

*Isaiah 9:1-7 - Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan-- ² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. ³ You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when **dividing the plunder**. ⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. ⁵ Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. ⁶ 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**. ⁷ 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.*

This morning, I am beginning an Advent series that will draw its themes from the four Advent candles: Hope, peace, joy, and faith. This morning, we will look at the hope that Jesus gives us.

If you are unfamiliar with the book of Isaiah, it is a collection of prophecies by Isaiah the prophet from the 8th century before Christ. God raised up prophets as His spokespeople when the nation of Israel was violating the covenant that had been set up at Mt. Sinai. At the time of Isaiah, Israel was in moral decay – idolatry, empty worship, and social injustice. Isaiah came to warn them that if they would not repent, that judgment was coming. But instead of trusting in God, Israel's King, King Ahaz, turned to Assyria for help and protection. And in chapter 8, we see that the people are turning to mediums and spiritists instead of to God. Eventually Assyria would turn on Israel and they would be taken off into captivity.

Listen again to the words used to describe the emotional climate in Israel in the passage we just read. Gloom, distress, darkness, shadow of death. Defeat, yoke that burdens them, rod of their oppressor, battle, blood. Listen to the language of war, oppression, despair. Life is hard and full of suffering and tragedy. Where is the hope?

But in the midst of this oracle of judgment comes this hope:

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

A child will be born who will be wise, a father to his people, establish peace, and most shocking of all – be known as mighty God. Israel may have failed in their calling to bring salvation to the nations. They could not even lead themselves in righteousness and justice. And so God would come down as a child to save them from their sin and from their mess. This is where hope will be found.

I want to talk this morning about hope. **We have a crisis of hope in America.** If you haven't heard about it, the US life expectancy has fallen since 2014. One of the biggest reasons is the increase in what researchers Anne Case & Angus Deaton called **deaths of despair**, which are deaths due to drug overdose, suicide, or alcoholic liver disease. During Covid, from Apr 2020-21, there was a 28% increase in drug overdose deaths. There are many factors that contributed to this increase, from economic challenges to loneliness and a lack of community or social connection to feelings of powerlessness, but I think that underneath it all is a **loss of hope**. **Hope that the future is going to be better than the present. Hope that one's situation will ever improve, that there is anything to look forward to, that one will ever be happy again, that anyone or anything can truly help. Hope that pain and suffering is not meaningless. Hope that death is not the end. Hope that can cause someone in pain to turn not to drinking, drugs, or suicide but to God and to other people for help.**

This loss of hope is understandable if you look around the world. The **economy** is moving in the wrong direction. The world is on the brink of another **world war**. People are more **isolated** and society is more **fragmented** than ever. Birthrates are declining, and marriage rates are declining. There are more reasons than ever to fear for our **health and safety**. So where is the hope to be found? Education? Technology? Politics? As obsessed as people are with **politics**, our politicians have given us little reason to hope. As far as **technology** has advanced, it is breaking down community, increasing polarization and fragmentation, and rapidly increasing anxiety and depression. And **education** is more agenda-driven and less truth-driven than ever. Even fiction used to be more hopeful. Now it seems like so many novels are about dystopian futures.

I recognize that this hits home for many of you, if not personally then because you know someone who in their hurt and despair has taken their life, or turned to substances to numb the pain. But as we enter Advent and turn towards Christmas, there is reason for hope.

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

How does Jesus bring hope? How do we find in the gospel a hope that will sustain us through suffering, through loneliness, through loss, even through death itself?

1 Peter 3:15 - *But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,*

Because of the gospel, we have three reasons for hope, borrowing from a Jonathan Edwards sermon entitled Christian Happiness that he preached in 1721 at age 18: our bad things will turn out for our good, our good things will never be taken away, and the best is yet to come.

1) **Our bad things will turn out for our good**

The story of Jesus is full of seemingly bad things. An unwed teen becomes pregnant, likely facing the judgment of her community. They are forced to travel late into her pregnancy to Bethlehem for the census. After Jesus is born, the genocidal king, who has heard of the birth of this Messiah, wants to kill all the boys two and under, forcing Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt as refugees until it is safe to return to Nazareth. And as Jesus grows up, the religious leaders want him dead, his closest followers betray and deny him, he is unjustly persecuted and nailed to a cross, and on that cross, even God the Father turns his back on Him.

But none of this suffering is meaningless. It is all part of a larger story for good, being used by God to save the world. The hope that Jesus brings is that in some way that we don't fully comprehend this side of eternity, our bad things will turn out for our good.

As Paul wrote:

Romans 8:28-29 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers*

This is probably the most hopeful verse in the Bible when it comes to perspective on this life. This means that whatever is happening to me is not a random intrusion into my life, but is part of a story, and that God is taking everything bad and is working it together for good for those who love him, to make us more like Jesus. Even the death of a loved one or crippling illness or painful divorce can be used by God, if we submit to Him, to conform us to the image of His Son, as fatherly discipline to train us for greater godliness and joy.

This is a real and certain hope. Think of the contrast this is to the prevailing narrative of our world. Richard Schweder, cultural anthropologist at the University of Chicago, writes *“The reigning metaphor of the contemporary secular view is suffering is just chance misfortune. The sufferer is a victim under attack from impersonal forces devoid of intentionality, and that means suffering is separated from the narrative structure of human life, a kind of noise, an accidental interference, into the life drama of the sufferer.”* In other words, most secular people see suffering not as an integral part of a larger story of God making me like His Son, but an intrusion into the story I am trying to live.

But as we look at the cross, we see that even when it seems like God is absent or unloving, He is very much present, working all things for good. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have hope that our bad things will turn out for good. Sometimes God is using it to mold us into people like Jesus, people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And sometimes this happens as He uses our suffering to bring comfort and salvation to others.

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 - *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our*

hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

In other words, sometimes the good that God brings out of suffering is that it equips us to bring life and encouragement to others who are suffering. Listen to Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*, reflecting on a time when he was in the Nazi concentration camp and was particularly discouraged and how he got through it: *"Suddenly I saw myself standing on the platform of a well-lit, warm and pleasant lecture room. In front of me sat an attentive audience on comfortable upholstered seats. I was giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp! ... By this method I succeeded somehow in rising above the situation, above the sufferings of the moment."* He found meaning in his suffering as he saw how it might be used to bring wisdom and help to others.

As Friedrich Nietzsche said, *"He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."* God's promises give us a why to trust in – He is working all things for good, to make us more like Jesus and to equip us to minister to others.

The first rock solid hope that Jesus brings is that even the worst things Satan or this life throws at us can be used for our good, for our sanctification, or for the salvation and encouragement of others, if we would trust in God.

2) **Our good things can never be taken away from us:**

Without God, you may have good things, but how do you hold on to hope when you know that the good will not last? When every relationship will be ended by death? When everyone's health will fail? When your best days are behind you? One of the real challenges to having hope is recognizing that we will eventually lose everything that is meaningful to us. But that is not the case as a believer in Jesus.

As Tim Keller put it:

"If your ultimate love and joy is found in the treasures of this world, then suffering will rob you of your joy and make you sadder and madder. But if your ultimate love and joy is found in God, then suffering will drive you deeper into the source of that joy."

The Christian hope is that our good things can never be taken from us. Jesus' death for our sins restores us to a right relationship with God. And now that we belong to Him, we can trust that all that is truly good will never be taken away.

1 Peter 1:3-5 - 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, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

All that is ours is kept in heaven, safeguarded for us. The love of God, that which our hearts have been longing for but looking to other things to give us, can never be taken away:

Romans 8:35-39 - Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This world is wasting away. Your health, your looks, your relationships, your status, are all going to eventually fade or die away. But the good things we have in Jesus will never be taken away from us.

*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. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ 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.*

We do not just want to live forever. **We want to know that love is eternal.** Love is what our hearts long for. And because of Jesus, we have that hope and promise.

And we also know that everything we do matters eternally. That is why Jesus says:

Matthew 6:19-21 - "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for

yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

And so we can give ourselves fully to the work God has for us, knowing that it is never lost:

1 Corinthians 15:57-58 - *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

As Jesus put it:

Matthew 10:42 - *And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."*

Do you know what that does, knowing that every single thing we do for the Lord matters eternally? That is a certain hope!

3) The best is yet to come

We know that death is wrong, that it is an intruder. As much as atheists might try to come to terms with death, there is still something so wrong and unnatural about death. And that is because it is unnatural. It is an enemy, an intruder.

1 Corinthians 15:25-26 - *For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

Death is an enemy. It is an intruder. And we know deep down that when someone dies, it should not be the end. The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us in 3:11 that:

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Death is not the end. The best this world has to offer is nothing compared to what is ahead. And that is our ultimate hope. Because Jesus came, died for us, and rose again, all who belong to Him will rise again.

John 11:25-26 - Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

And so Paul can write this about death:

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 - Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no **hope**. ¹⁴ We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

The Biblical writers grasp for language to describe what it will be like on that day. Revelation talks about no more suffering, seeing God, healing, intimacy. It uses marriage imagery – like a bride beautifully prepared for her husband. Marriage supper of the lamb. Streets of gold. Beauty. Intimacy.

1 Corinthians 2:9 - However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"--

And so Paul can write:

Romans 8:18 - I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

All will be restored, All wrongs will be made right. This is the ultimate hope we have, that in the light of eternity our sufferings will fade, that the sufferings we experience in this world would only enhance our joy on that day. All that you thought you had lost will be yours forever – the beauty, the intimacy, the health, the significance, the love, the peace, the joy. All of it will be yours forever. This is why Paul can write:

Philippians 1:21 - For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Death can not kill us, but only give us life to the fullest. This means that those who feel like your best days are behind you, that you will never be as happy or beautiful or strong or healthy as you once were, are just wrong. Think of the words of DL Moody – "Soon you will read in the newspaper that I am dead. Don't believe it for a moment. I will be more alive than ever before."

I love how this exposes “best life now” theology that tries to convince us that if we just keep a positive attitude, God will give us prosperity and blessing here on earth. Peter does not teach that. He tells them us that you may always be a slave. You may always be in a bad marriage. You may suffer and be persecuted until you die. But your hope is not in the things of this world. It is not in getting a promotion or in your marriage getting turned around or your health improving. Your hope is in Jesus, dying for our sins, rising from the dead. Your hope is in all that He has in store for you forever. This is a hope that the suffering of this world can not take away.

And so, if you are in a bad marriage, your hope is not that your spouse will die or that maybe one day it will get better. Your hope is in knowing that whether or not it turns around, God is at work, always working for your good, to conform you to the image of your Son. God will use your situation to equip you to minister to others. You know that what your heart is truly longing for, the love, the security, the joy, the intimacy – is truly found in a relationship with God, and that nothing will ever take that away from you. And you know that whatever your relationship is like, the best is yet to come.

If your work and career have not gone as hoped, your hope is not in getting that promotion, or that one day you will be doing what your heart desires. Your hope is in knowing that whatever happens, your identity is not in what you do but in who you are, and that God is working for your good wherever you are, equipping you for ministry to others. You know that the meaning and purpose your heart longs for is found in knowing and serving Him, and that the best is yet to come, that when you are with Him, you will reign with Him over the new creation in a way that fulfills your deepest longings.

If your health is gone and not coming back, your hope is not that some day it miraculously turns around. Your hope is that whatever happens, God is still working in you for your good, conforming you to the image of His Son as you trust in Him, using your situation to equip you to minister to others. All that is good will be yours forever, and perfect health will be yours forever where there is no more suffering or pain or death. Whatever painful life situation you are in, if your hope is not in this world but in Him, then even the worst experiences will only drive you deeper into Him, into the source of your hope and joy.

Death is not the end. Love is eternal. And there is a happy ever after. That is the hope? A child is born. Jesus, the Savior of the world.

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.