

# Our Hope: God is for Us

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Isaiah 64:1-9

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Hope's a strange thing. Hope is only borne out of what's missing. If everything's going your way you never have to resort to hope. Hope acts as a light in the darkness; if there's no darkness you have no need of hope. On the other hand, the only true and eternal Hope in the world becomes most available when we are most hopeless here and now. And when we're courageous to face the darkness full in the face. But who wants that? Wouldn't you prefer a full pantry, a full house of family and friends at Christmas, a full bank account, a full heart? I think most of us, most of the time, would.

So Advent is a tricky season, as Christmas is a tricky celebration. If I have no great need of a Savior, I will be forever a spectator at Christmas. I may like the gaiety or the trappings of the season, but Christmas, the celebration of the birth of the Savior, will forever elude me.

Maybe Isaiah's lament will help us enter into Advent. Have you ever felt like the prophet—for whom the situation had gotten so hopeless, and the people so discouraged, there is no earthly hope left to them? The covenant people of God had been forcibly marched cross-country to Babylon. Their Jerusalem temple had been plundered; their ancestral lands taken from them. Many of the Israelites had already died and others had forgotten all about God, settling in and getting comfy over in Babylon. The very existence of God's people was in question and Isaiah wanted God to come and do something about it: "Rip open the heavens and come down here and set things right, God! Get down off your throne and get this earth organized! And bring your big guns! We have no hope, otherwise. We know You did it before—remember when Mt Sinai quaked—Man, You could shake the Rockies from Alberta to Arizona like a baby's rattle! Come help us, O God!"

Have you ever felt this desperate, as if there were no human hope? Whether so broken-hearted, or scared, or in debt, or out of control, or angry, or so totally exhausted you just couldn't rally one more time—I'll bet you have. One of you described feeling absolutely dead in spirit: "It's like my pilot light has gone out."

The famous author Taylor Caldwell described her most desperate Christmas. She was in her 20's, already divorced, responsible for her little girl Peggy. She was unemployed, and running out of money, trying to make the rounds each day to find work. (Eight months before,

she had found a luxurious umbrella on the streetcar and returned it to its owner.) Caldwell's job ended Christmas Eve, that very day, and she had only \$15—which she and her daughter needed for food—and her \$30 rent was soon due. It had taken her six months to save \$8 for a small tree and a few presents for Peggy.

The sounds of Christmas merriment all around her mocked her loneliness. She fought through snowdrifts—"I had just about reached the lowest point in my life. Unless a miracle happened, I would be homeless in January, and foodless, and jobless. I had prayed steadily for weeks, and there had been no answer but this...abandonment... What was to become of us?"

I went up three flights of stairs and I cried, shivering in my thin coat. But I made myself smile so I could greet my little daughter with a pretense of happiness...For some reason, when I looked at the kitchen table Peggy had set, I felt broken-hearted. Misery overwhelmed me. For the first time in my life, I doubted the existence of God and His mercy, and the coldness in my heart was colder than ice." (We'll come back to her later.)

For Taylor Caldwell, for Isaiah, for you or me: you've surely noticed God doesn't usually answer our prayers the way we would like. Isaiah was asking for a divine Super-Hero Action Figure to come down and out-fight the fighters. It didn't happen. But what if it did?

Frederick Buechner explores this scenario: what if God had answered Isaiah's prayer? Let's say God did visibly intervene. Let's say God arranged for lightning to light up the sky every night over all the earth, spelling out "I AM" in every language. God's light show, visible for all to see. For a week, for a year.

What would happen? For a time, everyone would be dazzled. Maybe crime would plummet, we'd all just get along, church attendance overflow. "There is a God after all! Wow! We're not alone down here. Let's worship Him!" But as the days and months go by, things would probably get back to normal. (Don't forget, the world has been down this road before...that baby grew up, and was put to death, and was raised up from the dead, and 500 people saw Him at one time—and His friends turned the world upside down. How quickly the world wants to forget...) Someone, anyway, would soon enough ask, "This is great, but so what? What does it mean?"

We would all have “proof” of God’s existence and power and might, but what we need is not objective proof “out there”—what most of us really want is subjective evidence or proof “in here.” That God cares; that God is for us. Most people, religious or not, long for a personal sense of the Presence of God; we long to experience that assurance of deep communion with God.

If you know, really know, God is with you, God is for you, you can manage just about anything. Moses and his staff marched into Pharaoh’s court; Joseph endured years of unjust imprisonment in Egypt; David confronted giant Goliath and Esther risked her life to appeal to the Persian king. We don’t really need proof “out there”—what we long for is the certain hope that God is with us.

This dilemma—we need God to help but God does not—makes up the second section in our Scripture lesson. [vv 5-7] The first section [vv 1-4] calls out to God to come down and shape things up. Yet as soon as Isaiah asks this, he knows the answer. The people are hopeless against human evil and empire; God is their only hope—and why will God not come down and rescue His people? The prophet knew the people did not deserve to stand in His presence. “We have sinned; we have transgressed,” he admits. “We need You, O God, but we have disgraced You. We do not deserve to have You come near. So You have hidden away from us, and we have sinned.”

He likens the behavior of the people to filthy rags; their disobedience has caused them to become rootless and impermanent as an old empty plastic Walmart shopping bag flapping on a barbed wire fence on the interstate east of Winnemucca. “Our iniquity like the wind blows us away like a fading and withered leaf...” [v 6]

This language is metaphorical—but I suspect you have felt something of this battle when you engage the spiritual disciplines. You put your time with God first. Really, you do. You pray. You listen for God. With expectancy you study the Bible in the morning. But God’s calendar turns out to be different from yours, and mine. After a while we get impatient. “OK, God, maybe You have other plans. I’ll be back tomorrow to pray...” One tomorrow can lead to another, and if we’re not careful our lifeline, our prayer time, has suffered. When God finally says, “Have it your way—go play, or get on to those things you think more important” we’re in big trouble. (Then we can feel hopeless all over again—and, paradoxically, we probably start praying with renewed urgency whenever we feel hopeless.)

Fortunately, in this church most of you take seriously the discipline of prayer—so the assessment of Isaiah sounds unduly harsh: “There is no one who keeps calling on Your

name, or strives to keep taking hold of You.” [v 7] Still, I suspect most of us do not experience communion with the Holy Spirit as directly or as often as we would like.

If this is so for you—that God seems further away than you would like, I would urge you to

--Face whatever emptiness, or loneliness, or feeling of unfulfillment you may be aware of. However bad it is. God is with you; God is for you. So be ruthless in facing up to whatever may be missing within your experience. (This vague, inner dissatisfaction can be one of the most certain ways God speaks to you.)

The more we grasp at earthly straws, the less we are able to receive God’s sustaining hope. How many people keep kidding themselves: “if only I’d gone out with more women and then if only I’d married a sexier gal; or, if only I’d ended up with a more communicative guy; if only I’d been wealthier or in better shape, or belonged to a more upscale club; if only I’d had a better investment advisor, or been able to afford a better second getaway home...”

But the fact of the matter is this is a broken world; earth is far too small to satisfy our deepest yearnings! We are created for more!—for satisfaction in eternity and in communion with God. Our deepest longings will be fulfilled in the heavenly dimensions. The vague background noise of “something missing” which accompanies all of us on planet earth is one of the ways we know we are created for God. Philosophers may call this “the human condition;” theologians and pastors may call it a consequence of “alienation” or being separated from God; therapists and psychologists may call it “anxiety.” (Pharmaceutical companies call it “profitable.”) Something is not right—and cannot, and never will be, right. (This is not to say we quit striving, quit allowing the Spirit to work within us—on the contrary. The whole of our life’s work is to bring glory to God. But let’s not be foolish about where we are.)

I had more chances as a young man than most people to travel the world, to visit museums and castles and exotic places. Was I ever satisfied? No—I got home from one trip and I only wanted to go back to Europe again—but next time, to Asia too. And after that, why not South America too? But I never quit wanting to get to Europe. Enough was never enough; something was always missing. How many years would that wanderlust drive me before I realized something was wrong with the basic picture? When you understand enough is never enough, listen to what God is wanting to tell you. Something is wrong with the basic picture. (Your hope for something greater is never diminished by paying attention and being truthful.) Our sure hope fulfilled in the experience of God

is dimmed if we try to fill the emptiness with trophies and excuses and possessions, and if we tell ourselves this is as good as it gets.

--Face the possibility God is speaking to you not through the occasional dramatic lightning bolts but through the little daily moments and internal dialogue you carry on all the time. Will you be kind, or pretend you didn't notice someone else ill at ease? Will you join in the gossip about someone not present, or will you walk away or even speak up? Will you spend those minutes fiddling on the internet, or be disciplined with what you are meant to be doing? Will you take steps to be the peacemaker, and maybe take the first step toward reconciliation—or will you wait for someone else to come to you first? God is surely wanting to work within you before He is going to want to do much miraculous changing of your circumstances.

One famous psychologist is honest enough to note, "Our celebrity culture is awful. I was speaking to ten thousand people three weeks ago...I thought 'I've got to get up and do my schtick. Nobody knows me...I almost wanted to scream and run out of the place shouting obscenities at the top of my lungs, I thought. This is a ridiculous culture...People are assuming I'm something that's not anything close to what I am."

He goes on to admit "I don't know how to relate to my own kids half the time. There are times I haven't got a clue what to do. My wife and I attended a family funeral a week ago, and I let her down. When she let me know that I disappointed her, I got furious. I don't know how to connect. I know I want to connect...But my gosh, in the core of my soul, I'm a mess."

He continues, "Recently I've been saying to my wife and a few others, 'I wonder, what does it mean to really love Jesus?...I've been saved for forty-some years and I still don't love Christ like I want to. Let me just give up and play golf.'"

Larry Crabb continues on through the honest darkness to the light of his Christian hope: "I've had days like that a lot...[I live in more dark days than sunny days...] but when you face your life honestly, you find that there's something indestructible in your soul that's a miracle of grace. The Holy Spirit...is within me, even when I'm at my very worst." [Secrets of a Faith Well-Lived, p 131]

He keeps persevering; even in his darkness he keeps coming back in hopefulness to struggle to obey what God is speaking to him. God sees what no one else sees; God alone knows what you are battling against. This fellow may be a hero in God's eyes; I'm pretty sure God's idea of a hero is not always the way the world defines its heroes.

Let's check back in on Taylor Caldwell, reminiscing

about that dismal Christmas Eve when the cupboard was bare. God saw her perseverance in prayer—even when she had about given up, God did not. As it turned out, a great box of gifts arrived as she shivered from the cold—from the woman whose fancy umbrella she had returned months before. Two unexpected envelopes arrived along with the bills—one was a check for \$30, the January rent, and the second was a job offer. She and her daughter Peggy feasted on that meager supper, and she describes the overflowing joy she felt as she ran down the street among people walking to church to celebrate the birth of the Savior. She kept reminding herself, "I am not alone...I was never alone at all."

The Scripture lesson ends with something of this same assurance, this same unshakable source of hope. You are never alone. We have heard the plea for God to enter into history and save the day; we then heard how God's people have turned away. We know this standoff: we most desperately want God to help us even as we know we have not always been faithful to God. In fact we have failed God; we have sometimes given up on God and forfeited any claim we may have had.

"And yet..." "And yet...You are our Father, O LORD, and...we are Your people." This one tiny conjunction, "Yet," amid all the paragraphs of Isaiah, changes everything. It anticipates that tiny baby changing everything amidst all the nations and peoples. It shifts the axis of the moral world; it changes everything from "Law" to gospel. It changes our relationship with God and each other from how well we behave or achieve or follow the rules to how much God cares about us.

The prophet tells us the people Israel have no claim upon God as a result of their conduct. They have fallen short. Their situation before God is hopeless and their circumstances dire. "And yet..."

"Yet, O LORD, remember You are our Father." You are the Potter and we the clay; You have created us; You cannot walk away from us. We do not deserve You, but You cannot ignore us or forsake us. However we have loved or failed to love you; served or failed to serve You, deserved or failed to deserve Your love—still, You are our Father. Even when we feel our pilot light has gone out—You are our Father.

God answers, in time, with the Babe in the manger: the Babe born in Bethlehem reminds us our relationship with God is now all seen through the lens not of our obedience or merit or success—but through the love of God. Our hope now and forever rests in God's love, which alone is unfailing. Our situations change, our faithfulness wavers, our human hopes flicker and grow dim. Our progress

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sputters, our patience gives out, our resolve weakens—yet God sees us not as the covenant breakers we are—God sees us as beloved children. Often wayward, sometimes heroic—you and I are His beloved.

Since we have seen Jesus, the Son—His compassion for all, His courage and boldness, His deeds of power and healing—we know that God the Father is our Abba—our Daddy. The Great God who could tear open the heavens and come down and shake the Himalayas like a bowl full of jelly—God has shown us, in the Christ, that He regards every person to be of infinite worth and dignity. God has raised Him from the dead and restored Him to life; our hope is in this God.

Sisters and brothers in Christ; children of our Father in heaven: God has not hidden His face from you. He sees you in your struggles, and your perseverance is known to Him. He does not come to make new the universe, but has come to earth to make a new creation of each one of you, His beloved daughters and sons.

In Christ, our Hope never ends. Thanks be to God.

## Isaiah 64:1-9

“O, that You would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at Your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make Your name known to Your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at Your presence! When You did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at Your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides You, who works for those who wait for Him.

You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember You in Your ways. But You were angry, and we sinned; because You hid Yourself, we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on Your name, or attempts to take hold of You; for You have hidden Your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

Yet, O LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our potter; we are all the work of Your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all Your people.”