

Saturday Communion Service

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[0 : 0 0] Hope for the best is a phrase that you will hear from time to time. It's something that we perhaps rather forlornly say when we're not sure what else to say in a difficult situation. Well, let's hope for the best. Hope is a word, an idea that we use in many aspects of life. We may plan to go out for the weekend and we say, oh, I hope that the weather stays fine. Is that a vain hope, a forlorn hope? It certainly is a hope that we have no control over, no reason to expect that it will come to pass. Perhaps we have a deep hope that our favourite team will either win the championship or avoid relegation, depends on which team we support. But again, a hope that we may have very little reason to carry with us. So hope is something that we speak of a lot, but often in a rather vain or rather hopeless way. Is this the nature of Christian hope? Is it just wishful thinking?

I hope to show you from the Scriptures that that's far from being the case. Perhaps hope is also something that is very topical as we have been through the political process of the general election. Some folks will feel very hopeful about the future because of the general election. Some folks may feel rather hopeless about the future, and perhaps they do so whether or not there is a particular political result. And so hope is also something that is associated with the way that the world is going, whether it is international politics, whether it is all the news that reaches us from difficult parts of the world, or whether it's about just making our way through day-to-day life and the challenges and the struggles that that brings. We can find ourselves either thinking that there is reason for hope or that we feel rather hopeless. So really to get a Christian perspective on hope is very important. It may just correct some of the ways of thinking about hope that we might pick up from typical use of language, and it may give us perspective on the realities of the world around us. It may help us to put the realities that we see in our news papers and on our TV screens to enable us to look correctly with a Christian viewpoint at them. Hope is a significant theme in the Bible and certainly in the New Testament. We're going to focus on one letter tonight, but I do want to follow this theme through to our services tomorrow. So tonight we'll look at the letter of Paul to the Colossians, and then tomorrow we'll also look at passages that address hope from hopefully slightly different perspectives and slightly different angles on the subject, but from the letter of Peter, 1 Peter. In this particular passage that we read, you'll have noticed that the word hope is used on three occasions. You'll see it in verse 5 of chapter 1 of Colossians, the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven. You'll see it also in verse 23, where Paul speaks about continuing in your faith established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. And then you'll also see it in verse 27, the striking phrase, Christ in you, the hope of glory. So we have the word hope used in a number of different places. But it's important when you're thinking about a subject in the Bible to recognize that the concept of hope. A concept, an idea, a theme can be presented in other words. And so if you simply look up, for instance, in a concordance the word hope, then you may find some passages which have a lot to say about hope without using that particular word. And in this passage we'll look at one or two other verses that I think do just that. We're going to look at this theme with two main headings. The first is hope and the gospel. And there we'll be especially focusing on chapter 1 verse 5 and chapter 1 verse 23, and then the theme of hope and glory, and that is found particularly in verse 27. So two main headings, two main themes to look at, hope and the gospel, hope and glory. So let's have a little look at this theme of hope and its relationship to the gospel. And the first thing I want to say about that is that hope is grasped in the gospel. Where are you going to find hope in this world? Where are you going to get hope? Presumably most of us want hope. It's not a good thing to be hopeless. We would want to have hope. But where will we get this hope and what will be its character? Well, Paul tells us that hope in the experience of the Colossians came when they grasped the gospel. Hope and gospel, these two words, are brought together in both verse 5 and verse 23 of the passage we

read. So again, just to read verse 5, you'll read, the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel. So where did you hear about hope? You heard about hope in the gospel. Then verse 23, you read, if you continue in your faith, you'll read, not moved from the hope. So two key terms in this passage, both of them link together in a single sentence and both repeated. So hope and gospel link together, repeated. Now when that sort of thing happens in the Bible passage, you should sit up and take notice. You should say, okay, something is going on here. There are a number of things that Paul repeats in this chapter, and I think that when Paul repeats something, he's kind of using bold print, so to speak. He's drawing attention to something that's significant. In this case, you have a section of text where this combination of hope and gospel comes at the beginning, and then a fairly lengthy section of text, and then the repetition of that hope and the gospel. And when that kind of thing happens in the

Bible, you often get a sense that the two references are functioning a little bit like bookends along a row of books. I don't know if you use bookends. It's a kind of old-style way of storing your books.

[8 : 35] Most of us use bookcases, I guess. But if you've got an open shelf and you've just got this little array of books, then you might have, let's say, the head of an animal at one end and the tail of the animal at the other, or you might have two matching bookends that will hold the books upright.

So, in a way, that brings coherence. It brings a sense of solidity and oneness to these volumes that are standing upright. And similarly, what you've got when you get this kind of thing, which is sometimes called an inclusion, you get a reference at the beginning of a text, you get the repetition of the theme or the words or the idea at the end of the text, and they function to kind of bring a unity, a wholeness to a text. So, think of Psalm 8, which begins, O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. And then you have the Psalm, and then the last line is, O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. Or think of some of the Psalms towards the end of the Psalter, where you have the word, hallelujah, praise the Lord, at the beginning of the Psalm, and then likewise, the last word of the Psalm is the same word, hallelujah, praise the Lord.

When that happens, then the whole of what comes in between is kind of infused with that declaration, with that wonderful, striking theme that is repeated. So, in Psalm 8, the notion, that the Lord's name is wonderful throughout all the earth is the theme that runs with you from beginning to end, even as you're thinking about the particular content of the verses. So, what we have in Colossians chapter 1 is an emphasis on the theme of hope and its relationship to the gospel, and by repeating that combination, you get something like that bookend function. So, hope and the gospel runs right through this chapter. Everything that we come across in this passage, we might well think, how does that relate, if at all, to these two themes? So, hope is grasped in the gospel. Where do you find hope, according to Paul here in Colossians 1? You find it in the gospel. Okay, how does that work out?

Well, we'll look a little bit more at some of these, some of the details and explore what this hope is, and explore what the gospel is a little bit more. But let's see the function. Let's see what happens when a community hears about hope and is confronted with that reality in the gospel. Well, Paul tells us that it is the foundation of faith and love. Now, I'm sure you're all familiar with the trilogy, not the trilogy, the triad, let's say, of faith, hope, and love. Faith, hope, and love. You can think, perhaps, of 1 Corinthians 13, where you come across faith, hope, and love. And there are one or two other passages in Paul's letter, especially, where you'll find that combination. But this particular combination of these three words is slightly different, because whereas in 1 Corinthians 13, faith and hope and love are all things that people have or do, in this passage, it's not quite the same. What Paul says is he sees the faith and love in the community of believers. He says, I see that you have faith in Christ Jesus and you have love for each other. Faith, if you like, in terms of a relationship, a vertical relationship with God, love in terms of a horizontal relationship with one another, with the Christian community. And then he says, the faith and love that spring from the hope. Well, the NIV has slightly embellished the language there, but it's basically the same idea. The Greek simply says, on account of the hope. The faith and love you have on account of the hope. So, the NIV has got the sense of that in that the hope is what brings about, hope brings about faith and love in this Christian community. And clearly, faith in Christ and love for one another is something we would long to see in our Christian communities. We would long to see it, and if we are already seeing it, we would love to see more of it. So, this notion that hope provides the kind of seedbed, it provides the context in which these things can thrive, means that we would want to

have this hope. But notice that this hope is not hope that people have. It is a hope that is stored for them.

[14 : 15] Notice in verse 5, the hope that is stored or kept for all the saints. Sorry, that is kept, excuse me, let me read that again, the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven. So, you have a sense that there is something objective. It's not just whether you feel hopeful. It's not just whether you have a hopeful disposition, whether you're a kind of glass is half full sort of person rather than glass is half empty. It is that there is a hope, something concrete, something real, which is external to you, which is different from you, but rather something which is the solid rock onto which you can hand. Now, Paul doesn't exactly explain what that hope is at this point, but we'll perhaps see a little bit of what he has in mind. So, let's just notice for the moment that hope that hope comes from being confronted with the gospel, from the gospel being communicated to you. So, if you want hope, then listen to the gospel. If you want hope, listen to what God has to say in His Word. Hear the gospel. Now, that's a very practical way in which you can find hope. You may feel hopeless, and as I've seen some folks say to folks in terms of pastoral care, when you're feeling in that kind of frame of mind, perhaps what you need to do is preach the gospel to yourself. In other words, let yourself hear once again what God has said about what He has accomplished in Jesus Christ.

So, hear the gospel, because that's where hope is found, and know that hope is not just all about how you feel, but it's about something that is external to you as well. So, yes, we hope. Hope is a human emotion. Hope is something we do, but Christian hope has a sense of there being an external aspect to hope, something objective, something that is beyond how we feel on a given moment. Okay, so hope is grasped in the gospel, but secondly, and here's where we start to see some of the definition coming through, hope is rooted in what God has accomplished in the past and in what we experience now.

So, what is this gospel that is the basis for our hope? Where are we going to find hope? We find it in the gospel.

What is this gospel? Well, again, Paul doesn't exactly define gospel. One of the challenges we have in reading the New Testament is that we are reading communication between Paul and Christians, some of whom he knows well, some of whom perhaps he has had additional communication with, and so we are, as it's sometimes said, picking up one side of a telephone call. We are hearing one part of a conversation, and it's not always easy to get the full sense of it. So, sometimes Paul may have explained something or knows that his readers that he knows that his readers already understand the concept very well, so he doesn't go on to define it word by word. But in this case, I think that we can suggest that Paul does define the gospel, it's just that he doesn't say that's what he's doing. I want to suggest that in verses 12 to 14, Paul gives us what we could regard as a very neat summary of what he would say the gospel was. And what we find here is that the gospel focuses on what God has accomplished in Christ Jesus. The gospel is not primarily how your life can be better. The gospel is not primarily how you can feel free. The gospel is not primarily how you can have peace of mind. These are all very real implications of the gospel, of response to the gospel, and of putting your faith in Christ. But that's not what the gospel is.

That's not what's good news. The good news is that God has accomplished something definitive in Christ. And in these verses 12 to 14, Paul gives us a great little summary of how he understands that gospel.

[19 : 19] And so, I want to suggest to you that if you want hope, then you dwell on these realities. Think about them, know them, talk about them, and let them just permeate your thinking and your speech.

So, what does Paul say in these verses? Well, he talks about giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For, what did he do? He rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. In that short passage, we have an emphasis on God the Father's action and his desire to bring rescue to his people. In fact, it's a great little action plot. It's a very dynamic little section of text which speaks about people trapped in enemy territory, helpless and without hope, and God accomplishes a rescue by which he takes them from that enemy territory, removes them to a place of safety, the kingdom of the Son he loves, and blesses them with rich experience of new life and new hope in that new setting. So, the emphasis is on what God the Father has done. If you ever are tempted to think that the gospel is how Jesus

saves us from an angry God, then let Paul correct that. If you're ever tempted to think that God really wants to judge us, but Jesus, like some rescuing hero, steps in the way, then let Paul correct you. God the Father has acted in Christ. It is he who has rescued us and he who has placed us in the kingdom of the Son he loves.

Human salvation is the result of God the Father's great, great love for a people who rebelled against him. God the Father had every right to reject his own creation who had rebelled, but he chose not to, and instead he chose to act in Christ. And that, of course, will be the focus of our attention tomorrow.

So, tonight we are reminded that God the Father has acted in the past. So, strangely enough, Christian hope is not all about looking to the future. Actually, to get Christian hope right, you first have to look to the past. It's not all about looking even at your present experience, although we'll say a word about that in a moment, but it's starting with what God has objectively done.

[22 : 29] Too often, I think we are tempted to become very subjective as Christians. Do I feel like I'm loved by God? Do I feel forgiven? Do I feel like I know the peace of God? But ultimately we are called, because just as Paul says that the Colossians got their hope from being confronted with the gospel, we are told again and again to conform our feelings, our perspectives, which are so skewed by how we are doing physically or mentally or whatever our circumstances may be, whether we are tired or weary or whether we've had a tough day at the office or at home. All of these things can skew our understanding of what God has actually done. And so, we are called to present to ourselves once again what God has done in Christ, and let that be the foundation for our hope. When you think about the Lord's Supper tomorrow, don't ask yourself primarily how you feel. Ask yourself what God has done and how you have responded to that. Have you trusted in what He has done? Have you believed what He has done? And then, if that's the case, then regardless of how you feel, respond with obedience. Respond by taking the blessing, the encouragement, the strengthening that God offers in the Lord's Supper.

So, the gospel is primarily what God has accomplished in Christ, and that is a rescue mission. If you want to understand what has happened to you, then that's a great way of telling your personal story. In a sense, long ago, long before you were born, the gospel was that God rescued you, in the sense that Christ disarmed the powers, as Paul will say a little bit later in his letter.

He dealt with the written code that accused you. He paid the price fully that needed to be paid for your offense to God. And because of that, that is a rescue that has been accomplished. So, put your trust not in your present sense of confidence or that you're living a life that you can be proud of. I think perhaps as soon as you start feeling that, you have reason to worry. Rather, look to what God has done in Christ and which is the foundation of your hope. So, the gospel declares what God has accomplished, but that's not the whole story. It's the starting point. It's the basis. But the gospel also declares what the Christian experience is now. So, what is that? Well, we could sum it up that it is freedom, freedom from our captor, freedom from our past. Freedom from our captor. You can see that very clearly in that little summary of the gospel I've drawn your attention to. There's a very ominous story being told there that people who are not under the lordship of Christ are under the lordship of the prince of this world. That is not to say that everyone that is not a Christian is in some sense a devotee of Satan or something like that. It is rather to say that the way that Paul presents the story, there are only two kingdoms to belong to. There's not a third option. And one kingdom is the kingdom in which the powers of this age, the powers of darkness, have sway. And sometimes their sway will be exercised by leading to a sleepy satisfaction, not by some sense of grave desire to follow a wrong path, just by a general sense that, hey, everything's fine. C.S. Lewis in his famous book, *The Screwtape Letters*, says that the two errors that people can make with respect to the devil is either to take a serious interest in him or else to not think about him at all, to just ignore him. And Lewis said the devil greets both the magician and the materialist with equal delight. So the first way that we can understand our experience is that we have been released.

We have been set free from captivity. Of course, Israel understood its identity in that background of the exodus, and that exodus of slaves being released from captivity becomes the model for understanding what happens to a Christian. So we have freedom because of God's action from our captor. But we also have freedom from freedom from our past. And here we see that at the end of verse 14, Paul says, in Christ we have redemption, using the language of the slave set free. And then he explains what that means in our lives, the forgiveness of sins. One of the amazing things that can really open up hope for the future is to know that our past is dealt with. It won't go away. It

won't stop being a reality.

We will still remember aspects of what we have made in terms of choices or life paths, but it's dealt with.

[29 : 11] It's addressed. It's taken care of if we are in Christ. And we are free to move on. So many people still carry the weight of their past. Maybe even sometimes as Christians we can carry the weight of our past, where Christ has dealt with it. The gospel says God has accomplished in Christ redemption, the forgiveness of sins. So if that has been the judgment of God on our sins, if that is what God has decided as He's looked upon Christ, then let us not come to a different decision. Let us not come to a decision that, in fact, we're going to continue to carry these things with us. Let us be free. Let us know the reality of experience that we are free from our past. So the gospel does start by declaring what God has done in the past, but it also points to this wonderful reality that we can experience freedom, freedom from our captor, freedom from the past. And it's in the declaration of the gospel, rather than listening to our feelings, that we will find hope. So hope in the gospel, that's the key that I really want to emphasize in these two verses of Colossians 1. We find that hope comes from letting the gospel of God's grace in Christ confront us again and again and again. Tell that story to us. Memorize a little story. Learn to tell the story of the gospel in two minutes and tell it to yourself. Tell it to each other. Share it whenever you can so it forms part of your mental framework, your mental furniture. But then just briefly, hope and glory. So we've started to understand hope by looking backwards. And we've also seen that it has present implications. But there is also a future aspect. Hope looks forward to the completion of God's purposes. Hope looks to glory. The idea of glory is the sort of physical manifestation of who God is in His divinity. The idea of inapproachable light, the idea of perhaps think of the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus is seen gleaming, that is the notion of glory. But glory really speaks of the completion of God's plans. And that's

Christian hope. That Christian hope is not that the world is a set of circles, a set of cycles, where we just endlessly repeat the same story. The Christian hope is a hope of a straight line, which has a beginning and a middle and an end. And the hope of Christians is that God will bring His purposes to completion. But what Paul says remarkably in verse 27 of this passage is that Christians now experience something of that reality. They have Christ in you. Now, of course, Christ is the first fruits of what God will complete. He is the one who has, so to speak, in ahead of time, experienced the resurrection of the dead. He is the first fruits. He has already ascended to glory.

He has already experienced what He is going to make as a way for His people. So, Paul says, as believers, you have Christ in you. You have Christ living right there with you. And so that, in a sense, is your first taste of the reality of completion of the story. The hope of glory is Christ's personal presence with His people. And that includes a hope for personal transformation.

So, while as believers, and thinking about the Lord's table, and perhaps being very aware of our fallenness, and our sinfulness, and our weakness, and our ease of falling into temptation, God says that He knows your frame. He understands. And He still calls you, trusting in Christ, to receive what He gives to you as a free gift. But that hope that you have is a hope of transformation.

So, He talks about the desire, in verse 28, that as He proclaims the Christ of the gospel, He proclaims Him so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. So, even as we come as we are to the Lord's table, we also come with a Christian hope that looks forward to a different story, a story in which we are no longer these sinful, frail people, but we are brought to the completion that God has in mind. So, hope looks to glory, but also hope looks forward to full reconciliation.

[34 : 54] The lack of reconciliation in society is all too clear. Sadly, in South Africa, where we used to live until recently, we have seen in the news reports much about xenophobia, about one African not receiving another African, but rather rejecting and showing violence. And unfortunately, it's not restricted to South Africa or any one nation. There are many signs all around us where people are not reconciled. People will turn away from others. But Christ's death and resurrection have brought about reconciliation. We see that most clearly expressed actually in Ephesians 2. And so, the Christian hope looks forward to a reconciliation that brings all things together. We see that perhaps most clearly in verses 19 and 20, where Paul says, God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, Christ, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through the blood, through his blood shed on the cross. So, Christian hope looks not just back, and not just at present experience, but also to a time when all that shows fallenness and sin in this world will be dealt with. And the wonderful way in which that will be

expressed is a full reconciliation between God and humanity, and between human being and human being, and between human being and the creation in which we dwell. So, our calling now is to grasp this hope in the gospel, and then as we are enabled by God, to live out what we look forward to, to see it come bit by bit in our relationships now, in the way in which we show a different way to live, a different way that may just show to those who are without hope in this world, that there is a place that hope can be found. Will you grasp that hope tonight? Will you grasp that hope that is found in Christ, in the gospel? And will you know that hope, even as we gather tomorrow, that regardless of how you feel, and regardless of how you even realistically assess your life, our hope is not in ourselves, or in a political system, or in international organizations. Our hope is in Christ and in the fulfillment of God's purposes. Let's pray. Gracious Father, thank you for your word. Thank you that it gives us a solid rock to hold on to, and we pray that we might hold fast to it tonight. Hold fast to Christ tonight, so that we might truly live in hope. Thank you for your promises. Thank you that indeed our hope is for the best. In Jesus' name, amen.