

ABOUT MUSCLE MEMORY

Kathy Brasby

“The continual looking forward to the eternal world is not a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do.”

—C. S. Lewis

“If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

—Romans 8:24

Grappling with the idea of hope seemed so easy at the start. When I began research for a book about hope, my confidence in tackling this topic was in the clouds—and so, apparently, was my understanding of what hope really meant.

What was hope, anyway? I started with the dictionary. If I discovered a clear definition there, was there a need for a book on the topic? I could just send people to the dictionary and be done.

Well, that strategy flopped.

According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, hope is a feeling of expectation and desire.

But this word—hope—is like a butterfly flitting in and out of focus. You can’t nail down the definition.

Oxford English Dictionary’s second definition is “a cause or source of hope or grounds for hoping.” Yeah, I think they don’t know for sure how to define it either. Using the word *hope* to define it is admitting defeat.

Their archaic definition is “a feeling of trust.” Archaic. Out of modern use?

There lies the problem. I didn’t want a feel-good definition that had no connection with life. I wanted an understanding of hope that could marinate my heart and carry me forward with confidence.

Transparent moment: I am a Christian who trusts in God and in the truth of his word, the Bible. So, I am not convinced that the archaic definition of hope is useless. Only if the Bible is useless.

That’s my opinion. But what do others think? How do they engage with the idea of hope?

I needed to know what others thought. So, I dialed up that time-honored method of surveying friends and relatives. I asked a question to my social media connections: What is godly hope?

My Christian friends chimed in, because they all were certain that they understood it. I think they didn't first consult a dictionary or their confidence might have been drooping a little. Their definitions were pretty good. Here are a few:

- Hope is an antidote to fear. If God's in our future, there's no reason to fear.
- No matter what happens, we are in God's hands, and he wants good for us.
- Hope is peace and confidence.
- Hope is Jesus.
- Hope is trust.
- Hope is salvation.
- Hope is believing God will do what he says he will do.

Great answers. I considered copying them into my book and typing "The end" because these people had nailed it. Or so I thought.

More on that in a minute.

I also searched the internet for books or blogs or articles about Christian hope. There are just under a billion (you think I didn't count them, don't you?) and they largely communicated this: "Here are Bible verses about hope. Now live it."

These ideas are all fine. As Christians, we long for hope. It should give us peace and joy and confidence.

Should is one of those Christian words that stubs our toe and brings us crashing down. It is the uneven step between definition and application, and we often stumble.

What does hope really look like as we journey through this life? When we live out godly hope, how do we get through coffee dumped all over the carpet? Or puppy doodoo?

Or hearing our cousin/aunt/grandma is dying? Or finding our car dented after lending it to a friend?

Or, like a friend who recently traveled hundreds of miles back to her hometown for her class reunion, to rise one morning to find all four tires and wheels stolen from her car in the night. What a welcome home.

Do we have peace and light when the refrigerator just gurgled its dying breath right after we had to replace the transmission in the car? And when we are called in for an extra shift? Or, worse, we are called in to learn our employer has laid us off.

And that doesn't even touch the horror of loss when a parent dies. Or a child. Or a close friend. Or when we get news of the terminal diagnosis of a loved one. Or a spouse leaves. Or strays.

I've noticed that the memory of those on social media is about five days, but I waited a month before posting my next question.

I didn't think they'd recall their earlier answers about hope, and I don't think they did.

I asked this time: *What do you do when hardships hit you?*

The answers I got from friends were forthright. These same people who had given me clear definitions of Christian hope were now candid about their difficulties.

They were not immune to hardships.

Most found a distraction helped. Whether it was counting to ten—maybe a hundred—or screaming at the sky, they looked away from the difficulty. One young man meditated on flowing water, reminding himself of his own limited resources and considering what he could do right now in his difficult situation.

“A lot of time by the river has helped me get through a lot,” he said.

Others sought music. Or pulling weeds.

Several acknowledged that their first response to a difficulty was not their best response. A deep breath helped. Reflecting. Intentionally staying calm. Even a cup of tea could help. Or asking others for input.

Some withdrew emotionally, and often physically, to a safe place. Distance often leads to over-thinking or to prayer. People seemed to lean into one or the other.

Most were honest: difficulties could tip them into gloom and even depression. They had to work out strategies to counteract that. Often, a dive into scripture or worship helped.

The honesty in these answers struck me. Do we have difficulties? Oh, yeah. Almost daily. And hardships annoy us, confuse us, steal away our yellow morning light. Instead, bruises form on our soul. We walk in darkness. Limping.

And then, as Christians, we return to the question: what is hope and what can it do for us?

We often use the word hope to mean wish or dream. Nothing is wrong with that usage until we think it applies to our interactions with God.

We're back to that dictionary conundrum again. Christian hope—godly hope—is not about wishing or dreaming. If it is, there's no confidence for us.

We might hope our bank account has enough money to cover the last debit card payment we just posted. But there's no assurance in that hope. We might hope that buckling our seat belt and taking our vitamins will keep us safe from any disease or any harm. But that's not an absolute solution and we know it.

Godly hope is vibrant. Energetic. Refreshing. And we sort of understand it. But in our English language, when a word has more than one meaning, we figure out which meaning is appropriate by the context.

That doesn't help us much with the word *hope*. If I say to you, "I hope that you have a safe trip," can you tell if I'm desiring you to have a safe trip or I'm guaranteeing a safe trip?

We assume the former because, well, I don't have the power to guarantee a safe trip.

But the trick, for Christians, is that God has that power and we know it. So, we need some help to discern what hope means when God's involved.

We can use stories to help us connect definition with application, so that we have confidence in God when hardships strike. Because hardships will strike.

Stories give us muscle memory. Randy Ingermanson tells the tale of a young man, in ancient times, pressed into service by his villagers to help hunt a killer tiger. The young man had little experience hunting tigers and even less handling the spear in his hand. Untrained and frightened, he didn't want to join the other hunters.

But this tiger must be executed, or it would destroy all the goats and sheep of the village. Then the village would die. Even though he was terrified, the boy knew he must join the other hunters to protect his village.

The hunters fanned out to form a giant circle around the area where they had last heard the tiger. Thick green leaves blocked their view. As the hunters advanced toward where they thought the tiger was hiding, the boy felt sweat run down his back. Fear squeezed his body, and his heart thumped. His spear arm shook. Breaths were shallow and quick.

But he walked in unison with the others.

The hunters closed the circle and found the tiger. Its powerful orange and black body crouched close to the ground. It snarled and snapped big white teeth, its head turning from side to side. The hunters stepped closer, tightening the loop around the tiger.

The tiger searched the hunters, and its eyes settled on the boy. He was the smallest and his spear shook in his hand.

The tiger leaped toward this weakest member.

But as the tiger lunged forward, the boy remembered the stories he'd heard many times: *Face the tiger. Wait till the last possible moment to throw the spear. Kill the tiger, even if the tiger also kills you. Face the tiger.*

It was like he had done this a thousand times before. He waited, the spear damp with his sweat. He drew back the spear. The tiger came closer, its yellow eyes narrow with hate. He waited.

The tiger crashed into him, knocking him into darkness. His last memory before the darkness was shoving the spear forward. Kill or be killed.

He awoke to hear drumming and shouting in the village. A feast.

His body throbbed with the marks of the tiger's claws, but he knew the tiger was dead. He had saved the village.

Ingermanson describes the muscle memory of stories. We don't have to experience every challenge to know how to handle it when things get tough. We can learn from the experiences of others.

Not all wisdom comes from personal experience, but also comes from grasping others' stories.

In the coming chapters, we're going to examine stories of how others discovered hope as they learned from their mistakes and from their triumphs. Through stories like these, we also develop muscle memory for hope and for a future.

The dictionary offers wimpy definitions of hope, but we can uncover a powerful explanation and also a vigorous application of hope when we trust God.

The tiger didn't defeat the warrior boy because he remembered the lessons of the past. Hardships don't have to defeat us either. For the same reason.

The stories in the following chapters are gritty. Painful sometimes. Honest and transparent. We'll meet some people—modern and historic—who wrestled with harsh circumstances.

The question I asked over and over, in interviews and in studies, was this: "How did you hang on to godly hope in these difficulties?"

Why didn't these people give up on God? Or on life? Sometimes they complained and considered abandoning their faith. Some blamed God for their problems. But they hung on because they remembered God's work in the past. Muscle memory.

In a world that seems to lose the notion of hope in God, these stories provide vivid pictures depicting a future of hope.

I will reference God's work in the Old Testament history in the following chapters. If you're hazy about Old Testament history, consider checking out *The Scroll* in the appendix.

I included a *Digging Deeper* and a *Behind the Scenes* section after each story. These are optional but allow you to engage further in the issues of each story and to journal if that's your bend.

Come along and let's explore their stories.