

Sermon Series: Walk Wisely



#6 Hope that hangs on – Hebrews 6:19-20

Stephen Spielberg's 1991 retelling of *Peter Pan* as an adult with amnesia may not have aged well, but Maggie Smith's portrayal of Wendy in her elderly years is wonderful. She stirs hope and imagination in the hearts and minds of Peter's two children. While retelling young Peter Pan's adventures "Granny Wendy" turns to Peter watching on, and says, "Peter, **the stories are true.**"



JRR Tolkien said, in his essay *On Fairy-Stories* that there are "primordial human desires" that modernity has not been able to extinguish, including the desire to **escape death itself** – which he called "**the oldest and deepest desire**".

It has been said that: "(Humans) can live about forty days without food, about three days without water, about eight minutes without air...but only for one second **without hope**".¹

Producers and publishers know we are obsessed with adventures, both fiction and fantasy, that focus on hope – where lovers are never parted, lives cheat death, good triumphs over evil, and artists see their creative dreams fulfilled. Stage shows and musicals based on fairy tales return again and again to full houses because we have a common deep longing for life to be **better than this.**

Don Richardson published his research into non-Christian ancient religious cultures² in 2006 to make a strong case that deep within all men and women of every generation their lies a latent **longing for eternity**. Ecclesiastes 3:11 puts it this way: "God has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end."

Humans are **hope-dependent** and **hope-driven**.

¹ Sadly, this excellent quote comes from a Christian author, Hal Lindsey, from last century whose stories produced more fear of the devil rather than confidence in Christ.

² See this review of Richardson's book for insight into his findings

<http://worldviewwarriors.blogspot.com/2016/05/eternity-in-their-hearts-review.html>

What hope is

Let's first consider **what hope is**, and then go on to consider what is distinctive about Christian hope.

We could say that hope is made up of **2 key elements: desire and expectation.**

Let me illustrate this by comparing **two football fans**, both Carlton supporters. Both share a common, keen **desire** for The Blues to win each week. Yet one is living in the **1970's**, the other in **2018**. The former cannot remember a time when her team lost a game. She leaves home early with a spring in her step. The other cannot remember a time when Carlton last won a game as 2018 ended with the longest drought of victories fans had ever known. She vacillates repeatedly on game day, eventually deciding to **stay at home**. Both fans have a common **desire**, yet their expectations are poles apart. One fan sets off early, **full of hope**. The other stays home with little or **no hope** at all!

While it may be a frivolous illustration above, you can see how hope is a function of both **desire AND expectation.**

The use of the English word "hope" today presents us with a **problem**. It often suggests **uncertainty** rather than confidence. For example, someone asks you, "will the **weather** be good tomorrow?" You might answer, "I **hope** so," by which you mean, it's Melbourne, flip a coin! "Hope" is often, in our usage, no more than "**wishful thinking.**"

But by contrast, an ancient Greek word for "hope" bred a strong sense of confidence. **Elpis** (ἐλπίς), taken from Greek mythology was the **personification and spirit of hope**³ in the ancient world and symbolised the pleasure that accompanies a **firm hope**.



The Apostle Paul uses *elpis* in this way in Romans 8, saying...

For in this hope (elpis) 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

³ depicted as a young woman, usually carrying flowers or a cornucopia in her hands.

He uses this word 14 times in Romans in relation to the Gospel of Jesus and says this hope “**does not disappoint**” (Romans 5:5).

A Hebrew word for hope also conveys **confidence**. *Tikvah* (teek-var) means a **strong rope**, like that which Rahab promised to use to let Hebrew spies escape from danger (see Joshua chapter 2). Psalm 71 uses this word to say...

*For you have been my hope (tikvah), Sovereign Lord,
my confidence since my youth. (Ps. 71:5)*



Marks of Christian Hope

If we define hope more generally as above, what, then, are some of the **distinguishing features of Christian hope**? What do Christians carry with them because of Jesus Christ that might be of benefit to our neighbours and friends regarding hope?

The hope of the resurrection is the most significant point of difference and shapes the hope of Christians in all aspects of life; what the Scriptures call “a living hope”.⁴ Most religions propose some sort of **life after death**. Pure secularism offers no such hope but leaves us only to what author John Updike called “**our animal walk in the sun**”. But in contrast to all other systems of thought regarding our ultimate destiny, Christian hope stands out in the crowd in the following ways:

1. **Hope that is grounded** (Hebrews 6:19-20)

Far from abstract wishful thinking, Christian hope is firmly pinned to the **resurrection** of Jesus of Nazareth. It’s a reasonable hope because the evidence for Jesus’ being risen is **formidable and reliable**.^{5 6}

Shakespeare’s **Hamlet was wrong**. There *is one traveller*, according to the New Testament, who has returned from the “**undiscovered country**”. Jesus Christ has gone there and come out through it again into life. All who follow him can now have a **sure hope** beyond death.

⁴ E.g. 1 Peter 1:3

⁵ see Wolfhart Pannenberg or N.T. Wright for contemporary summaries

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:5-8

The writer to the Hebrews wrote regarding Jesus' death and resurrection...

*We have this hope as an **anchor for the soul, firm and secure**. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. Hebrews 6:19-20*

Similarly, when Christians at Corinth asked questions of the Apostle Paul regarding details about the resurrection, he concluded his responses with this personal note of hope:

'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' ...thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

Christian hope is grounded and firm

2. Hope in a compassionate God (Hebrews 2:14-18)

Secondly, Christians put their hope in a **compassionate God**. Consider the extraordinary event of the raising of Lazarus in John chapter 11.⁷ Some readers may be focussed on questions of the mechanics of how Jesus could have revived his deceased friend.⁸ The Evangelist hoped all might believe Jesus to be "the resurrection and the life."⁹ Yet, there is another important lesson here – to note the **empathy** of Jesus and his solidarity with us in grief in the face of loss and death.¹⁰ Christian hope is strengthened by the knowledge that the God who took on human life in all fulness for our sake fully empathizes with our fragility and mortality.

Hebrews 2:14-18 shows how Jesus...

"...shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death... and free those who all

⁷ The passage is included at the end of this article

⁸ Lazarus himself was only redivivus, not resurrected and would eventually die again in this life. Nevertheless, this is truly a miracle of God.

⁹ John 11:25

¹⁰ John 11:33-38

their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death... For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way.

Christian hope is strengthened by the knowledge that our God **truly understands** life and death.

3. **Hope for *this* world** (Rev. 21:1-5; 22:1-4)

Another important distinguishing mark of Christian hope is that God's future plans are for ***this*** world; ***this*** universe. It is common today for people to think of life after death as if it's a flight upward into an ethereal realm as a disembodied spirit. It will surprise many that such a view has more affinity with ancient Greek philosophies than biblical teaching! Indeed there is hope for a day in the future when the dead are raised, however, the final scenes of the Bible are not an image of the faithful leaving the earth for "heaven", but of the glory of God descending to our world, albeit fully renovated (see Revelation 21:1-5).

This hope is not only for this planet we inhabit, but for the **whole creation** (see Romans 8:20-21). Though the old "world" will indeed "pass away", but in the sense that it will be renewed and transformed one day to be suited perfectly for renewed and resurrected people dwelling with God. Such a new creation can only be imagined, not yet fully known; yet the imagery of Scripture asserts that it will be like this life, yet glorious.

This aspect of Christian hope gives real motivation for **activism in this life**, not merely biding time waiting for the next.¹¹ For example, Christian hope should lead to concern for **climate action** in our time, for fighting injustice, and for creativity and joy in this life. N.T. Wright and Timothy Keller are two prominent Christian teachers today who are at pains to correct the misnomer among many that being a Christian is about being sure of "**going to heaven**".

Our acts of faith hope and love in this life have purpose for God's glory now, and in the new creation will be found not to have been in vain. Martin Luther, the 16th Century European reformer said, "If I knew Christ were

¹¹ An error Paul addresses among some Christians at Thessalonica (see 2 Thes. 3:11,12)

returning tomorrow, I would still plant a tree today”. Luther knew that our future, bodily resurrected life in the new creation will be real, yet glorious.

Christian hope is for *this* world.

4. **Hope in a relational future** (John 14:1-4)

A fourth distinctive feature of Christian hope is that relationships are central. John Updike, the late American author and literary critic, wrote in his memoirs titled *Self-consciousness* of his disdain for those satirists and cartoonists in daily publications that like to depict heaven as **white-robed figures on clouds with harps and haloes** enjoying a **trouble-free, yet unearthly existence**. He reminds that Christian hope for the afterlife is **profoundly relational**, with “**loving relationships** at its core”. Jonathan Edwards, a great preacher and philosopher of the 18th century, affirmed this long before Updike. He published a famous sermon titled “**Heaven is a world of love.**” Instead of a future of abstractions, he preached a Christian afterlife in which **loving relationships are at the centre** just as they exist in the very heart of the Holy Trinity. John’s Gospel tells of Jesus speaking on the eve of his death with his friends and assuring them that...

My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:2-3)

Jesus’ call to “love one another” in this life has alignment in the next life for those who have their hope in him. The image he gave is a peace-filled commune under the roof of His loving heavenly Father.

Christian hope has relationships at its centre

5. **Hope as a gift** (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Lastly, but not exhaustively, Christian hope differs from other religious systems of thought in that its adherents are **not reliant on their own moral goodness or personal merit** for access or inclusion in all its promised

benefits. Although mortals love to make religious observance the means of measuring up to divine standards, the Apostle Paul points out that even the most “religious” fall way short of God’s holiness and righteousness and could not stand (Romans 3:21-23). Instead, the Scriptures tell us how God looked upon our plight and in and through Christ superseded our bankrupt systems that rank the righteous by human rules. Instead, God offers us the **goodness of His truly righteous Son** as a gift, received by faith alone; by no merit of the receiver. (Eph. 2:8-9).

Conclusion – Hope “imagined”

Many of your **friends and neighbours** may not share the above-mentioned hopes and expectations with you. Yet, we should have no doubt that each one shares the common **desire** for a fulfilling and satisfying life and, if possible, to cheat death and live on. And it is on this note that we return to the fairy tales mentioned when we began.

It’s famously known that one day **Tolkien and Lewis** were walking together in 1931 in Oxford as colleagues in conversation. Tolkien was a Christian and, at this stage C.S. Lewis was still a staunch atheist. They talked of the great epic fairy tales and fantasies of fiction and the wonder and imagination they fire in the human mind and spirit. Both agreed heartily on the importance of myths of this kind: where lovers are united for eternity, where death is cheated, in which good triumphs over evil, and so on. Something is deeply consoling for human beings, they agreed, and **nothing is more satisfying**.

“But”, said Lewis to Tolkien, “though these myths may indeed be wonderful, all myths are lies. They’re breathed through silver.” Tolkien turned to him and objected saying, “No, not if Christianity is true.” He went on to tell Lewis that the old fairy stories, though they are fiction, make us feel they are pointing to an underlying truth. Tolkien insisted that when you get to the Gospel story of Jesus Christ – how God saw us in all of our troubles and in the person of Jesus Christ comes down to write himself into our stories, and how on the cross though all things look bleak, at the last minute Jesus breaks the power of death and is resurrected to new life. This story, said Tolkien, “is not one more story –

pointing to an underlying truth – this *is* the underlying truth to which **all other stories point.**”¹²

J.R.R. Tolkien even went as far to say as a Christian that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is “a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories.” He was not suggesting Christianity is mere fable as many athiests like to contend; instead he was talking about “myth” and “story” in their original intention; not as in competition with the idea of “facts”.¹³

Later in life, having become a Christian, C.S. Lewis wrote: “One day you will be old enough to read fairy tales again.”

The story of Christ has entered history and the primary world, said Tolkien. It is **the** story to which all other joy-bringing, spellcasting, heart-shaping, hope-bringing stories only point. It is **the** greatest redemption narrative and destiny shaping story-arc of all. Other good stories, he said, give us a taste of the Gospel when there is “sudden and miraculous grace”, the “joy of deliverance”, a “fleeting glimpse of Joy...beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.”

It is vital then that we become familiar with and remain very familiar with the “story” of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as told in the Gospels and as testified to by the prophets and apostles. For as the Apostle Peter, himself a witness of Jesus’ resurrection, wrote...

In God’s great mercy we have been given 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. (1 Peter 1:3,4)

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¹² In this article via the link, Lewis reminisces on these events

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/85-years-ago-today-j-r-r-tolkien-convinces-c-s-lewis-that-christ-is-the-true-myth/>

¹³ It’s interesting to follow the history of the etymology and vernacular with regard to the word “facts”: originally meaning a gathering of evidences to close the gap between the known and unknown; not giving the sense of full and undisputable knowledge (see Alasdair Macintyre: *After Virtue*)