



The Gift of Hope

Romans 15:13

1. Hope Firmly Placed in the Past

- *Romans 15:13; Hebrews 6:18-19; 1 Peter 1:3-4; Micah 5:2;
Matthew 2:6; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Hebrews 10:23;
1 Timothy 6:17-18*

2. Hope Fully Practical for the Present

- *1 Thessalonians 4:13; Isaiah 40:31; Romans 5:5;
Colossians 1:27; Ephesians 1:18-19*

3. Hope Finally Perfected at His Presentation

- *2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5; Ephesians 1:14; Romans 8:24-25;
1 Corinthians 15:19; Titus 2:11-13; John 14:9*

4. Hope Fittingly Present in Your Presence

- *Colossians 1:27*

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Unwrapped: Hope

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Some of many people's best childhood memories are centered on waking up Christmas morning, eager to unwrap presents dreamt about the night before. Unfortunately, many of those presents were quickly used up, discarded, or lost. This Advent season, we will unwrap the presents that God has given us that can *never* get used up or lost; gifts of the season that we can keep all the year round. We are looking at the four traditional advent themes, one for each Sunday: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. These are the *real* gifts that we are given at Christmas. They are not pleasant thoughts or ethereal words; these are real, tangible gifts that we are given and that we give at Christmas. Today, we are talking about the real gift of hope.

At the first advent when Christ arrived as a baby, hope was in short supply. Two thousand years ago, God's people were living in occupied territory. Their precious city of Jerusalem was under Roman control. They were in the middle of God's Promised Land, and yet it wasn't their own; they were oppressed and beaten down by the ruling Romans. They were taxed to their limits and beyond. They were limited in their ability to worship. They were under constant scrutiny. Their hope of being God's community of people and restoring any kind of national pride was gone. Besides the Jews, the other cultures weren't doing much better. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans had their many gods—gods of war, gods of industry, gods of agriculture, gods of cities, gods of towns, and all kinds of others. But in all of paganism's galaxies of gods, there never was one called "god of hope." That's not surprising. In that ancient world, hope had become a despised delusion, long before our Lord was born in Bethlehem. And still today our culture does not know an abiding hope.

The fact is, there is *no* hope for this sin-cursed world apart from the true God, the God of Christmas, Jesus Christ. The Bible says:

"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." (Romans 15:13, niv)

God is a God of Hope!

There isn't anything in this world that offers a lasting hope. There *are* things we "hope" for; we hope for that favorite toy at Christmas, but the joy from it won't even last as long as the toy does. We hope for that raise or promotion, or that grade on a test, or even hope to be with the one we love. We hope for health for our loved ones or ourselves. And I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with those, however, even in the *greatest* of those things, at *most* they will all only last as long as life on this earth lasts. God, however, gives hope not only for this life, but also the next. His is the only hope that lasts forever, and we need that kind of hope.

This life needs hope; every one of us in this room (and every person on this planet) cannot live without hope. It's been said that people can live for forty days without food, four days without water, and four minutes without air. But we cannot live for four seconds without hope.¹

¹ Andy Crouch, "The Gospel of Steve Jobs," Christianity Today (1-21-11); submitted by Kevin Miller, Wheaton, Illinois

Hope has the power to make us better. CNN recently wrote in a research article that “The positive physiological effects of hope are well-documented, most eloquently in Jerome Groopman's "The Anatomy of Hope," where he writes: "Researchers are learning that a change in mind-set has the power to alter neurochemistry.

"Belief and expectation -- the key elements of hope -- can block pain by releasing the brain's endorphins and enkephalins, mimicking the effects of morphine. In some cases, hope can also have important effects on fundamental physiological processes like respiration, circulation and motor function."²

Hope is fundamental to our wellbeing. Some move through this life hoping to find hope, moving from one thing to another and leaving a trail of hopeless longings that never last. Others, who have found the hope of Jesus Christ, walk through this life WITH hope. You are either looking for it, or you living with it. That's it. Without it, none of us lives long. But Christmas is *all* about hope. Hope entered the world in the birth of Jesus Christ. Hope became reality that first Christmas. Hope arrived; hope “advented.” The word “advent” means “arrival,” and the concept of advent applies to Christ's first advent as much as his *second* advent (or his return someday). The season of Christmas reminds us of the first arrival of hope into this world in Christ; that we can unwrap hope and have it in our lives. We have the promise of hope for today, for each new day, and the assured hope that Christ will return again one day for us in a culmination of our hope.

Let's see what this hope is and why it is so important, starting with...

1. Hope Firmly *Placed* in the *Past*

Once you have experienced a reason to have hope, then that hope becomes something you can hang on to. You can unwrap it. For example, imagine a child who wakes up scared in the night and cries out, and then finds that her father and mother are right there. So the next time she has a nightmare, she can take comfort because she remembers that her parents were there that first time. She has hope with each new time because of the first one. In the same way, when Christ first arrived on that first Christmas, he brought hope into this world that will never go away for those who will trust Him. Because that hope arrived, we can have hope still today. And that hope is named Immanuel, “God with us.” That hope we have from Christ's first arrival serves like a lifeline from the past. The Bible says:

“We who ... take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” (Hebrews 6:18-19, niv)

That means that the hope we have when Christ arrived that first Christmas is an anchor from 2000 years ago with a chain reaching all the way to today. All we have to do is tug that line to know that it's still solid.

About 15 years ago, Shelly and I were able to go sailing with some friends for a week around the islands in the Puget Sound. We sailed on a ship called the Zodiac, a 160-foot, two-masted schooner. For a week, we lived on the ship, slept and ate on the ship; we were part of the crew on the ship, raising, lowering, and trimming sails, charting the course and tacking the ship, even taking a turn at the wheel. We each rotated jobs, but we also each had the same jobs each day.

² <http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/11/health/hope-healing-enayati/>

My daily job, along with another person, was to assist in retrieving the anchor after we had dropped it. The links in that chain were bigger than your fist. We had to run the motor that brought it up, and then one of us had to hose off the chain while the other was in the chain locker stowing the chain. The chain had to be laid out so that it could be dropped again without tangling. That job was called “faking the chain.” So one person was called the hoser, and the other was called the faker. I was the hoser, in case you are wondering. But that way, the chain was set so that when we needed to stop for the night, we’d find a cove and drop the anchor. Sometimes we’d drop as much as 100 feet of chain to the ocean floor, and then we’d drop another 30 feet or so to weigh it down even more. Then, no matter how strong the tide was, our ship would hold fast and we could sleep soundly through the night, thanks to that anchor.

In the very same way, according to that verse, no matter what we face in the journey today, we can endure it because of the hope that’s firmly placed in the past when Jesus first arrived. Once we have that hope, we can keep going.

Several years ago, an experiment on endurance was conducted at the University of California at Berkeley involving Norwegian field rats. The rats were placed in a tub of water, where they were forced to swim until they grew exhausted and finally drowned. That sounds like a win/win situation, doesn’t it? Science learns things and rats are killed. The world could use a few less rats! But during the first experiment, the researchers discovered that on the average, Norwegian field rats were capable of swimming for over seven hours before drowning. (I don’t know why it was Norwegian and not Canadian or South American.) But a second experiment was conducted, exactly like the first but with one exception. When a rat was getting too exhausted to swim any longer, the researchers would remove the rat from the tub of water for a few seconds, then put the rat back into the water to continue swimming. These rats were able to swim for almost twenty hours before perishing.

The researchers concluded that the rats in the second group were able to swim almost three times longer than the first group for the simple reason that they had hope. They had experienced a rescue – and what kept them going was the hope that they would be rescued again.

If rats need to have hope to remember, so do we; human beings are no different. Without hope, we drown. But with hope, we have a reason to live. Hope is what keeps us going. It has been said that, “as oxygen is to the lungs, so hope is to the human heart.”

Many people today have false hopes. They put their hopes in technology, or in hedonism, or in accumulating material wealth or power. But these hopes are like fool’s gold; they are false hope – ultimately they are worthless and have no power to keep us afloat.

That’s why Jesus came. Death is the ultimate hopelessness; we *all* drown in it. But Christ conquered death and the grave so that we would know that we could also do the same in him. This means no matter what happens, ultimately *nothing* can hurt us because of the hope we have from Christ’s first arrival.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.” (1 Peter 1:3-4, niv)

God promised to send His Son to us, and he fulfilled that promise (Micah 5:2, Matthew 2:6). That promise kept now gives us hope that He will keep every other promise he’s made to us:

“For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘yes’ in Christ.”
(2 Corinthians 1:20)

Sometimes people ask what difference that first Christmas makes today, and *this* is certainly one answer. Because hope arrived, it’s a hope we can still count on today. That’s why the Bible tells us:

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”
(Hebrews 10:23)

...and warns us not to hope in material things, but to trust in God:

“Command those who are rich in the things of this life not to be proud, but to place their hope, not in such an uncertain thing as riches, but in God, who generously gives us everything for our enjoyment.” (1 Timothy 6:17-18, niv)

Do you see? Because Christ arrived into this world, hope came with Him – a hope that is greater than anything the world has to offer us. So we can anchor to that hope that’s firmly planted in the past, which applies all the way to today, which is the second thing about this hope; it is...

2. Hope Fully *Practical* for the *Present*

It’s one thing to have hope that’s based on past performance. But we need a hope that will actively make a difference today. We need to be able to unwrap it. When we are going through difficult times, we need to know our hope will help us today. I’ve talked with several of you in this last week about what you are going through. Some of you are fighting potentially lethal cancer. Some are trying to piece your marriage back together. Some struggle with your kids. Some are facing holidays for the first time without someone you love or without an income. Life can get really, really hard. Besides being a hope that’s firmly planted in the past, can this hope make a practical difference in our lives in the present? Yes. Most of you, who I’ve spoken to this week, if I gave you the opportunity this morning, would stand and say, “Yes it does!” This hope does make all the difference, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychologist, who discovered this great truth while he was in the midst of a Jewish concentration camp during WW II. While seeking to survive the horror of imprisonment, Frankl began observing his fellow prisoners in the hope of discovering what coping mechanism would help him endure this horrendous existence. What Frankl discovered was this: those individuals who could not accept what was happening to them, who could not make their present suffering fit with their faith, who could not find its meaning in their world view... they despaired, lost hope, and eventually gave up and died. But those individuals that could find a meaning from their faith, were then able to find hope for a future beyond their present suffering, and so could accept what they were enduring as a part of their existence, and they survived. Their hope made a difference in their present situation.

That’s why the Bible says that even in the midst of our worst circumstances – even when we grieve – we still have hope! –

“We do not want you to . . . grieve like the rest of men who have no hope.”
(1 Thessalonians 4:13, niv)

A Hebrew word often used for “hope” in the Bible is *qavah*. This means, “to bind together, look patiently, tarry or wait, and hope, expect, look eagerly.” This is the context used in Isaiah 40:31:

“But those who trust [hope] in the Lord shall renew their strength . . .”

This is a waiting, expectant hope! A certain and sure hope in the future gives us supernatural strength,

“...they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31, niv)

Because God loved us so much that he would send His Son to us, how could we not hope? How could we not expect him to be with us and help us today? That’s why the Bible says that this:

“Hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” (Romans 5:5)

Our hope helps us today!

John Maxwell is a pastor, author, and speaker, and he very fluently tells the difference that hope makes for our lives today:

“Hope shines brightest when the hour is darkest.

Hope motivates when discouragement comes.

Hope energizes when the body is tired.

Hope sweetens while bitterness bites.

Hope sings when all melodies are gone.

Hope believes when evidence is eliminated.

Hope listens for answers when no one is talking.

Hope climbs over obstacles when no one is helping.

Hope endures hardship when no one is caring.

Hope smiles confidently when no one is laughing.

Hope reaches for answers when no one is asking.

Hope presses toward victory when no one is encouraging.

Hope dares to give when no one is sharing.

Hope brings the victory when no one is winning.”

(John Maxwell, Think on These Things)

If you have put your faith in Christ, this is the hope you have. I hope that you are living in that hope! The Bible says it is:

“ . . . Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Colossians 1:27, niv)

This hope *can* make a difference – listen: no matter what you are going through. There is no situation that is so hopeless that the hope of Christ isn’t greater than. So my prayer for you today is the same as the Apostle Paul’s prayer for the church in Ephesus:

“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. . . .” (Ephesians 1:18-19, niv)

I *long* for you to know the hope that makes a practical difference in everyday life, no matter how good or bad things may be going for you, no matter what you are going through. It’s hope from the past, for the present, and I want us to see that ours is a...

3. Hope Finally Perfected at His Presentation

Past, present, and future perfected.

On the southern coast of Italy, there is a harbor, which is very treacherous and difficult to navigate, especially at night. But experienced sailors understand that there is a safe, proven method to steer the waters. There are three lighted buoys placed at intervals right in the middle of the safest lane of travel. As they enter the harbor, they line these three buoys up in their sights until they make a straight line, and then follow that line safely through to shore. In the same way, if our hope is going to get us through this life and the next, we must line up all three: our hope is one that is firmly planted in the past and at the same time is fully practical in the present, but it will finally be perfected when Jesus is presented to us on his final advent – when he returns. It takes all three.

There is an element to hope that, by its nature, is unfulfilled. Hope implies a longing for something we have not yet taken hold of. We are talking about Jesus’ return and the hope of heaven one day. It is already guaranteed to us – it was promised to us and purchased for us by Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is our deposit on it, the Bible says in three places (2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5; Ephesians 1:14). Like a present under the Christmas tree with our name on it – it’s ours; we just don’t get to open it yet. We wait in expectation for what we long for to be fulfilled – Christ’s return.

We have a hope that started two thousand years ago, that applies today, and that will be fulfilled, completed, and perfected when he finally returns. It wouldn’t be hope if we didn’t have something to look forward to!

“For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” (Romans 8:24-25, niv)

The Apostle Paul reminds us in the middle of talking about Christ’s return, that if our hope were only for this life, what difference would that really make? It has to be a hope that lasts into eternity or it’s no better than anything else we might put our hope in this life. Paul said:

“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.” (1 Corinthians 15:19, niv)

This hope that we’re talking about gives us the ability to live today with help for tomorrow, too. We can live...

“Upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” (Titus 2:11-13, niv)

Because of Christ's first arrival (his birth, death, and resurrection), we have hope that makes a difference today, and hope that takes us into eternity.

I can still recall a geography lesson from elementary school in which we learned that the southernmost point of Africa is a point, which experiences tremendous storms. For many centuries no one even knew what lay beyond that cape, because no ship attempting to round that point had ever returned to tell the tale. Among the ancients it was known as the "Cape of Storms," and for good reason, with ships either sinking or disappearing.

But then a Portuguese explorer in the sixteenth century, Vasco De Gama, successfully sailed around that very point and found beyond the wild raging storms, a great calm sea, and beyond that, the shores of India. The name of that cape was then changed from the Cape of Storms to the Cape of Good Hope.

Until Jesus Christ came to earth, died, and rose from the dead, death had been the cape of storms on which all hopes of life beyond had been wrecked. No one knew what lay beyond that point until, on Easter morning, Jesus defeated death and Satan. Now we know He'll return to perfect all things.

Suddenly, like those ancient explorers, we can see beyond human death to the hope of heaven and eternal life with the Father. More than that, we dare to believe that He will return, and we shall experience in our own human lives exactly what the Son of God experienced in His, for the risen Christ says to us"

"Because I live, you shall live also." (John 14:9)

This is the heart of our hope: past, present, and perfected. This hope we have in Christ is a real gift of Christmas. Will you receive this hope, not just for this season but for your whole life?

Pray

Finally, ours is a...

4. Hope Fittingly *Present* in Your *Presence*

When you have accepted Christ, you have hope. But it isn't a useless hope; it is a useful hope. Because you and I live in a world that desperately needs hope. The reason that people are still rioting on streets of major cities a month after the elections is because they think they have no hope. They placed all their hope in Hillary and a set of ideas, and they lost the election. Others are wrongly putting their hope in President elect Donald Trump. And over 42% of our country didn't even vote; most because they thought it was hopeless to do so.

There are all kinds of struggles that people in our community are in the midst of, and they are having trouble finding hope for each day. They are wondering what they can hope for. Some put their hope in the next material possession, or the next relationship, or the next job, only to be disappointed again and again when they don't get what they want, and even when they do get what they want. So they wonder where they can find hope, and they wonder if they can find hope that will last.

If you have Christ in you, *you* have that hope – in you. IN YOU. God wants the world to see Christ their hope IN YOU. YOU carry the real gift of Christmas – you carry Christ in you. And

God wants you to unwrap that hope and bring that real gift into the world through your life – through your words and your actions. The Bible says:

“God wanted to make the glorious riches of this secret plan known among the Gentiles, which is *Christ living in you, the hope of glory.*” (Colossians 1:27, ceb)

You have hope from the past, for the present, and hope that will be perfected when Christ is finally present at his second advent. And until then, you have in you the real gift of hope; hope that is fittingly present in *your* presence in this world.

Take the Hope of Christ – the real gift of Christmas – into this world through your life.

Pray