

"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Hope is a powerful thing. Do you remember Senator John McCain of Arizona. He was in the news a lot in his later years as Senator. Did you know that he spent 5 1/2 years in a Prisoner of War camp in North Vietnam? His plane was shot down behind enemy lines. He broke both his arms when he ejected. When his parachute landed the North Vietnamese captured him, crushed his shoulder and stabbed him with a bayonet, then dragged him to a prisoner of war camp in Hanoi, dubbed the Hanoi Hilton. He was beaten and tortured daily for the first two years. Then it was reduced to weekly beatings for the rest of the time. They were trying to get information from him, or trying to force him to make statements against the United States that would be used as propaganda material. How could he survive such a brutal ordeal? HOPE ! He thought about his family and as long as he was alive he had hope of one day being freed and seeing his family again.

Yes, hope is a powerful thing, but it can also be a very fickle thing. Our hopes are so easily disappointed. They can be dashed in an instant. And very often they are dashed and disappointed. I just heard recently that suicide is now the 10th leading cause of death in North America. On average, someone commits suicide every 11 minutes in North America. That shows how dreadful it is when a person loses all hope. They have nothing to live for. You can see how important it is for us to have the Hope that does NOT Disappoint. That's what was given to us at Christmas.

Do you think Mary had any dashed hopes? Uh, yea, that's pretty obvious! A better question is did anything turn out the way Mary had hoped? Not much. We are not told anything about Mary's hopes and dreams, but I think it is pretty safe to say things didn't turn out as she hoped.

She was betrothed to Joseph, who clearly was a kind and caring man. I'm sure she had dreams of a beautiful wedding surrounded by family and friends. In those days the custom was to have a week long wedding celebration. Those hopes were dashed when the Angel announced that she would have a son, conceived by the Holy Spirit. We think of that as great news, and it was, but it no doubt brought Mary a lot of heart ache and dashed hopes. It almost cost her her marriage. Joseph didn't believe her story and planned to break off their engagement. It took an angel to convince him she was telling the truth. If her fiancé didn't believe her, what are the chances that anyone else would believe her? Pretty much zilch. It's possible even her own family didn't believe her. So her hopes and dreams of a happy wedding with family and friends evaporated. Instead Mary became the object of scandalous talk and disgusted glances.

What about her giving birth? In my 60 plus years I have never known or heard of any young woman who dreamed of having her baby in a barn surrounded by animals. How about you? I'm pretty sure that in spite of Mary's disappointing wedding, she still imagined having her baby in the warmth and comfort of her home with a midwife coaching her through. That hope was also crushed as word of a census that was imposed upon them was announced. You've gotta be kidding. That couldn't have come at a worse time. That became Mary's unwanted reality as her hopes and expectations went down the drain.

Yet, for all her hopes and dreams that were dashed and disappointed, Mary received something far greater than anything she could have hoped for – a hope that would never disappoint. The message of the angel did come true. She did have a son who had been conceived by the Holy Spirit

and therefore He was the Son of God. Jesus did grow up to be the Savior of the world. That child of hope born in Bethlehem went on to accomplish that salvation on Golgotha and in the empty tomb of Easter. Mary had many other disappointments and sorrows throughout her life. She endured the death of her husband, Joseph and even worse witness the cruel death of her firstborn son on the cross. But the hope that Jesus gave was never disappointed. She is with Him in Paradise now and will be forever.

He Came to Bethlehem - to Grant Us Hope!

Do you see the difference? There are several sources of hope. There's the hope that stems from our own desires and dreams. Those are the things we want to happen. But because we are not almighty and can't control everything, those hopes are often disappointed. God tells us, "you do not know what will happen tomorrow." Therefore God tells us with all our plans and hopes we ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." (James 4:13-15)

Our hopes are also based on promises of others. When people make promises, that gets our hopes up. We get excited about the promise and look forward to it. Those hopes can be dashed too if the person doesn't keep their promise.

That's where God is completely different from everyone else. As we read earlier in our liturgy, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." (Hebrews 10:23) God is completely faithful. God always keeps his promises. God is not only perfectly faithful and trustworthy, but He is also Almighty. There is nothing He cannot do, and there is nothing that can stop Him from doing what He promises. That's why this is the hope that will never disappoint.

We all have many unwanted realities in our lives; things that didn't turn out the way we had hoped? In the last two years with Covid there have been many unwanted realities. No one hoped for any of the things that have become a reality for us today. Especially those who have lost loved ones, either to Covid or to other diseases. In this world there are always going to be dashed hopes and disappointments.

Yet, because Jesus was born in Bethlehem according to God's promise, we have a hope that will never disappoint. God describes that hope in our text. Let's take another look. The first verses of our text tell us what Jesus has done to give us this real unshatterable hope. "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice we "HAVE BEEN justified by faith... through our Lord Jesus Christ." This hope cannot be disappointed because Jesus has already accomplished it. He has taken away all our sins which separated us from God, therefore "we have peace with God." Many people view God as an angry judge; One who is quick to punish us. It is true God's judgment against sin is fierce. But that is not what He wants for you. He gave His only Son to rescue you from that punishment. Now, through Jesus, we have peace with God.

Not only that, Paul goes on to say, "through [Jesus] also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand." By faith in Jesus, we have open access to God's grace. We stand in that grace. In other words when we live by faith in Jesus, we live under God's grace. He will not punish us for our sins, but daily showers us with His grace and love.

Because of all that Jesus has done to reconcile us to God Paul also says that we can "rejoice in hope of the glory of God." That is eternal life where we will live with God in His glory. This is what we hope for. And that hope will not be disappointed because it is not based on something we are wishing will happen. It is not even based on the promises of some man who may not be able to keep his promise. No this hope will never disappoint us because it is based on the sure promises of God. Because Jesus came to Bethlehem and because He already accomplished everything necessary for our salvation, this is a living hope which is absolutely certain.

Then Paul adds one more reassurance. This "hope does not disappoint, because the love of God

has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” Not only is the promise certain and guaranteed, the Holy Spirit works directly in our hearts to make us sure and certain. We know this is our reality. By faith in Jesus, we know that we are children of the Heavenly Father, and we know that we will live with Him forever in paradise. That is the hope that will not disappoint.

There is one more question I need to ask. Are you going to let all those dashed hopes and shattered dreams overshadow the real certain hope that our Savior has given us? The losses in our lives, especially the loss of loved ones can dampen the joy of our Christmas celebration. The holidays especially can be a very painful, sorrowful experience when you no longer have that loved one to celebrate with. Christmas can become a very lonely time.

If that is true for you, then I would suggest that you need a little more Advent. Advent is a time of preparation. But it's not just preparing for the celebration of Christmas. There are a lot of things we do in preparation for Christmas. There is the baking and decorating, cleaning and polishing, shopping for gifts and for more decorations. Those are all things we enjoy doing and they do make our Christmas celebration special. But it is also those things that make Christmas so sad when a loved one is gone because we remember doing all those things with them and it is just not the same without them.

That's why I say we need a little more Advent — the true Advent preparations. We just sang one of our favorite Christmas hymns, “Joy to the World.” That hymn tells us the reason for such great joy, “*The Lord has come!*” It also tells us how we can experience that joy. “*Let every heart prepare Him room.*” That is what Advent is about. Making room in our hearts for Jesus. Receiving Jesus to come and reign in our hearts as our King.

It's rather ironic and troubling that all the things that we do to prepare for Christmas can actually hinder or even prevent us from preparing room in our hearts for Jesus. We can so easily get all wrapped up in these external preparations and get so busy getting ready for the celebration, that we don't take time or make room in our hearts for Jesus. Don't let all your Christmas preparations and celebrations crowd out Christ.

If you are sad and lonely this Christmas because of the loss of a loved one or some other loss, remember that is precisely the reason Jesus came to Bethlehem. He came to “Bear our griefs and to carry our sorrows.” Isaiah 53:4 If you are grieving the death of a loved one, it's Ok to let those memories of past Christmases add a somberness to your celebration, but remember that Jesus came specifically for this, to conquer death and to give eternal life. That is the real joy of Christmas that becomes even more real in our time of sorrow. Jesus comes into our heart to dispel our sorrow and give real hope through His word. So make time this Advent to spend with Jesus in His word. It's not just something to check off your To Do List. But really spend time with Jesus. Let His word sink in and give you the comfort and joy. Let Christ enter into your heart with His love and peace. Marvel that Christ, the Son of God was born in this world of sin in such a lowly way to save you and to give you a future and a hope—the hope that will not disappoint.

That is the Hope that will carry us through all the dashed hopes and crushing losses in this life.

He Came to Bethlehem - to Grant Us REAL Hope!

Amen.