brain function is gone, and he has not spoken in three and a half months. It is medically and physically impossible for him to speak." Although Dad had been expected not to live through the night, his body had somehow rallied the strength to keep him breathing.

But the doctor went on: "It's not your dad I'm worried about; it's your mom. She is physically and emotionally depleted. You are going to have to do something."

And he walked out.

I stood at the foot of the bed, and just as the doctor had predicted, Dad didn't know I was present. He had wasted away, too few pounds draped on a 6-foot frame, lying in a fetal position, his eyes glassed over. This was once a great preacher; he used to quote entire chapters of Scripture, but Alzheimer's had stripped him of his cognitive ability. If you have ever stood at the bedside of a parent or relative so ravaged by this disease, you will understand.

In those dark moments, I heard a voice in my head, like the adversary, saying to me, *How do you preach faith when your dad's lying here in this condition? What do you tell people about God and healing and service? All of these years he was faithful, and now look how he has ended up!*

It sounded right. This was my father. I admit it: I was struggling. But in the next few moments as I prayed over my father, God gave me the words from Scripture to win that struggle. I went a few

rounds with the negative voice of the enemy, but the ultimate victory was mine, in 2 Corinthians 5:1: "For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (NASB).

So I said, "Devil, you're not going to win. When Dad dies and closes his eyes in death, that old tabernacle, that tent, falls away. He's going to step from one plane of reality to another plane of reality, and he's going to be in the presence of the King of kings and the Lord of lords!"

I got excited, and I had myself a camp meeting right there!

But then I stepped out of the room to where my mother and sister were waiting. My mother asked me what I had been doing, and I told her I had been praying with Pop. What she said next shocked me profoundly – and yet, in a way, it was very understandable ... and human, too.

"Why are you praying for him?" she said bitterly. "It won't do any good. Son, it's a joke. We prayed for him so long to be healed and look at him. There's no dignity in that room in there. I can't communicate with him. He won't talk to me. I sit by his bed every day, longing for him to say a word. He can't even know I'm present. When I realized how bad he was, I began to ask for God to take him home. He wants to be in God's presence. I know that. I know him. And now he won't die. When you need God the most, He turns His back on you. It's a joke, that's what it is."

Then she pointed her finger in my face and said, "Son, don't you ever pray in my presence again."

It sounds drastic, but if you have any experience with Alzheimer's, you know it is a terrible thing to have to care for someone who is slowly dying with it. They say Alzheimer's is one disease that kills two people – the victim – and the person who has to care for the victim.

Still, I was shocked. This was my mother, the quiet lady who backed my father up in his ministry every day of my life. When they pioneered a church, if he fasted for seven days, she fasted for seven days. If he fasted for 21 days, she fasted for 21 days. She was not extroverted, but when she prayed, God answered. To hear her speak as she had just spoken to me – it was like blasphemy coming out of her mouth.

What could I say? I could not quote Scripture to her. She knows more Bible than I do. I could not give her platitudes, like the difference between the glass half full and half empty – we were at her husband's deathbed, and that would just come out sounding trite.

The victory I had just attained in my own struggle with the devil was completely obliterated by my mother's attitude, and I found there was nothing I could do but leave. I had nothing to say to her.

Driving home, I began to cry.

"God," I prayed, "You've got yourself a problem."

I know it's risky to talk to God that way; but He's God, He can take it.

"If Dad passes," I said, "he will be in Your presence just like that. But if something happens to Mom, she's lost her faith."

This is what I thought. I had heard my mother say terrible things, and it seemed to me she had lost her faith. It scared me. I had looked up to her all my life; she had guided my path. I had seen God work in her life. But then, to hear those words from her lips – it created a struggle in me, something psychologists call "cognitive dissonance."

Cognitive has to do with what you know. And dissonance is conflict. Cognitive dissonance is when the things you know to be true are in conflict with each other. I knew my mother was a woman of God, and at the same time I knew she had just spoken words that rejected God. How could both these thoughts, both these "cognitions," be true?

But that night – as I was crying and worrying over my mother's loss of faith – the Holy Spirit showed me the truth: She had not lost her faith at all. She had been trained and educated, through decades of service to Christ, in a faith that would never leave her. She knew in her mind the promises are true. But in a moment of despair, she had lost her hope.

The devil takes the only path he can take. It's easier for the devil to discourage you emotionally than it is for him to defeat you scripturally. He can manipulate circumstances, but he cannot alter the Word of God. Romans 15:4 says, "For what ever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." The devil will not waste time attacking the faith of a mature believer, because the Word leaves him no power to come against your faith. But he will do all he can to attack your emotions, to kill your joy, to take away your heartfelt expectations for a good future.

Satan's attack is not so much against your faith as it is against your hope.

And this is what ails America today. Too many of us have lost hope. Christian leaders today tend to focus on the idea that America has "lost faith."

I disagree.

What America has lost, especially in the days since 9/11 and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, is hope. It's critical to recognize the difference between the two.

Hope is an emotion. It is a feeling. It is a belief. Faith is about education. Romans 10:17 says, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." You receive faith through learning, through hearing and believing the Word. This comes in addition to the "measure of faith" given by God to each person – so it seems the more teaching about faith you take in, the more faith you are going to have. You can train yourself in faith. It is learnable!

Hope, on the other hand, is an emotion. Faith is related to miracles. Hope is related to morale. You may have enough faith to turn your situation around at any moment, and yet you feel like you want to give up and quit. Why is that? It's not that you lack faith; but you do lack hope.

Hope is an expectation, a dream that a goal will be achieved, the dictionary says. Hope is a favorable, confident, happy anticipation. Faith is the dynamite, but hope is the fuse. It's the confident anticipation of good things to come – with a corresponding effort to reach out and attain it.

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Four days after I had left my mother angry, bitter, and hopeless at the hospital, she went back to visit my father. There – to her astonishment – she felt the presence of God.

"I didn't want to feel it," she told me later, "but it was like an anointing cloud." In the Old Testament, they called it the Shekinah glory. God is so powerfully real, He has an essence about Him we can sometimes sense.

It was this essence of God's Spirit that came over my mother when she walked into my father's room – and she heard a voice in her head. Four days earlier, the voice in my own head had been the enemy trying to destroy my hope. But this day, it was the voice of the Holy Spirit whispering to my mother. *Get ready, He said, he's going to talk to you today.*

Which was crazy. The doctors had already told us my father was gone; there was no brain function. It was impossible for him to speak. Even if he had come out of the coma, it had been months since he had been able to say intelligible words; and for three and a half years before that, Alzheimer's had made his conversation incomprehensible. My mother had prayed for those three and a half years just to be able to have a real conversation with him. But by now it was out of the question – except for this one little spark of hope breathed into life in my mother because of the promise of the Holy Spirit.

You might think it was just wishful thinking. But she had walked into that room with her hope gauge on E, and now the promise of God had nudged the arrow up just a little bit toward F. She sat down and waited with anticipation for what my father would say.

Hope is confident anticipation; it is an expectation that something is getting ready to happen. How did hope come to my mom? By the power of the Holy Ghost!

"I don't know if I was there three minutes or three hours," she told me later. "But I was looking right into his eyes when they cleared up – and he looked right at me. All of a sudden his mouth began to move, and with a strong voice he said, 'You know what, honey? God still answers prayer.' "

For the next 10 minutes, my father lay there, praying in an unknown tongue, under the power of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, he slid back into the coma.

"Son, nobody else could have spoken that phrase to me," my mother declared afterward. "Not you,

not any preacher, not any prophet, nobody could have spoken that phrase for it to have meant anything to me. The only man who could say that and it mean anything to me was your daddy, and he was brain-dead – but God let him preach one more message! And it restored my hope!"

America today urgently needs an infusion of hope. But a national renewal of hope can only come from a personal renewal of hope. New hope born in individuals – people like you. And the churches they comprise – churches like yours!

I don't know where your hope gauge is today. Maybe you're just about empty. Maybe you feel America is beyond hope. But there is a way to top off your "hope tank."

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