

## **Hope: The Misunderstood Virtue**

### **Dr. Mario Sacasa**

Welcome back, everybody. Thank you so much for being here with us and allowing myself and the other presenters to be part of this healing journey for you. I pray that these lectures have been helpful for you, that you've been able to take them to prayer and are able to apply them to the particular circumstances of your life.

### **Recap on Memory**

Well, in my last video, I shared just kind of a cursory brief understanding of how memory works and the role that it plays in our psychological and spiritual life. We all know that we can't change the past, but it is a great grace to know that we can change our interpretation and the emotions that surround those past events. This is good news, because if we can look at the past and make some changes in the ways that we see and interpret those events, then that means we can look to our present circumstances, our present challenges, and see those in a new light. And even that means if we can see our circumstances presently in a new light, then we can of course look to the future and imagine a future that's better than the present, too.

This is why it is important to understand how memory works, but this is also why it's important to know that memory plays a role in our capacity to hope. And since hope is one of those three theological virtues that are really important to have faith, hope, and love, we have a lot to say about hope. And so that's what I'm going to be diving into in this lecture, as well as in the next one. We're going to break apart this virtue of hope and understand it from a psychological perspective, as well as understand it from a theological one.

### **How Do You Use the Word Hope?**

So, let's just kind of think for a second here, all right? Do a little thought exercise with me. I am a therapist, after all, so I like to play a little games sometimes. All right, so just think for a second about the word hope and how we typically use this word. Often, we use it in a very passive sense or in a very negative sense. I give lectures on hope often and people will come up to me and tell me before the lecture begins or usually after the lecture's over, they're like, "I always thought about hope "about something weak or something passive. "I never thought of it as something active, "the way that you articulated it to be." Well, that's not just my articulation, that's the church's understanding.

So often we think about hope this way. We say, oh, it's just a well wish like, oh, man, I hope I feel better tomorrow, or sports, man, I love sports, right? So often at the beginning of every season, we always say, man, I hope my team wins the championship. Or if some fantasy, you're like, well, I hope I win the lottery, or man, I hope my kids just aren't a screw up when they grow up, you know? So, or just passing comments, like I hope you're having a good day today, right?

So, but often we use this word in a sense that just communicates a sense of passivity, that we really don't have much say on how we're going to feel today, or we admit that we don't have much say on how our team's going to perform throughout this season. Or we say that it's just a fantasy that we just hope things might be better without any real concrete understanding or recognition of what we can do to make those things better. So, this understanding of hope is simply just optimism, and optimism isn't bad. Optimism actually is an important psychological trait, too, but it's not exactly the same thing as hope.

When we speak about hope, I want to really help you guys understand that hope is more than just something passive. It's more than just something that we say when we're trying to be polite about people, but that hope actually is a great virtue and is something that we can cultivate within our lives.

## **A Personal Story**

So, I just want to share for a few seconds here and think about just a little bit about myself and why is it that these lectures on hope and memory are important to me? Well, like many of you certainly, I try to be faithful in my life, and I am a therapist who brings his faith into his work. Now, I think it's beautiful because I'm able to give lectures like this to kind of bridge the gap between the two, between what psychology says and what our Catholic spirituality faith theology says. But what also happens is at times that because in my professional life, the two have bled together, my service to the church is through my psychological work, that at times when I've experienced hardships or difficulties in certain work environments or even just in my own personal life, it's not just about work, and unfortunately it bleeds over into my faith as well. And so, at times this can make things very complicated.

## **Three Signs of Burnout**

So let me give you a little more concrete here. Recently, I was going through burnout for the first time in my life, and if you've never experienced burnout, let me give you a little kind of understanding of what burnout is. Burnout is understood as having three real qualities. The first is exhaustion, a sense that I'm just exhausted, I'm tired. The energy is drained. It's almost the sense that you feel like you're in a bathtub that's trying to stay full but there's like a leak somewhere, and no matter how much energy you put into it, it's always feeling like there's a drain against you. So that sense of exhaustion is a key marker of burnout. But that's not the only marker of burnout. That's the first thing that we think about.

The second piece, though, is the sense of cynicism, the sense that like, man, like, forget everything, burn the whole system down, just let it all go. Like, nothing is going to get better. You know, things like, my wife in the middle of my burnout, she found a t-shirt that she thought was funny that I should have that said something like, I used to be a people person, but people ruined it, you know, that type of stuff? And so those type of comments are certainly funny and there's some truth to that, but at the same time, there's a sense of cynicism that's deep within that, there's a recognition that, I'm exhausted and nothing I'm going to do is going to make it better. The circumstances aren't going to change, and no matter what happens, it's only going to turn out

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for the worst. So, cynicism is a dangerous thought to have, especially when we're in this conversation that we're having about hope.

But then the third piece with regards to personal burnout is inefficacy in the sense that no matter what you do, it really doesn't matter. That you're ineffective in the work that you're doing, you're not making any change to the system, to the environment that you're in. Nothing is going to be better. Nothing is going to change and nothing you can do can make it any better than what it is.

So, burnout is a dangerous kind of trifecta here of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, and this is all coming from the research of Dr. Christina Maslach if you're interested in learning more about that, you can look up her research. But it's important for us who have experienced burnout to recognize that it's just temporary.

Well, when I was going through my burnout, I didn't know that it was temporary. I didn't know that it was something that I could actually work through and pass through. I just became overwhelmed by this sense of cynicism, of exhaustion, of inefficacy in my own personal and professional life. And because as I said earlier, my personal and professional life are intermingled because of my work as a therapist who works for the Church, that this bled over into my spiritual life, and I had a hard time kind of sifting through what I was experiencing personally and in what was being projected out into my faith, what was being projected out to my understanding of my Catholic faith and confidence in the Church, as well as in the Lord and in confidence in Him and His ability to work through me.

So, I'm sure many of us have had these crises moments of our life, and I would start up by just saying that these moments of these, of crises of faith, aren't things that we really should be afraid of. It's not an indication that we're a bad Catholic if we have certain doubts or questions about certain things. Actually, it's a good thing that we have doubts, that we have questions, because what happens, what happened in my experience and what happens often for many of us when we experience these moments is that the Lord is calling us to a deeper understanding of who He is and is calling us into a deeper relationship with Him.

So, knowing that piece, what I did is I just dove deep into the literature. I wanted to understand what was happening in my heart. I wanted to understand what burnout was. I wanted to understand why I was experiencing cynicism for the first time. Listen, I'm an optimist by nature. I'm a people person by nature, and so to experience cynicism and disdain for people was very new for me, and it was actually a little shocking for me because that's not who I typically am. And that was a tell with what happened, is that it became an awareness of saying, whoa, this is not who I am. I don't typically think this way, I don't typically operate this way, I don't typically behave this way.

So, what's going on interiorly that I need to be a little reflective on and I need to do some work to better understand, and so I did. So I dove into understanding of the spiritual life, I dove into psychology and positive psychology specifically. And the fruit of this is lectures similar to this. I also have started a podcast called Always Hope, aptly named, because it really came out of my own experience. But even more so than just my ability to understand and to articulate these things and to help people such as yourselves, as well as helping those who are in my counseling

setting, what it did is it gave me a new framework for life, a richer framework for life, a deeper understanding of how God operates within the particular challenges that we are experiencing, recognizing that God simply just doesn't abandon us in those moments, but even more so is using those moments to guide us into a deeper relationship with Him. And so this understanding, this new understanding, this newfound appreciation for the word hope has been transformative in my own life and I pray that it can help you, as well.

## **Understanding Hope Psychologically Speaking**

So, if we reflect here for just a few minutes on how we understand hope psychologically speaking, and there's a few different researchers that are out there that are kind of speaking about hope, but there's one with the time that I have that I really want to focus in on. And the researcher that I want to focus in on, his name is Dr. Rick Snyder, and Dr. Rick Snyder together with another psychologist that worked within his group, Dr. Shane Lopez, both say this, they say that hope is this. *“Hope is the belief that the future will be better than the present combined with the belief that you have the power to make it so.”* Let me say that again. *“Hope is the belief that the future will be better than the present combined with the belief that you have the power to make it so.”*

So there's two major qualities when we speak about hope, psychologically speaking. We have to have the desire, the capacity, the belief that things can be better, which is often the way we think about hope. But the second piece, this recognition that we need to know how to make things better as well, that second piece, when we have both of these is how we see hope and how we understand it and how we can claim that we have hope.

So really let's break this apart a little bit more. Hope starts with goals. Hope is future-oriented. Hope is always recognizing that there's something out there more that we want or more that we want to do, and not in a lustful way or not in a greedy way, but in a way that says, all right, Lord, like, what are you asking me to do? Life keeps moving on. Life keeps going and there are certain dreams or certain desires that I believe that you've put within my heart. What are those things? Let me take some time to discern what my goals are and let me understand what it is, Lord, that you are asking me to entertain. What are you asking me to pursue? Because there's always new things that need to happen. There are always new problems that need to be solved, or there's always a new journey that God is calling us to. And so, ask yourself that. Think about your goals, think about your dreams. Do you still dream? Do you still allow yourself to think about the future in a more positive light, your own personal future? A

and so part of the question of the sermon is not having too many options, not being overwhelmed by all the different things that you want to do but focusing on the one thing or the two things that you genuinely feel God is placing within your heart and pursuing those things. So goals, having a certain sense of goals and looking at the future with a certain sense of desire, well, that's going to be a key here when understanding about hope.

## Way Power

Dr. Lopez and Dr. Snyder both use this funny word here, well, not funny. A couple words here to describe it. We'll use willpower. Willpower isn't the funny word. The second one I'm about to use is the funny one, but willpower. Well, what is willpower? So, if we need to have goals, do we have desire? Do we have energy? Do we have motivation? Do we seek meaning in those goals? Do I want to pursue that goal? The desire to be able to do that, okay? So that's the willpower piece. Grit, steadfastness, tenacity, those aspects of pursuing goals. That willpower element is also an essential piece of having hope.

The third piece here is this funny word now, way power. Way power. What does way power mean? Way power means that I may have the desire or may have the tenacity, I may have the grit for it, but I need to have the agency. I need to have the capacity and the knowledge to know how to pursue the goal that I want to pursue. So, hope is contingent on knowing how to achieve those goals.

See, what way power does is it helps keep hope realistic, because if we don't really know a path forward, then that can be a hopeless situation. Or goals without challenges certainly are just fantasies, and just, I'm just going to win the lottery. Well, that's not really a, that's not a good financial plan. A better financial plan is setting aside money regularly to put aside for your 401k or your IRA. That's a much better plan in terms of how to save for retirement. Hoping to win the lottery isn't it. But we have to recognize that there's a certain way power, a certain understanding of, okay, how am I going to accomplish the thing that I want to accomplish? Do I know how to accomplish that? And am I willing to go do the research and to understand the steps that I need to take to be able to go do that which I feel God is asking me to do? And of course right here is where sports, kind of hope falls apart, because at the end of the day, none of us have any way power over our team. We have no thing that we can do to make our team better than what they actually are.

## Wait Power

And so then the last piece with regards to hope is another funny word here that I want to introduce, well, that's Dr. Everett Worthington introduced to us. It's called wait power. So, hope is contingent in our capacity to wait. This is why in Spanish it's beautiful, the word for hope is literally the word for waiting. The word is Esperanza, Estoy Esperando, Esperanza, a recognition that we have to be able to wait on the Lord and wait for the right opportunities to be able to go engage in the things that He's asking us to engage in. So, hope also has a quality related to patience, relating to prudence, relating to this notion of waiting. Because we could have a desire for something, we could have a very clear goal, we could have a very clear understanding of how we want to accomplish that goal, but then at the same time, we also need to wait on the Lord for the green light to come for us to be able to take the steps forward that He's asking us to take.

Think for a second the famous story of Elijah and the cave. It's one of my favorite Old Testament passages. And the reason I love it is because it speaks beautifully about a prophet, about a man, about a person who is in deep relationship with Christ, with the Lord, excuse me, obviously it's

out of the Old Testament, who's in deep relationship with the Lord. And so when the angel comes at the front of the cave, and he says, come to the front of the cave and wait for the Lord, and a fire comes and God isn't in the fire, an earthquake comes and God isn't in the earthquake, and a strong wind comes and God isn't in the strong wind, and a still small wind, still, small voice, quiet wind, a quiet voice comes, and God's in that.

See, the purpose of this teaching isn't so much to say that God only comes in the still, small voice. That's not true. If you would rewind all the way to Exodus, you can see very clearly that God can manifest Himself in fire and tribulation, as He did with the Egyptians in splitting the Red Sea. I mean, God certainly has the capacity to be able to come and to manifest His glory and His strength in those events.

But the discerning heart, Elijah's discerning heart that's anchored in relationship was able to understand and to discern the difference and to know God's voice and to recognize in that particular moment, God was not present in that fire, God was not present in that earthquake, God was not present in that strong wind. God was present in the quiet moment, in the quiet moment. And so, for each of us to be a people of hope, we have to cultivate a relationship with God because God is guiding us. God is leading us in our hope. God is implanting those desires within our heart. God is asking us to pursue Him by pursuing those desires. God is asking us to equip ourselves to know what the things are that we're supposed to do to be able to actualize the desires that He's placed within our heart, and God is also calling us to be patient and to wait on Him for Him to give the green light when He gives it. And when He gives it, then brothers and sisters, let us have the courage to step forward in hope to do what God is asking us to do.

## **A Personal Story**

So I want to give a couple examples here of what this looks like in my life, because I know that this is kind of a little bit more heady right now. So, one clear example for me, and there are many, certainly many moments of hope that I can speak to, but the one that I want to talk about for the purposes of our lecture right now is when I completed my doctorate. I have a doctorate in counseling, education, and supervision. So, I got my master's degree in counseling, marriage and family counseling back in 2006. And when I started my graduate program, I had started it with my wife, who was a stay-at-home wife 'cause we had just had a baby that was five weeks old when I started a master's program.

So, for the three years that I was doing my master's program, we were living off a student loan as well as my graduate assistantship, which were some pretty lean times, to say the least, but we got through it. As I was getting close to completing my master's degree, my professors had recognized some capacity within me to be able to pursue the doctorate. That was off my radar. I did not think that I was one of these doctorate type people. Truly, I didn't recognize it, and I could tell you right now that I have a number of teachers in high school who if they knew that I had a PhD, they would probably laugh right now thinking about the fact that I would have that because I was not a stellar student in high school, and neither was I an undergraduate. It wasn't until my graduate program, that things started clicking for me.

So, I entertained that idea and I thought, well, let's think about this, and I said, well, I really can't do the PhD right after the graduate program, so I need to get my license, I need to start working, and I need to be able to start providing for my family. The idea of spending another three or four years living off of student loans was not enticing to me, so I know I needed to get to work. So, I got to work. I graduated in 2006, working, get my license in 2009. That was in North Carolina. We moved back to Florida. And then in 2012, we moved to New Orleans where opportunities, again, God's guiding us, opportunities present themselves, and so we followed the Lord as He's guiding us.

And it was in New Orleans then that around 2014, the idea for the doctorate started coming back. So again, in those eight years, I should say the idea was always present. So, I always had the desire for it. The goal was there, the desire was always there, and I interviewed a lot of people, friends of mine, who I know that had gone back and gotten their PhD, so even the way power element of it, I had that as well. But the last piece, that wait power, that recognition that I just need to wait and to see when the right timing is, that's the piece that took some time to kind of figure out. So, in 2014, the green light was there. Everything clicked. It's like, all right, let's go, let's make this happen, and so I did and completed the doctorate in three years, which was great.

What's come from finishing the doctorate though, is it's given me a lot of confidence to be able to pursue other ventures, other ideas, podcasts, speaking engagements and video sessions just like this that I wouldn't have been able to do had I not gone through and been faithful with the challenge of pursuing the PhD. And so, I'm grateful to the Lord that despite the circumstances, despite the challenges that were present during that time, it was hope that was guiding me through it and it was hope that was making it clear when I should pursue the PhD and to be able to do it and to see all the good things that had come on the other side of it.

### **Four Beliefs that Underlie Hope**

So, to wrap this lecture up, this is how I want to wrap up. Again, going back to, to Dr. Shane Lopez and his work, he says that there are four beliefs that underlie hope. The first is this, the future will be better than the present. Do you believe that? Do you believe that the future will be better than the present? That your future, not just the future, again, we don't have control over the economy, we don't have the control over geopolitical forces. All we have control over is our own life and our own circumstances and our own families and our own homes. But even within those circumstances, do you believe that the future will be better than the present? Do you believe that you have some power to make that so, or are you just abdicating all authority and all power and not claiming and recognizing that you actually have some say in being able to make the future a little bit better than the present? Excuse me.

The third piece here is recognizing that there are many paths to the goals. So, there are many paths towards making the future better. There are many different ways, many different senses of agency, many different things that you can learn that you can lean on, many different ways that you can kind of get there.

And then the fourth piece, and this is crucial, is that none of those, none of those paths to make the future better than the present are free from obstacles. The obstacles, challenges, unforeseen

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circumstances are all going to be part of this journey. And so if we acknowledge that, if we recognize the obstacles are going to be part of the way, still, do we see and recognize that we can still overcome those obstacles, that there are new pathways, new agencies that will, new methods that will present themselves as we continue to be faithful to the desires that the Lord is placing within our heart, to be able to continue to make the future better than the present.

So, brothers and sisters, thank you so much for listening to this lecture. Thank you so much for engaging with me as we're talking about hope. In my next lecture, in the third session here, I'm going to be speaking about hope from a theological perspective and to understand these concepts that we just articulated about desire, about willpower, about way power, about waiting, about recognizing that our future, there are obstacles that are going to be in the way and that's okay. That's part of the plan. We're going to come to understand how that looks like in a theological, in a virtue context, and recognizing that the Lord is always guiding us, that the Lord is always leading us. And that even in the midst of the challenges, even as we're pursuing certain ventures that He places within our heart, that even in those obstacles, even in those challenges, that the Lord is maturing us and guiding us and developing us into better people. So that's what we're going to be talking about in the next lecture.

So, God bless you, everybody. I pray that this retreat may continue to be a blessing for you, and I pray and hope that you're having a great day.