

“Tri-Focal Hope”

Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:31).

Isaiah 40:27-31 ¹

In the summer of 1991, as I was finishing up my Ph.D. dissertation, I made an interesting discovery as I prepared the final copies to be bound for the seminary library. I noticed that I was having a hard time dabbing white-out on the copier imperfections on those pages. I couldn't "hit the specks" for some reason.

I eventually decided to have my eyes checked, and subsequently went from never having had glasses at all to progressive trifocals in one fell swoop. I was very glad to have the glasses, as I have been ever since, and I was amused that this dramatic change came during my 40th year.

I've been noticing similar difficulties this fall. The text in some of my Bibles has begun to shrink quite fantastically, and the docs tell me that my eyes are getting older . . . the very idea!!! At any rate, I'm holding out for new glasses once insurance changes go into effect in two weeks, and my eyes will be very glad to have them! Keep the metaphor of "trifocals" in your mind. We'll come back to it.

The other mental image I want to build before we get started with our text came from my friend, Jean Belton, a member of our church in Bristol. Jean was recovering from a broken ankle, and when I asked her how her walking was going, she responded, "How the walking goes depends on who's walking with you."

Jean was talking about the personalities of her physical therapists, but her answer was far more profound than she intended for it to be: "**How the walking goes depends on who's walking with you.**" Keep that in mind, too, as we look once more at our text.

This is now the third week we've considered the message of Isaiah 40. Remember that Isaiah was speaking prophetically to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, many years after his own time. They were discouraged and despondent, thinking that God had abandoned them completely and forever.

If God had ever loved them, they thought, then God must surely have given up that love and replaced it with harsh judgment. Or if God did still care for them, then the God of Israel must be no match for the gods of Babylon, for they were still captives, and far, far from home.

Isaiah's message began with these familiar words: "**Comfort, comfort my people,**" says your God. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40:1-2).

Isaiah's message to the exiles was that God is indeed powerful, and that God is indeed compassionate. It's as though Isaiah said, "God is quite sufficiently powerful, thank you very much; and God does still love you. In fact, God loves you very much, and you will soon be delivered."

Our second look at Isaiah 40 focused on God's power: "**To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?**" says the Holy One. *Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 23, 2018, the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing” (Isaiah 40:25-26). Today, as we finish the chapter, Isaiah returns to the idea of God’s love and compassion, using the image of a strong and compassionate shepherd.

It was the week between Christmas Day and New Year’s Day, 1999—nineteen years ago this week. Our church in Louisville was without a Building Manager, and so as the Church Administrator I was spending a lot of time managing the five buildings of our church campus. Although the church was officially closed that week (as OMI will be this week), the Alzheimer’s Day Care that met in our facilities continued to meet through most of the week, so I came in every morning at seven o’clock to open up for them, and then came back in the evening to close the buildings and set the alarms.

On Wednesday morning I opened the building and returned to my office just as the sun was beginning to creep above the horizon. I put my head in my hands in exhaustion and said out loud, “Dear God, I am so tired.” *In that very instant*, God’s Spirit told me to pick up the *Guide to Prayer* that I keep on my desk and to read the reading for that day.

I’m learning to trust and to obey such spiritual promptings, so I picked up the *Guide* and turned to the prescribed text. This is what I read from the prophet Isaiah: *Why do you complain [and say], “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God”?*

*Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; **but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.** They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40:27-31).*

I realized that I had been standing alongside the exiles in Babylon, complaining that “*My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God*”; and the Eternal and Ever-Living God had spoken to me, instantly, exactly what I needed to hear. I trembled with the thrill of it! God could not have been nearer if God had been sitting in my lap. I sat in stunned awe and gratitude for a long time before I left the building . . . with renewed strength. These same words are the focus of our attention this morning.

In his answer to the exiles’ complaint, Isaiah returned to the twin themes of God’s **compassion** and God’s **power**: “God DOES still care for you and God is ABLE to provide what you need!” *Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak (40:28-29).*

From time to time when I’m talking with our daughter, Anna, about her many difficult and painful health challenges, I tell her, “I wish I could take all these things from you and bear them myself.” I can’t do that, of course, no matter how much I might want to do it; but that is exactly what our compassionate God has in fact done for us in the person of Jesus.

Our wonderful, amazing God is both *Yahweh*, the Creator God, and *Immanuel*, God with Us. And since God has now come to us in the Holy Spirit, our compassionate and powerful *Yahweh-Immanuel* lives within all who have been born again, all the time.

Pastor Tony Evans was rushing to catch a plane in an airport terminal when he noticed a man beside him who was walking half as fast but traveling faster. The other man was walking on a moving sidewalk, and Dr. Evans thought to himself that this was a beautiful

picture of God's Spirit in our lives. "When we walk in the Spirit," he wrote, "the Spirit comes underneath us and bears us along. We still walk, but we walk in dependence on Him."²

That's what Isaiah was getting at in the climactic verses of chapter 40: *Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; **but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.** They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint* (Isaiah 40:30-31).

It's at this point that we come to the source for the title of this morning's message: **Tri-focal Hope**. The three foci of Hope to which I invite your attention are the **Past**, the **Present**, and the **Future**.

Isaiah was trying to get the Jewish exiles to think differently in all three tenses about God's faithfulness and God's purposes in their lives; and it's hardly news for me to affirm with Isaiah that **how we think about things matters**. Thomas Oden, a pastoral theologian, helped me with this when he pointed out that hope-less-ness might really be called "despair in three tenses."³

According to Oden, when a Hope-*full* person looks at the **past**, she sees many experiences of faith-*full* relationships and meaningful accomplishments. And, where those are lacking, she sees both God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of significant others in her life covering the cracks and broken places.

When a Hope-*full* person looks at the **present**, he continues to see faith-*full* relationships, combined with a sense of efficacy and purpose connected to what God is doing in the world. He understands his life to be significant—to matter—both in time and in eternity. And when a Hope-*full* person looks at the **future**, she anticipates good things both in time and in eternity, the work of a personal, trustworthy God who keeps promises and who has promised us eternal renewal and redemption.

In stark contrast, when a Hope-*less* person looks at the *past*, he sees a trail of faithless relationships and meaningless activity steeped in unresolved and unrelenting guilt. When a Hope-*less* person looks at the *present*, she sees empty relationships, boredom, purposelessness, and meaninglessness. And when a Hope-*less* person looks at the *future*, he sees only emptiness, isolation, anxiety, death, and final, complete, ultimate, meaninglessness. Is it any wonder that such a person would be overtaken by a life-destroying despair?

It is into just such Darkness that God's Spirit speaks Words of Hope—both to the Babylonian exiles and to us. One of my favorite verses is John 5:24, where our Lord told us, "*I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death to life.*" In that one verse, our Lord summarized our tri-focal Hope: We have eternal life. We will never be condemned for their sins. We have already passed from death to life.

Can you sense the **gigantic** difference Hope makes? *Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; **but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.** They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

² Tony Evans, "Liberating Grace," *Decision* (July 2002), 25.

³ Thomas Oden, *The Structure of Awareness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969). Oden's idea is quite closely related to what I mean when I talk about our deep, fundamental human yearning for "A Life that Matters" and for "Relationships that Last."

As I'm sure you know, sometimes our lives soar like the eagles. Sometimes we find ourselves able to run and run, whether our encouragement comes through other people or through God's own direct action. And sometimes, the best we can do in the struggle of life is just to stumble along.

All of us have days when we can neither fly nor run, and stumbling along is the very best we can do. For some of us, that's what life is like every single day because we are caregivers for loved ones whose minds and bodies have been overtaken by disease. Our world is a 24/7/365 world in which finding rest is much harder to do than simply deciding to take a vacation. The needs of our loved ones never take a vacation . . . ever. The care we offer is heart-felt and gladly given, but we are weary—wary down to the very marrow of our bones.

Some of us are weary today because disease and pain have invaded, not the body of a loved one, but the very body we inhabit. We are weary of the never-ending pain, of night after endless night when sleep eludes us, of joints that move only with great struggle, of minds that age has made sluggish or that depression has dulled.

Some of us this morning can hardly remember what it's like to "soar on wings like eagles," and "running without weariness" sounds like somebody else's life. Even walking without stumbling and fainting seems like more than we have left to give. If that's where you are this morning, the powerful and compassionate Savior whose birth we celebrate says to you, "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest**" (Matthew 11:28).

Somewhat like the man Dr. Evans saw on the moving sidewalk, the soaring eagle is borne aloft not by his powerful wings, but by the wind's gentle power beneath his wings. Those who Hope in the Lord, who wait for the Lord, prepare ourselves to be lifted up and carried above life's storms by God's Spirit . . . in God's time and in God's way.

God is not in a hurry. God does not grow tired or weary. God takes the long view. God's purposes are for the Cosmos across eons of time. *Yahweh-Immanuel is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9).

"Your God is too small," Isaiah reminds us. Just for perspective, if the Milky Way galaxy in which we live (106,000 *light years* in diameter) were the size of North America, our entire solar system would fit inside a coffee cup. Our galaxy is one of perhaps one hundred *billion* similar galaxies in our unimaginably gigantic universe.⁴ And every aspect of this marvelous Creation is sustained moment by moment by our Savior's Word of Power (Colossians 1:17). Our God is an Awesome God.

At the same time, when we think about "hoping in the Lord," you and I do well to remember that "Hope in the Lord" is not a state of perpetual bliss, an eliminator of all problems, or the guarantee of a desired outcome. Hope is a choice we must make, especially when to be hopeless would be the easier choice. Hope is a gift from God that enables us to continue to believe in God's love, God's power, and God's faithfulness no matter what the circumstances of our lives look like right now.⁵

Choosing such Hope doesn't mean that we have all the answers or that all our problems are solved, but it does mean that *we have made a choice*. **Choosing to have Hope means that we choose to believe that the Babe in the manger is who He says He is.** *Choosing to*

⁴ Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Zondervan, 2006), p. 20.

⁵ Constance McNeill, "Pitch Your Tent in the Land of Hope," in *It's Time . . . a Journey toward Missional Faithfulness* (Atlanta: Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, 2005), p. 64.

have Hope means that we have had sufficient personal experience with the Living God to become persuaded that God is trustworthy, and we are willing to trust God beyond what we can fully understand or comprehend.

The Bible's answer to human hope-lessness is that the Story that began in Bethlehem's manger has rewritten the end of all our stories. The Manger of Bethlehem, the Cross of Calvary, and the Empty Tomb have opened up a future before us that we hardly dare to let ourselves imagine. The Resurrected Power of Bethlehem's Babe is the guarantee of our Hope, the proof that *"no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ"* (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Remember that **how the walking goes depends on who's walking with you.** When Jill and I were in high school, a frequent song the school chorus sang was "I'll Walk with God."⁶ The beginning and the ending of that song went like this: "I'll walk with God from this day on . . . and I'll never walk alone, while I walk with God."

A.W. Tozer agreed with Isaiah's tri-focal Hope when he wrote that

*Anything God has ever done, God can do now.
Anything God has ever done anywhere, God can do here.
Anything God has ever done for anyone, God can do for you.*

Tozer also wrote that "those who know Jesus at all well come to give Him a blind trust. They do not know what He will feel it right to do, nor what they themselves ought to ask from Him; but they are entirely sure of His interest in them, His compassion toward them, His power to bring about what no one else could do for them. And they leave it at that, with the inner peace that only He can give."

Will you have it all gathered up in four words? Here is the sum of the matter: **Christ Jesus, Our Hope** (1 Timothy 1:1).⁷

*And He will raise you up on eagle's wings,
Bear you on the breath of dawn,
Make you to shine like the sun,
And hold you in the palm of His Hand.*⁸

Amen, and Amen.

⁶ "I'll Walk with God," by Nikolaus Brodsky and Paul Francis Webster.

⁷C. F. D. Moule, *The Meaning of Hope: A Biblical Exposition with Concordance* (London: The Highway Press, 1953), p. 38.

⁸ Michael Joncas, "On Eagles' Wings"