

Christmas Hope...answering when?

Heb. 6:17-19

Intro. I'd like you to open your Bible or one in the pew in front of you to **Acts 27**. There's an action packed story here that might help introduce the subject of Christmas hope.

Acts 27:8-20 - We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them, "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also." But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest. When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the "northeaster," swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. When the men had hoisted it aboard, they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

I'm thinking few if any of us have ever been caught in a storm as ferocious as this 'nor-easter'. But I'm sure most of us have gotten ourselves into some kind of trouble because we didn't obey God or listen to advice we were given. I knew a poor fellow who wrecked an uninsured luxury car his fiancée' co-signed for him to buy. Then as a matter of company policy she was fired from her job when her wages were garnished for past due payments. Needless to say, that ended their engagement. But life has all sorts of trouble that can rock our boats and threaten our well-being. **v.20** represents trouble in the extreme when all hope is lost. Let me read it again...**When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.**

For the past three Sundays we've been talking about Christmas Love / Christmas Grace / and Christmas Joy. Christmas love answers WHY...why did God send His Son to die for us? God's love for us is the answer the NT repeats time after time. **I Jn. 4:9 - This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.** Christmas Grace answers HOW...how or on what basis, could God who is holy and just forgive and save sinners like us? **Eph. 2:8, 9** says, **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.** Grace is unde-served favor. Grace is God doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. Christmas Joy answers the question WHAT...what do we gain from that first Christmas. To a rough band of outcasts the angel said...**"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord."** Motivated by love and grace, the Lord sent a Savior. Jesus and His salvation is the reason and source of great joy for all who trust Him. But as we'll see this AM, Christ is also the hope of the world. He's the answer to our problems today and the solution to our concerns about tomorrow. So this AM we want to focus on Christmas Hope. Because hope has to do with things not yet seen or realized, it relates to the question WHEN? In this fallen world hope is what we need until Jesus returns to make things right.

1. The Diminishing Shadows of Hope

We're living at a time when many are pessimistic about the future. The world has always had plenty of doom-sayers and pessimists. But today the sense of hopelessness is pandemic. The future inspires anxiety and dread instead of hopefulness. The economy shows little sign of recovery / the political stalemate seems irreconcilable / an 18 trillion dollar national debt, lends credence to warnings of impending economic collapse. Under the threat of terrorism and talk of biological, chemical, and nuclear warfare, anxiety has ignited a new surge in suicide and the drug market.

Virtually everyone in health and wellness agree that hope is essential to sanity and a balanced outlook on life. Hope sustains the shipwrecked sailor through long days when no rescue vessel is in sight. Hope spurs on the athlete whose team has yet to win a game. The hope of parole sustains the prisoner in his lonely cell as he checks off the days, months and years he' served. Those facing long-term disability or terminal illness need hope. So do people who have suffered shattering losses, whether loss of loved ones / reputation / health / job or marriage. The truth is...we all need hope.

Emil Brunner wrote, *"What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of human life. Take oxygen away and death occurs through suffocation; take hope away and humanity is constricted through lack of breath: despair supervenes, spelling the paralysis of intellectual and spiritual powers by a feeling of the senselessness and purposelessness of existence. As the fate of the human organism is dependent on...oxygen, so the fate of humanity is dependent on its supply of hope."*

Last time we found that happiness and joy are not the same. Happiness is based on circumstances or happenings. But *joy is directly related to God and the firm confidence that all is well, regardless of our circumstances.* Happiness is an emotion people seek, but joy is a gift from God. The same kind of distinction exists between the common meaning of hope and hope as defined in the Bible. Most of what we call hope belongs in one of three categories; wishful thinking / blind optimism / or hopeful dreams. For a moment, let's think about these.

- *Wishful thinking* is the attempt to affect reality by positive thoughts. It's hoping things in or out of existence. It's like making a wish while tossing a coin over your right shoulder / breaking a wish bone / or crossing your fingers. It's hoping to win the lottery or hoping to ace an exam even though you haven't studied. Neither is likely to happen no matter how wishful we are. Wishful thinking is really a form of superstition. Its the notion that maybe, somehow, some way, sincere wishes will help things go the direction we want them to.
- *Blind optimism* is a hopeful attitude with no basis. I think most of us would rather hang out with an optimist than someone who cries the sky is falling! But blind optimism isn't what the Bible means by hope. A blind optimist either buries his head in the sand or views life through rose-colored lenses. He papers over problems as though they don't exist. I love the story about the cheerful boy who with shovel in hand was found digging in a stall piled high with horse manure. When asked what he was doing, he said, *"With all this manure, there's got to be a pony in here somewhere."* Though optimists are more pleasant to be around, their optimism is powerless to effect change. The blind optimist is ripe for crushing disappointment.
- *Hopeful dreams* take wishful thinking to the next higher level. Instead of just wishing he could dunk a basketball at age 65, the hopeful dreamer wolfs down some protein shakes and hires a personal trainer. He dreams of soaring from the free throw line and slamming one down. The problem is...he could never reach the rim even when he was 25 much less 65! Another guy may dream of job security and success ascending a corporate ladder. But lofty dreams often fall victim to factors beyond our control...

Like natural law that insists gravity is greater than hopeful dreams...or the disappointing reality that corporate layoffs can put an end to an employee's climb to greatness.

While mental attitudes like these are better than pessimism...none of them compare to the Bible's meaning for the word hope. No one by wishing can eliminate cancer or produce good weather for a picnic. Neither can anyone dream themselves into prosperity, success or heaven no matter how optimistic they are. People who lose hope or succumb to hopelessness, are often those who rely on things that can never produce what they hope for. Like faith, hope is only as dependable as its what it's built on. Say it with me...*"My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ and righteousness! I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand...all other ground is sinking sand!"*

2. The Dependable Source of Hope

Though we often define hope in terms of sentiment or wishful thinking, God is the ultimate source of hope that is substantial and dependable. Written in the context of Israel's agricultural economy where the nation's survival hinged on rainfall, the prophet asked...**Do any of the worthless idols of the nations bring rain? Do the skies themselves send down showers? No, it is You, O LORD our God. Therefore our hope is in You, for You are the One who does all this. - Jer. 14:22.** Neither wishful thinking / blind optimism / or hopeful dreams can end a draught or bring rain. Power over nature doesn't reside in rain-dancing paganism or misguided-environmentalism. What idols are powerless to do, the Lord God can do. **Therefore**, says Jeremiah, **our hope is in You.** In 17:7 he wrote, **But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence (or hope) is in Him.**

This encouragement to hope in God is repeated many times in the Psalms. Here are a few examples:

- **Psa. 39:7 - "But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.**
- **Psa. 42:11 – "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."**
- **Psa. 62:5 - Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him.**
- **Psa. 130:5 - I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope.**

The New Testament echoes the fact that God is the only true and dependable source of hope.

- **Rom. 15:13 - 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.**
- **I Tim. 1:1 - Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope... Then speaking of God's unfailing faithfulness to His promises...**
- **Heb. 6:19 says, We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.**

I Cor. 13:13 lists three enduring commodities. **And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.** Love, said Jesus, is the essence of a relationship with the Lord. He loves us and we ought to love Him. Faith is trusting God who provided salvation as a gift. Bible hope is a sense of expectancy enjoyed by those who have embraced God's love and grace. Instead of blind optimism, it's based on God's unfailing promises. Jack Countryman put it this way... *"God makes a promise. Faith believes His promise. Hope anticipates its fulfillment. Patience quietly waits."* Write that down, it's worth more than the price of admission to church this AM.

Lee Stroebel recently wrote a book entitled The Case for Hope. He writes, *"Hope is the inextinguishable flicker God ignites in our souls to keep us believing in the prevailing power of his light even when we are surrounded by utter darkness.*

It's the unswerving belief that better days are ahead, probably in this world and most certainly in the next. It's the quiet resolve He hardwires into our spirit that clings to the seemingly impossible truth that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him," and "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Rom. 8:28, 37) Over and over, the Bible urges us to trust God and His Word as the basis of our hope. Now if the title of the message means anything, about now we need some kind of a Christmas connection.

This AM I want to do something we've never done before. I want you to look at a famous work of art entitled, The Adoration of the Shepherds. This painting was done by the Dutch artist, Rembrandt in 1646. The painting depicts his vision of what it was like for the shepherds to see the baby Jesus. The setting is dark because it's a night scene inside what appears to be a barn. The dark tones force the viewer to examine the images carefully. In the center is the baby Jesus in the manger ...a feeding trough. Mary and Joseph are at his side. The shepherds are gathered around, intently gazing at the baby whose birth was announced by the angelic choir. If you look into the gloom, you can faintly see outlines of some sheep. Since shepherds won't leave their sheep untended, the sheep may have accompanied the shepherds into the barn. On the right side there's a rickety ladder leaning on a crossbeam. Perched on a beam above the ladder is a rooster.

Now I'm no art aficionado. But it soon hits you that the ladder and the crossbeam form the dim outline of a cross. Can you see it? The rooster in the shadowy background is a symbol of the betrayal that would happen in the distant future. Even in this joyous moment of the Savior's birth, the cross looms over the infant. Elements of antagonism and agony are present in this peaceful scene. But the most significant feature in the picture is the light. Unlike other Renaissance artists, Rembrandt didn't portray Jesus as an angel with a halo over his head. Instead, He painted a normal human baby. Notice how the entire painting is dark except for the baby in the manger. Rembrandt got it. He understood that Jesus came into a world of darkness. And notice...the light isn't shining on the baby, it's shining out from Him. His light lightens the faces of all who are close to Him. And notice this too, the light from the face of Jesus is more brilliant than the light from the lantern in the shepherd's hand. This work of art was Rembrandt's way of sharing his belief that hope and light emanates from the Christ child. Rembrandt Von Rijn believed the light and hope of the world is Jesus Christ! He also believed as the Bible teaches, that Christ's betrayal and crucifixion were not unexpected but were part of God's plan from the beginning.

Rom. 15:4 explains that God gave us His Word so that we might live with confidence and hope. **For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we have hope.** From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is a story of hope. We find this theme in the earliest chapters of Genesis. Just ask...“How did God respond when Adam and Eve sinned? Did He write them off? Did He destroy His prototype humans and start over again? No! The story of hope begins with the simple observation that God didn't give up on the human race. In love and grace, He determined to do something. He wouldn't let His highest creations self-destruct and He refused to let Satan win the battle for control of His planet.

So the Lord made a promise. This promise is called the proto-evangelium or the first mention of the Gospel. To the serpent God said, **“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” - Gen. 3:15** Even though this promise seems cryptic and vague, prophets who came later filled in the details. In its purest form the Lord promised to conquer Satan and sin by someone He would send. The rest of the OT reports the progressive unfolding of this redemption plan. But the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise came that first Christmas with the appearing of Jesus. By Christ's coming, over 300 prophecies were fulfilled. These fulfilled promises prove that God can be trusted to do what He says He will do. His promises are true and dependable. Our hope is built on His unfailing Word.

II Tim. 1:9, 10 say, **This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.** The hope of the world is bound up in the Christ child born in Bethlehem's manger. Joe Stowell wrote about hope as it relates to Christ's birth... *"The prevailing mood of Israel was anything but hopeful. The once proud nation was now a puppet state of the pagan Roman Empire. The common person lived under the defeating burden of the exaggerated requirements of the religious establishment. Centuries before they had been promised a deliverer who would restore Israel to its former glory, but it had never happened. Into this sense of cynical hopelessness, true Hope was born. But the tragedy of that first Christmas was that very few realized the hope that had been introduced. Hope for the forgiveness of sins. Hope for a bright future – forever. Hope for God's presence and power for daily living...Hope that would enable us to forget the past and set our sights on stuff that doesn't disappoint...A hope that, because of Jesus, is a certainty and not just another wish to be dashed on the rocks of reality."*

3. The Earnest Expectation of Hope – Heb. 11:1

The thing that distinguishes Bible hope from the sort that wishes the Detroit Lions would win a Superbowl is the assurance and confidence the believer possesses. **Heb. 11:1** says, - **Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.** Bible hope is being sure of things we don't presently see even when what is hoped for seems impossible. Its Abraham believing God would give he and Sarah a son when they'd been on Medicare almost 30 years. **Rom. 4:18 - Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him...** Bible hope is believing Jesus will soon airlift the Church from earth to heaven even though we've never seen such a thing.

How many shopped online this Christmas? When you shop online, sometimes a box shows up on the doorstep marked, *"one of two."* This simply means the box that arrived isn't the entire order...another one is coming. (How many feel that explanation insulted your intelligence?) My apologies. But that's how it is with Jesus. The earliest Christians didn't divide the life and ministry of Jesus into chapters or segments. Instead they viewed His entire time on earth, from birth to ascension under one heading they called, His **appearing**. For example **Heb. 9:26b** says, **But now He (Jesus) has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.** This epiphany or first appearing of Jesus fulfilled more than 300 specific prophecies or promises. These fulfilled prophecies demonstrate how utterly dependable God is. Jesus came the first time exactly as God said He would come and He did what God said He would do. But here's the thing...the first appearing of Jesus was not the last. His first coming was like that box marked "one of two." One of every 30 verses in the NT promises His first coming will be followed by a second. We read **Heb. 9:26**, but listen to what comes next...**vs.27, 28** say, **Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.** The Christ whose birth the whole world acknowledges is coming again. Are you waiting for Him? And it isn't just believers who are waiting...**Rom. 8:19** says, **The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.** The entire created world is waiting for Christ to return and release it from bondage to corruption. Once again, the hope of the world is Jesus.

Notice the connection between our hope and this soon to happen second appearing of Jesus. **Titus 2:11-13** says, **For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, 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.** These verses say Jesus appeared (past tense), but we're (presently) waiting for His (future) appearing.

In Christianity, the believer's hope is expressed this way... "already, but not yet." For example, Jesus already appeared the first time, but He hasn't yet appeared the second time. Another example is this...Those who have trusted Christ are saved already, but salvation in all of its fullness has not yet come. John often wrote in terms like this. **1 Jn. 3:2 - Friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.** Faith in Christ has already made us God's sons and daughters. But the miracle that will transform us to be like Christ has not yet happened. This change is described in the next verse...**Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. – 1 Jn. 3:3** Here this "already but not yet" situation is called **this hope in Him**. In between the "already" and the "but not yet" formula is hope! Based on what God has already done for us, we trust Him and are confident the good things He has planned for us will come to pass. This is **Phil.1:6** where Paul wrote, **being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

Aside from proving that Jesus is God's Messiah, the genealogy of **Matt. 1** is a record of hope. What do I mean by that? Just this...except for Jesus Himself, there's not a perfect person on the list! Every entry in the family tree of Jesus failed to live up to God's expectations. Every person Jesus descended from was a sinner. In his book entitled *The Glory of Christmas*, Dr. John MacArthur calls these flawed people, *Knots on the Family Tree*. The fact is...when God planned to become one of us by means of the Incarnation and virgin birth, the only people He had to work with were fallen and sinful. But that's the glory of it all. That's one reason Jesus is the hope of the whole world. He didn't come for the morally perfect or the spit-shined religious. From His genealogy / to His baptism / to His willingness to associate with tax collectors and prostitutes / and even to His death between two criminals...Jesus identified with sinful people like us. In **Matt. 9:13** He said, **"For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."**

Somehow many think the Church and heaven is for good people. The fact is, not a single person we know is good enough for God or for life in heaven. Do hospitals exist for those who are well? Do rescue teams exist for those who are safe and sound? No, of course not! God sent a savior because that's what we needed most. We needed someone to lift us from our fallen state and give us life when we were dead in sin. The Good News the angel announced that first Christmas night is this...there is hope for everyone no matter how godless and messed up their life is. There is forgiveness, cleansing, a new beginning and the promise of life forever in God's presence. And all of this is guaranteed by the God who has never failed to keep a promise!

Now we did a horrible thing this AM. We left 276 people stranded on a ship in a perilous storm. With no relief in sight they had given up all hope of being saved. Let's return that story as we finish.

Acts 27:21-25 - After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. (I guess there are occasions when it's OK to say "I told you so...") But now I urge you to keep up your courage, be-cause not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. And it did...the chapter ends with these words...everyone reached land in safety.

Let me say something with the same divine authority entrusted to the Apostle Paul. God has spoken. In His word, God has made some significant promises to all who trust Christ.

Just as the angel told Paul, everyone on board or “in Christ” will be saved though the ship of this world so many are trusting, will be lost. In **v.25** we see what faith does. Faith inspires hope. So just as Paul said, I say to you, **keep up your courage, men** (and women), **for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.** At a time when hope is diminished and many are anxious...at a time when many are trusting wishful thinking / blind optimism / and hopeful dreams, God has given us a rock solid basis for our hope. The same Jesus born in Bethlehem’s manger has promised to be with us through every storm. And then at the appointed time, He will return to carry us safely to the place He has prepared for all who trust Him. Christmas hope answers the question **WHEN**. Jesus Christ is our hope now and forever! We thank Him for what He’s “already” done, and trust Him for the part that remains, “but not yet!”