

What We Want in Life #2 • I want hope.

Hope and hopelessness, they are the best and the worst of life. Lewis Smedes is an ethicist, a Ph.D. professor, a Christian, a popular author, but when it comes to hope I think he is most qualified out of his own personal experience. Smedes says that during the first decade of his marriage to his wife, Doris, more than anything else in the world they wanted to have a baby. It was something of an obsession to them and finally after ten years of marriage she became pregnant. They were totally thrilled. In his words they thanked God and drank a toast to hope. Six months later something went wrong. He called the doctor and the doctor said she apparently is in premature labor. “Take her immediately to the hospital and I will meet you there at the emergency room”, and then on the phone the doctor said, “Oh yes; I have one more thing to tell you; I should have told you before. Your baby is going to be seriously malformed.” The doctor told Lewis Smedes that he needed to tell Doris en route to the hospital so that she knew what to expect. Smedes says, “Well I told her. But we decided that we were not going to give up hope. No matter what the doctor said we were not going to give up hope. So we kept on hoping all through the night.”

At 6 a.m. the doctor came to the new father with an embarrassed grin on his face and he said, “Congratulations! You have a perfect baby boy. Come on and see.” Smedes says he walked into the room and there was this baby that was a perfect specimen of manhood. He said it was a lot like him. Smedes says, “It’s true. Never give up hope. Never, ever give up hope.” And then he adds, “But two days later our baby was dead. Hope can break your heart.”

In his popular and well selling book, *Standing on the Promises*, Lewis Smedes quotes an old cavalry motto: “When your horse dies, dismount and saddle another.” Smedes writes, “to that good horse sense I would add a piece of hope sense: When a hope dies, let it go and saddle another. Hope does not have to die when hope dies.”

Hope is our fuel to keep going. Just as in a car if you run out of gas, you stop. If there is no gas in the tank you can’t get started in the morning, and so it is with hope. You have to have hope to get started. You have to have hope to keep going. Hope is our desire for a better tomorrow. It is the imagination that the way things are is not the way things always will be. Hope is looking beyond where we are and into what might happen and what could happen and it is having the faith that it will happen. That imagination will turn into reality.

Hope is not something that is gender specific. It is not more for men or women. It is not about age. Hope is something that we need when we are very young and when we are very old. It has nothing to do with nationality, whether an American or not an American. Whether a Christian or not a Christian, we all need hope. We can't go on, we can't live. It is the universal human need. As long as you've got it, as long as we have hope it is amazing what we are able to endure.

People who have hope can make it through severe sicknesses, deep losses, broken marriages, bankruptcies, career set backs, shattered dreams. If there is hope we can sustain through troubles and survive and even successfully move on into tomorrow. As long as we have hope. But without hope our lives become sad and painful, frightening and desperate and we may not be able to go on. God wired us all for hope. Hope can even take us to the brink of death and beyond. We were designed to hope into eternity. So we all need hope.

Hope is not the same as fantasy. Fantasy is so far fetched that we can actually imagine anything. You can imagine instantly that you learn a dozen languages and speak them fluently. With fantasy you can even change your parents and your birth date. You can move yourself from one generation to another. Hope is not like that; it is connected to reality. **Hope is the expectation of something better.**

In the Old Testament Moses was a man of hope. He and his ancestors had endured slavery for 400 years. A million people were enslaved by Pharaoh who said he would not let go and yet Moses had a hope. His hope was that they would not only be set free, but that they would go to a promised land, flowing with milk and honey, that had cities for them to live in that they had not built, fields to harvest that they had not planted, grapes that they could pick off of vineyards and arbors that they had not started. It was a dream of a better tomorrow.

Later on in the Old Testament is the story of David, who as a young man suddenly became the champion for his nation Israel against the Philistines and especially against the giant Goliath. What were his chances? All he had was a handful of stones, a slingshot and hope. He hoped for something that seemed ridiculous to hope for but hope turned into reality and the people of Israel were victorious because of David's hope.

On the 28th of August in 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke before 250,000 people gathered by the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. It was at the peak of the American Civil

Rights Movement and advisers to the president of the United States asked Dr. King to cool the rhetoric so people would not get riled up. He wasn't to get too emotional. He carefully prepared and presented a speech that did not express much expectation of something better. When finished, he turned away from the microphone and went to sit down when Mahalia Jackson, the great singer, seated behind King, shouted at him, "The dream, Martin, the dream. Tell them about the dream!"

King turned back to the microphone and spoke hope when he said, "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." And he gave hope. Hope, not just to a quarter of a million people but to millions of people across the nation.

So what do you hope for? You hope for a better job or maybe you hope for a job. You hope for marriage or you hope for the birth of a child. You hope for a lift out of discouragement and depression. You hope that the illness will not be what the doctors say that the illness probably is. You hope to get out of debt. You hope that the next school year will be better for you and for your children. You hope that your prodigal child or grandchild will turn away from a life of sin and to a loyalty to Jesus Christ. You hope that you will have a better relationship with God, and that you will connect to him and it will be different spiritually than anything you have ever encountered before. Or maybe you just hope that you will die well and go to heaven.

In every case hope is the expectation of something better and we all need hope. But when it comes through it's not hope anymore. Hope fulfilled is not hope. Romans 8:24 says, "Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?" You see, **hope is always future looking**. When your hopes come true you know what you do? We all do it. We've got to come up with a new hope. If our wildest dreams turn into reality we need another wild dream because in order to get beyond today and into tomorrow there must be hope. Now ironically the soil in which hope grows is dissatisfaction. It is only when we are dissatisfied with the pain, the problems, the frustrations, the disappointments and worries of life that we have hope. If there is no dissatisfaction there is no hope to be had. Hope is always for a better tomorrow and saddest of all people are those who have none. There is a heartbreaking line in I

Thessalonians 4:13 that describes non-Christians facing death and saying that they have no hope. I've been there at open graves with sealed caskets by those bodies of those who were not Christians and their families standing around and they have no hope that they will ever see that person again, no hope for heaven, no hope for eternity. It has got to be one of the saddest circumstances that you can ever be in but it is always sad when there is no hope, whether it is facing death or any other situation of life, we need hope.

The question is how do we get it? Surprisingly hope is a choice that we make. Some people choose hope and some people choose despair. It is not the circumstances that determine hope because some people have great hope in awful circumstances and other people are hopeless in pretty good circumstances. There are some people who are in constant pain and have little prospects for a physical recovery from their illness and yet you talk to them and they are loaded with an exuding hope. There are other people who are in great physical shape and don't seem to have any illness at all and they are the most hopeless people with whom you can have a conversation.

Several medical studies have rated the hopefulness of surgery patients and then tracked recovery and survival rate over 5 and 10 years. Those who choose to hope increased their likelihood of survival by up to 300%.

Perhaps Lisa Beamer said it best. Her husband was aboard United Airlines flight 93 on September 11, 2001 and spoke the famous words, "Let's roll!" Todd Beamer died a tragic death from terrorism. Lisa was five months pregnant and had two young children at home. Her circumstances were grim. Lisa Beamer said, "I knew I had a choice. I could choose fear or I could choose hope" and then she said, "I choose hope."

St. Paul wrote in Romans 5:1-5,

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

It starts with suffering which is the universal human experience. Every one of us has a story of suffering to tell. The question is what do we do with that suffering? And we choose to persevere, that is to hang in there and that choice of perseverance builds character and character builds hope and the Holy Spirit in the Christian helps us through that process.

We don't choose to suffer. I don't know anybody that chooses pain but we do choose hope. Understanding that choice is not so much a matter of sitting down in a chair and going between option A and option B. Option A is desperation and option B is hopefulness. No, it's not like that. It's in a whole series of individual choices. But we choose hope wisely, not a foolish fantasy but rooted in reality and trust in God. We choose to hang out with people who are themselves hopeful because it can crush hope when those around us are saddened themselves and hopeless.

Or it is the choice to pray for encouragement. I do that everyday. On my daily prayer list is that God will directly and indirectly, through others, encourage me to make it through today and tomorrow. I know that I need that.

It is the choice to get enough sleep because lack of sleep steals hope. When we are tired and when we are down hope slips too easily away.

It is the choice to be patient. The recognition that while hope is for a better tomorrow, it may not be in the next 24 hours. Romans 8:25 says, "*But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*" Sometimes what we hope for takes months and even years. It's the choices that we make. We choose to hope.

Michelangelo spent another long day on his back painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome. It was a lonely day for him. His body just ached. The sunlight had disappeared and the candlelight was flickering and he was discouraged and decided to call it a day. So he crawled over the scaffolding and down the ladder and ate his dinner by himself, a lonely man. Before going to sleep that night he wrote a sonnet to his aching body, a sonnet that is still available to be read today and the last line of Michelangelo's sonnet says, "I am no painter." He was so discouraged that he concluded that when it came to art he was incompetent. He went to bed and slept through the night and when the sun rose the next morning he got himself up, he went back to the Sistine Chapel, climbed up the ladder, rolled on his back, took out his pallet of paint and he began to paint again his portrayal of God's creation of the universe,

specifically of earth and humankind. Now how did he do that? He chose to go on. He chose to hope.

Now listen, almost everything here so far said applies equally to Christians and non-Christians, so is there no difference between those who are believers and unbelievers, those who follow Jesus Christ and those who do not? Oh there is a huge difference and that is because Christians have an enormous advantage when it comes to hope because we know that God is on our side. God spoke in Jeremiah 29 through the Old Testament prophet, *“For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future, then you will call upon me and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”*

Hope is kind of like an inflatable raft with multiple chambers to blow up. As a father of four one of the frequent duties of my life has been to inflate such things. Flotation rafts are designed with multiple chambers that have to be inflated separately. It's actually not a conspiracy against Dad to keep him winded, it's a safety measure. If one chamber springs a leak and deflates, you're still okay because the other remaining chambers will keep you afloat.

You see that's what God does. He does not promise to us that every chamber of our lives will always be full of hope. When there is a chamber that springs a slow leak or when one part of our lives is ripped open until all hope is gone out of it, God will see to it that there are other parts of our lives that have enough hope to keep us afloat and to get us into tomorrow. God is on our side. God wants the best for us. He has planned to make that happen. He gives us all that we need to grow hope. He is committed to our future. He will never abandon us and so when hope dies, when plans fail, when things go terribly wrong God comes in and gives new hope, new plans, turns failure into success so never give up hope. With God on our side we can always expect a better tomorrow.

Seek God. You will find him. Choose hope. You will not be disappointed and never, ever, give up hope! With God on our side we can always expect a better tomorrow.