Hope—A Closer Look

Ken Schleimer

Scripture quotations are from the ESV unless noted.

Two very different words

In Scripture, hope means confidently expecting something good that God has promised but that hasn't arrived yet. It is certain about *what* is coming because it rests on *who* promised it. The only uncertain part is *when*.

That is almost the opposite of how we use the word today. When we say "I hope it doesn't rain on Saturday," we mean "I'd like it not to rain, but who knows?" Everyday hope is a wish with a shrug attached.

Biblical hope has no shrug. Think of a child whose father has promised to pick her up after school. She isn't *wishing* he'll come. She is *waiting* for him, because she knows him. That is biblical hope: settled expectation, grounded in a trustworthy person, looking forward to a sure future.

A helpful habit: when you read "hope" in the Bible, think *confident expectation*. In English, "I expect a package Tuesday" is much firmer than "I hope a package comes Tuesday," and that firmness is what the biblical writers meant. The Bible itself links the two ideas. The Hebrew word for hope, *tiqvah*, is sometimes translated "expectation": the KJV renders Proverbs 23:18 as "thine expectation shall not be cut off," where the ESV reads "your hope will not be cut off." Paul pairs them outright: "my eager expectation and hope" (Philippians 1:20). Simeon and Anna show what this looks like in a life. They lived "waiting for the consolation of Israel" and "the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:25, 38), and they saw the promise arrive.

Three things mark it throughout the Bible:

- **It has a definite object.** It is hope *in* God and hope *for* what he has promised, never hope in general.
- **It carries certainty.** Its confidence comes from God's character and his track record, not from how things look.
- **It looks forward.** Hope concerns what is "not yet": promised, guaranteed, but still on the way.

Hoping versus "the hope"

The word works two ways in Scripture. As a verb, it describes something we do. As a noun, it often names what we are waiting for. Seeing the difference clears up a lot of confusion.

Hope as a verb: something we do. To hope (Hebrew *qavah* or *yachal*, Greek *elpizō*) is to look forward with expectation. Like faith (believing or trust), it is something every human mind can do. Everyone hopes in something: a paycheck, a diagnosis, a candidate, a relationship. The act of hoping is no better than what it is aimed at.

Hope as a noun: what we wait for. Here the weight shifts from the person hoping to the thing hoped for. The New Testament often speaks of *the* hope, something outside us, fixed and objective:

- "the hope laid up for you in heaven" (Colossians 1:5)
- "the hope set before us" (Hebrews 6:18)
- "our blessed hope, the appearing of… Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13)
- "Christ Jesus our hope" (1 Timothy 1:1)

This hope stays put whether or not we feel hopeful today. A weak grip doesn't make the anchor any less secure.

Why this matters. English focuses almost entirely on the verb, on the feeling of hoping and how strong it is. Scripture puts the weight on the noun, on *the* hope, which centers on Christ and what God has promised through him. That's where the certainty comes from. Biblical hoping is confident because it is aimed at the hope, not because the person hoping is optimistic. Hebrews ties hope closely to faith: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Faith gives hope its footing, because you can only confidently expect a promise from someone you trust. (The noun can describe the inner attitude too, as in "rejoice in hope," Romans 12:12. Even there, it's the attitude of someone whose eyes are on the hope.)

How we misuse the word

Most misunderstandings of biblical hope come from reading our everyday meaning back into the Bible. Here are the most common ones.

Everyday usage	**What it assumes**	**What Scripture says instead**
"I hope I get the job."	Hope is a wish; the outcome is up in the air.	Hope rests on a promise already made: "God, who never lies, promised" (Titus 1:2).
"I hope I'm going to heaven."	Salvation is a gamble you won't know about until the end.	Believers are "born again to a living hope" (1 Peter 1:3). The future is secure; only its arrival is pending.
"Stay positive. Never lose hope!"	Hope is a mood or personality trait, and the object doesn't matter.	Hope is always hope *in* someone: "Hope in God" (Psalm 42:5). Hope with no object is just optimism.
"Hope against hope"	Clinging to a long shot when the odds are hopeless.	In Romans 4:18, Abraham's hope stood against *human* impossibility, but it rested on God's promise. It wasn't a long shot at all.
"Jeremiah 29:11 means God will give me a good career."	Hope is a guarantee of personal comfort and success now.	That promise came to exiles who would wait 70 years (Jeremiah 29:10). God's "future and a hope" is about his purposes, often reached through hardship.
"Our only hope is the next election" / the market / medicine	Hope can be placed in any strong enough human resource.	"The war horse is a false hope for salvation" (Psalm 33:17). Paul warns the rich not to set their hopes "on the uncertainty of riches, but on God"

Everyday usage	What it assumes	What Scripture says instead
		(1 Timothy 6:17).
"All we can do now is hope."	Hope is passive, a last resort when action is over.	Biblical hope is active. It makes people endure (1 Thessalonians 1:3), purifies them (1 John 3:3), and gets them moving.
"Hopefully it works out."	Hope is a filler word for mild uncertainty.	Biblical hope "does not put us to shame" (Romans 5:5). It is never disappointed in the end.

The common use of hope is about *uncertain outcomes*. Biblical hope is about *certain outcomes not yet seen*. Paul puts it plainly: "hope that is seen is not hope" (Romans 8:24). The waiting is real, but the result is settled.

Hope in the Old Testament: waiting on a faithful God

In the Old Testament, hoping is very close to *waiting*: leaning your weight forward on God because he has proved he keeps his word. Several Hebrew words carry the idea, and two of them paint vivid pictures.

A rope you hold onto (*qavah*, *tiqvah*). The verb *qavah* means to wait for or look eagerly toward. Its related noun *tiqvah* (hope) can also mean a cord or rope. When the spies escaped Jericho, Rahab tied a scarlet *tiqvah*, a cord, in her window as the sign she would be spared (Joshua 2:18, 21). That's a fitting picture: hope is a line tied to something firm. Isaiah uses the verb in a famous promise: "they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:31).

Waiting it out (*yachal*). This word means to wait patiently, sometimes through pain. It's the word in the psalmist's pep talk to himself: "Why are you cast down, O my soul?… Hope in God; for I shall again praise him" (Psalm 42:5). It also appears in one of the darkest books of the Bible. Surrounded by Jerusalem's ruins, the poet of Lamentations writes: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases" (Lamentations 3:21–22). His circumstances hadn't changed. His hope rested on what he *remembered* about God.

What Old Testament hope rested on

Old Testament hope is never free-floating. It always ties back to something God has said or done:

- **God's promises to Abraham**: land, descendants, and blessing for all nations (Genesis 12:1–3).
- **God's past rescues**: above all the Exodus, which became Israel's proof that God can be trusted to save again.
- **God's covenant love** (*chesed*): "O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption" (Psalm 130:7).
- **God's coming King and coming day**: the prophets pointed to a future Messiah, a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34), and a restored creation (Isaiah 65:17).

Pictures of hope from the Old Testament

- **Job**, having lost everything, still says: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth" (Job 19:25). Note the verb: *know*, not *wish*.

- **Hosea** pictures God turning "the Valley of Achor" (literally, Valley of Trouble) into "a door of hope" (Hosea 2:15).
- **Zechariah** calls God's scattered people "prisoners of hope [prisoners with hope]" (Zechariah 9:12; see also the NET or CSB). Though captives for now, they are to hold on to hope for their release, because God's covenant guarantees it (9:11).
- **The Psalms** keep contrasting true and false objects of hope: "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God" (Psalm 20:7).

The pattern is consistent. Israel's hope was confident because God had a record. He had made promises and kept them before, so they could wait for him to keep the rest.

Yet Israel kept forgetting that record, even with abundant proof in front of them. Only days after walking through the Red Sea, the people were grumbling that they would starve in the wilderness (Exodus 16:2–3). The psalmist sums up their history: "They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them" (Psalm 78:11). "They soon forgot his works" (Psalm 106:13). Their hope depended on *remembering* what God had done, and memory proved a fragile thing to build on.

The prophets looked ahead to a day when God would fix this from the inside: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33); "I will put my Spirit within you" (Ezekiel 36:27). That promise is the key to the big shift from Old Testament to New, as the next section shows.

Hope in the New Testament: anchored in Jesus

The New Testament takes Israel's hope, and now ours, and fastens it to one person and one event: Jesus Christ and his resurrection. The Greek word is *elpis* (verb: *elpizō*). In ordinary Greek it could mean any expectation, good or bad. That broad, everyday meaning confirms the point made earlier: hoping, like believing, is a normal function of every human mind. What sets biblical hope apart is not the act of hoping but its object. The apostles filled it with Old Testament meaning: confident expectation of God's promised good.

What changed. Israel's hope leaned on memory of God's past acts, and memory kept failing. Believers in the New Testament have two things Israel never had:

- **The resurrection: proof that settles the question.** God raised Jesus from the dead, the one event that guarantees every other promise. Paul calls the risen Christ "the firstfruits" of the harvest still to come (1 Corinthians 15:20).
- **The gift of the spirit: a guarantee on the inside.** What the prophets promised has arrived, at least in part. Believers "were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit [holy spirit], who [which] is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it" (Ephesians 1:13–14; see also 2 Corinthians 5:5). The Greek word for "guarantee" means a down payment: a first installment that commits the giver to pay the rest.

So the believer's hope doesn't rest only on remembering what God once did for someone else. It rests on a risen Lord and a down payment already received. That's why Paul can say we "abound in hope" by the power of the spirit (Romans 15:13).

The believer's hope is further established by actually manifesting that gift, first of all by speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues is one of the primary evidences in the senses realm that a believer has received the gift of holy spirit. On the day of Pentecost, those who received it "began to speak in other

tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4). When the gift came on the Gentiles at Cornelius' house, Peter and those with him knew it had happened "for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God" (Acts 10:45–46; see also Acts 19:6). Israel had to remember what God had done in the past. The believer can see and hear proof, here and now, of the down payment on what God has promised.

Hope is an anchor. Hebrews says God backed his promise with an oath, "so that… we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (Hebrews 6:18–19). An anchor doesn't stop the waves. It keeps the ship from drifting. And notice where this anchor is fixed: not in our feelings but in heaven itself, where Jesus has gone ahead of us (6:19–20).

Hope is living. "According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). The hope is "living" because its guarantee is a living Savior. His giving of the spirit-gift is the down payment on everything else God has promised (Acts 2:33).

Hope is a person. Paul doesn't just say Christians *have* hope. He says Jesus *is* their hope: "Christ Jesus our hope" (1 Timothy 1:1) and "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

Hope is "not yet," but sure. "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:24–25). The patience isn't because the outcome is in doubt. It's because the outcome hasn't arrived.

Hope doesn't disappoint. "Hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit [holy spirit]" (Romans 5:5). Biblical hope will never leave you embarrassed for having trusted it.

Hope is the difference between two kinds of people. Paul describes life before Christ as "having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). He tells grieving believers they need not "grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Christians still grieve, but their grief has a horizon.

In short, the New Testament doesn't invent a new kind of hope. It shows that the hope Israel waited for has arrived in Jesus, and that his resurrection guarantees the rest will follow.

What exactly are we hoping for?

Biblical hope is specific. When the New Testament speaks of "the hope," it usually has these concrete things in mind:

1. **Jesus' return.** "Set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:13).
2. **Resurrection of the body.** Not a breath-life body living on somewhere, but a new body. Our present bodies are animated by the breath-life God breathed into Adam. The resurrection body will be animated by spirit-life. Paul calls this the difference between the natural body and the spiritual body: "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44; see 15:20–23, 42–49). The Greek word for "natural" here is built on the word for soul. Paul then draws the contrast directly: "'The first man Adam became a living being [soul]'; the last Adam

became a life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45). Paul says that if hope in Christ were for this life only, "we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

3. **Being made like Christ.** "When he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

4. **Eternal life.** "In hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began" (Titus 1:2). English Bibles say "eternal life" or "everlasting life," but both fall short of the Greek phrase, *zōē aiōnios*. *Aiōnios* comes from *aiōn*, "age," so the phrase literally means "life of the age": the life that belongs to the age to come. The point isn't only that it lasts a long time. It names a specific kind of life, the life of God's coming kingdom, lived in a spiritual body animated by spirit-life. That's why believers are called "heirs according to the hope of eternal life [*zōē aiōnios*, life of the age to come]" (Titus 3:7): promised, certain, and still on the way.

5. **The glory of God.** "We rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:2). Revelation shows where that hope ends up: the new Jerusalem, "having the glory of God" (Revelation 21:11), a city that "has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Revelation 21:23). There is a fitting symmetry here. The one called Lucifer, "light-bearer," fell from heaven (Isaiah 14:12, KJV), and Satan still "disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). The story that began with that loss of light ends with light restored: the true light is the Lamb, Jesus Christ, "the bright morning star" (Revelation 22:16).

6. **A new heavens and a new earth.** The present physical universe is not permanent. Peter says "the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire" and will "pass away" (2 Peter 3:7, 10). In their place God promises a new and far better home: "according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13). Creation itself waits "in hope" to be set free from decay (Romans 8:20–21). John saw it: "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away," and in the new one God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore" (Revelation 21:1, 4).

7. **Wrongs set right.** Part of our hope is knowing that the Judge of all the earth will settle every account. God "has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed," and he guaranteed it by raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 17:31). The evil that seems to go unpunished now will receive what it deserves: "God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted" (2 Thessalonians 1:6–7). Paul looked forward to the righteous judge rewarding the good (2 Timothy 4:8). That's why believers can leave revenge alone: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). The righteous judge will set right every wrong.

Notice what's *not* on the list: an easy life, guaranteed health, or getting what we want on our timetable. God does care about our daily needs, and believers can pray about them with confidence. But the Bible's central hope is far larger than any of those things, and it's the one hope that can't be taken away.

What hope does in a life

Biblical hope is not a feeling you wait to have. It's a settled confidence that changes how you live right now.

- **It produces endurance.** Paul remembers the Thessalonians' "steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:3). People who know how the story ends can keep going through the hard chapters.
- **It brings joy, even in trouble.** "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation" (Romans 12:12). Suffering, Paul says, actually ends up strengthening hope (Romans 5:3–4).
- **It motivates holy living.** "Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure" (1 John 3:3). If you're expecting to be face to face with your savior, you get ready for the meeting.
- **It steadies us under pressure.** "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23). Notice the reason given: not our grip, but his faithfulness.
- **It makes us ready to explain ourselves.** Peter tells believers to be prepared to give "a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). Biblical hope is reasoned, not blind. It can point to an empty tomb.
- **It changes how we grieve.** Christians still weep at funerals, but not "as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Biblical hope is a combination of the renewed mind and the working of the spirit-gift. Paul prays, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit [holy spirit] you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13). Just as believing grows with more and more of the Word and experiences with God, so does our expectation, our hope.

The bottom line

In everyday English, hope means "I'd like this, but I'm not sure." In the Bible, hope means "I'm sure of this, and I'm waiting for it." The difference comes down to the object: the verb is only as good as the noun it reaches for. Hope in circumstances, people, or our own efforts is always uncertain. Hope in the God who raised Jesus from the dead is as certain as his word.

So the next time you say "I hope," it's worth asking: *Am I wishing, or am I waiting on a promise?*

Key verses to remember

Passage	What it shows about hope
Psalm 42:5	Hope has an object: God himself.
Psalm 130:5–7	Hope rests on God's steadfast love and word.
Isaiah 40:31	Waiting on the LORD brings strength.
Lamentations 3:21–24	Hope survives disaster by remembering God's faithfulness.
Romans 5:2–5	Hope grows through suffering and never disappoints.
Romans 8:24–25	Hope is for what is unseen but sure.
Romans 15:13	God is the source of hope.
Colossians 1:27	Christ in us is the hope of glory.

Passage	What it shows about hope
Titus 2:13	Jesus' return is our "blessed hope."
Hebrews 6:18–19	Hope is a sure and steady anchor.
1 Peter 1:3	The resurrection makes our hope a living one.
1 John 3:2–3	Hope in Christ's appearing motivates us to live more like him.