

The God of Hope

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like to wish you all a very happy new year. It is a season event. It begins the church of Advent, and that begins our church year, as Will was sharing with us in the video.

I love Advent because it actually puts all of our lives in context, in a perfect perspective, because Advent means coming.

It is a season, as we heard, that reminds us that our lives are defined by the fact that Jesus has come to us in Bethlehem to die for our sins and to rise again in power, and that he will come again in glory to judge the world and to make all things right forever.

We confess this in the creeds every time we have a service together. We say that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, and we say that he will come again to judge the living and the dead, to make all things right.

And that means that our fears and our anxieties, our lives, are surrounded by hope far greater than anything that we can experience that would cause stress and fear in our life, especially as we think of this unique year that we have been going through.

[1 : 16] One of the great things about COVID was that I have friends that I became very close to when I was in youth group years and years ago. We were in a Bible study together, and we'd kind of lost touch a little bit, but through Zoom, we decided that we'd meet together regularly during COVID.

And it's been a great blessing. And one of the things that has happened in our conversations is we've talked about some of the big stresses, the big worrying things in life.

They are from the United States, and most of them live in Minneapolis. And so, of course, we talked about the race rights there, the injustice that was so shocking there.

We talked about the high numbers of COVID that they were experiencing, even higher than we have here. We talked a lot about the election, of course, and we have Republicans and Democrats in our friends of circles.

So we talked about that stress as well. And even a personal tragedy in life, we talked about happened during COVID.

[2 : 26] And you know, the thing that we have been struck by is that God is in charge of all this, that in all of these uncertainties, there is this one great certainty that surrounds all of our fears.

And that is that Jesus has saved us through the cross by dying for our sins. And his resurrection power, through all the ups and downs of life, are going to complete our salvation forever.

Because he's going to come in glory to bring the new heaven and new earth, drawing us all together. In a year of very bad news, this is the amazing good news that shines very brightly.

This is our hope. And we are in a series called Held by Hope. And there are two wonderful aspects of being held by hope. And that is that God not only holds us to himself, but that God holds us to one another.

Hope transforms our relationships. And I want to look at this. If you turn to verses 1 through 13 in Romans 15, and please grab a Bible.

[3 : 37] I hope you have one handy nearby. In this little reading, Paul tells us a lot about hope as he deals with a real life relationship problem in a small congregation in Rome.

And you can see the problem right away in verse 1. There is a division in the church between what he called the strong and the weak. The strong were mostly Gentiles who rejoiced in the fact that God saves them by grace alone.

You know, by this free gift, God has brought them into the family of God forever as they trusted in Jesus. And they're called strong because they had a faith that Jesus alone brings them to God and that they're freed from certain rituals and observances.

But the thing is, they were despising the Jews who believed that you had to keep those rituals in order to be God's people. They said that they were not strong and did not have a strong enough faith.

Well, the weak in this church were the Jewish believers who said that it is fine if Jesus brings the Gentiles into the people of God. Jesus fulfills all of what the rituals stand for.

[4 : 51] But it is important, very important for God's people to keep them. That's part of what it means to belong to God. And so they strongly judged the Gentiles, suggesting they weren't really God's people if they weren't observing the rituals.

So what is to be done? Well, now in verse 1, Paul gives difficult instruction to the strong. He says there, we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and more than that, not to please ourselves.

And that was shocking because Paul is saying that those with strong faith, and he included himself in that, need to agree and probably take part in the Jewish rituals so that there is a togetherness in that church.

It's shocking. It's unfair. It means that those with strong faith, which includes Paul, would need to give up their rights. It means bearing with people who were judging them.

Well, how can this happen? I love how Paul answers this. He doesn't say, you just need to get on with it. Just obey what I'm telling you. Do what I say. No, what he does is he turns their hearts to hope.

[6 : 08] It is hope in Christ that they all have. And he tells them that all of their relationships will change by embracing that hope.

He answers three questions about hope that I want to talk about and that they're vital for us today. First of all, what is hope? What is a true hope? Secondly, how is that true hope renewed in my life? And then thirdly, how does that hope change us? Well, first, Paul tells them what their incredible hope is in verse three.

Look at that verse. It says, for Christ did not please himself. What is he talking about here? He is talking about Jesus dying on a cross.

Remember in Gethsemane, the night before Jesus was going to die, that horrible death. Jesus prayed, Father, remove this cup from me.

[7 : 07] Yet, not what I want, but what you want. What you want. And our hope is certain because Jesus did not please himself.

Instead, he truly died on a cross. He certainly rose again for our reconciliation with God and union with himself. And earlier in this letter to the Romans in chapter eight, Paul brings that truth home, that hope home to our hearts.

He says, nothing in all the universe, spiritual or physical, can separate you from the love of God who is in Jesus Christ.

Now, back in 1563, a document called the Heidelberg Catechism was written. And this catechism has blessed the church for 450 years or more since then.

Churches all over the world. It was written to teach the young people and to guide pastors and teachers. It's 129 questions and answers.

[8 : 12] And they wonderfully explore God's grace. You can look it up in the internet. It is a blessing to go through this. And it begins with, what is hope? And I think Ben and Braun Short, who are leading our catechism, would support me reading that question to you.

Listen to this. It says, what is your only hope in life and death? The answer, that I am not my own, but belong body and soul in life and death to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ.

And it goes on to say, he has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood. He has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my father in heaven.

In fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to Christ by his Holy Spirit, he assures me of eternal life.

And he makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him. Isn't that wonderful? That is our hope. You belong to Jesus forever.

[9 : 28] All things must work together for your salvation. And so that means no matter what you're going through, whether you feel right now that you're at the end of your rope, if you're exhausted because your baby will not sleep, no matter how long you are physically separated from loved ones

or how hopeless a situation might be at work, no matter how anxious you might be because of final exams this coming week and essays do, nothing can separate you from God's love and his saving work in you and through you.

This is a hope that belongs to everybody in this church, even the ones that you disagree with. It is a hope that unites, that brings together our congregation and helps us to persevere.

In fact, it is a hope that will be perfectly realized one day in heaven when we are united in God's very presence, gathered in joy and thanksgiving and worship.

Well, now you might say, I'm not feeling that way right now. I'm not feeling that hopeful. So how does God renew our hope? How does he strengthen it?

Well, let's look at verse four. Verse four tells us, whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

[10:58] This is an amazing verse. It says that the main purpose, it's not the only purpose, but the main purpose of the Old Testament and the whole Bible is to teach us so that we might have hope.

God's word gives us hope. If you read the Bible with a willingness to be taught, he will strengthen and renew that hope in you. That's a real call for us today.

It's because that as you read, God will help you to endure and will encourage you by his word. Now, I want to say that that word endure doesn't mean it helps you to stoically just tough it out.

And the word encouragement doesn't just mean cheering you on. John Kelvin puts it really well when he writes that endurance is actually meekness by which we are willing to submit to God.

And then that encouragement of God's word is a taste of his goodness and his paternal love that renders all things sweet to us.

[12:07] Isn't that a beautiful way to put it? He's saying that learning from the Bible does both these things. It helps us to humbly hold on to Christ and obey him. And it also helps us to taste and see how very, very good our God is.

Well, how does the learning from God's word do this? Well, very simply, God's word shows us over and over again that God is a God of promise, that he keeps his promises.

The hope he offers is sure and certain, and it is powerful beyond our imagining. This is the message of the Bible. And you see this down in verse 8.

If you jump down there, it says, For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised, that's the Jewish people, to show God's truthfulness in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

You see, God is a God of promises, and his promises all come true in Jesus. That's what verse 8 tells us. His big plan, as we heard in that video, is to redeem the worlds that all nations, Jews and Gentiles, the ones who might be naturally separated completely, will one day be gathered together under Jesus.

[13:31] And because you know that this is happening to you, you are never outside the promise of God to do that gathering in your life with others who have that same hope.

And all of you who are gathered together here right now by this amazing technology of Zoom or YouTube, all of you have experienced really dark times that might challenge your faith and cause you to maybe doubt that hope that God has given to us in his word.

You might be experiencing it now. And you might have wondered, where is God? Why is he allowing this thing to be happening to me? Well, the scriptures show us that in all of these experiences, God is being faithful to his promise for you.

Jesus makes it absolutely certain that he is saving you, that you are in Christ, that he will bring you to the day of Jesus' glorious return through what you experience.

This is God's true hope. And you see this over and over again in the Bible. This is why Paul shares with this verses 9 through 12. Let's just look at this for a moment.

[14:46] Verse 9 is part of the Song of David from the history book of 2 Samuel. And there he spoke to God at the very end of his life after he had gone through all of his failures as king.

After he had committed terrible adultery and killed his friend to do it. After his children had turned out badly and turned against him. In all of David's flawed life, God was faithful to his promise.

And David says at the end of his life, I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing to your name. God, you're gathering the Gentiles together to us. And then verse 10.

Verse 10 is the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 at the end of his life. And he sings this song after in his pride he struck the rock, claiming God's glory.

And therefore, he was not allowed to go into the promised land. And in that song he sings, Rejoice, O Gentiles, with God's people. You see, he's saying through his sinful life, in the wanderings of God's people in the desert, even in their slavery, God keeps his promise to make Israel a blessing to the nations.

[16:03] And then there's verse 11. It's from Psalm 117. It's a really short psalm of worship. And it says this. It says, Praise the Lord all the nations. Extol him all the peoples.

And there's one more verse. For great is his steadfast love towards us. And the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord. That was sung by Israel throughout her history.

And it was sung on the day of Passover, when Jesus was betrayed and killed by God's people. On that awful day, God was keeping his promise so that we Gentiles now praise the Lord and know his steadfast love forever.

And then finally, look at verse 12. It's from the prophet Isaiah. It's spoken in the darkest days of Israel. When because of their disobedience, they are dispersed and they are sent in exile.

Isaiah says, The root of Jesse will come. Even he who arises to rule the Gentiles, in him will the Gentiles hope. You see, even in this dark day, God was keeping his promises.

[17:14] The root of Jesse is Jesus, our Lord and Savior. He will one day rule in glory. And he gathers Jews and Gentiles together in him for their great good.

So you see, every chapter of the Bible, God is saying, I will fulfill my promises. Jesus the Messiah will come. God will reign on the earth.

It will be difficult. But God will do his purposes in and through you. That's the certain hope of God. And you can be united around this.

Well, I want to end by asking this question. How does God's hope change us? Well, very simply, God's hope releases us to love as Jesus loved.

If our future is not secured, and we are not satisfied by God, then we are going to be captive to a self-focused life. We will either be controlled by our fears, or we will seek to control our future in very selfish living.

[18:24] But hope changes everything. It releases us. It gives us a confidence to serve each other. I read a great article by John Piper this week on this.

And he said this. He said, Hope is the birthplace of Christian self-sacrificing love. If we don't have that hope that Jesus is for us, then we will be engaged in self-preservation and self-enhancement. But if we let ourselves to be taken care of by God for the future, whether for five minutes or five centuries from now, then we can be free to love others.

Then God's glory will shine more clearly, because that's how he becomes visible. Now, in Rome, that meant in verse two, that each of us pleases their neighbor for their good, to build them up as Jesus pleased us.

And in verse five, it means that we will live in harmony. And so that question for us is, how are you pleasing people for their good? How are you building them up because of your hope in Christ?

[19:34] Well, you do that every time you ask someone, how can I pray for you? You are building them up. I experience being built up for a great good in my small group, Bible study.

Every time I hear the guys there share about how God has been speaking to them in this passage, how God has been working in their life through God's word, I am built up in faith.

Think about how you can pray for people in your life. How can you pray that God will build them up? How can you pray that God will bring his great good into their life?

Who can you pray for to build up? And a second change is that hope brings hospitality. Isn't that interesting? Verse seven says, welcome people into your life as Christ has welcomed you.

And so the question for us is, how in this time of COVID do I invite people into my heart? How do I invite them into my lives, my life? Perhaps it's by reaching out by phone or Zoom or email or text in some way.

[20:46] I know of somebody who reaches out to the people who they remember were sitting around them in church around their pews and calls and sees, you know, how are you doing? What's going on in your life?

Amazingly, you glorify God in any act of hospitality that you do. And the question for us, each of us in this time of social separation is, how can I welcome those in our church into your life?

Well, a final change that I want to end with is that hope brings a permanent joy and peace to you. The very end, verse 13, is a marvelous blessing for us.

It says, because you belong to him, you will be gathered to him forever one day. There's a permanent joy and peace that is yours forever because of Jesus.

God in his power will help you to abound in this hope. And this is what Paul prays for you. And I pray for this for you as well now.

[21 : 53] Let's listen to this. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Amen. Amen.