

CHRISTMAS COUNSELING

LUKE 1:78-29

THE BIRTH OF HOPE



FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

DAVID MURRAY
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INTRODUCTION

Overall life expectancy in America has fallen each year for the past three years. The last time this happened was 1918. Over the past two decades, deaths of despair from suicide, drug overdose, and alcoholism have risen dramatically, and now claim hundreds of thousands of American lives each year—and they're still rising.

Last year the CDC reported more than 100,000 drug overdose deaths during a 12-month period, a 28.5% increase over the prior year. Most of these deaths were attributed to the use of opioids by middle-aged white men. 911 calls for opioid-related use increased 250% between 2019 and early 2020. The key driver is economic misery combined with a sense that nobody in their community or in government cares for them. Other factors such as poverty, illness, chronic pain, inflation, healthcare costs, debt, all combine to produce a sense of hopelessness and helplessness in many. Little wonder that only 43% of US adult citizens believe that "The American Dream" still exists. A third say there is no such thing.

It's not just middle-aged and old people. In an *Atlantic* article, *Why American Teens Are So Sad*, Derek Thompson reports that "The United States is experiencing an extreme teenage mental-health crisis. From 2009 to 2021, the share of American high-school students who say they feel "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness" rose from 26 percent to 44 percent...This is the highest level of teenage sadness ever recorded."

Where can we find hope in a hopeless world? The Christmas story of hope can change our story of despair.

BACKGROUND

Our text is found in the closing words of Zechariah's song (Luke 1:67-79). Zechariah was married to Elizabeth. Although they had been childless into their old age, God promised Zechariah a son (John the Baptist) who would be great in the sight of God and prepare the way for God's salvation. When Zechariah expressed skepticism about this, God disciplined him with the inability to speak (Luke 1:5-23). When John was born and Zechariah gave him the name God wanted, God restored his ability to speak (57-65). As people questioned what was so special about this child, Zechariah composed this divinely inspired song (66-79).



1.HOPE IS DYING

"...those living in darkness and in the shadow of death" (79)

Living in darkness

Zechariah lived in dark times. It was politically dark as the Romans had subjugated and occupied Israel. It was spiritually dark as there had been no new revelation of God for 400 years. It was personally dark as Zechariah had reached old age and still had no children, a painful stigma in that culture.

Dying in darkness

Zechariah was old and coming towards the end of his life. As a believer he had some hope of life after death, but that hope was based upon Old Testament shadow truths and therefore could only generate shadowy hope.

Although Zechariah had some glimmers of hope for himself, when he looked around he saw a people not just living in darkness but living in the shadow of death. Death cast a long shadow over their lives. Most had little or no hope of salvation in this life and little or no hope of life after death. However much light they may have enjoyed at times in their lives, they could not escape the brevity of life, the finality of death, and the uncertainty about what was next.

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

Is your life dark and hopeless? Do you wonder what's the point in life? What is there to live for? Is life worth the bother? Maybe you had hope at one point in your life, but life events and experiences have drained that hope and filled you with despair. You see nothing ahead that looks bright, that looks as if things could change for you. Further, when you look beyond your own life, you see hopeless darkness in the nation, in the culture, in the economy. You are living in darkness.

Is your death dark and hopeless? You try to avoid thinking about death, but when you do, it's like a dark hole. You try to avoid it, but sometimes its shadow falls across your life. You fear dying, death, and what's after death. You're not sure you're going to heaven and are anxious that you could be going to hell. Or maybe, you despair that death is the end of your existence. But you just don't know. The end and what may be after is just dark and unknowable. You are dying, or fear dying, in darkness.

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My hope is dying, or maybe even dead.
Is there anything that can resurrect hope?



2. HOPE IS BORN

"...because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death" (78).

The Son rises and shines on dark lives

Zechariah looked forward to the arrival of the Messiah as if looking for a sunrise after a dark night. As he looked to the horizon he saw the most beautiful rising sun he's ever seen in his life. It's a gift of heaven to earth, from God to humanity. Because of his tender mercy, God looked down and saw how many had dark lives and dark deaths and sent his Son as his sun to shine into that dark hopelessness.

The burst of heavenly sunlight that rose in the stable of Bethlehem gave hope to those in darkness. It gave hope that God keeps his promises, hope that God has a plan and is in control, hope that good will triumph over evil, hope that God loves us, cares for us, and wants us to know his tender mercy, hope that God will do whatever it takes to make life purposeful and meaningful.

The Son rises and shines on dark deaths

While this baby's birth gave hope for those living in darkness, it also gave hope to those dying in darkness. His life and death purchased and provided salvation through the forgiveness of sins. His life, death and resurrection was like a flashlight that went before them in life and death. The shadow of death has been shrunk, lightened, and lessened. The baby born in Bethlehem shines his light on our path, giving us hope of a bright and eternal future.

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

We have bright hope about life. The Baby of Bethlehem assures us that God is in control, rules over our darkness, has a purpose in the darkness, and will eventually show us the bright light of his purpose. The Baby of Bethlehem may not change our circumstances but he does change the way we view them and live through them. The Baby of Bethlehem assures us that whether or not anyone else loves us, God does and does so with tender mercy,

We have bright hope about death. We need not live in fear of death, dying, or what's after death. "The appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus...abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). Christian hope is a realistic expectation of and joyful longing for future good and glory based on the reliable Word of God. That's my hope, what's your hope?

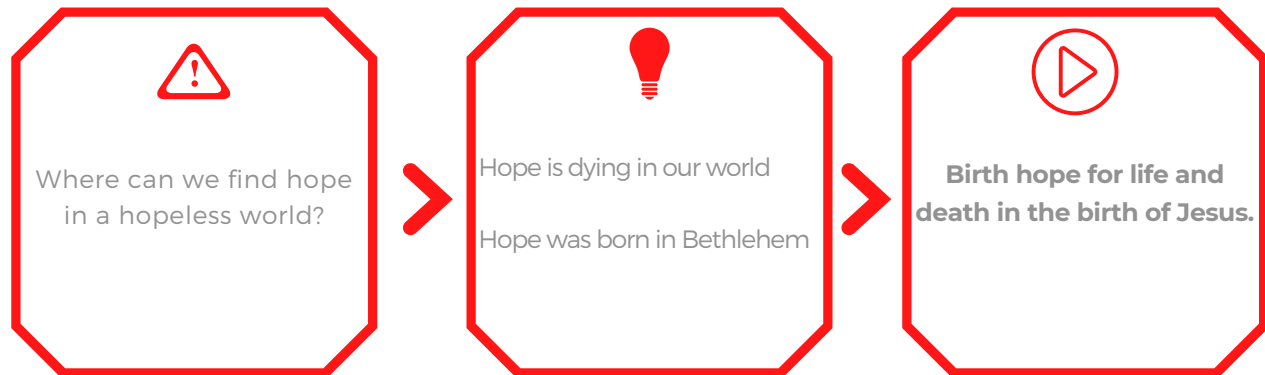
THE HOPE OF HEAVEN
GIVES HOPE ON EARTH



Hear God's Story > Change your story > Tell the story > Change others' stories



SUMMARY



CHRISTMAS COUNSELING

When hope counsels us we have optimism instead of pessimism, energy instead of lethargy, joy instead of sadness, power instead of weakness, belonging instead of alienation, possibilities instead of problems, self-care instead of self-harm, praise instead of criticism, progress instead of backsliding, ripe fruit instead of bare branches, resilience instead of defeatism, silver linings not just dark clouds, expectation instead of regret, motivation instead of moping.

Hope actually increases our overall physical health too as scientists have found that positive emotions such as hope affect our cells, tissues, and organs and ultimately our health and mortality. Hope is infectious and encourages other sagging Christians as well as making non-Christians ask us for the reason of our hope.

Prayer: God of hope, shine the hope of Christ into our hopeless lives to increase our physical health, our emotional wealth, and our spiritual usefulness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where do you land on the despair-hope scale (with 10 being maximum hope)?
2. What affects your levels of despair or hope?
3. How hopeful are you about your life? Your death?
4. How has Jesus increased your hope in life and in death?
5. How do you build and strengthen your hope?
6. Who do you know that you can counsel with the hope of this message?

First Byron Christian Reformed Church
8541 Byron Center Ave SW, Byron Center, MI 49315
Phone: (616) 878-9768
www.firstbyroncrc.org

Pastor David Murray
www.thestorychanger.life