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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“HOPE” ~ Luke 1:67-79

○ {Is 59:9b-10}

**We look for light, but all is darkness;
for brightness, but we walk in deep
shadows.**

**Like the blind we grope along the wall,
feeling our way like people without eyes.
At midday we stumble as if it were twilight;
among the strong, we are like the dead.**

Isaiah spoke these words 2,700 years ago, yet they are as current as today's news. Here in the United States:

◆ {National Mental Health Association} A minimum of eighteen million women and nine million men suffer serious depression in any given year.

◆ {Nat'l Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism; US No Drugs} Eighteen percent of us abuse alcohol or are alcohol dependent. Another 7.3% are addicted to illicit drugs – and that figure does *not* include prescription medications.

◆ {American Association of Suicidology} There is a suicide attempt every 39 seconds, and one individual “successfully” takes his or her life every 16.2 minutes.

☑ These figures involve only some of the *dramatic* cases. Millions more hang on in *quiet* desperation, clinging tightly to the dream that things will get better. Others are convinced things *cannot* get better, that emptiness and frustration are our fate: Robert Ingersoll said “**Hope is [a] universal liar.**” Friedrich Nietzsche argued that “**Hope is the worst of all evils.**”

The disillusioned equate hopelessness with realism, or even moral virtue. But what other “virtue” tends to provoke self-centeredness, anxiety, fatalism, apathy or its opposite drivenness, high risk behavior, and mental and physical illness?

☑ {Unknown} Hopelessness can even be lethal. It has been said that a human being “**can live about forty days without food, about three days without water, about eight minutes without air, but only for one second without hope.**”

That is an overstatement. Even so, despair can literally kill a person.

? Too many are sickened by, weakened by, debilitated by, even dying of hopelessness. *Why is the gloom so pervasive?*

☑ {B.H. Liddel Hart} Helplessness is one of the biggest reasons. “**Helplessness induces hopelessness.**”

↗¹ The cycle begins (ironically enough) with hope, concrete hope that we invest in a specific person, place, thing or event: a child writes to Santa, expecting his toys *to make him happy*; a woman sacrifices everything for her career, banking on *it to guarantee her security*; a man pursues a desirable woman, certain *she is everything he needs*.

↗² But that hope proves false. The child gets the coveted toy, only to discover that it is not what he *really* wants; the career woman is “downsized” at the age of 55; the man learns that his wonderful wife cannot totally fulfill all of his needs.

↗³ At this point in the cycle, the world offers three alternatives: (1) we can cling to the same old false

hope on the chance it won't let us down again; (2) we can transfer our false hope, investing it in a new idol; or (3) we can abandon all hope and fall into naked despair.

☹ This is where helplessness comes into play.

Under option 1 the boy can write to Santa a hundred times, but he might never get what he asks for. And if he does those gifts will eventually break down, wear out, or lose their hold on his imagination. He is helpless to stop it.

Under option 2 the woman can retool for a second career. But if her new company lets her go, or her stocks take a hit, or Social Security goes belly up there is little she can do about it.

Under option 3 the man can only resign himself to frustration and buy into the myth that every marriage ends in regret. He is powerless to perfect his imperfect wife.

So, will it be false hope or no hope at all? It is not my intent to shackle you with cynicism or burden you with misery. I am describing reality in our fallen world, albeit bluntly. Is it any wonder so many **“walk in deep shadows”** and others **“are like the dead”**?!

☑ And still we are all chronic hoppers – even the Ingersolls and Nietzches among us. Try as we might, we cannot avoid it for long. As Emily Dickinson wrote:

**Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in my soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.**

We hope because we must. Hence, it is doubly imperative that our hope be true and valid and solid, more

real than suffering and death, more substantial than cotton candy fantasies and tissue paper dreams.

Where can we find such hope?

☐ Please turn with me to Luke 1:67-79.

The speaker is Zechariah. He and his wife Elizabeth abandoned all hope of parenthood decades ago.

● {Lk 1:16-17, 15} But now, by the grace of God, she has borne a son! This child **“will bring back” “many of the people of Israel” “to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the [Messiah] ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”** He is John the Baptizer.

■ **“Filled with the Holy Spirit”** Zechariah prophesies, verse 68-69:

**“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people
and redeemed them.**

**He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the [lineage] of his servant David**

“Horn” is the biblical image of a strong monarch. Israel has been afflicted with a series of rulers who have either been pitiful weaklings or cruel tyrants. This king will be truly strong: he will embody immense power and, simultaneously, compassion and justice.

A sovereign like this, if he lives and breathes, is a worthy object of hope, is he not?!

■ Next, verse 71:

**“salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us –**

Zechariah is thinking first and foremost of Imperial Rome and Herod the Great (who rules Israel with Rome’s permission). Yet the Holy Spirit who puts these words in his mouth speaks of enemies who are far worse: sin, death, and the devil.

Imagine being liberated from guilt and wrong-doing, from decay and mortality, and from the forces of evil! Such freedom, if it can be accomplished, is a worthy object of hope, is it not?!

- On to verses 72-75:

**To show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant...
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without
fear
in holiness and righteousness before
him all our days.**

Divine mercy, God’s faithfulness, meaningful purpose (serving God), personal transformation (“**holiness**”), and virtuous relationships with God, self, and others (“**righteousness**”) – such a “**rescue,**” if it is achievable, is a worthy object of hope, is it not?!

- Finally, verses 77b-79:

**salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to**

**us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.**

○ {Jn 10:10} He is talking about forgiveness for every wrong, goodness which we do not have to earn, “**life ...to the full**” even in the face of death, serenity of mind and soul, harmony with others, and reconciliation to the Living God who creates and redeems and sustains us.

Such salvation, if it is real, is a worthy object of our hope, is it not?!

It does not require much historical knowledge or life experience to realize that this is beyond human achievement. Mortals of every culture, religion and political philosophy have shed blood, sweat and tears to make it happen – and they have failed. Our good intentions, clever ideas, and sophisticated engineering have come to naught.

We need God to do this. Amen?!

Not an indifferent deity who winds up the cosmos like a machine and lets it run without his intervention. We need a God who draws near.

Not a vengeful deity who looks upon our frailties with disgust and is keen to smite us for our failures. We need a God who is kind and merciful.

Not an indulgent deity who winks at our greed and immorality and violence and says, “It is what it is.” We need a God who is committed and powerful to change us.

- ☑ **O come, o come, Emmanuel** [God with us],
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here,
until the Son of God appear.

O come, thou Dayspring come and cheer
our spirits by thine advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put
to flight.

Take heart! The God we need came 2,000 years ago as a Suffering Servant. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus he established the Kingdom of God, which is full of light and life.

The God we need comes today in his Spirit and his Scriptures. He brings us into his Kingdom, and enables us to start receiving his blessings even now.

○ {Rev 19:16} The God we need will come in the future as **“KING OF KINGS and LORD OF LORDS.”** And he will utterly vanquish sin, death, and the devil.

This hope is true and valid and solid, more real than suffering and death, more substantial than cotton candy fantasies and tissue paper dreams.

Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!