

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

Popular music gives us little windows into how people think. Based on the popular music you know, think about how song writers handle the whole idea of **hope**. Of course, hope isn't usually talked about directly, but often it's right below the surface. For instance, people who are sad often turn to pick-me-up songs as a way of forgetting their problems a while, grabbing hold of some hope. You may remember the song "Don't Worry. Be Happy." Some song writers like to help people hope, like when the words express **hope** for love to continue, or express **hope** about connecting with someone you're attracted to. In some break-up songs the singers assert that there's no **hope** of ever finding love again, or they thank their friends for helping them through, or they hope for their next love. In some songs parents' hope is restored as they see how resilient and hope-driven their children are. Pet-loving musicians describe how their pets give them a sense of hope when things are going wrong in the world.

In case I'm making it sound like there's a lot of hope in popular songs, please understand: when I listen closely to the words, what I really hear is people who are hurting or are uncertain about what the future holds. They want hope. They believe something good will happen. There's got to be a morning after. The sun will shine again after the storm. Tomorrow is only a day away. Yes,

many times tomorrow is better. Most days are good days. But what about when tomorrow is not better? Your loved one gets sicker, or maybe it's you that illness keeps lurking around. How can anyone keep hope alive when the best of their hopes or happinesses is temporary? Is it ok to live like accidents, pain, and death will never come? Is it ok to keep reality bottled up behind pretty music or a grooving beat?

Of course, some songwriters are realists (also referred to as pessimists) who proclaim that you can't overcome poverty, hunger, disease, or the potential of humans to make things worse. These people go too far the other way, as if there is no reasonable basis to hope that any of this will change dramatically in our lifetime. In fact they would assert that if you have hope, you are living an illusion. It may come as no surprise that few of these harbingers of hopelessness have number one hit songs or top-selling books.

Enough about how others handle hope. How do you handle hope? Do you remind yourself: there's always tomorrow for dreams to come true? Or do you see yourself as a realist about the problems we face in this life? If we add one more ingredient to this conversation, might we find an excellent balance somewhere in the middle? Why, yes! As believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, we know what that one more ingredient is. An account from the life of the apostle

Paul can remind us of the ingredient which helps us find the balance between hopelessness and happy distraction.

The Bible book of Acts lays out Paul's story. He had grown up in the strictest religious sect of the Jews (Acts 26:5). He knew all of God's commandments, and he strove mightily to live according to them (Philippians 3:4-6). When Christianity started to spread among the Jews after Jesus' ascension to heaven, Paul did everything he could to buck this trend. He became a leading persecutor. He even went house to house arresting believers and trying to force them to blaspheme against Jesus (Acts 8:3, 26:11).

But after the ascended Lord Jesus visited him, Paul changed his mind and worked for the rest of his life to spread the good news that Jesus rescued all people from sin and hell through his death on the cross (Acts 9:1-31). More importantly Paul told people that Jesus came back to life again and rules all things from his throne in heaven (Acts 13:16-41).

This brought Paul into conflict with everyone who didn't feel their need for a Savior from sin, or who couldn't accept the idea that God would let his own Son suffer and die to reconcile his enemies, or who refused to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. Some of these opponents arranged for Paul to be arrested and beaten on several occasions (2 Corinthians 11:24-25).

Once when Paul was in Jerusalem to deliver aid money for hungry Christians, he went up to the Temple to worship the Lord. His opponents saw him there, stirred up the crowd with false accusations, dragged him from the Temple, and were trying to kill him. Some Roman soldiers intervened, saving Paul's life, but he was kept in prison. When the Roman commander tried to figure out why Paul and his accusers were at odds, a nasty dispute broke out, and again the commander had to intervene to keep Paul safe. When the commander heard about a plot to assassinate Paul, he sent Paul down to the Roman governor for trial (Acts 21-23).

In Acts 24 Paul and his accusers appear before the governor for a hearing. Imagine you are Paul as you listen to their accusations. *"⁵We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect ⁶and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. ⁸By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him."* Remember, you are Paul. How is your hope now? Do you wish you could play some pick-me-up music as a way of forgetting your problems. "I'm walkin' on sunshine, o-oh, and don't it feel good!" Sorry, Paul, that song won't be written for almost 2000 years. Maybe you should try golfing. No?

Well then answer the accusations of your hostile opponents. ¹⁰When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: “I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. (It was common for people back then to start by saying something nice to the judge. But Paul wasn’t currying favor through false flattery. He got right to his rebuttal.) ¹¹You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. ¹²My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. I was not the one who stirred up the riot that landed me in jail. ¹³And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me, especially the charge of desecrating the temple. I did no such thing. ¹⁴However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. In actuality it isn’t a sect. Sects pick and choose what they want to believe. But I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets. And I am willing to demonstrate this fully at some point. In the meantime let me try to reach out to you, O Governor, and to my opponents by saying, ¹⁵I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. That’s when God will judge everyone. ¹⁶So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man. Troublemakers don’t care about a clear

conscience. ¹⁷After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings—again, not something a troublemaker would do. ¹⁸I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this, because I would never desecrate the Lord’s temple. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. I was quietly worshipping the one true God. ¹⁹But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. They are the ones who stirred up the crowd and started the riot with their misleading accusations about me. ²⁰Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin because that’s the only time they’ve had interaction with me. I have done nothing against God or them—²¹unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: ‘It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.’”

What a great lesson on hope! Where is Paul basing his hope? If he hopes for a fair trial from the governor, he will learn disappointment during the next two years. The governor is not going to free him—both as a favor to Paul’s opponents and because he hopes for a bribe from Paul. The governor’s hope for a bribe will not be fulfilled either.

Where is Paul basing his hope? Does he hope for a smooth life and a relaxing

retirement? No. He has faced opposition in almost every city where he has tried to tell people about Jesus the Savior. Is it time to give up and go home? No. If Paul is released, he will get right back out there to share the story of Jesus with others. He hopes to be released so he can serve the Savior with his whole life. What a strange man! ...at least from the world's point of view.

But we get it, don't we? A LIVING HOPE SUSTAINS US, just like the apostle Paul. Our hope is in the Lord. We expect God will be faithful to his promises, giving us eternal life with him someday and helping us fight against all sin now. Our hope is based on the faithfulness of God. And that, my friends, is the secret ingredient which allows us to live between hopelessness and the temporary earthly hope that so many people strive for. We believers are comfortable with realism: "Yeah, I going to get sick again. And someday I'm going to die, unless Jesus comes back first. In the meantime I've got popular songs to enjoy, golf balls to swing at, a lot of good days to live, thanks to God. Sure I'm going to eat my fill of disappointment in this life. But I'm okay with that because A LIVING HOPE SUSTAINS ME. My Savior Jesus rose from the dead. He rules in my heart through his holy Word and Sacraments. He sustains my body with food, clothing, and shelter. He hears all my prayers and answers them according to his good and gracious will. He helps me be a good

worker and a good neighbor. God has promised to raise all the dead on the Last Day and give eternal life to all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true." That's my hope talking. And because it is based on the faithfulness of my God, A LIVING HOPE SUSTAINS ME. It empowers all us believers to live without despair even as struggles and sufferings sprinkle themselves into the many good days God gives us.

According to the last count I heard, there have been more mass shootings in our country than days in this year so far. Ukraine's eastern provinces and Crimea are still being occupied. Many nations seem bent on taking our nation down a notch or two. Our state politicians have passed several laws that are going to make it harder on followers of Jesus. But we believers in Jesus can add the secret ingredient to everything that brings hopelessness closer—the faithfulness of our God—and suddenly we have a good reason to hope as we strive to feed our faith on God's Word and take care of our other responsibilities with a clear conscience before God. We have a Savior who forgave us fully and loves us even when events in this life bring sadness. A LIVING HOPE SUSTAINS US, allowing us to live joyfully between fear and denial, no matter what is coming our way. How many other situations can you think of in which this living hope sustains you? God's faithfulness always makes the difference.