

HOPE THAT CANNOT DIE **Proverbs 11:7**

(NASB) "When a wicked man dies, *his* expectation will perish, and the hope of strong men perishes."

INTRODUCTION

Do you have any unfulfilled hopes? Are there things you'd still like to achieve or experience? Hope can provide wonderful motivation to do new things or make horrible circumstances seem bearable. A man walking in a park noticed a little league baseball game that afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. He responded, "Eighteen to nothing—we're behind." "Oh my!" said the man, "I'll bet you're discouraged." "Why should I be discouraged?" replied the boy. "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!"

Manufacturing millionaire Eugene Lang was born to immigrant parents in New York City in 1919. In 1981, he was asked to return to the elementary school he'd attended 50 years earlier, to address a graduating class of 61 sixth graders about education's importance. But P.S. 121 in East Harlem had changed greatly from his days. The principal told him 3/4ths of these students would probably never graduate high school. Lang decided to scrap his notes and make them a bold promise: "Stay in school," he advised them, "and I'll help pay the college tuition for every one of you." This transformed their world. For the first time, many had real hope of achieving a better life for themselves. Said one student, "I had something to look forward to; something waiting for me. It was a golden feeling." Lang enlisted a local community organization to provide services and support to the children through high school graduation. Nearly 90 percent of that class went on to graduate from high school or earn their GED, and 60% pursued higher education. Most of them now hold fulfilling jobs and are committed to the college education of their children!

Today's message explores the subject of hope from two angles: The Certainty of Dying Hope and The Certainty of Undying Hope.

I. THE CERTAINTY OF DYING HOPE

As the sun rose September 21, 2011 Troy Davis, on Georgia's death row since 1991, faced execution that day. All his hopes rested upon a legal stay sparing his life as it had done three times previously. Born in 1968 to middle-class parents in Savannah, GA, and bright, he was an apathetic student. At 20, he gained a good job manufacturing railroad crossing gates. But he often skipped work and then quit showing up just four months into the job. He wanted a solid future without the work necessary to build such a future.

On the night of August 19, 1989, Davis and a friend went to a Burger King. A drunk in the parking lot began to be mugged. Police officer Mark MacPhail, former Army Ranger and married father of two young children, moonlighted as a security guard. Rushing over to break up the scuffle, he was shot and killed. No murder weapon was ever found but shell casings found at the scene matched others found near Davis' home. Davis insisted someone else pulled the trigger. Witnesses who didn't know him identified Davis as the shooter based upon his clothing, as did witnesses who did know him. Their testimony convinced a jury of seven blacks & five whites after just two hours of deliberation to convict Davis, sentencing him to death.

It's not our purpose to thoroughly discuss the death penalty's validity. People deeply committed to the Lord may be deeply divided on this issue. But Troy Davis' life fittingly illustrates the truth of **Proverbs 11:7**: "When a wicked man dies, his expectation will perish, and the hope of strong men perishes." The adjective "wicked" of most Bible translations is not in two key Hebrew manuscripts. They simply state, "When a human being dies [referring to clinical, bodily death], expectations perish." **Proverbs** teaches emphatically if we place our full hopes for happiness and fulfillment in what we can experience in the short years of our physical life, we are foolish, wicked, or both. "And the hope of strong men perishes" serves notice to those confident in their great physical or mental powers they will still flicker and fade into

nothingness as their bodies decline and die. **James 4:14** (NIV) reminds us, "Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." None are truly in control of their future; none are strong enough or smart enough to live forever.

Admittedly, physical death (or illness, disease, suffering, or tragedy), is a bit confusing to reconcile with belief in a perfect Creator who loves us perfectly. Was it part of God's original plan for physical death to separate us from friends and family we most love and to extinguish our earthly hopes and dreams? No; certainly not. All such dismal circumstances resulted from the human race making a god of our own selfish desires and breaking away from our Heavenly Father's protective and nurturing embrace.

When we return to our Heavenly Father's arms by embracing the forgiveness He offers us through **Jesus**, which allows **Jesus** to absorb the ghastly, deathly impact that befalls us when we separate ourselves from our Creator's life, does this mean we can no longer physically die as Christians? No. **I Corinthians 15:20-26** and **51-55** (NIV) inform us that "the last enemy to be destroyed is death." This means it will not be until **Jesus** returns to earth as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (**Revelation 19:16**) to overturn sin's effects upon this planet that He will be able to release the stranglehold physical death has continued to hold upon us. Hallelujah! But in the interim, do we as Christians have Certainty of Undying Hope that extends vibrantly beyond the grave, or do all of our hopes perish at our death, just as they do with non-Christians?

Troy Davis faced imminent death as one who believed in The Certainty of Dying Hope, as **Proverbs 11:7** describes. His professed "faith" in God seemed totally focused upon God securing his release from prison or getting his death sentence reduced to a life sentence. He told his sister, "If I don't trust God to move this mountain, then why am I praying?" Nothing I read indicated he believed in the Certainty of Undying Hope in a glorious Heaven, even if he was executed, justly or unjustly. The Apostle Paul, faced with imminent, unjust execution at Roman hands, proclaimed from his prison cell, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (**Philippians 1:21**, NIV). Years ago, a Christian passenger on an ocean liner could identify somewhat with Paul. He was enduring a rough Atlantic crossing. As he leaned over the rail, his face a shade of green, a steward came along and tried to encourage him: "Don't be discouraged, sir! No one's ever died of seasickness yet!" The nauseous passenger looked up at the steward and said, "Don't say that! It's only the hope of dying that's keeping me from despairing over how badly I feel."

When the order to execute Davis was first signed in March 1994, he displayed the creative intelligence God gave him, which could have been used to achieve great good for himself and others. Davis launched some of the most effective court petitions and procedural moves in recent history. His skillfully worded allegations of being wrongfully condemned by a miscarriage of justice halted his execution three times; once within two hours of being put to death. By summer of 2007, Davis' public relations efforts had gained him international attention. Politicians, movie stars, the European Parliament, and Pope Benedict VI called for a new trial or for his death sentence to be commuted to life imprisonment. The U.S. Supreme Court responded by handing Davis a dramatic victory in August 2009. Citing a "substantial risk of putting an innocent man to death," the Court overrode usual limits on death-penalty appeals, granted a stay of execution, and ordered a federal court hearing to weigh new evidence of Davis' innocence. But the federal hearing upheld Davis' conviction and death sentence on August 24, 2010. Chief Judge William Moore of the U.S. District Court in Savannah, an appointee of President Bill Clinton, issued a 174-page ruling picking apart Davis' claims one by one. He concluded, "While Mr. Davis's new evidence casts some additional, minimal doubt on his conviction, it is largely smoke and mirrors." The Court found him guilty of maliciously killing police officer Mark MacPhail while MacPhail attempted to aid the drunk being abused.

Davis undoubtedly knew of his guilt, but some people are convinced they can make anyone believe their lies. Davis continued to file a flurry of petitions and appeals until hours before he was to be executed, citing bias and everything else he could think to suggest. By September 17, 660,000 people had signed his

petition for clemency, including William Sessions (former head of the F. B. I.) and former President Jimmy Carter. But at 8:08 p.m. Tucson time, September 21, 2011, Troy Davis perished via lethal injection. His valiant efforts, delayed his execution 17 years, but they could not halt his death forever. Whether all his hopes died with him depended in the end upon his relationship with the Lord **Jesus**, not his lawyers.

Let's now unpack our key verse: "When a wicked man dies, his expectation will perish, and the hope of strong men perishes." This verse uses synonymous parallelism to convey its "proverb" (which means "a comparison"). The main thought in the first half of the verse is restated by comparing it to something closely similar in the second half. "Expectation" (*tiqvah*) refers to "the hope" most people have "of still experiencing something good in their mortal life." "Hope" (*tohelet*) in this verse refers to "the lingering faith that something earnestly desired will be gained, despite delays and disappointments." Life's greatest tragedy is for all hope to die of ever experiencing good and happy times again, as this little ditty illustrates:

Two fools had cars they thought to be perfection. They met one day at an intersection. Tooted their horns and made a connection. A police car came and made an inspection. An ambulance came and made a collection. All that is left is a recollection. And two less votes in the next election. And two more graves in a cemetery section.

Nine different Hebrew words are translated "perish" in many Bible versions. They highlight how fully we "perish" if we insist our version of reality is the truth instead of what God's Word tells us is true about how we came to live on planet Earth and what happens to us when we die. Most people assume they'll go to someplace good after they die. In February 1994, the narrator of a UA Planetarium show told of a retired Arizona couple he knew. When they died, they hoped to be part of a constellation they loved. They said, "When you look at these stars, we'll be up there somewhere." How noble; how poetic; how dumb! Even worse, how insulting to God! We cannot substitute a fuzzy pink cloud for reality. **Hebrews 9:27-28** (NIV) helps us "get real" about what happens when we die: "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him."

"Perish" in Hebrew can mean "to expire" or "die" (**Genesis 6:17**); "to be cut off" or "be cut down" (**Genesis 41:36**); or to "fall down dead" or "drop dead" (**Exodus 19:21**). "Perish" can mean "to be swept away" (**I Samuel 26:10**); "to pass through" [death's door] (**Job 36:12**); or "to be spent" or "come to an end" (**Proverb 22:8**). It can mean "to be silenced," "struck dumb," or "doomed without further opportunity to speak in one's defense" (**Jeremiah 8:14**); or it can mean "to cease existence" or "be completely cut off" (**Psalms 49:20**). The most common Hebrew word for "perish," found in **Proverbs 11:7**, originally referred to sheep who "were lost" or had "run away" and were "destroyed" by their foolishness due to predators, poisonous plants, or dangerous terrain. Thus, it describes "being ruined" so completely that no trace of what perishes remains. Bless the Name of **Jesus** and our Heavenly Father's love we have an alternative!

II. THE CERTAINTY OF UNDYING HOPE

In the New Testament, the most common Greek word for "perish" is used in **John 10:27-28** (NASB): "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand." "Perish" (*apollumi*) is an intense form of a word meaning "destroy" or destruction." It signifies "to destroy utterly." This does not mean "extinction of being." It describes a "total loss" or a "total ruin of one's *well-being*." Neither we, nor any of our loved ones united by saving faith in **Jesus** to God's eternal family, will ever experience such total loss or ruin, or ever be totally lost to us! Russell Davis, at age 10, already had this certainty. After fighting cancer for four years, he wrote to his best friend: "Dear Brian, How are you doing? I'm alright in the hospital but a little sleepy. . . . When I die, if I do soon, don't worry 'cause I'll be somewhere special in Heaven. And sooner than I know it you'll be up in Heaven with me, 'cause a thousand years on earth is a minute in Heaven. I know you'll miss me when I'm gone, but just accept it like you did with your uncle. My mom will give you

something of mine so you can remember me always. So don't worry too much. Love, Russell." Three days later, he asked for a sip of water, said, "I love you, Mom; I love you, Dad," and went to his eternal home.

CONCLUSION

Rusty Woomer was born in 1954 to an alcoholic and physically abusive Dad. He made life for Rusty's family a recurring nightmare of fear, hunger, and poverty. By age 24, Rusty longed to find an accepting father figure and stayed high on alcohol or drugs to numb his pain. An ex-con befriended him. On February 22, 1979, he led Rusty on a spree of robbery, rape, and kidnapping. High on drugs, Rusty murdered four people and severely disfigured a fifth shooting victim. He landed on death row; deservedly so.

In October, 1985, Rusty spectacularly embraced the power of Christ's love and forgiveness. **Jesus** transformed him from one of the most wretchedly scabby, Satanically possessed human beings imaginable into one of the most awe inspiring and uplifting. Many in his South Carolina prison were drawn to Christ because they'd never witnessed such a marvelously powerful demonstration of who **Jesus** is! As Rusty approached his execution, he focused entirely upon the needs of others, unlike Troy Davis. He stated, "I would die one hundred times over if it would put one breath of life back into them [his victims]. I have prayed for the families over and over again, and my last prayer before I die tonight will be for them. I want to tell Governor Carroll Campbell I love him too. I appreciate him. I am sorry I put such a load on him by asking him to spare my life. No man should have to bear that kind of load."

When asked what his thoughts would be when strapped into the electric chair, he replied, "The human side of me is scared to sit down and be electrocuted. They tell me that I won't feel nothin'. But I've stuck my finger in the light socket and it hurt plenty. So even if it hurts for a millionth-of-a-second, that's frightening. But I'm gonna be holdin' Jesus' hand. Long as He's my partner, what can I say? After all, there's no way I'm gonna lose. If they execute me, the next thing I'll know is that I'll be resurrected and taken to heaven. If they don't, I'll be the same. He's made it impossible for me not to praise and love Him and tell people about what He's done." On April 26, 1991, the day of his execution, did his hopes die? No. He was already aglow with the transforming power of **Jesus** long before the electrocution switch was thrown! "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (**John 3:16**, NKJV).