

God's Gift of Hope

Today we focus on God's Gift of hope in our series, picking up and continuing on from where we left off with Peace and Joy. So let's start by looking at what we mean by hope. What statements do you typically hear people make that involve hope?

I hope it doesn't rain.
 I hope I pass my license
 I hope I get the job.
 I hope the world will be at peace.
 I hope he gets better.
 I hope she shows up.
 I hope . . . (dot dot dot - you fill in the blank).

Do you notice a theme here? Worldly hope is characterised by doubt, uncertainty, and a lack of control. We hope for things that may or may not happen. But in Jesus Christ, hope is a guarantee, a sure thing. Our hope is actually a "know-so" rather than a "maybe-so."

Let's unwrap this gift of God's hope by looking at hope past, hope present, and hope future as we journey toward Christmas.

Hope Past

What is the longest you've waited for something? I am talking more than just a meal or coffee in a busy café, to be served in a long supermarket checkout line or to get home via the Southern Motorway...

Is there anything you've been waiting for your entire life? The people of Israel knew all about waiting. Their entire history was marked by waiting as they looked forward to the coming of a Messiah who would set them free. The Old Testament is full of prophecies about this Messiah. Isaiah 7:14 is one example: *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."* [God with us]

And another well-known prophecy from Isaiah promises, *"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"* (Isaiah 9:6).

These and other prophecies gave a clear expectation of God's promised Messiah—hundreds of years before the arrival of the Messiah. The promise didn't always make the waiting easy. As we prepare for the anniversary of Jesus's coming this Christmas, we share in a sense, the waiting of the people of Israel.

Like them, most of us have situations and circumstances in our own lives that make it difficult for us to wait on God. And like them, we still wait for the complete fulfilment of God's salvation for the world. Yes, many prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus's coming, but others are yet to be completed when He comes again.

So what can purposeful waiting this Christmas season do for us? As we look back on hope past, we gain confidence and renew our faith in God's promises to us. Hebrews 11:1 says, *"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."* And...

We can find confidence in the fulfilment of Christ's arrival—and in all He has done in our lives over time. But we can also find assurance that there is much more to come—that God will complete His good work in you and me and that He will fulfil His promises to make all things new and complete in the end. So why not let this Christmas season be a journey of building confident hope as you wait for Christ's coming.

2. Hope Present

In the first chapter of Luke, we see Jesus's birth foretold again. But unlike the Old Testament prophecies, this is a much more personal and imminent foretelling. The angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her about the coming of Jesus.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him 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 Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

*"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"
The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*

So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26–38)

In the midst of life's questions, do you ever find yourself wishing that Gabriel would just show up and let you know what to expect? I mean, wouldn't it be easier to just know? ...Well, maybe.

But in Mary's case, perhaps it would have been easier *not* to know. What do you do with information like this? Mary was given a direct message from the angel Gabriel, but even (maybe especially) then it took faith to place her trust and hope in God.

Thankfully, Mary responded in faith and held fast to the hope of the promise of Immanuel, God with us.

Today, we know and hold fast to that hope. Jesus has come and made a way for us to be one with God, through His forgiveness of our sin. His coming changes everything. As you sit here today, the present hope you hold on to may not *seem* to be changing things. Your heart and mind may be flooded with the concerns and stresses and hardships you face. Any signs of change in your circumstances may be slim to none.

That doesn't mean change isn't happening. It doesn't mean God isn't working behind the scenes, inside other people or situations.

It doesn't mean He isn't working inside our hearts to teach and shape us. Regardless of what outward results look like at any given moment, we can find hope in the words of Hebrews 6:19, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."

Our present hope in Jesus doesn't stop the storms of life. It doesn't change the immediate situations we face. But like an anchor holds a ship steady against the wind and the waves, our hope holds us firm and secure in the midst of life's storms.

Let this season be one of secure hope in the midst of whatever storms or challenges you face.

3. Hope Future

While our focus leading up to Christmas is naturally on the birth of Jesus and His arrival in our world, God's gift of hope has a future aspect. Such hope is not just about preparing our hearts for Christmas but also about preparing our hearts for when Christ comes again. And you may find that waiting patiently for the second coming of Jesus is even harder than waiting for Christmas. We long for the time when all will be restored and made new, just as Revelation 21 reveals when He who was seated on the throne said, *"I am making everything new"* in *"a new heaven and a new earth."* Where God is dwelling permanently with his people so that there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

We experience the pain and suffering of today and wait in eager hope for the future. That is where our hope lies: that the baby who was born in a stable in Bethlehem will return again and complete the work of God in our world. And so we wait, placing our hope in Him for the past, the present, and the future. It's the bigger picture of our faith and of God's plans for our world.

The apostle Paul explained,
"For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" Romans 8:24–25.

It's hard to be patient. It's hard to wait. But I encourage you to lean in and unwrap the gift of hope today. No matter what the Retailers and stores try to tell you, Christmas has not yet arrived. This is a season of preparation, waiting, and expectation. There is value as well as excitement in patient and expectant waiting. May this be a season of wonder as you discover the gifts Jesus offers to you this Christmas: peace, joy hope and love.

Prayer: *God, thank You that in this season of Preparation we can unwrap Your gift of hope along with those of peace and joy. Help us to remember hope past, hold tightly to hope in our present realities, and wait with expectation for hope to be fulfilled when Christ comes again.*