

# That you may know the Hope

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Father God, as we look into your word together, we pray that you would speak hope to us.! And Lord, may my words be faithful to you. Amen.

Thinking about the theme of hope and the things that we put our hope in, got me thinking back to my childhood. And that question, and you might like to ask yourselves this as well, how old were we when we first began to realize that things don't last, that things change?

Childhood is a constant finding out. When a baby is born, it's got everything to learn. And as that baby becomes a toddler, becomes a child, grows up, there is so much to learn. Everything is new.

And children have that sense of wonder at everything, because everything is new. And that is the way things are, and that's what they're used to. It's a constant discovery of new things.

And we can see that in our children. But when did I realize that the things that I learned wouldn't necessarily last?

[ 1 : 2 5 ]     That the things I'd learned, and oh, so this is the way things are, actually isn't the way that things stay. In my case, the new, or relatively new, Hillman Minx, that Dad came home with one day, would be as rusty as what was left of the old Austin 10 in the field next door.

And I look back over my childhood at an abandoned car when I was a toddler, that over my entire childhood eventually dissolved into rust. But that awareness that the new car would become an old car, that the new fine fare supermarket in town would be somehow linked to the store that was just down our country lane, closing down.

I grew up with that store being there, and suddenly it wasn't. As I got a bit older still, and I got into football, the team that I supported enthusiastically, and I memorized the names of every player in the team and their positions, and I could still rattle them back to you now, most of them, would transfer to other teams.

What a betrayal. Or they would retire. Mum and Dad. A mum and dad. They don't age. Grandparents must always have been old.

Those are the eyes of a child. When did we realize that things change? It's a big lesson to learn, and I don't know that it was one that I learned particularly early on, that now doesn't last.

[ 3 : 1 0 ]     As we sing in that rather sobering hymn, time like an ever-rolling stream bears all its suns away. They fly forgotten as a dream dies with the dawning day.

And we don't like change, and we don't like the idea that things that we like and depend on won't always be there. We fear change.

It's different. Not sure about this. We hide in nostalgia. Life was somehow perfect then. The past was a golden age. Well, it wasn't, but we pretend it is.

What is? And what can we hope for that isn't going to fail us? And is the text of this sermon, All Good Things Come to an End?

No. It's Ephesians 1, verse 18, that you may know the hope to which he has called you. That reading in Ezekiel 34 promised a change for the better.

[ 4 : 14 ] If we'd started a few verses earlier, it would have been a much bleaker reading. Israel's leaders in Ezekiel's day were so corrupt, and the people groaned and suffered as a result.

And in that reading, God is speaking through Ezekiel and saying that he has seen this, and he will deal with it. He will put an end to that corrupt leadership. There will be no more self-serving elite.

The people will no longer be exploited because the Lord himself would look after them and care for them, and there would be a genuine new shepherd who would do it justly and rightly.

One day, the Messiah will come, and the ill-treated people of the here and now have a good hope to look forward to. One day, Messiah will come.

And that gives us that sense of hope that we come across as we look at our reading in Ephesians chapter 1. That you may know the hope to which he has called you.

[ 5 : 25 ] But what do we understand by the word hope? Because we can use hope in a different way. In English, our hope, I think, is more a sense of wish.

I hope so. This is what I want things to be like. I wish they would be like. I hope they'll be like. There's not a great deal of certainty that they will be like that, but that's the way that I would want them to be.

And as I look forward into the future, I hope so. And at Christmas time, the children in particular will be having their wish lists, the Christmas present lists, the things that they hope they're going to get.

And they might, or they might not. We'll have to wait and see, won't we? And we might have ideas about what we'd like to get for Christmas as well, but there are no guarantees attached.

We might be bold enough to actually tell other people what we'd quite like to have, but it depends, doesn't it? We'll have to wait and see. We might, more seriously, long for a more just society and an end to all the division and suspicion that there seems to be so rife in society today.

[ 6 : 39 ] And we long for things to change and long for things to be better. And we vote different parties in and we hope that there will be change for the better. But there is no guarantee.

It's not a bad thing entirely. We feel better with something good to look forward to. We look forward to Christmas presents, we look forward to that holiday that we put a deposit down on, and we expect, we hope at least, that it's going to be a good holiday, that the flights will happen on time, that the accommodation won't let us down, that the weather will be good, and all the things that muck holidays up so often won't be the case this time round.

We're looking forward to it. I remember a camping trip up to Kinloch, Burvey, which coincided with a severe gale, and in the end of it, everything was demolished and blown away, and our tent, weighed down with boulders, was the only one left.

We stuck it out, and we said, next year we'll come back. It won't do the same thing two years running, will it? It did. I think it was about 20 years before our boys forgave us and began camping themselves.

We scarred their minds for decades with those holidays. But Kinloch, Burvey, is a beautiful place you can't blame us for trying. But that is our sort of hope.

[ 7 : 58 ] We have this picture of something good in the future, and we long for it, and we look forward to it, and it might, or it might not, happen.

In the New Testament, they spoke Greek, and the Greek word for hope, *elpis*, has a slightly different meaning to wish.

It's a more concrete word of expect, and it's linked more to trust and expect than wish. It's rather more evidence-based.

We come up with a nice idea of something good that we would like to have happen, and we put our hopes in that. But there's not a great strong sense of any sort of guarantee that they will happen.

Sometimes they do. That's great, but not always. Whereas in the Greek, they would be looking for something in the future that is well-founded, likely to happen. It's more of an expectation, more of an anticipation.

[ 9 : 00 ] This ought to be happening in the future, and that is our hope. We are reasonably confident that under normal circumstances, this will happen. This is what we expect.

This is what we anticipate. There's more planning. There's more certainty in it than just a mere wish. You're looking forward to that sell-out concert, and the tickets are going for hundreds of pounds, and there's that scandal about ticket sales at the moment, but you've got two tickets for that concert.

Where did those two tickets come from? Are they, A, in your head because you're just going to turn up on the day and hope for the best? Are they, B, two tickets that you've bought from some shady online website that may or may not do anything other than take your money and send you a piece of worthless pay from return?

Or, C, you've been to the box office and got the tickets from the source? A, B, or C? A will give you a wish, a hope.

You can look forward to it, and that looking forward will hold good until the very day when it doesn't happen. Whereas those tickets you've got from the box office, you've got a reasonable ground for believing that when you turn up on the day, you'll get in.

[ 10 : 20 ] Hope, in the Bible, is more about how confident you can be over the thing that you expect.

And this is what Paul's prayer is in Ephesians 1, that you may know the hope to which he has called you. And in our culture, in our language, that you may know the hope to which he has called you, we would emphasize that you may know, oh, we know exactly what we're after, we just aren't too sure it's going to happen.

Whereas Paul is actually writing the other way round. He's saying we can be completely sure this is going to happen. Are you enjoying the anticipation of it?

My prayer isn't that it's going to happen, it will happen. My concern, my prayer, is that you're going to believe it and enjoy the expectation. That you may know the hope to which he has called you.

Note the emphasis there, is the other way round. The psalmist writes in Psalm 42 and 43, Why so downcast my soul?

[ 11 : 33 ] Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him. Ephesians 1, where we find this mention of hope in verse 18, isn't wishfulness, but a trust based on, as Paul puts it, his glorious inheritance.

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 the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

Ephesus, on the face of it, seemed a hopeless situation. Ephesus, this big, big city, I think it was the second largest after Rome in the whole of the Roman Empire.

Hundreds of thousands of people lived there. It was big. And at the heart of it was this huge temple to Diana, or Artemis in the Greek. Massive temple.

And at the heart of the temple was the image of Diana that had fallen from heaven. Presumably, it was some sort of meteorite that had landed in that area and convinced the people that that must have been sent down from the gods and it must be Diana the hunter.

[ 13 : 02 ] And the temple, and the temple cult was built around that. And it was a big city, it was a big city culture, and the whole economy, you can read about it in Acts, the whole of the economy focused on this temple.

The city's welfare, the city's economy, the city's prosperity was grounded and dependent upon this temple to Artemis, to Diana. It was well, it was empire-wide famous.

People would travel there from all over and it brought in an awful lot of income. How on earth did we crack that as Christians for the Lord Jesus?

How can we, few Christians, and the one time when Paul did come boldly preaching, there was a riot. How on earth do we serve the Lord Jesus in the shadow of that temple where the temple and the people and the economy and the culture and the tradition is so bound up in this temple worship?

how can we be faithful to Jesus here? What hope have we got of a breakthrough for the church against all that? We are so few and this is so, so enormously against us.

[ 14 : 24 ] And the church is faithful and they keep their relationship with Paul. Paul writes to them, Timothy comes to visit them, there are often Ephesian Christians mentioned throughout the New Testament.

But even so, they must be so conscious that they are so few and so weak and so insignificant numerically compared to the temple cult and the economy all tied in together.

The church must feel as if they're just barely hanging in there. Why so downcast, my soul? They read from the psalm one Sunday and they think, well, just look around, that's why we're so downcast.

And we might feel like that today where the churches are numerically comparatively weak compared to what they used to be and society ignores us and we feel sidelined, we feel a minority.

Why so downcast, my soul? And Paul writes, I pray that your eyes might be opened, the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he's called you.

[ 15 : 33 ] And what is our hope? This glorious inheritance that Paul speaks about, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. Paul's talking about an inheritance and we can tie that to Jesus' will, inheritance has usually come after somebody's died, don't they?

The will has been read, you're on the list, you're going to inherit something. And that's good news because it's always nice to inherit things but then you think, oh, it's not so good news because somebody that I love has died and that's why I'm inheriting it.

So there's always that bitter sweetness attached with legacies and inheritances because somebody has died to make that inheritance available.

It's the way of the world, it happens, but we also feel the loss. So what's this inheritance from? Who's died?

Well, Jesus has, he died on the cross. In a sense, when Jesus died on the cross, this is his will being read. This is what he has bequeathed to his people.

[ 16 : 43 ] This is the legacy that those who follow Jesus receive because Jesus has died. But of course, the difference here is that on the third day, Jesus was raised again from the dead.

God, we don't just proclaim a dying saviour, but we proclaim a risen Lord who is now ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father and from there will come again as judge and as king and as Lord.

So when we have the reading of this will and we are told that we have inherited something wonderful, there isn't that same sense of sadness and loss. there is no shadow over this inheritance because Jesus is alive to give it to us himself.

We celebrate being the resurrection people and that hope of seeing Jesus face to face. And so as we look at Ephesians 1, this is how, even when the church seems so weak and the Ephesian church must have felt so weak, in reality Paul says, open your eyes and see that you've actually got far, far more.

That great big temple is actually quite insignificant. If you go a couple of miles away, it's just a dot on the horizon. And Jesus is Lord, not just over the neighbourhood, but over the whole world.

[ 18 : 21 ] And we know through astronomy and all the latest discoveries that this world is just a dot in our galaxy. And the galaxy is just a dot amid myriad, myriad other galaxies.

And the Bible tells us that it was through Jesus, through whom and for him and by him all things are made and sustained.

what seems big and overwhelming to us is as nothing to him and we are his people.

It's just a matter of a different perspective. So just dwell for a moment with me on what Paul is pointing us to. what is this inheritance that we are being told to have a hope in, in the New Testament sense, not the English sense of the world.

Not just a, oh, I wish it will turn out okay, but the hope, the confidence, the anticipation, the expectation, the promise made by a God who keeps his promises is set out for us.

[ 19 : 32 ] that Paul is saying, my prayer isn't this hope will come true, but that you will latch on to how true it is. Jesus, raised from the dead, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead.

Everybody dies, dictators, celebrities, destitute people, rich and poor, all alike die. But Jesus is different.

Because God raised him from the dead. Jesus uniquely didn't stay dead. He is alive. When he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, Jesus is now in the place of highest honor, in the highest realms, in the heavenlies.

And we can only begin to begin to imagine what that is actually like. But Paul spells it out far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come.

However you look at it, there is no comparison with anything that impresses us in this life, anything that we can even begin to imagine. We're looking at something far, far greater than that.

[ 20 : 59 ] God placed all things under his feet. Again, we have God's unalterable, unopposable will. God has placed all things under his feet.

That is everything. It's that temple in Ephesus, it's the society that we live in today, it's this whole world, it's this whole galaxy, it's the whole cosmos, everything, under his feet.

We can't even begin to take that in. And appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

When you look at the church, it's quite difficult to take in that we have a special place in God's heart and in his plans. And however fallible, and boy are we fallible, and however frail, and boy are we frail, we are, and we recognise ourselves as being.

The Lord God has a special place for us in his heart. It doesn't make sense, but this is the way that he has chosen that it be. The church, so despised, so written off, so unfashionable, God has made promises to.

[ 22 : 22 ] And like the boy in the story that I told you, that peasant child who was a nobody in the kingdom, Sir Hector kept his promise and put that boy before the royal tournament.

It's the same with us, we are like the peasant boy, and Jesus is like Sir Hector. He has made a promise, and however weak and insignificant we feel and are, he keeps his promises.

And that is our hope. That is the hope that Paul prays that we will know, because that is the hope to which we are called. And Paul's prayer isn't, oh I hope this will come true.

His prayer is, you need to realise just how great this expectation is. Today, the first Sunday of Advent, we celebrate this hope, this part of our welcome for Jesus.

Christmas, as we come towards Christmas to celebrate it one more time, that awareness of what it represents in the promises of God. Our society still views heaven wishfully, often Christless.

[ 23 : 31 ] Oh well, when I die we'll be reunited with the people we love, oh he's gone to a better place, that sort of thing. What we have here is something far more concrete, and it is centred on the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is founded on his promise.

So the challenge there is how real is your hope? Do you tend to view hope as dream and wish, or as trust and expect? And how does that hope in the Lord Jesus affect life now?

Other things do let us down. Jesus won't, because he has promised. And Advent reminds us of Jesus' birth that makes that hope real to us, and also his return as king to fulfil that promise at some time in the future.

Amen.