

Good Soil



A place for growth and nurture

Session 4.2: HOPE

INTRODUCTION: GROWING IN FAITH, HOPE & LOVE

In this short series, we are thinking about the three Christian virtues named by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: ***faith, hope and love***.

While these are very common words, we will be trying to dig deeper to explore their meaning and application for us as Christians. So, not just *'What is hope?'* but *'What is Christian hope and how can we have it?'* And the same for faith and love. We will be looking to the Bible to help us explore the themes, and once again thinking about how we can grow in these aspects. Even if we think we have these virtues in small quantities, they are of great value to God and to one another, and always with capacity to grow.

PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

Please remember to keep in touch with your group and remind them of the date and time of the session.

Group members are asked to prepare for this session by making a list of a few things they hope for. If they have not come prepared to the session, please allow a few minutes to think about it and write something down to share with the others. Don't forget to come up with your own list too.

THINKING ABOUT HOPE (to read at home)

This session looks at the theme of **hope**. Hope is a much-used word in everyday conversation which expresses our expectations, desires or wishes for the things we are unable to see or know – either things of the present or the future.

Before you read on, make a list of five or six things you hope for. This can be for yourself, for others, or for the world in general. Take this list along with you to the session.

Notice how often we use the word hope when writing to people (in letters, text messages or emails): “*I hope you are keeping well*”; “*Hope the family are doing well*”; “*Hope to see you soon*”; “*Hope you have good holiday.*” Our expressions of hope are nearly always positive. Occasionally, with bitterness or anger, we might hope something bad happens to our enemies (this is expressed in the Bible in a few places). In the case of war, the hope of survival may rest on the downfall of the enemy, so such hope would not be unreasonable.

Hope also expresses a feeling more generally that things will turn out for the best: that our lives are ultimately heading in the right direction, or can be rescued. That *hope* might involve several smaller individual hopes of how things will get better. Despair is opposite of hope. When people reach a point of despair, it is usually when there is no obvious hope to cling to. Hope can get us through many difficult situations. Even when the present situation is dire, hope tells us it will not always be like this. A society or group of people that has lost hope is a very worrying state of affairs. Usually this happens when none of the options on offer are very promising.

Christian hope is based on what God can achieve: things that are works in progress in the present, or are promised for the future (in the Bible). They are things as yet unseen by us, but rooted in God’s promises. So, faith and hope are clearly linked. When we have faith in God, trusting in God’s faithfulness, we put our **hope** in what God promises. We will be looking at **three aspects of Christian hope**: *Hope of eternal life; hope for our growing holiness and life with God; and hope for the renewal of the world.*

STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS

First of all, have any of the mustard seeds sprouted since the last session? Have a look at them together.

Then, share with the group, or in smaller groups of 3 or 4, the list of things you are hoping for. (Or quickly write a list, if you haven't already.) Only share the things you are comfortable sharing, and do not feel under any pressure to share things that are personal or distressing.

What do you notice, as you listen to the hopes of others?

Are there any hopes you have in common?

What are the timescales of our hopes? Do we have short-term or long-term hopes, or even eternal hopes?

What (or who) gives you hope?

Are our hopes more personally-orientated, or do they express our desires for the world?

Can you turn your hopes into prayers? Or ask the group to pray for certain things.

A PRAYER

God of all our hopes and dreams,
be present among us as we express our hopes to one another.
May you tune our dreams and desires to your will;
and help us to trust in your promises.

Give hope to any who are experiencing despair or anxiety,
and help us to be people of hope in the world.

May you lift us from doubt, darkness, and despair,
by the power of your Holy Spirit,
and in the name of Jesus Christ:
the rock on which our hopes are founded. Amen.

READING THE SCRIPTURES AND DIGGING DEEPER

The New Testament gives us **hope in three dimensions**, which are all connected, and yet sometimes hard to imagine how God will work all three together. The first is that our hope is **for life beyond this life**, eternal life in heaven, thanks to the grace of Jesus and the forgiving love of God. The second is that **we ourselves** are constantly being '*changed from glory into glory*' (from the hymn '*Love Divine*', based on 2 Corinthians 3:18) as the Holy Spirit works in our lives to bring us closer to Christ in our character and deeper in our relationship with God. The third is that **the world as we know it will also be renewed**, thanks to the saving work of Jesus and his return to earth to 'make all things new' (Revelation 21:5). In this session we will take a brief look at all three, using **Paul's letter to the Romans**.

1. HOPE OF HEAVEN

Reading: Romans 5: 1-5 (New Revised Standard Version)

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

In this passage, hope of heaven is described as our hope of sharing the glory of God. We are put right in our relationship with God ('justified') through faith in Jesus, and our relationship is based on his grace. Our hope is that we will one day share in the heavenly glory of God (just as Jesus is glorified through his Ascension) and in the meantime we can remain confident ('boast') through our sufferings – remembering that Jesus himself suffered greatly – and our endurance

and character is often built up through times of suffering. Increasing and enduring *hope* is a result of this process, through the love of God, poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Here we see an example in Paul's thinking of how faith, hope and love are connected.

Have you experienced difficult times that have strengthened your hope, endurance, or character?

What is your hope for life after death? What do you base that hope on? What do we use to build up our picture of heaven? What promises of Jesus can you think of related to eternal life?

How does hope of heaven (eternal life, resurrection) sustain us through the difficult days?

2. HOPE OF NEWNESS OF LIFE WITH GOD

Reading: Romans 6: 1-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸ But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

In this (even more complicated) passage, Paul writes about the direction of our lives as Christians – towards resurrection with Christ. We have been saved through the grace of God, but we should not continue to engage in deliberate sin, just because God forgives!

The meaning and symbolism of Baptism is important here. Going under the water and coming up again symbolizes dying with Christ and rising with him. In Paul's thinking, in our new lives as Christians, the old ways of life have died and we should experience a different sort of life as God's people. We may experience sinful inclinations and temptations, but these things should no longer be our masters.

Since Paul knows that it is perfectly possible for a Christian to sin (and he writes in **Romans 7** about the struggles of the flesh), he seems to be saying that part of the battle is convincing ourselves that we are indeed 'under new management'. In **2 Corinthians 3:18**, he writes that we '*are being transformed... from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit*'. The hope is that as we keep up the life of faith (through prayer, Holy Communion, reading the Bible, and fellowship) the Holy Spirit works in us: we're each a 'work in progress'. In **Galatians 5**, Paul lists the **fruit of the Spirit** which will grow in us when we are open to God.

What do you hope for in your personal faith?

Where can you see God at work in you, making positive changes?

*In our times of temptation or struggle, try reading some of the hymns in **Singing the Faith** in the section '**Growing in Grace and Holiness**'. It might be useful to make these hymns into daily prayers.*

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3. HOPE FOR THE RENEWAL OF THE EARTH

Reading: Romans 8: 18-25 (New Revised Standard Version)

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

In this passage, Paul again starts with our present sufferings, but now extends our hope to the whole of creation. One day, he says, all of creation will be set free from its current decay. It is currently groaning like a birthing mother, undergoing the birth of the new creation from the old. This is echoed in **Revelation chapters 21 and 22**, which describe a new heaven and new earth – infused together with God at the heart. Paul says that what creation has been waiting for is the revealing of the children of God. So, this is linked to our personal relationships with God, and connected with the previous passage.

In God's power, what can the children of God do for the whole of creation? What is needed for the planet in the present crisis, and what can genuine Christian living do to offer hope to the planet?

How do you think the renewal of the earth is connected with the final life of heaven? What do we learn from other parts of the Bible?

PRAYING TOGETHER

- Who sustains your hope, or keeps you going? Thank God for them;
- Pray for those who are lacking in hope at the moment because of their circumstances or mental health;
- Pray for the world, in desperate need of hope, and for the salvation and renewal Jesus promises;
- Pray for each of us in our growing in grace and holiness;
- Pray for those who are close to death, needing the hope of eternal life;
- You might like to say **the Lord's Prayer** together.

A PRAYER FROM ST. PAUL

May the God of hope
fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. (Romans 15, verse 13, *New Revised Standard Version*.)

SUGGESTED SONGS TO LISTEN TO (or your own choice)

You can find all of these songs on  **YouTube**

Pull Me Through, by KXC Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1uU7IBaRZU>

Hope Has a Name, by River Valley Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTYSapLrOto>

In Christ Alone, performed by Adrienne Liesching

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn9-UNer6MQ>

MORE TO READ ON THE NEXT PAGE...

EPILOGUE: BUILDING HOPE THROUGH THANKSGIVING

Paul mentions *thanksgiving* or *thankfulness* almost as much as hope. For him, living in the present with hope meant also living with thankfulness, and a growing awareness of what to be thankful to God for. Being thankful of the actions and blessings of God in the present (even in suffering) can help us maintain hope for the future. Thankfulness reminds us of God's presence, power, and provision, and counting our blessings is good for the soul. When we cannot see beyond today's troubles and find that hope is too hard to grasp, building *the habit of being thankful* shifts our focus away from the negative onto the positive, and strengthens our hope.

Go back to your list of things you are hoping for. Could you make this a daily exercise? Write down three things you are hoping for, and alongside it each day write down three things you are thankful for. Offer them to God as a prayer, or simply make the act of writing them your daily prayer. God knows.

Don't forget that if you ever feel lacking in hope, please find a trusted person at the church that you can talk to. We can be there for each other to build one another up, in times when hope is at a low ebb.

Read and reflect on **1 Peter 1: 3-9** – entitled 'A Living Hope'.

COMING NEXT in GOOD SOIL:

SESSION 4.3: LOVE