

Fantasy #3

Jesus is Committed to the Fulfillment of my Dreams.

Passion week as the death of dreams.

Passion week reminds us that in three days anything can happen; even the discovery of joy on the far side of the death of our dreams.

As a student I was deeply impressed with a staff worker of a para-church Christian ministry on our campus. She was dedicated, faithful, and optimistic about God's presence in her life. The fact that she was single did not bother her. She fully expected that some day she would be married and have her own family, a dream shared by many young women. After several years of faithful ministry she began to wonder if her dreams would ever be realized. In her mid 40's she wrote me a letter that expressed her abiding faith but also revealed a deep disappointment in what had not been a part of her lot in life. I was heart-sick when I learned through a mutual friend that she was dying of cancer. I wept for the loss of this dear sister and I wept for the death of her dreams. Life is not fair. Of course, her loss is only in the context of the narrow view of this life and its rather limited view of what is really important.

We don't often hear testimonies that involve a sacrifice of our dreams. They are drowned out by the glory stories of those who have inherited the promises. Stories that encourage us to chase our dreams knowing that by faith and obedience we will inherit "what ever." Hebrews 11 contains a list of testimonies to the power of faith. The striking difference between the testimonies in Hebrews 11 and the testimonies that we often hear among Christians today is the fact that in Hebrews we have the record of some who did not inherit the blessings but trusted God anyway.

Base your hope on reality.

A friend of mine tells of an experience where he was watching a Little League baseball game. After observing the left fielder chase six or seven long hits and hustle the ball back into the infield, he asked him how his team was doing. The boy told him they were trailing 21 to 0. My friend then asked if he was discouraged and ready to give up. The youngster's answer was memorable - "We aren't beat; we haven't been up to bat yet."

If you wish to please God, pray for faith. If you wish to serve your fellowman, pray for love. If you wish to comfort your own soul, pray for hope. Without faith, I become neurotic. Without love, I become sociopathic. But without hope, I have no reason to live. It is no accident that above the entrance to Dante's hell is the inscription: "Leave behind all hope, you who enter here."

The distortion of your hopes.

One might, at this point, conclude that the enemy of man's soul (Satan), would do all that he could to tear down and destroy our hope. Quite the contrary. Because he knows how

desperately we seek it, he will use it for his purposes. He peddles HOPE - IN ANYTHING BUT GOD. He will distort it, as he did with EVE; misdirect it, as he did with JESUS and confuse us with respect to the nature of it, as he did with PETER.

Jeremiah 2:13: "*For My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.*" They aren't without hope; they have just misplaced it. This is the point I want us to see: Following Jesus may mean the death of your false hopes and dreams. I am convinced that Satan does not want to destroy your hope so much as misplace your expectations.

Matthew 16:21-23 "*From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.' But He turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's.'*"

Jesus saw Satan's influence in Peter. It was not unlike the serpent's influence on Eve in Genesis 3, where she is tempted to exchange the call and plan of God for human wisdom. Satan's temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4:1-11 involving good things (food, respect, lordship) that were misplaced or mistimed seems to follow the pattern. The temptation was to embrace a misplaced hope. Satan is not so much concerned about destroying our hope as distorting it.

Palm Sunday's hope is an illusion.

Nowhere is this point more powerfully illustrated than in the drama of Passion Week. The story starts on Palm Sunday and continues through Easter. There are two radically different hopes or expectations illustrated in Palm Sunday and Easter. Palm Sunday's hope is one of a glorious, temporal paradise, the restoration of David's kingdom on earth. On Palm Sunday, the pilgrims welcomed King Jesus, not the Lamb of Sacrifice. Peter's words in Matthew 16 were backed up by a chorus of fanatic supporters on Palm Sunday.

The hope of Easter is quite different. It is a hope that Peter could not have imagined before the resurrection and Pentecost. Easter's hope involved a dimension of life that was radically different from the social, material, and political expectations of Palm Sunday.

Palm Sunday's misplaced expectations too often characterize the church of our day. In Matthew 11:12 we read, "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force" (force their way into it). Like Peter, we cry out, "My Messiah can't die because he is the chaplain for my dreams."

While visiting a monastery in Hong Kong in 1989, I noted a painting of the Lord's Supper. Upon close examination it was apparent that all of the figures, the twelve disciples and Jesus, were Asian in appearance. My first response was shock. After all, we all know that Jesus was not Chinese. He looked like an early American pioneer. He was very WASP-like. He voted Republican, supported free enterprise capitalism, read the King James Version of

the Bible, and liked baseball. Our Jesus is the chaplain of our dreams. He was the chaplain of Camelot, not the challenger of our false hopes.

While on vacation several years ago, we were riding in the family car and listening to Chuck Swindall on the radio describe the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Our daughter, Debbie (age 8), was intently listening from the back seat. After a few moments she turned to her brother (age 6) and said, "David, do you know about Jesus?" David, expecting some new slant on an old story replied, "No." She continued, "Sit still, because it is real scary." After explaining the gospel message as only an eight-year-old can, she asked, "Now David, when you die, do you want to go to heaven to be with Jesus, God, your Mommy and Daddy and big sister, or do you want to go to the lake of fire to be with the Devil and bank robbers?" David thought for a moment, and replied, "I want to stay right here." This is the sentiment of most of the people I know. We don't want to die and go to heaven or hell. We want heaven in the form of the desires of our hearts to come here to us, now! How are we different from the pilgrims on Palm Sunday?

I am convinced that there is no lack of appetite for the Kingdom of God in our culture. Hollywood, Washington, D.C., and Middletown USA all want the Kingdom or what it represents (peace, justice, prosperity, love, happiness). The point, however, is that they want it without the King. They want it their way, not His. They want the joy of Easter without the suffering of Good Friday. They want the hopes of Palm Sunday to be resurrected at Easter.

We so easily equate the "good news" with the "good life" (the kingdom of God with the American dream). Christ is not the treasure that many American Christians seek; he is but the means to a temporal paradise in terms of relationships, health, wealth, fulfillment in vocation, justice, etc. When we correctly note that Christ offers us an abundant life, we incorrectly let our culture define the meaning of "abundance." At one point in time this summer I found five channels on cable TV offering viewers plans to get rich without working, through purchasing the "how-to" tapes of the promoter. At the same time, both Christian channels were running programs that offered basically the same promise through giving a "seed faith" offering to the evangelist.

Many of my seminary classmates who were premillennial in their theological convictions were postmillennial in their ministry expectations. They were generally pessimistic about spiritual - cultural progress but optimistic about spiritual and cultural change through their personal ministry. They believed that they would bring about a new world of spiritual utopia through their preaching. It is interesting to note that Jesus did not promise that we would change the world. What He did promise is that we would have fellowship with him in his suffering. We somehow thought that if He loved us, He would obey our commandments and make our Palm Sunday expectations a reality. We perhaps still believe this.

Zeal for God is no cure for the false hopes of Palm Sunday.

Peter's experience recorded in Matthew 16 provides a strange paradox. In verse 11, we read of Jesus' strong endorsement of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." But then, in verse 23, Peter is being linked with Satan, "Get behind me, Satan." Peter's insight and zeal did not protect him from entertaining false hopes.

One of my close friends in ministry, recognized for his gift of faith and zeal in worship, left his wife and the ministry because of unresolved depression over expectations that were not realized. In this case, it was the assurance of the physical healing of a close friend. When the friend died, the pain, disappointment, and confusion were devastating to his faith, resulting in years of wasted living and selfish choices. How can we worship a sovereign God who may allow us to experience disappointment? If He loves us, He should deliver to us our dreams, or at least His promises (according to our understanding).

God takes a risk every time he blesses us. The children of Israel were instructed by God to "fleece the Egyptians" of their gold and silver during the Exodus. A short time later, the Israelites were worshipping those gifts in the form of a "golden calf." They had not abandoned spiritual zeal. They had simply redefined their hope. They had chosen to worship and serve the creation rather than the Creator. They had found their hope in the gift, not in the giver. It seems that we are prone to cling to anything and everything but Jesus in our desperate search for hope.

A young Korean student missionary in our congregation was asked what he felt were the strengths and weaknesses of the American church. He replied, "Americans have great resources in publishing, education, and seminars to help the church do almost anything. These resources are the strength of the American church. Its weakness is that it puts its faith in these things." God's people, in their love for God and zeal for ministry, often display great hope for success. But we must always ask, what is the nature and object of the hope. Zeal for God is no cure for the false hopes of Palm Sunday.

The cure for Palm Sunday is Good Friday.

It is sad but true that the most common cure for false hope is disillusionment. Howard Hendricks once told me, "When trying to persuade a fool, if you can't convince him, at least confuse him." As painful and depressing as disillusionment might be, I am convinced that it can be the bridge between fantasy and reality. If you are disillusioned with a God who seems to give little attention to bringing you the desires of your heart; if you are becoming cynical with the promises that seem to go unfulfilled; if you are wondering if Christianity is just a foolish illusion - then maybe, just maybe, you are on the threshold of a basic but often neglected spiritual truth. Christianity is for people who have died with Christ and have given up all hope in anything but Him.

At a leadership conference some time ago I heard a young minister share his testimony of abuse growing up in a dysfunctional family. While at a Christian summer camp he was

nurtured to faith by a godly Christian leader who took him under his wing and became the father that he had longed for. Years later a misunderstanding grew between this young man and his mentor. The misunderstanding ripped open all the old scars from past abuse so that deep depression and despair resulted. It was in this “Good Friday” of the soul that this young man came to the insight that eventually led him into the ministry. He said, “I finally came to realize that only God could be the father that I longed for and needed.” This young man had given a messianic role to someone other than Jesus. Most of us have made a similar mistake with a mate, a job, a child, a ministry, etc.

I have already mentioned our first-born son’s special circumstances. He is now in his late 20s, has never spoken, does not know his parents, and is heavily medicated to control multiple problems – tourette’s syndrome, seizures, and autism. I do not for a minute wish to suggest that Daniel’s condition is in some twisted way orchestrated by God. His tragic physical and psychological condition exposes a problem much more serious than his autism. It revealed a false hope in a life that was ordered after my dreams with a very narrow definition of “the good” and short-sighted perception of “God’s work.” God can and has used the death of my dreams to prepare me for Easter and its true hope.

The death of my dream as a father was as hard as the death of Peter’s dream on Good Friday. But it was a death that freed us to loosen our expectation of the two other children that God would give to us. It was a death that taught me to give up a lot of false hopes about ministry and life. More than any other part of my ego’s agenda, it was the dreams that needed breaking. The cure for Palm Sunday is Good Friday.

Paul recognized in writing Philippians that sharing in Christ’s resurrection was only possible if he was in some real way dead. The cross was given, not to rehabilitate a tired Pharisee but put to death and resurrect a child of God. To know Jesus meant that I participate in his suffering and death so that I might be a candidate for the power of his resurrection.

Easter will not resurrect Palm Sunday’s hopes.

The disciples who were completely disillusioned by the events of Good Friday were not going to find those hopes resurrected at Easter. The sociopolitical kingdom fashioned after the Davidic model would not be realized in the life of the disciples. What they would be given is a radically different, and in many ways more dramatic, expression of the kingdom. They would be ushered into a sense of security, significance, and serenity that would not be dependent upon the changing winds of economics, politics, social justice, and military might.

Tony Campolo has an inspiring sermon entitled “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming.” In our personal Fridays where there is a death to our hopes and dreams, we need to know that there is a Sunday hope. We need to know that in the midst of the pain and injustice of life there is hope. But we must be very careful to distinguish between the false hope of our imagination and the true hope of the gospel. We must realize that for many of us (like Peter)

“It’s Sunday, but Friday’s coming.” We need to realize that the hope of Easter will not resurrect the hope of Palm Sunday.

Christian baptism unites us with Christ’s death. This baptism means the death of not only our sinful deeds, but also our distorted hopes and dreams. Peter was asked to die to himself in this sense, he was to let go of his beautiful dreams, carnal agenda, and false hope. We are tempted to blame Satan when our hopes and dreams are dashed on the rocks of hard times. What we seldom stop to consider is that the biggest obstacle to our “ship coming in” may not be Satan but God. God wants to save us FROM our idols, not WITH our idols. God wants to bless us but not our shallow and misplaced desires.

I suppose it’s only human to run from the unpleasant business of life. Rejection, mockery, brutality, disappointment - these things hurt! So, it’s only human to turn away. But pain-filled days can be a laboratory wherein character forms and wisdom is acquired. It can be the place where we come to know Jesus. The twelve apostles’ last week with Jesus was not too encouraging . . . Judas’ betrayal, Peter’s denial, the remainder’s cowardice, a midnight arrest, false witnesses, a shameful trial, then the cross. The apostles fled the terrors of that night as we run from the threats to our dreams. The encouraging point is, they didn’t go far. And God, in His generosity, held their lives to the pain using it to humble them, tenderize them, mold them, grow them. The pain of Christ’s Passion Week was a time of maturation in the disciples’ lives. And I believe, if we can but trust God, the most difficult times of our lives can serve to mature us . . . that is, if we do not run away. That hard spot at work, that painful episode in marriage, that crushing disappointment with a friend - simply embrace it, ask God what it has to teach, and abide. God will do the rest. Passion week reminds us that in three days anything can happen; even the discovery of joy on the far side of the death of our dreams.

A strategy of action in avoiding false hopes.

Let’s talk about some of the habits that lock us into false expectations. First, be careful not to find a false sense of security in a superficial and selective **proof texting** from the Bible. The Palm Sunday crowd would have had no trouble finding Biblical texts to support their hopes. But they had failed to discern the timing of the promises they were claiming. They were selective in what they choose to hear. In Mark’s gospel (chapter 9) we have a record of Jesus telling his disciples that he will be betrayed and killed. In verse 32 we read, “But they did not understand what he meant and *were afraid to ask him about it* (emphasis mine).” We too often can identify with that fear. We know about the Biblical stories of suffering, pain, etc. but we are afraid to explore them lest we discover that such suffering is to be a part of our story as well.

Second, we must not give too much weight to a subjective **feeling of peace** or happiness at the prospect of a dream being realized. Just about any positive expectation is going to bring a rush of joy, but the question remains: is this hope grounded in God’s plan? We live in

a culture that too quickly wants to equate holiness with wholeness or happiness. It falsely believes, “Whatever will make me happy or healthy must be God’s will.”

Third, it is not always safe to **following the crowd**. Unfortunately, many communities of faith foster false expectations. For example, how often have people been led to believe that all problems will quickly disappear when Christ is received as Lord and Savior? Most of us realize that our problems don’t go away just because we have faith in Christ.

I have found the wisdom literature of the Old Testament to be very helpful, in that it gives me not just the lofty principles of Proverbs where I am led to expect that all will work out if I am hard-working and virtuous. The ideals of Proverbs must be read alongside the complexity and confusion of Ecclesiastes, where the rules do not make sense. All is vanity, in that the bad people prosper and the good die young. Ecclesiastes represents that stage of spiritual development which can lead to cynicism, despair, and apostasy if we are not careful. We need to read on to the book of Job, where we find the virtue of trusting God even when life does not make sense. I need the full breadth of this wisdom literature as I face a church with simplistic answers and a world that is too often confusing, sometimes contradictory, and even cruel. There are two types of simplicity in life. One is on the near side of life’s complexities, and the other is on the far side of life’s complexities. The simplicity of Jesus was not blind to the depth of life’s enigmas.

There are a number of other observations that we can make of our lives at this point. First, **bitterness** can be an indication that we have placed too much hope in the wrong place, or that our expectations have been distorted. When we don’t get what we want, we make someone else pay for our disappointment and pain by radiating our anger. This anger can be a sign that we have had unrealistic expectations.

Second, **history** can guide us in solidifying our expectations. For example, if we are tempted to feel that Christ must come back in our lifetime, we should observe that there have been several generations of believers that have been equally convinced, and yet it did not happen. If we are wise, we will temper our expectations with common sense and the experience of those who have gone before. We look for His return but plan as though we will live out our lives to our death.

Third, recognize that we all see “as through a glass dimly.” **Humility** and caution in arriving at conclusions is not a sign of weak faith; it is a sign of wise faith.

The real challenge, however, comes with the experience of Good Friday. When our dreams die on the rocks of realities that we cannot deny, do we give up, or look up? Will we abide in faith with a God who has disappointed, yes, even hurt us? Will we wait for Easter?