

Reasons to be Hopeful

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[0:00] So, if you've got a Bible, would you open it with me, please? Or open your phone at Ephesians chapter 1.

This is the main place we're going to be staying this morning for a while. And, like I said, the second half of the chapter primarily. And the theme that I want to really pick out and lift before you this morning is hope.

It seems to me that a lot of people are looking for signs of hope nowadays. For many reasons, obvious to you, no doubt, it's been a difficult year.

All kinds of disruption. And we're constantly looking at the news, looking for good news and signs of advancement and of opening up. And you've experienced some of the benefits of that, of course, here locally yourselves.

But in all kinds of ways, not just people in church and Christians I know, but friends of mine who are not Christians are really asking the question, when most of life that I like is taken away from me, when the things that give me pleasure or comfort or assurance, whether that be people or stuff, when I can't do that anymore, and when I don't get access to it in the same way that I wish I could, then what's really going on?

[1:16] What am I doing here? What sustains me and makes me feel good? And what gives me hope? It's more difficult to find that, isn't it? When the stuff of life, the people of life, that really we've found are so essential to life, are taken away from us.

And I think there's some really, really good stuff in this passage that speaks to you this morning, I hope, if you're a Christian. Maybe you're still struggling to feel hope, because, of course, we're as affected as anybody else, if you're a Christian this morning.

But maybe, if you're not a Christian this morning, or if your friend or your neighbor is really saying, what's in the gospel for me? I mean, really, why would I become a Christian? There's so much in here that I hope you see that gives us hope.

So let me pull three things out this morning. Reason number one that we should have hope, because of what Paul says about who God is, is thanksgiving. That's something that overflows out of what Paul says, not just in this letter, but actually quite a lot in his letters.

When he's speaking to the Christians, noticeably, even when he's speaking to Christians who've got problems, I mean, churches have problems from time to time, sadly, and even in those cases where there are things he needs to address, he often starts by saying how thankful he is for the people because of who they are in Jesus.

[2:33] God is doing something extraordinary in ordinary people. Now, I don't mean to call you ordinary, but you know what I mean? Maybe people who aren't in the top 20 richest in the world or CEO of their company or whatever it is, people who are going about their business with ordinary jobs, looking after their families, God is doing something absolutely extraordinary and also something that you and I could never do for ourselves.

That's important because we're often told to look to self primarily to find the answers nowadays. So you find this immediately in verses 15 and 16. Now, we're coming in kind of halfway, aren't we? Because there's a whole half of the chapter that precedes that. So I'll refer back to the first half of the chapter. But in verse 15, Paul says, For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I've not stopped giving thanks for you.

Now, Paul's an important person by any standards, really. He was a prominent person in his culture and his religion. And then as he becomes a Christian and God claims his life, radically changes his life, Paul is still an important person because he's entrusted with the gospel.

He knows he's seen Jesus in that very vivid, visceral way. And he's entrusted with carrying the gospel and giving the gospel, calling people to the gospel. And yet he's overjoyed when he thinks about the people of Ephesus.

[4 : 01] Ordinary people struggling with life, doing life, jobs, family. He's so thankful for them. So the question is, why? Why? Well, for this reason, takes us immediately back into the first half of the chapter.

Let me just pick out a couple of things here. Paul is aware that as happened with him, becoming a Christian isn't like a kind of like, it's not like a little behavioral shift.

It's not like you've followed a four-step plan to better living or something like that. It's not a wee badge you wear, although some would like to think that. It's a radical reorientation of your very being.

You have a different identity. I'll take you back to verse four. In his very full introduction, he says these words about what God has done in them. He chose us in him before the creation of the world. Now, that's quite something, isn't it? That even before the creation of the known physical universe, God had these people in mind. And if that's true of these people, then it's true of all people in Jesus.

[5 : 08] And that means it's true of you. I wonder if you think of yourselves in these terms. God chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

Now, again, despite what many in our society may think about that concept of being holy, this isn't about being stuffy and having all your fun taken away from you, but rather it's about becoming more like Jesus.

It's about being set apart and distinct in God's eyes as he sees you as his treasured person who he loves and he has a plan for your life.

And it is to take away the sin and the tendencies to go astray. Though you wrestle against that at times, it is to take that away and to take that away and in its place to put in Christ-likeness so that one day when he comes again, he will see you in Christ as perfect.

I mean, that is the way he looks on you now if you are in Jesus, but one day all sin will be taken away from you. Wonderful plan that God has for your life. Wonderful purpose.

[6 : 16] And it's thorough, isn't it? It's huge. It's a big deal. And maybe, I don't know, maybe they'd lost sight. I think we all do in some ways, don't we? The magnitude of what God is doing, the magnitude of what it means to be a Christian.

It's not something you inherited from a bygone era that our country maybe wishes we could forget about, no longer relevant to the times. It's totally profound.

And Paul is overjoyed because, you know, the thing is, he knew, didn't he? He'd been transformed. He was the one who went after Christians and now he's the one who looks on them and he says, I'm so happy to see what God is doing in you.

So there's a lot in the first section of the chapter, but I'm going to move on because we don't have time to go into all of that. But here specifically what he wants to give thanks for are two things. You'll see he says in verse 15, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus, your faith, and your love for all God's people.

Now again, the chapter is so packed that you can spend a long time on each of these, but what's notable about these? Well, it's very important, isn't it, that Paul says, what's important here is your faith in Jesus.

[7 : 29] Now that's profound in our day and age because again, many people may say to you, look within. You have the answer. We have the answer. Now we can do a lot. God has given us many gifts perhaps and God asks society as well to work well together.

But God also knows that our essential need is outside of ourselves. I can't redeem myself. Neither can you. We can't save ourselves.

And we can't do what Paul goes on to do, to say in the rest of the letter, where he looks a lot at the church. We can't do this amazing thing that God is building through all of time and history in gathering people from all backgrounds.

The amazing diversity and unity that exists within the church is something that only God can do because of the unity that exists in Jesus. So faith in Jesus is essentially looking outside of ourselves for the answer.

And it's very important. And secondly, your love for all God's people. Now again, can you see how important that is? As we have been loved, we are called to love our neighbor, the person who sits

next to you in the pew, the person you've been in church with for 20 years, or the person who just walked through the door.

[8 : 46] And again, that is very counter-cultural in a world that's constantly falling out, struggling to get along. Society is often fragmented, but there should be this love within the church, a regard for one another as those who are in Jesus.

Let me ask you a couple of questions just as we let this thought circulate for a moment. Is this how you see yourself? So again, I don't know you.

I don't know if you're here this morning seeking God. This is what God wants for you. This is what you're being called to, to become a Christian. It's somebody who God knows intimately and cares for, even from before the foundations of the world.

It's mind-blowing, really, to think about it. And somebody who looks at their own resources and honestly finds themselves wanting, not having the capacity, even to make life how you want it, in every little detail.

We can't do that. We certainly can't redeem ourselves. We can't in the same way that the Lord Jesus can. Is this how you regard yourself? Maybe you're a Christian who's just, feels smashed by life.

[9 : 59] You know, it has been a difficult year. Maybe you have difficult circumstances right now. And yet in that, I want you to see again that you are somebody who is known, treasured, for whom God has a purpose.

He's radically reshaping your life, remaking you in the image of Jesus. Or have you lost a sense of expectation of what God is doing in your heart?

You know, has it become just dry and routine? And I suppose we can all identify with that, can't we? But we're called back again from our experience and our feelings to the testimony of what God in his word through Paul says to you about who you are and what God is doing for you.

So that's the first question. And the second question is, do you see one another in these terms? Isn't that a hard thing when we realize the joy with which Paul beholds a group of Christians and he calls them to that love for one another?

You know, irrespective of character, we're different people. We have different preferences. We maybe have different visions for the church or all kinds of things. And yet there must be that godly, Christ-like regard for one another, a love that is rooted in the fact that I owe everything to Jesus.

[11 : 23] And so does my brother and sister and that brother and sister. All of us loved by God. And that is the reason we are who we are and where we are where we are.

So the first reason for hope is thanksgiving. Paul sees a lot of hope for thanksgiving and hope in other words. Second reason is to do with insight.

The way God helps us understand ourselves as we understand him. So in other words, knowledge of self, who I am, who you are, is inevitably tied to knowledge of God.

When we don't know God, this kind of comes from what I was saying to the young folk, and when we've only got our own understanding to go on, then that becomes deficient. We start to realize that that won't cut it.

It doesn't help us understand ourselves anywhere like when we start to look into what Paul is saying here. Insight, knowing God leads to knowing self. What does God give us? What insight are we talking about here?

[12 : 24] Well, look at verse 17. Let me read these words. And here's this great plea. You know, Paul says, I pray for you, I love you, and I'm praying for you.

What's he praying for them? Well, I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ the glorious Father may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation. So he wants them to know.

He wants them to have insight. There are different ways these words can be translated. Now, lots of people want insight. Lots of people want knowledge. It's why I nearly came to Aberdeen to go to university.

It's why people learn. It's why we educate our children. It's why many different religions are concerned with the issue of inner illumination. But I think that's the difference. In the way many sort of religions, philosophies talk about enlightenment, the call to you very much is, again, I keep coming back to this, to look within, to find your own inner illumination, even to the point where some people I know have come to the conclusion that the answer is within to the extent that they have their own divinity.

Find your inner goddess is something I've seen a friend talk about a lot recently. So you've just got to, it's really all on you. It's all on your shoulders. Find your inner goddess.

[13 : 44] Find your inner wisdom. And again, Paul has already said that faith in Jesus is the essence of what we need. And so it really begs the question here when we come to this passage and he's saying, I'm asking God that he will give you wisdom and revelation.

It begs the question, well, hang on a minute, don't they already know him? Isn't he writing a letter to a church? Surely they already know God. And of course, what that helps us see is that Paul's not just talking about some head knowledge.

He's not just talking about having some facts. And he's not talking about historic faith where they can say, yeah, on the 26th of March, 1992, I put my faith in Jesus. I've not really done anything about it since.

Because what Paul is saying here is you have faith in Jesus, then you have access to Jesus. Every day, all of the time, you can know him more. His prayer is that they will know him more. I'm asking the God of Father, we give you spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better.

[14 : 54] Again, not so you can be top of the class or be counted clever or get prestige in the church and people think you're the top dog Christian. But because that's God's gift to redeem you, to forgive you, and to reveal himself to you so that in all of the stuff that you're going through right now, you have the knowledge of God accompanying you at all times.

He's very gracious to do that. Oftentimes, in human organizations or societies or whatever, the head person is really quite distant.

Very, very few people get access to the top guy or the top girl. But God, creator of the whole universe, wants you to know more about him.

He wants your thoughts to be about him. He wants your assurance to be from knowing him. He wants your wisdom to be from knowing him and understanding him. All of these things come from, again, what Paul is saying here, the knowledge specifically.

But more specifically than that, there's the inner enlightenment. He talks about in verse 18, I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened. Again, in order that you may know, and here we get specifically, to hope.

[16 : 18] The hope to which he has called you. So, Paul is saying here, it's not just about head knowledge, it's about personal knowledge of God. It's about the knowledge of your savior. It's about the knowledge of your creator.

And this brings true enlightenment. So, again, if enlightenment, according to society or different religions, depends on knowing self, that's all very well if you do have all the wisdom in the world within yourself.

If you do have the ability to fix your life, to redeem yourself, to make your life map out in the way you would like it to. But if we're honest, we don't.

We can't. And again, what Paul is saying is that we essentially need the knowledge of God giving us that perspective of our place in the world and of our future hope.

And much of the enlightenment that's spoken of here is tied into that theme of future or inheritance that we're going to look at in just a moment. Specifically then, I want you to notice something about hope here.

[17 : 23] He says in verse 18, I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know the hope to which he has called you. Now, that's very specific.

In other words, what Paul is saying here is unlike the kind of hope that we may have about something that we're organizing in our lives, it's contingent on our ability to make it happen and it's contingent on circumstances outwith our control.

We don't know if the summer holiday is going to go to plan or if things are going to get shut down again or if it's going to rain all week. Whatever. There's all kinds of things that we can't control. To it, it's something that he has done.

He has created it. Of course, because of what the Lord Jesus did when he lived the life we could never live for us. Gave his life as a sacrifice for us.

And then was raised again to glory. Ensuring that the work, the essential work of salvation was completed and secured. That is the hope.

[18 : 32] And you are called to it. So he has done it. So that is why your faith is in Jesus and not on yourself. It is not in you. It is on him and what he has done.

The hope to which you are called. And then again, as I said, this has hope for the future because he goes on to talk about the fact that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.

Now again, just a couple things briefly about this word inheritance. Because there are two aspects to inheritance in terms of what the Bible says about that for us and God.

Is this referring to the inheritance we get as Christians? Is this the hope for the Christian that one day when the Lord Jesus comes again we will receive the inheritance that the Bible speaks consistently about?

Or, as it maybe suggests here, is this an inheritance for God? Look at the wording. The riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.

[19 : 38] That's actually a really interesting way of putting it. The answer, ultimately, is both are true and both are astonishing cause for hope because the Bible promises you and I a future inheritance.

We are co-heirs with Christ of the redemption of the cosmos that God will one day work. That in itself is an astonishing promise which you must remember and take to heart.

But it's also true that God sees his people as his inheritance. Now, isn't that amazing? That God cares enough in his grace and his mercy to see those sinful people who he's worked, purchased, into his redemption as his inheritance.

Something which he treasures. Something which gives him pleasure. People in their massive vulnerability without their ability to save themselves called into his hope secure because of the work he achieved with the guarantee of the spirit of the future inheritance that we look forward to.

God is delighted in his inheritance which is his people. I hope that gives you hope. I hope that gives you cause for thanksgiving as well.

[21 : 04] That does a couple of things for us before we move on more quickly to our final point. It puts into perspective your achievements. So, there may well be many things that you are doing well in life at the moment.

You may be getting on well. You may be succeeding. Good. That's great. God gives us again many capacities and gifts and where to use them. And yet, of course, the temptation for us is the more we become capable and successful, the potential.

God gives us a good idea of the future and the potential. It means that if you feel like you're just not doing so well at the moment, if you feel low, if you feel down on yourself or if you think others are down on you, think God's, God calls you his child and he says that he loves you and that he has plans for you, that he has redeemed you and that he delights in you.

Paul wanted the Ephesians to remember this and he wanted them to know it more. I hope you do too. But thirdly, let me finish with this. We've looked at reasons to be thankful. We've looked at the hope that we have because of the sense of enlightenment, of knowing more.

But the third reason is power. But the thing is, it's not our own. It's not about, again, what we are able to do. It's about what God can do. While you are weak, he is strong.

[22 : 49] The new identity that we have in Jesus, the hope that we have for the future, the inheritance, all of that, as I've already said, is so dependent on what he has achieved.

But all of that is possible because he has the power as well as the will to achieve it. All rests, and it's all inextricably tied to Jesus. And particularly, the image we get here is of the resurrection of Jesus. The power that God had to do that. You know, again, we may get used to that concept. You're a Christian if you've been for some years, you've heard about the resurrection many times. And yet, it is an indicator of the power of God.

And of course, it is an indicator also of what he is able to do in you. Christ being raised from the dead, the first fruits of his people who will also be raised to glorious new inheritance and new life one day.

So, let me just tease that out for just a moment. It's very, very linked actually, but I'm going to draw your attention to one other passage this morning, and that is in the book of 1 Peter. So, let me just read a few verses from the book of 1 Peter.

[23 : 59] In our passage, Paul has been talking about, verse 19, his incomparably great power for us who believe. And he goes on to say, that power is the same as the mighty strength that he

exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.

So, there you see the link that I've just been speaking about with the power of God and the resurrection of Jesus and of the place that Jesus now has at the right hand of God.

And if I turn to 1 Peter, chapter 1, in verse 3, we read a very similar theme. I just want to kind of balance this with another part of Scripture where Peter writes these words, praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his great mercy, he's 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.

This inheritance is kept in heaven for you who through faith are shielded by God's power. Isn't that fantastic?

[25 : 11] Because again, if so much of the advice you may receive comes down to it all being on you to make something of yourself, to look within, the essential problem with that is our limitations.

that philosophy when it comes up against that reality of our ultimate limitedness, if I can put it like that, makes us feeling shortchanged in some ways.

And so, what we have when we come to the passage like this is a resource that we could never generate by ourselves that is divine in origin and that is actively at work on your behalf guaranteeing your future, redeeming your now and because of what Jesus has done, cleansing your, the hurt of the sin that you know you do and have done.

That is what God has done for you in calling you to be one of his. And so, what we find in a passage like this is that in an uncertain world where hope is hopeful, we don't know if things are going to work out and we feel our fragility and our frailty and our uncertainty and of all the anxiety that comes with that, there's a certainty we get from biblical revelation and from testimony and Paul's teaching here that we're to take hold of, hear it again, let it work into your heart, it's not about what you can do, it's about what he has done and you are asked to believe which means you're asked to be humble and say to God I need you but in doing that it doesn't demean you, he in fact exalts you because again he calls you his child, he has set his love upon you and I do hope that again this morning if you're on that journey if you're looking and asking then you see that what transforms everything here is the essential character, the goodness and the love of God in being willing to do this for ordinary people such as me and you.

What a good God, what a generous God, what a powerful God, your hope is found in nothing less. So let me finish just now and pray that that would actually be the seat of all our hope.

[27 : 51] We do ask just now Lord that you would please teach us, reveal to us your tenderness but also your power and again I ask that you would help us to apply this.

Again, we face all sorts of circumstances help us to go through life taking hold of these truths and reaching out to you and we pray that you would give us the assurance of hope in Jesus.

Amen.