

The Hope Initiative - God is good and wants good things for us.

ME

So while I was doing my A-levels at high school, there was a day when the English Lit class had some fun. You know those classes when it gets the end of the term, almost the holidays when everyone had given up the will to learn any more?! Productiveness is dead. Even the teachers get to the point where they start putting on videos instead of teaching. Well the English lit class decide to have some fun and they wrote little poems that they then put into peoples lockers. So I got to my locker one morning and found this piece of paper sitting inside. I actually have the original copy right here with me!

“The British Barack Obama has stolen my heart away,
I would give my life to hear him say,
“Good morning” to me before assembly!
To be together is our destiny.
The way you walk, the way you talk Ande,
Your eyes, your hair, your skin of ebony,
All these have captured my heart,
Everyday I think how wonderful thou art!”

Oh, this made me very happy! Despite a few liberties taken with the rhyming words at the end of each line, I was over the moon! And it wasn't the fact that that they mentioned my eyes, or hair or even my skin. It wasn't even the fact that some girl, had basically written a poem of shakespearean-esque romance about me! It was actually the person they likened me to. The very first 4 words. “The British Barack Obama!”

Obama is someone who I have always been enthralled by. The answer when anyone asks which famous person do you admire most. And it's more than just because of my love for politics. It's more than just because of the colour of his ebony skin. It's more than ... just .. the way .. he talks which ... makes every word .. seem thought out and purposeful. There was something that Obama did when he ran that impressed me so much. That stood out amongst the opposition. If anyone was aware of the 2008 American presidential election, you will know that the slogan Obama ran under was “Yes, we can.” It was different because it made people feel like they could achieve something. I remember the scenes of hundreds, if not thousands of people chanting ‘yes we can’, many with tears in their eyes. It empowered people. It gave them belief that they could see change and they themselves could even bring the change. It gave them hope. Yes, we can. And it worked, Obama successful became president. Not only that, Obama's inauguration had a viewership of nearly double that of the the previous 2005 inauguration. A fact that I'm surprised Trump didn't try to claim!

Obama ran under a banner of hope and it inspired a nation. But especially the Black population. Barack Hussein Obama. Son of a white Mother and black father from Kenya. I'm sure for African-Americans everywhere this felt like a turning point. The New York times ran an article, headlined “Obama elected as racial barrier falls.” Commentators started

declaring that America had entered a post racist stage. Hope had started something. People had hope that things were about to change.

Skip forward to 18th March 2018. Has the system changed? 6 days after Obama had left office, a surging number of hate crimes took place. Racism was still present. In other areas of American society school shootings continued to occur, poverty still gripped millions, the country felt more divided than ever. Was the hope that statement 'yes, we can' brought still alive? It felt like things had swung back the other way. Now I'm not blaming Obama or Trump, or judging America. But I want to point out the fact that the Hope that inspired by Obama was expected to have changed things. That's what everyday Americans thought. As powerful as hope was, it didn't look like it was able to change things. Despite their hope things hadn't changed. And it can make you question the system. Despite hope it would change, is it really possible? Is the system broken?

WE

Because that's what can happen when we hope in something and don't get the responses we want. When we are found still waiting, still hoping, day after day and night after night. The hope that we have can get whittled away, losing strength, not inspiring the same passion within us. If we hope and don't see the results we were expecting then it can cause us to question what we had hope in.

And I'm sure there's things in your life that you are hoping for, hoping to seeing change in, hope will happen. But if faced with a situation that gets worse rather than better, how do we keep our hope?

When we what we are hoping for doesn't materialise then that hope can easily turn to doubt.

When we have hope that God will act in our situation and yet our situation still looks bleak then it can raise some hard questions. If we are suffering, if we are in pain and we need help that we just don't seem to have, it can even cause us to question God. When faced with suffering and hardship and confusion is God still good? Does God even wants good things for us?

Maybe it's got to a stage that you start to wonder does God even want me to be financially successful? Because I have been waiting for a breakthrough and its still not here.

Does God even want me to find someone to spend the rest of my life with? Because I have been waiting and waiting and I still haven't found anyone.

Does God even want me to achieve more? Because right now I'm not doing what I know I could be doing to influence my workplace or even change this city.

Does God really want good things for me. If he does then why doesn't he do it.

Have you ever been there? Hoping for something better but after not seeing anything change, starting to questions if God really wants good for you?

Is God really good? If he is good, why do I suffer, why do my friends and family and the people I love suffer? If he is good then why doesn't he sort my situation out? Can a good God really let me be in this mess, in this difficult situation.

Its when faced with these hard situations that we get questions about God. When what we are hoping for isn't fulfilled, it can lead us to even question if God is good.

God

And it when our hope in God is tested that we need to know how we can stay strong and stand firm. When things are not going our way, what can we do to ensure that our hope isn't snuffed out.

But even if you have ever been in this situation or maybe if you are going through it right now, we can look at somethings that Paul wrote in the Bible to help us. Paul went through hard seasons, he faced tough times. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul talks about how he V23“taken more beatings, been dragged in and out of prisons, been eye to eye with death. Five times I have withstood thirty-nine lashes from Jewish authorities, 3 times I was battered by Rods, once I was almost stoned to death, 3 times I was shipwrecked, and I spent one day and night adrift on the sea. ...faced the most extreme circumstances: perilous rivers, violent thieves, and threats by my own people and the gentile outsiders alike....v27 I have survived toil and hardships, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst without a crumb in sight, bare to the cold. Im sure after everything Paul had been through he sometimes questioned his hope in God and questioned whether God really did want good things for him.

2 Corinthians 12: 6-10

6 Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, 7 or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

Paul tell us that there was something that happened to him that was intentional. In order to keep him becoming conceited, he was given a thorn in his flesh. He doesn't describe this in any further detail. We don't know what this thorn was, it could have been a situation that was causing him pain, it could have been a temptation he was battling, It could have been a difficult person that was causing problems. It may have been physical pain. It could have been any struggle that he was going through but there was something that was hard and difficult to endure.

8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

We get a sense of how desperate Paul was. Pleading and begging God to take this pain away. Paul pleads with God and yet has no answer. He pleads again but still nothing. He keeps going again, pleading to God take away this pain. After everything Paul had been through, for this to be something that Paul was begging God to remove means it must have been pretty bad. And then God speaks to Paul

9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Now Paul understands. I think we lose just how big an impact what God says to Paul has on him because of how short this description is. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." For Paul, suddenly something clicks. He begins to understand that this trial, this hardship, this pain he is going through actually has a purpose. There is a revelation that despite Paul feeling weak and at what he thought was a low point, it was actually going to be a situation that revealed God's power. Suddenly Paul understands and suddenly his pleading stops, his attitude changes because he has the revelation about his situation.

Instead of pleading, his language changes, the way he interacts with God changes, even his approach to his situation changes. Instead of pleading, Paul starts to say,

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Perfect system vs Immaculate System

It can be easy to look at the way God works and instead of appreciating what it does, to twist it into an attack. Into a way of accusing God for not being fair, not being just, not being good.

It can be easy to want an immaculate system. A system where there is nothing wrong, there is no pain and no struggle. That's what an immaculate system is. The dictionary defines immaculate as having no stain or blemish. Having or containing no flaw or error. It defines it as being spotlessly clean.

And often it is this sort of system that we want. We can often want a life without problems, without hard situations and without struggles. But how would this work. If we are honest, we can look at our issue and follow it back we can see areas where we made mistakes or messed up. In an immaculate system there would be no place for us because there would be no place for us when we messed up.

Instead what God gave us is a perfect system. The definition of this is 'Having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics; as good as it is possible to be.' Satisfying all requirements, a state of being completely fit for purpose. It can be used as a noun to Make (something) completely free from faults or defects; make as good as possible.

This is the perfect system that God created. It is a system that has difficult times that you have to endure but answers to help you overcome them. The system that God set in place is one of redemption where no matter where you're at or what you've done or despite what you are going through, there is still an opportunity for you to come out on top. It's almost like God inbuilt a mechanism that helps you to get back on track when you slip up. To turn a bad situation into something that can help you. God is not good because he stops bad things

happening to you, rather God is good because he has created a way for you to overcome your situation.

This is the beauty of what God has set up for us. Why Paul places so much value on his weakness because it is then that God's power rests upon us.

There is a perfect system in place that allows us to mess up, to not be good enough and to not know the answers because it is then that God's power rests upon us. It is a perfect system because it does not require you to be the best, or the most articulate, or the most capable. Instead it takes you as you are and allows God's power to fill the rest. The system is so perfect because it has in built mechanisms to help you get through your situations. It's a perfect system because its is completely fit for purpose by turning your loss into gain, your weakness into strength and your failures into successes.

This is the incredible thing about God. He is so good that he can't bare to leave you in your situation and so has created a way for you to overcome. And this is why we can have hope in God. Not because we go through hard times but because he has given us answers to them.

He created a way for his greatness to make up the areas where we fell short. He created a system that was completely fit for purpose by allowing us to have a relationship with God. A system that makes us as good as possible. A system that makes us completely free of the defects and faults that should hold us back. A perfect system.

Yes, we still go through suffering. Yes, like Paul, it may still hurt and it will still be hard but it is through our struggle and need that God's power rests upon us.

Recently, Pastor Tom reminded us that glory lies on the other side of pain. That by enduring through your pain, you achieve greater and more than before. And this is exactly the system that God created. A trial you have to go through but a result that produces greatness.

In a world where it is so easy to feel lost and without direction, we can have full faith in a God who knows everything about the present situation as well as the future. When we have are unsure about what's going to happen next in our lives we can trust that God will see us through.

When media and culture around us pushes us to acquire as much as possible, to take take take, to focus on your own individual needs, God has put in place a system of provision that allows you to be generous and give and yet not go needy.

In a society that is connected through social media to an unprecedented level that only matches the loneliness they feel, God has created a community that you can call home, that you can belong to and find purpose within. The concept of church is original content of God and can provide you the solution that you need.

But it goes beyond that. In Romans 5:8 it reminds us that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” The ultimate solution to the ultimate problem. We can have hope that God is good because he sent his son to die for us. An act of love that moved us from death to life. That makes us right with God.

YOU

Paul doesn't say that things are easy or comfortable. Rather it's his revelation that the harder things become, the more powerfully God can work. That the more out of reach the answer is for us, the more necessary it is for God to intervene on our behalf. That the more illogical and impossible the solution is, the more God will have to bend science as we know it, to create the miracle that can get us through. Paul's hope comes from this faith that God is good and that what God wants is good things for us.

We need to understand that this system that God has set up is actually for our good. A system that doesn't prevent us from difficult situations but a system that turns those difficult situations into something good.

And the first thing that we can do once we realise this, is the same thing that Paul did when he realised it. We turn our pleading into thanksgiving. Instead of begging God to get us out of our situation, we thank God that that he can turn that situation into good. We thank God that even though we are finding things are hard, we are actually in the middle of an opportunity to see God at work. Maybe that's what you need to try to do today. When you next pray, why don't you decide to change your approach and focus on God and what he can do instead. While you pray, thank God for what he has done for you in the past, thank him that he is with you right now as you go through this hard season. Thank him that he knows the future and thank him that he is working it for your good. Don't let your situation influence what you think about God. Don't let your situation make you question whether he is in fact good or wants good things for you. Instead, When it gets to a point when your hope is being tested and you feel like questioning God's intentions, thank him. If you start by pleading for an escape then your problem becomes your focus, If you start by thanking God, then your focus becomes him and his power over your situation. And if your focus is on that then your hope will not only stay alive, it will be even more powerful than before. So thank God for he is good and he wants good for you and it your intentional thankfulness that will continually remind you of that and keep your hope alive.

Speak it out. If you are having difficulty being thankful then speak it out loud. Say what you are thankful about. Go home today and when you are alone, tell God what you are thankful for. Maybe you need to write down a personal declaration of how God has been good in your life and stick it somewhere that you will regularly see it.

Share it around. It's hard to be thankful around people who are out to whine about life all the time. People who always find something to complain about. So make sure that you are hanging out with people who who promote this.

It's so easy for us to fall into a rut where we whine and look for publicly sympathy. How about instead of going on facebook to post about how you have had a crap day, why don't you choose to post something about how good God is.

US

In order to keep our hope that God is good, alive and strong, we need to ensure we are regularly coming back to him with gratitude. Our hope is found in the fact that God wants good things for you and so has created a way for you to achieve far more than you could on your own. That the very thing you thought of as your failing, as your incapability, as your weakness, is actually the way God can work in you and through you.

Hope is a powerful weapon. Hope inspires hope. It can change individuals who then communities, who then change nations that then change generations.

If we can maintain a hope within ourselves that God is good then who knows, maybe it could return a generation back to a God who wants good for them.

Hope.