

The Audacity To Hope

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"For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what one sees?"
—Romans 8:24

The subject of hope is much in the news these days, due in great part to American presidential candidate Barack Obama, who has been called the "candidate of hope." A sermon titled "The Audacity to Hope," given by his then-pastor, Dr. Jeremiah Wright, almost 20 years ago, supposedly greatly inspired Mr. Obama. I use the term "supposedly" because, in his comments recently, he says he did not hear much of what his minister said over the many years that he sat in his church.

Nevertheless, he must have heard at least this one sermon because he has appropriated a form of the title—*The Audacity of Hope*—for his own book and speeches. The transcript of this sermon is readily available, and it is very well done. Dr. Wright begins with a description of a George Watts painting entitled "Hope." It shows a bandaged woman with a broken harp, sitting on top of the world. Dr. Wright verbally paints a vivid picture of all that the artist was trying to convey. He then moves on to the story of Hannah from I Samuel 1.

Throughout the sermon he weaves the theme of hope. This wounded woman, he says, despite her obviously sad state, has the audacity to pluck the one remaining string on her harp in praise to God. Hannah, as well, had the audacity to hope and pray when, says Wright, "there was no visible sign . . . that what she was praying for, hoping for, and waiting for would ever be answered in the affirmative."

Some readers may have seen the YouTube clips of Dr. Wright preaching. He is lively to say the least, not to mention profane and angry. His style is so energetic that one might miss the meaning of his words.

Not long ago, my son Cody and I went to the funeral of the mother-in-law of a friend. We sat near the back, in our black suits and white shirts, while everyone else was in their best T-shirts and windbreakers. The Pentecostal minister doing the service had not known this lady, but he did not let that stop him from preaching her up to heaven anyway. The funeral service was nothing more than his previous Sunday's altar call with a few modifications.

However, the man was animated, emotional, and demonstrative while speaking without notes or opening his Bible. He bounced all over the stage, and at one point, his waving arms knocked an empty plastic water pitcher down onto the top of the closed coffin! He was not on a par with Dr. Wright, but in his own simple, country way, he got the job done.

Cody had never experienced preaching like this, and he said later that he could see how people would buy into this kind of religious hype. An observer does not pay enough attention to the words because he is so busy watching the show. Highly charged and emotional sermonizing can sway people, but are they listening to the words or are they watching the show?

The Uncertainty of Hope?

Senator Obama is a highly effective public speaker. The speech he gave in Philadelphia, addressing the flare-up over his pastor, was good, even very good. He first came to national attention when giving the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. That speech, too, was very well done. The words push all the right buttons, and they were delivered so well! At one point he said, "We worship an awesome God." Speaking of hope, his rhetoric soars:

Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope! In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation. A belief in things not seen. A belief that there are better days ahead.

The words sound good, do they not? These words, if they stood alone, are true. Yet, just as a minister might spring around on a stage and lift a verse out of context to "prove" his point, we must look at the context here also. Remember, Senator Obama was introducing John Kerry as the Democrat candidate for President at the 2004 Democratic National Convention when he said these things.

After invoking God, and quoting a piece of Hebrews 11:1, he continues:

I believe we can give middle class relief and provide working families with a road to opportunity. I believe we can provide jobs to the jobless, homes to the homeless, and reclaim young people in cities across America from violence and despair. I believe that we have a righteous wind at our backs, and that as we stand on the crossroads of history, we can make the right choices and meet the challenges that face us.

All this will happen, he then goes on to say, if the people elect John Kerry and John Edwards.

Notice how "we the people," led by his nominees, can do all this? What happened to our "awesome God"? It appears that what hope means to God's called-out ones and what it means to the rest of the world are two different things. If one of God's elect is out of work, it is not to government that he will look for help in finding a job. The same is true if he is homeless or his children are drug addicts and running with gangs. The government is the last place he would look for help! The hope of a member of the Body of Christ is in God and His promises.

This is not true for most, however. The people of this world view hope as some future thing that they are uncertain of attaining. They want more money, a luxury car, a beautiful home, or whatever else they greatly desire, but they may or may not get it. *Webster's Dictionary* says that "hope implies little certainty but suggests confidence or assurance in the *possibility* that what one desires or longs for will happen" (emphasis ours). Is that how *we* define hope?

Expecting Good

Dr. Jeremiah Wright ended his sermon on "The Audacity to Hope" with these words: "And that's why I say to you, hope is what saves us. Keep on hoping; keep on praying. God does hear and answer prayer." Is there anything to disagree with there? No, not at all. If this were all we ever read or heard from this man, we would have no dispute with him. Unfortunately, much of his other rhetoric is vile and hateful.

He again quotes from the apostle Paul without reference, "Hope is what saves us." We could take a bit of exception to this statement, as it leaves much unsaid, but it is a true statement nonetheless. Paul writes this in Romans 8:24: "For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?"

The archaic meaning of *hope* in the English language is "to have confidence or trust," while the current meaning is "to *wish* for something with expectation of its fulfillment." Over time, words can experience "semantic drift," meaning simply that their definition morphs. It is the word "wish" in the modern definition that dilutes what hope should mean to us. When politicians speak of hope, they are merely creating "wish lists." Government will make our lives better by giving us stuff. No personal responsibility is required on our parts; we need simply to hold out our hands, and we *hope* it will be filled.

The New Testament uses only one Greek word, *elpis*, for "hope." Its verb form is *elpizo*. It means "expectation of good"—not a wish that something good will fall into our laps but a full expectation of good to come, especially in a religious sense.

These words are found over eighty times in the New Testament, though they are not always translated as "hope." Sometimes, especially in older translations, they are translated "faith" or "trust." Whereas the current meaning of "hope" lends itself to wishing, its original sense was to trust and have faith. *Elpis*, according to one lexicon, is synonymous with faith. The King James Version translates *elpizo* as "to trust" eighteen times.

In the King James Version, Hebrews 10:23 reads, "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith [*elpis*] without wavering; (for He is faithful that promised)." Most modern versions have translated it literally as "hope." The great American scholar Noah Webster is said to have known at least fifteen languages (and some claim as many as twenty-six), including Hebrew and Greek. He published his translation of the Bible in 1833. In many places, he changed the wording of the King James, but he left the word "faith" in verse 23.

Paul tells us to hold *elpis* fast, without wavering. Can we do that with a wish? No, not really. But if our hope is in God's promises, if our faith is in God and His unbreakable Word, then, yes, holding fast is possible.

Commentators Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown remark on this verse, "Hope . . . is indeed faith exercised as to the future inheritance. Hope rests on faith; at the same time quickens faith, and is the ground of bold confession." One might say it is a matter of convictions versus preferences: The hope of the apostle Paul was born of conviction, while the hope of political rhetoric is a preference.

Faith and Hope

The problem with the catchphrase "the audacity to hope" is that it removes faith from the picture. Jeremiah Wright says that Hannah had "the audacity to keep on hoping and praying when there was no visible sign . . . that what she was praying for, hoping for, and waiting for would ever be answered in the affirmative." In other words, she had the boldness, the daring, the courage, the nerve—even the *gall*—to pray and keep on praying. The implication is that God had given her no indication that He was listening, but she had the bravery to pray nonetheless.

This is taking hope in the wrong direction—toward wishing. Hope is not based on the audacity to make the request, but on faith that God is true (John 3:33) and that His Word cannot be broken (John 10:35).

Many will have seen an old movie where an orphan comes to live with a kindly aunt, and the aunt says to the child, "I trust you will be happy here." She means, "I expect you will," "I believe you will," "I have every confidence you will," and "I *hope* you will be happy here." To hope is to trust. To trust in someone is to have faith in that person.

Extending this principle, we could say that to have faith in someone is to love that person. To have faith, trust, and hope in another, we have to know him. We must have a relationship with him, believe in him, and what he represents. This is especially true with God.

Can anyone outside the Body of Christ truly have hope? Paul gives us the "big three" virtues in I Corinthians 13:13: faith, hope, and love. Clearly, they are all connected.

Notice Romans 8:24-25 again: "For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, then we eagerly wait for it with perseverance." The King James reads, "We *are* saved by hope," meaning that our hope is so strong that it supports us. Adam Clarke says of this verse, "We are supported and are comfortable in the expectation we have of receiving from the hand of our God all the good we need in the troubles and adversities of this life, and of having our bodies raised from corruption."

"The audacity to hope" implies that we really have no reason to hope. No sign has been given from above that anyone is listening, yet we boldly hope nonetheless. This may be true for those in the world—and it is undoubtedly true for those waiting for the government to improve their lives. But this is not true for us. We are saved by our hope, a hope so strong that it carries us and supports us through trials.

We do not come out of this world and its politics because of a wish or a dream, but rather, we come out of sin as a response to the hope, the trust, and the faith that God has given us.