

THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING

Part 2 | HOPE

Matthew 1:18-25

December 10, 2017, by Pastor Steven Edelman

What are you holding on to? I have spent many summers working at different camps. This one particular Young Life camp called Rock Ridge had an activity called the Tower of Terror. The Tower of Terror is a 30-foot telephone pole with a two-foot platform at the top. The idea is to climb all the way to the top with a friend, jump off, and try to grab and hold on to bar that was 10 feet out. I did this. I put on the harness, attached a rope, and climbed up. Once I was at the top I stood on this two-foot platform and waited for the second person to join me at the top. As I was standing thirty feet in the air I started to feel weak in the knees. Every little movement in the telephone pole caused me to question the assurance of my harness. "Is this safe? How many bodies were really buried in forest? Is that a fray in the rope? Is the harness tight enough or too tight?" Any little bit of wind that came my way weakened my ability to place my hope in the rope even though I knew it was secure. Any sign of weakness displayed in my demeanor would result in heckling from the high school boys who were watching below. He is shaking... He is weak...

As the second person climbed to the top of the pole, I experienced moments of terror as I was terrified of falling. Once that person joined me at the top we had to figure out how to both stand side by side. The idea was to both jump at the same time and try to hold on to a bar that was ten feet out. If you missed you would free fall - until the assurance of the harness stopped the fall. I remember the first time jumping and our hands reached that bar and the unpredictable force, weight, and timing of the other person would create this disorder which made it very difficult to hold on to. Sometimes we could hold on. And other times we would find ourselves falling with the hope or assurance that the rope and harness would not fail.

What are you trying to hold on to? Are you holding on to certain hopes for Christmas 2017? Maybe you have hopes for this church service. Maybe you are hoping the preacher doesn't preach too long. Maybe you are hoping I won't put you to sleep! Someone did approach me two weeks and said, "Thank you for not putting me to sleep!" Do you have hopes for your occupation, your career, your future, your family, or your friendships? What are you holding on to when it all falls apart? Our human abilities can only give us so much hope, and eventually something or someone will disappoint you. What are you holding on to?

We just started new series on, "This Changes Everything" and today we are going to be looking at part #2 - hope. What is hope? The world defines hope as being optimistic or the ability to expect positive outcomes. **The Word of God defines hope as having assurance in the promises of God.**

As we are going to see, we must find strength in the promises of God to maintain hope in our lives.

Because the promises of God give us strength, we must be confident of His:

1. HOPE IN OUR STRUGGLE.

a. Mary's struggle. (v18)

Look with me at verse v18 which says, *"18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been **betrothed** to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."*

Most people think that betrothed simply means to be engaged to be married. Betrothed is so much more than that. Scholars say, "A betroth woman is a woman who has already entered into a

covenant agreement of marriage. It would be equivalent to having all the paper work done at the wedding ceremony. The husband would have already given some money to the father of the bride in exchange for his bride. It was traditional for a betrothed woman to remain living in her father's house for period of time until the marriage was consummated. This was considered a proper thing to do. In other words, Mary and Joseph were in covenant or promise agreement that BINDS them together. Only divorce or a failed requirement of the covenant agreement can separate them. If the woman lays with another man during her betrothal she will have committed adultery."

An engaged woman (in the modern sense of the word) is a woman who verbally agrees to marry a man and posts it on Facebook. However, they have not entered into any covenant agreement. Either party can change their mind without any penalty, because they are not legally bound to each other.

In verse 18, notice that Mary had been betrothed to Joseph which really adds to the color of the Christmas story.

How do you think Mary felt when she found out she was pregnant? Knowing that the baby wasn't Joseph's and people were going to talk! People would jump to conclusions, which would mean either Joseph and Mary had sex before marriage or she was unfaithful to him. In this shame-and-honor culture, the implications of others finding out is devastating to Mary. She would be shamed, socially excluded, rejected, divorced, abandoned, and could even be put to death for the appearance of adultery.

In many ways Mary is faced with a hopeless tragedy that doesn't make sense in the moment. Jesus Christ comes into her life and she has to give up her stellar reputation. Like Mary, our circumstances may not make sense or may even seem unfair at the time. **Notice, that the Christmas story starts with scandal and struggle, but it doesn't end there.**

Next, let's look at Joseph's struggle.

b. Joseph's struggle (v19)

Look with me at verse v19 which says, *"And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, **resolved to divorce her quietly.**"* Guys, what would you do if you were about to be married and you find out your fiancé is pregnant with another man's baby? It would be over. The majority of guys would end the relationship because there would be no trust left. The situation would have left Joseph broken hearted and weighting out his options. A scholar says, "he cannot follow through and marry her, because that would condone what he thinks is Mary's sin of adultery. Divorce for adultery was not optional but mandatory among many groups in ancient Judaism, because adultery produced a state of impurity that, as a matter of legal fact, dissolved the marriage. Yet, his concern for her long-term reputation compels him to avoid exposing Mary to public disgrace."

In verse 19, notice that Joseph doesn't understand or know the promise of God in the mess he is going through. **He is caught up in a limited human perspective.** He is completely ignorant to what God is doing and he starts to storm. Based on the story you created in your head, you will respond. **Notice that his disappointment leads to relational separation.** The story in Joseph's head is, "she sinned against me - so I am going to divorce her." The real story is, "God caused this to happen and he is going to use it for good." Frankly, that is exactly what you or I would do in the same situation. We think we know better because we have our dreams, our plans, on our schedule.

Don't minimize what Joseph is going through. Think about a husband whose wife is going through cancer, or through depression, or addiction. The husband is also suffering in different ways. It could be emotionally or physically. Those who have been through hard times understand what I am saying. It could mean that his dreams or the life that he wanted has been compromised. To properly care for someone who is ill takes its toll emotionally and physically on caretaker. It leaves a mark on everyone involved. The marks are just different. Do you respond with hope or do you respond with despair when difficulties arise? Or do you ask God what he wants to do despite your plans going all wrong. **When we**

don't properly work through our disappointment it leads to separation. It can lead to both separation with God and others. Are you disappointed with someone or maybe even God?

The struggles in our life challenge our ability to hold on to the assurances of God.

Bev Smallwood says, "Tragedy has a way of testing your faith. After you've come through the darkest days of this emotional winter, your faith will be altered. No question about that. **You will be either stronger or weaker spiritually.** Did God cause this? • If God is all-powerful, why didn't He stop it? • I was taught that God would watch over me and protect me. What happened? • I prayed and believed, but it didn't work. Why not? • How can I trust God after this? • I'm really angry with God. Is He angry with me? Think about it this way. Think about a relationship you have with someone you really care about, such as your spouse, child, or close friend. Now imagine that something happened that caused your loved one to question your motives or to believe that you had chosen to do something hurtful. Would you want that individual to stay away from you and refuse to talk about his or her concerns, holding them in and carrying them for years? Or would you want the opportunity to discuss it and to be around the person to reassure him or her of your love and commitment? I don't know about you, but I'd definitely want my loved one to talk with me about his or her perceptions, questions, and struggles."

When facing disappointment in life we can easily become hopeless. You could be facing problems in your family, your friendships, your jobs, with your self-image, your depression, your past, and your uncertain future. Maybe your health is not what you expected it to be and your dreams have been crushed. Maybe you have been promised something that didn't happen... and you're angry. How do you respond when you are faced with suffering? I know I struggle. I know I have lost hope at times. Disappointment occurs when the experience of something falls short of what we expected. **Life is full of disappointments that cause us to question the assurances of God. Even though the assurances of God have not changed - we still demand that we get what we want. If not, deep down we are disappointed because we don't like what is going on in our life. Therefore, we begin to question the character of God and whether he is trustworthy or not. Or whether we should really give our life to him. Notice that the only thing that has changed is our circumstances.**

Philip Yancey says, "Some people lose their faith because of a sharp sense of disappointment with God. They expect God to act a certain way, and God - "lets them down." Others may not lose their faith, but they too experience a form of disappointment. They believe God will intervene. They pray for a miracle, and their prayers come back unanswered."

Like Mary and Joseph, we too struggle to be confident of His hope when we are struggling. Secondly, because the promises of God give us strength, we must be confident of His hope as we face doubts.

Because the promises of God give us strength, we must be confident of His:

2. HOPE IN OUR DOUBT.

When we are struggling we often move from disappointment to doubt. We can easily get into a place in which we question God when life doesn't go as planned. We tend to let go of hope and brood. Why me? God do you really care about me?

a. Confronting our doubts through His revelation. (v20)

Look with me at verse v20 which says, "*But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."*

Notice that God shows up and confronts Joseph's doubts in a dream. He reveals that he is being used by God to do something that he can't completely comprehend. God starts to make clear what is not clear to Joseph. Hope fills the mind of Joseph which diminishes his doubts. Notice that Joseph believed the promise God gave him which reversed the separation between Him and Mary. It swashed the disappointment and doubt that he was feeling. In our doubt we start to think things like: Why are you not coming? Why are you not helping me? God may take his time, but he keeps his promise.

Tim Keller says, "But it was centuries, millennia, before the angel came to Mary and told her about the child she was to bear, and she sang, "The promise was a long time in coming! In fact, in the four hundred years before Christ was born no prophets were sent to the people, let alone a messiah. **It looked like God had forgotten them. No one was coming, it seemed. But then he came.** . . . God seems to forget his promises, but he comes through in ways we can't imagine before it happens. Think of the coming of the promised Messiah. This divine King was born not in a castle but in a feed trough, a manger. He confounded all expectations, but it was only by coming in weakness and dying on the cross that he could save us. God kept his promise."

How do we confront our doubts through what God has told us? Recognize that we like to control the road map of our life and know everything well in advance. Jesus somehow drops right into the course of our life and redirects us. He reveals the need to confront our doubts over and over again.

Isaiah 55:8-9 says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares Yahweh. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts."

In your doubting how do you respond? Are you able to take comfort in God's promises when you are disappointed?

WE EITHER CHOOSE DOUBT OR ASSURED PROMISES.

Bev Smallwood says, "Distrust and Doubt Wear You Out Maybe you think it would be easier to just stay where you are . . . questioning, eternally questioning. Stay away from a God you don't understand. But there is a big price tag to that. Let's look at a few of the consequences of distrust.

1. At a time when you need it most, you have nothing solid to hold on to. When everything is dimly lit, shifting, and uncertain, the last thing you need is to feel disconnected from God and other sources of your spiritual strength. The relationship with an unchanging, ever-present God can be the anchor that prevents your shipwreck when you are going through the raging storms of life.

2. You feel a need to depend totally on yourself at a time when you are not yourself. When you don't trust God, and you don't feel that others understand, you have no one left to depend on but yourself.

3. The distrust can grow into hardened cynicism. It's a short trip between spiritual distrust and a cynical, what's-the-use-anyway attitude. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines cynical as "contemptuously distrustful of human nature or motives. . . . When your legitimate questions begin to morph into a belief that God is up there just waiting to squash you if you make a wrong move or for no reason at all, that erroneous belief can pour concrete into your soul."

What are some of the promises that God has given us to cling to as you are falling? Scripture is jam-packed with the rich promises of God.

GOD'S PROMISES FOR US:

- If we seek Him, we will find Him. (Matthew 7:7)
- His love will never fail, he will never give up on us. (Romans 8:7)
- He brings comfort in times of sadness. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4)
- God promised to finish the work He started in us. (Philippians 1:6)
- All things will work out for good for His children. (Romans 8:28)
- He promises rest when we bring him our burdens. (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jessica Howell says, “Sometimes good things fall apart, so better things can fall together.”

In order to confront our doubt, we need to remind ourselves that God keeps his promises. We need to be confident in them in order to move through disappointment and defeat doubt.

However, he has some divine requirements to help us cling to hope.

b. Confronting our doubts through His requirements. (20-21)

Look with me at verse v21 which says, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to **take Mary as your wife**, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and **you shall call his name Jesus...**”

Joseph is given a set of instructions to move forward through his doubt and uncertainty. First, “do not fear - take Mary as your wife.” Secondly, the angel also tells Joseph to name his boy. Culturally, it was the father’s absolute right to name his child. He had full rights over his children, and naming was a sign of his control over the family. **The angel, however, takes Joseph’s rights away for a greater purpose.** By refusing to let him name Jesus, the angel is saying, “If Jesus is in your life, you need to give up your agenda. This child who is about to be born is your agenda.”

The divine requirement is to give up our rights in order to be confident of His hope. We no longer can cling to our agenda, but need to seek out his agenda.

Many people are interested in being a Christian but they still want control of their life. They don’t want to give up their rights. Do you see the problem here? When we do whatever we want we are trying to name Jesus! We can’t have Jesus on our terms. The angel says, if Jesus comes in your life, you don’t tell him what to, he controls you. Jesus is not some kind of advisor. He is king of your life. If you want Jesus, you have to give up the right to self-governance. Denying yourself is counter cultural and that is exactly what Jesus is called you to do. To follow Jesus, you are going to need the bravery to do something our culture thinks is absolutely absurd. You are going to have to deny what you want.

What circumstances will it take for you to fully give up control of your life? What needs to be taken away? God often allows us to go through a crisis to refine us. A crisis is really just a fork in the road that forces us to make a decision. A decision of whether you are going to trust Jesus with your life or not. When we continue to doubt we are saying we trust our plan for our lives more than what He wants to do.

As you have seen, the promises of God give us the confidence to move through both disappointment and doubt. Because the promises of God give us strength, we must be confident of His:

3. Hope in our response.

a. Realizing the promise child. (v21b-23)

Look with me at verse 21b-23, “*She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel*” (which means, *God with us*).”

God is telling us by the very name given JESUS IS WITH US no matter what is happening. There are three concepts in “Immanuel” we need to know: he is God, he is human, and he is with us. From this first announced promise to the rest of the Gospels we can see that it means being in relationship with him, conversing with him, learning from him, having his comfort moment by moment. The purpose of God coming to earth is that we would know him and be confident in what he wants to do in us and through us. Do you realize what’s going on? Where’s your hope? Where’s your joy? Where’s your amazement? This should be the driving force of your life!

Tim Keller says, “There is nothing like a baby. Even young children have their own agenda and can run from you. But the little babies can be picked up, hugged, kissed, and they’re open to it, they cling to you. Why would God come this time in the form of a baby, rather than a firestorm or whirlwind? Because this time he has come not to bring judgment but to bear it, to pay the penalty for our sins, to take away the barrier between humanity and God, so we can be together. Jesus is God with us.”

What does it look like to have a genuine relationship with Jesus? It requires, as does any close relationship, that you communicate with him regularly, candidly, lovingly. This doesn’t just mean “saying your prayers” but having a prayer life that leads to real closeness with God, a sense of his presence in all areas of your life. This is what we need no matter what the circumstances are.

All of scripture is telling us that this rest will come to us only through Jesus Christ. We need rest from the troubles, disappointments, and evils of this world. Humanity has a way of wanting to control history, trying to right the wrongs of the past. That is not only tiresome, but also impossible. Christmas tells us that despite our efforts God is in control of history. And someday he will make everything right. We need to rest in his powerful strength no matter what happens. **Our hope in Christ keeps us right side up, even when our world turns upside down.**

b. Responding to the promise child. (24-25)

Look with me at verse 24 to 25, “*When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*”

Notice that Joseph does what God tells him to do because he realizes God’s beautiful promise. The circumstances of Mary being pregnant didn’t change and he will still face difficulty. But what changes? Joseph changes. Jesus came for a specific purpose of rescuing all of us from the mess we find ourselves in. Do you see the good news in your confusion? In your lost state? It is good news for all of us because of what he has done for us.

Christmas means that we are lost in trouble and we can’t save ourselves. Christmas means there is nothing less than the death of the Son of God himself that could save us. That means you and I cannot pull ourselves together on our own strength and work through disappointment and doubt. But through Christ, we can live a life full hope. Christmas shows us that Christianity is good news given through a promise. In verse 21 it says, “for he will save his people from their sins.” The Greek word for “saved” means “God to the rescue.” Hope is given. Will you respond?

Bev Smallwood says, “**Realize That sometimes God delivers you from trouble, but sometimes He delivers you... in it.** The storm is raging. No more boarding up windows or shopping for storm supplies. The furious winds are howling. Loud “cracks” probably signal the snapping like toothpicks of the tall pines that surround our house. Wham! An unknown missile slams into the boarded glass windows. Thank God they’re boarded! What can I do? Absolutely nothing. The only thing I can do now is to be quiet, listen to the wind, and breathe. It’s time to be still, listen, breathe deeply—and to know that He is God. I’ve been praying— but now it’s simply time to rest, fully conscious of the One who is neither surprised nor frightened by the storm. Be still, listen, breathe . . . be still, listen, breathe . . . This place in the arms of God is like the eye of the storm, strangely calm while surrounded by miles of hurricane-force winds and swirling debris. Literally, peace in the midst of the storm.

Strength? He has that for you too. When you’re exhausted and feel that every bit of your own strength has been squeezed out of you, have faith that your resources are a long way from depleted. The divine supply is ready to flow into you when you ask.”

Mary and Joseph must have been filled with **hope** as they looked down at their baby boy in a manger. Knowing that this child, wrapped tightly in clothes, lying in a dirty manger, surrounded by animals in a barn that would fulfill God’s promise. Knowing that He was the one in whom God’s people would find forgiveness of sins and a relationship with God.

His promise is greater than anyone imagined. It came true in the midst of struggle and doubt. Jesus Christ is “God with us”. IT IS A GREAT HOPE. The claim that Jesus is God also gives us the greatest possible hope. **This means that our world is not all there is, that there is life and love after death, and that evil and suffering will one day end. And it means not just hope for the world, despite all its unending problems, but hope for you and me, despite all our unending failings.** A holy God would not have come down to us in Jesus Christ for no reason. He would have simply demanded that we pull ourselves together, that we be moral and holy enough to merit a relationship with him. God would have just overlooked sin and evil and embraced us if that was enough. However, He did come and eventually gave His life for you and me, because that was required. Christmas means, then, that for you and me there is all the hope in the world.

WORSHIP + PRAYER TEAM

As you look over your life. **What are you trying to hold on to?** What keeps you from fully jumping into a full relationship with Jesus? Are you feeling weak? Have you been disappointed? Have you been wrestling with doubts? Have you been hurt by others? Have you faced death? So has He! Are standing there wanting to fully trust Him, but there is something that is holding you back. Jump into His strong arms. He wants you to be assured of the promises He has given you. Trust the harness and fully give Him your life. **What are you holding on to?** Fall to Jesus.

Let’s end the service with an amazing carol that talks about the night hope came down. The assured promise that was given by announced by an angel. A hope that when realized, caused people to fall to their knees in worship. Let’s end with the song “O Holy Night.”

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

END PRAYER

“Dear God,

Please take away my pain and despair of yesterday and any unpleasant memories and replace them with Your glorious promise of new hope. Show me a fresh Holy Spirit inspired way of relating to negative things that have happened. I ask You for the mind of Christ so I can discern Your voice from the voice of my past. I pray that former rejection and deep hurts will not color what I see and hear now.

Help me to see all the choices I have ahead of me that can alter the direction of my life. I ask You to empower me to let go of the painful events and heartaches that would keep me bound. Thank You for Your forgiveness that You have offered to me at such a great price. Pour it into my heart so I can relinquish bitterness hurts and disappointments that have no place in my life. Please set me free to forgive those who have sinned against me and caused me pain and also myself. Open my heart to receive Your complete forgiveness and amazing grace. You have promised to bind up my wounds Psa 147:3 and restore my soul Psa 23:3.” Bev Smallwood