

Sunday 18th January 2026 - Hope & Encouragement

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Date: 18 January 2026

Preacher: Ian McKeown

[0:00] So, here we are, well into January, the start of 2026, a new year, a new beginning. I wonder what it will hold for us. Good things, we hope.

What about your hopes for this year? What dreams might be stirring in your heart as you look out at the year stretching before us?

Well, if you're a Wolves or a West Ham fan, sorry, sorry Tom, sorry. Yeah, given where they're at in the Premier League right now, you know, the bottom.

Sorry Matt. You might be hoping you can stave off relegation this year, you know, but really don't hold your breath.

Or maybe you're hoping, you know, to achieve some personal goals this year. Maybe this is the year to get fitter or healthier, make some changes to your diet, get those trainers back on.

[1:09] I'm not seeing a lot of nodding out there, so no, maybe not. Or maybe start something new this year. Yeah, a new challenge, a new hobby or something.

Or just make some room, maybe more room, for some peace and stillness in your every day. That would be a good thing.

Or maybe your hopes are wrapped up in others as well. You know, your partner, your children, your grandchildren, or helping a friend who's struggling.

Hoping they'll find their way through or come back to good health. Or perhaps you're just hoping that things are going to be better than they were last year.

Or maybe hopes, or your hopes are more pressing, you know, I hope I can just keep paying the bills. Keep my health. Keep my job.

[2:09] I hope I can hold it together this month. This week. Today. I guess often when we use this word hope, we mean something tinged with uncertainty.

I hope so. Which really means I'm not sure. You know, we cross our fingers, hope for the best. But that's not really how the Bible uses this word hope.

In the New Testament, the Greek word most often translated as hope is *elpis*. And it's a joyful expectation or assurance grounded in God's character.

Based on something rock solid rather than wishful thinking or just our personal circumstances. And just to be clear, okay, we're not talking about certitude.

That we have all the answers. That's a poor substitute, I think, for faith. It's too easy. And people see through that kind of dogmatic, shallow faith.

[3:25] We still have to dance with doubt. There will still be dark nights of the soul. Hard and perplexing questions.

And we have to be honest about that. But weaving its way through all of that noise is something alive.

Something breathing and dynamic that pulses with resurrection energy. And it's a living hope built on a solid foundation.

And I know. I know too well. Look around us at the world at the moment. Put on the news if you dare. And there's so much, isn't there, that weighs heavy.

The headlines scroll by. Wars, conflicts, division, corruption, fear and foreboding. Suffering on a scale that can feel just overwhelming.

[4:26] The climate is changing. The climate is changing. The geopolitics of the world is fracturing. And the future seems very, very uncertain.

And it would be easy. And it would be easy, wouldn't it, to let hope shrink down. To contract to something small and defensive.

To protect ourselves by not hoping too much. To keep our dreams modest. So we won't be disappointed.

But this morning, I want to invite us into something different. I want to suggest that hope. Real, robust, expectant, living hope.

Is exactly what we are called into in times like this. In 1 Peter, it says this. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[5:28] In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

A living hope. Not a static, theoretical, abstract hope. But something alive and breathing and dynamic. And full of resurrection energy and potential.

Because the resurrection isn't just something that happened 2,000 years ago, is it? It's a power resonating right now. In the middle of all that is going on around us in the world.

And deep within us. In our own hopes and fears about the future. And Paul, writing to the Romans, puts it this way.

We rejoice in the hope of glory. And more than that, we rejoice in our sufferings. Knowing that suffering produces endurance. And endurance produces character. And character produces hope.

[6:31] And hope does not put us to shame. Because God's love has been poured out into our hearts. Through the Holy Spirit. Of course, Paul isn't saying we should enjoy or seek out suffering in some sort of masochistic way.

He's saying something much more profound. That hope can actually grow stronger through the difficulties that we endure. Hard as that might seem.

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian Jewish neurologist and a psychiatrist. He survived the Nazi concentration camps.

And after the war, you may have read his book. He wrote, it's still in print. He wrote a book to find meaning and hope out of this terrible experience that he and many others had had.

And how people responded to unimaginable suffering. And in the course of his research, he found that some became brutal and brutalized.

[7:39] And some gave up entirely. And some held on by planning all the things that they would reclaim in their lives after liberation.

Only to find that when freedom finally came, they had become trapped in their own depression. And that no earthly restoration could fill the void.

But there was a fourth group. Small but significant. These were people who, despite losing everything, maintained what Frankl called their inner liberty.

They allowed God to transform their pain and suffering. And in doing so, they found a source of hope that couldn't be stripped away.

Because it wasn't dependent on their circumstances. They had discovered what Frankl described as a spiritual cornerstone. Something beyond themselves.

[8:44] An indestructible hope that could survive anything. Because death itself had already lost its ultimate power.

And for me, this is beautifully captured in one of my favorite films. And I know I bang on about the Shawshank Redemption, don't I? I don't know how many times I've said it up here.

But, you know, I think it's a brilliant film. If you haven't seen it, I think you should. And if you have seen it, I hope you agree with me. I'll be honest, you know, there are some pretty disturbing scenes. And the language can be a bit fruity at times. Yeah. You know, but if you've not seen it, it's worth a watch. If you know, the strap line for the film is, fear can hold you prisoner.

Hope can set you free. And that pretty much, I think, sums up the whole film. It's an incredibly powerful parable full of Christian symbolism.

[9:47] If you don't know, it's a story about a man, Andy Dufresne, falsely accused and convicted of killing his wife and sentenced to Shawshank State Penitentiary. It's a dark, dark place.

But Andy refuses to give up hope. He will change the system and bring hope to his fellow inmates. And whether it's cold beer or uplifting music or new books, all small acts of kindness, of defiance, that slowly inspire others to dare to hope.

It's a powerful story about living hope that Andy comes to symbolise. And I think for us, it's a hope that endures, a hope that holds us like an anchor in whatever storm we might find ourselves in, hope for the here and now and the life in the new kingdom.

And a hope that ripples out like a pebble in water spreading far and wide.

At the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul offers this beautiful benediction to the Christian community there. 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.

[11:14] And I think Paul very deliberately chose to end his letter this way. Those early Christians in Rome were living right under the nose of Caesar in a society that could be brutal and hostile to them and their faith.

And Paul wanted them to know and to be known as people of hope, a community of hope in the midst of that world.

You know, in these uncertain times when a lot of people feel adrift and hope, quite frankly, is failing, maybe that's what it means for us to be church in 2026.

A community of people trusting in God, reaching out to those around us with all joy and peace. Yes, with all our warts and all, imperfect, of course, and not with all the answers, but overflowing with hope, a living hope that speaks of life and life in all of its fullness into our community here.

And not a naive optimism that pretends everything's okay, but a deep, resilient hope that enables us to face reality honestly and that draws others to find that hope and faith in Jesus.

[12:46] And the good thing is, even in just small ways, we can nurture and practice this hope and share it and allow it to ripple out into the wider community.

So let me just offer four simple practices that we might kind of carry into 2026. If you don't already, why not begin each day by naming one thing you're grateful for?

I know there's a number of people that already journal that and maybe post it on social media. It doesn't have to be profound. You know, thank you, Lord, for a warm bed.

Thank you for the smell of fresh coffee. I thank you that the pain I feel now is not the whole story. Because I think something profound happens when we cultivate thankfulness.

And, you know, neuroscience has caught up with this now. And with MRI and neuropixel scans of the brain, we can see that feelings of gratitude activate key regions in the brain, such as the prefrontal cortex, but other parts as well.

[14:11] And that has the capacity to change physiological aspects of our brain through the release of different hormones. And like a lot of habits, the key, of course, here is consistency.

Gratitude is a way of deliberately retraining our attention. It's about consciously and intentionally choosing to acknowledge the good things and people in our lives.

And the more we acknowledge it, the more we see it. And so gratitude is the soil, if you like, in which hope grows. In the book of Acts, we meet a man called Joseph.

But the apostles gave him another name, Barnabas, which literally means son of encouragement. And that's a good thing to be known for, isn't it?

He was the one who vouched for Paul when everyone else was afraid of him. The one who gave John Mark a second chance when Paul had written him off after Mark abandoned them on their missionary journey.

[15:24] And who knows, without that encouragement to carry on, Mark might not have written the gospel that bears his name.

Encouragement has this sort of ripple effect that we can't even begin to imagine. So what if this year, we make it our aim to be Barnabas people, to actively encourage at least one person every day.

It doesn't have to be grand. A text message, a word of appreciation, a little note to say thank you, affirming them, just noticing people, listening to them, or maybe just a kind smile.

And you know, in a world that tears down people with such casual cruelty on social media, isn't it good to be someone who lifts others up?

And we have no idea how much a single word of genuine encouragement can mean to someone who is struggling. So let's be generous with our words.

[16:37] The writer and theologian Brian McLaren talks about how we all have these, and how we all live these inside stories.

Narratives about who we are that we tell ourselves, what the world is like, what's possible, and how these stories, for us, shape everything.

How we see ourselves, how we interpret things, what happens to us, what we believe, the future holds. And the thing is, we often don't even ourselves realize we're telling them.

We can be blind to these inside stories. Because some of those stories are fear-based, scarcity-focused, shaped by anxiety.

So we look at the state of the world, the conflicts, the divisions, the injustice, and the fear story says, everything's falling apart.

[17:44] I feel helpless. Who can I blame? But we have been invited into a different story, the story of resurrection, of redemption and restoration.

And this story says, God is making all things new and there is always, always hope. Our past does not define our future and endings can become beginnings.

And this isn't about positive thinking or pretending everything is okay when it isn't. the resurrection story is honest about death. Friday was real.

But it insists that Sunday is coming. It's about choosing which story gets the final word. So when you catch yourself rehearsing, and I know I do, a story of woe and despair, just pause.

Notice it. Name it. And then ask yourself, what would hope say here? And take that fear narrative and consciously retell it through the lens of a God who brings hope out of despair, beauty out of ashes.

[19:09] And then finally, none of us can sustain hope alone. We weren't designed to.

From the very beginning, God said, it's not good for humans to be alone. And that truth, I think, runs right through scripture and right through our lived experience.

We need each other. The writer Dave Tomlinson writes about how faith is never just individual. It's always, always communal.

It's a communal thing. We are a body, Paul says, and the parts, the different parts need each other. The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you. The head cannot say to the feet, I don't need you. We are interconnected, interdependent, woven together, and that's not a weakness. It's the design. I know there'll be times when you show up to church and you'll be the one bringing encouragement to others and hope, praying for others, radiating faith.

[20:24] And there'll be times when you show up empty, tired, and exhausted, and you need to receive. And both are valid.

And I know, and I'm sure you've experienced this, when things are difficult, our instinct is often to withdraw, to isolate ourselves, to pull back from community.

community. But that's precisely when we need it most. So I'm sure you have already, but if not, make gathering with others who share this hope we have a non-negotiable in your spiritual life.

And come to church not because you have to, not out of duty or guilt, but because you want to be here. And deep inside you, you know you need to be here.

You need to be connected with the body. To be part of this body because others may very well need you.

[21:37] So I don't know what this year holds for you. I don't know what challenges you'll face, joys you'll experience, what losses you'll grieve, but I do know this.

You are not alone. You are held by a faithful God who has conquered death itself and you are part of a community that will always walk with you.

And you, we, carry within us a living hope that beats with resurrection energy that nothing, absolutely nothing, can overcome.

so may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen. Amen.