

Sermon 5-31-20 Hope: Finding hope in the Epistles

Based on a sermon by Adam Hamilton

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Welcome. My name is Kim Fields and I am one of the pastors at Central Church in Richland, Washington. We would like to welcome you to the latest message in our sermon series in which we are seeking words of hope from the Bible.

But first, do you know what today is? A while back a friend posted a reminder on Facebook. It stated simply, “For those who are unaware, today is Wednesday”. It sparked a discussion of how, sheltering-in-place, with our schedules disrupted, without our usual markers of time, many of us have lost track of what day it is. It’s true. So, let me ask you, do you know what today is? **Today, of course, is Pentecost**, the day when we remember and celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, who equipped and empowered the disciples to be the church. This is important, because it is that same Holy Spirit who equips and empowers us today. However, I have to admit that when I was planning this sermon series, I forgot all about Pentecost. I knew I wanted to bring a word of hope to the church, and so I scheduled a five part survey of the Bible, forgetting that this was the week of Pentecost. Still, I suppose that preaching on hope on Pentecost is not wholly inappropriate. After all, who better to turn to for hope than the Holy Spirit.

Let me begin by reminding you of what we mean by hope. As you may recall, **hope is the conviction that the future will be better than the present.**

Certainly, that is what we hope for, and I believe, what the scriptures teach us.

You may recall that over the last three weeks, we found hope in the Psalms, then in the Prophets, and last week we found hope in the Gospels. Today, we will continue to seek words of hope in the Epistles, by focusing on the letters Paul wrote to the churches he founded and served.

If you recall Paul's story, he was an ambitious young rabbi who was looking to make a name for himself. **Paul** grew up in a town in southwestern Turkey, in a good Jewish family. His parents were wealthy enough to buy Roman citizenship. Which meant that Paul was born a Roman citizen, a big deal in that time. Not many rabbis could claim Roman citizenship. Paul studied under the finest teachers and then went to Jerusalem, where he sought to make a name for himself.

About this time, another rabbi, by the name of Jesus, made his appearance in Palestine. Some of Jesus' followers even made the claim that he was the Messiah. Their claims grew even stronger after Jesus had been crucified, and as they claimed, rose from the dead. This heresy was drawing a number of Jews away from their faith. Paul had not actually met Jesus, but he knew heresy when he heard it. He knew that as a rabbi, and man of God, he had to put a stop to these lies that were misleading his people. So Paul took upon himself the mission of silencing the followers of this new messianic faith. He arrested many and even had some stoned. Indeed, Paul was the one who gave permission for the stoning of the very first Christian martyr, Stephen. Following the stinging of Stephen Paul headed to the city of Damascus, carrying papers that empowered him to arrest the Christians who were there. It was on the road to Damascus that the Holy Spirit came upon him as a blinding light; knocking him to the ground; and Paul heard the voice of Jesus asking, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

Paul's world was turned upside down. Blinded, and unable to see, he was led into the city of Damascus, where he waited for three days, confused, unsure of what had happened to him. Finally, God sent Ananias to pray for Paul and tell him about Jesus. Paul was converted and baptized into the very faith he had dedicated his life to eradicating.

Paul's experience is an example of what we discussed when we were going through the Psalms. We learned that it is often in times of disorientation and confusion, like Paul had just gone through through, that we reexamine our lives and turn to God. It is when the world seems to be falling apart around us that we are most open to hear new truths. That is what happened to Paul. And not just that day on the road to Damascus. Like many of us, Paul went through other times of disorientation that opened him up to new truths from God.

Think about it. Paul was repeatedly beaten and imprisoned. He watched as the ministries he had carefully constructed seemed to collapse. But each time the Holy Spirit used those challenges to bring Paul to a deeper truth and a closer walk with God. That is how the Holy Spirit works.

Let me remind you of some of the things that Paul went through. As you may recall, Paul made his **first missionary journey** into central Turkey. It was on that journey that Paul was forced to flee the city of **Antioch** with Barnabus. Together they ran for their lives. He then made his way to **Iconium** where he was beaten and left for dead on the edge of town. Paul moved on to **Lystra**, where once again they determined to put him to death. That was Paul's first missionary experience. Oh, there was fruit, but there was also a whole lot of adversity and pain.

Paul's **second missionary journey** was not a lot different. This time he went to Greece, to the city of **Philippi**. While he was there preaching a young slave girl accepted Christ, but after she was converted she lost her ability to tell fortunes. This infuriated her owners. They blamed Paul for taking away their cash cow. They had him arrested. They then led Paul into the center of town where he was stripped naked, beaten with rods, and thrown into prison.

Paul found himself in prison with Silas. Do you recall what he and Silas did that night? Let me read to you from Acts: **About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. — Acts 16:25**

Amazing isn't it? Paul and Silas sang hymns and praised God while lying in prison nursing their wounds. Hearing and seeing the faith of Paul, as he praised God even after all he had suffered, his jailer converted, along with his entire family. Think about that. Paul was praying and singing praises to God even though he had just been beaten almost to death and thrown into prison.

Here is what I want you to notice. When we are looking for how Paul was able to find hope, even in the midst of adversity, note that Paul continued to praise God even when the going got tough. Paul looked for the things he could be grateful for, and looked forward to things he would be grateful for. He was able to thank and praise God even in the hardest of times.

Let me be clear, that is a description of how Paul met the challenges of difficult times, not me. When things around me don't make sense and I am feeling down and questioning what God is doing, I seldom stop to look for things to be thankful

for. I rarely praise God. Yet when I do, when I do, I have found that it makes all the difference. That is why we continue to worship, pray, and seek the Spirit even when things are not the way we want them to be. It is why we continue to gather for worship in front of a screen when we would rather be in our sanctuary with our sisters and brothers praising God. It is because, when we take time to come into God's presence and pray and praise, the Spirit gives us hope. This is what Paul was advising when in 1 Thessalonians 5 he said:

**Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. — 1 Thess. 5:16-18**

Paul instructs us to “give thanks in all circumstances”. However, that is easier said than done. How was Paul able to do that? When I think of Paul's instructions, I recall Agnes. Agnes was a member of my first church. Sadly, Agnes was not able to attend worship. Agnes could not leave her care facility. She was bedridden. She couldn't even roll over without help, bed sores were a constant trial. I felt bad for Agnes and tried to visit her every month or so. I went to pray for her, to encourage her, but every time I visited, Agnes encouraged me. I asked her one time how she was able to find joy and hope while stuck in a hospital bed.

Do you know what Agnes said? Agnes told me that she had made the decision to look every day for small things she could be thankful for: a card from a friend, a call from her daughter, a treat with dinner, a devotional that encouraged her, and then to praise and thank God for her blessings, however small they might be. She explained that, “When I give thanks, my whole attitude changes. I experience hope again.”

Like Agnes, Paul's afflictions seemed overwhelming. He tells of them in 2 Corinthians Chapter 11. The passage is a bit long, but it is not even a complete list of what Paul suffered. Paul wrote:

**I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, 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 fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. 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. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. — 2 Cor. 11:23-28**

There was nothing easy about Paul's life. Too often we think that hope comes when our lives are under control, when times are good, or at least when we can see a clear path to better times. That was certainly not the case for Paul. Paul lived a hard life. There were constant challenges. He rarely knew what was coming next or when better times might come. Yet, like Agnes, Paul had hope. Paul experienced hope because he looked for things to be grateful for and gave thanks in every circumstance, knowing that was the will of God in Christ Jesus.

But that was not the only reason Paul had hope. Another reason Paul had hope, even in the face of this ongoing persecution, was because he knew Jesus and believed that Jesus had died and risen again. More than that, Paul believed that in

Jesus' death and resurrection God had conquered both death and evil. What is more, because evil was defeated, Paul knew that no matter how bad things got, the bad was only temporary. He knew that God would win in the end. Paul saw in the resurrection the message that he did not need to fear anything.

As a kid I used to love to watch **Lassie**. I was amazed by the trouble Timmy got himself into. Timmie might tumble into a well, or get cornered by a cougar, or find himself trapped in the middle of a rising river. I recall sitting on the edge of my chair, afraid of what might happen to Timmy, but I wasn't really scared, because deep down I knew that everything would be OK, that Lassie would rescue Timmy in the end. It is like my mother used to say, "**The worst thing is never the last thing.**" The worst thing is never the last thing because God will bring about good in the end. Paul knew that because of the resurrection the worst thing would not be the last thing. Even if he was killed, he knew that death would not be the end, that, like Jesus, he would live.

Indeed, in Paul's Second letter to the church in Corinth we read:

**We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. — 2 Cor 4:8-9**

How was that possible? It was possible because Paul believed in the resurrection. He believed that in Christ, God had won the victory. Oh, Paul might have been pressed on every side, he might have been perplexed, he might even have been persecuted, but none of those things were the end of the story. Much like an episode of Lassie, God would win in the end.

Indeed, Paul goes on to say:

**For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. — 2 Cor. 5:1**

Paul is saying, “Even if I die it will be OK. In fact, it will be better than OK, because I will be with God.” Personally, I know that my life is different because I believe that. Don’t get me wrong. I am afraid sometimes. I get confused sometimes. I even feel depressed some days. But deep down I know that in the end God will win, and that one blessed day I will be with God in heaven.

That is why Paul was able to write his words of hope to the little church in Thessalonica. This was one of the first churches he started. They had had a death in their small community and the members were grieving and struggling.

Knowing this, Paul wrote to them:

**Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. — 1 Thess. 4:13**

Paul was not telling them they shouldn’t grieve. Of course, we grieve when we lose a loved one, but we grieve differently. We are a people with hope. We believe that our loved one is not gone. Their life is not over. They are with God. More than that, they are now seeing all those things that we only dream of on this side of death. They are now in a place where there is no more sorrow, suffering or pain. They are reunited with those who have gone before. They are with God. I don’t know about you, but that gives me hope.



When we have that hope, we live our lives differently. That is why Paul was able to live like he lived. It was because he had hope.

One of the things that I do when I can are funerals for people who are not members of any church. I think everyone should have a funeral, and so, from time to time, I will do a funeral for a community member. I am happy to do that, but those funerals are different. When I sit down with families from our church, and visit about their loved ones who have died, they are sad. They miss their family member. But they also give thanks that they are in a better place and take comfort in the hope that they will see them again. They have hope, a hope that overcomes death.

However, that is not always the case when I visit with families who are not a part of our church. Often, they are not sure what they believe. I always share the gospel with them, but many times they don't know where their loved one is. They grieve, but not as those with hope. They grieve without hope. And that is hard.

But not for us, because we have hope. I have hope. With Paul:

**I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 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. — Romans 8:38-39**

That kind of faith gives us hope in the face of adversity. We live differently because of it. We live differently because we believe that the future will be better than the present we are experiencing.

That does not mean that life will be easy. That does not mean that we will never face trials or pain or defeat. But, we trust that on the other side of those trials is eternity and that eternity will be better than anything we have experienced or can even imagine.

Which brings me to the last point, the point I hope you will carry with you through the week. Paul had an absolute belief that no matter what happened God could and would bring good out of it in the end. More than that, he refused to believe that any pain or suffering or adversity would be wasted if he gave it into God's hands.

But before I go there, I want you to hear something very clearly. God is not the cause of all suffering and pain. God did not cause the policeman who was shot the other week to be gunned down. God did not ordain that an innocent baby in New York would die of COVID. God does not intend injustice, abuse, corruption, or needless suffering.

But, and this is an important but, God can redeem suffering and evil and bring good out of it, at least for those who are following and serving him. That is what Paul tells us in our memory verse for this week. Will you read what Paul wrote with me:

**We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. — Romans 8:28**

That was what Paul believed. He believed that God would bring good from every beating, from every imprisonment, from every time he was kicked out of a town. God would bring something good out of his suffering. Paul believed that.

It is why Paul was able to write his short letter to the Philippian church. He was sitting in prison, awaiting a death sentence, and yet he wrote to this struggling church sharing words of joy. The church members were aware of what Paul was going through. Some were even questioning why God would allow these things to happen to Paul. So he wrote:

**Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. — Phil. 1:12-14**

Just think about that. Paul was in prison. What did he do in prison? Paul thanked God for putting him there so that he could witness to the prison guards. Paul was thinking, “How else would I have ever received the opportunity to share Christ with them? But since I am here, with them in prison, they are stuck listening to me and I have had the chance to share with all of them my hope in Christ.”

I know that I would have been licking my wounds and whining to God, asking why is this happened to me? Not Paul. He said, “How awesome is this. I have a whole new mission field to share the gospel of hope with.” Paul was filled with hope and joy, even in prison, and that was the hope and joy he shared with the church in Philippi. Paul could tell them to rejoice. He could rejoice himself, even in prison, because as he looked back on his life he could see how God had used the

hard times to bring about good. And he believed God would bring good out of this, too.

I wonder if when you reflect on your life and recall the hard places, when you are somehow able to place them in God's hands, if you can see ways that God brought good out of them? I don't know about you, but when I have been able to give my pain and my grief to God, I have found that God has worked in extraordinary ways to redeem and transform my hard situations and bring something good out of them. Indeed it has been the dark valleys that God has used for good to make me who I am today.

Have you been watching The Last Dance about the career of Michael Jordan? Lorraine and I have really enjoyed it. Paul's words remind me of one Michael Jordan's most famous Nike advertisements. Watch it with me, will you?

<https://youtu.be/JA7G7AV-LT8>

Did you hear what Michael said? He said "I have failed over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." That was how Paul saw adversity. He believed that God would take that adversity and redeem it so that he would succeed in accomplishing the good work that God had called him to do. But to see that you have to pay attention.

Let me ask you. Are you looking for the opportunities that God is even now getting ready to bring out of your adversity? Are you prayerfully awaiting and seeking what God might do?

That is what Paul is telling us to do. He is saying that we can find hope. We can find hope in even the most difficult circumstances. In order to find that hope, we need to prayerfully look for those things we can be grateful for and rejoice. We need to trust that God is in control, that God has won the victory, and that the worst thing is never the last thing. And above all, we must remember that God can redeem and bring good out of even this, if in faith, we place it in his hands.

Let me leave you with the promise of our memory verse for this week:

**We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. — Romans 8:28**

What can we say except Hallelujah and Amen.