



Finding Flourishing

Time and pace for your
work-life wellbeing

Naomi Aidoo

Praise for *Finding Flourishing*

'Finding Flourishing masterfully blends biblical wisdom with the practical TIME framework, offering a simple yet profound strategy for improving wellbeing in relationships, work and personal growth. This book stands as a crucial guide for navigating the chaos of modern life, pointing readers towards fulfillment and flourishing through Jesus. It's an essential read for anyone on the path to personal transformation and a life marked by deep satisfaction and joy.'

Jordan Raynor, bestselling author of *The Sacredness of Secular Work and Redeeming Your Time*

'Finding Flourishing is a heartfelt, wise guide that feels like a breath of fresh air. It's not just a book; it's a journey through the ups and downs of life and relationships, grounded in spiritual truths. The author writes from personal experience, offering practical and relatable advice. Whether you're navigating parenthood, looking for better wellbeing, or figuring out relationships, this book meets you where you are with kindness and insight. If you're feeling overwhelmed by life, this book will help you find peace and a path toward a fuller, more meaningful life.'

Atinuke Awe, wife, mother of two and founder of Mums and Tea and Five X More

*'Having had coaching sessions with Naomi, I have personally benefited from her deep wisdom and expertise in navigating work-life wellbeing from a faith perspective. The honest writing in *Finding Flourishing* is a breath of fresh-air, and provides a gentle, yet practical, framework for us to apply the principles to our own lives.'*

Emma Borquaye, author and podcast host

'Written by a busy working mum who knows what she's talking about, *Finding Flourishing* combines practical advice and inspirational content. This book provides a great opportunity to pause, reflect and reorientate our lives around the things that really matter.'

Ruth Jackson, presenter, Premier Unbelievable, and mum to a boisterous toddler

'Naomi writes as a friend to anyone who is truly seeking to flourish. She meets the reader where they are, but brings... a depth and richness that can only come from a tenacious excavation and application of truth in her own life. I am thankful for her work and the empathy available to us all in this book, which encourages us with stories, practical instruction and truth to truly flourish no matter what the season.'

Susanna Wright, writer and filmmaker

'A beautiful, gentle reminder of profound truth. Putting into perspective faith and wellbeing, drawing on scripture written many years ago yet that are still so relevant for today's struggles, bringing peace, comfort and encouragement. Naomi has an honest yet kind tone... you almost feel like you are in conversation with an old friend over tea. From the faith focus to food for thought prompts, this really is a book, journal and a friend in one. A timely piece of work that is so needed in the wellbeing space and I know will equip anyone who reads it with the tools and encouragement to flourish.'

Yasmin Elizabeth-Mfon, creative consultant and founder of Pick Me Up Inc

'Naomi expertly debunks the myth of work-life balance and urges us towards a much healthier, and more obtainable, "wellbeing" goal instead. I was worried that the book would give me yet more to add to my already full "to-do" list but instead it made me feel seen, understood and empowered to make changes. This well researched book could be a lifeline for many struggling to keep up with expectations from themselves and/or others. I thoroughly recommend it.'

Loretta Andrews, music manager and artist development coach

‘This book is a gift into the world. The stories, the level of relatability and authenticity mixed with the invitation to take what you have read and integrate it into your everyday, ordinary, busy life makes this book not only readable but actionable too. Thank you Naomi for guiding your readers towards wellbeing. This is now my go-to gift for the women in my life.’

Jo Hargreaves, The Faith Filled Therapist

‘Naomi is such a leader, not only in talking about wellbeing and finding your unique time and pace – but in living it and demonstrating to others as well. With her guidance, I’ve found systems that have helped me flourish and find peace in the busyness of life. I’m so excited that now, her message gets to reach thousands of new people. Dive into the book and get ready to feel refreshed and renewed!’

Abiola Babarinde, brand strategist and wellbeing enthusiast

‘Naomi Aidoo presents a compelling blend of faith and practical wisdom, offering readers a roadmap to navigate the complexities of modern life with grace and purpose. Through insightful reflections on wellbeing and relationships, mindset and the transformative TIME framework, this book provides not just inspiration, but tangible steps toward everyday flourishing. I highly recommend this book to anyone seeking to align their life with timeless biblical principles while flourishing in their work and relationships.’

Steve Cockram, cofounder of GiANT

‘Naomi brings thoughtful reflections, coaching wisdom and practical advice together to encourage everyone to invest in their wellbeing. It’s a valuable resource.’

Rachael Newham, theology of mental health specialist and author



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The author asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

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work-life wellbeing

Naomi Aidoo



Ministries



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To my husband, James: thank you for everything seen and unseen.
Your commitment to us finding flourishing will always mean more
than I can articulate.

To my children, Micah and Neriah: may you always find flourishing
in he who formed you.

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Introduction

The room was pitch black, and as I rocked my ten-month-old baby to sleep for the umpteenth time that night, while trying to make sure I didn't accidentally tread on the creaky floorboard and wake up my eldest, who was sleeping soundly, I found myself crying out to God (silently, of course).


'How, and why, am I someone who is supposed to write a book about wellbeing?'

Here I was, a mum of two very young children, one of whom still wasn't sleeping through the night, and I honestly felt like I had nothing to give. I had scattered fragments I'd collected over the years, which I absolutely knew had been useful to me and to others. But standing, shushing, swaying into the early hours of the morning with a baby in my arms certainly didn't feel like the persona or impression I wanted to give to the world when I spoke about work-life wellbeing. 'Aren't I meant to be an expert of sorts or, at the very least, have everything together and not be sleeping in three-hour chunks night after night?' I silently asked myself.

We see the wellbeing gurus, don't we? Well-rested, well-nourished and well-presented. Standing in my children's bedroom at 1.00 am that night, I felt like a fraud. That is until God stepped in, as he so often does, and graciously reminded me of the truth:



'Wellbeing has so much more to do with your source than your circumstances.'



The balm that these words provided was, without my knowing it, exactly what I needed. I had no other source but God. I'd tried others and undoubtedly found them wanting.

Although God was absolutely my source – of faith, strength, hope, joy, peace and everything in between – I could easily recall seasons of my life where I'd felt much closer to him than I did that night; days where I'd poured over my Bible for hours as opposed to in bite-size, interrupted chunks; days where I'd led Bible studies and large online communities; days where sleep featured more heavily, and my time was more my own.

Despite receiving this word about my source outweighing my circumstances, I stalled in beginning to write the book you're now holding for a few more months. I didn't want to admit it then, but I think I simply thought that I'd soon feel how I used to feel 'back then', and I'd then be the expert required to write a manuscript which mattered.

Time marched on, as it does. I worked a little more with my daughter in the area of sleep, and she started sleeping through the night. My son started school. And still I waited.

For anyone who's experienced any form of life alteration, such as having a child, you'll know that who you once were and who you've now become are quite different people. There's an excitement about the new alongside a longing for what once was. I'd felt this four years prior when my eldest was born, and it had crept back in when faced with the magnitude of writing something I wanted other people to learn and benefit from. 'If I could just be who I used to be,' I thought, 'then I wouldn't feel so under-qualified.' But God's words continued to ring true – this was about my source and not my circumstances. And the same is to be said for you.

Who or what is your source? When you consider that your wellbeing could be found there, does that leave you wanting?

Finding Flourishing is a book in which I'm delighted to share a different perspective on work–life wellbeing: a perspective which doesn't automatically assume you've got everything together and just need a few tweaks, nor place unrealistic expectations on your time. Instead *Finding Flourishing* will serve you with a reminder of your humanness, with an understanding that your humanness is not a shock to God, and with tools which will enable you to keep going and keep growing in your own time and at your own pace.

What *Finding Flourishing* will and won't do

If at one end of the spectrum there is me in my mid-30s, rocking my baby in a pitch-black room in the dead of night, at the other end is me in my early 20s.

At 21, I was nearing the end of one of the most transformative years of my life on a gap year with my church. Among various types of work within the community, I'd had the privilege of working within local schools leading assemblies and PSHE lessons. It was during those times that I knew whatever 'next' looked like for me, I wanted it to include working with young people.

A year or so later, I'd qualified as a teacher and was working in a school notorious for its challenges. So much so, in fact, that it was deemed inadequate by OFSTED during my training year and was then taken over and granted academy status the following year in an attempt to turn it around. As tumultuous as this sounds, I actually enjoyed the challenge and soon realised that the students I most enjoyed working with were indeed the ones deemed 'challenging'.

During the day-to-day routine of those years, I set up initiatives such as lunchtime groups and after-school activities, which meant that students who were notorious for being in school only for the hours absolutely necessary found themselves lingering behind and engaging with what was there for them to do. In a lot of ways, knowing I was having an impact in this way was hugely rewarding, and I kept increasing the amount I was doing in this area. At one point, I was running multiple youth-work provisions after school with my church, alongside my full-time job as a teacher.

However, I soon learned the hard way that just because something is good, that doesn't mean you shouldn't place boundaries around it. I took my work too far and became burnt out, all in the name of 'calling' and passion. Suddenly, getting out of bed was harder than it used to be, and I was often tearful for what I felt was no reason. A lack of boundaries and really listening to myself led to an inability to do the things which months earlier had felt like second nature.

After a trip to the doctor, I was diagnosed with moderate depression and anxiety and prescribed a pot of pills. Thankfully, this wasn't a permanent position for me, but that diagnosis in my early 20s serves as a reminder for me personally of where burnout can lead.

When I was able to evaluate what needed to change and had the capacity to do so, I gradually started ensuring that boundaries and better habits were in place, as well as giving myself space to ask myself questions about how I was doing at at any given time, which I usually did through my journal. This led to wellbeing becoming much more of a prominent feature in my life and work, and was therefore something which I ensured that later my coaching clients paid attention to within themselves as well.

With my background in teaching rather than medicine, the thoughts and tools this book will equip you with are not intended to be

diagnostic. Although I will certainly discuss mental health, both from research and from my own as well as others' experience, and I trust this will be beneficial, I am not a doctor. It's important to emphasise from the very beginning, that despite what you might have been told, there's no shame or embarrassment in seeking medical support for issues which need medical attention. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Operating from my current position as a coach, however, it's important to state that I will ask questions! These will be questions that I've asked myself, questions which will ask you to truly search yourself and your circumstances and cause you to assess the gap between where you are and where you want to be – never from a place of condemnation or criticism, but rather to gain clarity and momentum for what's next. *Finding Flourishing* will offer you journal prompts and questions for reflection which are designed to give meaningful momentum.

Whether you're currently feeling blissful or burnt out, *Finding Flourishing* aims to meet you there. All it requires from you is some honesty, which might not always feel comfortable, but will lead to both subtle and significant shifts.

What is wellbeing?

To summarise these introductory thoughts on wellbeing, let's visit Abraham Maslow and his famous hierarchy of needs (1943) for a moment. Maslow suggested that human beings have both deficiency needs (D needs) and being needs (B needs). The deficiency needs are split into four categories, moving from the most basic need to the more complex; physiological; safety; love and belonging; and self-esteem. The B need is 'self-actualisation' and Maslow argued that, when the D needs are 'more or less met', our natural disposition is to seek to fill that growth and being need of self-actualisation, which of course, is never truly met as we continue to go and grow in the direction of our destination.

Wellbeing can be defined as a state of being comfortable, healthy or happy. The broad nature of this definition leaves a lot of room for interpretation, and rightly so. One person's comfort might look different to another's and, if we're to think seriously about Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we'd be highly presumptuous to suggest that doing X will instantly change our lives. Each individual needs different types of care and support in order to truly thrive.

This is why wellbeing isn't something we can just add to our to-do list, as though we can simply tick a box to show that we've meditated for the ten minutes we were supposed to today. I don't believe it's somewhere we arrive and stay at; rather it's somewhere we're continually re-seeking as our external circumstances shift and change. While our circumstances aren't the be all and end all for wellbeing, how we're currently experiencing life is often a significant factor in the outlook we possess at any given point, and it's important to continue to make enquiries there. Indeed, we must look inward in order to avoid plastering toxic productivity or positivity over something much more than skin deep.

Wellbeing over well-balanced?

Both in and outside of the wellbeing arena, we hear the phrase 'work-life balance'. While I understand the sentiment, as a busy working mum of two, I don't think 'balance' truly exists for a lot of people, and the apparent lack of it in our often full-to-the-brim lives can cause us to feel guilty or to think that we're doing something wrong by not obtaining it.

Now, before you think that *Finding Flourishing* is all about how working hard is evil and that we should all just chill out a bit and leave our email 'out of office' message permanently on, that's not what I mean. In fact, this is part of the reason that I think the notion of work-life balance is impractical. It suggests that all of the plates should be

perfectly and simultaneously spinning and that dropping any one of them at any given point means you've failed.

So no, I don't hold to the popular belief that it is a problem if someone wants to 'burn the midnight oil' for a few weeks in a row while working on a busy project. I think it's counterproductive to force someone to 'just stop' while they're in the midst of some major work. I'm sure you know as well as I do that sometimes you're just 'in the flow' and you don't notice the hours whiz by as your blank page *finally* fills up with words.

The professional networking site LinkedIn now includes 'stay-at-home parent' in the list of job titles on their site. (I'm aware there were a lot of mixed responses about whether or not to use this based on what potential employers might think, but that's another story for another day.) I think this is fantastic and recognises that raising children, though not paid employment, is still work. Even acknowledging this to yourself can help you realise that your time spent raising children was not 'doing nothing', but was productivity happening in a different way to the method typically prescribed.

Similarly, I don't think there's much of an issue if, after one of those particularly busy periods of non-stop work or raising little people, you have a few weeks/months/whatever period of time is needed when you're not 'go, go, go' and you actually sit back and take it a little easy... or easier.

If work-life balance exists, I think it comes in waves which last weeks and months, even years; it's not something you have to ensure you have every day.

Yes, make sure you go to the bathroom and eat a meal during the busy seasons, and make sure you take a shower and pick the laundry up off of the floor during your more chilled ones. But let's not make the way we live our day-to-day lives clinical, robotic and full

of 'should'. Instead, let's remind ourselves that we're human beings and not human doings. *Finding Flourishing* is a book which will help you do just that.

Faith focus

Along with journal prompts and questions for reflection, each chapter of *Finding Flourishing* will include a 'Faith focus'. As a Christian, I firmly believe that God has a lot to say about wellbeing, both generally and for each of us specifically. He cares about human flourishing. For one reason or another, wellbeing isn't something which is often spoken about at church, and this in itself can cause people, at best, to question whether it's a topic God has any interest in. At worst, it can cause us to believe that God is actually against us thinking about wellbeing at all. When a theme or a topic is commonly coined as personal development or 'self-help', it can instantaneously be incorrectly thought that God wants nothing to do with it. Our chapter-by-chapter 'Faith focus' will aim to shed light on what God might say pertaining to wellbeing. If, as I heard that night while rocking my daughter, wellbeing has much more to do with our source than our circumstances, it would be irresponsible of me to include methods, hacks and frameworks here while leaving no room for God's perspective. Although these thoughts won't be exhaustive, I do hope they'll give you space to reflect biblically.

I've been interested in wellbeing generally for a long time and for most of this duration I've specifically found myself thinking about it through a faith perspective. Before I became a coach and worked in my own business full-time, I worked part-time for my church and often found myself thinking about initiatives and ways in which we as the church leadership team could encourage more openness both from and for members of the congregation whose day-to-day lives had very little to do with typical 'church ministry'. One of the suggestions I gave (which didn't go ahead in the end, due to an already

packed schedule!) was 'Well Church', which essentially was about people taking time to pause and recognise that they were fully and wholly seen by Jesus, no matter what their circumstances. It would have been space for people to share, to be prayed for and to walk away knowing that the idea people can come to church 'as they are' isn't theoretical, but real. Although this might not have improved their circumstances on the spot, it would have started that journey, even by way of a realisation that life in Jesus could look different to anything else they'd been trying. The inspiration behind this initiative was a story found in John 4.

John 4:1–42 documents a story often referred to as 'The woman at the well'. The story opens with Jesus on a journey and verse 4 indicates that he 'had to go through Samaria'. Although geographically this was the logical route to take, strict Jews wouldn't take it in order to avoid defilement from the Samaritans. In the story, an unnamed Samaritan woman happens to be drawing water from a well at the hottest point of the day; she was guaranteed some privacy as no one else would be drawing water at this time, preferring the cooler morning or evening shift. This way, she could avoid the judgemental stares. As we head back to this 'had to' phrase, it begins to tell us so beautifully that Jesus meets us where we're at. He could have taken the longer but more 'appropriate' route to Galilee, but he 'had to' meet this woman.

The story goes on to illustrate so clearly that Jesus knows and sees every aspect of our lives, even the parts we're ashamed of. This woman had been leading a promiscuous life. However, rather than drawing attention to this and shaming her for her circumstances, Jesus gently steers and guides her into realising that her source – perhaps a need for affirmation and affection – wasn't the right place to keep going to. He awakens her to the fact that true life is in him. He uses the metaphor of drawing water from the well by describing himself, and

indeed, the Holy Spirit to come, as 'living water', a source which will never run dry. As he did with this woman, when Jesus reminds us of the significance of our source, putting our trust in him as opposed to our circumstances, it causes us to think and therefore do differently.

Our 'Faith focus' will reflect on God's perspective on each of the themes *Finding Flourishing* explores, providing you with a view you otherwise might not have considered.

Food for thought

Each chapter of *Finding Flourishing* will also feature questions and prompts, which will cause you to think about what you've read and then, when you're ready and when it's relevant, to apply some of what you've learned to your life. So, as we journey through the rest of the book, here are some initial questions to get you thinking:

- 1 What or whom do you consider to be your 'source'? When you consider your wellbeing as having much more to do with this than with your circumstances, does this serve as encouragement, or not?
- 2 What stage of life do you think or know that you're currently in, and what are you trying to squeeze into it from a place of 'should', because you feel like you're supposed to, rather than taking heed of where you're currently at and acting accordingly?
- 3 What have your previous thoughts been about wellbeing and God (if any)? Have these changed over time, or are you willing to think about this area a little differently as you go through *Finding Flourishing*?



2

Wellbeing and hope

At the beginning of a coaching programme with a new client or group, I use a well-known tool called 'The Wheel of Life' in order to assess and understand where a person is at currently, both in their life and their work. This tool asks people to rank their emotions and current experience according to a particular theme. There are many different variations of 'The Wheel of Life', and it's typically up to the practitioner to decide which themes they want their clients to explore based on the nature of the coaching experience they're facilitating for them. As 'work-life wellbeing' is the typical foundation for my coaching, one of the eight themes I explore through the use of 'The Wheel of Life' is hope.

I have found the presence of the notion of hope in these sessions to be hugely impactful. It's the theme which is undoubtedly most commented on and typically explored to the greatest extent. People are intrigued by and invested in hope.

Hope has a wide range of definitions and, depending on what circles you move in, can get both good and bad press. Hope is paramount to wellbeing because without it we can find ourselves despairing, which, in the long run, does nothing for anyone. If we, individually or collectively, want to get somewhere or accomplish something, hope is fundamental to us doing so, because sometimes it will feel like we want to give up.

One way I like to describe wellbeing is as ‘holistic health, hope and happiness, which reflects and acts on the past, present and future’. This idea, and the use of the word ‘hope’ within it, has been shaped and moulded as I’ve worked with clients. With some clients, their ranking for most other aspects on the wheel can be low for one reason or another, and yet hope still receives the highest score. Supporting clients to simply witness this fact can be a catalyst in the momentum they gain thereafter. Even an acknowledgement that there’s hope for the future in the midst of otherwise difficult times can be enough to mobilise action and motivate change.

American writer and politician Clare Boothe Luce (1903–87) said: ‘There are no hopeless situations; there are only people who have grown hopeless about them.’ This is a quote I profoundly resonate with in light of the importance of hope and its connectedness to wellbeing. If our wellbeing is much more dependent on our source than it is on our circumstances, hope is of the utmost importance. What we hope in, and why we hope in it, will also have a bearing on how robust this strategy actually is, which we’ll explore within our ‘Faith focus’. However, perhaps surprisingly, hope is of huge value and importance in and of itself too.

Digging deeper

As a Christian, my hope is undoubtedly rooted in Jesus and the sure foundation that a life in him provides. This isn’t dependent on my circumstances, but it also doesn’t ignore the fact that some circumstances can be hard, even devastating. Jesus doesn’t overlook this at any point either.

In John’s gospel, Jesus says: ‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full’ (John 10:10). Jesus’ desire and intention is abundant life for us today. But how can this be possible when even the most privileged

of people don't live a life devoid of problems? More significantly, how can this be possible when so many across the globe face war, famine, poverty and worse? Some of this will be answered in the aforementioned verse. Death and destruction were never part of God's will; they're very much the plan and attack of the enemy. However, these things are also not a shock to God. He's not taken aback by horrific circumstances. Also in John's gospel, Jesus says: 'I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world' (16:33). Trouble in this life is promised, and yet it seems as though life to the full is also. We'd be forgiven for thinking that this doesn't add up.

This is where faith and hope are of such significance. Having faith and positive belief in the face of difficulty is sometimes called 'spiritual bypassing'. When I first encountered this term, I felt conflicted about the notion that something of paramount importance to me could be passed off as what sounded like a crutch or a coping mechanism. However, I soon reminded myself that if hope, faith and belief are not rooted in the concept or person you're cultivating spiritual practices around, then yes, they will fall short. What's crucial here is faith and who or what it's founded on.

This chapter's 'Faith focus' will look at faith and hope in Jesus and its significance through the real and lived experience of King David, who, in one of the many psalms he wrote, confidently said, 'I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!' (Psalm 27:13, ESV), while his enemies lay in wait for him. We'll explore what having confident hope and faith can look like in the midst of less-than-hopeful circumstances. We'll also take a glance at Mark 9 for a simple prayer we can echo when hope and faith feel far off, but we know we need them.

Why hope?

In a world where wellbeing can take on different forms, hope offers an underpinning. Many business gurus will say that ‘hope isn’t a strategy’. They stand in good company. Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying that ‘he who lives upon hope will die fasting’. My belief is that while hope may not be a strategy, it is a standpoint. It is a declaration of sorts and a line in the sand which affords the person who dares to hold on to it a freedom which other areas of wellbeing don’t necessarily provide. Hope suggests a holding on *in spite of* circumstances, a willingness to keep trying – even if the trying is simply believing that things can be better than they currently are.

This disposition is vital. Not only does it ground the one who carries it, but it sends a clear message to those who want that carrier to give up and submit to hopelessness. The hopeful disposition digs its heels in and tells everyone who gets within sniffing distance of it that it’s not going to be moved. It’s safe to say that hope had taken hold of the apostle Paul when he said in Philippians 4:11: ‘I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.’ We don’t need to go too far into what’s documented of Paul’s life to recognise that it was far from plain sailing. His anchor was Jesus, and perhaps hope gave him the strength to lower it.

The truth is, hope doesn’t always get the best press. Those who are hopeful have sometimes been viewed as ‘head in the clouds’ types who don’t have a firm grasp on reality. This, however, couldn’t be further from the truth. Many psychologists now believe that hope is a key component in truly understanding human flourishing. From a faith perspective, scholars and thinkers in the church have been studying hope for centuries. For example, Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest theologians of the medieval period, defined hope as ‘a theological virtue by which man, relying on God’s strength, seeks an arduous but possible good’. Here, hope is outlined as both the endpoint (the virtue) and the means or journey to go about obtaining it. Beyond

theologians, however, hope is also heralded among philosophers and psychologists alike.

Thinking hope

The link between science and hope may not seem obvious. However, the more we learn about hope, the more it will confirm to us that we can do a whole lot more with it than we can without it. And hope is important not only for our doing, but also for our being. *The Oxford Handbook of Hope* states: 'Hope is positively related to experiences of positive emotion and psychological health and inversely associated with experiences of negative emotion and psychopathology.'¹ While objects of hope may differ, based on a number of aspects such as worldview, there is a central thought among scholars that, at least at its basic foundation of 'positive expectations for the future', hope is significant.

It is also rarely, if ever, dangerous or harmful. In fact, more often than not, even in excruciating circumstances, it is quite the opposite. There is an increasing body of research and work which demonstrates the benefits of hope not only on our wellbeing, but also on our overall mental health, not to mention our academic and physical achievements.

There is, however, an element of our own agency that comes into play when it comes to hope benefiting our wellbeing and beyond. As clichéd as the 'glass half empty or glass half full' analogy is, there is something significant about it. People referred to in certain texts as 'high-hope individuals' maintain a positive disposition towards their goals, focusing on the possibilities of success as opposed to the alternative possibility of failure as they approach them. The good news here is that these high-hope individuals haven't simply lucked out with this disposition, but rather they harness agency in the pursuit of their goals; for example, by more readily asking for help or drawing

on alternative resources. These are habits and traits which can be developed and then go on to cultivate more hope, further indicating that hope is a renewable resource. Viewing hope as a renewable resource also offers the opportunity to collectively draw upon one another. When one individual might be lacking hope, a friend, colleague or family member is likely to be able to offer a more hopeful perspective that they're better able to see at that point.

Faith focus: 'I believe. Help my unbelief.'

The Bible is filled with stories of people and places who faced such extreme hardship that it doesn't bear thinking about. This is, of course, not dissimilar to the difficulty and devastation which so many across the globe face today. So you'd be forgiven for thinking that a focus on hope is either tone deaf or distasteful. However, history is not void of it. In fact, history is so hope-filled it should give us more pause for thought and reflection than it often does.

King David is one of these historical figures who held on to hope in the midst of danger. At the time of writing Psalm 27, it is believed that David was in hiding while his enemies were lying in wait for him. The opening of the psalm is a profession of hope despite the bleak backdrop. Verse 1 is a clear declaration of who God is to David. His reminder to himself that God is Lord of his life (and indeed of all life) gives him the confidence to utter two rhetorical questions, which are undoubtedly hope-filled: 'Whom shall I fear?' and 'Of whom shall I be afraid?' Verses 2–3 highlight these circumstances, and this is significant. Hope doesn't dismiss reality and put a plaster of toxic positivity over something which needs addressing. Rather, it puts those circumstances into perspective and, in this case, does so in light of who God is in the midst of them.

After giving himself some reassurance and reminders of God's promises in verses 4–6, the psalm changes structure and becomes a direct

prayer to God. David cries out for help and makes pleas to God from verses 7 to 12. He does this despite the opening four verses providing such certainty on his standpoint of who God is to him.

This, I believe, is of importance for believers today. Hope isn't passive. Hope isn't simply an acknowledgement of who God is while we wait for him to prove us right. Rather, it's an active stance. That act could simply be an acknowledgement and a belief, or it could be movement and action in the direction of what we're hopeful for. We're told in the book of James that 'faith without deeds is dead' and that faith is actually made complete in action (James 2:20–26). This is why David doesn't simply make declarations of who God is, but instead goes on to cry out to the one he knows has the power and authority to change his circumstances.

The last two verses of Psalm 27 see David reminding and encouraging himself once again. The final verse (v. 14) serves as a reminder for us, just as it was for David – a reminder to wait. Hope waits. Once we've cried out and done all that we can from our own very human and frail position, we remind ourselves that God's timeline does not look the same as ours. We wait for him to act from a disposition of hope and faith that he is who he says he is and who we believe him to be.

At this point I'd like us to explore a simple, authentic and hope-filled prayer which we can echo when hope is all we have, while simultaneously it feels hard to hold on to. In Mark 9, we read of the disciples being caught in a dispute with a large crowd of people. When Jesus eventually reaches them and enquires what's been going on, a father in the crowd shares that he'd brought his demon-possessed son to the disciples in the hope that they would be able to cast the demon out. They weren't, and now there appears to be a debate going on as to why. In verse 20, the boy is brought to Jesus and as a result of being in his presence, falls to the ground, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asks how long this has been happening and the father confirms it has been the case since childhood. At the end of verse 22, the father, clearly

in the depths of desperation, says, 'But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us' (ESV). Verses 23–24 read:

“‘If you can?’” said Jesus. ‘Everything is possible for one who believes.’ Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’

It’s that prayer of doubt-tinged hope and faith which I so resonate with and believe to be important for each of us.

Just like hope, faith is messy and imperfect. What this sorrow-filled father knew is what many of us know to be true of ourselves. Yes, there is a foundation and root of belief. However, just as present, albeit sometimes louder or quieter, is a doubt, which we feel guilty and uncertain about. The desperate words of this father – ‘I believe. Help my unbelief’ – remind us that faith and hope in God aren’t about being perfect, about holding on to them with such certainty that being rocked is somehow evidence that they’ve disappeared. What it can indicate instead is that we’re humans with a very real spectrum of emotions.

What should encourage us even further, however, is Jesus’ response. He healed the boy completely. This hope-filled and yet somehow half-hearted prayer of the boy’s father led to the healing of his son. What might hope lead us to believe and, in turn, act upon as we utter similar words to our heavenly Father?

Food for thought

- 1 What disposition do you currently hold when it comes to hope? Has any of what's been shared in this chapter caused you to think differently? If so, what actions might it cause you to take?
- 2 How has hope previously arisen for you in the face of challenging past circumstances, and how might this serve as a reference for how you might handle current or future challenges?
- 3 Have you ever had that sneaking suspicion that hope has to be whole in order for it to be real? What can even the glimmers of hope you hold right now cause you to dream and do about your future?

Notes

- 1 Matthew W. Gallagher and Shane J. Lopez (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Hope* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 134.





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