

Introduction: When I was a church planter in another state many years ago, we had a young man named Conner in his late 20's early 30's who came into our new little church that met in an Elementary school and he heard the Good News of Salvation in Christ and was changed in dramatic fashion. He began immediately to meet with our senior pastor and his story was that of Heroin addiction. He made a good faith effort to surrender his mind, his heart and his life to Jesus. But the power of that drug was always right there...calling him back.

We called our church "The Grace Place"—it was a nickname. We just wanted that little place to be a triage for broken hurting people who had no hope of ever changing their lives. Apart from Jesus? Not a prayer. It was the kind of church that when you stood up and said, "turn in your Bibles to the book of Acts" you wouldn't hear the familiar rustling of pages being flipped because half the people didn't own a Bible and the other half didn't know where the book of Acts was.

And Conner was on fire (at least that's the Christian language we used to use to describe it). He loved God and would often be brought to tears over his sin, over his past—but those tears of regret for things lost—for so many years thrown away on nonsense and false gods—would morph into tears of joy in his worship.

I got a call at work one day and my friend the senior pastor told me that the police had found him in his car the night before—deceased from an overdose of Cocaine.

My heart broke as we reached out to his friends now active in our church and his family who had turned to faith because of his witness. I don't know what was going on in my friend's mind minutes before he OD'd. I don't know what kind of pain or despair he may have been feeling.

It is possible for a believer in Jesus—a person who has made peace with God and been reconciled through embracing his cross and resurrection—to feel despondent and hopeless.

Stats: Sociologists who study the phenomenon of suicide zoom in on suicide notes. They look at the notes left behind by ancient Greco-Romans from Jesus' time all the way up to modern suicide notes. And they have found one undeniable common thread: *hopelessness caused by feeling trapped in an impossible, unchanging, unending nightmare.* **The circumstances behind it are wide and varied.** There is no one situation that triggers it. But there does seem to be one constant—a *state of mind that says—this situation is never going to change and it is unbearable.*

Transition: Hopelessness can manifest itself in a variety of forms:

Causes of hopelessness. Feeling...

- **Feeling Abandoned or Forsaken** Those who struggle with depression often feeling discarded by the group; left behind or left out; detached from community and isolated. Isolation can bring intense feelings of unworthiness, and that sense of worthlessness can lead to alienation from the world. When we get isolated we tend to make up stories—about ourselves and about what other people are thinking about us.
 - James attended a small church in a school where I was pastoring and asked me out to lunch. He told me his story how he was bed ridden with sores all over him because he was like 400 pounds (no kidding). To prove it, he took out a picture of himself dressed up like Data from Star Trek TNG and showed me when he was “thinner.” In the picture he was probably about 290 lbs. He began to tell me how his wife had abandoned him in the little single wide trailer where they lived. She still lived there, but she wouldn’t bring him his meals, she was hateful towards him, and often just didn’t speak or respond to him at all which gave him a furious rage. So he decided he was going to punish her by starving himself to death. Then he lost a bunch of weight and eventually improved enough to get exercise and get out of the house. But his heart had not changed against his wife. He told me the story, pausing with these intermittent rage fits towards his wife for ignoring and abandoning him during this period. I put my hand on his shoulder and told him Jesus Christ releases him from this anger. He wept through that lunch at Pizza Hut and I drove him home—he was happy and free. Couldn’t wait to share his forgiveness with his wife.

Another cause of hopelessness is...

- **Failure** people who actually try and experience the shame failing. This can happen when marriages tragically fail or when jobs are lost, or goals are not achieved. I have had times in my life when I had set my bar of achievement so high—and when I failed I was miserable. Depressed. Just a season of melancholy because I failed. I would come to church late, and leave early because I felt so conspicuous by my failure—I didn’t want anyone to interact with me and ask me that dreaded question: “How is everything?” Because to me that question got translated to my head as “How is everything SINCE YOU FAILED SO MISERABLY?” Somehow our broken and sinful minds just inflate and exaggerate how other people see us. Now it’s true there are some judgmental religious nuts out there—haters who suffer from their own performance insecurities and they are like heat seeking rockets looking for someone to step on because that’s how the Pharisee steps up. On the backs of others.

Another common cause of hopelessness...

- **Powerlessness** In every situation that I can’t change—it reveals a false belief I hold—that I am in control. It reveals and arrests my illusion of control and my reliance on God. The absolute best gift we can give people who are experiencing circumstances beyond their control is not our advice. Delay your impulse to give advice, and just give them the best Christmas present you can—your presence. Your listening ear not a lecturing mouth.

- My best friend's 5 month old baby was in the hospital—many years ago—and he unfortunately attended a Charismatic Word of Faith Church where the pastor preached a sermon with my friend sitting right there—on how everything that ails the family comes through the sin of the Father. I interrupted the whole service and stood up and challenged him. He later came to the hospital and told my friend that if he had enough faith his baby wouldn't be sick. I told him to turn his Bible to Gal. 4. He got jeff-angelized.

The very last thing that our brothers and sisters need from us when they are in the throws of pain, feeling powerless and despair over a situation they can't control—is for us to show them judgment in any way.

- **A sense of ultimate doom: Sociologists and psychologists** study people who hold a “this world only” worldview—and the term for it is survival-doom worldview. Don't believe for one second that a person who is an intellectually satisfied atheist has any sense of hope whatsoever. If you hold a worldview that says that you are creature that exists purely as a result of natural and undirected forces—that you are not really a soul, a self—and there is no prospect for life beyond the grave—then the instances of hopelessness among those who hold a mere survivalist worldview are very high. Paul said, “If we have hope only for this life then we are to be pitied.” Because unlike the brute and beast of the field you and I are the kinds of beings who long for hope, who imagine a world beyond this life—who wish that there was something like “heaven” or a blissful afterlife.
 - American Journal of Psychiatry reported the following: “Religiously unaffiliated subjects had significantly more lifetime suicide attempts and more first-degree relatives who committed suicide than subjects who endorsed a religious affiliation. Unaffiliated subjects were younger, less often married, less often had children, and had less contact with family members. Furthermore, subjects with no religious affiliation perceived **fewer reasons for living**, particularly **fewer moral objections to suicide**. In terms of clinical characteristics, religiously unaffiliated subjects had more lifetime impulsivity, aggression, and past substance use disorder.” The World Health Organization posted the following: “

When you have a society that has been fed the pabulum that they have no more intrinsic worth or value than an animal—that our lives have no ultimate reality—just meaningless matter in motion, we shouldn't be at all surprised that a worldview like that is hopeless and breeds depression and high incidents of suicide.

In the first century, the one thing Israel did have going for it was a sense of hope. Far more so than pagan nations.

Israel had experienced God's deliverance from Egypt, celebrated in their Freedom Festival "The Passover" every year. That event commemorated God's choice of them as a people and His miraculous deliverance from oppression of foreign powers.

Israel had experienced hundreds of years as a sovereign world power—inhabiting some of the most important travel and trade routes in the ancient world and the Levant. God supernaturally established them in the land and provided an everlasting Dynasty in David's family.

The prophets and the poets—their national spokesmen and their national worship leaders celebrated what God had done in bringing them an everlasting Kingdom, warned of impending Judgment and exile if they turned back to idolatry, if they practiced injustice and corruption, if they forsook the Lord their God.

And as the story goes, that's just what happened. So into Babylonian exile they went. Just as the first people were banished from Paradise and God's immediate presence, exiled in a cursed world, so Israel would be banished from the Paradise of the temple mount where God's presence tabernacle among them.

The focus of the prophetic books then became New Exodus, New Kingdom, New Covenant, New Creation. God was going to do a new thing among them. He was going to give them a New Covenant where his Words and precepts would be written on their hearts, not just tablets. He was going to change their hearts from that of stone cold granite, to hearts of flesh—transformed again into his image. And he was going to deliver them from the true exile—not a geo-political exile—but from our banishment from paradise. Repairing the gaping wound of humanity, the ruptured relationship between men and God.

And he would do all this by fulfilling his promise to Abraham—that in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed. That in Abraham's offspring—a virgin born, holy Son of the Most High—God would once again tabernacle among his people. He would be their God and they would be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, Co-heirs in his eternal Kingdom.

What's more, God would raise back to life every faithful Jew—every son of Abraham, every follower of Torah covenant. The hope of new bodies living in a resurrected world where God was King—that was the hope of the first Century Jew in Jesus' day.

Israel had this hope. But they had lost their sense of national vocation. They lost a sense of mission to the world.

1. Jesus is the hope of Israel.

Ezekiel 36:25-27

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my statutes.”

Jeremiah 17:12-13

“A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary.

¹³ O LORD, the hope of Israel”

Acts 28:20

“For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.”

And what was their hope?

IN Jesus’ day it was resurrection from the dead at the end of the world—what they called “this present age.” The resurrection of the righteous would begin what they referred to as “the new age” or the coming age characterized by God’s sovereign reign, his renovation of the cosmos, and bringing back righteous Israelites to life in newly resurrected bodies—impervious to disease, pain, or sin.

In Acts 23:6 when Paul is being lashed and whipped and tried by the Sanhedrin (comprised of Pharisees and Sadducees) he cried out to the council “Brothers I am a Pharisee—a son of a Pharisee—and it is because of my hope in the resurrection from the dead that I am on trial today” and this sparked a knock down drag out fight between these warring factions because the Sadducees did not affirm the resurrection and the Scribal Jews did.

Acts 24 when Paul is tried before the festooned and pompous Governor Felix, he reminds him quite incidentally that both he and the Pharisaic Jews believed in the Law and the prophets, and their hope in the resurrection of the righteous.

The startling truth that they didn’t expect was that their national resurrection would begin in the person of Jesus their Messiah. He is the first fruits of all who would come after him. And all who hope in him

2. Jesus is the hope of the nations.

But what about all those unsavory, unpleasant idol worshipers out there in the world? Israel longed for God's salvation—the resurrection of the dead and to join

Israel's Vocation

Isaiah 42:6 He calls Israel and Judah “A light to the Gentiles.”

Isaiah 49:6

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Luke 2:32

And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ²⁹ “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

Matthew 12:18-21

“Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;
²⁰ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not quench,
until he brings justice to victory;
²¹ and in his name the Gentiles will hope.”

Acts 13:47-48

44. The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. ⁴⁶ And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, “**I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.**”

⁴⁸ And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.

Jesus is the hope of Israel: He came as their long awaited Messiah.

Jesus is the hope of the Nations: He came to call a people who were not a people—to join the family of God, to partake in the covenants and promises of Israel’s resurrection and salvation.

3. Jesus is the hope of every person.

- **Jesus gives every believer a hopeful future.** The hope of every person is not the discovery of a cure for all our illnesses. It’s not freezing your head in a cryogenic chamber—or a super rocket that can destroy an asteroid headed for earth. The hope of humanity is Christ Jesus.
 - Rom. 8:23-25 “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”
- **Jesus helps us in our present sufferings.** First we compare our present sufferings with the glory to be revealed in us at the resurrection of Christ (v.18). When we cross reference our current sufferings with the effulgent glory and relief at Christ’s coming—then our present sufferings vanish like a headlight in the brilliant noon sun. Swallowed up in victory.
 - We compare but we also...
 - Pray—Paul said “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” There is something so mysterious about the Spirit’s intervention—inexpressible travailing, deep exertion or labor as in childbirth. **When my kids were born** I labored a lot. But Kerri really did all the heavy lifting I think you would agree. I was there, I participated in a

manner of speaking. The Greek term here is a compound term: *syn* (meaning “together with”) and *stenadzo* which means “to grieve in anguish, in labor.”

In our suffering in this fallen world, the Spirit does all the heavy lifting. We may be in the room, experiencing the throws of pain—but the Spirit is expressing the unspeakable things in our heart to God the Father on our behalf.

Jesus gives us the hope a bright and glorious future.

The Spirit helps us in our weaknesses—our current trials which pale by comparison to the glory of resurrection.

- **Jesus gives every individual meaning and purpose. Notice this last bit here in Rom. 8** “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

The world cannot give you your true purpose. It can give you a job. It can give you some fun. It can give you a few distractions and maybe even a little psychological help when you get stuck—but it cannot give you your ultimate purpose because that comes from God.

Paul says we have a kind of knowledge—the assurance that accompanies being called according to his purpose. God’s purpose for us is...

- To be conformed to the image of his Son. The Son of God who became the son of man so that the sons of men might become the Sons of God. Christ is now God’s true image—and all of us who are in Christ are destined to be transformed into the character of Christ.
- God’s purpose for us is to be justified—meaning we are declared in the right in God’s heavenly law court. We stand accused and the charges stick because we are actually guilty. We embrace the one who bore our penalty and took our place bearing the full brunt and force of the wrath of God for sin—and now we stand in court and are declared “In the right” which means to be justified. He who knew no sin became sin for us so that we could become the righteousness of God in Christ.
- To follow Christ in a permanent resurrection to eternal life. Jesus wasn’t raised again to die as those whom he brought back from the grave in his earthly ministry. Jesus has been resurrected in a permanent glorified body and all those who follow him, who put their trust in him will be conformed to that image—a perfected, imperishable and radiant new body. “Glorified” he says. How curious.

Our true meaning and purpose is so much bigger than the provincial stuff we get caught up in.

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Closing Story
Worship Team