

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. ^{NIV} **Romans 15:13**

The Word of God calls believers to be the most hope-filled people on the face of the earth. Obviously, that includes ministers of the Gospel. Isn't it about time we lead our congregations as *hope-filled pastors*?

2012 Pastoral Care Emphasis: "Hope-Filled Pastors"

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ^{NIV} **1 Peter 1:3**

I am so impressed with the dynamics of a **living hope** – a hope made possible by our wonderful Savior, conquering death with His own death and resurrection from the dead. This hope is not mere wishful thinking detached from human experience and actual historical events. Our living hope is anchored in Christ's death-conquering resurrection. Faith in Christ's substitutionary atonement for our sins and historic resurrection gives birth to our own victory over death and eternal life. Hope doesn't get any more alive than that!

How does this **living hope** impact the lives of believers and the pages of human history? Does it withstand the darkest of hours and most horrid catastrophes?

In his classic work *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark portrays how the plagues actually aided the early growth of Christianity.

Christianity excelled during the plagues of the second and third centuries AD. While pagans abandoned their sick family members in hopes of escaping deadly illnesses, Christians stayed and cared for both their own and those abandoned by their pagan relatives. Christians and pagans who were too ill to care for themselves had a far greater rate of survival simply because caring hands supplied them with food and water. Such loving care convinced many pagans to turn to Christ and begin living the eternal hope that trumps the fear of temporal death.¹

Both the sick and the well were strengthened by the hope within them. Those facing illness with eternal hope were far less likely to succumb to the grip of anxiety which so often accompanied illness and preceded death. They burned less energy while at peace with the outcome of heaven or earth, in contrast to pagans whose only hope was the length of days alive on earth. Sick people with the hope within had a better probability of survival, given their peaceful posture.

¹ Paraphrase of Rodney Stark, "Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion" *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 1996)

Likewise, that same hope within individuals who still had their health provided a security that allowed them to take risks with contagious individuals. If they came down with the plague, they had far less to lose compared to pagans whose only hope was this life. As a result, far more of those with hope within stayed to nurse the sick back to health if possible.

But what medicines were available in those early centuries to combat deadly plagues? They certainly did not have antibiotics!

Many stricken with illness died simply because they were too weak to get water and food for themselves. But if someone was able to see to it that they were hydrated and fed, the rate of survival was far greater simply because caring hands supplied them with water and food. Now if a pagan survived the plague simply because those with the hope within stayed and cared for them, odds were pretty good that they, too, would gratefully receive the hope within versus continuing in the way of those who abandoned them for fear of death.

How has your living hope in Christ made a difference in your life? Family? Congregation? Community?

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