

Hope in the Midst of Despair



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When I think about what Jesus commanded us to do, I tend to alternate between hope and despair. Despair is defined as the loss of hope, so these are polar opposites. I never totally lose hope, but neither do I ever think everything is just wonderful.

We must cast all our anxieties on him—whether they are personal or global—because he cares for us. (1 Peter 5:7) That verse follows after a word about the elders and is followed by admonitions to be watchful, sober-minded, resisting the evil one who is seeking to destroy us. We know anything that will be done, will be done by the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us, not by our gifts or human power.

So our despair comes from looking at our own inadequacies, or blaming the inadequacies of the church in its outreach. Both require us to turn away from our human perspective toward God. Only he can overcome our flesh, which we allow to overwhelm us.

I experienced this while in Thailand, India and China this year. Any of us can feel hopeless when we hear about the next ISIS aggression. Exposure to great and growing need for the gospel stretches our views of the reality of the task remaining. We also see signs of great hope. And we usually see things that we don't know how to interpret. We see in

part. We understand only a small portion of what is happening. Ralph Winter used to say that when you are in a cross-cultural situation, where you are out of your own culture and understanding, you are like a dog in a museum. Seeing everything but understanding nothing.

I felt that way many times this year.

After 32 years at this kind of work, I (usually or eventually) remind myself to go back to the Lord and his Word, and throw myself on his mercy and sovereignty. It is his task and power that accomplishes anything and everything for good and for his glory. We press on only because of him and by his power. We only have hope in the midst of a world devoid of hope because of the one thing that can break human despair: the cross.

We can only imagine the crushing experience represented by death on a cross. We feel it every time we read the gospel accounts or see Christ's death depicted in film. Part of what we are feeling is for the disciples, who lost all hope that night. Part of what we feel is that our sin put him on that cross. He took on our sin—meaning he took it off of us completely.

So the despair of that day gives way to the power of the resurrection. Power and hope now dwell in those who know him. And that amazing power enables us to actually do his work and please him—in part, by bringing people into relationship with him.

John Stott, in his book, *The Cross*, said it well:

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross.... In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?... I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in Godforsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross that symbolizes divine suffering.

There, and only there, can we rest and have hope. Rest when we desperately need to stop and sit and be still, and rest in the midst of the hard work that is life and ministry in Christ.

As I observed first hand some of the massive spiritual and human need around the world—and also see it in my own nation—I needed to remind myself that it doesn't depend on me. When I think it does, I am overwhelmed. God blesses us and uses us so we can be a blessing through his power, which is at work in and through us. That gives us hope.

