

## Pastoral care and living hope

Samuel Lopez

**W**hen I was nine years old, for several days my grandfather suffered great pain in his abdomen. Frightened, I asked him what was happening, and he responded: “Oh, my child, this is nothing! God will take these pains away, and this body will be transformed. Do not be afraid!” Although I did not fully understand his words, I sensed his faith and his hope of deliverance. My grandfather knew the reality of illness and suffering. But he was a believer in Christ, so he also knew the biblical stories of healing and hope.

**Sometimes we struggle to keep hope alive. Yes, suffering and illness are realities of life, but it is in facing up to these difficult times that we are enabled to exercise our faith.**

How can a pastor honor biblical stories of miraculous healing and maintain trust in God’s healing power while continuing to care for people who face ongoing suffering? As pastors we face many situations of suffering, and we ask for God’s will. Sometimes we struggle to keep hope alive, and our temptation is to fall into fatalism or into unreal optimism. Yes, suffering and illness are realities of life, but it is in facing up to these difficult times that we are enabled to exercise our faith.

Christian hope is more than wishing for the best, more than optimism. The narratives of Jesus’ miracles of healing and hope provide us with a foundation for trusting in God’s power. And in 1 Peter 1:3 we are reminded that the believer in Christ has a *living hope*. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:3–5).

This Christian hope is placed in our hearts by a living Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. From the perspective of 1 Peter, hope is real and gives us comfort and peace. We can trust and have faith in the power of God who exercises mercy and showers us with love.

A few years ago, one of our church workers came to my office and told me about the results of medical tests that revealed cancer in her pancreas. She cried, I cried, and we prayed. The question in my mind was, "What is God's purpose in all this?" Even though I felt a heavy burden for my beloved sister, somehow I felt God's presence and peace. We prayed for healing and for God's will to be revealed, and we glorified Jesus Christ our Lord. Three weeks later, she called me to say that new testing revealed no cancer. Then we wondered if the first tests had been mistaken. We did not know, but we believed what we have always preached: that God has the power to heal.

Of course we rejoice in stories of healing. But what do we do when a believer in Christ faces a terminal illness, and death becomes imminent? How can we faithfully keep hope alive in the midst of such suffering?

### **The power of living hope**

If we return to 1 Peter, we find key elements of an answer to the question of how the believer can face difficult times:

1. *Remember that God is in charge.* First Peter 1:3 seeks to help believers realize that God is in charge. We are invited to lift our eyes and see beyond our present circumstances. If God is in charge, we have nothing to fear.

2. *Bless and praise God.* God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, is the Creator of the universe. We are capable of blessing and praising God in all circumstances. God is a living God, and we have no other hope. Because God is the Father of our Lord Jesus, and because we are in Christ, God is also our Father.

3. *Anticipate the power of the resurrection.* The hope of the resurrection is a hope by which we can live today; it is a joyful anticipation of our full participation in God's kingdom. The risen Christ is the hope of the believer. We have this living hope that no present circumstance can destroy. We await something better!

The power of this living hope is the life of Christ in the heart of each believer; when we realize the presence of Christ in us and

have faith in his resurrection, we have resources that will help us face any spiritual or physical difficulty.

### **The pastor and the community of faith**

At the beginning of my first pastorate, one member of the congregation who had many illnesses was sent to her home to spend her last days. We did not know how long Fermina would be facing this suffering. Besides praying for her, we offered our presence to her not only by visiting her but also by having weekly worship services at her home and even celebrating the Lord's Supper and foot washing with her. For about nine months, until her death, the church demonstrated love and companionship throughout this difficult experience. For the family and the congregation, peace and comfort were clear results of this experience.

We should never underestimate the power of our presence. When we spend time with people who are suffering, we convey the message, "Christ is with you, and we are with you!" In the end, the congregation felt that God had been good and merciful, and that death has no power over the believer. And I learned that providing emotional and spiritual support in times of crisis is a pastoral responsibility, and the community of faith provides the environment of love and care. I also learned that we must never lose sight of our living hope, which is Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Of course we rejoice in stories of healing. But what do we do when a believer in Christ faces a terminal illness, and death becomes imminent? How can we faithfully keep hope alive in suffering?**

Sometimes we experience the miracle of healing, and other times we face suffering as testing and become distressed for "a little while" (1 Peter 1:6), until we go home.

Several years ago, Juan was diagnosed with colon cancer. He was living in the U.S., but the rest of his family was in Mexico. He underwent surgical treatment, but his condition deteriorated, and his doctors gave him two months to live. Juan wanted to go back to Mexico. The congregation gave him spiritual support through prayers and pres-

ence, and we bought an air ticket for his travel home. He could barely walk and was very sick.

When the day of his flight arrived, two of his nephews and I went with him to the airport in Philadelphia, where we located a

wheelchair for him. Only one person could accompany Juan to the gate, and I thought he would ask one of his nephews, but he requested that I go with him. As we waited for his plane to begin boarding, we had a beautiful conversation about our faith in Christ. When the time arrived for him to enter the airplane, I prayed for him. We knew that this was the end, that we would not see each other again on this earth. I assured him that we would meet again in our heavenly home. The moment of departure arrived. We looked at each other. There were no more words, only a tear from his eyes and a tear from mine as I pointed toward heaven and we smiled. Fifteen days later he passed away. That was just the beginning of life for him! Amen!

*In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:6–9)*

### **About the author**

Samuel Lopez, New Holland, Pennsylvania, has been a Mennonite pastor and presently works as administrator for the Spanish Mennonite Council of Churches under Lancaster Mennonite Conference. He is also moderator of Iglesia Menonita Hispana and a member of the Mennonite Church USA Executive Board.