

The Hope Initiative: Characterised by Hope

Dr Phil Temple

ME: Today, we're going to be continuing the Hope Initiative series. More on that title later. But right up front, let me be honest: I feel a bit torn when it comes to the topic of hope. I'm not sure I'm naturally a hopeful person. I think I tend toward being critical more than hopeful at times. I have a knack for spotting problems; and focusing on when things go wrong. Here in church; and at work. I am definitely inclined to see the negatives, if left unchecked. Except when it comes to time-keeping. Where time-keeping is concerned, I'm the eternal optimist. I'm always convinced I can get ready in the shortest likely time; get to my destination in the shortest possible time. As a result, I'm always late. I feel like my natural inclination, my personality, veers toward cynical with just a dash of the hopeful.

WE: Today, I want to explore our inner inclination toward hope, or lack thereof. I want to look at hope as a characteristic; as an aspect of our personality; as a personality trait, if you will. I think some of us are naturally hopeful people. Enthusiastic, optimistic; outgoing and energetic; people who see the best, expect the best and give our best. Others though, aren't. Others are more like me. We see the negatives. We see the problems. We have to work at it to see the good. But perhaps we don't always try so hard. We don't necessarily see ourselves as negative or cynical or critical, more "realistic". Only a fool hopes for the best all the time, right?

I find the whole topic of personality fascinating. As many of you will be aware, I'm a psychiatrist. One of the areas I found most interesting as I headed into psychiatry was that of personality. The dictionary defines personality as "the combination of characteristics or qualities that form an individual's distinctive character". In psychological terms though, it would more be defined as "the set of habitual behaviours, cognitions and emotional patterns that evolve from biological and environmental factors". It is the way we behave, the way we think, and the way we feel. It is partly innate – inborn, natural –and partly shaped by our experiences and influences; especially during childhood. It is how we see ourselves; how we see the world; and how we cope with the stresses of life.

We often think our personality is rigid and unchangeable. "This is just who I am" or "This is just the way I am". But that isn't quite true. Our personality is formed by our upbringing; firmed up by adulthood; but it is not entirely fixed. It is stable, but not static. It can be shifted, subtly; refined. The way we see ourselves can change. The way we see the world can change. The way we cope with life can change. So if we're not naturally hopeful, perhaps we can learn to be.

The question then is, why would we want to? Isn't it better to be a realistic? Aren't we just setting ourselves up for a fall if we hope too much? Aren't we lining ourselves up for disappointment? Are we leaving ourselves open to being let down?

Actually, no. It turns out that hope is good for your health. Studies show that:

- Hope has the can help people heal faster and easier.
- Individuals who maintain hope, especially when battling illness, significantly enhance their chances of recovery.

- Patients who maintain high levels of hope have an improved prognosis for life-threatening illness and an enhanced quality of life.[
- Hopeful people are more likely to make healthy lifestyle choices – more consistent at maintaining a healthy diet; more successful at giving up habits like smoking – helping improve recovery from illness, and preventing illness in the first place.
- Belief and expectation, which are key elements of hope, block pain in patients suffering from chronic illness by releasing endorphins and mimicking the effects of morphine.
- In general, people who possess hope and think optimistically have a greater sense of wellbeing in addition to the improved health outcomes.

Hope is not just good for your health though. It has been shown to have a positive impact in personal development. It helps maintain drive toward a certain goal; and helps individuals overcome barriers to success. Some theorists have even explored the impact of hope in a business context, with some postulating that hope is an essential condition that must exist for even the most talented leaders to lead change.

Hope then can make us healthier, happier, more effective and more successful. Even if you tend toward realism or even pessimism, a little bit of hope can transform the impact and fulfilment you experience in life.

How then can we go about developing hope? How can even the most cynical amongst us learn to temper our more critical urges with a little hopefulness? How can we develop hope as a characteristic in our lives? How can we internalise hope? How can we develop hope as a personality trait? How can we make hope part of who we are?

We're going to explore how we can find hope in even the most difficult of situations. Because my thought, my suggestion, is that if we can learn how to find hope even when the going gets tough, we can learn to have hope in every situation. Does that make sense? If we can be hopeful even when life is hardest, we can stay hopeful at every step and stage of life. If we find a hope that is present when we're at our lowest, we can experience hope through the bad and the good; we can know hope every day. And if hope becomes hardwired in us, from good to bad, difficult to successful, it becomes part of who we are. Are you with me?

GOD: To explore this, we're going to look at a Biblical account of three men who held onto hope in an extremely challenging situation. The account is found in the book of Daniel. To set the scene. God's chosen people, the Israelites, had been invaded by a foreign force – the Babylonians. Jerusalem was besieged. The best and brightest of Israel's nobles dragged off to be indoctrinated in the ways of Babylon. Some of them proved to be skilful leaders – resisting, to an extent, the king's attempts to convert them; and in turn finding influence in the king's government. The king, Nebuchadnezzar, started to get delusions of grandeur. We read in Daniel 3 that he built a huge gold statue and demanded that all the people worship it. He decreed that anyone that did not would be thrown into a fiery furnace. His advisers though came to let him know that not everyone had been following his new law...

Daniel 3:12-23 – “ 12 “But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”

13 Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, 14 and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? 15 Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." "

This is a fascinating interaction. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were significant leaders in the kingdom. They had been promoted indeed after they had helped Daniel to interpret the king's dreams, in an account we read just one chapter earlier. They were capable men, commended previously by the king. But here, showing their unwillingness to bow down.

This was a difficult, scary situation. A life and death situation. They were facing an agonising death - burned alive. Yet there is hope in their words. Not certainly, but hope. They believe God will deliver them, "but even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up". It seems they are not certain of the outcome, yet expect the best. They do not know for sure that God will come through, but they have a confident expectation for good. Let's continue...

Daniel 3:19-30 – " 19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual 20 and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. 21 So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. 22 The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, 23 and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty." 25 He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods." 26 Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, 27 and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. "

This is an unexpected turnaround. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego emerge from the flames unscathed. Yet what happens in the flames is even more powerful. There is a fourth man in the fire – one who looks “like a son of the gods”. Nebuchadnezzar is so impacted by this that he calls them out by the name of God. He goes on to speak in the next few verses of how God sent an angel to protect them. And yet, I wonder, as others have done, if not perhaps the fourth man in the fire was even greater than an angel. Could it be that they find not one like a son of the gods, but indeed the Son of God. Could it be that they find Jesus in the flames?

Nebuchadnezzar is so impressed by their boldness and willingness to trust God that he declares that no-one can speak badly of their God – threatening a death sentence against anyone that does! He declares “no other god can save in this way”; and promotes these three Hebrew heroes.

Yet it's not the outcome that I want to focus on as much as the attitude of these three men. Did they know that they would find God in the fire? Did they know that in the midst of their toughest situation, there they would find Jesus? Their words suggest they did not know for certain, but they had hope that God would come through. Hope that it'd work out OK. They had a confident expectation that somehow, someday, God would work this for good.

There is a lesson we can learn here when it comes to our tough situations or difficult circumstances. If we're really honest, I think we can fall into believing that tough times mean God has abandoned us; that difficulties mean God is ignoring us; that God is disinterested in our struggles and stress. We can sometimes assume that the presence of problems or pain implies the absence of God. But we see here that is not the case. We can experience God most closely and see His power most dramatically when we go through tough times. This then is a source of hope. It is a reason for optimism and expectation. It is often in the toughest of situations that we know God most closely and experience His presence most powerfully.

Perhaps today you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. Maybe you wouldn't say you had a relationship with God. You may feel this doesn't apply to you as a result. But that doesn't have to be your situation any longer. You can ask God to come into your life. You can open up your life to him today. More on that later. First, I want to be sure we've all grasped this. This account shows us that when life is most stressful, God is often most tangibly present. We may assume that difficulties can cause God to feel distant; but actually we can know Him most closely when our situation is most challenging. If you're taking notes, you may want to write this down: The presence of problems or pain does not imply the absence of God or His goodness – oftentimes God is closest when life is at its most tough.

We need to grasp this idea if we are to find a hope in all situations. We need to know that God is close in the toughest of times. Because if we can find hope when life is at its hardest, we can hardwire in hope as a characteristic of who we are.

This example is not an isolated incident. It is not a one off. From front to back in the Bible, we see examples of how God shows up when the going gets tough. He is so powerfully present when His people face trouble or trial. In the New Testament, we find the apostle

Paul – one of the great writers and leaders of the early church – encapsulating this confidence in the goodness of God whatever life may throw at us.

In Romans 8, Paul is writing on the topic of hope. He points out that hope is not about what we already have, but what we will one day see. He sets this hope in the context of creation; and writes of how the Holy Spirit helps us to hope. Then in verse 28, he writes some of the most powerful words in all of scripture. Words which underline the experience we see in the lives of those three Hebrew nobles; words which have encouraged me in some difficult times of late; and words which could revolutionise our lives if we truly grasped them today...

Romans 8:28 – “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

“In all things”. Not some things. Not some situations. Not some circumstances. Not sometimes. But “in all things”. All things. In every situation. In every circumstance. All the time. “God works for the good of those who love Him.”

Isn't that what we see in the lives of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? In a situation that looks hopeless and lost, God works for their good. God turns it around. They walk out of that fire with not even singe to their robes or the faintest smell of smoke in their hair. Not only that, but God is praised; and they're granted promotions. It seems like the direst of circumstances, the toughest of times; but God is at work for their good.

This verse in Romans underlines that this is not just God's plan for those guys; but for all who love Him. Even when “they're wishing and wishing and wishing bad things ... a lot of bad things” on you, God's plan is to work good in that situation. [Drake – “God's plan”]

In all seriousness though, this is such a powerful concept. It is so central if we're to become hope-filled people. What would happen if we truly believed that God could work all things for good? Wouldn't that stir up hope within us? Wouldn't that fire up confident expectation? Wouldn't that cause us to expect good even when the going was tough?

Notice what Paul is and isn't saying here. Paul is not saying that God *causes* all things. He is not responsible for the difficulties you face. Sometimes they're a result of an imperfect world. Sometimes they're a result of our bad decisions. Sometimes they come about because of how other people treat us. But Paul does say that God can cause all things to work for good.

Equally, Paul is not saying all things *are* good. We know that to be true too, right? Some situations are extremely painful. They are awful. Chances are there will be people here today who have experienced situations so tough that I cannot begin to imagine them. Paul is not saying that all things somehow are good, but he is saying that out of all things God can produce good.

I know this from personal experience. As many of you will know – because I talk about it all the time – I broke my knee a few months ago. It was an extremely painful injury. I needed surgery to put it back together; and again to get it moving. It still doesn't work right. But in

the midst of this unwanted challenge, I have found good. It has developed friendships in ways I didn't expect. It has given me opportunity to step back and take stock of the pattern of my life. It has caused me to be grateful for things I took for granted. And through it all, I have seen God at work in powerful ways. Even though my knee is not yet right, I have already seen so many ways that God has used this situation for my good.

Now, did God cause my injury? Definitely not. I did. Because I'm not very good at tackling! Was this part of His plan for my life? Probably not. Is it what I wouldn't have wanted? Of course not. But has He worked through it for good? Undoubtedly. And though my knee may be weaker; my faith in God is stronger. My hope, my optimism, my confidence is who He is and what He can do – it's stronger than it's ever been.

My desire today is that you would find the same confident expectation we see in Shadrach, Mishach and Abednego; that same confident expectation I have experienced; that same confident expectation promised by Paul. That through good things and bad things, average things and OK things, through all things, you would know that God works for your good.

I fully believe that if we can internalise this idea – if we can absorb in, hold onto it and consistently apply it – then we shift our outlook in a more hopeful direction. We can develop this cast iron confidence; this solid gold expectation; this characteristic of hope which can greatly enhance our lives.

YOU: To become hopeful people, we need to consistently look for the good that God does. In the good and the bad times; when we're struggling and when we're doing well. We need to look for the good that God can do. I think you can sum up my main point in a question to yourself today. To help you hold it, to use it. We need to get in the habit of asking ourselves: What good could God do in this situation? What good could God do in this circumstance? What good could God do with what's in front of me? What good could God do in this?

If we could just get in the habit of asking that, we'd become more confident; we'd become more expectant; we'd become more hopeful. We would internalise hope. It would come to define who we are.

But there's one other thing that Paul says that I want to explore before we finish. He writes that "we know that in all things God works for the good...". We know. Not we think, or we wonder, maybe. But we *know*. There's a certainty there. A certainty mirrored in the actions of those three Hebrew nobles. How can we develop that same kind of certainty? I've got two thoughts for you, based on the lives of those men and this verse from Romans 8.

1) Look Back

This was not the first time these three men had defied the king. In Daniel 1, we read of how they refused the king's food, because it had been dedicated to idols. They chose, along with Daniel, to eat only vegetables and fruit. Yet despite their restricted diet, they came out ten times better than everyone else. Ten times better. They became the best of the best, by holding on to God's guidance instead of doing what the king had asked. The chapter later, in Daniel 2, they had prayed to God for an answer, to help interpret the king's dream when again their lives were on the line – and again God came through. When they stepped into

that furnace, their hope that already been refined – it had been forged in the past experience of how God could be counted on when their lives were on the line.

If we want to stir up a sense of what good God could do in the present, it helps to remember the good that God has done in the past. Even if your present situation is challenging; you can thank God for past goodness. You can thank God for past provision. You can thank God for progress.

Let me show you this visually. [Wheelchair at one side of stage; two crutches in the middle. Start at one end, moving across.] When I first broke my knee, I turned up in church in one of these. A few months later, I graduated from the wheelchair to two crutches. Last time I spoke, I was down to one crutch. Now I've had a week walking without any. Am I where I want to be? No. I want to be running and jumping and dancing. But I'm not in a wheelchair. I'm not on two crutches. I don't even need one crutch. I'm not where I want to be, but I thank God I'm not where I was!

I don't know your story. I don't know your situation. But if you've been a Christian for any length of time, chances are you can thank God for something He has done. If you're not a Christian, you may not feel you can thank Him for what's gone before – but let me tell you that regardless of how you feel about Him, He loves you – and if nothing else, you can thank Him that you got to be here to hear that today!

Gratitude is so powerful when it comes to developing hope. In truth, we don't even have to look back across weeks or months to see God's goodness. Even across a day, we can see glimmers of what God has done. Why not take a few moments at the end of each day to thank God for His goodness? You may want to write down sometime you're grateful for. You may want to just reflect. Either way, if you want to see the good that God could do, it helps to look back with gratitude at what He has already done.

2) Look Beyond

Finally, it strikes me that this account is not just about three men who somehow walk out of a fiery furnace; it's about a king and his nation who turn their eyes to God. Likewise Paul writes of "those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose". God has a purpose at work that goes beyond just you.

To see the good that God could do, we need to look beyond – not just beyond our present difficulty, but beyond ourselves. Our world needs hope. Pastor Tom was very intentional and very clear when chose the name "The Hope Initiative". Because an initiative is a campaign, but it means more too. To initiate means to begin, to start, to kick off. We want to initiate hope. To stir up it, to spark it, to restart it; to restore hope in people's lives.

What does it do in others if they see a hope in you? What does it do in them if in even the hardest of situations, you see good? It lifts their eyes, doesn't it? It inspires hope in them. It causes them to ask if there might be good in their situation; and to look for the source of your confident expectation for good.

We've just been through awards season in the film industry. Golden Globes, Baftas, the Oscars. In music, we've had the Grammy's and the Brits. I'm conscious that often we see people thanking God when they win an award. But many of us know, deep down, that it's easy to thank God when you're winning; easy to thank God when life's going well. The people that really inspire us are the people that can thank God when their lives are difficult; the people who hold onto to God's goodness even when they face incredible challenges, difficulties and pain. We sometimes think that we best represent God when we are successful; but the reality is that our toughest times can be so much more powerful in pointing people to Him. Sometimes God shows His glory on the billboard of our successes; but oftentimes He paints His goodness across the canvas of our difficulties instead.

There is power even in our problems and pain. When the going gets tough is often the time when we can most powerfully both see and demonstrate the goodness of God. I'm not saying God causes our problems to show who He is; but even though He does not cause of difficulties, He can reveal His glory in the midst of them none-the-less.

If we want to see the good that God could do, we need to look back with gratitude, but we also need to look beyond – beyond ourselves, beyond our situation, to His purpose at work through it all.

US: As I draw things to a conclusion, I hope I have equipped you with the tools today to shift your outlook. I hope that this message will cause you to approach each day a little differently; to live with a little more hope; and that bit by bit that hopefulness will change your personality – that hope will become a characteristic that defines who you are.

To summarise what we've spoken of: The presence of pain or problems does not imply the absence of God and His goodness – indeed oftentimes, He is closest when life is at its most tough. To develop hope as a characteristic of our lives, as a personality trait, we need to consistently look for God's goodness. To LOOK BACK – with gratitude; to LOOK BEYOND – with purpose. To ask ourselves: What good could God do in this?

If we can do this consistently, over and over, day by day, week by week, month by month, I believe we can become more hopeful people - that hope can become an aspect of our personality; a characteristic which defines who we are – and that we will live more hopeful lives. Lives that expect more, believe for more, hope for more. Longer, healthier, happier, more fulfilled lives. More satisfying, significant lives. Lives which make an impact that goes beyond what we alone are capable of. Lives which inspire hope in others.

I believe we can see hope arise in our workplaces, friendship groups and families. Hope stirred in our schools and universities. Hope spoken through our businesses, careers and creativity. Hope established in our city. Hope restored in our nation. That together, we can be a beacon of hope for Norwich, Ipswich, Bratislava and beyond. Hope rooted and established not in situation or circumstance; but born out of a confident expectation that God can and will and does work all things together for good.