



**AGENTS OF HOPE:
MAKING THE FUTURE A PRESENT REALITY
(Sermon)**

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I. Introduction

Rocky¹ hates his job. He doesn't care much for his boss. He despises having to do the same thing day after day, week after week, month after month.

This is why, once a week he drives to a local convenience store and buys a couple lottery tickets. He likes to imagine that one day he will hit the big one, or at least a jackpot with six or seven figures. Then he will retire, or at least take some time off and find a better job.

If he doesn't come up with a winning number this week, there's always next week. It's his only hope.

II. A Christian's Hope

Before we come down too hard on Rocky, let's take a moment to consider that we Christians have been waiting more than 2,000 years for what we call the "blessed hope"—that day when Jesus will return and put an end to all that makes our lives miserable in the here and now: disease, divorce, poverty, domestic abuse, senseless violence, drunk drivers, suicide bombers.

The hope that today will be better than yesterday gets us out of bed in the morning and keeps us going through another day.

Hope is an amazing commodity. It allows prisoners to endure a sentence of many years because they believe that some miracle will eventually let them experience freedom and allow them to reunite with their families.

Hope allows someone with a terminal illness to believe that a cure lies just around the corner, that if they survive just a little longer doctors may come up with a treatment that will give them an opportunity to enjoy again the blessings of good health. Who knows? The prayers of family and friends may result in some kind of miracle.

Who knows what tomorrow will bring? That's why we hope.

III. When Hope Fails

But hope has two sides. Said the wise man: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life" (Prov. 13:12).²

There comes a point in all too many situations when even hope is thwarted. A loved one dies; a marriage disintegrates; a business fails. Yet life goes on.

Let's be real: not all our hopes and dreams are realized—not in this life. What then? Do we become hopeless? Do we just give up, pull the covers over our heads, and waste away?

A fascinating story in 2 Kings 7 captures all the elements of hope, hopelessness, and hope renewed. Perhaps you remember it.

Samaria was under siege. A siege was a remarkably cost-effective way to conquer one's enemies. All you had to do was surround the city, not allow anyone in or out, and wait for the

lack of food and drinking water to decimate the population. Eventually the citizens surrendered without a struggle.

Now it happened that four men had been banished from the city. Their offense? They had leprosy. According to ancient Israelite custom, people with leprosy were banned from normal society lest they infect someone else with the dread disease.

These men lived a kind of living death. They had to rely on the kindness of friends and family for their food, but they were forbidden to interact with them. Plus, they lived with the feeling, popular at the time, that sickness was the result of God's displeasure. If you were sick, it meant that God was somehow displeased with you. And since the restrictions against someone who had leprosy were so severe, most considered leprosy the ultimate in God's punishment.

So here are these four men. No food in the city meant that the people they relied on for survival were no longer able to provide for them.

That led them to say to each other, "Now there were four men with leprosy at the entrance of the city gate. They said to each other, 'Why stay here until we die? If we say, "We'll go into the city"—the famine is there, and we will die. And if we stay here, we will die. So let's go over to the camp of the Arameans and surrender. If they spare us, we live; if they kill us, then we die'" (2 Kings 7:3, 4).

We see their logic: Facing death by starvation, their only hope, even if it's slim, is to beg for mercy from their enemies. It might cost them their lives, but it's their only hope.

IV. Hope Resurrected

At dusk the four men went to the Aramean encampment. Unknown to the four, sometime during the day the Arameans had heard "the sound of chariots and horses and a great army" (verse 6), and they had fled in a panic, abandoning "their tents and their horses and donkeys" (verse 7). And in the tents the four men found food and water, not to mention "silver, gold and clothes" (verse 8).

Talk about hitting the jackpot! A few moments before they were on the verge of starvation. Now they were rich beyond imagination.

After they ate and drank their fill and hid some of the gold and silver until later, they remembered why they were there in the first place: a few hundred yards away was a whole city of people who were still starving.

"Then they said to each other, 'We're not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. . . . Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace.' " (v. 9).

Suddenly, these four men, still afflicted with an incurable disease, were heroes. They hadn't done anything to scare off the Arameans, they had not provided or prepared any of the food, but, armed with a message of hope and deliverance, they returned to the city and gave hope to its citizens. God used them as ambassadors, agents of hope.

V. Agents of Hope

If there was a time when the world needed more agents of hope, that time is now. Hopelessness is all around us. Hopelessness is demonstrated in random shootings at shopping malls, schools, theaters, churches. Hopelessness is often behind the religious and political violence that takes place around the world. Symptoms of hopelessness are reflected in the insane quest for wealth, pleasure, and mindless entertainment that infects our society.

Most of the time, we imagine that the people with whom we interact are looking for a message, something that will challenge their traditions and lead them to embrace what we value in the Bible.

In fact, people may not be looking for a set of doctrines as much as for a concept about spiritual things that will support them through the hard times we all experience.

Is there a God?

Does He care about me?

Is He there when I need Him?

Our friends and neighbors aren't necessarily looking for a Bible study (although sometimes they are), they're looking for evidence on which to hang their hope. They want a reason to get up in the morning, motivation to go on.

Since 2007, CNN has been honoring what it calls "Everyday Heroes: Everyday People Changing the World." Ten nominees are presented at a New York City gala and honored for their efforts to serve others.

In 2013 the nominees for CNN's Everyday Heroes included:

- *Richard Nares*. In 2000 Richard Nares lost his son, Emilio, to cancer. When the 3-year old was diagnosed with leukemia, Nares and his family entered the world of lab tests, radiation treatments, and hospital visits. Fortunately, the Nares family had a large support system, flexible jobs, and understanding employers.

But among the other families Nares became acquainted with, he found no such support. Single parents without transportation often had to take time off from work and spend hours on public transportation to get to their kids' medical appointments.

After Emilio died, Nares worked with the hospital where his son had received care and volunteered to provide transportation. "I was going every day," he says, "picking up families all over the county."

Soon the number of requests became unmanageable, so in 2003 he started the Emilio Nares Foundation. Today, the foundation provides more than 2,500 rides a year, traveling more than 70,000 miles to help families who struggle with the near hopeless situation of having a child with a terminal illness.³

Richard Nares is an agent of hope.

- *Danielle Gletow*. Since 2008 Danielle Gletow has been the force behind the non-profit organization One Simple Wish. The organization helps to grant the wishes of children in foster care in more than 40 states.

Ronald Henning's wish was for a suit to attend a relative's funeral. When he approached his caseworker, the expense was considered "non-essential."

That's when an anonymous donor, through the website "One Simple Wish," donated enough to buy Henning a suit. "I got custom-fitted for the suit and I was able to go to the funeral," he says. "I could pay the same respect as everyone else."

Gletow and her husband, Joe, have been foster parents since 2006. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, more than 400,000 children live in foster-care in the United States. "These are individual children who have individual wishes and individual personalities and wants and needs and dislikes and likes," she says.

Sometimes a wish can be as simple as providing funds to a young man who wanted to go to after-school karate lessons with his friends, or paying for transportation so that a relative can attend a graduation ceremony. Gletow observes, "These small things make an enormous

difference in the life of a child who has spent their entire life wondering if anybody cares about them.”⁴

Danielle Gletow is an agent of hope.

● *Georges Bwelle*. According to the World Health Organization, the African nation of Cameroon has only one doctor for every 5,000 people (compared to one for every 413 people in the United States). In 1981 Georges Bwelle’s father broke his arm in a car accident. An infection in his arm eventually affected his brain.

“We would have taken him out of Cameroon if we had the money,” says Bwelle. Instead he spent years escorting his father to overcrowded clinics and hospitals, hoping to get him treatment. “You can leave home at 5:00 a.m., running to the hospital to be first, and you are not the first.”

After seeing his father, and so many of his fellow citizens suffer and die, Bwelle studied to become a doctor, eventually becoming a vascular surgeon. He started a non-profit organization, ASCOVIME, which provides free medical care and education supplies to the marginalized, destitute populations in Cameroon and other countries in the rainforests in Africa.

Nearly every Friday, Bwelle and as many as 30 people tie medical supplies to the roofs of their vans, pile in, and travel across rough terrain to visit villages in need. Since 2008, Bwelle and his group of volunteers have helped nearly 32,000 people with free medical care. People come from as far as 60 kilometers, most of them on foot.

One man received treatment that allowed him to work again. “This will change my future with my family,” he said.

“I am so happy when I am doing this work,” Bwelle says. “To make people laugh, to reduce the pain, that’s why I’m doing this.”⁵

Georges Bwelle is an agent of hope.

VI. Just Say Yes

As a movement, we have been waiting for “the blessed hope” for more than 150 years (Christians in general for a lot longer than that).

For some, unfortunately, waiting in hope means keeping ourselves doctrinally correct and morally pure against all the theological and sociological contamination so prevalent in our society and around the world. And the typical way we accomplish that is to withdraw from worldly influences, wrap ourselves in cocoons of doctrinal purity, and hope that we will be deemed faithful when Jesus returns.

But beyond keeping our fingers crossed and hoping Jesus will return before we get old, or get cancer, or see our loved ones experience some kind of tragedy and heartbreak, is the kind of hope that rolls up its sleeves and seeks to bring hope to those who don’t have it.

Richard Nares knows what it feels like to lose a child to cancer. That’s why he works so hard to bring hope to cancer patients and their families who cling desperately to every sign of hope they can.

That’s why Danielle Gletow and her “One Simple Wish” foundation is such a blessing to those who live in foster care. She knows that those children often live in a succession of settings, some of them good, some of them not so good. But the fulfillment of small wishes might just be enough to keep these kids positive and hopeful until they’re old enough to live on their own.

Georges Bwelle grew up in an environment where antibiotics and antiseptics were reserved for only a few, and minor illnesses and injuries could lead to major complications, even

death. That's why he loads a van with supplies and staff to set up mobile clinics where the poor of any age can come to receive treatment.

Rather than just being people of hope, God wants us to be agents of hope. What's the difference? It's the difference between seeing and doing, the difference between recognizing a problem and working to solve it.

And the beauty is that no matter where we live, there exist in our communities avenues through which we can be agents of hope. Are there people who are homeless? We can help prepare food at their shelters. Are there kids who don't have anywhere to go after school? We can volunteer at the library for a story hour. Are there old folk who don't get out? We can offer to take them shopping, or out for a meal at McDonald's.

Chances are, we don't have to look very far to find some organization in our community that is already providing these kinds of services, organizations desperate for volunteers. We don't even have to start our own. Just a few hours a week spent volunteering for a community organization communicates a powerful message to our community: We can be agents of hope.

And by bringing hope to those who teeter on the edge of despair, we are saying, "Yes, God cares. Yes, He has plans for our good, something unimaginable glorious. And in the midst of the world's heartache and despair, we are here as agents of hope, helping with your burdens, reflecting God's love and concern for you."

Agents of hope, waiting for Jesus' return, will be so focused on bringing hope to those with little or no hope that we won't have time to notice that our Lord "delays His coming." When He comes, He'll find us doing what He wants us to do: Being agents of hope.

VII. Conclusion

No one was a better agent of hope than Jesus. He specialized in hopeless cases. Those who were sick, blind, paralyzed, grief stricken, consumed with guilt, found in Jesus someone who gave them hope.

Notice this passage in which Matthew describes Jesus by quoting from the prophet Isaiah:

"Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope' " (Matt. 12:18-21).

Jesus wasn't unaware of the hopelessness around Him. He wasn't blind to the suffering He encountered. In fact, He focused especially on those who were on the edge of hopelessness. Jesus could have spent all His time discussing theology and debating some fine points of doctrine, and He did—sometimes. But He was primarily a man of action, an agent of hope. Those of us who are His disciples have the happy privilege of being agents of hope, joining Him in spreading hope wherever we go.

¹ Not his real name.

² All scriptural texts in this sermon are from *The New International Version of the Bible*.

³ Cnn.com/2013/05/02/health/cnnheroes-nares-cancer-rides/index.html. Accessed Jan. 16, 2014.

⁴ Cnn.com/2013/03/07/us/cnnheroes-gletow-foster-wishes/index.html. Accessed Jan. 16, 2014.

⁵ Cnn.com/2013/08/01/world/Africa/cnnheroes-bwelle-cameroon-doctor/index.html. Accessed Jan. 16, 2014.