

A MOTHER'S HOPE

God's Encouragement for Those Who Encourage Others

We Meet God's Heart in Mothers

I want to reflect with you today on the subject of a Mother's Hope and explore that theme from a couple of angles. Let me just begin by observing that where it is present in someone, ***there is nothing quite so beautiful, powerful and encouraging to her offspring as a Mother's Hope.*** I remember reading the story of a boy named Pablo who recounted the influence his mom had upon his life: "My mother said to me: 'Son, if you become a soldier you'll be a general; if you become a monk you'll end up as the Pope.' Instead, I became a painter and wound up as Picasso!"

In one of the Apostle Paul's most famous writings, he says: **Love bears all things, believes all things, HOPES all things. (1 Cor 13:7).** In other words, love of the highest kind, says Paul, bears burdens for you and believes in your potential, and longs for the very best for you and never ever gives up on you. And when God in the Old Testament is searching for some analogy to explain that he has a passion like this for his children Israel even after they have messed up badly, even while they are enduring hardship, this is how God describes his love: **Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?... See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands (Isa 49:15-16).**

At her best, no one communicates a hope-filled love closer to God's than a mom. I remember how many times I came home from school dejected from some bad encounter with a classmate, or a poor performance on some assignment, or a failure on the field and my mother was there to pick me up. I remember when the person I adored in college dumped me and I was so devastated; it was my grandmother who called me up and said: "*Lots of fish in the ocean. Pack your bags. I'm taking you fishing in Florida!*" I think of the common sense counsel my stepmother, Patty Ann, has shared with me so many times that's helped me see a fresh way through a problem. Or the way when I get too down on our boys to the point of discouraging them, their mother, Amy, rushes in to declare her indomitable belief in them.

Have you had one or more human beings who have HOPED in you like this? I imagine many of you could tell such stories. But even if you haven't and can't, remember this: God looks at you as he looked at his child, Israel. He says: **Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!** And then picture how Jesus fulfills and seals this promise by pouring out his own blood for you upon the cross. **See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands (Isa 49:15-16).** There is nothing quite so beautiful, powerful and encouraging to those she stretches out her heart and hands to as a Mother's Hope.

God Has Grace & Mercy for You

But I would be remiss if I didn't also observe that many mothers need to be given hope themselves. Perhaps you are one of them. Raising children has always been a rigorous journey, but it is especially so now. Not too long ago, the New York Times carries an article entitled: **"America's Mothers Are in Crisis. Is anyone listening to them?"** The article pointed to other headlines that repeat the theme: "Pandemic Triples Anxiety and Depression Symptoms In New Mothers." "Working Moms Are Reaching The Breaking Point." Almost 70 percent of mothers say that worry and stress have damaged their health.¹ They know they need more self-care but don't know where to find the margin to do it. Dads and kids: ***How could we help replace "MOM'S PACE" with more "MOM SPACE" – not just today but every week?***

Even without the past two years, mothers I know say that being a mom can bring out both the hopeful best of you and also the horrible worst. At least this is how Christian author, Nancy Ortberg, described her experience in an essay entitled, *"The Jekyll and Hyde of Motherhood."* "When I became a mother, I found a [noble Dr.] Jekyll inside of me. For the first time there was a person in my life whom I loved more than I loved myself. I was doing unselfish things because I wanted to. I was becoming a patient and kind, calm, reasonable, generous, thoughtful, loving person. I thought, *This is a good thing, this person who is emerging. I love being a mom.*

"But then there is another person who comes out sometimes... and I want to say, *Who is she? How can I make her go away?* At one time I had a three-year-old, a two-year-old, and an infant... The fussy baby... clung to me like a baby monkey hangs onto its mother and would not let me put him down. While [he did that], my toddler was unwinding the toilet paper and making designs in every room of the house. She also took all of the books off the shelves and started tearing pages out of them. While this was going on, my three-year-old was begging me to play Candyland... There was a mound of dirty laundry... [and] no food in the house, and I had to go to the store.

'At the grocery store, I had a baby clinging to me, a toddler in the grocery cart, my other one running up and down the aisles; and the grocery cart was so full I had to kick the pad of diapers down the aisle... I fought to hold back the tears as I thought, ***What am I doing with my life? Look at me.*** Back at home, I unloaded the groceries, fixing lunch while the ice cream melted. Then I took the kids to the park before rest time. A park with three children is not fun. I kept counting, *One two three*. I came with three; I've got to leave with three. By the time I got home I hated myself [and] my children. I put them in their rooms and shut the doors... And I went into the garage, and I cried... I was becoming an impatient, frazzled, rude, angry, frustrated mom; I was splitting into two people. Not all moms are like that. I know moms who are patient and kind toward their children almost all of the time. I admire them. I don't like them, but I admire them. That is not me."

Nancy goes on to marvel that God does not abandon mothers like her. Quite the contrary, he has a heart for them. As I said last week, God is especially with us in the LOW places. "God loves you even with that Hyde creature living inside of you," says Ortberg. He wants to transform that creature but he's never going to forget or reject you, just because there's a Hyde in you. God sees the Dr. Jekyll part of you – the person becoming more like him. And he has great HOPE for you.

Have you ever thought about the battle that must have raged between the divine and human natures within Jesus? *"Do I wash Judas' feet or break them, so he can't go betray me? Do I pray to my father for the forgiveness of those crucifying me or send them to Hades? Do I stop and attend to that person's need or do I go and rest because I am weary and I thirst?"* The writer of the Book of Hebrews reminds us: **We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are... Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb 4:15-16)**

Maybe you're one of those mom's Nancy Ortberg mentions that just has it all together and are a perpetual source of peace and love. We want to read your book! But if you are a more complicated creature than that, hear this clearly: ***You can have HOPE mothers because Jesus understands you and has the mercy and grace you need*** – and all of us do.

God is at Work With You

Have you ever heard it said that *"a mother is only as happy as her least happy child"*? She can only be fully at peace when all her children have found God's peace for themselves. When I talk with mothers of adult children it is often evident how front-of-mind the condition of even their mature kids is to them. I spoke recently with my own mom who is 85. I was describing a particularly busy week. She started saying things like, "Well what if you made this change or asked for that help and slowed down and got more sleep." It sounded like a conversation we'd had when I was in college. I said, "Mom, you know I'm 63 years old, right? I get senior citizen discounts now. I've got to figure this stuff out for myself." She said, "I know, but I worry about you."

How many of you have at least one kid or grandkid you are worried about? Maybe they've have turned away from God or never turned to him in the first place [If you are one of those kids at any age... EXPAND]. Maybe you have a child who is making mistakes or seems to be lost or has have gotten him or herself into a big mess. You're not crazy. It's understandable to be concerned. But you don't have to carry all that weight 24/7. Someone bigger than you is doing that.

The Apostle Paul tells us that **[God] wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim 2:4)**. Jesus says, **What do you think? If a**

person owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way, your [Parent] in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost (Matt 18:12-14).

So, here's the takeaway: As much as you want to help your family members thrive, God wants it more. You can be certain that God himself is at work to reach that child or renew them in the ways he or she may need it. ***You can have HOPE, mothers, because God cares for the growth and salvation of your children even more than you do.*** Your prayers and words and actions toward your children or grandchildren are certainly important. Keep 'em coming. But God has people and influences he can bring to bear upon that child you are concerned about. He can reach them when they go off to college or off the rails... when they move across the country or find themselves in a pit... God is not done being a Heavenly Parent to your children yet. You can go to bed tonight, sleep soundly and let go of the worrying for a little while because God is going to be up all night anyway. As the Psalmist says, **He who watches over you will neither slumber nor sleep. (Psa 121:3-4).** As a pastor, I've heard so many stories that ended so much more positively than they began; so Moms, have HOPE. There is a heart even greater than yours at work.

God Has More to Show You

Mother's Day is bittersweet for my sister, Lisa. She's got three wonderful sons who have blessed her richly, but there will always be a hole in her heart because her daughter Carrie, afflicted with spina bifida, didn't make it. I have more friends than I can name here who lost a child during their teenage or young adult years and EACH of those names is precious to me. My wife's "other mother," Jeanne, is in her 80's now. She has a Christian faith but she can't understand why she's still here and two of her children aren't. There are a lot of moms (and dads and siblings) who know this kind of pain. It's one of the largest, most heroic fellowships in this church and the region around us. If YOU are one of those people and you haven't gotten connected yet to the ministry of Ian's Place in Clarendon Hills, I encourage you to look into that. There is an amazing fellowship with the mother of Jesus and many others at the foot of the Cross.

But remember, too, that beyond the Cross there stands an Empty Tomb. In the final chapter of the Lord of the Rings Trilogy, we overhear a conversation between the humble Hobbit, Frodo, and the great wizard, Gandalf. By now, Frodo has seen so much pain and loss, but something in him senses that there must be something more, that perhaps there is a light at the end of the darkness.. And so he asks the great wizard, Gandalf, ***"Is everything sad going to come UNTRUE?"***

Gandalf pauses for a moment, looks tenderly down into Frodo's imploring eyes and then replies: "*There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the will of evil.*" The author, J.R.R. Tolkien, you see, was a student of the Bible. He believed the Scripture's promise that there is coming a day when Christ returns to make everything new (Rev 21:5). The Apostle Paul puts it this way: **No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him. (1 Cor 2:9 NLT)**. Death will be swallowed up by life (1 Cor 15:54; 2 Cor 5:4). For my sister and Jeanne and you and all those who put their trust in Jesus -- it will be as if nothing sad had ever happened. You will awake to a morning of stunning redemption and joyful reunion, when your grief is replaced by laughter and thanksgiving. ***You can have HOPE, mothers, because God hasn't yet shown you all the good he has in store.***

So, on this Mother's Day, I pray that you who are such givers of hope to others will keep holding onto hope in God for yourself. Even when the Hyde in you emerges, have confidence that Jesus understands you. He has all the grace and mercy you need. If it ever feels like you've failed as a mother, dare to trust that God cares for the growth and salvation of your children as much as you do – more even – and He is still at work with them. And, finally, when those you've loved seem lost to you forever, remember, God hasn't yet shown you all the good he has in store. And dads and kids, I wonder how we might work today to slow Mom's Pace and give Mom Space to think on all this or do whatever else helps renew a Mother's Hope.

Please pray with me...

Lord, thank you for the mothers who have given us life and love and hope. We know that in their giving – however great or small -- they were reflecting YOU whose love and hope will never fail. Encourage the moms in our midst today and wrap your arms around those who await us in heaven. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ Jessica Grose, "America's Mothers Are in Crisis: Is anyone listening to them?" *The New York Times* (2-4-21)