

## **The relevance of faith to life**

By Dr. Jim Denison

The Presbyterian lay minister Fred Rogers ("Mr. Rogers" to us) once quoted an anonymous scrawling on the bulletin board of the great Notre Dame cathedral in Paris: "The world tomorrow will belong to those who brought it the greatest hope."

Counselors and psychologists have long known the truth of those words. Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist and concentration camp survivor, documented the fact that those prisoners who believed in tomorrow best survived the horrors of today. Survivors of POW camps in Vietnam reported that a compelling hope for the future was the primary force that kept many of them alive.

A mouse dropped in water will give up and drown in minutes. But if it is rescued, it will tread water for more than 20 hours the next time. Austin pastor Gerald Mann saw his church grow from 60 to 4,000 in 14 years. His explanation: "I know three things people want when they come to church: they want help, they want home, and they want hope." How can Christian faith bring hope to your life today?

### **Avoid dead ends**

Consider this statement by C. S. Lewis:

"Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best ones. There is something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife may be a good wife, and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job: but something has evaded us" (*Mere Christianity* 119).

We know there's "something more" which has evaded us. What do we do about it? Some of us live for tomorrow. We hope that the next job, the next girlfriend or boyfriend or spouse, or car or clothes or city will fill what is lacking. We put our hope in tomorrow, believing that it will somehow be better than today. But it never is. So some of us settle for today. We give up our dreams of a better future, and settle into the present as we find it. We call ourselves "realists." We decide that there is no such thing as real love, or purpose, or meaning in life. We'll settle for what we can get with what we have.

And some of us escape the present. Medieval monastics retreated from the physical to concentrate on the spiritual. Simon Stylites lived nearly 40 years on the top of a pillar, 60 feet above the ground, refusing to come down. His example was widely applauded.

Others escape the present in less spiritual ways. Drug or alcohol abuse, sexual addictions, fixation on cults or the occult--anything to lessen the pain, the grief, the disappointment of hope abandoned.

In Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, Fantine is a young single mother without a job, a place to stay, or a way to support her child. If you've seen the musical, you'll remember her haunting song, titled "I Dreamed a Dream":

*I had a dream in time gone by  
When hope was high  
And life worth living  
I dreamed that love would never die  
I dreamed that God would be forgiving.*

But her love has died, and she believes that her God is not forgiving. And so she ends,

*I had a dream my life would be  
So different from this hell I'm living  
So different now from what it seemed  
Now life has killed the dream I dreamed.*

### **Make earth like heaven**

Perhaps not. Perhaps there's a fourth option. If you will turn your life over to Jesus Christ, he will bring hope to every hour you live. He wants to forgive every sin in your past. He wants to guide every step in your present. He wants to bless every moment in your future. He cares about every part of your life, and wants to help you find his joy.

First, ask Jesus to forgive your mistakes and become your Lord. He will give you eternal life, and you will always be the child of God. Next, find a church where you can become part of God's family. Life was never meant to be a solo. Just as we cannot play football by ourselves, we cannot handle our problems without the help of God's people. You need the prayers and support of others, and they need yours.

Now, choose to spend time alone with your Father at the start of each day. Buy a Bible in a translation you can understand, get a notebook, and make an appointment to meet with God. Start with the Gospel of John, reading a few verses each morning. Ask God to speak from his word to your mind and heart, and write down what comes to you. Pray about the problems and opportunities of your day. Spend a few minutes praising and thanking God. As you begin the morning with him, you'll have his help all through the day.

Finally, find a way to help others. In life, we receive what we give. As we serve others, our needs are met. We must breathe out to breathe in. Look for ways to use your gifts, talents, and resources to meet needs in your church and community. Seek opportunities to share God's love in yours. The more you give hope away, the more you find it in your soul.

Listen to Lewis again: "the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next...It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven, and you will get earth "thrown in"; aim at earth and you will get neither" (*Mere Christianity* 118).

Live for God's glory on earth, and you will have all the help of heaven. Choose to meet the needs you find in God's name and love, and you will have more opportunities than you can imagine. Turn your vocation, school, neighborhood, and family into your mission field where you will help people follow Jesus, and you will have more joy and satisfaction than earth can offer. Seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and everything will be added to you (Matthew 6.33).

## **Conclusion**

Don't search for hope where it does not live. It is not in your next job or purchase or relationship. Don't give up on hope for today, or seek to escape the present. Find your hope in the *fact* that Jesus never left the world he entered on Christmas day. His Spirit lives in you now, if you have asked him to forgive your sins and become your Savior. He will redeem every problem and pain you put in his hands, if your hope is in him.

*The Imitation of Christ*, probably the most widely-read book in Christian history next to the Scriptures, was written seven centuries ago by an unknown monk named Thomas from the town of Kempen. His record of God's word to him brings God's word to us today:

*Do not be worn out by the labors which you have undertaken for My sake, and do not let tribulations ever cast you down. Instead, let My promise strengthen and comfort you under every circumstance. I am well able to reward you above all measure and degree. You shall not toil here long nor always be oppressed with griefs. A time will come when all labor and trouble will cease. Labor faithfully in My vineyard; I will be thy recompense. Life everlasting is worth all these conflicts, and greater than these...Lift your face therefore to heaven; behold I and all My saints with me--who in this world had great conflicts--are now comforted, now rejoicing, now secure, now at rest, and shall remain with Me everlastingly in the kingdom of My Father.*

As will we. This is the hope, and the promise, of God.