

March 1 – Read Psalm 32:1-6.

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them.

March 2 – Read Psalm 51:7

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

Read that verse – ponder it. Relish in its truth and richness. Thank God for it. Ohhh cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean! Sounds so nice, doesn't it? Hyssop – powerful stuff. I think it's a knock-off brand of *Dove or Jergens*. Not really. Hyssop is a plant – a wild herb with bluish purple flowers that cluster along its single stem. Looks kind of like a narrow bottle brush. Some say it has medicinal qualities. You can still buy its oil. So maybe David is telling us that the real cure for sin and failure is herbal!! Mix up a batch for a poultice, rub some on your feet and sins removed! Nothing against all you natural med lovers or herbalists – but you don't have anything powerful enough for that job.

So now read Exodus 12:22, and get the real image behind the psalmist's request.

Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning.

This was the time of the Passover in Egypt. The hyssop was the delivery agent for the slaughtered lamb's blood to get from the lamb to the door posts. Cleanse me with hyssop! Apply some of that lamb's blood and ***I will be clean***. That'll do it. The writer knows both the severity of the problem and the power of the remedy. Sprinkle me and I'll be clean – wash me and I will be whiter than snow!! Powerful stuff!

I love this scene from heaven when John is getting an angel guided tour of the goings on in the kingdom halls of our God - ***Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?" I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.***

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Imagine that literally for a moment. Soiled robes – dirt smudged, stained, weathered. And there sits a tub full of blood. The one standing next to it suggests taking off those robes and give them a good washing in the tub. Doesn't makes sense. Doesn't make sense until you're clear on the nature of the filth and on the source of the blood. ***'robes washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb'*** - ***Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*** It's some serious crud and some potent blood. It's what protected the Hebrews from a deadly visit from the angel of death at the Exodus. It's what was symbolized every time an innocent lamb or goat or dove was executed and its blood sprinkled on the altar as a sin offering. It's what has been and is remembered and celebrated every time the sons and daughters of God gather at the communion table for the Lord's supper – body broken, blood shed. It's what John declared when he saw his cousin Jesus step into the waters of the Jordan River – 'behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.' It's what Jesus provided and declared as His precious blood ran down his torn flesh and soaked the ground below – 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing!' It's what you need and I need if there is any hope of standing 'clean' before our holy and righteous God. And here is the clincher – nothing else will do the job!

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

The writer understood the serious nature of the stain and also understood the only hope for a remedy. Do you? Pray about that today. This is why the gospel is good news!! Today spend time with this truth – do you understand the serious and deadly nature of sin? Do you see the amazing and unbelievable and effective gift of forgiveness God has provided for us through the giving of His Son? Consider that today. Then after you have considered this truth – then consider the life of freedom and acceptance God has provided for you now and for eternity through the blood of the Lamb – is it one lived with an appropriate level of gratitude and devotion. Pray that this would be so for us as a church community.

March 3 – Read Deuteronomy 32:39

“See now that I myself am he! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand.

Ever done anything stupid? I have. Plenty. Bet you have too. And sometimes other people saw the whole thing go down. So I have heard the words spoken to me – ‘so what did you expect?’ Or, ‘you made the bed so you have to sleep in it.’ Or the ‘and exactly what were you thinking when you did that?’ My guess is you have somewhere in the course of your life made decisions or engaged in actions that ended up badly – and you had to pay the price and live with the consequences. I don’t think I’m alone in this.

But what about when a mess comes, disaster strikes, losses occur, wounds land and you not only didn’t do the stupid thing – you actually were doing the good thing, the wise thing? What then? Reread the passage for today. God is God. No competitors. No overthrowers. No usurpers. God is God. So sometimes God will either let some tough things into our life or, according to this verse, personally deliver them. That stinks.

But God is God. And God is good. Always. So if He wounds – healing is intended. If He does not intervene and interfere then what is allowed in has not just a purpose but a God-ordered purpose in it. I know that is not an easy pill to swallow. I know those are not easy seasons to endure. I know when in those places it is hard to understand any good whatsoever in them and it is also very hard to reckon them with the God who is love. But God is God. And God is good. Not only can no one deliver out of His hand – but His hand will also ultimately deliver each and every one who is His son or daughter through Jesus Christ. Not always easy news but still good news nonetheless. Don’t you think? Consider that prayerfully today. If there is a place in your life or in the life of someone you know who is in a tough place would you pray for both God to deliver and for God to accomplish His good purposes in and through those circumstances.

March 4 – Read Proverbs 16:24.

Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

God created all things. He spoke it and it came to be. Lights, moons, galaxies, atoms, quarks, black holes, suns, fish, hippos, giraffes, man, woman, angels, frogs, gravity – and even stink bugs! God spoke and things came to be.

Powerful stuff – God’s words.

He spoke words of covenant and called a people to be His own – the whole Bible tells the ongoing story of the power of His word – it persists through generations, it continues even when rejected, it protects through wars, betrayals and a persistent rejection for the sake of idols and self-centered willfulness. God speaks – a people are not only called – they are formed, protected and multiplied.

God’s word – potent.

It holds the universe together. It directs history. It reveals His nature to those who listen. And it redeems and transforms. ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’

God’s words – powerful.

So are yours.

You are made in His image in this way. Reread the verse for today. Consider your words – those spoken openly, those whispered cautiously. They are powerful by nature. But are they a honeycomb? Sweet to the soul. Healing to the bones. Be honest!! Review your words from yesterday, last week – generally speaking.

Your words – they are powerful. They can be sweet to a person’s soul, they can be healing to another deep down to the bone. Or their power can be used otherwise. Their potency can be exercised in ways that are not ‘image of God bearing.’ Shouldn’t be. Shouldn’t happen. Especially once you understand their power and the responsibility that comes with them. Words are powerful. Words are a gift. Words are uniquely given to image bearers to exercise. But they can and do get mishandled, misused and misguided. Jesus says every person will give full account for every careless word spoken. May I suggest to you this day that any word that is not sweet to the other’s soul, not healing to the other’s spirit, not spoken to benefit and build up – falls into the category of ‘careless words.’

Pray about that today – your words are powerful. Period. Exercise with caution. Pray today that God’s Spirit would bring a spirit of conviction over our culture today – especially in the social and political realm. We are in the midst of a war of words – and nobody wins that.

March 5 – Read Isaiah 38:14-17.

I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove. My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens. I am being threatened; Lord, come to my aid!” But what can I say? He has spoken to me, and he himself has done this. I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul. Lord, by such things people live; and my spirit finds life in

them, too.

You restored me to health and let me live. Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish.

In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back.

Read these verses today and consider their truth. But before you jump in and review all your current hardships and anxieties and the unfair circumstances of your life and the places you can readily point to where God ought to do something – first, look back. Look back and see if there is any track-record at all of God using hardship or suffering in your life that ultimately you see now turned out to be for your benefit. Once you have a few then reread the verses and let fly all the requests for deliverance, help, provision, protection, vengeance, etc. etc. But could you end all that with something like this – ‘and finally God – I know that ultimately you will restore me, I know that ultimately you will keep me alive – forever, and God what I really want in all things is what you have for my benefit. Amen.’

I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul. Lord, by such things people live; and my spirit finds life in them too.

March 6 – Read Romans 15:13

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe in Him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Hope is hard, isn't it? It is a longing – unsatisfied. It is a healing – not yet apparent. It is a degree and a career – yet ahead. It is a love – yearning. A reunion – still in the planning. Hope is hard, isn't it?

I think so. Even more – I find it so. Apparently God knows this. Reread the verse. ***The God of hope*** wants you to hope.

Hope that one day everything will be set right; hope that the time will come when all that junk will make sense; hope that that deep hurt will be healed; hope that injustice will give way to that which is just and right; hope that the prodigal will one day return home; hope that reconciliation is possible; hope that the loneliness will be replaced friendship...

hope is holding fast to what is not there to grasp. Hope is believing in what you don't yet see. Hope is seeing the best when you are standing in the worst. Hope is trusting when everything is shaking. Hope seems crazy – but without it life is crazy. Hope is hard. God knows it. ***Now may the God of hope...*** interesting phrase ‘the God of hope...’ Does that mean God hopes? Or does it mean that God is the true longing behind our hopes? Both, I think. God hopes we will walk in faith. God hopes we will seek Him with all our heart. God hopes every prodigal will come to his or her senses and come home to Him. God hopes we will honor and obey His word. God hopes we will join Him in His mission of seeking and saving the lost. God hopes we will love Him with all we have and all we are. God hopes. And God is the true longing in all our hopes. Every good and perfect gift comes from Him. God is our refuge and our strength. God is our healer and provider. God alone is our Savior. All our hopes are found in Him. But hope is hard, isn't it? It is a longing – unsatisfied; a thirst unquenched; a hunger that still aches. An arrival still off in the future. A blessing not yet arrived. Hope is hard. And God knows it! Reread the verse - ***Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe in Him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*** Hope is so hard that God has commissioned the Holy Spirit to empower us to be able to hope! So consider today the nature and necessity of hope. Look over your life and deep within your heart. Where do you find hope living? Thank God for it. And where have you forsaken hope or are considering such? Ask the Holy Spirit to use His power to build up and fortify your hope! Pray about that today – and today pray for some brother or sister in Christ who you see ‘losing hope.’ Ask the Holy Spirit to use His power to renew and fortify hope in that person. And if you know someone who is not a Christian who is living without hope or holding onto a false hope – ask the Holy Spirit to work in them to bring them to faith so He can bring them a true and reliable hope!

March 7 – Read Romans 8:18-25

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God's sons to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it—in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of God's children. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains until now. And not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. Now in this hope we were saved, yet hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with patience.

Patience is a waste! Who needs it? Who on earth wants it? Patience – it's twiddling thumbs, filling time, making due. Patience – it's what you are supposed to have in long lines, gridlocked traffic, and when on hold with an important

phone call. Patience makes me impatient!! **'eagerly waiting for it with patience'** EAGERLY WAITING ...WITH PATIENCE! That's an oxymoron, isn't it? Who in their right mind wants to wait!? And eagerly?!! I can't even do that with my microwave – 10 seconds to go – open the door and dig in! Patience is wasteful, stupid, a nuisance and overrated. Until I need it.

'Cause when I need it you ought to have it, and in abundance – and if you don't then you are insensitive, uncaring and full of pride. Reread the passage. Creation is patient 'eagerly awaiting with anticipation for God's sons and daughters to be revealed.' Oh, by the way – 'eagerly awaiting' ever since the fall. That's a lot of patience.

And creation is not the only place we find patience on our behalf - **And not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.** Creation has patience with us.

So does the Creator. I'm not yet all I am to be, nor am I yet all I could be with the Spirit in me. God is so patient. With me. 'Eagerly awaiting...' Maybe patience isn't so bad a thing, after all. Creation has it. The Creator has it. Faith requires it - **Now in this hope we were saved, yet hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with patience.** Today thank a tree for having patience with you. Thank God for having patience with you. Thank the Spirit for 'eagerly waiting' on you. And ask the God of all patience who has saved us in hope – to give you all the patience you need for yourself and with those around you. And take time to be clear and specific with your prayers. Where are you impatient? In what circumstances or with what people/person do you tend to be impatient? Where have you given up hope because you have run out of patience? Where might you be trying to control where you, in faith, ought to be 'eagerly awaiting' what is not yet visible? Pray about those places today – patiently, with hope and ask God to share with you some of His 'eagerly awaiting' ability.

March 8 – Read Jeremiah 14:19-22

Have You completely rejected Judah? Do You detest Zion? Why do You strike us with no hope of healing for us? We hoped for peace, but there was nothing good; for a time of healing, but there was only terror. We acknowledge our wickedness, Lord, the guilt of our fathers; indeed, we have sinned against You. Because of Your name, don't despise us. Don't disdain Your glorious throne.

Remember Your covenant with us; do not break it. Can any of the worthless idols of the nations bring rain? Or can the skies alone give showers? Are You not the Lord our God? We therefore put our hope in You, for You have done all these things.

Ever get surprised by God? It's great, isn't it? An unexpected blessing. A totally out of the blue provision. A much needed touch, word, encounter that revived your hope and lifted your spirit! Ever get surprised by God? Pretty cool, isn't it? Except when it's not. What about the being 'surprised by God' things that stir more anger than appreciation? What about the 'surprised by God' things that rattle your nerves more than quiet your spirit? What about the 'surprised by God' places where the surprise isn't an answer to prayer, rather it is His apparent refusal to answer one? What about the 'surprised by God' times when you do what the verse says but don't receive what the verse promised? What about the 'surprised by God' turns that make you question God's goodness rather than reassure you in it?

Jeremiah had those sorts of surprises aplenty. So many it drove him and the people to repent! Maybe some sin of theirs was behind all the 'surprises.' (When things get really bad, you'll try anything, right? – BTW they were right – read the story for more). But Jeremiah makes a breakthrough. He has an insight. And he makes an appeal. He appeals to God not on the basis of his or the people's need; he intercedes for God's intervention not for the sake of the people's benefit. Rather He calls on God to stand up for His own glory, to act on behalf of His own Name and to intervene for sake of His own rule and reign and covenant promise.

Our greatest hope is not to bank our good in the hope that God will act in our circumstances to do what we want in our kingdom for the sake of our reputation. Our greatest hope, and the source of our greatest blessing is to appeal to God on the basis of His Name, His kingdom reign and His covenant character. Do that, and you have a hope you can count on. Do that, and you might just find your problems will take on a new light and a new size. Do that, and you might just find yourself 'surprised by God' pleasantly. Consider these verses. Talk to God about those hard to understand 'surprises' in your life – but do so on the basis of the hope we have in knowing **He is the Lord our God and we put our hope in Him.**

March 9 – Read Romans 12:12

Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer.

Ever have someone tell you the obvious? You have a sore on your arm the size of a cantaloupe and someone suggests 'you ought to get that looked at.' Thanks.

You make a major decision or large investment and everything falls through. Some sensitive soul tells you 'you should have gotten some professional advice before....' Go away.

You open up your heart and pour out your soul about a circumstance that is tearing you apart. Your friend tells you, 'that's got to be really hard.' Duh.

Ever have someone tell you the obvious? 'Be persistent in prayer.' Thanks. 'Be patient in affliction.' Like what choice do you have? Some things are obvious and as the saying goes – those things 'go without saying.' But then you have 'rejoice in hope.' Come again? 'Rejoice in hope.' Does that mean that if you are one of the remaining die-hard Pirates fans that is still holding on that this year might be the year – you should rejoice in that drea... I mean hope? Does that mean that because you hope your friend or you might be part of the very small percentage that will beat that diagnosis – you should be throwing a party? Does that mean all those folks throwing.... I mean spending money on lottery tickets with a gazillion to one odds of hitting and hoping that will provide them a way to retire should be elated over their plan?

'Rejoice in hope.' Hope is hope because it is in something you don't have yet. Hope is hope because the thing hoped for either hasn't arrived yet or doesn't exist yet. Why would anyone rejoice in that?

I can see longing in hope. I can see keep believing in hope. I figured out a couple days ago we ought to be patient in our hope. But 'rejoice in hope?' Seems crazy.

And is – if your hope is in a long-shot, or an unlikelihood, or a crazy gamble, or a huckster, or in most things that really matter; or in your own ability for that matter. But when you place your hope in God and what He has promised – to rejoice is the only proper response. For there your hope is as sure as His power is unlimited. There your hope is as certain as God being right. There your hope is as good as God. So 'rejoice in hope.' Today look at all the challenges, hopes, longings, regrets, etc., in your life. Then review the hope you have been given in knowing that all the promises of God find their yes and amen in Christ Jesus our Lord. Then do your happy dance. That's a hope you can rejoice in – even before it comes.

March 10 – Read Hosea 2:14-15

Therefore, I am going to persuade her, lead her to the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her vineyards back to her and make the Valley of Achor into a gateway of hope. There she will respond as she did in the days of her youth, as in the day she came out of the land of Egypt.

God will lead her. Speak tenderly to her. Restore her vineyards. Revive her love. Sounds nice, doesn't it? God is speaking about what He is about to do for His chosen people, Israel.

God is so nice. Even sounds a bit romantic – like a wonderful escape to spend time together. ***I will make the Valley of Achor into a gateway of hope.***

You know that sound a needle scraping across a vinyl record makes? You should be hearing that in your head right now. ***I will make the Valley of Achor into a gateway of hope.*** The valley of Achor was a place where God poured out judgment on his people for their idolatry and disobedience! The valley of Achor was where the armies of Israel met their first defeat and that before an army that was puny in comparison. The valley of Achor was where God pulled back his protection and let Israel experience defeat. Not so romantic after all is it.

I will make the Valley of Achor into a gateway of hope. What's hopeful about that?

Here's what. Achor was also the place where the sin of the people was confessed before God and their disobedience remedied. As a result, God's protection and favor returned.

Gateways are interesting. They symbolize a place of transition. They represent a leaving behind and a crossing over. St Louis is the gateway to the west. India has its 'gateway to the world.' Gateways are fascinating – computers have them. They are transitional places. They mark a leaving behind and an entering into. With God's involvement, even ***The Valley of Achor can become a gateway of hope.*** What that means is that even places of hardship, places of suffering, wilderness places can be the very places God can use as gateways. Gateways to change, gateways from hard heartedness to restored love, gateways of rejection to a renewed passion. Gateways from turning away from God to restored intimacy with Him. Places of suffering and hardship as gateways of hope.

Let that encourage you today. Even the hardest spots, toughest circumstances, greatest struggles, deepest hurts, most incredible losses can – with God – become gateways of hope.

Pray about that today.

March 11 – Read Acts 24:15-16

And I have a hope in God, which these men themselves also accept, that there is going to be a resurrection, both of the righteous and the unrighteous. I always do my best to have a clear conscience toward God and men.

Do you have that hope? Read the verses again.

Do you have that hope? Hope not only in a resurrection, but the resurrection both of the righteous and unrighteous. Do you have that hope?

If you do, by all means celebrate. Thank God. Praise Him! Rejoice in such a hope! And do so with all those who share that hope with you. It's only appropriate – and if you have such hope – gratitude and praise are truly barely containable. Do you have that hope? Resurrection. Life – here-after. Do you have that hope in its completion - ***both for the righteous and the unrighteous***? If you truly do hold that hope, then your heart must move toward the latter, the unrighteous. For such, the resurrection will not only be a great surprise, it will be a great disaster.

And I have a hope in God, which these men themselves also accept, that there is going to be a resurrection, both of the righteous and the unrighteous. Paul said that. And he lived it. He rested in the certainty of the joy and life he would discover after this world. And he labored with every ounce of his ability, effort and focus to help every person he could to discover and share in that hope with him. Elsewhere he said, ***I become all things to all people... in hopes to save some.*** And, ***I am not ashamed of the gospel for it has the power of salvation for all... And – I don't care what their motive is... just so Christ is preached and people believe.*** Paul had in him a great hope in God which included the certainty that ***there is going to be a resurrection – both of the righteous and unrighteous.*** That hope allowed him to rest regarding his future, but kept him awake at night when he thought of others' future.

Talk to God today about that great hope you share in with Paul. The resurrection. Are you sure of it and able to rest in it – knowing your hope in God will not disappoint? It will be as He has said? If not, ask God to give you that assurance. Then think about all those you know and love who do not share your hope in God, but who nevertheless will stand before Him in the resurrection. Ask God to help you to see and understand the great tragedy of that. And ask God to give you His heart and longing and energy and power to do and sacrifice all you can in this life to help those who do not have that hope in God through Jesus to find it.

Today pray for all the names on the orange sticky notes we have in our sanctuary. Ask God to use us to help them find Him. If you have time, go out to the church this week and pray over those names and over our church.

March 12 – Read Psalm 130:5

I wait for Yahweh; I wait and put my hope in His word.

Read that again. One more time.

Do you? Do you ***wait and put your hope in His word?***

To do so, you have to read it. You have to study it. You have to take it in – deeply and regularly. This verse is actually an example of Hebrew poetry. It is a form of synonymous parallelism. Meaning the first phrase and the second phrase are meant to be equivalent. That is to say – to wait on ***Yahweh*** is to wait and put your ***hope in His word.*** In the negative it means that if you are not spending time waiting and hoping in God's word – you are not waiting or hoping in God. So today pray about that. That is, in fact, why I write these little prayer guides – not to entertain or make you feel religious and not even to get you to pray – I write them to help you 'wait on God' by 'waiting and putting your hope in His word.' Where might you be missing out on connection with, or understanding of, God because you are not spending time with Him through His word? What 'next step' might God have you take so that your hope is truly in Him? Pray today for our church community that we would be diligent in pursuing and hoping in God by pursuing and waiting in His word.

March 13 – Read Ecclesiastes 9:4

But there is hope for whoever is joined with all the living, since a live dog is better than a dead lion.

I once knew a guy who I think remembered every pithy saying ever made. He could quote them on end. Some of them made you laugh. Some made you think. You've heard some, I'm sure. 'Beats a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.' 'Hard work never killed anybody – but why take a chance?' 'Some people are like clouds – when they go away it is a brighter day.' 'Everything happens for a reason. Sometimes the reason is you made a stupid decision.' You've heard them. You chuckle and you wince.

'A live dog is better than a dead lion.' God said that. He also explained it – ***'there is hope for whoever is joined with all the living.'*** My friend had a saying that kind of said the same thing. I would see him and ask 'John, how are you doing?' He would almost inevitably respond – 'well, I'm still above ground.' What he meant he was he was still breathing, still walking around, still ***joined with all the living. A live dog is better than a dead lion.*** Consider that today.

Yes there are challenges. Yes, there are hurts and disappointments. Yes, not everything in life is easy or as you wanted. But you are still **with all the living** right? So thank God today for the incredible gift of life. Thank God today that as long as you are still **above ground** there is hope. While you are at it and still alive and kicking, why not run through all the good things God has placed in your life today? I'm not suggesting some trite pollyanish version of life or asking you to join the hoards who try to find contentment in the power of positive thinking. What I am suggesting is that oftentimes when life is hard, or things do go south – all we see is the hard and the south. Our vision goes tunnel-like. But there is more. And sometimes just noticing the more is helpful and encouraging. After all **a live dog is better than a dead lion**. As my friend used to say – 'Life always offers you another chance. It's called tomorrow.'

March 14 – Read Job 30:26.

Yet when I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness.

Job said that. He wasn't kidding. Not one bit. You know things are bad when your wife and the mother of your 7 sons and 3 daughters, walks up to your sickbed and tells you 'why don't you just tell God to stuff it and then die? Good night, honey.'

Job had it bad.

But I think almost everyone walks through such days sooner or later. The diagnosis is bad - health falters. Losses that are just too deep for words strike and tear your heart apart. Finances crash and bills just keep on coming. Trusted friends turn against you, loved ones walk out. One disaster is followed up with another. Hard times turn into nightmare seasons. ***When I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness.***

Sometimes hope moves past desperate and just seems stupid. Ever been there? Endurance is drained. Hope seems like a joke. Friends don't know what to say so they say stupid things. Even loved ones just want it all to end. ***Yet when I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness.***

What do you do when there is nothing you can do? What do you do when you do everything you can do and things just keep getting worse? Your prayers go unanswered. The pain does not relent. Your friends are befuddled because all their prayers for healing and claiming of a miracle didn't work and their theologizing about why all this is happening and how God must be working something great in all this, almost energizes you enough to rise up and go give them all a good conk on the head. The turn for the better doesn't come. Your staunchest supporters are weary beyond exhaustion and hope now just for an end. ***When I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness.***

Ever been there? Or know someone who has? It is hard and confusing – and you just don't know what to do.

Let me suggest what NOT to do – don't try to justify God or make sense of the circumstances. Somehow God is still in charge and the circumstances are horrible. Acknowledge both.

Second - don't lose hope. ***Jesus, for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.***

Don't just wait for God – wait 'with God.' 'With God' - He is always in control, He is always at work, He is always good.

Consider the horror of the cross. Let Him know how you feel. Tell Him what you want – Jesus did. Complain to Him about what is wrong, evil, unfair and hard. But hold fast – to Him. Don't abandon hope.

And if you know someone living in such a place, demonstrate faithfulness to them. Encourage them. Pray for them. Lift burdens for them. Hold on to hope for them. Endure their rants. Sit with them in their weariness. Acknowledge their sorrow. Don't feel like you have to make sense of it all for them. And remember those around them – like Job's wife – they too are impacted, burdened and weary. Give help.

So today pray for those who are in such a season. Ask God to show you how you can help. And if you are reading this and are in such a place – know you are not alone. Your church is not just FOR you but here to be with you in any way we can to help.

March 15 – Read Ezekiel 37:11

Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’

Do you know the rest of the story? Pretty amazing. God takes the prophet Ezekiel to an expansive plain. But the sight is not inspiring. Rather it is unnerving. The ground is barren and littered with bones. Not a few, but millions. Leg bones, skulls, arms and hands – by the thousands - picked clean by scavengers. Bleached white by the sun. Silent. And still. Tragic. Lifeless. As Ezekiel surveyed the desolation God fires Him a question: ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ Now Ezekiel is not new to this dance. He’s spent some time with God. He’s seen a thing or two that shocked his socks off – well, sandals off – I don’t think they wore socks back then. But anyway, Ezekiel has figured out that God is full of surprises and loves to see if and how we factor Him into our perceptions and possibility thinking. So Ezekiel answers God’s question with one of his own – ‘You know, my Lord. You alone know.’ In other words Ezekiel looked at the valley of bones and then I picture him looking over at God and saying, ‘well God, let’s see what you got.’ Game on. And note from that moment on discussion is ended and God gives directions and commands and Ezekiel executes. ‘Speak the word of God to the bones.’ ‘Command the bones to listen.’

‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! 5 This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath[a] enter you, and you will come to life. 6 I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’ Ezekiel did what he was commanded. And don’t overlook the lunacy of it all. Giving a sermon in a morgue. Teaching a bible study to the remains in a crematorium. Pronouncing the impossible to the unresponsive. Crazy. Stupid, really. Futile. Unless you start to factor God into your reality.

Ezekiel had been around God enough to know, it’s best just to go with it. He did. A clatter arose. Bone found bone. Tendon and cartilage held them fast. Muscles grew. Organs, vessels and veins, teeth, hair, abs, lips. All took their place. Out of dust, bones became bodies. Wow! Amazing! But disappointing. Now, instead of a plain of bones you have a valley of bodies. Absolutely amazing – but still useless.

So God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the wind – to come and fill the lungs of the slain and bring them to life. It did. And the dead bones arose as a vast and mighty army. Now reread today’s passage.

Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’

Look at your life. Where does it appear barren, dry and dead? Where in your life do you look and say ‘hope is gone’? Today, would you take another look – but this time with God by your side? Will you let Him ask you what He asked Ezekiel? ‘Can these bones live?’ And rather than a ‘no way, God’ or an ‘I’ve tried everything, Lord’ or a ‘things are just too far gone here, God’ will you factor God into your perception and those circumstances and answer His question with yours – ‘You know, my Lord. You alone know.’ Then instead of waiting for an explanation just do what HE tells you to do. No matter how crazy it may sound to you. Do that - and you might just get a look ‘at what He’s got!’

Pray today about that area in your life where your hope is gone. Also, today, pray for God to move at Four Mile to raise up a vast army of sons and daughters made alive by the wind of His Spirit.

March 16 – Read Zechariah 9:11.

Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.

Prison. Life on lock-down. Hemmed in. Shackled behind thick walls and high, sharp wire. Existence hemmed in by bars and locks and guards and alarms. Prisons – made to keep some people in – to keep other people safe.

Hope does that. It puts up barriers. It fortifies life. It holds certain people in and keeps other people safe. ***Return to your fortress you prisoners of hope!***

The passage is describing a jailbreak! Sound the alarms – raise the alert! But rather than calling in the trackers, loosing the dogs, and deploying the search teams God simply makes His appeal - ‘Get back in here you rascally escapees!!’ Sounds laughable, doesn’t it? Almost bizarre. Imagine a federal prison warden dealing with a prison breakout in such a way. ‘Alright all you inmates now you just march right back in behind these walls. Hup! Hup! Step to it now.’ He’d be fired. Who in their right mind thinks that an escapee would willingly choose to return?! What warden would ever dream that escapees would return to life in fortresses in response to a simple plea?

In the criminal realm some actually do return. They find life on ‘the outside’ too unfamiliar and too hard. So they run for a few days then they turn themselves in. For them life inside made more sense and was much more bearable. And most prison breaks are hatched and executed to throw off the restraints and leave behind the life-draining containment of existence behind prison walls.

But this is different. The invitation to return is not to a more restricted life but to a more abundant one! ***even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.*** In other words when God issues the appeal to ***return to your fortress*** it is an invitation to life in a bigger world, not a smaller one! The ***prison of hope*** is like that. They don’t restrict life they empower it! Prisons of hope don’t bind you, they free you. If you don’t believe me ask anyone who has spent time ‘on the outside’ of having hope.

The prodigal gave it a shot. He thought the fortress of his Father’s house was restrictive, suffocating and a prison. So he made a run for it – what he thought was a jail break ended up being a head-on run into a prison cell. A dark, lonely, empty, despairing existence marked by life robbing routine, empty relationships and meager provision. I can just hear his father’s heart whispering its appeal - ***Return to your fortress, you prisoner of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you. Please come back home.***

I know we want everything we want and we want it now. I know holding to hope can appear to be settling for less. I know life in our Father’s house can at times feel routine, restricted and controlled. I also know that life on the outside of hope is empty. I’ve chased it. I’ve weathered it. I’ve regretted it. I’ll take the ‘prison of hope’ I find in our Father’s house any day of the week.

So if you are reading this and you find yourself on the outside – without hope – in a nightmare you thought was a run for freedom, alone, broken, used, in a distant land you thought was the place you would find freedom – would you quiet your mind, settle your spirit and come to your senses – life in the prison of hope beats life ‘on the outside’ hands down.

Come on home.

Pray today about that in your own life. Where have you traded off the hope that God gives because it seems to restrictive, too binding, too costly? Where have you cast aside the hope God gives for the control you want? Would you return today – not to settle for something less but to discover how much more God has for you? Pray also today for someone you know who is ‘on the run’ – headlong in a ‘breakout’ from God’s good life. Ask God to help that person to come to their senses and to hear God’s appeal to return to the fortress of His love and provision.

March 17 – Read Luke 20:20.

Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be sincere. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor.

Sneaky buggers. Commissioned by even sneakier buggers to spy, to keep a close watch – ‘hoping to catch Jesus in something he said.’ To find some fault. To trap him in some duplicity. To expose ‘another side’ of him that they could leverage, to identify some error or ensnare him in a falsehood – so then they could post it on facebook, upload it on

youtube, launch rumors in their bible studies – with hopes that once it was out there, it would go viral; all in order to create a stir, make themselves look good as the moral police and protector of the common folk, to discredit him solely based on the fact that they didn't like him and ultimately to destroy his reputation because they felt threatened by his presence.

Sneaky buggers. Evil, too.

Of course their plan didn't work. Couldn't. They were 'hoping' in something that wasn't there. They were banking on something that didn't exist. They were on the lookout for a side that existed only in their own warped minds. But such are false hopes – truth & reality seldom will stop those who hold them! It's the nature of hope. It shapes your perceptions, forms your motives and drives your actions. If you can't find flaws – make some up. If what you seek isn't there in truth – spread a rumor. If the stumble doesn't come – fabricate one. If there is no duplicity, bend the truth.

They hoped to catch Jesus in something He said - Spies, who pretended to be sincere – but who were up to something far more insidious. The malignant pretending to be benign. Sneaky buggers. They were power grabbers, control seekers, privileged and insecure – dangerous combo.

And they were after Jesus. Then and now.

They never did 'catch him' at anything – even though eventually he did get ***handed over to the power and authority of the governor***. But that was Jesus' own doing – not theirs. Hope is powerful – even false ones!

So today consider where your hope is set. And here is how you can tell – if you think there are flaws in Jesus' character, or shortcomings in His goodness, or loopholes in His decrees, or some hidden agenda in his actions – then your 'showing up' where He is will always have an element of 'pretending to be sincere.' You will always find reasons to dial back your devotion and ways to twist what He has plainly declared to justify whatever it is you are so determined to get. And when your hope is not fully in Him - you will spend way more time and energy trying to justify your own goodness than you do pointing to his; and you will invest more energy in accomplishing your own will than you do in accomplishing His.

So today consider your hope. It is powerful. But is it truly and fully in Jesus? Or is it in something or someone else? Oh, by the way – those 'sneaky buggers' – they are always going to be in the mix. That's why you better be rock solid sure that who you are and how you stand with God is based 100% on who Jesus is and not who you are. Cause when they find they can't get at Jesus - they will come at his family.

March 18 – Read Luke 23:8.

When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort.

Nothing wrong with that I suppose – hoping to see Jesus do something incredible. As His brothers and sisters, He doesn't have a problem with our hopes that he will intervene or provide. Jesus doesn't scold us for expressing our hope for Him to provide a healing touch, a word of wisdom or a faithful friend. Jesus actually loves it when He finds us waiting for His arrival, holding fast to the hope of His acting in our lives and living with confidence that with Him all things are possible. So I guess Herod was a good follower then. Not quite. And for one specific reason. It's there – near the end. ***He hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort.***

Jesus is quite capable of working miracles. Did them then, and does them now. Plenty. Jesus can heal blindness. Cure disease. Provide resources from the most bizarre places. Jesus can command weather patterns. Strengthen lame limbs. Stretch limited resources to supernatural lengths. Jesus loves it when we are pleased with His presence. He wants us to want Him near. But there is one thing Jesus won't do. For you. For me. For Herod. For anyone.

Perform.

He will give signs. Jesus will work miracles. He will do the unexpected and accomplish the impossible. But never to perform.

You see, Jesus cares nothing about our applause – but He does desire and deserve our allegiance. So He will bless us, but never perform for us. He will work in and through us but never show himself for the sake of entertaining us. Herod wanted to see Jesus perform. Herod wanted God in the flesh to put on a show for his pleasure and entertainment. Herod wanted to have God dazzle his senses, to do a routine – to perform at his bidding. Herod was deluded. He was blind. He misunderstood who this Jesus was and who Herod was. Herod, I think, has many descendants. People who demand that God perform. Who seek out a Jesus who will perform. Those who profess wanting to see Jesus, longing to be near Him, appealing for His presence, **hoping to see Him perform a sign of some sort**. Such a hope is deluded.

Today consider your hope and faith in God. All of it – hopes for healing, hopes for provision, your expectations in worship, your desires for experiences with God, your prayers for miraculous works from God – all of them. Any of it tainted with the ‘Herod delusion’ just wanting or expecting or hoping God might perform some sign for you? A good way to note the ‘Herod delusion’ creeping in is to see if there is any place where you are lowering your devotion or compromising our allegiance to Him because we deem His or His church’s performance not what we want it to be, or deem it should be?

Pray about that today. Ask God to move - to stretch out His hand to move and to work signs and wonders - but at the same time ensure God that your love, your devotion and your allegiance are not conditioned on anything he may or may not do in response to our request.

March 19 – Read Acts 23:6.

Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.”

Paul was summoned to the court room (actually he was dragged there). His accusers thought him nuts. His opponents deemed him crazy. The ‘trial’ was a mockery. The charge: Paul of Tarsus held an unswerving conviction that the dead would one day rise. It says he was on trial **because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead**. What could possibly be wrong with such a hope? As far back as you go there was in the beliefs of human beings some concept of a life after this one. It was described in dusty theologies and portrayed in ancient myths. It was thought about, pondered, propounded, discussed and debated for centuries and even millennia. So why all the hype? Why is Paul now standing trial because he expressed **hope of the resurrection of the dead?**

Here is why - Paul claimed not to hold to a hope or some hope of the resurrection of the dead but to **THE HOPE of the resurrection of the dead**. And his hope wasn’t based on some theological musings of those who had nothing better to do. Nor was this hope relying on the vague and indefensible extractions of some ancient mythological tale. He was on trial for hope that had a solid and reasonable defense. Paul knew Jesus.

Jesus demonstrated in history what Paul hoped in. **His resurrection of the dead hope** wasn’t wishful thinking or the product of vague musings – it was proclaimed and demonstrated by Jesus Christ and promised to all who were His. So this hope was not some dream that maybe, just maybe it might be possible. This hope wasn’t some psychological gymnastics exercised to avoid the thought of one’s inevitable demise. This hope was hope only because, though it was certain and guaranteed and proven, it just had not arrived yet.

But it will come.

And will come in, and through, one person – faith in Jesus Christ. Now that will get folks riled. That hope will stir up some reaction. Hold onto and give expression to that hope as **THE HOPE of the resurrection of the dead** and even religious people will come out accusing and attacking and putting you on trial. As horrible as that may be – such trials, such accusations, such attacks change nothing about the true nature of the hope. Nor, the despair of those who do not

have it. So today consider not Paul's plight, but Paul's hope. **THE HOPE of the resurrection of the dead.** Do you share in that hope? If you do, then it should mark you. You see death differently. And as a result, you live life differently.

Pray about that today. And today pray for all those names on orange post it notes – ask God to help them find and believe in **THE HOPE of the resurrection of the dead** Jesus Christ.