

I love this story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. In fact, I’ve probably preached on it a dozen times, and each time I come back to it, I discover something new. At this point, of course, it’s not as easy to discover something new. It takes a little more pondering and prayer. But still, it happens. Something pops out that I may not have noticed before or may not have thought about. This time it was the sentence, **“We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”** Notice the past tense. **“We had hoped...”**

So why did these particular words pop out? Well...if Easter was about anything, it was about the fulfillment of this hope, wasn’t it? By raising Jesus, God showed that He was who He said He was and could do what He’d promised to do. God made clear that Jesus was indeed **“the one to redeem Israel.”** But even as this hope was being fulfilled, the two disciples had given up hope. Even as evidence of the resurrection piled up around them, their hope was over and done. **“We had hoped,”** they said; past tense. **“We had hoped...”** Looking back, no doubt they realized the irony of this – in fact, the irony of saying it to Jesus Himself. But looking back, did they realize anything more than that? Did they learn the obvious lesson about the danger of giving up hope too soon?

What a costly mistake that could have been! Giving up hope too soon. And what a costly mistake it still can be – even for us today! Yet, it’s so easy to do, isn’t it? Giving up hope too soon. It is so understandable, for by its very nature, hope is hard to hold onto. To start with, hope is always about the future; it’s always about the unknown and the unseen. That makes it hard enough. Then too, there are different kinds of hope, and some are more reliable than others.

For instance, there is the kind that’s absolutely reliable – the kind better called assurance. One example would be our hope of eternal life. This hope is divinely guaranteed. In fact, it’s backed up by Jesus’ resurrection and His promise, **“Because I live, you also will live.”** So with this kind of hope, it’s just a matter of time before it’s fulfilled. Yet even so, it can still be hard to hold onto.

Much harder, though, is the kind of hope at the other end of the spectrum, hope that is basically just a wish. This kind has no divine guarantee, no backing or promise from Scripture. It’s something we’d like God to do, but we have no reason to expect God to do it. We just...hope He will. So naturally, this kind of hope is much harder to hold onto than the first.

But it’s not the hardest. That would be the kind of hope that falls right smack dab in the middle: hoping for something we know God wants to happen, because His Word says so, but which He will not make happen if it means violating someone’s free will. You see the challenge! God knows what’s best for each person, and God wants what’s best for each person, but He will not force anyone to accept it. Encourage, enlighten, persuade, warn, allow consequences – that He’ll do -- but

He will not violate free will. God will not force anyone enjoy a healthy, productive life; God will not drag anyone kicking and screaming into heaven. So you see why this is by far the hardest kind of hope to hold onto! And as it happens, often our deepest, tenderest hopes fall into this category.

For instance, suppose we have a loved one who has gone down the wrong path in life. We know God wants them to turn around, but we also know God will not force them. So we pray and pray for this loved one – our only “promise” being that God is working on them somehow, somehow. We hope and hope that they’ll see the light – our only “guarantee” being that God desires this even more than we do. But after years of this, it can be tempting to question: *Is this person ever going to change?* Especially if we see no desire to change, it can be tempting to question: *Is there even any point in praying for them or trying to help?* And that’s when it is tempting to do what those two disciples did on the road to Emmaus – give up and adopt a “past tense” attitude. “**We had hoped**” for change. But not anymore; that’s over with now. “**We had hoped...**”

My friends, what danger there is in this attitude! “**We had hoped...**” Do you see the danger? How presumptuous it is! How faithless! How short-sighted! We cannot know what all might be happening in a given situation! We cannot know what God might be doing behind the scenes! More to the point, we cannot know what might turn everything around just the way we’re hoping – perhaps not today or tomorrow but eventually...if we just persevere!

And if we know God wants something to happen but just hasn’t brought it about yet, what does it mean spiritually for us to say, “**We had hoped**”? That we’re giving up on God? That we question His good will? That we doubt He “**is able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine**”? Really, what else can it mean if we give up and adopt a “past tense” attitude: “**We had hoped**”?

Plus consider how much can be lost! Like a wayward loved one “**we had hoped**” would turn around. Or a relationship “**we had hoped**” would be mended. Or a marriage “**we had hoped**” would be salvaged. The list could go on and on. So much can be lost by giving up hope too soon! And these are just personal issues! How about social issues? Justice issues? Moral decay? World problems? “**We had hoped!**” What will improve with an attitude like that? If something was ever worth hoping for, and if God hasn’t given a clear no, then it is still worth hoping for, and waiting for, working for, praying for, fighting for! Let there be no “past tense” attitude: “**we had hoped!**”

And just so you don’t think I’m pointing fingers here, let me assure you: I know this temptation well! I know it all too well! Maybe that’s why these three little words popped out at me: “**we had hoped!**” Let me also assure you: I know that every person here “gets” the importance of perseverance – the importance of hoping...and waiting and working and praying and fighting for the things that

really matter! It's just that it's so easy to forget what a long, hard slog perseverance can be! And that's why I'm bringing this up today. History shows the potential pay-off of perseverance – sinners becoming saints, enemies becoming friends, swords beaten into plowshares, oppression overcome. But what history doesn't show is how tough it is before the pay-off – how draining, how discouraging perseverance can be! Nor does history show how tempting it is to lose hope right up to the moment our hope is fulfilled! But that's the truth, and it helps so much to remember it -- not just that perseverance can lead to the fulfillment of our hope, but rather, even though it's a long, hard slog, perseverance can lead to the fulfillment of our hope!

I mean, take Saint Monica for example. If we could talk to her, I'll bet that's the story we'd get. History tells how years and years of praying for her wayward son, Augustine, finally paid off. We know him today as *Saint* Augustine. But think what a long, hard slog that was! Years and years of him chasing after any fool philosophy. Years and years of him bouncing from bed to bed without taking responsibility for his actions. That kid did his level best to break his mother's heart! And how many times must she have thought: *What's the use of hoping he'll change? He just gets worse instead of better!* How many times must she have felt like throwing in the towel? *That's just the way he is, and there's nothing I can do!* But there was something she could do, and Monica did it. She kept praying for him, kept trying to show him the right way. She kept holding onto her hope no matter what. And in time, her hope was fulfilled. In time, her perseverance paid off. But only after a long, hard slog!

Then too, some of you remember the example I used during Lent about the Monday evening prayer services in former East Germany. History tells how years and years of praying for liberation finally paid off. The Berlin Wall fell and soon afterward, the communist dictatorship. But again, think what a long, hard slog that was! What if you had been one of the few brave souls who dared come out for the first Monday evening prayer service in Leipzig – knowing Stasi agents were watching you; not knowing what the repercussions might be? And think how you would have felt coming out Monday after Monday, year after year, with no sign your prayers were changing anything? In fact, the oppression got even worse! Sure, eventually more and more people joined you in prayer. Eventually other churches followed your lead. Eventually hundreds of thousands joined in peaceful candlelight demonstrations. Eventually your prayers were answered. But each step of the way, how tempting it was to lose your hope – right up to the moment your hope was fulfilled! Yes, perseverance paid off, but here again, only after a long, hard slog!

And such has been the case many times in history, hasn't it? That alone should make us think. But then too, think how many more times it could have happened but didn't because people got discouraged and finally adopted a "past tense" attitude. *We had hoped that our loved one would turn around... We had hoped that our friend would come to the Lord... We had hoped that our church would*

experience revival... We **had** hoped that our city government would improve... We **had** hoped... You see where this is going?! Perhaps not every hope will be fulfilled. Granted! But the chances plummet dramatically if we give into a “past tense” attitude: “**We had hoped...**”

The truth is: we’ll only know for sure when we stand in eternity. And actually there may be some pleasant surprises! This came up last Thursday in Bible class while we were discussing the verse in Psalm 138, “**The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me.**” We discussed how, this side of heaven, we may never know God’s full purpose for us...or all the ways He has responded to our prayers and efforts. One example I shared was George Mueller. Up to the day he died, this great man of God had prayed and prayed and prayed for his friend’s conversion. And up to the day he died, he never saw his friend budge an inch. So much for his hope, right? But that was not the end of the story. As a matter of fact, God finally did get through to this friend. Do you know when? At Mueller’s burial! Right there at the graveside the man finally came to faith in Christ. All that perseverance paid off after all! True, Mueller only got to see this standing in eternity, but what a joy that must have been! What a relief, too, that, however tempted, he never let himself slip into a “past tense” attitude and give up: *I **had** hoped that my friend would come to faith in Christ.*

Sometimes it may seem like we know too much to hold onto our hope. It just doesn’t seem realistic! But if our hope is backed by God’s Word, if it’s something God says He wants to happen, then the just the opposite is true: we know too little to give up our hope! If the two disciples on the road to Emmaus teach us anything it’s that we cannot know what all might be happening in a given situation; we cannot know what God might be doing behind the scenes! So what would make it realistic to give up? If something was ever worth hoping for, and if God hasn’t given a clear no, then it is still worth hoping for, and waiting for, working for, praying for, fighting for! That’s the point we want to take home with us today. Even if it means a long, hard slog, let there be no “past tense” attitude: “**we had hoped!**” Amen.