

HOPE OR DESPAIR? LUKE 7:1-17

In the news recently was the story of Jessica O Conner and Dion Reynolds who were lost in bush for 19 days in Kahurangi National Park. That is a long time to be lost, when you haven't anything to eat for 12 days. But upon rescue Jessica says she never lost hope that they would be found.

Hope is a powerful thing. Hope is what can sustain a person through incredible adversity. Equally, without hope, we fall to despair. Hope sustains us, despair pulls us down. For those grappling with suicidal thoughts, the difference between staying alive or attempting suicide is whether we have hope or despair.

Despair focuses on the past. Hope focuses on the future. Victor Frankly – a holocaust survivor wrote that it does not matter what happens to us, it is our response that gives us power. When we focus on hope, it pulls us forward, If we focus on despair it pulls us down.

Today I want to read two short stories from the Book of Luke. Read them many times but never really thought about them together. However, Luke has arranged his material deliberately, and even though these stories are in different places and times, he has placed them together. Why? One is a story of hope and one is a story of despair.

Read Luke: 7:1-17

These two accounts are stories of contrast. The first is set in Capernaum, the second in Nain, a day's journey southwest. One is about a Roman centurion slave. Roman Centurions were in charge of 100 men and were the backbone of the Roman army. They were men of character, authority, reliability and seasoned combat veterans. We see here a kind man, given his attitude towards his slave. Slaves had no rights and were considered disposable. He was also a religious man. It is hard to know whether he just supported the Judaism out of good politics or something deeper. But he had a good attitude, a humility towards the Jews which was unusual. He understood the cultural implications of inviting a Jew to his home and so sent a delegation of Jewish leaders. He clearly had won their respect by this attitude towards them, despite the fact that the Jews generally despised the Romans.

The other story is about a widow's only son. What we find hard to grasp is that if you were an older woman

with no children and no husband you were facing a very bleak future. There was a high chance you might be assaulted, or die of hunger or exposure. You were of no use to the community unless you could produce more children or do labouring work. The Jews did have a welfare system of sorts, but it was barely enough to keep a person alive. So the picture here is not just one of grief at losing a son, it was the utter despair of a very bleak future.

In the first story Jesus responded to a request, in the second Jesus acted on his own accord. In the first Jesus never saw the sick slave, in the second Jesus touched the young man. In the first Jesus healed without a word, in the second Jesus spoke healing

But the biggest contrast is the Centurion had confidence in Jesus while the woman was in total despair. She had no hope. I wonder where you are on a continuum this morning. Despair, a sense of hopelessness or hope and total Confidence

How do we move from one to the other? How do we not end up with that awful sense of hopelessness as the widow of Nain felt as she considered her future?

The centurion's faith in Jesus is remarkable. Where he gained, this insight is not clear. However, he understood that Jesus had authority over sickness. In addition, it did not matter where Jesus was physically. Location was not an issue. If Jesus spoke the word, his servant would be healed. His confidence came from his understanding of who Jesus was.

The woman had no hope because all she could see was her circumstances. And her circumstances were bigger than her God.

We find hope when we remember 3 truths. In tough circumstances when our feelings threatened to overwhelm us, what we focus on mind on is critical.

Hope comes as we remember that the things that makes us feel helpless do not limit God.

The obstacle we face is not an obstacle to God. The battle we face is not a battle for God. God is not panicked by what we face. God is not helpless in our circumstances. God is not short of resources when we feel there are not options. God is greater than the greatest obstacle that you face.



He is the God who put the stars into space. The universe that is bigger than anything you can possibly imagine. 46 billion light years is size of the observable universe while the actual universe might be 250 times greater than this.

He is the God who created atoms. There are 2 million atoms in 1 millimetre. Within atoms, there are sub atomic particles which are 1/100,000 smaller than an atom.

"There are more stars in the universe than grains of sand on the earth." and "There are more atoms in a grain of sand than stars in the universe."

Hope comes as we remember that God is at work on our behalf. The problem is that we cannot see or feel or touch God. We do not feel like we have any evidence that God is at work. In fact, all the circumstances seem to be saying that God is not doing anything. When we see nothing happening, we start to fill in the gaps with our own story. We never fill the gaps with good thoughts but with negative ones. God does not care. God has left me. God has forgotten. This is exactly what Satan wants us to believe. We look at the circumstances, and we say "Well this just confirms it. God has left me to suffer this alone."

Therefore, we have to actively choose to focus on this truth. Passively doing nothing will never lead to confidence. We have to choose to say "I choose to believe that God is at work. I chose to believe that God has not left me. I choose to believe that God cares for me." If we want evidence we just need to remember the cross – Christ died for us.

Hope comes as we remember God is on our side.

Some of you might be thinking this is bad theology. I do not mean that God will get us out of the situation we are in or that God will answer everything request we make with what we want. What I mean is that God wants the very best for us. God loves us intensely, passionately. Read Romans 8:25-27

The Holy Spirit hears our prayers and intercedes for us according to God's will. We might want certain outcomes, which do not line up with God's plans or our best interests. However, the Spirit takes our prayers, and conforms them to the will of the Father. He edits them as it were so they are the best prayers as they go to the Father. The Holy Spirit is praying on our behalf.

The centurion confidence was in his understanding of

who Jesus was. Here was a man who had authority. The woman's despair was because her problems were bigger than her God was.

I was reading a psychology article on hope for this message. It was not a Christian article but it said that a person needed three things for Hope.

- Faith in something bigger and more important than yourself.
- Gratitude for what you have, not what you don't have
- Love i.e. relationships with family and friends that you connect with regularly.

Basically secular psychologists are saying that without God there is no hope. Our hope and confidence comes not from within ourselves. It comes from without. Anyone can practice gratitude and have loving relationships. But actually true hope comes from a source outside of ourselves. The centurion recognized that. He instinctively recognized authority when he saw it. That gave him confidence.

I do not know what you are facing this morning. I do know we are living in uncertain times. Nothing quite seems the same now. The world has changed in ways we could not imagine at Christmas time. It is easy to find ourselves moving towards despair.

Our confidence is not in ourselves. It is not in our circumstances. It is in a God who created this world, who passionately loves us and who is working out his plans for a great future. Read 2 Tim 2:11-13

Download or listen to this message at:

www.icbc.org.nz

REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

- *Reflect on a time of despair in your life. What led you to that place? How did you get out of it?*
- *Are you naturally more optimistic or pessimistic? What are the advantages / disadvantages of each?*
- *What helps you gain a sense of perspective on the greatness of God?*
- *What lies from the enemy are you vulnerable to in tough times. What Scriptures counter them?*
- *What helps you experience the depth of God's love for you?*
- *What hope sustains you as you consider the future?*
- *How can you encourage someone who is in despair?*



CENTRAL BAPTIST

LOVE GOD : LOVE OTHERS



CENTRAL BAPTIST

LOVE GOD : LOVE OTHERS