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Hope



Hoping is coping: A psychological and theological application of hope

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Introduction

Hope is a strategy that many people utilise, either consciously or unconsciously, to cope with threats to their physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Hope is not an exclusively Christian construct. Indeed, the insights of secular psychology provide a helpful framework for understanding Christian hope, whilst the Scriptures offer numerous practical examples that unpack the ways in which hope facilitates coping.

A secular perspective on hope

Definition

“Simply put, hopeful thought reflects the belief that one can find pathways to desired goals and become motivated to use those pathways.”¹ Hope is a goal-oriented cognitive and behavioural process with four functional components: desire, expectancy, pathways, and agency. These provide a way of feeling, thinking, behaving, and relating to oneself and one’s world.²

Desire

The goal of hope must be “desired by the hoper”³ and “of sufficient value to occupy conscious thought.”⁴ The more important a goal is, “the greater is its value within the person’s motivation. Without having a goal that matters, people have no reason to act.”⁵

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Goals must be attainable and yet have a degree of uncertainty as to their fulfillment.⁶ A desired outcome that is certain cannot be the object of hope. An outcome that is logically impossible or self-contradictory also cannot be the object of hope. The desired goal or object of hope must fall “within a range of physical probabilities which includes the improbable but excludes the certain and the merely logically possible.”⁷

Linked to desire is affect. Affect describes the emotional significance to the individual of attaining the object of their hope.

The affective tie can be small or unbelievably strong, depending on the degree to which the coping structure depends on hope to defend against despair. Individuals always are tied to their hopes; they need them; they resist losing them; they fight to maintain them.⁸

Affect enables an individual to “monitor their own resources vis-a-vis the demands of the task” and use the findings to make decisions about which goals to pursue.⁹ Positive affect also contributes to greater persistence in goal pursuit.¹⁰

Expectancy

There must be a reasonable likelihood that the object of hope can be attained,¹¹ otherwise there is no compelling motivation to strive to reach it. Because hope is more fluid, less specific, and more flexible in its expectations than other related constructs, there is a much higher probability that desired goals will be attained.¹² Expectancy is “a sense of confidence or doubt about the attainability of the goal value. If the person lacks confidence, again there will be no action.”¹³ In addition to the likelihood of goal attainment, expectancy has two subsets, outcome expectancy and efficacy expectancy.

Pathways (outcome expectancy)

Outcome expectancy is the belief that “a particular behaviour will produce a particular outcome” and that there are various strategies that can be implemented in order to achieve the desired goal.¹⁴ These strategies are also known as “pathways”. Hope requires the capacity to “generate successful

plans to meet goals”¹⁵ and to “entertain multiple ways of meeting a goal or generate diverse approaches to goal pursuit.”¹⁶

[Hope] allows for the rekindling of determination and willpower even when faced with blockages, as additional alternative pathways have been proactively determined. The resultant boost in willpower in turn motivates the search for still further alternate pathways in light of the realities of the new situation.¹⁷

Agency (efficacy expectancy)

Efficacy expectancy, or agency, is the degree of confidence an individual has in their “ability to perform a given behaviour that will lead to the desired outcome.”¹⁸ Confidence, or self-belief, is based on past experience.¹⁹

Agency is highly motivational.²⁰ It has variously been described as “goal-directed energy and determination”²¹ and “successful determination in meeting goals in the past, present, and future.”²² Agency theory views “expectancies based on personal efficacy as the most powerful predictors of behaviour.”²³

Two related constructs

Two related constructs are optimism and wishful thinking. Both overlap with hope at a number of points but are differentiated by their degree of unrealistic expectation and overconfidence about the probability of a desired outcome being attained as well as the rejection of potentially negative outcomes.

Dispositional optimism

It has been argued that many of the characteristics of hope are equally descriptive of optimism.²⁴ There is some truth to this, however, hope is essentially a process whereas optimism is a disposition. Optimism describes “a generalized expectancy that good things will happen.”²⁵ It “expects the best possible or emphasizes primarily the positive aspects of a situation”²⁶ to the exclusion of other possible positive or negative outcomes.

Optimistic beliefs can be highly motivational and self-fulfilling. They support goal attainment by “contributing to the sense that we are competent and efficacious agents and that our goals are both desirable

and attainable.”²⁷ They can motivate people to live up to high standards and expectations.²⁸ Optimistic beliefs can contribute to effective coping in that we “pursue our goals because we believe that we have the capacity to attain our goals, due to self-enhancing beliefs, and illusions of control and superiority.”²⁹ Aspinwall & Leaf found that optimistic beliefs are a predictor of increased persistence.³⁰

However, without the moderating reality-oriented focus of hope,³¹ optimism can result in “optimism bias” or the “illusion of invulnerability.” “Optimism bias” ignores or denies the possibility of negative outcomes that can “prevent us from adequately preparing for the challenges ahead and lead to failure and disengagement.”³² Optimism has been associated with negative coping strategies such as avoidance, minimization, and distancing.³³

Wishful thinking

Wishful thinking involves an individual overestimating the likelihood of desirable events occurring.³⁴ It has the effect of reducing anxiety by reconstruing an event or its likely outcome, however,³⁵ it has a number of potentially negative consequences. Individuals may “underestimate the risks they are exposed to and overestimate the likelihood and value of uncertain rewards.”³⁶ In addition, the “desire to ‘see the world through rose-coloured glasses’ naturally leads to several apparent deviations from rationality such as optimism, procrastination, confirmation bias, and polarization.”³⁷ A wishful thinker may procrastinate by delaying actions when the future is uncertain, by twisting or distorting information to support their optimal beliefs, and by holding to these divergent beliefs very strongly.³⁸

A New Testament perspective on hope

In the New Testament the hope of eternal life, grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, is a recurring theme.

Since Jesus has awakened from death, the dead will live, the guilty will be pardoned, enemies will be reconciled, the miserable will rejoice. This fulfillment of Messianic hopes

seemed for the disciples to come so close that they could practically touch and seize it. When they thought of Him, they thought of this future.³⁹

The resurrection of Jesus “gives both foundation and substance to the Christian hope of eternal life.”⁴⁰

The following commentary on New Testament passages which discuss hope, while not exhaustive, is of sufficient breadth to capture the essential qualities and significance of hope in the life of a believer.

Exegetical comments

Romans

And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Romans 8:23–25, ESV).

Hope is understood here with reference to an as yet unseen future. It does not belong to the empirical world and its goal is unpossessed. In this respect, “hope is inseparable from patience.” The Greek word for patience suggests surrender to “God’s will, way, and timing. Like patience, hope is purified through submission.”⁴¹ The present implications were that Paul did “not allow his attention to become wholly absorbed in the present, whether its responsibilities or its frustrations. His gaze repeatedly lifts to the far horizon, and the hope of what lies beyond it is what sustains his faith despite the contradictions of the present.”⁴²

Hope makes a statement about the nature of God:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope (Romans 15:13).

The God of hope both inspires and imparts hope to his people.⁴³ His presence, by his Spirit, fills us with joy, peace, trust, and power, which

overflow in “the sure hope that God will yet completely fulfil his original purpose in creation.”⁴⁴

2 Corinthians

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16–18).

Hope provides an alternative perspective on present experiences. Paul's reason for not losing heart was that the weight of his “light momentary affliction,” although far from insignificant, was as nothing when compared to the “eternal weight of glory” that still lay ahead. Paul's future expectation, though intangible, directly impacted his present state of mind. However, this was not an automatic process. It required both a decision and an action. “It was only as attention was focused on what was unseen that suffering led to glory. The participle with which the verse begins may be translated ‘provided [or, since] we keep our eyes fixed . . .’⁴⁵ The “verb carries a conditional force: ‘*provided* we do not fix our attention on what is visible,’ for then we should most certainly have cause to be discouraged and feel depressed by life's conditions and trials.”⁴⁶ Paul had to learn to lift his eyes to the unseen future (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:8–11).⁴⁷

We have become too spiritually nearsighted, and living in a world of “instant everything” has robbed us of the perspective of time. Time has a way of reversing judgments, and eternity has a way of telling us what was valuable and what was permanent and exposing that which was temporary and useless.⁴⁸

In chapter 5, Paul links faith with hope.

He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good

courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:5–7).

These verses differentiate between Paul's present life and his future existence in the consummated kingdom of God. "The corollary of 'residence in the body = absence from the Lord' (v. 6) is 'absence from the body = residence with the Lord' (v. 8)."⁴⁹ As a corrective to two possible misunderstandings of being "at home in the body" (2 Corinthians 5:6), Paul inserted verse 7.⁵⁰

The first misunderstanding was to equate being "at home in the body" (2 Corinthians 5:6) with a total separation from Christ. Paul makes it clear that the separation is merely physical, not spiritual. "Despair is an experience to which he [Paul] does not submit; for to despair is to disown the Spirit and to disown the Spirit is not to be a Christian at all."⁵¹ The second was that of a realised eschatology. Some believed that "they were already experiencing the fullness of the age to come," which made "the triumphalistic message of Paul's opponents so attractive, especially when it excused and even legitimized their materialism and moral laxity."⁵² However, being "at home with the Lord" does not simply describe location. The preposition "with"

implies a fellowship both active and reciprocal . . . what is thus signified must supersede earthly experience where the believer "knows" the Lord (Philippians 3:10). So being "at home with the Lord" is a higher form of the intimate fellowship with Christ that the believer experiences on earth.⁵³

While "at home in the body" (2 Corinthians 5:6), "it is impossible to see the fullness of the resurrection glory still to come."⁵⁴ However, faith effectively became Paul's sight in the present until such time as "the Lord's visible form [would] be manifest."⁵⁵ Hope, viewed through the eyes of faith, determined how Paul would live in the present moment. "He trusts in God's promises as the ultimate reality and lives accordingly; he does not live as if his present suffering were the sum of life. It is Paul's confidence

in God's future (i.e., faith focused on God's promises) that determines how he lives in the present."⁵⁶

Ephesians

In Ephesians 2, hope is defined by its opposite, hopelessness.

remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:12–13).

Hopelessness is the consequence both of being separate from the spiritual blessings that come from being “in Christ” and not belonging to the people God in the world. The spiritual blessings are listed in Ephesians 1:3–14 and include being chosen before the foundation of the world, predestined for adoption, redeemed through Christ's blood, having the forgiveness of sins, having knowledge of the mystery of God's will, hearing the word of truth, and being sealed with the Holy Spirit as a guarantee. The effects of hopelessness are either overconfidence or despair. The former is “a badly timed, self-willed anticipation of what one hopes for from God.” The latter is a “self-willed anticipation that what is hoped for is impossible of fulfillment.”⁵⁷

In Ephesians 4, hope is associated with calling.

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:4–6).

The notion of calling “provides the conceptual framework within which the rest of the paraenesis is to be understood.”⁵⁸ It reinforces the shared nature of hope as common to all who are called. Hope provides Christians with “a sense of expectancy, [and] directs and unifies their actions.”⁵⁹ Calling also provides assurance of the fulfillment of hope. Believers are “those who have hoped in Christ (1:12) and have a hope that

is certain because it rests on God's call, God's initiative (1:18).⁶⁰ Moreover, the Holy Spirit serves as a deposit or "guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it" (Ephesians 1:14).

The 'one hope,' common to all believers, is the foundation of Christian unity. It "is not something individual and private but corporate and public, hope for a cosmos that is unified and reconciled, a world in which everything is brought together in harmony through that which God has done in Christ."⁶¹ It also motivates. What we strive for in the end determines how we behave in the present. "Our methods, our organization, even some of our beliefs may be different; but we are all striving towards the one goal of a world redeemed in Christ."⁶²

Philippians

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord . . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:8–14).

Against some Christian converts in Philippi who held to a form of realized eschatology,⁶³ the Apostle Paul argued that "his growing knowledge of Christ, his sharing here and now both in his sufferings and in the power of his risen life"⁶⁴ were daily bringing him closer to "attaining the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:11), although attaining the resurrection remained in the future. "Resurrection from the dead therefore is not the return of a dead man into *this* life, which is headed for death, but a totally new life that has death behind it."⁶⁵

With reference to verse 14, Kent notes that "goal" and "prize" are similar in meaning but different in focus. "'Goal' rivets attention on the

race that is being run, whereas “prize” centres the thought on the glory that follows.”⁶⁶ The prize is complete knowledge. “To know Christ fully and completely was the prize for which he [Paul] had been striving ever since his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road.”⁶⁷ There is a corporate as well as an individual dimension to the ‘prize.’ Paul’s desire was “to be part of the people, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, who will stand justified before him [Christ] on the final day because of their identification with Christ.”⁶⁸

Colossians

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel (Colossians 1:3–5).

Hope has both future and present dimensions. It denotes the gift given by God and “laid up for you in heaven” (Colossians 1:5), to be realised when “Christ who is your life appears [and] you . . . appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:4). The expectation of future glory was the driver of the Colossians’ faith and love in the present. Their hope originally came from hearing the word of truth brought to them by Epaphrus. This true word was “contrasted tacitly with the more recent and heretical preaching of the Colossian errorists.”⁶⁹ In the present moment, hope “assured them [the Colossians] of the adequacy of the gospel they had received . . . [and] precluded any desire to supplement the gospel with additional speculation from the false teachers.”⁷⁰

Hebrews

The Book of Hebrews has much to say on the subject of hope.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible (Hebrews 11:1–3).

Faith manifests hope. The primary meaning of faith in the Book of Hebrews is not “a passive belief in the truth of God”⁷¹ or a subjective sense of inner certainty about the “things hoped for” (Hebrews 11:1). Rather, faith is objective in nature.

Assurance expresses “the basis or foundation of things hoped for,”⁷² “an objective reality that is unquestionable and securely established.”⁷³ Conviction likewise has the objective sense of “proof” or “demonstration.”⁷⁴ “The action produced by faith is a manifestation or a proving of the reality of things not yet seen.”⁷⁵

While forward looking and with a clear sense of eschatological fulfilment,⁷⁶ faith “bestows upon the objects of hope . . . a substantial reality, which will unfold in God’s appointed time. It gives them the force of present realities and enables the person of faith to enjoy the full certainty of future realization.”⁷⁷ Morris described faith as “a present and continuing reality”⁷⁸ that enables us to be certain of “realities for which we have no material evidence though they are not the less real for that.”⁷⁹ “Faith through its active character gives substance to, that is, expresses the reality of things hoped for; it demonstrates the truth of things not yet seen.”⁸⁰

The “people of old” (Hebrews 11:2) were commended for the concrete actions that allowed their hope to be realised.

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God . . . By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous . . . By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance (Hebrews 11:3–4, 7–8).

1 Peter

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:3–4).

The results of the resurrection of Christ from the dead are twofold: new birth and hope. The latter, hope, is “an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Hebrews 6:19), and “living”, because it is “of a different order: a sure and confident outlook which has a divine, not a human, source.”⁸¹ Calvin noted the “implied contrast between the hope fixed on the incorruptible kingdom of God, and the fading and transient hopes of man.”⁸² This hope has a future orientation, being directed towards an eschatological fulfilment, and given its origin, its reliability is certain. It “has a vigour, a patient endurance, and an assurance beyond any human power: such hope can no more fail than the living God who bestows it.”⁸³

1 John

Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:2–3).

New Testament hope is the hope of “being like him [Jesus] when he appears” (1 John 3:2), specifically in purity and righteousness.⁸⁴ While the complete revelation of the redeemed human nature lies in the future, we have glimpses of it in the present. Hope has very practical, present implications. One does not wait until Christ’s appearing to begin the process of becoming like him. The image of God, obscured by the fall, was renewed at the moment of conversion. “We were ‘created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness’ (Eph. 4:24; cf. Col. 3:10).”⁸⁵ Since then, the Holy Spirit has been “transfiguring us ‘into his likeness with ever-increasing glory’ (2 Cor. 3:18; cf. 1 John 2:6).”⁸⁶

The change in view is holistic: moral, spiritual, attitudinal, and behavioural. The standard or model is Christ (as he is pure; cf. 3:5), or perhaps more accurately, in the light of the Christology of the Johannine writings, the model is God as revealed in the person, teaching, and life of Christ, God’s Son.⁸⁷

A New Testament definition of hope

Drawing on these passages, a New Testament definition of hope has three components: victory, sanctification, and scope.

Sharing in the victory of Christ

First, the goal of hope is to experience the fruits of Christ's victory over sin and death. Jürgen Moltmann wrote, "the dead will live, the guilty will be pardoned, enemies will be reconciled, [and] the miserable will rejoice."⁸⁸ Barth concurred. "To know him as the living One, the Risen from the dead, is to receive and have at once, from the very outset, basic, direct and unconditional certainty of the final victory which is still awaited but which comes relentlessly and irresistibly."⁸⁹

Hope takes the form of the "assurance" and "conviction" of "attaining the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:11), knowing Christ fully and completely⁹⁰ (Philippians 3:8), "being like him when he appears" (1 John 3:2; Philippians 3:10), and inheriting the spiritual blessings "kept in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 1:3–14; Romans 8:23). All this is the gift of God (Romans 15:13) and the fulfilment of his original creative purposes.⁹¹

The consequence of the alternative, hopelessness, is either overconfidence or despair. The former is "a badly timed, self-willed anticipation of what one hopes for from God." The latter is a "self-willed anticipation that what is hoped for is impossible of fulfilment."⁹² Hopelessness can result from "fix[ing] our attention on what is visible" rather than the glory that is ahead.⁹³

The sanctification of the saints

Second, beliefs about the future can never be divorced from present experience. The faith and "love for all the saints" of the Colossian Christians was the practical outworking of their "hope laid up in heaven" (Colossians 1:5).

We are what we are in hope. For that is the other side of the Christian situation: though Christian existence can, on the one hand, be described by the indicatives—we are sanctified, we are purified—nevertheless, so long as it moves within this world, it stands under the imperative . . . What God wills is

sanctification; thereto He called us . . . What has happened in principle must be brought to reality in practice.⁹⁴

Individual, corporate, and cosmic scope

Third, hope is not just the personal assurance and conviction of an individual resurrection and transformation. It is also a corporate experience, as we anticipate standing as part of a justified and glorified people before Christ (Ephesians 2:12; 2 Corinthians 5:8) at his appearing (1 John 3:2). Further, hope has cosmic consequences as the whole of creation “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19) and “freedom from bondage to corruption” (Romans 8:21).

The categories of desire, expectancy, pathways, and agency are helpful for ordering the New Testament material.

Desire

Hope, in the New Testament, is goal-focused and future-oriented. “Goal striving as an aspect of religious faith is central to many spiritual projects.”⁹⁵ While in no way precluding the setting of other second order life goals, the hope of the resurrection that “lies ahead” (Philippians 3:13), “has not yet appeared” (1 John 3:2), and is laid up “in heaven” (Colossians 1:5; 1 Peter 1:4), is the overarching or first order Christian goal. The resurrection was so strongly desired by the Apostle Paul that he used the language of “waiting eagerly” (Romans 8:23), “groaning inwardly” (Romans 8:23), “pursuit” (Philippians 3:13), “straining forward” (Philippians 3:13), and “longing” (2 Timothy 4:8) to characterise his desire to attain it.

Expectancy

“Assurance” and “conviction” (Philippians 3:11) speak to the likelihood of goal attainment, which, although certain, is as yet unpossessed and must be awaited with patience.⁹⁶ This confidence is maintained without empirical proof because the resurrection belongs to realm of heaven rather than earth and cannot be seen with the natural eye (Romans 8:24–25; 2 Corinthians 4:18; Hebrews 11:1). However, it becomes visible through the lens of faith (2 Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 11:3) and “in the word of the truth, the gospel” (Colossians 1:3–5). Hope is given form and substance through the actions it engenders in the lives of believers (Hebrews 11:1–8). It is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 5:5; Ephesians 1:14).

Pathways

Paul stated that, given the importance of the goal, he would use “any means possible [to] attain the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:11). In this regard, his earthly credentials were second to none.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Philippians 3:4–6).

However, in the end, his best efforts amounted to nothing.

Manifestly inadequate is, of course, the reference to an imaginable human goal and the discernible progress of the human race towards such a goal . . . It is neither humanity, the Church nor faith which radiates, capacitates, awakens and maintains this certainty, however, but the living Jesus Christ Himself. He and He alone is the Victor who will finally triumph.⁹⁷

There is only one pathway to experiencing the fruits of Christ’s victory. The mercy of God (1 Peter 1:3–4) expressed through “the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13) alone enables us to attain the prize. “The basic cause of human estrangement is sin, and Christ gave himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.”⁹⁸ Nothing else is required because “all that is necessary has already been accomplished through Christ’s sacrificial death.”⁹⁹

Whilst we cannot attain the prize through human effort, we can experience the coping benefits of hope through a continual surrender to “God’s will, way, and timing” that is “purified through submission.”¹⁰⁰ We must intentionally lift our gaze “to the far horizon and the hope of what lies beyond.”¹⁰¹ We must “grow in the knowledge of Christ and share here and now both in his sufferings and in the power of his risen life.”¹⁰² We must strive for moral, spiritual, attitudinal, and behavioural change in imitation of Christ, in whom our hope is revealed.¹⁰³

Agency

Goal directed energy and determination flow from the awareness of the prior work of Christ. Paul was motivated and driven by the “upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14; cf. Ephesians 4:4). Our calling provides us with assurance of the fulfilment of hope because it is ultimately dependent on God’s initiative.¹⁰⁴ The work of new creation had already begun in Paul and he “groaned inwardly” (Romans 8:23) for its completion.

Coping

Coping defined

How does hope facilitate coping? Coping is the process by which an individual deals with threats to their psychological integrity¹⁰⁵ or their “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person’s resources.”¹⁰⁶

Coping is process oriented, contextual, and has immediate outcomes. Process orientation concerns what a person actually thinks and does in a specific stressful situation. This usually involves two appraisals—a primary appraisal where the individual evaluates the potential harm or benefits posed by the encounter to their commitments, values, goals, health, well-being or self-esteem and a secondary appraisal where they consider what might be done to prevent harm or increase the potential of benefit.¹⁰⁷ The contextual nature of coping recognizes that personal and situational variables shape coping efforts. Immediate outcomes refer to the individual’s judgment as to the successful or unsuccessful resolution of the situation with respect to their goals, values and beliefs.¹⁰⁸

The coping benefits of hope

Hope is “an essentially positive phenomenon necessary for healthy coping.”¹⁰⁹ Hope’s functional components of desire, expectancy, pathways, and agency address the criteria of coping—process-orientation, adaptability to contextual variations, and immediate outcomes—and unlock a number of positive tools for effective coping. Ten can be identified from the above discussion and are detailed below. Some were found in the secular literature, some in the biblical literature, but most were in both.

Positive reappraisal

First, hope leads to the positive reappraisal of circumstances and acts as a “bypass to an ongoing and unpleasant ‘present.’”¹¹⁰ It enables individuals to deal with situations in which their needs and goals are not met in the present by hypothesizing about their gratification in the future¹¹¹ and reappraising present experiences as stepping stones towards their desired future.¹¹²

The literature further suggests that hopeful people are more likely to engage in “challenge appraisal” than “threat appraisal.” The latter emphasizes “the potential harm in the transaction” whereas the former emphasizes the “difficult to attain, possibly risky, but positive mastery or gain.”¹¹³ Confidence in the outcome allows for obstacles to be appraised as “challenges and learning opportunities.”¹¹⁴ Challenge appraisals are associated with problem-focused coping and rational planning and action. Strategies include “rational action, perseverance, positive thinking, intellectual denial, restraint, self-adaptation, drawing strength from adversity, and humour.”¹¹⁵ Threat appraisals, on the other hand, are more commonly associated with wishful thinking.

In 2 Corinthians 4, the Apostle Paul’s future expectation directly impacted his appraisal of his immediate circumstances. He did not “allow his attention to become wholly absorbed in the present [with its] responsibilities, frustrations, [and] contradictions.”¹¹⁶ He wrote, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8). This required both a decision and the consequent action to fix his gaze on his desired goal. “It was only as attention was focused on what was unseen that suffering led to glory.”¹¹⁷

Anxiety buffering

Second, hope serves an important anxiety buffering function.¹¹⁸ Positive reappraisals have the effect of making life under stress more bearable.¹¹⁹ Hope protects against the de-energising effects of despair by activating the motivational system to respond.¹²⁰

In Hebrews 6, hope is described as providing “an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Hebrews 6:19). The consequence, described by Paul is that “we do not lose heart, though our outer self is wasting away

..” (2 Corinthians 4:16). He continued, “we are always of good courage” (2 Corinthians 5:5–6). “Despair is an experience to which he [Paul] does not submit; for to despair is to disown the Spirit and to disown the Spirit is not to be a Christian at all.”¹²¹

Motivation

Third, hope contributes to agency by motivating individuals to take any and all such actions as are necessary to achieve their desired goals. “The more important a goal is to someone, the greater is its value within the person’s motivation,”¹²² and “people who are confident about the future exert continuing effort.”¹²³ Hope “allows for the rekindling of determination and willpower even when faced with blockages . . . [and this] resultant boost in willpower in turn motivates the search for still further alternate pathways.”¹²⁴ Hope also contributes to greater persistence in the pursuit of goals.¹²⁵

In the biblical literature, dissatisfaction with the present and the longing for a better future are powerfully motivational. “Hope does not make one patient but impatient, nor placid but restless. When a man does begin to hope, he can no longer be satisfied with things as they happen to be.”¹²⁶ In 1 John 3, John described the very practical and present implications of the hope of a future redemption. The one who longs for Christ’s appearing does not wait until that event to begin the process of becoming like him. Rather, they are motivated to pursue change in the present.

Unity of action

Fourth, emphasising the corporate rather than the individual aspects of hope, the ‘one hope’ (Ephesians 4:4), common to all believers, directs and unifies the actions of the Christian community towards a common goal.¹²⁷ “Our methods, our organization, even some of our beliefs may be different; but we are all striving towards the one goal of a world redeemed in Christ.”¹²⁸ Unified action increases the likelihood of goal attainment.

Adaptability

Fifth, hope is flexible in its expectations¹²⁹ and in its response to situational variables, thereby allowing people to explore multiple ways of meeting a goal¹³⁰ and “stay open to new information for problem solving or adaptation, even when typical avenues seem closed.”¹³¹

A predictor of well-being

Sixth, hope is a predictor of emotional well-being and life satisfaction.¹³² It “conveys important information about one’s rate of progress, goal completion, and the status of one’s psychological resources to pursue a particular goal at a particular time.”¹³³

Resilience

Seventh, hope has been shown to play a significant role in the development of resilience which, in turn, allows people to maintain better physical and psychological health in stressful situations, when experiencing acute medical conditions, and in the face of physical and psychological trauma.¹³⁴

Personal transformation

Eighth, again drawing on the biblical literature, hope results in moral, spiritual, attitudinal, and behavioural change modelled on Jesus.¹³⁵ The goals we strive for in the future shape how we are in the present. If our goal is to be like Christ at his appearing (Colossians 3:4) we do not wait until Christ’s appearing to begin that process. Rather, the Christian strives for it in the present, “purifying himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:3). This was the driver of the Colossians’ faith and love (Colossians 1:4–5).

A foretaste of things to come

Ninth, hope allows for a taste of a desired but as yet unrealised future in the present. In Hebrews 11:1–3, the actions of people of faith “gave substance to . . . [and] expressed the reality of things hoped for . . . [and] demonstrated the truth of things not yet seen.”¹³⁶ Their faith gave the object of hope the force of present reality.

Assurance of the adequacy of the gospel

Tenth, in Colossians 1:5, hope is seen as assuring us of the adequacy of the gospel, thereby “precluding any desire to supplement the gospel with additional speculation.”¹³⁷

Conclusion

Hope “reflects the belief that one can find pathways to desired goals and become motivated to use those pathways.”¹³⁸ Hope has four aspects: desire, expectancy, pathways, and agency. These can be found in both the secular and the New Testament literature. A hopeful person is one

who has desired, valued, and attainable goals that occupy their conscious thought, has identified pathways to goal satisfaction, and who has confidence in their ability to navigate those pathways. Desired goals are unique to each individual; however, from a scriptural perspective, the primary goal of Christian hope is to experience the fruits of Christ's victory over sin and death. The pursuit of this goal has direct implications for moral, spiritual, attitudinal, and behavioural change in the present, and it also finds individual, corporate, and cosmic expression.

Coping is the process by which a person deals with threats and challenges to their physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Hope, irrespective of the desired goal, facilitates coping by unlocking a range of positive coping tools. Ten were specifically identified in this study:

1. Positive reappraisal
2. Anxiety buffering
3. Motivation
4. Unified action
5. Adaptability
6. Predictor of well-being
7. Resilience
8. Personal transformation
9. A foretaste of things to come
10. Assurance of the adequacy of the gospel

Further investigation will likely reveal more. These tools are mostly agnostic, although faith does provide direction and focus to their application. The last is specifically associated with the pathway to the goal of sharing in Christ's resurrection victory. The pursuit of hope is an accessible and effective strategy for coping with the challenges and opportunities of life.

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