

## Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

June 14, 2016

Okay, this is going to be a week in which you'll need to put on your "thinking cap." I want to invite you to think with me about the idea of "hope." I've thought quite a bit about "hope" across the years, and I think it offers us more benefit than that of which we are usually aware.



As you'll quickly discover once sensitized to the matter, we use the word, "hope" quite often, frequently as a synonym for "wish": "I hope the Orioles continue to do well"; "I hope it doesn't rain on our picnic," etc. When used as "wish," I spell "hope" as **hope**.

The other main use of "hope" among Christian folk is "the hope we have in Christ": "*We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure*" (Hebrews 6:19a). Or again, "*I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day*" (2 Timothy 1:12). When used in this fashion, I spell "hope" as **Hope**.

It seems to me, though, that there are at least two other spellings of "hope" that convey important content for those who follow Jesus. The first of these has to do with *misplaced* hope.

We humans frequently put our hope in things and in people who are insufficient for the load we commit to them. We hope that making a certain amount of money, completing a certain educational program, or securing the blessing of a certain person will make our lives secure and meaningful . . . only to discover that, having achieved these things, they are unable to deliver what was promised or expected.

I spell this kind of misplaced hope as "**H(h)ope**," suggesting by this unusual spelling that we have placed "Capital H Hope" in something or someone unable to carry that load. The Bible's spelling for this is i-d-o-l.

My fourth spelling of "hope" has to do with the way in which I think God intends for us to live our lives, hour by hour and day by day: "*And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*" (Colossians 3:17). This fourth "hope" is spelled "**h(H)ope**," indicating that we do the ordinary things we do every day in the light of the anchor-for-the-soul Hope by which we lean into the Future God has promised.

Not only are there four ways to spell "hope," but there are also three "tenses" in which to understand hope.<sup>1</sup> With respect to the **past**, h(H)ope looks back on past experience and sees both God's faithfulness and God's forgiveness. Because of the forgiveness we have found in Jesus, we not only are set free from guilt for our own Sin, but we are able to offer forgiveness to those who have sinned against us. H(h)ope, on the other hand, experiences the past as guilty, isolated, and faithless.

With respect to the **present**, h(H)ope experiences most days as purpose-full, effective, and fulfilling: *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God*

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<sup>1</sup> These three tenses come from Thomas Oden, *The Structure of Awareness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).

prepared in advance for us to do. . . . As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.<sup>2</sup> H(h)ope, on the other hand, experiences the present as boring and meaningless. (I'd almost be willing to say that it is impossible for someone who is living in h(H)ope to be bored.)

Finally, with respect to the future, h(H)ope lives “on tiptoe,” trusting God’s faithfulness and anticipating ways in which that faithfulness will be experienced, both in time and in eternity. Persons who live in H(h)ope face the future with anxiety and dread, seeing death as an extinguishing rather than a transition into Eternal Life.

One of my favorite verses that brings this all together is John 5:24, where Jesus told us, “I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me **have** eternal life (PRESENT). They **will never** be condemned for their sins (FUTURE), but they **have already** passed from death to life (PAST).”

There’s one more way in which I’d like to try to distinguish between h(H)ope and H(h)ope. This approach has to do with how we understand the things that happen to us, whether we experience them as “good” or “bad.”



All of us try to explain our experiences and the events of our lives by attributing them to causes—by making “causal attributions.”<sup>3</sup> Whether a person is Hope-full (“h[H]ope”) or Hope-less (“H[h]ope”) is determined in large measure by the ways in which these attributions are made.

Both Hope and Hopelessness are at least partially the result of these largely unconscious calculations of probability. Some have suggested that such Hope-related calculations of probability take place along three continua. These dimensions are (1) *locus of causality* (**Is the cause of this event internal or external to me?**); (2) *stability* (**Is this situation likely to change over time?**); and (3), *limits of the arena* (**Does this affect all of my life, or only some part of it?**).<sup>4</sup> Each of us tends to make these evaluations according to a fairly predictable pattern.

When **bad** things happen to us, despairing/Hope-less persons (“H[h]ope”) tend to respond with an **internal-stable-global** style. A person with this style understands negative events to be caused by some *personal failure* (internal) which is characterological and *not likely to change* (stable), and that negatively affects life satisfaction in *virtually every area* (global). Such a person sees her or his situation as being the painful result of an irremediable deficit in her or his personhood, or as the result of hostile and inexorable fate.

At the other end of the spectrum are those persons whose attributional style is **external-unstable-specific**. These persons tend to locate the origin of negative experiences *outside of themselves* (external), considering these experiences to be *transient* (unstable) and situation-specific, not global. Thus Hope-full persons (“h[H]ope”) view negative experiences

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 2:10, 4:16

<sup>3</sup>Bernard Spilka, Phillip Shaver, and Lee Kirkpatrick, “A General Attribution Theory for the Psychology of Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24 (1985), 2-3.

<sup>4</sup>Martin E. P. Seligman et al., “Depressive Attributional Style,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 88 (1979), 242.

as *temporary setbacks that can be adequately managed*, and they are not afraid to consider adventurous solutions to them.

On the other hand, when **good** things happen, Hope-less and Hope-full persons again take opposite approaches. Hopeless persons understand positive events as external-unstable-specific, that is, as being related to chance, not character, unlikely to persist, and affecting only a tiny portion of their lives. Hopeful persons understand positive events as internal-stable-global, that is, as being related to their own activity and/or character (and God’s grace), likely to persist, and affecting most dimensions of their lives. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle between these two extremes.<sup>5</sup>

I know this is a bit complicated, so here’s a diagram to help you go over it again in your mind. *This really will make a difference if you stay with it until you understand it*, and it gets better ☺. We who follow Jesus, who live in h(H)ope, are able to view our lives through these six lenses in even more positive ways. Here are some explicitly Christian dimensions to each of these six “positions”:

Hopeful Response to Positive Events	Hopeful Response to Negative Events
<b>INTERNAL</b>	<b>EXTERNAL</b>
<b>STABLE</b>	<b>UNSTABLE</b>
<b>GLOBAL</b>	<b>SPECIFIC</b>
Hopeless Response to Negative Events	Hopeless Response to Positive Events

1. **INTERNAL:** God has, through Jesus, completely changed my character. I am a new person!

*This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!* (2 Corinthians 5:17).

2. **EXTERNAL:** This transformation is all God’s doing, and isn’t at all dependent on my own strength or goodness.

*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 6:23).

3. **STABLE:** These God-made changes are guaranteed both for time and for eternity.

*With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever* (Hebrews 9:12).

4. **UNSTABLE:** Whatever my faults today, God continues to work in my life to make me more like Himself.

*Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church* (Ephesians 4:15).

5. **GLOBAL:** God gives me an abundant, overflowing, rich, and satisfying quality of life that is not dependent on my circumstances.

*The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life* (John 10:10).

<sup>5</sup> Chris R. Brewin, “Depression and Causal Attributions: What is Their Relation?” *Psychological Bulletin*, 98 (1985), 297-309.

6. **SPECIFIC:** God’s forgiveness and God’s empowerment allow me to be fully present in each experience and with each person.

*What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, “Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well”—but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn’t enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless (James 2:14-17).*

I’m sure you can think of other verses; and all of this together might be represented like this:

<b>Christian Experience</b>	Hopeful Response to Positive Events	Hopeful Response to Negative Events	<b>Christian Experience</b>
<i>True Inner Change</i> 2 Corinthians 5:17	<b>INTERNAL</b>	<b>EXTERNAL</b>	<i>Comes from God</i> Romans 6:23
<i>Eternal</i> Hebrews 9:12b	<b>STABLE</b>	<b>UNSTABLE</b>	<i>Always Growing</i> Ephesians 4:15
<i>All of My Being</i> John 10:10b	<b>GLOBAL</b>	<b>SPECIFIC</b>	<i>THIS Person/Event</i> James 2:14-17
<b>Christian Experience</b>	Hopeless Response to Negative Events	Hopeless Response to Positive Events	<b>Christian Experience</b>

I know this has all been quite a mental exercise, but I believe that such things as these constitute a great deal of what Paul was talking about when he wrote, “*don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person **by changing the way you think. Then you will know** what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is” (Romans 12:2).*

Go forth, and live in h(H)ope!

Dave

