

Hope and the Narrow Gate: Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land

Fr. Matthew Hawkins, August 24, 2025

"Lord, will only a few be saved?" The question rings out across the centuries, as urgent today as when it was first posed to Jesus on that dusty road to Jerusalem. In Luke's Gospel, we find Jesus journeying toward the holy city, teaching in towns and villages, when someone calls out with this haunting inquiry about salvation's scope.

Jesus' response cuts to the heart: "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able." The narrow gate—not a theological puzzle to be solved, but a lived reality to be embraced.

But what does it mean to walk through this narrow gate? And how do we do so as people who, like the ancient Israelites, find ourselves as spiritual exiles in a strange land?

The Song We Cannot Sing

Think of Psalm 137. It's not today's psalm, but it fits today's Gospel so well and yesterday's retreat where we talked about the Christian understanding of "Hope." In Psalm 137, the psalmist captures our condition with devastating clarity: "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. On the poplars there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

How indeed? The Israelites found themselves displaced, their temple destroyed, their identity scattered like dust in the Babylonian wind. Their captors wanted entertainment—"Sing us something cheerful from your homeland!"—but how could they? How can you sing songs of divine presence when God feels absent? How can you proclaim God's faithfulness when everything familiar has been stripped away?

We know this feeling. We are spiritual exiles in our own time, in our own strange land. The culture around us often feels foreign to the deepest truths we hold dear. The values that shape public discourse frequently run counter to the Gospel's call for justice, mercy, and peace. We hang our harps on the willows of our own Babylon, wondering how to sing the Lord's song in a world that seems increasingly hostile to that song.

The Nature of Exile

But here's what we must understand: this exile is not merely circumstantial—it's ontological. It's part of the human condition itself. From the moment Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, we have all been wanderers east of Paradise, carrying within us the memory of a home we've never fully possessed but somehow remember.

The narrow gate that Jesus speaks of is not about exclusion—it's about the difficulty of maintaining hope when hope seems impossible. It's about the challenge of singing the Lord's song precisely when we find ourselves in the strange land of a world that has not yet fully embraced God's reign.

The narrow gate is narrow not because God's love is limited, but because the path of faithful living in an unfaithful world requires something that goes against every survival instinct we possess: it requires defiant hope.

What Is Defiant Hope?

Defiant hope is not wishful thinking or naive optimism. It's not pretending that suffering doesn't exist or that injustice will simply resolve itself. Defiant hope is the audacious act of living as if God's promises are true even when all evidence suggests otherwise.

The Israelites by the rivers of Babylon embodied defiant hope when they chose to remember Zion even in captivity. They could have assimilated, forgotten their identity, sung Babylon's songs. Instead, they hung up their harps—not in defeat, but in protest. Their silence was itself a form of song, declaring that some things are too sacred to be performed on demand, that some truths cannot be commodified or reduced to entertainment.

Defiant hope says: "I will not let this strange land define me. I will not let exile become my permanent address. I will remember who I am and whose I am, even when—especially when—the world around me forgets."

The Narrow Gate as Spiritual Discipline

This brings us back to Jesus' teaching about the narrow gate. The gate is narrow because defiant hope requires discipline. It demands that we choose, again and again, to live according to the values of God's kingdom rather than the values of whatever Babylon we find ourselves in.

The narrow gate is the daily choice to forgive when forgiveness seems impossible. It's the decision to work for justice when justice seems perpetually delayed. It's the commitment to love our enemies when they seem irredeemably hostile. It's the practice of generosity in a culture of scarcity, of truth-telling in an age of deception, of peace-making in a time of violence.

Many will try to enter, Jesus says, but will not be able—not because they lack God's grace, but because they lack the spiritual stamina required for defiant hope. They

want salvation without transformation, resurrection without cross, the song of Zion without the discipline of exile.

Learning to Sing in Babylon

But here's the Gospel truth that transforms everything: we are not meant to remain silent forever by Babylon's rivers. The narrow gate leads not to a smaller version of the same world, but to a completely different way of being in any world.

Learning to sing the Lord's song in a strange land doesn't mean waiting until we get to a more hospitable place. It means discovering that God's presence is not dependent on our circumstances. The Israelites eventually learned this—their exile produced some of the most profound theological insights in all of Scripture. It was in Babylon that they deepened their understanding of God's universal sovereignty, that they grasped more fully the meaning of covenant faithfulness.

Similarly, our spiritual exile can become the very place where our faith matures, where our hope becomes truly defiant, where we learn to sing new songs that couldn't have been sung in more comfortable circumstances.

The Community of the Narrow Gate

The narrow gate is not a solitary passage—it's walked in community. The Israelites wept together by Babylon's rivers, and together they remembered Zion. Together they made the difficult choice to maintain their identity as God's people in an alien land.

We too need communities of defiant hope—gatherings of people committed to walking through the narrow gate together, supporting one another in the discipline of faithful living, encouraging each other when the song becomes hard to sing.

These communities become training grounds for resurrection living, places where we practice the values of God's kingdom even when the broader world operates by

different rules. They become laboratories of hope, workshops of transformation, rehearsal halls where we learn new verses to ancient songs.

The Ultimate Song

The narrow gate ultimately leads us to understand that exile itself can become a form of worship. Our very displacement becomes a testimony to the fact that we belong to a different kingdom, that our true citizenship lies elsewhere, that we are indeed strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

And in that recognition, we discover something remarkable: we can sing the Lord's song in a strange land precisely because we acknowledge the land as strange. Our song becomes not an accommodation to Babylon, but a witness against it. Not a celebration of the status quo, but a proclamation of the coming kingdom.

The defiant hope that carries us through the narrow gate is ultimately hope in God's faithfulness—not just God's faithfulness to fulfill promises someday, but God's faithfulness to be present with us right now, right here, even in Babylon, even by the rivers of our own exile.

Living the Song

So how then shall we live? How shall we walk through this narrow gate and sing the Lord's song in our strange land?

We live with the recognition that every act of love is a verse in that song. Every work of justice is a melodic line. Every choice to hope when hope seems impossible is a harmony that rises above the discordant noise of our Babylon.

We live knowing that the narrow gate is not a barrier to be overcome but a way of life to be embraced—the way of Jesus, who himself walked the path of defiant hope all the way to the cross and beyond.

We live as people who have remembered Zion not as a place on a map, but as a way of being in the world—a way that trusts in God’s ultimate victory even when present circumstances suggest defeat.

Conclusion

The question posed to Jesus was, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” But perhaps the better question is: “Lord, will we have the courage to live as though your salvation is real, even when the world tells us otherwise?”

The narrow gate awaits. Not as judgment, but as invitation. Not as exclusion, but as the way of life that leads to life. It is the path of defiant hope, the way of those who choose to sing the Lord’s song even in—especially in—a strange land.

For in the end, we discover that our exile is not permanent. The narrow gate leads home. And the song we learn to sing in Babylon becomes part of the great hymn of praise that will one day fill all creation, when every tear is wiped away, and God’s kingdom comes in its fullness.

Until that day, we walk through the narrow gate together, holding fast to our defiant hope, learning to sing new songs of ancient faith, trusting that the God who called us into exile can also call us home.

The Lord’s song can indeed be sung in a strange land. We have only to find the courage to lift our voices and begin.

Lift every voice and sing, Till earth and heaven ring, Ring with the harmonies of Liberty, Let our rejoicing rise High as the list’ning skies, Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Amen.

Retreat Notes



How do we move closer to experiencing hope as a living encounter with the Living Christ?

Romans 5:3–5 shows us that **Christian hope is cruciform**. It grows out of suffering, through endurance and tested character, into a confidence that rests not on outcomes but on God’s love poured into us. Hope is not a coping mechanism but participation in divine life.

Unlike worldly hope, which is usually the first thing we express in the face of suffering (“I hope it will get better soon”), Paul presents hope as the **final product**.

- **Suffering → endurance:** Hope begins in the crucible of suffering. Christian hope is forged where one might expect despair.
- **Endurance → character:** Patient perseverance through trials doesn’t just get us through, it reshapes us. Character here (*dokimē*) means tested, proven virtue.

- **Character** → **hope**: Only when we have been reshaped can we hope rightly. This is not naïve wishing but a tested confidence in God.

Paradox: Suffering, which normally extinguishes hope, becomes—through grace—the womb of hope.

Romans 5:3–5 speaks of hope as Transformation through Suffering. Paul is not endorsing silver-lining spirituality.

- **Optimism** says suffering will probably ease up.
- **Hope** says even if suffering persists, God’s love is already present, and the Spirit is already at work shaping us into new creatures.

Questions for Reflection

Optimism risks disappointment because it depends on outcomes. Hope does not disappoint because it depends on God.

- What kinds of suffering have led me not to despair, but to deeper endurance and character?
- Do I see hope as something I generate or as something poured into me by the Spirit?
- How do I distinguish between hope and mere optimism in my daily outlook?
- How can the Church embody hope that does not disappoint in a world deeply acquainted with disappointment?
- Why does Paul place hope after suffering, endurance, and proven character?
- How can suffering really be the “womb of hope”?

Lyrical Reflection

There is a difference
between **optimism** and **hope**.

Optimism says,
"Things will probably get better."
Hope says,
"Even if they don't, God is with us."

Optimism rests on appearances.
Hope rests on a promise.

Optimism is a mood.
Hope is a **virtue**.
A choice.
A flame that does not die
even in the dark.

Hope is not wishful thinking but a reality grounded in Christ, poured into us by the Spirit, wrestled with in lament, and extended to the whole of creation.

Optimism Looks for the Silver Lining. Hope Looks for the Cross.

Optimism is a bright forecast:
"Things will work out.
The market will bounce back.
People will come around.
We'll find common ground."

But hope has walked through Gethsemane.
Hope has sweat blood.
Hope has looked into the abyss
and whispered, "Nevertheless, Thy will be done."

Hope does not flinch at the nails or flee the tomb.

Because hope knows the tomb is not the end.

Optimism is shaken by suffering.

Hope is forged by it.

In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul reminds the Gentiles that they were once “without hope and without God in the world.” But now, through Christ, the “dividing wall of hostility” has been torn down. Hope here is not just personal—it is communal. To hope is to discover a new identity: no longer strangers, but fellow citizens and members of God’s household. Hope means reconciliation, belonging, and a future as part of God’s temple, built on Christ the cornerstone.

Ephesians 2:11-22 shows that **hope is not sentimental comfort but radical transformation**. It is the hope of reconciliation where there was estrangement, belonging where there was exclusion, and construction where there was ruin. Christian hope is Christ himself—our peace, our cornerstone, our new humanity.

Questions for Reflection

- How does remembering our own estrangement (v. 12) deepen our appreciation of hope in Christ?
- What “dividing walls” in our present world does Christian hope demand we confront, trusting that Christ is our peace?
- If the Church is “a dwelling place for God,” how do our divisions undermine or obscure this hope-filled identity?

Lyrical Reflection

St. Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus—
a fractured, pluralistic city—
and tells them not simply what Christ has done,
but who Christ **is**:

*“He is our peace,
who has made both one
and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.”* (Eph 2:14)

Not “he might be.”
Not “one day, he will be.”
But now.
He is.

This is not optimism.
This is hope.

Hope does not require evidence.
It requires faith.

Hope does not depend on the odds.
It depends on the One
who has already torn down the walls
that divide us from God
and from each other.

Optimism says: “Things will probably get better.”
Hope says: “Christ has already broken down the walls, and though conflict persists,
reconciliation is assured in Him.”

Optimism relies on circumstances; hope relies on Christ.

Optimism looks to probability; hope looks to promise.

In *Romans 8*, we read that hope includes creation's groaning and the Spirit's intercession. Can we accept that Christian hope asks us to live in tension—between visible futility and unseen glory—without rushing to resolve it? Paul expands hope beyond the individual to all creation, which “groans in labor pains” awaiting redemption. Believers, too, groan for the redemption of their bodies, while the Spirit groans in intercession. Hope here is eschatological and cosmic: it looks to unseen glory that outweighs present suffering. It is patient, enduring, and sustained by the Spirit who prays within us.

Romans 8:18–27 presents **hope as cosmic, cruciform, and Spirit-filled**. It is not denial of suffering but endurance through it, trusting that suffering is labor toward new creation. Hope is unseen, groaning, patient—but unshakable because the Spirit intercedes and God promises glory.

Hope here is not private consolation but **creation-wide longing**. Paul personifies creation:

- Creation “waits with eager longing” (v. 19).
- Creation “was subjected to futility” (v. 20).
- Creation “will be set free from its bondage to decay” (v. 21).

Paul describes three groanings:

1. **Creation groans** (v. 22), in labor pains.
2. **We groan inwardly** (v. 23), awaiting redemption.
3. **The Spirit groans** (v. 26), interceding with sighs too deep for words.

Hope is therefore born out of groaning. The metaphor is childbirth, not death—groaning signals not the end but the beginning. Hope is labor pain. This marks the difference between hope and optimism:

- **Optimism:** anticipation based on probabilities, visible trends, manageable outcomes.
- **Hope:** trust in what cannot yet be seen, because it depends on God's promise rather than human calculation.

Here Paul highlights patience (*hypomonē*): hope is stretched-out waiting.

Hope is not stoic endurance. The Spirit actively sustains it:

- The Spirit intercedes with unutterable sighs (v. 26).
- The Spirit aligns our groaning with God's will (v. 27).

Thus, hope is not merely human resilience but divine participation. God himself groans within us and for us.

Theological Dimensions of Hope

- **Christological:** Hope is patterned on Christ's paschal mystery—present suffering, future glory.
- **Anthropological:** Hope affirms that human beings are not yet what they will be ("adoption, the redemption of our bodies," v. 23).
- **Ecological:** Hope encompasses the created order, which awaits liberation.
- **Pneumatological:** Hope is sustained by the Spirit's hidden intercession.

Questions for Reflection

- In what ways do we hear creation's groaning today (ecological crises, wars, cultural decay)? How does hope reshape our response?
- How does the Spirit's intercession deepen our confidence that hope will not collapse under the weight of suffering?
- What does it mean to see hope as "labor pains" rather than "wishful thinking"?

Lyrical Reflection

Optimism believes we can fix things.

Hope believes God can redeem them.

Optimism builds its house on projections.

Hope builds its house on the Rock.

Optimism says, "*We can do this.*"

Hope says, "*God is already doing something.*"

Even when I can't see it.

Even when I can't understand it.

Even when I don't feel it.

Hope is trusting

that grace is at work in the silence,

in the detours,

in the delays,

in the waiting.

In *Psalms* 42, Hope wrestles with despair, thirsting for God. Romans 8 and Psalm 42 embody living with paradox—groaning creation, thirst, exile, yet defiant hope. This embraces mystery instead of resolving it too quickly.

Do I see hope as a tranquil state, or as a wrestling match in which faith argues with despair?

Hope as Struggle

Notice the paradox: the psalmist both *questions God's absence* and *commands himself to hope*. Hope is not serene confidence but a dialogue between despair and faith.

- On one side: tears as food (v. 3), tumultuous waves overwhelming him (v. 7).
- On the other side: memory of worship (v. 4), prayer to the “God of my life” (v. 8), and the refrain of hope.

Hope lives in this oscillation, not in the elimination of doubt.

Hope as Thirst

The deer imagery frames hope as thirst. Hope is not casual optimism but desperate longing, the cry of a creature who will die without water. To thirst for God is to recognize that nothing else will satisfy.

Hope in Exile and Dislocation

The psalmist mentions “the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar” (v. 6)—far from Jerusalem, far from the temple. Hope here is exile-hope: trust that God remains faithful even when the center of worship and community is inaccessible.

Hope as Defiance

The refrain is not mere consolation—it is resistance. “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” implies: despair is real, but it does not have the last word. Hope is defiant trust in God’s future faithfulness, even when the present is silent.

Questions for Reflection

- When do I, like the psalmist, need to preach hope to my own soul?
- What does my soul “thirst for” that only God can provide?
- How do I hear and respond to the taunts of “Where is your God?” in my own life?

Psalm 42 reveals **hope as lament in motion**—a refusal to give despair the final say. Hope here is not the absence of sorrow but the stubborn resolve to trust that “I shall again praise him, my help and my God.” It is thirst, exile, and groaning, but also memory, prayer, and defiant expectation.

Lyrical Reflection

When the world says, “*Be optimistic,*”
we say something deeper:

*“I will hope in the Lord,
who is my help and my shield.”* (Psalm 33:20)

When the world says, “*Don’t worry, it’ll get better,*”
we say:

*“Even if the fig tree does not blossom...
yet I will rejoice in the Lord.”* (Habakkuk 3:17–18)

Because **hope doesn't come from predictions.**

Hope comes from presence.

From the God who is not far off,

but who has broken the wall

and come near.

He is our peace.

He is our hope.

He is here.

And because He lives,

so does hope.