

World Without Hope?

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[0 : 0 0] I'd like to think with you this evening on something that we've read there in that passage in Ephesians chapter 2, and particularly in the words 12 and 13.

The last words of verse 12, the first words of verse 13, Without hope and without God in the world, but now in Christ Jesus.

Walk on through the wind, walk on through the rain, though your dreams be tossed and blown.

Walk on, walk on with hope in your heart, and you'll never walk alone, you'll never walk alone. These words of course have become very famous.

They were originally part of a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical called Carousel in 1945. Gerry and the Pacemakers, a Liverpool group, made them very popular in 1963.

[1 : 1 2] And then they were adopted by the Liverpool Football Club as their anthem, and also by Celtic here in Scotland. The trouble is that for so many of us, our dreams turn to dust, our hopes crumble, and we feel that we are walking alone.

And that may be the experience of many people at this present time because of the coronavirus crisis. So many people feeling that all they had anticipated in life, it is all crumbling away.

And so many people isolated, walking alone, perhaps not even to walk very much because of this. Well, that's perhaps just one indication of the reality of our text here.

That so many people in the world today are without hope and without God in the world. Because we live in a world uncannily similar to that Roman world of the first century, which Paul describes, without hope.

Disillusioned, even despairing. A world where our hopes turn to dust. The poet Christina Rossetti, quite a while ago, put it like this, The hope I dreamed of was a dream.

[2 : 3 4] And now I wake, exceeding comfortless and worn and old, for a dream's sake. So many people in our society disillusioned by all the promises that were made.

People in America talk about the American dream. Well, I suppose everybody in every nation has a kind of dream of what they would like their life to be like. And so often it turns out so different.

We become disappointed, disillusioned, disheartened, even cynical. So what is the Apostle Paul meaning here by people that were without hope, a world without hope?

He's describing there the Roman world of his time because he's speaking here to people who basically came from that Gentile background. They weren't Jewish people, most of the people in the early church there in Ephesus.

And he's speaking about that world out of which they've come. Politically, it was a world without hope. The dreams of a new golden age under the great Caesar Augustus had now turned to dust.

[3 : 4 1] Instead of the charismatic Augustus, he was followed by the morose and suspicious Tiberius and really the evil Caligula and Nero.

And all those early dreams seemed to have turned to dust. In religion, there was a collapse of the traditional, formal religions of the past. And instead, there were all kinds of mystery cults coming up and tremendous superstition.

You know how Paul in Athens, he uses a word that could be translated very religious or very superstitious when he speaks to them. He said, I can see that you're very superstitious religious because they were without hope.

There was no real basis on which they could lay their hope. And all sorts of superstitions came in. Astrology was very popular at that time, just as it still is today.

Saturn in triangular relation to Mars means bad luck is one of the quotes from some ancient literature. But at a higher level, at the intellectual level in philosophy, there were people like Seneca, the great Roman philosopher, who said, evil has its root within us in our inward parts.

[4 : 57] Facing up to what is our real truth, what the Bible actually says, but having no hope as to how to deal with that. And in the face of death, again, little or no hope.

The poet Catullus said, suns may set and rise again, but when our brief light has set, one unbroken night remains.

There was a lot of cynicism about the ancient religions that talked about some sort of life beyond death. And so many people were now without hope for anything beyond death itself.

How similar in so many ways to our own world. There's a kind of cynical despair that crept into our Western world perhaps a couple of centuries ago.

The poet Byron said, what is hope? Nothing but the paint on the face of existence. The least touch of truth rubs it off. And there's also a fear of imminent disaster and stupidity of the human race.

[6 : 00] And you get all kinds of conspiracy theories around as to what's going on and what's wrong. Bob Dylan said, the Titanic sails at dawn and everybody's shouting, which side are you on?

It just seems so pointless and so stupid.

We're facing disaster in so many ways. You know, people talk now about the environmental disaster, possibility of extinction. And yet nobody seems to be able to deal with it.

Bertrand Russell, the great British philosopher and mathematician and also a very convinced atheist, he said that he had to read at least one detective story a day to drug himself against the nuclear threat.

That was back probably in the 50s and 60s when that was the great fear that everybody had. Today it's perhaps fear of terrorism, fear of global economic collapse, fear of environmental disaster.

[7 : 26] But so little hope. It's as if the Titanic is sailing to destruction. There's the failure of the twin traditions of science and religion.

Arthur Kessler in his book, *Darkness at Noon*, he said, nature has let us down. God seems to have left the receiver off the hook and time is running out.

So both religion and science didn't really provide any hope for him. And in the note that he left before he committed suicide, he said, I'm leaving with some timid hopes for a depersonalized afterlife beyond due confines of space, time and matter and beyond the limits of our comprehension.

Well, if you can make sense of that, you're certainly better than I am. What is a depersonalized afterlife? Ceasing to be a person, how can you exist after that?

And then there's the depersonalization of the modern bureaucratic and technological age. This was foreseen by an author called Franz Kafka who was writing in the earlier part of the 20th century.

[8 : 42] He wrote one book called The Castle in which a man is trying to get justice for himself, and in another The Trial where he is being pursued by the state.

And Os Guinness, the Christian writer, says, in The Castle man is reduced to a file and in the trial to a case. It's again the depersonalization of human beings.

And today because, much more so because of computerization and so on, we feel just not even like a cog in a machine, but just like some microchip somewhere.

And pop culture as well seems also in many ways to have lost some of the vibrancy and hope that perhaps it once had. The world doesn't make sense.

This is perhaps epitomized in a great way by the suicide of Kurt Cobain who was leader of the band Nirvana. He said in his, again, the note he left before he committed suicide, I can't stand the thought of Francis, that was his daughter.

[9 : 57] I can't stand the thought of Francis becoming the miserable, self-destructive death rocker that I've become. He couldn't look on his life with any kind of hopefulness or any kind of self-respect.

He just was so torn up by the fact that his daughter might become the same sort of failure as he himself. And yet he was someone who was lauded and praised and glorified by so many people.

And then there's a kind of cosmic despair, we might call it, as we think of, well, what's the future for this universe in which we're living? And of course, scientists will tell us, well, eventually it's going to burn to extinction.

The sun eventually will stop shining. There'll no longer be a solar system. The whole universe in one way or another will wind down.

Louis Allen, the American comedian, put it in his own inimitable style. He said, more than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction.

[11 : 05] Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly. In other words, he's saying there's two impossible, despairing choices, and that's all that lies before us. Bertrand Russell, again, whom I quoted earlier, he said, brief and powerless is man's life.

On him and on his race, the sure, slow doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way.

For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness. It remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow fall, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day.

It's all very powerful, emotive, noble language, but there's a complete emptiness at its heart. In light of what he's just said, why should anyone have noble thoughts, lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day?

Why not just say, eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow we die and because tomorrow the universe dies? It makes no sense whatsoever. No hope.

[12 : 21] No hope for our lives here. No hope for the universe. No hope for the universe. Dylan Thomas, in speaking of death, the poet, the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas said, do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light. And I think we see something of that today, where people are absolutely terrified of death. And this is the thing that the COVID virus has thrown up, because this is, our lives here are being threatened, and our whole way of life is being threatened to be cut short by this virus.

And there's no hope beyond death itself. Or in the words of Eomer in the film of Lord of the Rings, he said, hope has forsaken these lands.

And that's the way we feel. What hope do we have for the future? We are without hope, Paul says here, because we are without God, without hope and without God in the world.

C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity said, look for yourself and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay.

[13 : 41] And you know, that's what the Western world has been pursuing for so long now. Look for yourself. Find yourself. Do your own thing. Put me first. And he says, what will you find?

Hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. And so many people have found that to be true. But he says, look for Christ, and you will find Him, and with Him, everything else thrown in.

The trouble, Paul says, is that we are estranged from God. The verbs that he uses here, separate, excluded. You're foreigners without God.

We're on the outside. We're excluded from this great relationship with God. Why is that the case? Why is not everything rosy?

Why is not everything pretty? Why is not everything just satisfactory? Well, verses 1 to 3 here explain that. It's because of our rebellion, our disobedience of God, our self-centered pleasure, seeking our own way.

[14 : 49] And not only that, but God's anger against our sin, that we are estranged from Him. And we are dead in sin, as Paul puts it here.

All these expressions that he heaps one on the other really bank up the seriousness of this tremendous, dangerous situation in which we are.

As it's put in Isaiah chapter 59, verse 2, your sins have separated you from God. And that's the great tragedy of the human position. That's why we are without hope.

We're separated from God. We don't know God. We don't have relationship with Him. The Creator of the universe. The One who came into this world in the person of Jesus Christ to speak to us, to communicate with us, and to save us.

We don't know Him. We're a world without hope. Right at the beginning of the Bible in the Old Testament, in the book of Genesis, there is someone who is the very picture of despair.

[15 : 56] Genesis chapter 4, verse 16. So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of wandering, east of Eden. And it's these words from which John Steinbeck took the title of his book, East of Eden.

And also there's a film made of it. And it speaks of the despair of those who wander away from God. And that's exactly what Cain was doing.

And that's exactly what our society has been doing for over a century now, wandering or running away from God. Is it any wonder that we are a world without hope?

But Paul, of course, doesn't stop there. He doesn't say that, you know, it's a world without hope, without hope and without God in the world. He says that's what you once were. But now in Christ Jesus, there's a complete contrast.

The message of the Christian gospel is that there is hope. Not a sort of feeble, wishful thinking kind of hope. But a real hope grounded in the reality of Christ's life and death and rising again.

[17 : 04] And in the reality of a real relationship with God through Him. There's hope because of Jesus. We know that God exists not because of some clever proof of the existence of God.

We know He exists because of Jesus. This historically revealed person who is the Son of God. Who claims to speak from God.

Who says, I and the Father are one. And we look at this person. We look at the historical records of Him. And we see that He is utterly different from anyone else.

We see that although He is very firm and clear against everything that is wrong. No matter how powerful the person may be that He's speaking to.

He is also kind and compassionate. We see this amazing complexity of His character. That speaks ultimate goodness.

[18 : 08] That is so different from any other historical person or any person living today. We see God. We see the face of God in Jesus Christ.

We don't need a clever proof of His existence. We read the scriptures. We read the scriptures. We read the gospel. And we come face to face with a person such as we've never met before.

The Son of God. And we know that ultimately the universe makes sense. Again, not because of some kind of clever proof or even our scientific investigation of it, which is important.

But we know that ultimately it makes sense because Jesus is the Logos. It's the Greek word for word.

But it's more than that. It is reason. It gives an explanation. Jesus is the source of all meaning and explanation and reason for the universe.

[19 : 15] Because He is the one through whom it is created. He's the one who sustains it by the word of His power. And therefore, there is a purpose to everything.

And God is working out His purposes in the world through Jesus. In this passage from verse 3 onwards, we read of some of the actions of God.

God choosing. God planning. God is in ultimate sovereign control of all that happens in the world. As we look out at the universe, we're not looking at just some chaotic thing.

That makes no sense. We're looking at a world and at a universe that God has created, that God is sustaining, and that God has a purpose in it all. That's part of the hope that we have in Christ Jesus.

In Jeremiah chapter 29, verse 11, God says, For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

[20 : 22] There's a hope and a future promised to us in Jesus Christ. There is hope ultimately because of the cross.

Here in this chapter again, in verse 16, we read these words, And in this one body, to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility.

There's an interesting interplay in that passage there, the second part of this chapter, where He's talking about a hostility between God and man, but also hostility between human beings, Gentiles and Jews, and so on.

But all of that hostility is solved and resolved in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. How can that be? Well, for the Gentile, they were excluded from Israel, excluded from the covenants of promise, as He says in verses 11 and 12.

For the Jew, the law became a barrier, as it says here in verse 14. A barrier because, of course, although He had the law, the whole law of God, yet He couldn't keep it.

[21 : 33] And ultimately, it would lead either to self-righteousness, to the belief that, oh yes, I am keeping it, like the Pharisee were thinking about this morning, or else it leads to despair, that I can't please God in this way.

And all are dead in sin and under God's wrath. Jesus has destroyed this hostility, both that between God and man and between human beings, by the blood of His cross, by His redeeming death.

In verse 7 of chapter 1, we have again a reference to that, where He says, in Him, that is in Jesus, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

He paid the price of our freedom and our forgiveness and our reconciliation, because He took the price of all of that, the penalty for all of that, on Himself.

We are unable to reconcile ourselves to God, because we can't pay that price. We can't pay the price of our disobedience. The only way we could pay for it was being condemned to hell forever.

[22 : 57] However, we couldn't pay the price and yet remain alive and in God's favor. But the Lord Jesus Christ, as the eternal Son of God and as true living man, could pay the price, not just for one person, not just for you or me, but for every person in the whole world who would trust in Him.

Because His work has eternal significance and value and power. He fulfilled the law by living a perfect life in obedience to God's will.

And He took the punishment due to our sins on Himself. And in doing so, He created in Himself one new man, as it's put here in verse 15.

In other words, saying there's no longer Jew and Gentile, no longer all these religious and racial distinctions. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

If we all trust in Him, there's this new humanity that He has created. If we are in Christ Jesus, as Paul's favorite expression is, then we are made alive and raised with Him to new life, as it's put in verses 4 to 6 earlier in the chapter.

[24 : 21] So, we who once were far away have been brought near, as it's put here in our text in verse 13. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Jesus.

How can that be ours? Well, it is, as Paul explains in verse 8 there, it is by grace through faith.

It's not by works. It's not by our climbing some sort of ladder to God by our own achievements, our own good deeds. God gives us hope and a future because He has done everything that is necessary for our salvation, and it's all His grace, His undeserved favor and love towards us.

And all that's required of us is faith, trusting in Jesus Himself and in what He has done for us. God has given us hope and a future if we trust in Him in this life because He promises, I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Though you pass through the waters, they will not overwhelm you. He gives us all these marvelous promises for life here and now in this world, that yes, we may have all kinds of troubles, all kinds of difficulties, all kinds of opposition, but He's promised to be with us through all of these and never forsake us.

[25 : 58] We have His promises for life in this world and in the history of this world. We're told that the gospel will be preached to every nation, and we see day by day that being fulfilled more and more, the gospel expanding, the church expanding in various parts of the world, although here we may feel that the church is declining or just holding its own, in so many parts of the world, the gospel is going out in power.

There are promises that the Jewish people, as a people, will respond to Christ as their Messiah, and that will bring renewed blessing to the world.

As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15, if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men, because our hope extends beyond life in this world into the future, past death itself.

Robert Burns, in his great poem, *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, which is one of his few poems that really gives a favorable picture of the Christian.

It's picturing this cotter, that is this ordinary, poor, agricultural worker in his home conducting family worship, and this is how part of it goes.

[27 : 33] Then kneeling down to heaven's eternal king, the saint, the father, and the husband prays. Hope springs exulting on triumphant wing, that thus they all shall meet in future days, there ever bask in uncreated rays, no more to sigh or shed the bitter tears, together hymning their creator's praise, in such society yet still more dear, while circling time moves round in an eternal sphere.

You see, the Christian has his hopes not bounded by this life and by death. It goes beyond that, into a glorious future, trusting in the promises of God, that all will be made well.

J.R.R. Tolkien, in one of the appendices of the book to *The Lord of the Rings*, which describes something of the relationship of one of the main characters, Aragorn, to Arwen, whom he marries.

It speaks of Aragorn's death, and in it he says to Arwen, In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold, we are not bound forever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory.

Farewell. And that speaks something of that great Christian hope that we have. We're not always bound to the circles of this world, and our life doesn't come to an end just because our life here comes to an end.

[29 : 11] And therefore, although we may go in sorrow, and we may sorrow the parting that death brings, yet it is not in despair because we have this great hope in Christ Jesus.

In conclusion, Mother Teresa said, The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy, it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for.

We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread, but there are many more dying for a little love.

The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty. It is not only a poverty of loneliness, but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love as there is a hunger for God.

In Jesus Christ, God has provided the remedy for that hunger and that despair. Make sure that this very night that you are in Christ Jesus, because Christ Jesus is our hope for time and for eternity.

[30 : 32] Let's pray. Our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for your own word. We thank you that it speaks words of hope into our often hopeless situation.

And we pray that not only would these words come as words of comfort to Christian folk, but also they would come as words of challenge and invitation to those who as yet have not placed their faith in Christ.

O Lord, we pray that you would awaken each one to a sense of need before you and a sense of awe that you have provided everything that's necessary to deal with our despair and our hopelessness, our disillusion.

And we pray that we may place our trust in the one who came to save us and to give us hope. We ask these things in Jesus' name and for his sake.

Amen. Amen.