

# Hope for a Despairing World

December 27, 2020

Various texts

This morning we conclude our Christmas series examining the gifts that Jesus has brought with Him. It has been my perspective that Jesus came precisely for times like these. He came bearing gifts that a fallen and broken world like ours needs at times like this. He came to give us light, peace, healing, life, salvation and today hope. He came to give us hope.

As I have been pondering this thought that Jesus came to give us hope, it seems to me that this is the culminating gift or perhaps the accumulation of all the other gifts. Hope by definition is an optimistic view of the future. Hopelessness is the ultimate of pessimism toward the future. And what gives us hope? It is that Jesus has given us all these gifts. He has shown His character in the way He has interacted with mankind. And so, if we know that He has given us all these gifts, then we can have an optimistic view of the future. That's my perspective.

So, this morning we are going to once again step back and look at a big picture issue of Scripture: hope. Bear with me as we look briefly at a whole bunch of texts, linking them together to make the point. You will have to keep your focus to have it make sense. I begin with a passage, an anchor passage that puts into perspective this whole issue of hope. The passage is Romans 8:18-25. Consider this our theme text of this morning. READ

Main point: Jesus came to give us hope, real hope, steadfast hope.

Such a hope is based not on wishful thinking, or an optimistic attitude or an ignoring of negative things. No, hope is based on the character of the One who is sovereign over all things. Who He is based on all we know about Him ought to give us hope. Or perhaps said another way, all of Scripture has been written to give us hope. From the first chapters to the last chapters, the Scriptures have laid out a reason for us to have hope NO MATTER WHAT OUR CIRCUMSTANCES ARE. And this hope is centered on one person, our Savior, our Messiah, our Lord Jesus. He gives us hope, no He IS our hope!

I. A fallen and broken world is always in desperate need of hope.

In other words, our problem is not confined to our present circumstances. In a fallen world, there will be a never ending series of threats to our hope.

After all, one of this year's threats was COVID-19, right. It has completely disrupted our lives. I think this means there has been a COVID-18 and 17 and 16. Is there anyone here who thinks there will not be a COVID-20, or 21 or 22? Of course there will be! History is a never ending string of viruses which threaten to undo us. We live in a fallen, corrupted world.

Or, how about peace and war? How long has there been war on this earth? Since the beginning. Is there anyone here who actually thinks we can come up with some system, some United Nations that will prevent war in the future? As long as there are fallen people, there will be war, terrorism, attempts to destroy others.

I could go on, but I think I've made my point. Living in a corrupt world means you will always have to deal with corruption. Living in a fallen world means you will always have to deal with fallen people. Living in a diseased world means you will always have to deal with diseases.

So, should we all just give up, give in, quit? No, but we ought not put our trust in man either. I have to tell you that going through this past season has left me with zero hope for any politicians or political solutions to our problems. I know I'm being pessimistic here, but I cannot think of one politician, no not one, that I am confident will do the right thing right now. I don't care if that's local, state, or national; legislative, judicial, or executive; Republican, Democrat or Independent; capitalist, socialist, fascist or anti-fascist. I have no confidence in any of them, no confidence in media, education, business, entertainment. They have all failed. They have all shown themselves to be talkers and not doers, saying one thing publically and other things in private, willing to look the other way when it best suits themselves. I don't know how I'll ever have confidence again that we have honest and open elections (except for Ward I in Seward, which is where my wife serves of course!) And hear me clearly, I also know that I would not necessarily be any better either!

What about the Church? What about church leaders? Well, I just read an article this past week about another prominent Christian leader who was the epitome of virtue publically, but anything but privately. It is widely known that going through 2020 has been so stressful on clergy that half or so have some sort of plan to change either professions or locations after this is all over. I think you all know it has been no fun to be a pastor in 2020. Do I really think 2021 is going to go back to normal? My pastor friend in town told me back in May that COVID had put him 5 years closer to retirement. I could relate. And again, I do not put myself above anyone else. I know I am a fallen, flawed pastor as well. I urge you NOT to put your trust in me. As I have said for years, as a

pastor you offend 10% of your congregation every year, so after 10 years you've offended everyone.

So, as I look forward, I do not see lots of good things on the horizon. I have no expectation that the Huskers will be good next year, that the virus will be gone, that our government will actually function, that all of the restaurants will re-open, that I will be able to trust the news, that everything I read on the internet will be true. And I'm by nature an optimist! No wonder so many people are depressed these days. About 1 in 7 of us has been treated for some kind of depression. I understand why.

There, I've spent the last 10 minutes giving you reasons to lack optimism, reasons to lack hope. Now, for the rest of this message, I would like to give you even better reasons to be optimistic. There is great reason for hope, and it is found in the person of Jesus Christ. He is our hope.

## II. Our source of hope is the person and work of Jesus.

The song we have been singing this season here at Hillcrest is "Hope Has a Name." And this is very true. Our hope is Jesus. Our only hope is that He is who He has said He is and will do what He has promised to do. It is all tied up in Him.

Again, we go back to the beginning. God warned Adam and Eve to obey or else. They disobeyed and fell under the curse, and their world was cursed along with them. They were condemned or doomed as were all who came after them. But as we saw on Christmas Eve, right there in the midst of articulating that curse, God pronounces a future event that would defeat the curse. There would

come a time when the “Seed,” the Son of the woman would defeat satan. There, that is hope. The future of mankind had hope because God promised that this one person would do what was planned for Him to do. We know that event as the coming of Jesus who defeated satan on the cross and the effects of the curse were cancelled, people rose from the grave, the separating curtain in the temple was torn, the penalty for our sin was paid, the dread of death and condemnation was lifted, the world was turned upside down. Ever since then, there has been reason for sinners like us to have hope.

Think about it this way. Biblical hope is not just a state of optimism. That might be how some find hope, but it is not how we find hope. Our hope is bound up in a person. As I’ve tried to make clear, not one of us is that person. Why? Because we are all flawed. We are all sinners who sin. We will all say one thing and do another. We will all look out for our own interests first. We are all rebels at heart. But what about God? What about His One and only Son? Well, in that case, we have to examine His character based on His actions, especially as compared to what He has promised.

As I suggested on Christmas eve, there are over 1,000 prophecies about the coming of Jesus on virtually every page of the Old Testament. Some are huge and vague, like sending a Savior. But others are obscure and specific like being born of a virgin, a direct descendant of David, born in Bethlehem, but a citizen of Galilee, at a specific time from the writing of the book of Daniel as recorded in Daniel 9. Those are specific, hard to account for predictions, and Jesus met them. Or just read Psalm 22 and notice how many times it parallels the events of the crucifixion. Psalm 22 details Jesus’ crucifixion scene with amazing detail, all written hundreds and hundreds of years before it happened.

Yes, it seems to me that God and His word have passed the test about controlling the future...and this is key when it comes to hope. The only way

you can have a secure hope is if the one who promises actually controls the future. If I promise that 2021 will be better, that is a very different thing than if God promises that 2021 will be better. I'm not in control of 2021!

So, then we have to look at the content of God's promises. Again, He has promised many things, some general and hard to pin down, others quite specific and hard to fake. He has promised never to leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). He promises to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with us. I believe that promise, hold to that promise, but it is hard to quantify, substantiate. But He has also made some pretty specific promises about His resurrection and His return.

Let's look at Mark 9:30-31. "They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." Specific? Yes. Future oriented? Yes. Out of His control for manipulation? Yes. Okay, then let's look at Mark 15:29-32, there while hanging on the cross, those words were thrown back at Him. "And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, 30 save yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31 So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him." He was being put to the test. But did it happen as He promised? Yes it did. He showed He controls things outside of a mortal person's ability to control regarding future events.

But what about the future from our standpoint? Well, how about John 14:1-6? "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2

In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4 And you know the way to where I am going." 5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Specific? Yes. Future oriented? Yes. Out of a normal person's control? Of course. Notice here He is dealing with His disciples and their lack of clarity and hope for this event. They were still in the process of assessing whether they could trust Jesus to be telling them the truth. They were not yet convinced. But within a few days and months, they would become bold witnesses to the truthfulness of these statements of Jesus. They would die for these truths, they died believing such truths.

The truth is that Scripture is written in such a way as to build a very strong case for the believability of the promises of God based on His character and His track record. He is who He said He is and did what He said He would do. Why should we doubt that regarding the things yet to come? He has given us no reason to doubt Him. He is a person of character and He has a spotless track record, tested over and over again. He who knows the future and controls the future has promised a blessed future to those who put their trust in Him. That is believable! We can have hope.

III. Therefore, like all those who have gone before me, I will have great hope for the future.

The people of God have always been a hope filled people. It has been a key characteristic of God's people. We are not believers in fate or chance. We are not just wishful thinkers. No, we are people of hope.

Our college study has been going through the book of Hebrews. When we left off for the semester break, we were in the middle of Hebrews 11. Hebrews 11 starts off with a definition of faith as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. It then goes on to present an honor roll of the faithful, a listing of these great heroes of the faith who lived by faith. It is characterized by the repeated phrase, “by faith.” By faith this one did this, by faith that one did that. And the purpose of this great list is to encourage the reader not to give up, not to turn back, not to give up hope. The point is made in the text that all of these people lived lives of faith even though they never (in their human lifetimes) received the things hoped for. “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” (Heb.11:13) Abraham was promised a homeland. He was told that the land of Israel would someday all be his. And yet he lived in a tent his entire life. He lived by faith. He died in faith.

The original readers of the book of Hebrews were being tempted to give up on their faith, to return to their Jewish roots. Their current negative circumstances were causing them to doubt the path they were on. And the point being made in chapter 11 is that all of these heroes of the faith did things that would have not made any sense except for the fact that God had told them to do what they did and He would reward them accordingly. They were called to lives of faith with a hope filled perspective. They all stayed the course through difficult times and challenges.

But then notice what comes immediately following the chapter 11 list. Hebrews 12 starts off this way, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him

endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb. 12:1-2)

Can you see how this applies to us? The picture painted is that of a race with a stadium filled with those who have gone before us, all cheering us on to finish strong. It tells us to keep our focus on the One who stands at the beginning and end of our faith, Jesus. He ran this race, He stayed the course, He endured the most difficult of times and now He is on the victor’s stand. He is the One we are to focus on.

The Scriptures challenge us to be prepared to defend our optimistic view of the future. I Peter 3:15 says it this way, “but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.” God knows there will be plenty to suggest that this world is messed up and getting worse. But we are to be people of hope because we know the One who controls all and knows and has declared the future. Since we know Him and His promises, we can be very optimistic about the future.

That doesn’t mean there will not be hard times. The book of Revelation lays out the worst of circumstances that will take place in the future. But even there, the text is filled with optimism for the believer’s future. Even if we are living in those days, even if we are being threatened with death for disobeying government orders, **EVEN IF THEY KILL US**, still the truth the promise is that we will win. God will honor those who are killed for His name’s sake. Scripture is quite clear that dark days are always before us, but we are not to let our hearts be troubled. We are to believe in God and His Son, Jesus.

Indeed, who knows, 2021 might be worse than 2020. The doomsayer government doctors seem to think so. But they don't know our God, they do not control the future. They don't have control over diseases, they don't have control over death. They don't give life. They don't save. Only our Lord does all of these things, and in Him I have set my hope. How about you?

If we believe this is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will reflect on our God's character and history.
- 2) We will cling to His promises.
- 3) We will keep a long term perspective.
- 4) We will be a people who are filled with hope.