

# iHope

Isaiah 40:27-31 <sup>1</sup>

You may know by now that I'm a great fan of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>2</sup> I've seen all the films several times, and I've read all the books three times, beginning in 1967. I'm currently re-reading them all a fourth time, and I've also re-read *The Hobbit*,<sup>3</sup> the prelude to the trilogy, which is due out in film in December.

In the final film of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Frodo, the protagonist, and Sam, his faithful friend, are climbing Mount Doom. Frodo, the chosen Ring Bearer, is carrying the One Ring of Power, and as the story goes, the only way to save Middle Earth from the gathering and overwhelming forces of evil is to destroy the Ring by throwing it back into the fiery bowels of the mountain from which it was forged in the dim reaches of the past. Frodo is the only person in the story whose character is sufficiently pure and strong that he can carry the One Ring without falling victim to the temptations of its power.

The climb up the mountain is treacherous. Volcanic fireballs hurtle through the air like meteors. Great rivers of lava course down the mountain. Gollum, a creature who once possessed the Ring, lurks nearby, watching for an opportunity to seize it once more. As Frodo and Sam make their final ascent to the fires of Mount Doom, the burden becomes so heavy that Frodo collapses in a heap on the rocks.

As Sam cradles Frodo in his arms, he tries to encourage Frodo with memories of their homeland, "Do you remember the Shire, Mr. Frodo? It will be spring soon. Do you remember the taste of strawberries and cream?"

"No, Sam," Frodo replies wearily, "I can't recall the taste of food, the sound of water, the touch of grass. There's nothing left."

"Well, let's be rid of the Ring once and for all, then. Come on, Mr. Frodo. I can't carry [your burden] for you. But I can carry you. Let's go!" And Sam hoists Frodo onto his back and carries him to the top of the mountain, where the Ring is finally destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

As summer becomes fall with winter ahead, some of us probably carry burdens that threaten to overwhelm us as Frodo's burden threatened to overwhelm him, and what we need for the journey is a faithful friend like Sam to encourage us to keep on keeping on. As one of our members in Bristol once told me when I asked her how her walking was going during her recovery from a broken ankle, "How the walking goes depends on who's walking with you."

Although Jean was talking about physical therapists, her answer was far more profound than she realized in that moment: "**How the walking goes depends on who's walking with you.**" Jean's reply captures the essence of Frodo's dependence on Sam, and it also captures the essence of our primary text this morning. If you'll open your Bibles to Isaiah 40, beginning with verse 27, we'll remind ourselves of that text:

*Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, "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*

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on September 23, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1937).

<sup>4</sup> *The Return of the King*, New Line Cinema, 2003, directed by Peter Jackson.

*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).

Our specific focus will be the last verse: ***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 40:31). That's worth underlining in your Bible, if it isn't underlined already.

You'll notice that there are four promises in this verse. **The central, overarching promise is that those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.** The other three promises are corollaries of that primary one: (1) there are times when those who hope in the Lord will "soar on wings like eagles"; (2) there are times when those who hope in the Lord will "run and not grow weary"; and (3), and there are times when those who hope in the Lord will "walk and not be faint." We'll look at each of those corollaries in turn.

**Soaring on Wings like Eagles:** Several years ago, Edward Farrell traveled from Detroit to Ireland to celebrate his favorite uncle's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. On the birthday morning, Ed and his uncle got up before dawn and went for a walk along the shore of Lake Killarney.



After watching the sun rise in silence for about twenty minutes, Ed's uncle began to skip along the beach, smiling radiantly. After catching up with his uncle, Ed asked, "Uncle Seamus, you look very happy. Will you tell me why?"

"Yes, lad," the old man said, tears streaming down his face. "You see, the Father is fond of me. Ah, me Father is so very fond of me."<sup>5</sup>

My friend, how long has it been since you skipped for joy like Uncle Seamus did, caught up in the wonder of God's delight in you? How long has it been since you were overcome by whistling or humming or singing or laughing in the sheer joy and delight of your relationship with God? Such delight lies behind Zephaniah 3:17, my favorite verse in the Bible: *The LORD your God is with you. He is mighty to save! He will take great delight in you. He will comfort you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing!*

Do you know who Bethany Hamilton is? Once ranked as the best amateur teen surfer in Hawaii, Bethany lost her left arm to a tiger shark in October, 2003. Bethany's pastor, Steve Thompson, said of her, "She's looking forward to the future. She's asking herself, 'How can I show the world that I still have a life, that I enjoy my life, and that my life is filled with joy?'"<sup>6</sup>



Uncle Seamus and Bethany Hamilton know what it is to "soar on wings like eagles." They know how to rise above their circumstances, lifted by the love of a heavenly Father who dances over them with joy; a Father who takes delight in those He loves; a Father whose faithfulness is as sure as the dawn of a new day.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Brennan Manning, *The Wisdom of Tenderness* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), pp. 25-26.

<sup>6</sup> Jill Lieber, "Teen Surfer Riding Wave of Amazing Grace," *USA Today*, March 19, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> See Mark Hayes, "And the Father will Dance!" (Chapel Hill, NC: Hinshaw Music, 1983), based on Zephaniah 3:17: "And the Father will dance over you in joy! He will take delight in whom He loves! Is that a choir I hear, singing the praises of God? No! The Lord God Himself is exulting o'er you in song! Sing, O daughter of Zion, with all of your heart! Cast away fear, for you have been restored! Put on the garment of praise, as on a festival day. Join with the Father in glorious, jubilant song!"

Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons in the second century, once wrote that “The glory of God is a human being who is *fully alive*.” And Teilhard de Chardin, the 20<sup>th</sup> century visionary, philosopher and biologist, said that “**Joy** is the most certain sign of the Presence of God.” So, on a scale of 1-10, how close are you right this moment to being “fully alive”? How close are you this morning to being “joyful”? Even if it’s not your portion today, I pray that you will know many days on which you soar “on eagle’s wings”!<sup>8</sup>

**Running without being Weary:** It was the week between Christmas Day and New Year’s Day, 1999. Our church in Louisville was without a Building Manager, so I was spending a lot of time managing our large church campus. Although the church was officially closed that 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 again.

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*, the 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 passage given. 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).*

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 couldn’t have been nearer if He 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.

**Walking without Fainting:** Finally, there’s a third dimension to the renewed strength promised in Isaiah 40:31. Sometimes we soar like the eagles. Sometimes we continue running because of God’s encouragement, whether that encouragement comes through other people or through God’s own direct action. And sometimes the best we can do in our struggle 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 ourselves 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.

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<sup>8</sup> See Michael Joncas, “On Eagles’ Wings” (Portland, OR: New Dawn Music, 1979).

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, our Lord Christ says to you, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28).

One of my favorite stories is Roy Edgemon's story about a little girl named Susie. Susie had been playing in the yard before dinner, but she didn't come in to eat when she was called. After a canvas of the neighborhood failed to find her, Susie's distraught parents were about to call the police when Susie walked through the door.

In response to her parents' frantic "Where have you been?!" Susie responded, "I went over to Sally's house. The head had come off of one of her favorite dolls, and she hadn't been able to get it back on. When I couldn't get it back on, either, Sally began to cry, and I've been helping Sally cry."<sup>9</sup>

Christian psychiatrist Scott Peck wrote of such moments as the one Susie and Sally shared, that "When I am with a group of human beings committed to hanging in there through both the agony and the joy of community, I have a dim sense that I am participating in a phenomenon for which there is only one word. I almost hesitate to use it. The word is "glory."<sup>10</sup>

That's what happens when we carry each other, as Sam carried Frodo. That's what happens when we encourage each other and help each other cry. Do you remember Jean's profound answer to me? "How the walking goes depends on who's walking with you."

Some of us this morning may need someone with whom to cry. For whatever reason, your life is in a mess, and you feel dirty, broken, and worthless. We've all been there, and we'll all be there again, but you're there now. If that's your situation this morning, let me ask you this. If I offered you a \$20 bill, would you take it? How about if I wadded it up and threw it in the mud? What if I stomped on it? Could you still take it to a store and spend it?

Sure you could. That \$20 bill has value because of what it is, not because of how it looks, or where it's been, or what it's been used for. A crisp, clean \$20 bill is not worth any more than a dirty, worn-out one. And it's the same with you and God.

You may feel as though you've been stepped on, beat up, and kicked around. You may feel dirty, unworthy, and useless. But no matter what you've been through, you still have a Father who loves you. Indeed, you have a Father who delights in you!<sup>11</sup>

Finally, when we think about "hoping in the Lord," we do well to remember that Hope 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 an easier choice. Hope is a gift from God that enables us to continue to believe in God's love regardless of the circumstances of our lives.<sup>12</sup>

Choosing such Hope doesn't mean that we have all the answers, but it does mean that we have made a choice. Choosing to have Hope means that we choose to believe that Jesus is who He says He is. Having had sufficient personal experience with the Living God to

<sup>9</sup> Roy T. Edgemon, *The Doctrines Baptists Believe* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1988), p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*, p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> From Mike Silva, *Would You Like Fries With That?* (Word, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> 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.

become persuaded that God is trustworthy, we become willing to trust God beyond what we can fully understand or comprehend.

The Bible's answer to human hopelessness 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).

As C. F. D. Moule exclaimed, Will you have it all gathered up in four words? Will you believe that God's Central Guarantee is a *Person*? Here is the sum of the matter: **CHRIST JESUS, OUR HOPE** (1 Timothy 1:1).<sup>13</sup> Will you trust your life to Him?

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<sup>13</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Meaning of Hope: A Biblical Exposition with Concordance* (London: The Highway Press, 1953), p. 38.