



CHAPTER 3

Living in Hope

"Our consolation
and **OUR HOPE**
IS CHRIST HIMSELF."

—Pope Francis, Letter to Christians in the Middle East, December 21, 2014

29. **THE VICAR OF HOPE.** Pope Francis has been a beacon of light and a messenger of mercy. His words of encouragement have inspired me, and millions like me. I would like to share with you now a few passages that have offered me great comfort.

"You have asked me for a word of hope, and the one word I have to give you, is Jesus Christ. When everything seems too much, when it seems that the world is crashing down around you, embrace his Cross, draw close to him and please, never let go of his hand; please, never leave him." (14)

"Are we often weary, disheartened and sad? Do we feel weighed down by our sins? Do we think that we won't be able to cope? Let us not close our hearts, let us not lose confidence, let us never give up. There are no situations which God cannot change; there is no sin which he cannot forgive, if only we open ourselves to him." (15)

"May we not be robbed of hope, because this strength is a grace, a gift from God which carries us forward with our eyes fixed on heaven." (16)

Imagine if we lived in hope in such a way that nothing, or no one, could rob us of hope. Imagine if we lived in such a way that Christ were as real to us as the "real world" we live in. What if Jesus Christ himself wanted to give this gift to you at Christmas?

To live in communion with Christ. To never be robbed of hope. To live like this. Imagine if that were possible ... for *you*.



30. **IS THAT REALLY POSSIBLE?** As I write to you, I feel my heart leaning toward the hope of "living in God" and then, almost immediately, I hear the whisper: "Is that really possible?" After all, I must admit I can sometimes barely get through the day, much less do so in perfect communion with Christ. Soon after I hear the invitation to live in Christ I hear the temptation that I cannot do so. Then, I realize the temptation is just that: a temptation. Perhaps you can hear it, too. Perhaps you too would like a deeper relationship with God. You too would like to live in hope. Then, you too hear the temptations. Perhaps they sound like this: "You can't do that, look at all your sin." "You can't do that, you're too busy. You can barely keep up now, much less if you had to try to be perfect." "You can't do that; you don't want to become one of those fanatics do you?" "You can't do that, you barely believe in God, much less religion." These are temptations. The reason we believe all those temptations is because 90 percent of the statement is true: you cannot do this. No, you cannot do this alone.

31. What I have come to know in my own life is this: God is merciful. God's fidelity runs deeper than the patterns of our fidelity. Regardless of how often you have struggled with life, God does not struggle in that way. He is faithful. He is pursuing you. He wants you. He wants to help you. To live in God, to live in hope, is to believe that he is who he says he is and he does what he promised he would do. I remember the day when I for the first time read Pope Benedict XVI's *Spe Salvi*. Among the many insights that inspired me, I found great comfort in his practical wisdom teaching us all how to live in hope. In chapter one he mentions three keys to living in hope: patience, perseverance and constancy. Let us together unpack these three keys.

32. **PATIENCE.** I remember the day I found out I was to become a bishop. It was the fall of 2006. I was 43 years old and had been ordained 17 years. I never dreamed of being a bishop. I was happy as a pastor and thought I would live the rest of my life as such. However, God called and I trustingly said "yes." I was ordained auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of New Orleans on February 28, 2007, almost exactly one year and six months after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. It was all so new: a new home, a new diocese, a new people to love and serve. What I discovered in the hearts of the people I came to love was this: in order for them to hope they had to be patient. Katrina's wake of destruction would take years to recover from. Families were split, neighborhoods were destroyed, entire cities had to rebuild. It took time, a lot of time. My fatherly heart did not want people's suffering to unnecessarily linger. However, I too needed to be patient. I learned that as a bishop the most important thing I could do was accompany them, to walk with them. I, with them, needed to be patient.

To live in hope, we must be patient. If hope is a person, I am called in patience to trust that God is always actively involved in the ordinary circumstances of my life. Even if I cannot see what or when or how, I trust that God is doing something. During Katrina's rebuilding I learned from the holiness of people that I served that God really does want what is best for us. It may not come on our timeline, it may not look like what we expected, but God is faithful. I especially want to encourage anyone reading who may be struggling with the economy, or with more personal suffering such as your marriage, your family or your health. Be patient. God is active, He is doing something. Even if you cannot see what God is doing, have hope that he is with you and soon will ease the burden.

33. **PERSEVERANCE.** Hebrews 10:36 reminds us: "You need endurance to do the will of God and receive what he has promised." Notice here that Saint Paul says three things. First, God has promised. He has promised to be with us. He has promised he will never abandon us. Second, we are to receive what he has promised. Christianity is not only a belief in a person but is also a belief that the person is actively involved in the circumstances of my life. God wants to bless me. Of course, we cannot have a false receptivity, merely sitting back expecting God to do everything for us. We are called to an active receptivity where we are intentionally looking to him, letting him lead us. Third, we need endurance or perseverance, especially when the blessings do not come on our timeline. As I recall the many sacred conversations with Katrina victims, I remember the distinct fatigue that comes in waiting. As we wait for light in the darkness it is easy for us to grow tired of waiting, to grow tired in the waiting. I saw many good people in their fatigue grow more susceptible to temptation. It sounded like this: "God is not going to come through for you." "Nothing is going to happen." "You're alone." "Why don't you move on and take control of your life." "You'd be better off without God, after all it doesn't look like he's going to answer your prayer." I heard those voices tempting the many I served. They were good people, simply growing tired in the waiting. They heard those temptations. I suspect many of us reading have heard them, too. When we grow tired in the waiting, we pray for perseverance. The temptation in fatigue accuses God of abandoning us. Perseverance requires that I hold fast to what I know to be true, even when I cannot see it in front of me. When we cannot see our way out of our current situation, we hope in the truth that God is always with us. Here we choose to choose. We choose to believe, even when our situation is not changing.

34. **CONSTANCY.** Constancy refers to a firmness of mind. Constancy is a disposition of sorts. Saint Paul speaks of the virtue of constancy in his letter to the Ephesians when he writes: We should "no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from their cunning in the interests of deceitful scheming. Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head." (17) Saint Paul urges us to be firmly rooted in truth, in Christ. To live in hope requires a firm grounding of our interior disposition. Constancy is like the rudder of our disposition. You might look at it as our predetermined attitude. We are constant in our choices: in our prayer, in our turning to God, in reminding ourselves of who he is and what he promised. What keeps us constant? We need both interior and exterior structures. Interiorly we need a commitment to prayer and self-reflection. We need time to pay attention to our attitudes and from where we make decisions. Exteriorly we need people, the right kind of people in our lives. We need people who believe in hope themselves. During those early months in the Archdiocese of New Orleans constancy was a grace I prayed for. Not only did I see people who needed grounding in their own lives, but I myself needed to not be "tossed by waves and swept along by every" form of distraction or discouragement. I experienced so much change: from a pastor to a bishop, from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, and all of it in the intensity of post-Katrina trauma. In the overwhelming period of transition and change, I found myself surrounded by people who were struggling with suffering and the fatigue of unanswered prayers. There I discovered that constancy is a grace to pray for. When we grow weak, when we can no longer hope on our own or persevere on our own, we need to ask God to give us the grace. He is eager to give, if we but merely ask for help.



35. **CHOOSING TO CHOOSE.** Life has been a great teacher. I have learned much about life in the school of struggle and suffering. As a person of hope I have learned that to live in hope requires that I choose to hope. Pope Francis encourages us: "Christian hope is not simply a desire or wish, it is not optimism. No! For a Christian, hope is expectation, a fervent, passionate expectation of the ultimate and definitive fulfillment of a mystery: the mystery of the love of God in which we were reborn and are already living." (18) I choose to have hope because I believe that Jesus is who he says he is. I choose to have hope because of the "passionate expectation" that God is real. I choose to hope when I do not feel it. I choose to hope when I do not see the change I long for. I choose to hope when making a choice is all I can do. This Christmas many of us are called to choose to have hope. You may not see the change in your life that you are longing for. There, may I ask you as a spiritual father: can you choose to hope? You may be fatigued in the waiting. There, may I ask you: can you choose to hope? May I ask you, as I have before in this letter: what do you need from the Lord? To live in hope, to be a person who lives in hope, what do you want from God this Christmas?

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

For your personal prayer and small group discussion

- What stirs within as you consider living in hope?
- How particularly is God speaking to you about patience?
- How particularly is God speaking to you about perseverance?
- How particularly is God speaking to you about constancy?
- What do you really want from God this Christmas? Has your answer changed at all since week two?

FOR YOUR PRAYER

Praying with the Scripture readings from daily Mass

- **SUNDAY, DECEMBER 11.** Psalm 146:6-10: "The LORD sets captives free" (vs. 7) God wants to set you free. Look at the following words: fear, doubt, complacency, stuck, sin, comfortable. From which of those does God need to set you free from?
- **MONDAY, DECEMBER 12.** Luke 1:26-38: "May it be done to me according to your word" (vs. 38) Mary believed that God could work miracles in her life. Do you believe? Do you want Him to do so? Do you want God to work miracles in your spiritual life?
- **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13.** Psalm 34:1-23: "I sought the LORD, and he answered me" (vs. 7) Do you believe that when you seek the Lord that He will answer you? If so, what do you really need from Him? If not, why not? Have you had an honest conversation with Him about this?
- **WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 14.** Isaiah 45:1-25: "I, the LORD, do all these things" (vs. 7) God can do a lot. God can do "all these things." Let's go deeper with yesterday. Do you believe that when you seek the Lord that He will answer you? Believe. Ask. Ask for what you desire.
- **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 15.** Isaiah 54:1-10: "The LORD calls you back" (vs. 6) The only place to start is to start where you are. Wherever you are with God simply ask Him to meet you there.
- **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 16.** Psalm 67:1-8: "our God, blesses us. May God bless us still" (vs. 7-8) Consider all the ways that God has blessed you in the past. Consider that He wants to do even more. If God could bless you with anything, what would you want Him to bless you with?
- **SATURDAY, DECEMBER 17.** Read the Scripture readings for Sunday of the Fourth Sunday of Advent to prepare to this weekend's Liturgy.