

Chapter 1

Hanging on... When You Want to Give Up

My roommate and I had decided to do a “manly thing” and go camping in the hills that surrounded our college. Since neither of us had dates for the weekend, this seemed like a good alternative. The fact that we had no camping gear or survival skills didn’t cross our minds. We were free and adult (well, almost) and could do anything we wanted.

Walking along, enjoying the splendors of the mountain country above California’s fertile Napa Valley, we came to a giant cliff pockmarked with small holes evidently carved by generations of birds making their nests - or something else, entirely; I’m no geologist. The cliff was in our path, and instead of going around it, my roommate wanted to climb it. Roommates are seldom selected on the basis of high intelligence.

“I don’t know,” I said, staring up at the vertical wall. “It’s going to be a tougher climb than you think.” Translation: “You want to do what!”

“What’s the matter? Are you chicken?”

“No. If you can climb it, I can too. I was just saying we don’t have to climb it.”

“It’ll take us hours to go around. Come on.”

I realize that any sane adult would have stopped the discussion at this point and explained the obvious reasons for not accepting such a stupid challenge. I, on the other hand, swallowed a couple of times and started up the cliff. It was tough going, and my arms started aching after only a few feet. But there was no way I was going to let my roommate know how afraid I was. So I ignored the discomfort and kept on climbing.

I didn’t look down for fear I’d get dizzy. Instead, I just pressed on, determined to get to the top, no matter what it took. My pride was at stake, and besides, at this point, trying to get down was an even more frightening thought than going on ahead.

I had made it about three-fourths of the way up the face of the cliff, when suddenly my roommate called out from below with a note of terror in his voice. “Danny [that’s what people called me then], I’m stuck! I can’t move. My legs are shaking too bad!”

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I looked down, and my stomach lurched. Dizziness swept over me, and I hugged the rock face of the cliff, breathing deeply. Here I was, hanging on by my fingernails, barely surviving this terrifying ordeal, and now my roommate was about to fall off the cliff. At this height, there was no way he'd survive the fall. What was I supposed to do?

I reviewed my options. I could leave my friend where he was and continue the climb. But that would leave me on top of the cliff, even farther from help - with no idea what to do next. Or I could try to climb down, get under my friend, and try to help him down the face of the cliff. This second option was really stupid. I was barely hanging on myself. How could I be of any help to him?

Yet, on reflection, I knew it was the only choice I had. Nothing else offered any hope at all. It was a minor hope, admittedly, with all sorts of negatives involved. My chances were slim, at best. But, when you come right down to it, a slim hope is immeasurably better than no hope. So I closed my eyes and started down.

Somehow, I managed to get around and under my roommate. Then I climbed back up to where he was. I calmed him and then guided his feet back down the face of the cliff, putting each foot in a hole and holding it there as he settled his weight on it. In that manner, we worked our way down the face of the cliff and got to the bottom.

When we stood again, at last, on solid ground, I looked up at the cliff we had survived (you'll notice I didn't say "the cliff we had beaten"). It seemed even higher than it had in the beginning. I realized more clearly how hopeless the task was that I had set myself. In retrospect, there was no way I could have done what I did. Getting myself off the face of that cliff would have been challenge enough. But to get my roommate down too - with his legs shaking and his confidence broken? It was impossible. Yet, I had done it. We had done it.

I realized, then, that hope, even the slimmest hope, acted on can enable us to achieve the impossible. I realized, too, that a person should never give up on anything that needs doing. Even the smallest measure of hope is incredibly more valuable than having no hope at all. It had saved two very stupid guys' lives.

The twin enemies of hope

Hope. That's what this book is all about. How to get it. How to keep it. How to make it work for you so that you're able to hang on

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when people all around you are letting go. And how to find it again, if it has been torn from you by people, circumstances you don't understand, or even by your own stupidity.

The hated enemies of hope are defeatism and despair. These two are like polluted air in which hope cannot survive. There are people all around us who, by their words and actions, communicate that there is no reason to go on, that the battle is too tough, that we're sure to lose anyway, so why not save ourselves a load of trouble?

We have to fight against these voices if we're to have any hope of surviving to develop a life of faith. We can't be passive about this. If we want to become all that Jesus wants us to be, we must become vocal advocates for hope. We have to take the offensive. We have to stand up and be counted on the side that says we can beat this - whatever it is.

As I write these words, Magic Johnson has just announced that he's been infected by the HIV virus, the virus from which AIDS comes. What this means is that Magic is going to die from AIDS. He may even be dead by the time this manuscript is published and gets into your hands.

Magic has long been one of my heroes. I never thought he was perfect, but I admired his spirit. Magic was the eternal optimist. He always believed he could make the perfect pass, hit the game-winning three-pointer, or motivate his team to go the extra mile in a relentless quest for victory. When his team lost, he took defeat hard, but he always bounced back with that irrepressible smile. Magic was a winner, and he always saw the positive side in any situation.

I don't know what Magic's personal life is like, and I don't want to. Obviously, he made some devastating mistakes. I listened to Magic on television the night he revealed to the public that he'd been infected. "I'm gonna beat this," he said. And, even knowing that no one with AIDS has ever been cured, I believed him. Magic then went on to dedicate himself to working with young people, warning them about the kind of conduct that got him infected, warning them not to believe that it happens only to "other people."

The week after his announcement, sports commentators were discussing what they would remember the most about Magic Johnson - what moment best captured his uniqueness. Different commentators cited various sterling moments in his career. Then one said, "I'll remember this moment right now, with Magic standing in front of the cameras, announcing his condition and telling the world that he would

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give his life to helping others avoid falling into what had happened to him. It is in many ways the most characteristic event in the life of the Magic Johnson I've come to know."

I'll remember that comment for a long time, because it has the ring of truth. It captures a concept that surpasses who is going to win what game in the world of sports and touches on a fundamental human quality we can all understand.

In my mind, in spite of the HIV virus, in spite of admitting his own weaknesses and failures, Magic Johnson stands for hope. He stands for that irrepressible spirit that refuses to fall victim to defeatism or despair. In that sense, and only in that sense, he serves as a model for what all of us need to emulate.

That's what this first chapter is about: learning how to recognize and then resist the incursions of defeatism and despair in our lives. Learning how to hang on when we want to run away and hide. It's a vital skill we must acquire if we're going to have the faith and tenacity to hang on till Jesus comes. But to do it, we need a perspective.

Discovering the life of faith

Part of the problem so many of us face in putting together a lasting life of faith is that we're caught up in misconceptions about what it means to be a fully functional Christian. In the following pages, we'll be contrasting what people think it means to be a Christian - in various circumstances - and what the Bible describes as the normal Christian life.

The life of faith isn't really all that complicated. There are no arcane secrets that only a few can master after strenuous effort. There aren't any mystical revelations accessible only to a select group of the spiritual elite. However, a life of faith can seem very elusive to many of us because, consciously or not, we want it to match our preconceived ideas. We want to fit it into a box the size and shape we feel we can comfortably handle.

It doesn't work that way. We can't put God in a box, and neither can we do so with a life of faith. In this matter, at least, we have to take things as they are, not as we want them to be.

A life of faith involves certain things we believe. For example, it involves believing that God is both loving and just - and that He cared so much for us that He sent us His own Son to die in our place. It involves a belief that we're worth God's attention. (Sometimes

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believing that we're worthy of love is just as hard as believing God is capable of it.)

A life of faith involves certain decisions we need to make. For example, we have to decide to accept the gift of life God offers us, including a willingness to allow Him to change us according to His will. It involves a decision to act on our beliefs, rather than merely standing back and hoping good things will happen.

A life of faith involves certain things we do. For example, when we see how destructive certain behaviors are to our faith, we're going to stop doing them. And when we see how beneficial certain other behaviors are to our faith, we're going to start doing them. These aren't things we have to do, but things we get to do.

A life of faith involves certain attitudes we need to embrace. For example, when we make a mistake, we need to learn how to ask for and receive God's forgiveness. Doing this requires both an attitude of repentance and a willingness to be forgiven. But all too often, human pride gets in the way.

The devil's gonna getcha!

In the world of ideas and beliefs, Christians have always had a unique perspective. We've viewed life as a continuing conflict between darkness and light. The Gospel of John, for example, presents this conflict as the predominant theme in the life of Jesus. He is the light that came into the dark world. All the hosts of darkness, led by Satan, array themselves against Him. At the very beginning of his Gospel, John summarizes Jesus' life and ministry: "All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never mastered it" (John 1:4, 5). Then John goes on to prove the truth of this view by telling the story of Jesus' life and death.

To John, darkness is not some passive "force" in the universe, largely benign unless we wander into its path. It is a very real fact in life, with implications for every human being. The Bible sees Satan as the leader of a militant force dedicated to the downfall of humanity and eager to tear down every single human being in his malign quest. And the most potent tools in his arsenal, I believe, are defeatism and despair. That's why I've made overcoming these two enemies of hope the theme of this first chapter.

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Why does Satan seek to inculcate defeatism and despair? Because he wants us to believe we are so far beyond hope that it is useless to turn to Jesus. But we need to understand that Satan's message of defeatism and despair is a lie. It has no basis in fact and runs contrary to every biblical fact about the way God relates to us. The fact is, there is nothing we can do that God won't forgive - if we turn to Him and ask. The fact is, God loves us and will do everything humanly and superhumanly possible to save us. The fact is, we are so special in God's eyes that if we are not among the redeemed, individually, all heaven will weep.

But if Satan can get us so confused that we turn our backs on God, believing we're hopeless - then we are. So, the very worst thing any of us can do is to give up. If the devil's gonna getcha, he's going to do it by making you feel so defeated that you believe victory is impossible. He's going to do it by putting a dark cloud over your head, blinding you to the accessible forgiveness God is offering. If he can make you feel lost, then - and only then - you are lost.

The devil doesn't necessarily care whether you lose heart in some dramatic fashion. Far too many people who might be considered upstanding citizens and who are even active church members find themselves caught up in the vicious cycle of defeatism and despair.

It happens to us when we lack the biblical knowledge to understand God's attitude toward us and, as a result, turn away from Him when we should turn to Him. It is remarkable how confused we can be about even the more fundamental truths of Scripture. In fact, it is often the basics that tend to get us sidetracked. It is not at all uncommon for our very familiarity with the things of God to create confusion about His attitude toward us.

For example, as we grow up, parents and teachers try very hard to pound a set of values into us. One reason is because we're impossible to be around until we learn some discipline.

This reminds me of my two dogs. Binky, our first dog, understood in one day what he was supposed to do when we took him outside for his morning walk. Within a few seconds he had taken care of business and was ready to go back in. In fact, after just a few days, Binky learned to jump up and down to let us know he needed to be let outside.

Then we got Nukki. We call Nukki, affectionately, our "box of rocks." Even now, Nukki doesn't really understand why we take him outside. As a result, he continues to have occasional "accidents." We've tried everything with this dog, but he is either as dumb as dirt or as

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stubborn as a mule. Personally, I go for the dirt theory - though he is stubborn too.

Discipline, in a dog's life - or a human's - is extremely important. Not only does it make us bearable to one another, but it keeps us out of far more trouble than we usually realize.

But sometimes the way we, as Christian parents, try to teach our children discipline confuses them at a very fundamental level, causing them to associate being bad with earning God's disfavor. So they grow up feeling that if they sin or disobey, God turns away from them. And they grow up with a natural aversion to God - a tentative attitude toward Him that leads to even further distancing as time goes by.

Nothing could be farther from the truth than the perspective that God is angry with us when we mess up. Of course He wants us to learn discipline. Of course He wants us to be kind, loving, faithful - and all the other things good people should be. But God doesn't turn His back on us when we fail. On the contrary, it is when we're in trouble that He calls out to us most urgently because we can find a path to overcoming only by turning to Him.

It happens to us when we lose our spiritual focus through boredom or preoccupation with other things. Nobody plans to get bored spiritually. We don't decide to drift away from God. Sure, we can probably trace our decline to specific events and behaviors. We made the decision to do those things. But we didn't decide to do so on the basis that it would distance us from God; we decided based on the appeal of the particular activity.

A loss of spiritual focus is a complex thing. It doesn't usually happen all at once, but is the gradual result of neglect in one or several areas. It may be because we've failed to develop good, consistent devotional habits. We've just gotten out of the habit of being spiritual. It may be because we've harbored anger, envy, or some other negative emotion toward someone until it has eaten away at our ability to see clearly. It may be because of some event that has soured us toward the things of God. We've slipped away without realizing what we've lost. It may be because we've allowed someone to lead us astray either in behavior or belief. It may be because we have been lazy, taking the easy course when we should have taken a stand for principle. It may be because we have lost sight of our values in the face of some overwhelming temptation, and now we feel totally out of touch with what we once felt was most important to us.

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Establishing a pattern for recovery

So, what can we do to resist the pressure to fall into defeatism and despair? Anything? If so, what would it take to get started? And how could we keep at it, once we've begun?

Let me state, right here, that when we're hanging on by our fingernails, we're seldom in the best frame of mind. We tend to be angry, cynical, and quick to find flaws in any idea. You'd think we would be so desperate to get help that we would be open to anything offering even the faintest ray of hope. But that's often not the case. It takes all our emotional energy just to survive from day to day, and making the commitment to do anything new seems overwhelming.

Which brings me to this point: the following suggestions will be helpful to you only if you want them to be. Otherwise, they'll be nothing more than fluff. I've been where you are now, and I know how easy it is to see why nothing will work. To be blunt, from a practical perspective, you have to choose to find the good in what follows. You may even need to try some of these things believing they won't work. That's two strikes against the idea, I know. But two strikes is not a strikeout. There's still a shot, and that's all I ask - a shot at helping you.

So, here are some things you might consider in establishing a pattern for recovery from defeatism and despair.

1. Make a conscious choice to enlist in the ranks of the hopeful, rather than the hopeless. One of the things we must never do is ignore the power inherent in choice. When we choose to do something, whatever it is, we put forces in motion that have tremendous long-term impact. Making a choice will not, in itself, make a thing happen at least not immediately. But it starts the process. It marshals our forces.

Making a decision launches us in the right direction. Even if we fail to achieve what we aimed at, we can still pick ourselves up and move on along a path that will lead to eventual victory. We can't remember our commitment (and use it to remotivate ourselves) unless we've made a commitment.

So, we need to enlist in the ranks of the hopeful - of those who believe good things will emerge eventually and who are willing to commit themselves to the process of making it happen.

Let's be brutally candid here. There are two types of people around us every day: those who see the world through the eyes of hope and those who see the world through the eyes of cynicism. The cynic believes in nothing. He sees the dark side of every situation. He

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considers those with a hopeful attitude fools. If you have a cynical turn of mind - or if you have vocal cynics around you - you need to understand the dangers of cynicism and be prepared to resist it.

Cynicism is a defensive posture. People adopt it in order to protect themselves. They've been hurt, and they don't want to be hurt again. So they isolate themselves from anything that might hurt them - including the belief that anything good can happen to them. We'll discuss this more in a later chapter. It's enough, here, to point out that if we want to survive and grow in a life of faith, we cannot align ourselves with the cynics.

Instead, we must choose to identify ourselves with those who cling to hope. We don't do this because of some vain urge to "go down fighting." We do it because we know that hope has power. The very thing that won't work for someone who has lost hope will work for someone who's willing to try. Having hope is not a matter of being a better person or possessing some remarkable virtue that others can't attain. Instead, it's often merely a matter of figuring out that there is nothing to be gained from hopelessness and that hope is the only alternative - even when there is ample evidence in the world around us that such hope is ill-founded.

When I was a teenager, my life was a mess in many ways. I didn't have any goals for the future or even any dreams, to speak of. My self-worth was so low I had no expectations from life. I hadn't been raised to see any value in spiritual things, so I felt church was a waste of time and that religious people were strange. I ignored all the efforts my teachers put forth to educate me, so I was remarkably ignorant.

As a result of my low self-esteem, I gravitated to a crowd of small-time, petty criminals who wanted nothing more from life than a bottle of cheap wine, some money in their pocket, and a girl with even lower values than their own.

The predictable path for my life was nothing but a short spiral into jail and an early death. I was clearly among the hopeless.

Then an evangelist came to town and held a series of meetings. My sister asked me to attend. I didn't really want to go, but to keep her from pestering me (and because I was living with her just then and needed to keep on her good side), I agreed. As I listened to the messages each night, I found myself switching back and forth between cynicism and speculation. Much that the evangelist said seemed totally alien to me. But here and there, a point struck home and seemed to

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make some sort of sense. Mostly, I was impressed with his radiant optimism.

Toward the end of the series, I allowed myself to ask the question, "What if all this is true?" Now, that may seem like a small, insignificant question, but it was a crack in the wall of my indifference. And it allowed a small ray of hope to penetrate the darkness of my interior life. That one small beam of light started a process of change.

At the end of the series, when the evangelist made his appeal for people to give their lives to Jesus Christ, I made a decision to give this religion thing a try. I was still uncertain and confused; three weeks doesn't transform a person with no religious background into a person of faith. But I felt the vague glimmerings of hope, and I made a choice to walk down that sawdust trail and see what would happen.

The rest of my life, to a large degree, has been shaped by that choice. At the time, it was just a small step, taken with a great deal of uncertainty and without much of the real faith that Christians are supposed to have. It was a baby step. But it started me along the way. And on that foundation, other baby steps were built, one at a time - each one a small exercise in hope that led, inevitably, to the next one.

Change doesn't happen overnight. We don't become persons of faith merely by an act of the will. But by choosing to be among those with hope rather than those with no hope, we take the all-important first step.

I think of two men in the Bible who sat daily at the feet of Jesus: Peter and Judas. Both of them listened to the words of truth that the Master spoke. Both of them witnessed miracles day after day, confirming undeniably that Jesus was God's Son. Both suffered a crisis of faith, turning on Jesus during those final hours, betraying Him, denying Him.

Yet, when confronted with the enormity of what they had done, they responded in two diametrically opposed ways. Peter, acknowledging his sin, chose to become a person of faith and hope. He lived the rest of his life with the fact that he had denied his Lord. But he also accepted the forgiveness Jesus offered and moved forward into a life of hope. He was shaken, but not shattered.

Judas, faced with a similar realization of what he had done, gave in to defeatism and despair. Having betrayed Jesus, he could not face the future, so he went out and hung himself.

When Peter made a decision to enlist in the ranks of the hopeful, he knew full well how deserving he was of Jesus' rejection. But he

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trusted in the loving character of God and moved forward. That is what each of us must learn to do: enlist in the ranks of the hopeful - and move forward.

2. Put yourself in a position where the grace of God can flow through you in service to others. There is something about being used by God to bless others that helps our sense of hope to grow. Conversely, there is something about living only for ourselves - even if it's done in a religious context - that undermines hope.

A religious vocation, for example, doesn't automatically bring greater spiritual focus into a person's life. In my work today, one of the things I do is train people in marketing to church groups. Several of those who have come into our program during the last two years were at one time pastors of various churches. As I've worked with these ex-pastors, I have noticed a common theme that runs through their stories. One of them put it this way, "I entered the ministry out of a desire to help people. But, over the years, I became enmeshed in the mundane functions of church life - meeting with committees, solving petty problems between church members, trying to raise money from people who didn't want to give it, struggling to communicate with people whose priorities were anything but spiritual. And I've become burned out with the ministry."

Now, I'm happy to have these talented, capable individuals in my company. Yet it is also tragic, because it reflects a trend, among some pastors at least, of losing hope in the effectiveness of their ministry. These men have not lost their faith, but they have lost hope in how their religious vocation contributes to anything significant. They wanted to help people, but they allowed their ministries to be diminished to the point that they were merely functionaries in a religious setting. And they had to get out.

This can happen to any of us, whether we're paid servants of the church or members who are active in the life of our individual congregations. Religion becomes a taskmaster to us if we lose sight of how to put ourselves in the path of God's grace, giving and sharing with others in a continual cycle of blessing.

But this doesn't in any way diminish the value of the concept of ministry in a life that is well lived. It is through ministering to others that we find the only true path to hope. And we dare not allow anything to come between us and our opportunities in this area.

We don't all have the same talents or opportunities. And the result is that the specific types of ministry available to us may differ from

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person to person. But our specific area of ministry is far less important than the need to become involved in what God is doing in the world.

One of my friends is a Catholic monsignor who was once the director of a major Catholic relief agency providing support for thousands of people in the Middle East. I've been entranced by stories he's told me of conflicts between various religious groups in the areas where he worked and how he came close to death on many occasions due to the violent behavior of various factions.

One time, agents of a certain faction stopped his car during a particularly vicious uprising. They were systematically dragging people out of their cars and killing them. When they came to his car, the monsignor knew his time was up. He was a foreigner, and it was open season on foreigners. But, miraculously, the guerrilla force let him pass. To this day, he doesn't know why he was spared, except for his belief that God had additional work for him to do.

God has things for all of us to do. And He preserves us, sometimes, so that we can do them. My friend, the monsignor, has had a very specific type of ministry that not everyone can experience. But the fact that his experience is unique doesn't make it any more functional than the experience you or I may have in our own communities. We're all part of what God is doing in the world, and we want to be available to Him for as long as He has use for us.

God is doing things in the world. He's touching lives and changing them. And we can be part of this process - if we choose to do so. When we become involved, the effect on our own lives is revitalizing. By helping others we are, ourselves, helped.

3. Become an agent of hope by serving as a vocal advocate for positive, enduring values and activities. There is something about verbalizing hope that makes it more powerful in our lives. It's fine to be a passive participant in hope. It's certainly better than being caught up in hopelessness and despair or becoming a proponent of cynicism. But if we want to move to the next level of hope, so that our certainty influences others in a widening circle of expanded hopefulness, then we must become advocates of hope.

Becoming an advocate of hope is not as complicated or difficult as it may seem. We don't necessarily have to become a leader in order to be an effective advocate. We just have to be willing to speak out with honesty and sincerity - even if it's just to our circle of immediate friends.

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Monte Sahlin, a man whose path has crossed mine many times, has developed a series of materials - indeed, an entire program for individuals and churches - built around the idea of "friendship evangelism." Now, this isn't an entirely new idea, and neither is it one that cuts against traditional evangelism. What it does, however, is provide a new approach to an old topic.

Monte's conviction is that we will always be more effective reaching people we know than people we don't know. So, why not put our effort and commitment into working for the people with whom we're likely to have the greatest impact - our friends?

This seems so obvious that we may miss the underlying subtlety. Advocacy for any belief or perspective depends for its effectiveness on credibility. And our greatest credibility should be with the people with whom we are in some type of relationship. For example, because of their trust in me, my kids are far more likely to believe what I tell them than they are what somebody else tells them. And this is true for all parents.

My wife Brenda speaks with great authority to our children. She is a remarkably detail-oriented person with a vivid memory. So, when she gives our kids counsel, it has the ring of truth to it. They don't always like what she tells them, but it is very difficult for them to dismiss what she says.

Our daughters are teenagers, and as such, they're not above trying to tell us they're doing one thing when they're really planning to do another. The only problem with this is that Brenda was once a teenager too, and she remembers - in the greatest of detail - times when she did the same. So she spots all the signals and is very difficult to fool.

I remember the time Jill, our younger daughter, skipped school to go off campus for lunch with a group of girls. This was a serious situation, made all the more vivid because it just so happens that Brenda had skipped school once too - in her case to see a boy. So, Brenda told her story to Jill.

"When I came back to school the next day after skipping class and went to the school office for an admit slip, 'Prof,' the principal of the school, called me into his office.

"Was it worth it, Brenda?" he asked me, never even allowing for the possibility that I might try to deny what I had done.

"Yes," I said.

"Good," he returned. "Don't ever let it happen again."

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“That was the last, and only, time I ever skipped class. ‘Prof had such credibility with me that I would never risk his disapproval - even though he hadn’t punished me when he might have.”

In telling this story to Jill, Brenda was saying, “I know what it feels like to be a teenager and to want to be free of restrictions.” But she was also saying, “And I know how important it is to keep trust with the people you love.”

Of course, our credibility with the people closest to us can be ruined. Sometimes the people who know us best are those best equipped to see how flawed our witness really is. But the people who care about us are also the ones most inclined to overlook our weaknesses and see our better qualities.

So, in spite of the possible flaws, we’re still in a position to have our greatest impact among our friends. They’re the ones who are most likely to take the time to listen to us, and they’re the ones who can best tell whether we’re sincere.

Taking a stand for things that really matter to us - the values that motivate us - is an enabling experience. It takes us to a new level of self-confidence and gives a power to our actions and the motivation to stick with them. Even if we get swatted down by those around us, there is still great benefit in having taken our stand. We don’t want to be invading the space of others, attempting to coerce them into seeing things the way we do, but we have every right to speak up for what we believe. We will find our lives and the lives of those around us blessed when we do.

The ministry of Jesus, of course, provides the perfect illustration of this principle. The apostle Paul writes of us, “Your world was a world without hope and without God. But now in union with Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near through the shedding of Christ’s blood. For he is himself our peace” (Ephesians 2:12-14). We were hopeless until Jesus came to provide us a reason to hope. He took a stand, doing for us what we could never have done for ourselves. He was “swatted down” for this, swatted all the way to Calvary. But in apparent defeat and humiliation came ultimate victory. In the process of standing for hope, Jesus has provided us nearness with God.

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Becoming an advocate of hope

He calls on us to do the same - to advocate the same values He died to preserve in us. To become advocates for the things we love, agents of change, positive witnesses to the new life in Jesus Christ.

Becoming an advocate for hope can take on many different dimensions.

We can focus on living in a hopeful fashion. Living as a hopeful person means doing all those positive, hopeful things that make the world a better place. And this isn't limited merely to "religious" things. For example, a person living in a hopeful fashion would be a proponent of recycling the basic components of life and a proponent for containing the continued overconsumption of our world's natural resources. Why? Because the natural environment belongs to God and to our children, and we have a moral responsibility to do what we can to preserve it.

A cynic would say, "It's no use. Why bother?" Such a person believes nothing we do matters, that it's too late to preserve our environment or resources. But he is an enemy of hope. It does matter what we do. Our actions today can change things.

Living in a hopeful fashion also means many other positive, constructive things, such as treating the people around us (including our children) as people who can become great, given our support and encouragement. It means going the extra mile for people, showing them that we're on their side, even when they don't believe it due to their own cynicism or despair.

Living in a hopeful fashion involves hundreds of daily decisions and actions that show the world around us that we haven't given up - on the world, on people, and on ourselves.

When I see a severely overweight person out walking along the street, my spirits are lifted. Here is somebody who hasn't given up. While thousands of others are sitting at home watching television with a bag of potato chips in their laps, here is somebody who believes in getting out and trying to beat the battle of the bulge. Here is somebody with hope who hasn't given up on himself or herself. Here is a winner. He may not be where he wants to be yet, but he's a winner all the same.

We can focus on taking a message of hope to others. The world needs more hopeful people who take the time to spread a message of encouragement wherever they go. Our communities need it. Our jobs need it. And our homes need it too.

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When I was a child, all I heard was how our family had nothing and never would have anything. As a teenager, all I heard was how I needed to settle for second best because it was my lot in life. As an adult, I often hear people bemoaning how terrible the economy is, how terrible people of other ethnic groups are, how hopeless the plight of our nation's cities is. This is an ugly, insidious message that needs to be countered by people who believe differently.

Are there economic problems and racial problems in our nation today? Of course. Are our cities in trouble? Of course. We could spend hours listing all the problems in the world. But, again, there are two groups of people - those who see only the problems and those who see the opportunities.

If we don't say anything about how the world - or even our little corner of it - could be made better, we are contributing to the denial of hope. So we need to speak up with a positive message.

Another part of my job these days is managing a group of salespeople. In one telemarketing unit I have fifty people who are trying to earn a living in sales. Some of these people are experts on why they can't sell. If you ask them, they'll tell you how the economy is sapping their potential, how the competition has grown stronger, how the company has handcuffed them with demands for increased paperwork. If we allowed them to do so, these people would send us all into the pit of despair.

But others of these salespeople just go out and sell successfully, week after week. They're facing the same sales factors as the others, but these "insurmountable" difficulties don't seem to hamper them.

I asked one, the other day, how it was that he was able to sell so consistently. He replied, "Sales is just a numbers game. If you make the calls and treat each customer as somebody who is important to you, the sales will come. That's all I do. I don't worry about all that other stuff. I tell these people who are complaining all the time, 'Just do it. Stop griping, and get on the phone and do it.' "

There's a world of truth in that. Don't get caught up in why it can't work. Just do it. That's hope.

We can focus on resisting those who misuse or abuse hope. Hope is such a tenuous thing for all of us. It's a feeble flame that must be fed and protected.

We start this abuse of hope in our homes when we punish our children in thoughtless ways and squelch their spirit. We do it when we tell them they're stupid and they need to shut up. I've listened to

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parents do this again and again. They don't realize the devastating impact it is having on their children's future. Children don't know any better and therefore take Mommy's or Daddy's word for it that they are stupid. This is a subtle form of child abuse. I call it "hope abuse," because it shuts doors in children's minds and makes them lose self-worth.

In the adult world, too, there are those who misuse hope through despair. These include spiritual leaders who use their positions to dominate or intimidate others - or as masks behind which they can hide while they live lives contrary to what they profess. These also include politicians who cynically promise voters what they have no intention of delivering, adjusting their message to the audience so that people believe they are putting in office someone who advocates values that are not at all the politician's true beliefs. These are all people who pretend to be agents of hope, while all the time they are actually agents of chaos.

The problem is, of course, that we cannot always tell what people are really like. They seem to be one thing, while it's all a masquerade. We're all complex individuals, capable of different actions depending on the situation. Yet, if we want to contribute to the development of hope in the world around us, we need to try to consistently advocate themes that promise hope.

And, at the same time, we need to resist those who, in their cynicism, sap the hope out of the lives of those around them. For example, we need to support legislation that protects children from those who abuse them. We need to be increasingly supportive to victims of other types of abuse too - whether it's the victims of the drug pusher or rapist in the streets, the businessperson who misuses his employees for his own gain, the politician who lies to be elected, or anyone else who is victimized. Victimizers need to know that we're prepared to unite our efforts to stop them from sapping the hope out of the lives of people.

Never give up

It is all too easy to fall into the trap of defeatism or despair - to yield to the temptation to simply run away and hide when the going gets rough. There are evidences all around us that it - whatever "it" happens to be - can't work. But remember that giving up never gains anything. It's far better to struggle on in what others consider a

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hopeless cause than to join the many who collapse under the effort. Even if the battle is ultimately lost, what better life could you live than a life caught up in commitment and effort? The deeper joys in life seldom emerge from the celebration of victory; they emerge from the sense of focus and the application of our energies in the effort to succeed. Doing battle is often more satisfying than the actual victory we may achieve as a result of the struggle.

That's the point of this chapter. Hope has nothing to do with the end result; it has everything to do with the process of striving toward it. Hope brings us a rich life. Hope transforms each day and fills it with energy and expectation. In a sense, we don't have to win to enjoy life, but we have to live with hope.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying victory is unimportant. I am merely distinguishing it from another very important concept: striving for victory. And I'm suggesting that both are essential for a satisfying life.

You've heard people say, "It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." It's better to have fought for the values we believe in - even if all around us we see people giving in - than to have abandoned our values because they seem impractical or "old-fashioned." It is better to keep trying to become the people we want to be - even when we fail over and over again - than to abandon the struggle and merely accept that we are flawed and can never do right.

Change is slow sometimes. We may go for months or even years, seeing little evidence that we're becoming the people we want to be. Yet, in the life of hope, we struggle on, hanging on by our fingernails, determined to stick with it until it works. To some, this might seem like a vain effort. But to the person with hope, there is always tomorrow, always one more try, always a reason to believe it will happen, eventually.

And it will. God's counsel to Christians is:

No wonder we do not lose heart! Though our outward humanity is in decay, yet day by day we are inwardly renewed. Our troubles are slight and short-lived; and their outcome an eternal glory which outweighs them far. Meanwhile our eyes are fixed, not on the things that are seen, but on the things that are unseen: for what is seen passes away; what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Ultimately, God will triumph, and those who have accepted His grace and allied themselves with Him will celebrate His victory with Him. And even though we may not always be able to see the evidences

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of God's work in our lives, we know it is in His hands and that He will not fail in His effort to make us the people He wants us to be. Paul says, "Of one thing I am certain: the One who started the good work in you will bring it to completion by the Day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). That is the basis of our hope, not what we see or even the steadfastness of our own commitment, but God's promise that He will finish the job on time.

All you need to do is hang on until then - even if it's by your fingernails!

You have learned that they were told, "Do not commit adultery." But what I tell you is this: If a man looks on a woman with a lustful eye, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27, 28).

Jesus is concerned with what we are, not merely what we seem to be. If we make the decision to be God's person, then He will step in and help us become what we really want to be.