

# Days of Hope

*Passionately communicating the love of God to hurting kids in a gentle way*

## Resurrecting Hope

By Jon Wells

"Sorry, Bill, I just don't think you're quite ready to come home yet." (names changed to protect identity) With a string of explicatives, Bill slammed down the phone in the office and stomped out into the great room. After years of living in adolescent facilities, he was so close to completing his treatment and going home. With a single sentence, his adoptive parents had extinguished any hope of that happening anytime soon. Over the course of the next few days, Bill got in several fights in the school and on his unit. He punched a hole in the wall and was written up several times for defiant behavior. As he sat in his treatment team meeting at the end of the week, it was obvious that Bill was going to be staying in residential for many months to come. At the meeting his parents shrugged and lamented, 'Bill is just out of control.'

Unfortunately, Bill's story is a common one among residential youth. The system is littered with landmines that have the potential to set off a child

and give the adults in the conference room a reason to shake their heads and delay disenrollment. The reasons vary, but the results are often the same.

*Your aunt and uncle did not pass their home study, they need to buy a fire extinguisher, but we will inspect their house next month and see if they are ready. Just hang in there.*

*Your caseworker quit and we are reassigning your case, we will reschedule your meeting when we can.*

*We don't have a transporter to take you to family court, but we will try to go next time.*

*We have to wait for an open bed at your next placement, we don't know how long that will take.*

*I know you are done with your program, but we are not ready for you to come home yet.*

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.

-Solomon, Proverbs 13

These youth find themselves trapped in a revolving cycle of disappointment, negative behavior, lengthened treatment

timeframes, and more disappointment. I have seen this cycle so often that it colors my response when kids tell me that they are going home soon. Just last week a young man told me about his plans.

We must accept finite disappointment,  
but never lose infinite hope.  
-Martin Luther King, Jr.

Resurrecting Hope  
continued . . .

"Pastor Jon, I am going back home next week!" His excitement was palpable.

"That's awesome *Chris*! Who are you going to live with?" (*names changed to protect identity*)

"My mom. She said I could come home at our last family therapy, and my therapist said I was ready!"

"What if they delay it for a week? What if all of the transporters are unavailable? What if they tell you to wait until the end of the month?" I asked.

His smile reversed itself.

"What about these guys on the unit? Are they still hassling you?"

I spoke with Chris for the next half an hour about how kids experience a set-back and end up in residential for weeks and months longer than they would have.

"What are you willing to suffer? Are you willing to refuse to respond when things go south? Can you make good choices even when you have a good reason to be frustrated?"

As I left the unit that day, I encouraged Chris with this last thought. "Don't give them a reason to complain. Push through these last few days and you will go home."

Many believe - and I believe - that I have been designated for this work by God. In spite of my old age, I do not want to give it up; I work out of love for God and I put all my hope in Him.  
-Michelangelo

Yesterday when I visited his unit, Chris was not there. He toughed it out, ignoring the instigations from peers and the small delays that always seem to pop up

in the system. But for every kid like Chris who moves on, there seem to be dozens who slip up, giving everyone a reason to extend the child's stay in care.

Every story is different. Bill's adoptive parents were pushing his buttons because they were afraid of his homecoming. I have seen other kids who were scared to go home, and they sabotaged their own disenrollment to avoid it.

Some kids get set up for a big let down from the start. I have actually seen teens who are dropped off at a facility with the promise that 'it is just for a few days.' Their family or caseworker doesn't want to have to deliver the bad news. They go home and leave it up to the cottage staff to explain what is really going on.

"You're going to be here for a lot longer than a weekend."

These kinds of experiences affect children deeply. The product of repeated disappointment is often a total loss of hope. Kids who have been in the system for years have shed any sense of gullibility. They

are slow to believe good news, and quick to doubt any promises that come their way. Many have completely lost their expectation for a good outcome.

It is a sobering experience to talk to a child who has given up on any good thing in the future. The loss of hope makes real time decisions meaningless. *Should I work my program or should I start a fire in the trash can?* When the outcomes are hopeless, my choices don't matter anymore. *What are they going to do, lock me up?*

These hopeless ones are living in a self-fulfilling nightmare. Convinced that the future is bad, they behave in ways that produce ugly consequences. Saddled with the pain of the outcomes they produced, they say to themselves, *I told you so, nothing will ever get better.*

Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;  
but those who hope in the LORD  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.  
-Isaiah 40:31-2

Of course it follows that when Jesus intersects their story He asks them to do the one thing that will pull them out of this descending spiral. He asks them simply to believe.

*I am for you, not against you.*

*I have good plans for you.*

*I bring healing, freedom,  
restoration, and peace.*

The invitation of the gospel is to courageously place hope in the unseen God, to believe in the One who gave himself for us. For a kid who has lived hopelessly in the system for so long it may seem impossible. But I have seen the tiniest spark of faith ignite into a changed reality for so many of these youth. Others who choose to cling to their self-fulfilling nightmares continue to head down a painful road.

So I must ask you; what do you hope in? What do you dare to believe in? Are there situations where you have been so beaten down that you have surrendered any expectations for a good outcome? Do something crazy; invite Jesus into the mess and choose to believe.

Hope is the thing with feathers  
and wings that perches in the  
soul— and sings the tune without  
words— and never stops at all.

*-Emily Dickenson*

# Questions Kids Ask

By Aaron Jeffers

## If I keep knowingly sinning, will God still love me?

Last Sunday I asked the kids at chapel, "What causes you to have anxiety or worry?"

"Going home."

Another said, "Coming here to residential."

Then another, "Getting bullied."

This next answer silenced the room, "Is there ever a point when a person keeps knowingly sinning that God will stop loving you?"

An answer veiled in a question. Their anxiety/worry was, "I mess up so much, that I think God has given up on me." We were talking about casting all of our cares, worries, and anxieties on God. What do you say when their anxiety is God?

There are many times when we're doing a group activity and a child is not able to sit with the group.

The staff explain, "They're not allowed to participate in a group activity right now. They have been acting out recently." Then that kid shamefully buries his or her head between folded arms on a cold hard table. That's how a lot of these kids feel about God. "Yup...guilty, I'm not allowed to join this group called 'Christians' because I'm such a mess-up."

"Passionately communicating the love of God to hurting kids in a gentle way." That is the vision statement and our mission at Days of Hope. In response to the question, I started with the fact that God's ability to love far exceeds my ability to sin. He knows the package deal of our life and even knows our sin before we commit it (Just ask the Apostle Peter about a rooster crowing). My sin is not better or worse than your sin, and God sent his son to become all of our sin so that we could not only be free from sin, but be permanently adopted as a child of God.

I think the question of 'God giving up on me' is especially difficult for those who have been adopted, and then thrown back into state custody. Praise God that God our Father doesn't do that spiritually with us! It is true that people knowingly and habitually sin, even when deep down they want to repent. This is often a reflection of a deeper wound that needs healing. Stasi Eldredge says, "You can't repent your way out of brokenness." It is easy to tell a deeply wounded person who is struggling with a habitual sin to repent. But it is like telling a person to arm-wrestle with a broken arm. *Try again, get it right this time.*

These kids have so much brokenness to work through with God; the last thing they need to worry about is a God who would abort them over habitual sin. I know many adults, including myself, who have wrestled over this question and get log-jammed over certain passages in the Bible that might cause a person to question their salvation. The best answer I believe is to go back to the basics:

1. God is love and wishes all to come to repentance and none to perish.
2. Jesus became all of our sin; past, present, and future (if you think about it, all our sin was in the future of the cross of Christ).
3. Salvation is by grace through faith.

It's sad how hard it can be for these youth to believe these simple truths. Please pray for these kid's precious hearts.

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