

Stretched Tight: The Hope of Advent

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Text: Psalm 33:16-22; Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 2:25-32

I. Introduction

[Open with the measuring tape demonstration]

I need a volunteer. Come on up here.

[Have volunteer hold one end of the cloth measuring tape]

Now, I'm going to measure the distance from here to here. Watch what happens if I just let the tape hang loose between us.

[Demonstrate the tape sagging]

Can I get an accurate measurement this way? No, of course not. The tape is slack, it's sagging, it's useless for its intended purpose.

But watch what happens when I pull it tight.

[Pull the tape taut]

Now there's tension. You can feel it, can't you? *[To volunteer]* Pull back a little. Feel that? That tension is uncomfortable. It would be much easier to just let it go slack again. But this tension—this stretching—is exactly what makes the tape useful. Without the tension, I can't measure anything accurately. The very purpose of this tape requires it to be stretched tight.

That image—a cord pulled taut, stretched between two points, existing in creative tension—that's one of the primary biblical words for **hope**.

And that might surprise you, because we don't often think of hope as something uncomfortable. We think of hope as optimistic, cheerful, maybe a little bit naive. "I hope it doesn't rain on my vacation." "I hope the traffic isn't too bad." "I hope things work out."

But biblical hope is different. Biblical hope isn't wishful thinking or positive vibes. Biblical hope is being **stretched tight** between two realities—the reality of where we are now and the reality of where God has promised to bring us.

And during Advent, we're invited to live in that tension. To feel the stretch. To acknowledge that it's uncomfortable. And to trust that this tension, like that measuring tape, serves a purpose.

Today I want to explore what the Bible means when it talks about hope, and how the Advent season—this time of waiting for Christ's return—invites us to be stretched in ways that are uncomfortable but ultimately life-giving.

II. Two Words That Change Everything

When you read the Old Testament in Hebrew, there are two primary words that get translated into our English word "hope." And understanding these two words opens up the whole season of Advent in a fresh way.

The First Word: Yakhal (Waiting with Expectation)

The first word is **yakhal**. It means "to wait," but it's a particular kind of waiting. It's waiting with expectation for something you deeply desire.

The first person in the Bible to *yakhal* is actually Noah. After the flood, Genesis tells us that Noah sent out a dove to see if the waters had receded. The dove came back. So Noah **waited** seven days. Sent the dove out again. It came back with an olive leaf. So he **waited** another seven days. Then sent it out one more time, and it didn't come back.

That waiting wasn't passive. Noah wasn't just killing time. He was stretched between where he was—stuck on that boat—and where he longed to be—standing on solid ground in a renewed world.

There's a beautiful proverb that uses this word. Proverbs 13:12 says:

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life."

The word "hope" there is not the same word but it is related to *yakhal*. It's the thing you're waiting for, the thing that drives you, motivates you, keeps you going. And the proverb tells us something true about human nature: when the thing you're hoping for keeps getting delayed, keeps getting pushed back, it makes you sick at heart. It drains your life.

But when that hope is fulfilled? It's like the tree of life.

The Second Word: Qavah (Stretched Tight)

But here's where it gets really interesting. The second Hebrew word for hope is **qavah**. And this is the one that connects to our measuring tape.

The root of *qavah* is the word **qav**—which is literally a measuring cord. In the ancient world, if you wanted to measure out land or cut a piece of wood to the right size, you'd use a cord. You'd stretch it out between two points and pull it tight to get an accurate measure.

So when the verb *qavah* developed from this noun, it took on this meaning: **to be pulled taut like a measuring cord. To exist in a state of tension.**

Let me show you how the Bible uses it.

Isaiah 5 — The Song of the Vineyard:

The prophet Isaiah sings a song about God planting a vineyard. He digs it, clears the stones, plants the best vines, builds a watchtower, cuts out a winepress. He does everything right. And then the text says he *qavah*—he stretched tight with expectation—for it to yield good grapes.

But it yielded worthless, stinking grapes instead.

God says, "I *qavah'd* for justice, but got bloodshed. I *qavah'd* for righteousness, but got cries of distress."

Can you feel the tension in that? God isn't just casually hoping things work out. He's stretched tight between what he's invested and what he's expecting, and the gap between the two is painful.

Psalm 33:20-22:

Or listen to this psalm:

*"Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our heart rejoices; in his holy name we trust. Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we **hope** in you."*

That word "hope" at the end—*qavah*. "Even as we are stretched tight in our longing for you."

The psalmist isn't saying, "We're casually optimistic about you, God." He's saying, "We are pulled taut between where we are and where you've promised to bring us. We're living in tension. And we need your steadfast love to sustain us in this uncomfortable place."

III. The Difference Between Hope and Optimism

Now, this helps us understand something crucial: **hope is not the same as optimism.**

Optimism looks at the circumstances and says, "I think things are trending in the right direction." Optimism is based on data, on probabilities, on the trajectory of current events.

But biblical hope? Biblical hope is independent of circumstances. In fact, biblical hope is often strongest when the circumstances look worst.

Go back to [Psalm 33](#). Right before the verse about hoping in God, the psalmist says this:

"The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue."

In the ancient world, if you had the biggest army and the best horses—the ancient equivalent of tanks—you'd be optimistic about your chances in battle. The data would support your confidence.

But the psalmist calls that a **false hope**. Why? Because real hope isn't based on the size of your army or the strength of your resources. Real hope is based on the character and promises of God.

When David faced Goliath, optimism said, "You're a teenage shepherd with a sling. He's a nine-foot warrior with bronze armor. The smart money is on Goliath."

But hope said, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

Hope doesn't deny reality. Hope anchors itself in a deeper reality—the faithfulness of God.

IV. Living in the Tension: What Advent Teaches Us

So what does all this have to do with Advent?

Everything.

Because Advent is the season of living stretched tight between two comings of Christ.

We look back to the first Advent—the incarnation, when God became flesh and dwelt among us. That already happened. The promises were fulfilled. The Messiah came.

But we also look forward to the second Advent—the return of Christ, when he will make all things new, wipe away every tear, and establish his kingdom in fullness. That hasn't happened yet. We're still waiting.

And in between those two comings, we live stretched tight. We exist in creative tension.

The Already and the Not Yet

Theologians call this the "already and not yet."

The kingdom of God has already broken into the world through Jesus. Death has already been defeated. Satan has already been disarmed. The new creation has already begun.

But—we still get sick. We still bury loved ones. We still live in a world marked by injustice, suffering, and decay. The kingdom is here, but it's not here in fullness yet.

And that gap—between the "already" and the "not yet"—that's where we're stretched tight.

Paul captures this tension beautifully in [Romans 8:23-25](#):

"And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

We groan. We wait eagerly. We're stretched between what we've already received (the firstfruits of the Spirit) and what we're still waiting for (the redemption of our bodies, the renewal of all things).

That's not comfortable. But it's purposeful.

V. The God Who Holds Both Ends

Now, here's the crucial question: What keeps us from snapping under the tension?

When a cord is pulled tight, eventually it reaches its breaking point. The stress becomes too much, and it snaps.

So what keeps us from breaking under the weight of living between the "already" and the "not yet"? What sustains us in the tension?

The answer is this: **God holds both ends of the cord.**

Think about it. The "already" of Christ's first coming—that was God's doing. We didn't bring the Messiah into the world. God sent him. In the fullness of time, God acted.

And the "not yet" of Christ's return—that's also in God's hands. We're not waiting for ourselves to get it together. We're not hoping that if we try hard enough, we can bring about the kingdom. We're waiting for God to act again, just as he acted before.

The same God who was faithful to send Christ the first time will be faithful to send him the second time.

This is what Psalm 33 is getting at:

"Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and our shield...Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you."

We can endure the tension of waiting because God's **steadfast love** holds us. The Hebrew word there is *chesed*—God's loyal, covenant love. The love that doesn't quit. The love that keeps promises.

We're not white-knuckling our way through the tension, hoping we're strong enough to hold on. God is holding us. God holds both ends of the cord, and his steadfast love keeps us from snapping.

VI. Simeon: A Portrait of Advent Hope

I want to show you what this looks like in a real person. Turn with me to Luke 2:25-32.

This is right after Jesus is born. Mary and Joseph bring the baby to the temple to present him to the Lord, and there's this man there named Simeon:

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

Simeon was **waiting**—*yakhal*. He was stretched tight in expectation for the consolation of Israel, for the Messiah to come. And that waiting wasn't passive. It shaped his whole life. He was righteous and devout—his hope produced a life of faithfulness.

But here's what's beautiful: Simeon didn't know when the Messiah would come. He just knew that God had promised he would see it before he died. So every day, Simeon woke up and lived in that tension. "Is today the day? Will I see God's salvation today?"

And then one day, prompted by the Spirit, he goes to the temple. And there's this ordinary-looking couple with their baby. But Simeon knows. The tension releases. The hope is fulfilled.

He takes Jesus in his arms and says:

"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

Simeon spent years—maybe decades—stretched tight in hope. And when the fulfillment came, it was worth every moment of waiting.

But here's what I want you to notice: **We're in the same position Simeon was in.**

Simeon was waiting for the first coming. We're waiting for the second coming.

Simeon didn't know when it would happen, but he knew God had promised. We don't know when Christ will return, but we know God has promised.

Simeon lived faithfully in the tension, and that hope shaped his whole life. We're called to do the same.

The difference is that we have even more reason for hope than Simeon did. Because we can look back at the first Advent and say, "God did it once. He kept his promise. He sent the Messiah. So we can trust him to do it again."

VII. What Hope Looks Like in Real Life

So what does it look like to live stretched tight in hope during Advent and beyond?

Let me give you three practical implications:

1. Hope Makes You Honest About the Pain

When you understand that hope is tension, not denial, it frees you to be honest about how hard things are.

You don't have to pretend everything is fine. You don't have to slap on a fake smile and say, "God is good!" when you're going through something devastating.

Remember Romans 8? "We groan inwardly as we wait." Groaning is part of hope. Lament is part of hope. Saying, "God, this hurts, and I don't understand, and I need you to come through"—that's not the opposite of hope. That's what hope sounds like in the tension.

Biblical hope gives you permission to say, "This is hard. I'm stretched tight. And I'm choosing to trust God anyway."

2. Hope Makes You Patient With the Process

If you understand that the tension is purposeful, you stop trying to escape it prematurely.

We live in a culture that hates waiting. We want instant results, instant relief, instant transformation. But hope teaches us patience.

Paul says in Romans 8:25, "If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." The Greek word there is *hypomone*—it means "steadfast endurance," "remaining under the weight."

Hope doesn't make the wait shorter. Hope makes you able to bear the wait.

It's like that measuring tape. The tension is uncomfortable, but rushing to release it too soon means you don't get an accurate measurement. Sometimes God stretches us because the stretching itself is doing something important in us.

3. Hope Makes You Active, Not Passive

Here's what's counterintuitive: Even though hope involves waiting, it's not passive.

Think about Simeon. He was waiting for the Messiah, but that waiting shaped how he lived every day. He was righteous and devout. He was attentive to the Spirit. He showed up at the temple when the Spirit prompted him.

Hope doesn't make you sit around doing nothing. Hope makes you live faithfully in the present because you're confident about the future.

If you really believe Jesus is coming back to make all things new, that changes how you live now. You pursue justice because you know God's kingdom is coming. You resist sin because you know you're being transformed into Christ's image. You invest in relationships because you know love is the one thing that lasts into eternity.

Hope isn't escapism. Hope is the fuel for faithful living in the present.

VIII. Conclusion: The Measuring Tape of Advent

Let me come back to where we started.

That measuring tape only works when it's pulled tight. The tension isn't a flaw—it's the whole point. Without the tension, the tape can't do what it's designed to do.

And in the same way, the tension of Advent hope—the stretching between Christ's first coming and his second coming—isn't something to resent or escape. It's the very context in which hope does its work in us.

God stretched himself between heaven and earth when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The incarnation is God entering into the tension of human existence, becoming one of us, taking on flesh and blood and all the limitations that come with it.

And now, in the time between Christ's comings, we're stretched between what God has already done and what God has promised to do. We're pulled taut between the manger and the throne, between the cross and the crown, between the first Advent and the second.

And God holds both ends.

His steadfast love anchors us on one end—the love that sent Jesus to be born, to live, to die, to rise. And his faithful promises anchor us on the other end—the promise that he's coming back, that death will be defeated fully, that every tear will be wiped away, that all things will be made new.

So this Advent, I want to invite you to embrace the tension.

Don't try to escape it by pretending everything is already perfect. And don't give in to despair by focusing only on what's not yet here.

Live stretched tight between the already and the not yet. Feel the tension. Acknowledge that it's uncomfortable.

And trust that the God who holds both ends knows exactly what he's doing.

Because one day—and it could be today, it could be tomorrow, it could be a thousand years from now—but one day, the tension will release. Christ will return. Every promise will be fulfilled. And we'll discover that all the waiting, all the groaning, all the stretching was worth it.

"Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

Amen.