

## The Hope of Christmas

Luke 1:31-33, Luke 3:1

### **Slide 1**

Today we began the Advent season by lighting the first Advent candle, the candle of hope. This candle reminds us of the hope God gave His people when He promised to send them a Messiah, a Savior, a Deliverer.

The candle reminds us that this promise was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ. And it invites us to look forward in hope to the day of Christ's second coming, His second Advent.

If you think about it, it's entirely appropriate for Jesus, who's the hope of the world, to have come in the form of an infant, because babies are hope personified. They are pure potential. Their lives are all in the future.

Is there a mother or father who hasn't looked into the face of their newborn baby and wondered, "What will this little child accomplish, what will he become? A doctor saving lives, an engineer, painter, ballerina, astronaut, athlete, research scientist... anything is possible.

But Mary had more than the usual maternal pride to justify having great hope for her son. The previous year, she'd been visited by an angel, Gabriel, who gave her this promise:

*Luke 1:31-33, "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

This promise to Mary echoed the prophecy of Isaiah, given seven centuries earlier:

Isaiah 9:6-7, *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.”*

Not only that, but Joseph, Mary’s husband also received a promise:

Matthew 1:20-21, *“An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”*

In other words, when Jesus was born, God made it clear that this baby was the one for whom the world had been waiting and watching and hoping, ever since the first man and woman had been driven out of Eden.

## **Slide 2**

What joy must have filled Mary and Joseph’s hearts as they looked down at their tiny son, wrapped in blankets, lying in an ordinary manger filled with straw, surrounded by cows and sheep and donkeys.

What hope in knowing that this child was the one in whom all of God’s promises would be fulfilled. Knowing that He was the one in whom God’s people would find forgiveness of sins.

The one in whom they would find true and lasting peace. The one whose power would establish an eternal kingdom of justice and righteousness.

It must have been almost overwhelming, as they considered the awesome responsibility God had given them.

I mention all this because it highlights the fact that Christianity is a religion of hope. It is a faith that looks forward to the future, to the time when God's promises will be fulfilled.

That was true for God's people prior to Christ's birth, as they looked forward to the birth of the promised Messiah.

It was true for Mary and Joseph as they looked down at their newborn son, knowing that the time for the fulfillment of God's promises had finally come, and it's true of us today as we look forward to His return.

Our faith is a future-focused faith, a religion of what's to come, a religion of hope. Now, that doesn't mean Christianity has no relevance to our daily lives right now. Far from it.

The Christian faith is intensely practical. But it means that the here and now is not our only focus, or even our primary focus.

Colossians 3:1-2, *"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."*

Our primary focus is on the world to come, but paradoxically, it's our future focus that allows us to live this life to the fullest.

Now that would be the end of the message, if it weren't for one thing. Hope is not automatic. In fact, sometimes hope is very difficult.

Sometimes our circumstances seem anything but hopeful; on the contrary, sometimes they can seem all but hopeless. So how do we sustain hope in the midst of disappointment and difficulty?"

How do we keep from being completely overwhelmed by trials and pain? How do we maintain an attitude of hope when everything in us wants to yield to despair? When we want to give up?

We've all faced situations where there seems to be little objective reason for hope – in our jobs, in our marriages, in relationships with family members, or in seemingly hopeless medical or financial problems.

Some of you, right now, may be in situations that seem hopeless, so you're tempted to give up hope. How do we hold on to hope during those times when our circumstances seem hopeless?

### **Slide 3**

First, put your hope in God. Trust in Him for help. That may seem obvious, but too often we're willing to seek help from anyone and anything before we turn to God. He becomes the appeal of last resort.

After we've exhausted every other option, we look to God. If the problem is financial, we don't look to God first; we look to a banker, or maybe a rich uncle, or any other way we can to put our hands on more cash.

If the problem is relational, a conflict with a spouse or a family member, we'll buy books on marriage, scour articles in magazines, listen to Oprah or Rosie, and then finally, maybe turn to God for help.

We'll try everything we can think of, and then, when nothing else works, we'll think of praying. But that's backwards! We should go to God first, not last. Listen to what the Psalmist wrote:

*Psalm 33:16-22, "No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save.*

*But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you.”*

Now, what’s the Psalmist saying? That kings shouldn’t have large armies, that their warriors shouldn’t ride on horses? No! He’s saying that even if a king has a large, well-equipped army, it can’t guarantee success.

If he’s relying on that for victory, if his hope is in those things, he’ll be defeated. Our hope should be in God. When we place our hope in God, it pleases Him.

He delights in rescuing those who place their hope in Him, the Psalm says His eyes *“are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them.”*

He becomes their “help” and their “shield”; He’s more valuable to them than ten armies.

I’m not saying you don’t go to the doctor when you’re sick, or that you don’t go to the bank when you need money, or that you don’t see a counselor to help you work out conflicts in your marriage.

I’m saying don’t put your hope in these things. You put your hope in God. He may use a doctor, or a banker, or a counselor, but your hope is in Him, not them.

You don’t trust the doctor to take care of you, you trust in God to care for you through the doctor.

Remember: it's not the size of the king's army that matters. It's not the size of your wallet, or the skill of your doctor, or the insight of your counselor that matters.

What matters is whether you are placing your trust and hope in God. When you're in a situation where your hope is running low, what do you do first?

Do you rack your brain to think of all the ways you can solve the problem? Do you try to think of people, and resources, and organizations, and plans, and strategies?

Where in the process does prayer enter the picture? First? Last? Never? Here's what to do. When your situation starts to seem hopeless, just stop.

*Say, "Lord, I don't know what to do. I'm not sure how to handle this. But my trust and my hope are in you. I'm relying on You to resolve this situation. Please show me what you would have me do. Amen."*

What will happen if you do that? Can I guarantee that nothing bad, nothing unpleasant, nothing painful will happen? No. Can I guarantee you the outcome you desire? No.

Our hope is not in what we hope God will do. Our hope is not in one specific result. Our hope is in God Himself. We trust Him to do what's best, and that may not be what we expect or desire.

But what I can guarantee is that God will prove Himself faithful to you, and that He will not disappoint you. You won't regret putting your trust and hope in Him.

*Isaiah 49:23, "Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who hope in me will not be disappointed."*

Lamentations 3:25, *“The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him”*

Psalms 147:11, *“The LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.”*

One caution: this doesn't mean that God's goodness and wisdom are always immediately evident.

Sometimes it's only looking back, in retrospect, that we can see how God has been caring for us, providing for us, protecting us.

Sometimes when we're right in the thick of things, we can't see any evidence of God working at all. But if we continue to trust Him, to place our hope in Him alone, we'll not be disappointed.

So where does this kind of hope come from? Let's be real. It's one thing to say, *“put your hope in God.”* It's another to actually do it.

Where do we get the faith we need to do this? Well, from God. We have to go to Him to get the faith we need to place our hope in Him. One-stop shopping!

Romans 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.”*

#### **Slide 4**

One way to develop an attitude of hope is to read the Bible; think about all the promises of God.

The more you fill your heart and mind with thoughts of the life to come, the less the sorrows and disappointments of this life will disturb your peace of mind.

That's how Paul was able to write, in Romans 8:18, *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."*

And in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, *"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our **light and momentary** troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."*

The more we focus on the blessings and glory of the life to come, the less burdensome our current problems will seem by comparison.

That's why both Presidential candidates are suffering through this painful election contest, with recounts and court challenges. The prize far outweighs the suffering.

What's more amazing is that Paul's own sufferings were anything but *"light and momentary"* by most people's standards.

2 Corinthians 11:24-27, *"Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked."*

That's what Paul was able to call *"light and momentary"* troubles. And he wasn't exaggerating. In comparison to what he knew was coming, they were.

The problem for us isn't that we think too much of our current problems, but that we think too little of what God has in store for us.

If we gave that more thought, the difficulties and sorrows and pain that threatens to overturn our faith would seem much smaller and less significant.

## **Slide 5**

### Conclusion

So, what's the basis for our hope? What right do we have to place our hope in God?

The answer is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God whose birth we celebrate this season.

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

Do you know Him? Have you placed your trust in Him? Are you trusting in Him right now?