

DAVID BRANKER

1 Corinthians 13:13

OneHope is one of our valued, treasured ministry partners. Their goal is: “God’s Word. Every Child.” They are taking God’s word to the next generation all over the world. Last year they reached 102 million children with the word of God. Isn’t that remarkable? That’s amazing, isn’t it? We have a number of Riverside folks that are part of the OneHope team and staff. We love them. They are a blessing to us.

Today, David Branker is here. He is the Chief of Staff for the Office of the President of OneHope. He is a dear friend to us here at Riverside. He is passionate about God’s word. He is passionate about God’s word for every child. He also has a heart to strengthen the local church. He served as an executive pastor at Celebration Church in Jacksonville. Before his rich experience in church life he had a business career, 70-80 years ago, right David?

I have to tell you, it’s very special that David is with us today, because OneHope has their big annual celebration tomorrow and Tuesday. It’s the biggest event of the year for them. Actually, to get David here I had to take him to his favorite coffee shop and woo him to be here on this Sunday. That’s because I believe that he has a message to share with us.

In transparency, I thought about rescheduling because of the events that happened, but as I prayed about it, I felt like, no, there’s a message that God is going to speak to us through David. We prayed and shared on the phone and David rewrote his entire message just to bring the Father’s heart to us on this day as we process and heal from what has transpired. We are delighted that David is with us. We are grateful that Connie, his lovely wife is with us and Joshua, his son. They have another son, Jonathan, who is in D.C. on a school trip. Riverside, would you welcome David as he comes to share God’s word with us? David, thank you.

Thank you. It’s a long walk from that way. Pastor Brian gave me an option. He said, “You can sit with me or you can sit with your wife.” I said, “She’s way better looking -- I’m going to sit with her.” What a privilege it is to be here. Thank you so much. Church, you have been blessed, as you know, with an amazing pastor. Pastor Brian, thank you, not only for what you do here at this amazing church, but in our city. Many of you don’t know that in our city there are lots of other pastors. Pastor Brian is one of the pastors to the pastors. Not only does he shepherd you, he helps other

pastors as they fulfill their calling and purpose. So would you join me in honoring him and thanking him for all he has done? Of course, you know he can't do that alone. God has given him an amazing partner and friend. Nice to meet you today, again.

I also want to say thank you to you, as a church, because your partnership is so important to us. It has been an incredible blessing, not only to OneHope, but to children that we reach around the world. If I could just make one correction in your introductory remarks: OneHope doesn't reach children with God's word. OneHope serves churches that reach children with God's word. We reached 102 million kids last year. And all the 112 million that we are trusting God for this year are going to be reached through churches just like you, that step forward and resource the work to get God's word in many different ways into the hands of children, so that they might hear the good news of the gospel. So thank you for your partnership. Last year you helped us translate the Bible App for Kids for an entire country – Romania. Every child and infant in Romania that is now interacting and hearing and engaging with God's word on their Bible App is doing it because Riverside Church says, "We want to be a part of that." So thank you for doing that.

I want to transition quickly in the next few minutes and talk to you about not just what happened this week, but what I believe God wants us to know about the way he has prepared us for moments just like this. This was a Valentine's Day we are never going to forget. As a community we still grieve and we still hurt over the unthinkable violence and tragedy that took place in our schools, particularly in Parkland. But I want you to know that every other school was impacted in one way or another, because what happened in one place cast a river of fear that cascaded through all of the schools in our community.

We are heartbroken. We are in shock. We are still trying to figure it out. We are still trying to process the pain and how we respond to it. And most importantly, we are mourning with those who are mourning today. These events and countless others can leave us with some serious questions. I had a couple as I was thinking about today. The first one was this: **Are there really any more guarantees in this life?** Is there anything that we can count on? Is there anything where we could say: "This is going to last; nothing is going to shake this?" It causes you to ask some questions.

I want you to know that the Bible says there are three things that *will* last. There are three things that you can absolutely count on. There are three things that will endure. **1 Corinthians chapter 13,**

verse 13 says there are three things that will endure. They are faith, hope, and love. It says the greatest of these is love.

Each time I read that verse, like most people, I tend to read the first part of the verse as sort of an intro to the real message of the verse. Right? There are three things that will endure: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love. That's where my mind goes. Then one day the Holy Spirit just said, "Hey, would you put that on pause a little bit?" Yes, the entire verse was written for a purpose, not just the last part, David. Go back to the beginning. There are three things that will endure. Don't miss that.

Today I just want to pray that the Holy Spirit would shine a bright light on this part of the verse and help us to understand what God is trying to say to us. Father, I thank you for your word. I thank you, God, for your amazing goodness toward us, even in the midst of trials and pain. Holy Spirit, you are the greatest teacher of them all. I yield to you right now and ask you to teach your people exactly what you want them to hear. Would you give us, God, listening ears as we lean into you today? In Jesus' name, Amen.

I want us to know with all assurance that there are three things that will endure; but more than that, I want us to understand why it matters to us. It matters because God said that in the midst of a world that will currently bring you surprises, in the midst of our brokenness, I want you to know there are some guarantees. I want you to know that there are some things that are unshakable. Today I want us to focus on three of them. 1 Corinthians says they are faith, hope, and love. Today we will discover a faith that overcomes, a hope that endures, and a love that just never quits.

I. A faith that overcomes.

This kind of faith is not a faith in ourselves. It is not a faith in the goodness of humanity. It's not a faith in our bank accounts. It's not a faith in our neighborhoods or communities. As we think about Parkland, this tragedy happened in what is considered one of the safest schools and safest communities in Florida, not to mention one of the best schools in Florida. **It is faith in an unchanging God.**

Hebrews 11:6 says, “So you see, it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that there is a God and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.” You see, faith matters to God. He said it’s impossible to please him without faith. But faith also matters to us. It’s not some loose assumption about which we are not sure. **Faith is a conviction. It’s an assurance; a conviction that God is, and a conviction that what God said he will absolutely do. This kind of God-faith comes through his word.**

And by the way, it’s not just a conviction in times of desperation. God calls us to a *life* of faith. I will say it this way – a rich life of faith. So here’s my question: **What kind of faith is God calling us to?** Well, in Luke chapter 18, verses 16 and 17, the Bible says, “Then Jesus called for the children and said to the disciples, ‘Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you, anyone who doesn’t have their kind of faith will never get into the kingdom of God.’” Speaking of their faith, the scripture uses a very interesting word for children. The English Standard Version actually uses the right translation; it’s called “infants.” There were infants.

What do we know about infants? They are totally dependent on their parents. Infants can’t take care of themselves. They depend on those who are their caretakers, who are their parents, who are the guardians in their life. I want you to know Jesus is saying, “I am that for you. I want you to be totally dependent upon me and know that you can trust me. Know that you can lean into me. Know that you can know that you know that in difficult times I will be there.”

You probably detected a bit of an accent in my speech. I am from Trinidad; not a big country – about 1.5 million people. My wife is from New York. She is Nuyorican. And my son is from right here. My other son is not with us today. When he was young we used to call him a little stitch. Since he’s not here, he’s not going to hear the message. But he had this way, that when he saw me, he would come running at full speed and just jump at me. It was my job to quickly get myself in position, because if you’re not in the right position, you can get some surprises. Get yourself in position and catch him. Somehow, we never told him, “Hey, no really, you can come jump.” He kind of figured that out because I was Dad, because I was his father. He would run at full speed and just let his little body go and he knew Dad would catch him.

I want you to know that God the Father is just like that. In the midst of the most difficult times, when you don’t know where else to run, he is saying, “Hey, this is the kind of faith that I’m calling you to –

one that says you can depend on me. I will be there for you.” It’s not a faith just for those times. It’s a faith for the way you live. You and I, I believe, understand this scripture. It says that Jesus promised, “I will be with you always,” right? Is that new to anybody here? You’ve heard that before? “I will be with you always.” Yet, somehow we allow ourselves to believe that when we live our day he is not present.

I have recognized every morning when I get up, I’m no longer saying, “God, what am I going to do? Could you help me with my stuff? Could you help me with my day?” No, I’ve changed my prayer, because I know he is with me. I say, “Jesus, what are we going to do together today?” It’s a life of faith. He is with you. That’s why even in the dark times, even in your brightest moments he is with you. “Jesus, how are we going to respond to this? Jesus, what are you saying to me?”

I want you to know that faith is not supposed to be this abstract thing out here. It’s supposed to be what fuels you as a son and daughter of God. **God invites us to a faith that always overcomes.** It *a/ways* overcomes. Faith in God can outlast any trial, any tragedy, and any adversity. You know why? Because the Bible describes God as faithful. He is faithful. In other words, you can count on him.

Not only does he call us, and he tells us, “Hey, this is going to endure,” – faith, you can depend on it. He also invites us to a hope that endures.

II. A hope that endures.

Hope is not wishful thinking. “Man, I hope we have great weather for the picnic this afternoon.” I realize I’m standing between you and good international food, so I’m going to be on time. Or, “I hope the Dolphins really win next season.” Wishful thinking -- that’s not hope.

The reason why I told you my wife was Nuyorican is because there are some Spanish words that she has taught me. Most of them are not good ones. But this one was a really good one. She says the word for hope in Spanish is “esperanza,” right? It’s actually closer to the real meaning of hope. It means “expectation.” **Hope, biblical hope, is having a good expectation of God.** [Unger’s Bible Dictionary](#) says it’s the expectation of good. That’s biblical hope. So maybe a better way of asking the question is: **Is your expectation of God alive? What are you expecting of him?**

Let me give you three quick reasons for your hope to be alive today.

1. First of all, because **God's mercy is boundless.** Regardless of how and what you do, he says, "My mercies are new for you every morning. He prepares a fresh batch of mercy that awaits you when the sun comes up."
2. Secondly, because **Jesus has risen from the dead.** He has ascended into heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he is ever living to make intercession for you and for me. **Jesus is interceding on your behalf.** He is actively interceding over the things that are going to confront you today and tomorrow and the next day. Is your hope alive? Do you have good expectation of God's posture towards you? He is an intercessor. That's what Jesus is, and that's what he's doing.
3. And because, finally, **God's thoughts towards you are infinitely benevolent.** Jeremiah 29:11, from the New Revised Standard version of the Bible says: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

Remember the story in Mark 4? Jesus is in a boat and decides to go over to the other side. Then storms come up and the disciples begin to panic. Everything is going haywire in their life. They are like, "We're going to die!" And he's sleeping on a pillow in the back. They decide to wake him up, shouting, "Teacher!" Listen to the question. Listen to the charge that we bring to God. "Don't you care that we are going to drown?" Somehow in the midst of a calamity we ask questions and we assume and presume things about God – that he must not care because this happened. Ever been there? "Lord, where are you? Don't you see what I'm going through? Don't you care? If you are really there, won't you do something?"

You see, friends, the truth of the matter is that in this life we are going to have storms. No one escapes them. We are living in a broken, broken world. There is no sea in this ocean that is a stormless sea. Every sailor has to learn. If you're going to be in the water, you have to learn how to navigate the unexpected. Chaos will hit our lives and it will happen quickly. You will start off one moment and everything is good with the world, then all of a sudden, everything just seems to fall apart. But I want you to know: He is still there. **The Savior does not deliver us *from* every storm, but he promises to deliver us *through* every storm. He is there. He may seem detached, but he's not. He may seem disconnected and uncaring, but I want you to know he is not. He is right there.**

He is with you in the midst of the physical, emotional, relational, or even spiritual wind that may blow against you. He is there. He does care.

This week we are grateful to friends like Crystal Woodman Miller. She is a Columbine survivor. We've just experienced what's been called our Columbine moment. She was under the table when gunmen walked into that classroom, trying to kill as many kids as possible. When she heard of what happened in our city, she dropped everything she was doing and said, "I want to make myself available to you, to the churches, to the schools, to kids, to parents. I can tell them my story." She is going to be with our city through Thursday, but I wanted you to hear a bit of her testimony.

Rolling video: You know, my experience has taught me that when you stare tragedy in the face, it's always possible to see a reflection of hope staring right back at you. It isn't until we fully plummet the depths of despair that we recognize hope and our great need for it. When death seems to have just an immovable grip around our hearts, the fresh newness of life begins to emerge, enabling us to grow stronger and become more vibrant than ever before. Ten years ago, seven and a half minutes would forever alter my life, and that of my classmates and community. It would become a defining moment in history as 13 innocent lives would be lost and 25 others would be severely wounded. As a 16-year-old teenager, my world was absolutely consumed with friends, fashion, boys, grades, and sports. But on April 20, 1999, as I would step into the library at Columbine High School, I would experience my ultimate wake-up call. I would discover what truly matters in this life.

You know those two boys had come into our school with the intent to kill as many people as possible. Even though I didn't recognize it at the time, I desperately clung to hope because hope clung to me, refusing to let me give up or give in. Over time I would begin to discover that I was no longer marked by my tragedy, but I was marked with hope. I was marked with this innate purpose for the rest of my life. I began traveling around the world, speaking to different people in various circumstances. I have come into contact with thousands of young people, challenging them to make an impact on the world -- through personal choice and through their actions towards their fellow peers. I have sought to bring a message of hope to the hopeless in war-torn Kosovo, tsunami-devastated Indonesia, terror-filled Russia. I have lived among the impoverished in Central America and among the broken and the sick in Africa. Each and every person that I have met along the way has given me courage and inspiration to carry on. I have lived a lifetime in these last 10 years. This chapter of my life – it

began while I was hiding underneath a table, when destruction was all around me. Today, that same table is the platform so that I can go out and share a message of triumph. Beauty is always birthed from the ashes. Now, looking back, I realize that no matter how dark or lonely or even cold the winter may be, summer was always a part of me.

In the midst of the greatest tragedy, we can cling to hope, because as Crystal reminds us, hope clings to us.

I want to share with you a verse from the book of Job, chapter 14, verses 7 to 9 that struck me so poignantly. Talking about hope, the Bible says:

*For there is hope for a tree,
if it is cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that its tender shoots will not cease.
Though its root may grow old in the earth,
and its stump may die in the ground,
yet at the scent of water it will bud
and bring forth branches like a plant.*

I want you to know that all hope needs is not a bucket of water, just the scent of water. The Bible says that tree will bud again, and I'm believing God that our city will bud again. We will discover a better tomorrow as we support each other and as we place our hope in God. Church, I want to encourage you: **Let's keep our expectation alive.**

God has promised us not just a faith that overcomes and a hope that endures, but finally a love that just never quits.

III. A love that never quits.

While faith enables us to see God, to come to God, love enables us to imitate him. **Love is the very essence of God.** The Bible says it just like this. It says: **God is love.** There can never come a time when God's love will come to an end. His love cannot fail. There are over 32 times in the scripture where love is described as unfailing love. That's the nature of love. **It cannot fail.** This love, this agape love, this actively selfless, sacrificial, without regard for reciprocation love, is not just something that was demonstrated on the cross 2000 years ago. It is something that is timeless.

God's love is timeless. It is from infinity past to infinity future because it's the essence of who God is, from everlasting to everlasting.

But that also means that God's love is active today; for you and for me it is active right now. And it's going to be active tomorrow and the next day and the next week, throughout the rest of our lives and even into eternity. This is the God-kind of love I'm talking about. It's unfailing, and it's unchanging.

This week, unfortunately, we have been showered by imagery and videos of hate and violence and grief and brokenness on our television screens. Today I want to ask you to take a moment. I want to ask you to let the Spirit of God refresh you. Let's just seize this moment right now and allow God to refresh us in his presence. If you would, just shut everything out. I want to read a passage over you. As I was praying for you I said, "God, would you allow these words to be like fresh water, just running over your people, washing over them?" The Bible says in Romans Chapter 8, verse 31:

If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son, but gave him up for us, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse those whom God has chosen as his own? No one. For God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one, for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us. Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity or are persecuted or hungry or destitute or in danger or threatened with death? As the scriptures say,

*"For your sake we are being killed every day;
we are being slaughtered like sheep."*

No, despite all of these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love; neither death, nor life, neither angels, nor demons, neither affairs for today, nor our worries about tomorrow, not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below, indeed nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Receive that today. 1 Corinthians Chapter 13, verse 8 assures us this kind of love never fails. This morning I want to remind you about two things.

- First, **you are absolutely loved by God.** Psalm 33:22 says, “Lord, let your unfailing love surround us, for our hope is in you alone.” Romans chapter 5, verse 5, in the English Standard version says: “...and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts (watch this) through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” The Holy Spirit is the only one who can pour this love from the Father into your heart and into my heart. And he pours it out because God loves you with an unfailing love.
- But secondly, **he pours it in so you and I can pour it out.** The Holy Spirit pours God’s love into us for this very kairos moment we are experiencing, so we, as a community, as a church, as people together can lock arms and then say, “God, now I know and experience your love. Now God, help me to pour it out to those around me.”

There are many struggling. My wife works as a VPK teacher. She said Friday morning she was surprised that the kids were good, but the parents were crying as they were releasing their kids into her care. We have a city that’s hurting, that’s in pain. God has called us and he goes, “You, my Church, are my instrument. You are my agency. You are my conduit for this love to now get out.”

Today our friends, our schools, our kids, our community – they need an encounter with God more than ever, and with his love, and it will happen when they encounter you over the next few weeks. You say, “But David, I don’t feel equipped to do that.” Let me just encourage you. You don’t have to have all the right words. You don’t have to have the right answers. You don’t have to be able to answer all the questions. Just be there. Just extend your arm. Just give a hug. But in doing that say, “Father, now pour it out lavishly.”

People in crisis are most receptive to the love of God. We know that. We have seen that. We have evidence to demonstrate that. It’s actually, church, what God has entrusted to you and to me. But there’s one more thing. There’s always one more thing, right? First of all, God loves you. Second, he pours it in so he can pour it out. But there’s something else that’s important and I don’t want you to miss it as I wrap up.

We all have unique, identifiable features. For me, I am one of 13 kids and my father has a very distinctive nose. There is a little hook somewhere around the two-thirds position. When I was growing up, I could never get away with anything bad because everybody saw me coming and said,

“Aren’t you a Branker?” You know why? God, unfortunately, gave me the hook in the two-thirds position. Everybody who saw me knew exactly who I was with, who I belonged to. I was a Branker. I have identifiable features I could never shake. It actually protected me from a lot of bad stuff, because I knew they would know who I belong to.

Love is the one thing that demonstrates our God-given DNA. God is love. When you show love, when you pour it out, you know what happens? You look just like your Father in heaven and others will see the family resemblance. They will be like, “Ahh – there’s something different about you.” **This is why God has called us as his Church, in this moment, in this city. There are three things that will endure. Yes, you can count on it: A faith that overcomes, a hope that endures, and a love that absolutely never fails. Because of God’s faithfulness you and I can be full of faith. We can place our hope and trust in him. We can depend on his unfailing love.**

Father, I thank you for your word today. Thank you, God, because we can sense that you are with us. Not just with us, God, you are for us. You are a good God. You are a benevolent God. And God, I just ask you as you have poured into us now, God, release your Church to pour out your love to those around them. Father, I know that as we do that, and as we show our resemblance, Jesus said it this way: “They will know you by your love” -- that God, it will draw all men to you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.