

CORE COMPETENCIES

Core Beliefs

- Trinity
- Salvation by Grace
- Authority of Bible
- Personal God
- Identity in Christ
- Church
- Humanity
- Compassion
- Eternity
- Stewardship

Core Practices

- Worship
- Prayer
- Bible Study
- Single-Mindedness
- Biblical Community
- Spiritual Gifts
- Giving Away My Time
- Giving Away My Money
- Giving Away My Faith
- Giving Away My Life

Core Virtues

- Love
- Joy
- Peace
- Patience
- Kindness/Goodness
- Faithfulness
- Gentleness
- Self-Control
- Hope

I can cope with the hardships of life and death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

- Humility

We begin a new series this week—an Advent series. Advent is all about anticipation and arrival. It's one of my favorite times of year. I love to think about and marvel at the lengths God went to in sending His Son to us. As we look into the lives of the people He intersected with in the Christmas drama, I'd invite you to locate yourself in their story where you can. See where you have common ground with them. Ask how God might be saying some of the same kinds of words to you today. Even though we're separated from these people by geography and time, we still have much in common with them. Let's allow God to speak to us even as He spoke to them, and let's be ready to respond.

In the Story,

Richard Gotthardt, Pastor of Spiritual Formation

Christmas Series: Week 1 (Focus: Hope)

We had Hope for 199 days. We loved her. We enjoyed her richly and shared her with everyone we could. We held her during seizures. Then we let her go.

The day after we buried Hope, my husband said to me, "You know, I think we expected our faith to make this hurt less, but it doesn't." Our faith gave us an incredible amount of strength and encouragement while we had Hope, and we were comforted by the knowledge that she is in heaven. Our faith keeps us from being swallowed by despair. But I don't think it makes our loss hurt any less.

Early on in my journey, I said to God, "Okay, if I have to go through this, then give me everything. Teach me everything you want to teach me through this. Don't let this incredible pain be wasted in my life!"

God allows good and bad into our lives and we can trust him with both. Trusting God when the miracle does not come, when the urgent prayer gets no answer, when there is only darkness this is the kind of faith God values most of all.

I believe that the purpose of Hope's short life, and my life, was and is to glorify God.

Nancy Guthrie, Holding On to Hope (Tyndale, 2002); submitted by Gary Smith, Ft. Myers, Florida

This week we begin the season of advent looking forward to our celebration of Christ's birth. This first week we will be taking an up-close look at the angel's visitation to Zechariah and Elizabeth to tell them of the coming birth of their son John. The birth of a child was a dream that Zechariah and Elizabeth had hoped for long ago. This week we will focus in on this theme of hope and its ultimate purpose to deepen our worship of God.

Day 1: Hope in Waiting

Zechariah and Elizabeth had waited on God's provision of a child for a long time. Although, they had most likely given up hope long ago that they would ever be able to have a child, they had been faithful to God in the waiting. As you read through this passage, look for the theme of waiting on God.

Read Luke 1:5-25.

What is something in your life that you have prayed for and are waiting on God for?

How has this period of waiting affected your belief in God? Do you believe more or less in God's faithfulness?

Read Psalm 121. What do these verses tell us about God?

How do these truths about God relate to the area of your life for which you are waiting on God?

Day 2: Hope in the Face of Impossibility

Zechariah and Elizabeth not only had to be patient in waiting on God, but they also faced the reality of the physical impossibility of their request. Both of them were well past their child bearing years and had resigned themselves to the fact that they would never be parents.

Waiting on God isn't a one day decision, but a daily commitment to trust Him for His faithfulness. Often the circumstances we are trusting God for seem impossible. As you read Luke 1:5-25 again today, look at it through the lens of hope in the face of impossibility.

Reread Luke 1:5-25.

What is an area of your life in which you are facing the reality that your desires may be impossible outside of God's intervention?

What is your response to this reality?

Read Luke 1:37 which is a statement from an angel to Mary regarding the impossibility of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Think on this statement and ask God to encourage you in your area of impossibility.

Day 3: Hopelessness of Comparison

Something that can destroy our hope in God during difficult times is feelings of disgrace or our perception that we are flawed when we are compared to other people. Elizabeth experienced disgrace in her inability to bear a child. Read Luke 1:5-25 again today looking for and thinking on how comparison would have made Elizabeth feel even more hopeless.

Is there an area in your life in which you identify with Elizabeth's disgrace and disappointment because of a tendency to compare yourself to others?

How have you allowed this area of feeling flawed or different to isolate you from other people? From God?

Ask God to show you His purposes in this area of limitations or in these circumstances.

Ask Him to allow you to experience His acceptance and His hope in this area.

Day 4: Hopeful Obedience

Although Zechariah and Elizabeth had lost hope that they would ever have a child, they pursued God wholeheartedly. As you read through this week's passage (Luke 1:5-25) again, pay close attention to the evidence of Zechariah and Elizabeth's obedience.

What allowed Zechariah and Elizabeth to faithfully follow God in the face of great disappointment?

If our priority is following God, how will that allow us to retain hope in the face of a hopeless situation?

In life circumstances in which you are waiting on God, how can you make your pursuit of God your priority?

Day 5: Hope Fulfilled

Zechariah and Elizabeth's experience of waiting on God and then being given a son built their hope in God. Their son was John the Baptist whose life focus was to proclaim the coming of Jesus, preparing the way for Jesus' earthly ministry. God answered Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers in far greater ways than they could have ever imagined.

Our creed for hope is: *I can cope with the hardships of life and death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.* It is our hope in Jesus Christ that must be the foundation for facing life's waiting times.

Read Hebrews 6:17-20

What does this verse tell us about hope?

We are approaching the Christmas season in which we celebrate the birth of Jesus; the One who offered us our salvation. His act of death on a cross and bodily resurrection are the anchors for our souls. We are preparing to celebrate the One who offered us this kind of hope.

How does this truth affect your preparations for Christmas?

This week, what can you do to tangibly remind yourself of the focus of our celebration: Jesus the hope-giver?