

## Finding Hope in an Age of Despair

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Rich Nathan  
June 17 & 18, 2017  
Silent Killers  
1 Peter 1:3-6

A couple of months ago, Governor Kasich convened a meeting here at Vineyard Columbus with about 60 or 70 religious leaders. We discussed the opiate crisis in our state. No state in America has seen more deaths from opiate overdoses, we're talking whether from prescription pills, heroin, fentanyl or carfentanyl, than Ohio.

Alan Johnson, a long-time Vineyard Columbus member, who is a reporter for the Columbus *Dispatch*, along with another *Dispatch* reporter contacted the coroners' offices in all 88 counties of Ohio. They found that at least 4,149 Ohioans died of unintentional drug overdoses in 2016.

That's a 36% increase over 2015. This year the number is going to be much higher. You know, we read of someone being murdered almost every day in the newspaper. But did you know that Ohioans are eight times more likely to die of a drug overdose than they are of being murdered?

To give you some sense of how enormous the opiate epidemic is in the United States:

- In 2016, it's estimated that at least 59,000 people died of drug overdoses in the United States
- More people died last year of drug overdoses than Americans died during the entire 20 years of the Vietnam War.

About 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam from the first death back in 1956 to the last death in 1975. Think about the staggering number of deaths. The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC, contains 57,939 names.

If we were to do a memorial to the opiate deaths just from last year, we'd need to have 1,000 more names on the memorial.

- More people died of drug overdoses last year than died from:
  - Auto accidents (59,000 vs. 38,000)
  - Gun shots (59,000 vs. 34,000 including all suicides, homicides and accidental shootings)
  - The peak year of AIDS deaths (59,000 vs. 49,000 AIDS deaths in 1995)
- Drug overdoses are now the leading cause of death of Americans under the age of 50

In other words, more Americans under the age of 50 are dying of drug overdoses than are dying of any disease or accident. In case you're wondering about what our church is going to do about this epidemic, Vineyard Columbus is working with the Governor's office and is putting together an education and drug prevention plan for kids and teens that we will roll out to parents, teens and kids this next year. We'll also be starting recovery groups for those who are struggling with opiate addiction. This is, brothers and sisters, an all-hands-on-deck moment for government, for schools, for communities of faith. In our community, Vineyard Columbus wants to help lead the way forward towards a recovery of hope.

Sociologists studying the drug epidemic have termed drug overdoses along with suicides and alcohol-related disease Deaths of Despair.

Since 1998, deaths of despair – drug overdoses, suicide, and alcohol-related deaths – have more than doubled for middle-aged, white working class men. The rate of deaths of despair for middle-aged white working class women, although it's lower than men, has more than quadrupled since 1998. For the first time in American history, the rate of death for middle-aged working class whites is now higher than the death rate for middle-aged working class African-Americans. Deaths of despair.

What do we mean by despair? Despair is a feeling that life will get worse for you, not better. The despair of many in this country is that their economic future, their political future, their personal future, will be worse than their parents. Despair has become the characteristic mood in many rural communities and in smaller cities all across America.

Despair is not just affecting middle-aged adults. Our kids are not doing well. More than 36% of teenage girls in America are depressed or have suffered a recent major depressive episode according to a recent study in a psychiatric journal. Nationwide, student health centers are inundated with mental health concerns at universities.

The *Wall Street Journal* just reported that Ohio State has seen a 43% jump in the last five years in students seeking mental health counseling. It's great that students are seeking help more often than they did in the past. But it's deeply troubling that so many students feel the need for mental health counseling.

This mood of despair that things are just going to get worse and worse, not better and better, permeates all of our entertainment. For every upbeat, positive movie or TV show, there are dozens of dystopian stories. *The Hunger Games*, the *Divergent* series, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Giver*. Almost every popular show is about an anti-hero. *House of Cards*, *Breaking Bad*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Game of Thrones*. Our entertainment is reflecting the national mood of despair regarding our own future and our country's future.

Doctors regularly warn us about silent killers – diseases that have few warning signs – that can kill us. Things like high blood pressure, diabetes, coronary artery disease, colon cancer, cervical cancer. Today, I’m going to begin a sermon series titled “Silent Killers”. I’ll be focusing, not on things that will kill our bodies, but silent killers of our emotions, silent killers of our souls. In this first talk I want to talk about God’s answer for despair and hopelessness in a message I’ve titled, “Finding Hope in an Age of Despair”.

Let’s pray.

1 Peter 1:3-6

<sup>3</sup> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

Now, the book of 1 Peter was written to help Christians in the very early church to endure and to persevere in their faith in the face of the extremely negative reaction of neighbors and family to their new Christian faith. Christians were held in terrible disrepute in the early church. They were called anti-social; they were viewed as atheists because they didn’t worship all the gods; they only worshipped one God. They were viewed by their neighbors and by their families as disloyal because in every time and in every age good people are defined by the rest of society by the degree with which they agree with the rest of society’s values, the degree by which they conform and their children conform according to the society’s norms.

The Roman Empire back then did what all societies do and so the larger Roman Empire used all the means of social control available to it to bring the Christians back in line. Those means included verbal abuse, labeling, shaming Christians, insulting Christians, maligning Christians, marginalizing Christians – economic pressure, firings, boycotts of businesses. And where legal, as in the case of slaves and wives, physical abuse.

The situation in Rome was not unlike today. Christian faith is viewed negatively by many of our country’s elites. In the best universities, in most media, in most literature, in professional societies, especially in the social sciences – psychology, sociology, anthropology – and applied social sciences like psychiatry and counseling and social work, Christianity is viewed really negatively in lots of circles.

How does the Apostle Peter as a pastor encourage Christians who are living under tremendous pressure, who could easily give way to despair about their futures? How does Peter encourage Christians to keep holding on to their Christian faith? How does

Peter encourage Christians to not throw in the towel and to not give way to despair? He encourages Christians to hope.

1 Peter 1:3, 13

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,  
<sup>13</sup>Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.

What is hope?

A defined hope

Hope is not a feeling addressed to our emotions. Hope is a decision addressed to our wills. Hope is a decision to believe God for a good future based on the way God has worked in the past. Hope says, "I have a future!" Hope says, "Blessing is coming to me!" Hope says, "What God started, he will complete! And what God promised, he will fulfill!"

It is hope that sustains us in the hard times and it's hope that causes us to crash through the quitting points, whether it's the quitting points in our marriages or the quitting points in school or the quitting points in a job or the quitting point on life itself. Hope is what helps you crash through the quitting points because you believe in a good future for yourself.

Let me give you a simple illustration. Imagine that there are two people, Jack and Jill, who are hired at a bill-collecting firm. They both make minimum wage. The only difference is that Jill is promised that at the end of the year she's going to get a \$25,000,000 bonus. Jack's not promised anything. The job is miserable. All day long on the phone, Jack and Jill are screamed at by people they're trying to collect from. Their boss is awful. He keeps pressing them for a certain rate of collection. Their co-workers are all negative. The job stinks. Jack tells Jill, "I'm going to look for another job. This place is horrible. I don't think I could work here for another month." Jill says, "Oh, I don't think it's so bad. I'm definitely going to work here at least a year."

What's the difference between Jack and Jill? It's their expectation of the future. Jill has hope. Jill believes good things are coming to her so she hangs in there. Jack doesn't have the hope so he quits. Everything turns on our expectation of the future. Our current mood is largely determined by whether we have hope or not. Our current level of joy, our depression, even our physical health.

It's interesting that Peter calls Christian hope a living hope.

## A living hope

### 1 Peter 1:3

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead

What will get you through hard times is not a fond hope, a false hope, an unrealistic hope. What will get you through hard times is a living hope, Peter says. The world is full of false hopes. You know what a false hope is. When I was a child, I used to get chain letters sent to me. Do any of you remember those in the days when the postal service was still in business and people used to send letters? Did any of you ever get a chain letter? You have to copy the whole letter 20 times and put a dollar in and send it to 20 friends and in a week you will receive \$1000. I was always the guy who broke the chain.

False hopes. Eat a certain cereal every day and you will lose weight. Listen to these three CDs in your car for a month and you will speak Mandarin Chinese like a native.

False hopes. That's what modern marketing is all about. Charles Revlon, the founder of Revlon, said that he didn't sell makeup to women; he sold women hope. That's what all the makeup ads are all about. If you wear this, you will look like a runway model. If you wear this, the man of your dreams will come and pick you up on his white horse and carry you off into the sunset.

Immature religion nurtures false hope. The reason that I've been so strong about not having this church buy into prosperity gospel messages that are everywhere on Christian television is because these prosperity messages nurture false hope, dead hope. It is immature religion. If you have enough faith, you and your loved ones will be healed 100% of the time. If you have enough faith, and believe hard enough you will financially prosper all of the time. If you are a good person, you will not suffer; God will protect you from all tragedies and all pain.

Immature religion always nurtures false hopes, unrealistic hopes. To the extent that you have a mental checklist of God's promises that's inaccurate, to that extent you are going to experience disastrous consequences regarding your faith. Because if you believe, for example, that God has promised you a happy marriage and you don't have a happy marriage because either you're single or you're married, but unhappy, to that extent, you will despair. Or perhaps you'll throw in the towel, not just on marriage, but on God and faith. God just didn't keep his promise.

If we believe that God promises us health and wealth and that God promised that everyone you love and care about will never get really sick or have a terrible accident, but then you or a loved one gets sick, we'll either sink into denial and pretend that our

reality is other than it is which makes us liars, or we'll be shattered because we'll believe that God didn't do what he promised to do. That's what happens to a lot of folks who hold onto prosperity teaching. They begin to lie about reality – "I'm really well" when they are still sick, "Everything's really great!" when it's not.

Or your faith will be shattered because you'll believe that God didn't do what he promised to do. We need to make sure that our mental checklist of what God promised is accurate and is backed up by a proper interpretation of the Bible. Peter does not say that what will cause us to crash through the quitting points is a false hope, a fake hope, a hope based on a mental checklist in which we project up to God your fondest wishes and pretend that God promised us what he has not promised us. Peter offers us a living hope.

Brothers and sisters, there is so much fake hope, false hope, right now. And that fake or false hope is causing people to despair. People keep putting their hope in politics and politicians and their promises. We know what's going to happen there – those hopes will be dashed. Politics and politicians cannot offer us a living hope. So how do you get a living hope at a time when much of America is sinking in despair.

Howard Thurman was one of America's greatest theologians, authors and pastors in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thurman gave a famous lecture at Harvard University about the meaning of Negro Spirituals. You know, songs like "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" or "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot". He answered the objection that all these spirituals talked so much about heaven and thrones and crowns that people would wear when Jesus returned and it just made people submissive and docile – it was just pie in the sky when you die, by and by. Thurman argued on the contrary, that it was belief in God's coming judgment; it was faith that one day all wrongs would be made right and that people would be reunited with loved ones and they would be with Jesus forever, that gave blacks the capacity to endure through years of slavery and injustice.

Rather than weaken slaves' self-respect or kill their passion for justice, Thurman said it was precisely belief that this world wasn't all there is and that our death wasn't the end that

"Taught a people how to ride high in life, to look squarely in the face those facts that argue most dramatically against all hope, and to use those facts as the raw material out of which they fashioned a hope that their environment, with all its cruelty could not crush."

Now, imagine instead of that living hope you came along to slaves and said, "Listen, all that stuff about heaven and God's coming judgment and reunions with lost loved ones, that's just pie in the sky. Be realistic! Put your hope in politicians in Washington, they'll take care of you. Put your hope in progress, after all things always get better. Put your

hope in science or in people's goodness. Put your hope in the goodwill of people in power."

What enabled African-Americans in our country to endure the most barbaric kind of cruelty, separation from their spouses and children, grinding poverty – what enabled people to endure and not take their own lives was a living hope. It was a decision to believe God for a better future based upon what God has done in the past.

Christian hope is not only a living hope, Christian hope is

A sure hope

The Christian hope is not an uncertain hope. I hope this new medicine makes a difference in our son's life. Nothing else has worked in the past. We're hoping this works. I don't know how I did on the test, but I'm hoping for at least a B. I hope I get this job I applied for. There are a lot of great applicants. I hope I get it. Christian hope is not like a kite blowing in the wind, depending on the circumstances. Rather the book of Hebrews says it's an anchor.

Hebrews 6:19-20

<sup>19</sup> We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, <sup>20</sup> where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

A friend of mine was in South Africa during the years of Apartheid. He went to hear South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu preach.

As he was sitting and listening to Bishop Tutu, the South African security police broke in and they lined the walls of the church with recording devices to see if Tutu was going to say anything that would get him arrested. He had been thrown in jail just a few weeks before. Now they were coming back for him again. Tutu looked at the South African police and said to them, "You are powerful, very powerful. But I serve a power greater than your power. I serve a God who cannot be mocked." Then he turned to them, smiled and said, "Listen, you have already lost. I invite you today to come join the winning side!" The effect of Tutu's words on the crowd was electric. From being cowed with fear because of the police, the crowd leapt to their feet and began to shout and praise God and dance. The South African police just slinked out of the church.

How could Bishop Tutu so confidently say, "Why don't you give up now and come to the winning side?"? How did he know that his side would win? Because he had a sure hope. You see, Christian hope is a certain hope. It's an anchor for the soul based upon what God has done in the past. And the specific thing that God has done in the past that gives rise to a certain Christian hope is raise Jesus from the dead.

1 Peter 1:3

<sup>3</sup> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

Let me work out the logic of the resurrection for you and why Peter called the resurrection a living hope. The resurrection changed everything for Peter and for us.

Have you worked out the logic of the resurrection of Christ? Here's the logic in the New Testament. Jesus is a kind of first fruits. Like the first tomatoes in summer the resurrection of Jesus offers the promise of more to come. Jesus is the beginning of the new creation: what God started to do in Jesus, when he raised Jesus from the dead, he will do for everyone who embraces Jesus by faith. Jesus is the harbinger of things to come. What we have now, in part, through faith in Jesus we will have fully when Jesus returns.

Edmond Clowney, the great New Testament scholar, said:

*Our hope is anchored in the past: Jesus rose! Our hope remains in the present: Jesus lives! Our hope is completed in the future: Jesus is coming!*

I have hope in any situation because I have bet my life on this one truth – Jesus who was crucified for my sins rose from the dead. Jesus' resurrection began a chain reaction that will result in me and every other follower of Christ also being resurrected from the dead.

You see, the only sure hope is based on what can't be taken from you. If you're building your hope on something you can lose then that's not a sure hope at all. If you're hoping, for example, in yourself – in the fact that you've always been able to succeed in whatever you put your mind to you can achieve - guaranteed at some point you're going to have a crisis that you won't be able to push through on your own. You're going to get old, you're going to get sick. You're going to have a family problem. You're going to grieve. Life in this world is hard. If your hope is really in yourself, life is going to teach you that your wits alone, your grit, your hard work is going to fail when you inevitably encounter a problem that you can't fix.

If you are putting your hope in your financial plan, in the stock market, your financial plans and the stock market could all crash. If you're building your hope on another person, on your family, you can lose loved ones. You can be betrayed. Friend, what are you hoping in that can't be taken from you? The only sensible way to live is to build your hope on something that can't ever be taken.

Jesus tells us this in Matthew 6.



Matthew 6:19-20

<sup>19</sup> “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup> But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

Jesus says the only sensible way to live is to put your hope in what you can't lose. Listen, sure hope is available only to people who believe in something beyond this world and beyond this life. If you are an atheist, you can't have a sure hope because you don't think there is any reality to anything beyond this world. Everything in this world is always under threat. If you don't believe that there's life after death, you can't have a sure hope because death marks the end of your existence. And if the end of your personal existence doesn't terrify you then you are simply refusing to think deeply about life and death. So, I ask you again, what are you hoping in for a good future that can't be taken from you – though the world should end or you die?

Peter says you need to set your hope in something beyond this world and beyond this life. Here's the only sure bet – Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Finally, Peter speaks to us about

A rich hope

1 Peter 1:4-5

<sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Christian hope produces incredible fruit in a Christian's life. When you set your hope not on something that can be taken from you, but you set your hope on God because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the Bible lists dozens of good things that will be produced in your life. Things like joy and confidence no matter what happens.

Here's what we read in

Romans 8:28, 35-39

<sup>28</sup> And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

<sup>35</sup> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the

present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If you set your hope fully on God and not on something that can be taken from you, the Bible says that that hope will produce an ability to rejoice in suffering, patience in waiting, good character.

Here's what we read in

Romans 5:2b, 4

And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope.

If you set your hope entirely in God and not in what can be taken from you, you'll be able to keep praying without giving up. Here's what we read:

Romans 12:12

<sup>12</sup> Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Let me ask you a question. Despite all the craziness coming out of Washington, despite any misfortune that has befallen you or has befallen a loved one, are you still hopeful? Can you say, friend, that you have in your life a living hope, a sure hope, a rich hope and that you're not giving way to despair because of what God has done for you in Jesus Christ? Do you have a hope that you cannot lose? Is your hope solidly placed in Christ?

Let's pray.

## Finding Hope in an Age of Despair

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I. A defined hope

II. A living hope

III. A sure hope

IV. A rich hope