

## “Leaving Despair Behind”

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Mahatma Gandhi said this about despair: *“When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it always.”* The definition of Despair? *“the complete loss or absence of hope”*.

Look at Genesis 17. Each of today’s Bible readings suggests reasons for despair. Abraham and Sarah, had no children, they were just about 100 years old, and I assume had given up hope of having children and heirs. But look what God tells them in Verses 1-2, *“When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.”* Then to make this a reality, see what God promises in verses 15-16, *“And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”*

In the second lesson from Romans, Paul talks about suffering. Suffering’s an invitation to despair. And in the Gospel, Jesus told His disciples that He was going to suffer and die. Peter reacts to that with anger. If Peter was filled with despair it isn’t really clear in Mark, but by the time he and the disciples get to Calvary and the tomb, with Jesus in it, they all were filled with despair!

So what leads you to despair? What might happen that could plunge you into despair. Many times, despair is like a deep pit that gets deeper and deeper and many times we can’t get out of it! Childlessness? Physical or emotional suffering? Worry? Finances? Not realizing your dreams for life?

God’s calling us home to heaven. But there’s a strange thing about the way God calls us home. We ask God for daily bread in the Lord’s Prayer. In his explanation, Martin Luther, tells us that everything we have are gifts of God to us in this life. You know what else? It’s all going to be taken away from you, sooner or later, bit by bit or in one fell swoop.

Losing these things could lead you to despair, but God says, *“It’s OK to leave all that stuff in the place of your earthly stay. It hurts to lose it but I’m calling you to something better. I’m calling you to Myself.”*

**Our challenge is to give up despair.** We need to know we’ve been blessed by God and He’s given us so much. Despair gets us nowhere! **We have to give up the possibility of despair.** We have to stay positive not negative. We need to keep our minds on seeing how God’s with us supporting and caring for us. **We need to replace despair with the living hope of the resurrection.**

Martin Luther put it this way in his famous hymn, *“A Mighty Fortress”* we looked at last Sunday. *“And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, though these all be gone, our vict’ry has been won; The Kingdom ours remaineth”*. So let’s get this into our minds lightening the load as we journey to our true home. Let’s leave despair behind!

Open to Romans 5. In the Bible, **the opposite of despair is hope.** God wants us to give up despair this Lent and every day and replace it with hope. Look at verses 1-5, *“Therefore,*

*since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."*

This hope to replace despair is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Look at Mark 8. Did you catch it as you heard the Gospel? Look at verse 31, "*And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.*"

Did you get that? Peter didn't, he missed the hope. Without hope, there's a void in your life. For Peter that void was filled with anger, rebuke, and by the time of Jesus' death, despair! He yelled at Jesus and told Him He was wrong and it wasn't going to happen the way He told them it was, and when it did, Peter was lost!

**Leaving despair behind means clinging to the words of Jesus as He leads us into the future.** Leaving despair behind means holding onto hope despite our feelings. C.F.W. Walther, the first president of our Seminary and Synod, said this, "*The blessedness of Christians does not consist in pleasant feelings, but in the assurance that in spite of the bitterest feelings imaginable, they are accepted with God and in their dying hour will be received into heaven. That is indeed great blessedness. Happy moments come to Christians when they are given a foretaste of their future bliss. But at the same time these are merely passing moments in the lives of Christians, sun-rays which once in a while find their way into their hearts.*"

Leaving despair behind isn't easy; it doesn't happen with a snap of the fingers. It's a lifelong and hard struggle. Honestly, you and I can't do it unless we hang onto the hope of our resurrected Jesus. Time after time, temptations to despair will still come, but the Spirit of God raises us heavenward with true hope. So let's leave despair behind and cling to hope!