# THE INVITATION TO HOPE

3 December 2023

## INTRODUCTION

Today's the first Sunday of December, and there are 4 Sundays to Christmas. In this period leading up to Christmas Day, which we *also* call Advent, we will be preaching a sermon series called: **The Invitation.** Discover with us the Invitation to Hope, Peace, Joy and Love as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Today we'll begin with an "**Invitation to Hope!"**

I love Christmas, the carols, mince pies, decorating…seeing the joy as people open their presents, watching families re-unite after times of being apart and fulfilling the promises of Christ amongst us, the Prince of Peace. I love all of it…

As a child I would sneak out of my room in the middle of the night, just to sort out all the presents so I would get mine first! Until I was caught, and Mom tied a string to the doorknob of my bedroom door so I couldn't get out 😊

**Why couldn't I wait?** – because I hoped for something good to be nicely wrapped up and sitting under our Christmas tree with my name on the tag. I'm still like that little boy; bigger on the outside but inside there is still a little boy jumping up and down shouting, "*is it time yet; can I open mine now?"*

As Christmas Day draws closer, we take time to buy the food, put up the decorations, organize the guest list, update the gift list, and do everything else, so that we're ready for the big day. This is also a **season of preparation to welcome Jesus** into our lives and into our world so that we would be transformed by the living reality of God with us, Immanuel. It's the reality of God loving us so much that He would leave heaven and live constantly with us, every moment of every day. So that our every decision and action and purpose of life, is lived out of that reality. **That's the hope of Christmas**, the hope of welcoming God into our life, of choosing to make Him the centre of our being.

I really enjoyed the viewpoint of German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned and died for his belief in a German concentration camp during the 2nd World War. This is what he says:

> "*The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, who look forward to something greater to come. For these, it is enough to wait in humble fear until the Holy One himself comes down to us, God in the child in the manger. God comes. The Lord Jesus comes. Christmas comes. Christians rejoice!"*
> (Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christmas Sermons.)

He encourages us to start this Advent time of preparation with an awareness of our need for God, and how necessary hope is. He reasons that we know that we are spiritually poor and imperfect, deeply needing a loving God who wants to be a part of our life to save us. The Bible provides us a definition of hope.

## BIBLICAL HOPE:

Hope is a word that makes me double check what I mean when I use it. In general use, it could mean "I wish…" for example, "*I hope my boss comes to work in a better mood from tomorrow!*" But hope could also mean "I want something to happen, or I have an expectation of…." Perhaps like "*I hope Shirley wins the Lotto*

*this week…and I expect (hope) that she shares it with me 😊" ('Not a chance' she said!)*

Instead, "**BIBLICAL HOPE" is to look forward to something with certainty,** to unequivocally (*undeniably, indisputably, unmistakeably, unambiguously*) or to clearly know (*have absolute certainty*) that what we're looking ahead to, will happen. Faith is simply living out practically what we're hoping for! Or, if our hope is that we will live in heaven with God, then faith is living as if heaven has come to earth today.

Hope brings the future into the now and whilst we do not deny the present, we live out God's future for us now.

The Bible tells us that we can be certain that we are acceptable to God (*Romans 5:1*), despite how we feel about ourselves; and that we are adopted into His family (*Ephesians 1:5*) once Jesus is our Saviour. Biblical hope is living as God's children today, knowing that all things work together for good, that we're deeply valued and loved and we can ask for anything. This hope is the foundation of a "Kingdom focused life!"

What we're hoping in or hoping for can only be certain if that hope is given by the only one who cannot fail (*1 Corinthians 1:9*). **God is our only unchanging constant,** (*Hebrews 13:8; Malachi 3:6*) and so His promises are the only true (*2 Corinthians 1:20*) foundation for our hope (and therefore our faith.) True Biblical Hope can only be certain if what we're hoping for is found in God's character and His promises. *(sorry, no promises of winning the Lotto!)*

The Bible has many passages about expectantly looking forward to what God will do. The first one I want to cover is in Luke 2, which tells us about what took place around Jesus' birth. To fulfil the Law, Mary and Joseph had Jesus circumcised on the 8th day after His birth and, after about 40 days, they went to the Temple to dedicate their first born son, Jesus, back to God. Read from vs 25 with me:

> ***Luke 2:25-32 (MSG)***
> *25 In Jerusalem at the time, there was a man, Simeon by name, a good man, a man **who lived in the prayerful expectancy** (hope = expecting something…) **of help** for Israel. And the Holy Spirit was on him.*
> *26 The Holy Spirit had shown him that he would see the Messiah of God before he died. 27 Led by the Spirit, he entered the Temple. As the parents of the child Jesus brought him in to carry out the rituals of the Law,*
> *28 Simeon took him into his arms and blessed God:*
>
> *29 God, you can now release your servant; release me in peace as you promised. 30 With my own eyes I've seen your salvation; 31 it's now out in the open for everyone to see: 32 A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations, and of glory for your people Israel.*

Simeon can teach us a lot about hope, about **actively waiting in prayer** and hope whilst holding onto God's prophetic promises to him. Life must have often looked bleak to Simeon as he experienced the Roman occupation of his homelands, and all the loss and brutality that went with it.

I wonder how often he wanted to just give up, "*life is so hard!*" I think he went to God often and cried out: "*When will the prophecy come true? is it time yet?*" But no matter what the circumstances were, Simeon held onto his personal experience of God and the promises he had received from God: "*you <u>will see</u> the Messiah*."

Biblical hope encourages us to ask God and keep on asking, to knock on God's door, and keep on knocking, to search, and to keep on searching **for our very own**

**personal experience of Him** *(Matthew 7:7-8)*. It's not automatic, we must want it and, never giving up, wait for the answer! (This is not passive, it's active. It's prayer, fasting, reading the Bible, listening to teachings until God answers us. My experience of this:

*During my Matric year, I was searching for what to do with my life. I had asked God for help, and having heard nothing, figured it was up to me. I had a chance at a bursary to UPE, so was thinking to go that way. One day, walking home after school, I began, again, to discuss my future with God {argumentatively, not recommended!}, finishing by saying out loud: 'do You ever answer us?'*

*Before I had stopped talking, I thought this thought: "Go and make disciples, teaching them to obey Me, baptising them…" (SCARY!) which I later discovered comes from Matthew 28. Now understand that I wasn't thinking biblical thoughts at the time, nor had I read through the Gospels – I was still reading the other shorter books! This was* ***my personal experience*** *of God.*

Our pre-formed ideas of who God is and what He must do for us do not help us in finding our own personal experience of Him. For some, the initial personal experience of accepting Jesus as Saviour is sufficient; but God's goal for you is so much more than that. He wants each of us, to constantly experience His presence in every area of our life. And we can hope for, expecting His presence to be always and continuously present in our everyday life (*Ps 27:4, Ex 33:15*). He wants to be actively and constantly involved in our life *(Hebrews 13:5-6)* every moment of every day!

If you're feeling inadequate, unworthy, that you could never measure up in your life; then I believe God is saying this to someone: *"Here is a certain sure hope for you for today and the future: Jesus has made you more than adequate, He made you worthy in His sight; you are the apple of His eye and I know the steps of your life, for I have changed them for good, for the best, and* ***I will not allow what has been stolen to be the final influencer of your life***." **Now that's hope!**

But I also know that for many of us, this year has been a struggle, and the future doesn't look like getting any better! Disappointments, mistakes, betrayals, we've experienced it all – but there is a song taken from Revelation 20 that has this line in it: *"I've read the back of the book and we win,* " I've read the Bible to the last page, and, good news, at the end of everything – we win! That's a promise to hold onto.

Simeon challenges us to:

# HOPE FOR THE RIGHT THINGS!

Read this with me and search out what it says to you about hope:

> ***Romans 5:1-5 (NLT2)***
> *1 Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.*
> *2 Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and* ***we confidently and joyfully look forward*** *to sharing God's glory.*
> *3 We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. 4 And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens* ***our confident hope*** *of salvation. 5 And* ***this hope*** *will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because He has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with His love.*

The first point to take note of here is that these verses focus our attention on Jesus! Vs 1 & 2 clearly show that ***we confidently and joyfully look forward*** (that's hope!) because of what Jesus has already done for us! He came to earth, then died and rose again.

Hope, therefore, is **based on what Jesus has already done for us**. It is not an unproven wish list that we want for ourselves. Hope says that despite our current life experience, we '*see into the future'* and we choose to focus on what God promises, i.e., the certainty of '*sharing in His glory!*' (vs 2) When everything we try to do seems to constantly go wrong, or not go right; that's when we should be realising that we cannot do it and only God can. This is our chance to trust God and get His help. When we see His solution before us, then we can begin singing joyfully, telling everyone how good God really is! Because we know His promises!

Hope excites us and strengthens us because despite the potholes and load-shedding, high petrol prices and all the struggles of life in South Africa; because despite the disappointment that we're not reaching our personal goals, our journey leads us into God's glory, every moment of today and tomorrow and forever! Hope helps us to look past the problems of the present and see into the possibilities of the future. (page / dot) and we live in joyful expectation, not depressed history.

God's glory is shown by His presence in our life. And as we share His presence with our friends and family, He brings needed physical, emotional, and spiritual healing into their life, and then we get to join in the celebration! Not because we're super good, or super religious, but all because of what Jesus did for us, even before we started looking for Him! (*1 John 4:10*)

At the same time, verses 3 – 5 reminds us **that hope is also a destination.** So even when we are experiencing suffering, pain, hardship, confusion, discontentedness, uncertainty, depression etc, all of these are a journey that leads to growth in our life as we trust God to ensure it all turns out for good. (*See also Ps 23*) Read vs 3, 4 & 5a with me:

> *3 We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. 4 And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens* ***our confident hope*** *of salvation. 5 And* ***this hope*** *will not lead to disappointment.*

When we're struggling, God wants to guide us into **a place of hope for the future**, a confident certainty that God is in control (*Deuteronomy 31:8*), that He knows what is best (*Romans 8:27-28, Proverbs 19:21, Ps 37:5*) and will ensure that everything works out for good! (*Romans 8:28*) It's **God's character** that is a confident assurance for the future because God's love, through Holy Spirit who is in us, is a sure and certain guarantee of His acceptance of you and me.

True, we do need to step up and make the choice to trust God, despite what we feel. We need to put aside our past, our history of hurt and disappointments, and take a chance on God. People have let us down because we trusted them, but we can choose to not give up on God because of them. Tata ma chance – it's better odds than the Lotto! Take a chance on God and allow Him to demonstrate His love for you, and then ask Him to show you His presence and power in your life. Life will always be filled with chances to show others how good He is!

# THE KINGDOM OF HOPE (OR HOW DO WE APPLY THIS)

**We live today, because of the hope we have for tomorrow**. Not on our wishes or wants but based on the unchanging, everlastingly true character and promises of God, the same yesterday, today and forever.

Our trust, our confident assurance that despite our sufferings and struggles today, is in God's love, plans and purpose for us being able to overcome anything. Hope for our future is based on that, it's founded on God's faithfulness. And He does not let us down.

Because, finally,

> ***Psalm 62:5 (NLT2)***
> *Let all that I am wait quietly before God, for my hope is in Him.*

There is no one else we can hope in.

Amen!

**I want to remind us** of what I said earlier as we allow Holy Spirit to begin to minister to us:

If you're feeling filled with shame, guilty, dirty, inadequate, unworthy, or that you could never measure up to anyone's standards (even your own for yourself) in your life; then I believe God is saying this to someone:

"*Here is a certain sure hope for you for today and the future: Jesus has made you more than adequate, He made you valued, worthy in His sight; you are the apple of His eye and He says 'I know the steps of your life, for I have changed them for good, for the best, and …*

***I will not allow what has been stolen in the past to be the final influencer of your life***."

There is a song taken from Revelation 20 that has this line in it: "*I've read the back of the book and we win,"* Let's not ever forget "we've already won!" through Jesus. That the hope we are holding onto.