

The light of Hope at Christmas

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Preacher: Geoff Hall

- [0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Would you use your spirit now to cut into our hearts with your word and guide us so that we may hear your word, that we may be shaped by it so we may know you better.
- Amen. Excuse me. Well, what are you hoping for Christmas? I wonder if you haven't been hoping for much, considering what we've endured this year.
- My hopes for holidays aren't too high, having cancelled twice this year already. My hopes for church gatherings have been pretty low too.
- For youth events and Christmas gatherings also, people have been asking me, Jeff, do you think we'll have Bible study soon?
- When do you think we'll get to see the youth? Do you think we'll be able to have any of our term for activities? And to be honest, most of the time, I haven't been expecting very much.
- [1 : 2 1] This year has dashed my hopes. But this week, God has given us a great gift.
- Zero cases in Victoria. And not just no new, none at all. Victoria is completely COVID free.
- How about that? Praise God. Isn't it great? So perhaps your hopes are lifting. Maybe you're hoping that you will spend time with friends and family, gather for Bible study, dinners and parties.
- Tonight we're starting our Christmas series, thinking about Christmas hope and why we should have high hopes. And it's not just because COVID seems to be under control in Victoria, but because at Christmas, God gives us secure hope of salvation in Jesus.
- Tonight we're going to look at a few passages from the Old and New Testament and see how God's people put their hope in God's promise of salvation. Let's start with God's people, Judah, in the Old.
- [2 : 5 1] Many years after King David, the kingdom had split in two and God's people had repeatedly rebelled against him. Both the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah, had not listened to God.
- They wanted his blessing, but they refused to listen to his commands and live his way. That was how they found themselves in that pickle in 2 Kings 18, surrounded by that menacing Assyrian army.
- And not long before that, the northern kingdom had been totally destroyed by them. And it must have seemed very hopeless, mustn't it?
- Looking down that barrel, surrounded by a powerful foreign nation, easily outmatched in terms of military might.
- And there was plenty that they had done to incur God's wrath. And how about that taunt from the field commander in verse 32?
- [4 : 0 0] Just listen to it again. I think it's on the screen. Do not listen to Hezekiah, for he is misleading you when he says, the Lord will deliver us. Has the God of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of Assyria?

Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sevaphim, Hennah and Ivar? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand?

Who of all the gods of these countries have been able to save his land from me? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand?

And now the same enemy faces Judah. And they ask, on whom do you base your confidence?

In other words, on what is your hope? Surely not on God. Look what we've done to every other nation. When you're looking at such a foe, it's easy to feel like everything is hopeless, isn't it?

[5 : 16] How could anything ever change? How could we come out on top? And it felt a bit like this during the year, didn't it? The enemy of 2020 has surrounded us.

There were only rumors of relief. The light at the end of the tunnel was just a distant speck. Every time there was promise of relief, it didn't really come.

It felt hopeless. At the end of terms two and three, I foolishly said to my youth leadership teams, next term things will be better.

We all know how that turned out. It would have been easy to think God had forgotten about us. Why hope in God? He doesn't care about this, about us gathering together.

Isn't this what he wants? Did you feel abandoned? Did you feel like trusting in God was hopeless?

[6 : 21] Maybe you could empathize then with early first century Israel. For hundreds of years, Israel had not heard peep from God.

At least the third foreign power had conquered since Assyria. And there was hardly any comfort for God's people in sight.

But despite all this, not all had forgotten God's promise. Not all had lost hope. In Luke 2.25, we meet Simeon.

We learn that Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel. This means he was looking forward to the time when Israel would be comforted or encouraged.

And this is pretty striking considering the circumstances. He believed God's promises and was faithfully holding onto them.

[7 : 22] But it had been a long time since there'd been any victory for God's people. We can learn from the character of Simeon, can't we? An old man, I assume, since he alludes to his death.

Yet, he lived a righteous life compared to the leaders of Israel who had all but abandoned their God and his commands.

When the world is dark and everything seems hopeless, the righteous hold out hope. Simeon waits for Israel's consolation, never fading in trust or thinking that God had forgotten his people.

There's something special about this man, isn't there? This is before the resurrection and before the coming of the Holy Spirit. But verse 25 tells us that the Holy Spirit was on him.

God was clearly with Simeon. Perhaps he was one of the last Old Testament prophets. And then we see his hope was rewarded.

[8 : 34] Take a look in your Bibles at verse 27. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God saying, Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may dismiss your servant in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation.

Simeon faithfully held out hope because God had told him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's salvation. And then when he sees Jesus, even though he's a little baby, he holds him up and says, I can die in peace.

The Jews in his day must have had their hope in all kinds of things, wishing for various comforts and reliefs, especially considering their foreign oppressors and their wishy-washy relationship to the law, maybe prophets, kings, wealth, much like plenty of Christians today hoping for all kinds of things, spiritual, physical, emotional, in and out of God's word.

But Simeon shows us that when the righteous have their hope in the salvation that God has prepared, they are comforted, irrespective of hardship because they have seen God's salvation.

In fact, they can face death with a smile. My friend's brother died last week after a five-year battle with cancer. And as I chatted to him, he told me about all his non-Christian friends who offered all sorts of pagan platitudes like he's looking down on you, I'm sure he's playing footy in heaven, to which my friend would reply, no, he's not looking down on me, but he is with Jesus.

[10 : 40] And then he said something to me that I won't soon forget. The light of the gospel never shines so bright as when we're faced with death. Don't we truly see how little hope people have as when we're facing death?

Simeon had such a solid hope in God's promised salvation that simply holding the baby Jesus, he could smile at death. I wonder if your hope is like Simeon's.

God has given us a reason to put our hope in his promises, hasn't he? In fact, don't we have even more reason than Simeon?

I want to look at one more passage to illustrate the challenge we face with putting our hope in God. It comes from John 20.

After Jesus was raised from the dead, he'd appeared to all his disciples except one doubter. Have a listen. It's on the screen.

[11 : 50] John 20, verse 24. Now, Thomas, also known as Didymus, one of the 12, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, we have seen the Lord.

But he said to them, unless I see the nail marks in my hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his sight, I will not believe. Thomas had seen and walked with Jesus for three years.

He'd seen all the signs, he'd heard all the teaching, and not to mention the other apostles had seen him alive. Sorry, they'd told him that they'd seen him alive.

Thomas had plenty of reason to hope in the resurrection of Jesus, and Jesus had told him that the Messiah had to die and rise. And so I wonder, after hearing this, how you would judge Thomas?

Heavy-handedly? An idiot? An idiot? Should have listened? Should have known better? Or perhaps more sympathetic? I probably would have done the same.

[13 : 00] Well, Jesus rocks up and tells Thomas what's what. Have a listen. Verse 26 on the screen. A week later, his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them.

Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you. Then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here, see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.

Stop doubting and believe. Thomas said to him, My Lord and my God. Jesus tells Thomas, Stop doubting and believe. Jesus thinks he should have trusted.

He should have listened. Well, now he does listen. He sees Jesus and says, My Lord and my God, what a great result. But that's not really the point, is it?

Listen to verse 29. Jesus told him, Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

[14 : 08] Thomas saw and believed. That's great. But he didn't hold out hope like the righteous Simeon. At Christmas, we learn about a great salvation that is far greater than any goodness in the world.

Sorry, than any goodness in anything in the world. And like Thomas and Simeon and Judah surrounded by Assyria, we can't see that which God has given us to put our hope in.

Yes, God showed Simeon, but he lived his life without seeing it. So we too have his promise. We too have his word.

And we have his spirit which speaks into our hearts just like Simeon. I wonder if you know what happened to Judah when they were surrounded.

Isaiah tells the people not to fear and not to act. And not long after, the angel of the Lord goes out into the Assyrian army and kills 185,000 of them.

[15 : 20] And they go home with their tail between their legs. They put their hope in the Lord and they saw their salvation.

Simeon too under foreign rule put his hope in the Lord and saw God's salvation. But Thomas, he's fascinating, isn't he?

He has more reason to have a firm hope in Jesus. Yes, he'd seen Jesus die but his friends had seen him alive and he'd refused to believe.

And this is what I think will be a challenge for us. We have even more reason. We've seen God do even more. Rescue even more.

Comfort even more. Save even more. Fulfill even more. We've seen the power of that blessing Jesus mentioned to Thomas as the church and the gospel has spread across the world with far greater barriers to fellowship and growth than COVID.

[16 : 30] As we look at the state of the world outside Australia it seems pretty hopeless doesn't it? And sad. I don't like looking at the numbers anymore it's so depressing.

But the more I think about it the more I realise my hope in regard to that is in a worldly solution a vaccine a building a carol service don't get me wrong those things are great and I wish God would send them but Simeon has shown me that this Christmas they are not what my hope should be in though I will pray for them my hope should be in what I cannot see I should be holding out hope for the salvation my Lord and my God has shown and promised in Jesus and so should you let me ask for God's help for that to do that thanks God for the salvation you have shown us and thanks for the example of Simeon who held out hope even though the odds seemed to be against him give us the strength to follow his example and hold out hope for the salvation you have given us in our

Lord Jesus Amen