

Becoming Hopeful in a Hopeless World

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Q: How do I live with hope? This world seems so lost at times. Even more personally, my life seems so painful and senseless at times. It all just seems so pointless.

A: Thank you so much for writing and asking this question. The very fact that you have asked this question is a sign that you have a certain degree of hope, because you have taken action in asking for an answer. And hope is almost always going to be connected to action.

Years ago, I read Laura Hillenbrand's phenomenal book *Unbroken*. It is the story of the life of a man named Louis Zamperini. After WWII broke out, Louis soon joined the Air Force and found himself flying in a B-52 bomber in the South Pacific.

On one of these runs, the bomber crashed into the ocean and only three men survived: Louis, and two of his crewmates. They spent the next 47 days drifting under the blazing hot sun of the South Pacific Ocean, constantly hungry, perpetually thirsty, and often threatened

and attacked by sharks.

Desperate, nearly mad, and hopeless, one of the men Francis McNamara ultimately succumbed to hopelessness and died aboard the raft. Louis and the other survivor, Russell Allen Phillips lived to finally make it to land. At one point in her unfolding of the story, Laura Hillebrand noted, “Given the dismal record of raft-bound men, Mac’s despair was reasonable. What is remarkable is that the two men who shared Mac’s plight didn’t share his hopelessness. Though all three faced the same hardship, their differing perceptions of it appeared to be shaping their fates.”

Hope is powerful. But hope is not merely optimism or wishful thinking. Often, people I work with who share their desire to live in hope seem to reveal that what they long for is optimism. While optimism can be a nice thing for most people on most days, it is virtually useless when needed the most.

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People with hope differ from merely optimistic people in at least one critical way. Those with hope all share the core conviction: Life has meaning. This conviction leads them to action.

We live in a hopeless age. Don’t get me wrong, there is an awful lot of optimism, but very little hope. The source of this hopelessness is a profound lack of meaning in most people’s lives. Consider this, most people live their lives looking forward to “the next thing”. We say things like, “It might be rough now, but once I get that promotion, then I’ll be fine.” Or, “I know that I’m lonely now, but once I find someone then I’ll be fine.” Or, “I know that my spouse and I are discontented now, but once we have kids then we will be fine.” Or a thousand other things that we look forward to that will help us to “be fine”. There is nothing wrong with looking forward to things, but sooner or later we discover that it just doesn’t deliver. We go on to the next thing and are no better off. We miss the meaning of the moments of our lives because we have forgotten that all of life is meaningful.

This is why being a Christian, a real follower of Jesus Christ, is a game-changer. All of us experience the pain that the world throws at us. All of us experience discouragement and even utter destruction (we are all going to die some day). All of us will be confronted with situations like Louis Zamperini’s...where we cannot escape and where wishing isn’t enough. As Christians, we know that God has made this world good. We know that evil and suffering and death are not a part of his plan for our lives, but that he is with us in the midst of even the worst and most destructive storms. We know that he can work out for the good everything that comes against his children. We have this hope, this confidence, that our lives have meaning.

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And if our lives have meaning, then all of our choices have meaning. Many people are paralyzed by their situations or paralyzed by their fears. Too many of us look at the challenges of the moment and choose to “wish” rather than choose to hope. But wishing is hopelessness in disguise. It leads nowhere. Hope leads us to action. Hillenbrand describes the difference between the men in the raft. She writes, “Louie’s and Phil’s hope displaced their fear and inspired them to work toward their survival, and each success renewed their physical and emotional vigor. Mac’s resignation seemed to paralyze him, and the less he participated in their efforts to survive, the more he slipped.”

How does a person grow in hope? By reconnecting with the Story. By being reminded that we believe that there is more to this life than just this life. By being committed to the truth that God is in all things and all moments and that our decisions matter. And then...then to simply begin making choices. Decide. Act on those decisions. You cannot do everything, but you can do something. Do what you can, and you will find that hope has become a powerful force in your life.