

So that you may be Full of Hope

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, so we're starting a new series this week on Paul's prayers for the early church, and I've been asked to introduce the series, as well as look at a couple of his prayers.

However, before doing that, I want to make an apology for not finishing off my talk properly last week. As those of you who are here may recall, I used the parable of the wheat and the weeds as a basis for some active participation by members of the congregation. However, the more astute of you will notice that I did not complete the talk by explaining the meaning of that particular parable, having spent time reviewing the other parables we'd looked at in the series.

So I'm going to finish the last series first before I start on the new series in a minute. So briefly, for those of you who either can't remember or weren't here last week, the parable I used last week was the one where Jesus describes a scenario where a man sows wheat, but then his enemy comes along at night and sows weeds amongst the wheat. The man's servants, with seemingly a good idea, say let's pull up the weeds straight away. But the man says, no, you should wait until the harvest is fully ready and then separate out the wheat and weeds. Now, Jesus does not explain the parable immediately. And later on, the disciples ask him, explain to us the parable of the weeds in the fields, because obviously they didn't understand it.

And now it's important to remember the Bereans, who were commended in Paul's letters for going back to the scriptures after hearing sermons to see if what was said was true in the scriptures.

Because I have heard interpretations, and I was probably going to give the same one last week, that says the picture is that the field is the church, and the weeds is a picture or a metaphor for those who are not saved yet, and yet still take part in church life, believing themselves to be Christians, and unintentionally causing problems maybe, because they are trying to do things which, although sincere, are not from God, but from themselves. We are then, in this interpretation, instructed not to be judgmental about fellow church members, but allow God to take action at the right time. However, when you look at what the Bible actually says in the latter part of Matthew 13, and what Jesus says is the interpretation, it is a bit different. So, then Jesus left the crowd and went to the house. His disciples came to him and said, please explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field. Jesus answered, the one who sowed the good seed is the son of man. The field is the world, not the church. And the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one. And the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are the angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The son of man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father.

[4 : 1 0] Whoever has ears, let them hear. A reminder, I think, as ever, we always have the choice of what and who to believe. You may go away this morning and choose not to believe anything I have said this morning. I may never know that, so that's fine. We may choose not to listen to anyone.

But the implication of this parable is that we should listen to Jesus and what he has said, and by implication also take note of the Old Testament and not just the New Testament, because after all, Jesus' teachings were based on the scriptures he knew, which were the Old Testament.

We should also be wary not to believe the words, thoughts and ideas and philosophies of the world that do not come from God.

Pushing the interpretation a bit further, but hopefully legitimately, both wheat and weeds will actually produce some sort of harvest. In the case of the wheat, a useful, healthy crop that can either be turned into flour and then used for cooking, or used for seed for sowing the following year to produce more wheat.

But there are seeds in the weeds as well, which will only produce more weeds, more damaging plants. However, Jesus also indicates that in due time, there will be a judgment to differentiate between those who are parts of God's kingdom and those who are outside it, and at that time will be confirmed as being permanently outside his kingdom.

[6 : 04] Here concludes the last series on parables. I think now I'm ready to move on to the next sermon series, having got that out of the way. And as was mentioned earlier, we're starting on a series of Paul's prayers for the early church, or Paul's powerful prayers for the early church.

And in the four weeks of November, we are looking at four prayers, or series of collections of prayers under the heading, So that you may be strengthened in power, unified in love, able to share the good news, able to know God's will.

And what I like about this series is that the four different focus points over the next four weeks cover a range of the Christian life. So they include looking inwards to ourselves.

They include looking outwards to our brothers and sisters in Christ. They look further outward to those who are outside the kingdom.

And they look upwards, encourage us to look upwards to God. A nice range, a full looking at ourselves as Christians, and how Paul's prayers might benefit us.

[7 : 30] Having said that, to be honest, I struggled a bit with the two particular passages I was given to develop an obvious message about how we might be strengthened in power.

So I'm hoping that what I have come up with for this morning might in some way feel you leaving strengthened, regardless of what I might say, because I don't think there is a specific message about this will strengthen you.

But I'm hoping that together we can learn something. So I'm going to take the two passages I was given in the order in which they appear in the Bible, simply because for me it seems sensible that way round.

Our first passage is from Romans 15, verse 13. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So first of all, I want to look at what biblical hope is, certainly as meant in the New Testament, and contrast it with some of the more usual, perhaps more human meanings or understanding of the word hope.

[8 : 48] So hope for the Christian, I would argue, is not just a vague general feeling that maybe something good or something better will just turn up sooner or later, nor is it a feeling of definite positivity to help overcome pain or some negativity associated with a poor situation or set of circumstances you might find yourself in.

There's also not just a state of optimism about the future that says things can only get better, indeed will only get better. And often in the political sphere, there is a sense from people that things can only get better if we get the right political leadership in place.

Rather, biblical hope, I would say, is a much more grounded and reasonable kind of hope. The root word, and this is the only Greek we're having this morning, for the word that we translate as hope, is *elpis*, which may be better translated, not so much as hope, as anticipation or expectation or even confident expectation.

So nothing sort of vague and woolly, but something quite definite and positive. And in fact, if we look further back at the preceding verses in Romans, in the Romans passage that we're not going to read this morning, we can see why Paul could pray so confidently.

And if we remember that he studied under Gamaliel, one of the rabbis, and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. This means that Paul and the scriptures predicted and prophesied that Gentiles would turn to worship God and come to that place through the root of Jesse, who he now understood and realised was Jesus.

[10:57] And not only did he understand that Jesus was the help for all people, he also knew it at this stage supremely in his own life.

In Philippians 3, he describes his position and the confidence he had before his conversion. circumcised on the eighth day of the tribe of Benjamin of Israel, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, zealous, based on the law, faultlessly righteous.

And who wouldn't want to be all of those things? But imagine for a moment Paul dying and arriving in heaven before his Damascus Road experience.

There he is, standing at the gates and God comes to speak to him and says to him, Paul, lovely to see you. Why should I let you into my kingdom?

And Paul, at that stage, answering something along the lines of this, I was born into the right family. I got 100% in every religious knowledge exam I ever took.

[12:17] I scored 100% in my ethics and morals practicals. I went through every religious rite and ceremony necessary. I never, ever did any work on the Sabbath.

I gave away precisely one-tenth, no less, of all my income and possessions. And God might answer, Paul, that is fantastic.

That's brilliant. That's better than anyone else has ever done. Now, tell me, have you met my son, Jesus?

And Paul having to answer, no, but I have made sure that a lot of his friends got killed. As Paul explains in a later bit of Philippians, he now knows that any hope he needs or has is in Jesus.

The Jesus he now believes did actually rise from the dead. Paul also now knows for himself the joy of being in Jesus.

[13:29] the joy that comes from knowing that his salvation no longer depends on his good deeds or religious practices, but on his relationship with Jesus.

The joy, I would say, of knowing that if in the end any good I do doesn't actually outweigh the bad I've done, that I can still know God's forgiveness and he can still see me as righteous if I am in Christ.

Paul also knows the peace that comes from knowing he no longer has to strive for an unachievable perfection because his presence in God's kingdom is now assured because he has entrusted his eternity to Jesus, the one whom even death could not destroy.

this now brings us to the part where we actually have to do something ourselves in order to be available and ready for God to fill us with all joy and peace.

And I would like to underscore here the fact that it says all joy and peace, not just some joy and a little bit of peace, all joy and all peace. peace. What we must do, as Paul says in the prayer, is we must trust God.

[14 : 59] So what does it mean to trust someone? This includes a number of things. We have to believe what they say, accept it as true and then act in a manner that shows that we actually believe that it's true.

For us, that should mean reading and learning the Bible and then putting into practice what we read there. And I could dare to suggest the good starting point for this where we go back and look at the parables we've recently been looking at in our sermon series and listening to the sermons again, where amongst other things we were taught about forgiveness, faithfulness, trustworthiness, doing small things well, being open about our faith, being persistent.

And these are all things we have to do, not just know about. But why should we trust God? What makes him so trustworthy then?

Looking up the qualities of trustworthiness brought up the following. Integrity, honesty, promise keeping and loyalty. So does God possess any of these qualities?

Well, back in Numbers, the Bible asserts that God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act?

[16 : 27] Does he promise and not fulfil? And the implication of that is that no, he doesn't lie. Yes, he does act. Yes, he does fulfil his promises.

Does God have strong moral principles to back up this assertion of integrity? Well, he certainly would like us to have strong moral principles underlying by the Ten Commandments.

We certainly see in God someone who keeps his word. Sometimes that's a word of punishment for sin, but also a word of promise. When God, when Moses did in the end lead his people out of Egypt.

And all those who put the lamb's blood on their doorpost were saved from the death of their firstborn. This also counts as an example of God keeping his promises.

But for us, this side of the incarnation of God as Jesus, we see him keeping the promise of a saviour, a saviour for all mankind. Is he loyal?

[17 : 34] Well, despite the repeated sin of Israel and their rejection of him and turning to worship false gods, he remained faithful to them.

He did not go off and choose a different people, a different nation, but they brought to fruition the promise to bring a saviour out of Israel. So I would say that God fulfills the criteria for being a trustworthy person, and that should be enough to encourage us to trust him.

And if we trust him, we should do all we can to find out what he requires from us in thought and word and deed to prove our worthiness to be called his sons and daughters.

And specifically, we know that he requires us to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with him. So turning now to our second passage for today, and looking at it a bit more briefly than the first passage, we read in Ephesians 1 verses 18 and 19.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

[19 : 10] So the first part of the reading has echoes of Jesus talking in Matthew and echoing and quoting Isaiah about the dangers of eyes and ears that never see and ears that never hear.

there's no point in you being in a sermon if your eyes are closed and your ears are blocked. No point being in a prayer meeting, no point being in any Christian service if your eyes are closed and your ears are blocked.

God does not automatically infuse us with all the knowledge and wisdom we need to live perfectly holy lives.

And I say alas, because it would be great if he did. But God knows what is best and obviously it's not best for that to happen automatically.

As many of you know I play squash. You could say that when I first picked up a squash racket and hit a squash ball on a squash court playing against another person, that at that point I became a squash player.

[20 : 29] But it is also true that the first time I did that I did not know all the rules of squash, but have had to learn them over the years in order to play squash properly and safely.

At that point also I did not know how to play a backhand properly or how to serve well or how to play a drop shot and many other skills within the game. But through being taught by others better than myself, by practicing, by observing, by reading the rules, I have, I like to think, improved over the years.

And likewise as a Christian, again, I like to think that I've improved over the years, and if I have, it's because I've learned by being taught by others better than myself, by observing the practices of others, and by practicing those things myself.

And like my squash came, I'm still far from perfect and still have much to learn. where is this going, you might well ask, and what does it have to do with Ephesians?

And to be honest, I wasn't quite sure myself, but it seemed to be right to share it. The problem I found with this particular prayer was that trying to look into the meaning of the phrase, the riches of his glorious inheritance, the meaning was difficult to pin down.

[21 : 58] We've already looked at the hope to which he has called us, and we have established that the eyes of our hearts are not automatically open and drawn to what we should be looking at.

It's a bit like the 3D pictures that Tim used as an illustration in one of his talks earlier this year. We may look and look at something that looks very strange, but sometimes we need someone else to just guide us in how to look, and then suddenly it becomes clear.

However, I was reassured to read that this verse is ambiguous in Greek as well as not necessarily been clear in English. The nub of the problem is whether it means an inheritance that belongs to Jesus, which is us as the saints and the whole redeemed world, or whether it is an inheritance that comes to us.

But I think that whichever it is, when Paul says he wants us to know something, he doesn't mean he wants us to just know about it and remember it, but rather he wants us to experience it.

In this case, knowing the riches of his, that's Jesus, glorious inheritance, may be understood as experiencing life and participating in a life that demonstrates all the principles of Christ-like living, with its love, generosity, service, community, worship, sharing, hospitality, and more, and the incomparably great power, being the power that enables us to put to death the things of flesh that get in the way, that draw us away.

[24 : 00] That power that enables us to forgive the most horrible of sins, the power that enables us to live, sorry, to love the least deserving, that enables us to put Christ at the centre of everything we do.

In summary then, if we are to see Paul's prayers for the early church answered in us, I would say we need to do, amongst many other things, but specifically the following.

Ask God to open our eyes and unstop our ears. We need to put our trust in God for our salvation and for our daily living.

We need to spend time finding out what God is like and what he says. We need to practice what Jesus taught us and practice what Jesus showed us.

And then we will begin to see the hope we have in him, realised in our day-to-day lives with our family, friends, colleagues and brothers and sisters in Christ.

[25 : 27] May God bless you and me as we seek him in earnest. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.
Amen.■■■■ women