

GOD'S GIFT OF HOPE FOR YOU

Good morning, Fil-Am! Hope you had a great Christmas. It's really different this year but we know the Lord our God is always the same. He is always faithful. I hope we'll be the same toward our God. Always faithful. But, people's faith could go up and down depending on their circumstances.

Sometimes, people lose their faith in God because of a tragedy that has fallen upon them or other people. Like the guy who was seating next to me in an airplane many years back. I struck a conversation with him, we talked about this and that, and then our conversation drifted to the hurricane that hit Bangladesh that year and killed 70,000 people. The guy's face suddenly became red in anger, not at me, but at God for not preventing it to happen. I told him that we couldn't blame God for such things because we live in an imperfect world. Then I added that a time will come when God will put everything back in order. The guy softened a bit and he said that he had become an atheist because of events like that. In short, he had lost hope.

You see, the human spirit needs hope to survive and to thrive. One expert said, "Since my early years as a physician I learned that taking away hope is for most people like pronouncing a death sentence. Their already hard-pressed will to live can become paralyzed and they may give up and die."

The writers of the Bible recognized this more than 2500 years ago. King Solomon wrote in Proverbs 13:12 "*Hope deferred makes the heart sick but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.*"

This theme of hope is woven all throughout scripture and it's going to be our theme this morning as we're getting ready to enter a new year.

In fact, we're finishing up a four-week series today we're calling "The Promise of Christmas" where we're talking about the wonderful promises of Christmas like God will always meet our need at the right time, that he wants us to get closer to him that's why sometimes he messes up our plans, and that things will look up for us if we only look up to him. Today we're going to talk about his promise of giving us hope in the midst of uncertainties. So, I've entitled it "God's Gift of Hope for You".

The point I want to make this morning is that the God of the Bible is the only source of hope for humankind. Yes, we're going to have a new government, yes, we're going to receive a new stimulus check although it's in limbo right now, yes, we're going to get out of this pandemic sooner or later because of the vaccines, but God offers a hope that is so powerful that it can transform a human being's life and it can rewrite a person's eternity.

It's not the kind of hope that we normally think of when we use the word hope. In everyday conversation we use the word "hope" in various different ways. But they're not really consistent with the biblical meaning of hope.

For instance sometimes we talk about hope and what we really mean is wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is like blowing out the candles on your birthday cake and saying, "I hope I have another year of health and happiness." You're not sure. If you're a student, "I hope that cute girl in Zoom notices me". You're just not sure. We don't have any power to make it happen.

Another kind of hopeful attitude is blind optimism. I think it's great to be an optimistic person. But some optimists see everything through rose colored glasses. Everything. To them everything is just fine all the time. In fact some religions take this approach. Christian Scientists for instance say that all evil ultimately is just an illusion. It's not real. We're just imagining it.

And sometimes people in their blind optimism will pretend things are great when they're not. That's not biblical hope.

Then there are ambitious dreams, another kind of hope. These are the lofty goals we tend to set right about this time of year, these resolutions before we go into the New Year. We set a lofty goal. We say, "Next year I'm going to buy a new car." And not only do we set this goal but we go about saving money and preparing so we can actually buy the new car. Or we say, "Next year I'm really going to improve my golf game." And we don't just say it, but we go out to the practice green and the putting green and we really practice to try to improve.

All of that is fine. It's wonderful to set ambitious goals and then to work toward achieving them. The problem is that often we are restricted by our own limitations or by things that are outside of our control. When I was in high school I dreamt of becoming a chess champion. I played chess with my dad night and day to hone my skills. But I found out that I became so obsessed with the game that it occupied my mind night and day even when I wasn't playing. I wasn't normal anymore and so I decided to abandon my ambitious dream. So, sometimes our own limitations or circumstances or other people can affect our dreams in such a way that we end up disappointed or worse.

Now let me contrast wishful thinking and blind optimism and ambitious dreams with biblical hope.

For most people hope is something that they do. But the Bible talks about hope as something we can have. See the difference? Hope is something you can have. You can possess it. You can own it. For someone who follows Jesus Christ here is the definition of hope. Hope is the confident expectation that God is willing and able to fulfill the promises that he has made to you. The Bible refers to this as living hope because it is always directly linked to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Peter wrote in 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. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you.”*

Through His resurrection, Jesus Christ demonstrated once and for all beyond any doubt that He is God. And that He really does possess the power to fulfill the promises that He makes to us. Promises that He’ll change our lives, promises that He’ll guide us, promises that He will walk side by side with us through the turbulence of life, promises that He can cause good to emerge from the personal problems that we face, promises that He will grant us eternal life in heaven with Him. The resurrection is an actual physical event in history that sealed Christ’s identity as being the God who loves us and who is committed to helping us.

Hebrews 6:19 says, *“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”* Hope in and of itself has no power. You can wish for something, you can hope for something, you might feel a little better about it. We might fool ourselves into thinking everything’s ok. But the only way hope has any real power is when it’s anchored in the God who has real power. Those who follow Jesus hope in the confident expectation that God is willing and able to fulfill the promises He’s made to them.

In the time remaining I want to talk about three particular areas where Christians draw hope from Christ. I think these are three areas that are especially relevant as we go into a new year. **Why do Christians have hope?** Three reasons.

1. We have hope because we’ve been forgiven of our past.

One of my favorite verses is Lamentations 3:21 *“This I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning.”*

What the writer is saying is that we can live with hope as followers of Jesus Christ because even though we may fail God and even though we may fail others as well, like our children or our spouse in some way, God's compassion never fails us. It means he will keep on loving us and therefore keep on forgiving us for those wrongs we've done in our past. You see, God is a God of second chances.

All of us have gadgets, be it a phone, a tablet, a computer, and what-not. All these gadgets are not perfect, right? Sometimes, they freeze, sometimes they crash, sometimes they do weird things, sometimes they're just too slow. What do you do when you want to make things right again? You reboot, restart, or reset. And you can do this over and over again because these gadgets are not perfect.

None of us is perfect like these gadgets. I'm not saying we're gadgets or machines. But when things go wrong in our lives, we can reboot or restart. Start over, have a fresh slate.

But here's the key. You don't restart on your own power. You'll only ruin yourself if you do that. Because you didn't make yourself. You didn't create yourself and therefore you wouldn't know how you should function properly. You restart with the help of Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus is in the Starting Over business. That's His job. He's your Creator. He made you. Because he loves you and he wants to see you doing well in life. He's saying, "I can forgive you. I can forgive you of your past because My compassions are new every morning. They never fail."

You know, some people need a reboot from God because of guilt. For them, guilt has just squeezed hope out of their lives.

I read recently an article in Christianity Today magazine about a father who talked her 18-year-old daughter into getting an abortion. Let me read an excerpt.

(Quote) "As a Baptist church youth leader, Jerry Little had long preached about the evils of abortion.

He and his wife, Debbie, repeatedly opened their home to young, unwed mothers-to-be. But in 1993, his daughter, Candy, 18, revealed her own pregnancy. Shocked, Little convinced himself that his daughter's case was different and that only an abortion could resolve the issue. Candy, however, didn't want an abortion.

Little drove his daughter 120 miles from their Amarillo, Texas, home to Lubbock for a clandestine abortion. Once inside the facility, Candy became so distraught that the abortionist refused to do the procedure. But Little persisted, talking her into the procedure. Two days later, Little and his daughter returned. Although Candy continued to cry uncontrollably, this time the abortionist took Little's money.

When Candy returned to the waiting room, she gazed vacantly in her father's direction and said, 'Let's go.' He immediately knew their relationship would never be the same, but he tried to push that knowledge aside. For the next two years, the Little family nearly disintegrated while keeping the abortion a secret. The guilt and blame nearly overwhelmed Little, who felt he had nowhere to turn.” (end of quote)

That's what guilt does. Guilt lies to us and guilt tells us “You are disqualified from a reboot. You will never get a clean slate.” Guilt squeezes hope from our lives. Jerry Little lived under this cloud of remorse for so long looking for something that would help. Until one day he agreed to his daughter's request to go through a Bible study and counseling. He grasped the immorality of his actions, admitted his guilt, prayed for God's forgiveness, and experienced healing. Now that God has provided this forgiveness, a dark cloud in his life has lifted. At present, he is an active leader of a Bible study group.

Friends, God's mercies are new every morning. He'll never tire of extending his grace and mercy to anyone who comes to him in genuine repentance.

2. The second reason Christians can have hope is we can be confident of his presence in our present.

Yes, God is present in our present. Some people have given up hope because they think that God is not interested in their daily struggles, or their daily needs or their daily worries. Nothing can be farther from the truth. God is as real as the skin on your body. You just can't see him. The Bible makes it clear that he is never absent. The psalmist says in Psalm 46:13, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." When you're in trouble, God is watching over you. He is the One you can run to and ask for help any time, any day, anywhere you might be, and for any purpose you might need.

All you need to do is to call to him when you're in need. This is what God says in Jeremiah 33:3, "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know." This is in the Old Testament where God is speaking to his chosen people the Israelites. But this principle also applies to all believers in the New Testament, whether Jews or not, including us. As believers, we are able to come to God and have confidence that he will hear us. Because now we are his chosen people as 1 Peter 2:9-10 says, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession". And how have we become chosen? Through the Lord Jesus Christ. If you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then you belong to the family of God. You carry Jesus' name and whenever you come to the Father, he knows you are his own, and he will do whatever you ask him. Jesus says, "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son". (John 14:13) He's saying, "Ask God whatever you want in my name. And I'll do it." Now, there's a caveat. 1 John 5:14 says, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." So, obviously, asking to win in Lotto will not be heard by God. Instead, you'll be the one who'll hear from the Holy Spirit telling you, "Do not waste your money".

My point is, we can be confident that God will hear us and respond to us in our time of need as Hebrews 4:16 tells us. As I mentioned in the first message of this series, “God can do anything instantly, at the right time.” You just need to trust him and wait on him.

Elmer Towns, a well-known pastor and author, writes about an experience he and his wife had / a long, long time ago. He says, “My wife and I went through college by faith. If we had not prayed together daily through all our difficulties, I don't know how we would have made it. I earned \$1 an hour for driving a school bus, which was just enough to pay for our necessities, but there wasn't even a dime left over for a Coca-Cola.

One evening the only thing in the kitchen cabinet was a can of tuna, so my wife served a tuna casserole. As we clasped hands to thank God for the food, I prayed, “God, you know we are broke. You know it's two days until payday. You know we are willing to fast until we get money, but we ask you to please take care of our needs.”

As we finished praying, the laundry man came to the door. Ruth met him to say, “No laundry today; we can't afford to have anything cleaned.” But he had not come to pick up our cleaning. The laundry man explained, “A few months ago your landlord asked me to pass along \$20 to you to pay for having thawed the pipes for him. I had forgotten about it until today.”

Some might say this was a coincidence, but Ruth and I say that our prayer together reminded the laundry man that he had \$20 for us. He had been sent by God.”

As a Christian, you can be confident that God is present in your present.

3. The third reason Christians can have hope is we are assured of our future.

I'm sure many of you have heard of the myth of Pandora's Box. According to Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman created by the Greek god Hephaestus. She was very beautiful. One day, she got married and for her wedding gift, she received a beautiful and valuable box from the gods and goddesses. But they told her, "Never open that box!" She made a promise to obey that warning but as time went on, her curiosity grew.

Back then, there were no such things as sadness or hunger, jealousy, laziness, greed, or anything like that. There was death but it was like a long sleep with no suffering.

Pandora's curiosity, however, finally caused her to decide one morning that she should take a little peek in the box. She opened it and out flew all the terrible things like greed and envy, hatred and cruelty, poverty and hunger, sickness and despair, and lots more. She closed the box but it was too late. There was one thing left inside the box though. Hope. And yet, Hope eluded humans and they never knew what it was because it was kept forever in that box and that box was never opened again.

That's how the ancient Greeks looked at life. Life was filled with misery and pain with no hope in the horizon. Hope was just a dream. Many people have a similar viewpoint of life. They think of life as just but a series of ups and downs, with more downs than ups, and then, after this mind-reeling journey of a rollercoaster ride, comes the inevitable—death. Death is the end of it all. You are snuffed out. There is no existence beyond this. When you die everything you have, everything you are, is buried in a casket and that's it.

This feeling of hopelessness has pervaded American culture. In 2017, according to a poll, only 62% of Americans believe in life after death. The rest either don't believe or don't know whether there is life after death.

No wonder we have hopelessness in this land. The hopelessness is so black that people can't face it.

So, some people go to wishful thinking and they say, "Maybe I'll be reincarnated or something." Or some people engage in blind optimism and say, "I just won't think about it. Maybe by the time I get sick and I'm ready to die they'll find some cure for whatever it is I have." Or they'll pursue ambitious dreams and say, "I'll lose thirty pounds, I'll cut my cholesterol in half. I'll extend my life span just through discipline and self-control and hard work." Those defense mechanisms can make people feel all right for a while. But there is one really, really ugly statistic in this world and that is - death plays a perfect game. Out of ten people, ten dies. One hundred percent. And the tricky thing about death is sometimes we don't see it coming. We just don't see it coming.

I don't know if you remember seeing the film of a plane that crash landed in Sioux City, Iowa in July 1989. It exploded into flames. The fuselage, or the main body of the plane, broke up into several pieces. One piece of the fuselage broke off and went into a cornfield upside down. In that fuselage was Jeff, a computer salesman and a Christian. He found himself strapped into his seat hanging upside down, not a mark on him. In an interview, he was asked how he felt before the plane crashed. He said, "I just braced myself for the worst. I figured I was going to die any second." Then, he was asked again, "Was there a feeling on the plane of despair, of hopelessness as you all knew that you were about to crash?"

He said, "I'll tell you the truth. It was very scary. But at the time I felt like I was full of hope. I really had hope that if I were to die at that moment, I would be in heaven with God forever. I really had hope that if I died at that moment God would care for my family. It's like it says in Psalms... 'What can anybody do to you if your hope is in the Lord.'"

How we face death says a whole lot about how we face life. When you are assured of a future in eternity with God then you have a sense of confidence and boldness and courage in this world. It turns hopelessness to hope. That changes everything. That changes your perspective. Even in ways that are hard to understand.

So here's my question as we approach a new year. Why would you want to spend another 365 days wondering is it going to be hopelessness or is it going to be living hope? Do you want to spend another year uncertain of your future? I don't think so. So what do you do?

Titus 3:5-7 says, "...he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy... through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."

How do you have that hope? It is by trusting in Jesus alone as your Lord and Savior. That means believing that he died for your sins, that he was buried, and on the third day he rose from the dead. He is now in heaven looking at you and waiting for you to invite him into your heart. If you want to do that, first acknowledge that you're a sinner who needs forgiveness for your sins. Confess whatever sins you've committed and promise to never do them again. Then, turn your life over to Jesus. Let him be the driver of your life. Obey him. Read his word the Bible so that you grow in your new-found faith. Jesus Christ can change your life. He has done that to me. He has done that to billions of people throughout history. In a little while, I'm going to lead you in praying to receive Jesus in your heart.

Friends, we're about to enter a whole new year. And there is nobody in this Zoom meeting who is guaranteed that they'll be alive tomorrow.

I want to give you a chance to go into 2021 forgiven of your past, confident of the present, and assured of your future with the sure expectation that if you follow Jesus Christ, He will fulfill every promise that He has made to you. Do you want that?