

Sermon Summary #17

The Power of Hope in the Power of Christ Philippians 3:17-21

I can live in the absence of a lot of things. If pressured to do so, I can probably get by without baseball and movies and books and a nice car and the home where Ann and I currently reside. To lose all that would be hard. It would put a strain on life. But I think I can live without them.

There is one thing, however, without which I cannot live or thrive. ***I cannot live without hope.*** To live without hope that God has a purpose for human history, a purpose for **my** personal history; to live without hope that God will one day bring all things to consummation and put the world to rights; to live in such a world would be senseless and, at least for me, impossible. To live without hope that there is a conscious eternity following physical death, to live without hope that Jesus Christ is alive and will deliver his people from death and sin and destruction, to live without hope that truth will be vindicated and all lies exposed; to live without hope that genuine justice will finally be done, is simply inconceivable to me. Were such **hope** not to exist, **I** would cease to exist.

To go through life childless or friendless or loveless must be a horrible experience. But people do it all the time. But nothing can possibly compare with living a life that ultimately is hopeless.

Yet, there are people who attempt to live that way. A Methodist minister from Sri Lanka visited Ghana many years ago. He invited some Hindu friends to tea and asked them to give an account of the hope that was in them. Not only were they unable to understand what he meant by his question, he soon discovered that ***their language simply did not have a verbal equivalent for our concept of hope. Nothing in their language, and certainly nothing in their religion, could serve as a functional equivalent to the Christian concept of hope.***

Not all versions of “hope” are good or helpful. Some people try to cope with their problems by cultivating what they call “hope” that something better will appear around the corner. They can’t bear facing the pain and pressures of life in the present, so *they create a fantasy world for themselves*, “hermetically sealed to keep out the cold of reality. [Such so-called ‘hope’] is escapist, defeatist, [and] trivial” (Stephen Travis, 11). In the end, it accomplishes nothing except to delay the inevitable.

That’s actually how a lot of non-Christians think about us. They believe that we embrace life after death in order to escape dealing with the problems this present life brings our way. Our hope in the second coming of Jesus Christ, so they say, is simply a pious way of making life livable and perhaps a way to justify shirking our responsibilities in the here and now.

Let me say this as clearly as I can: that is *not* the nature or purpose of Christian hope! In fact, it is hope in the second coming of Jesus Christ that *empowers us and motivates us* to tackle head on the problems of the present. It is the hope of the second coming of Christ that *gives meaning and value to life* in the present. ***It is hope in the second coming of Christ and his power to transform our bodies and to subject all things to himself that gives us a reason to live like Paul, in imitation of Christ, rather than to be like those in Philippi whose “end is destruction” and whose “god is their belly” and who “glory in their shame” and who “set their minds on earthly things.”*** That is Paul’s point in Philippians 3:17-12. Let’s look at it together.

Imitating those who Imitate Christ (v. 17)

You’ve heard me on several occasions talk about the most influential people in my life. ***My dad*** was by far and away the greatest example I’ve had. To be like him has always been my goal. ***Russ McKnight***, who died a little more than 20 years ago, also exerted a huge influence on me as he did on several people here at Bridgeway. I was greatly affected by ***Dr. S. Lewis Johnson***, who taught NT and Theology at Dallas Theological Seminary for many years and with whom I worked as an associate pastor for eight years in Dallas.

But there are also women who've had a life-changing influence on me. *My mother*, now 93, is certainly first among them. *Joni Eareckson Tada* is another. So too is *Jackie Pullinger*.

My point is not that we imitate others because they are divine and we are but mere humans. My point is not that we mimic their gestures or try to reproduce the sound of their voice or how they dress or how they walk. My point is that *we ought to strive to imitate others to the extent that they imitate Jesus Christ*. And these people I've just mentioned certainly did that.

This is what Paul is saying here in v. 17 – *“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”* He said much the same thing in *1 Corinthians 4:16* – “I urge you, then, *be imitators of me.*” However, lest you think Paul is an egomaniac and wants to spiritually clone himself in other Christians, listen to how he put it in *1 Corinthians 11:1* – “Be imitators of me, *as I am of Christ.*”

Paul doesn't want them to imitate him in his role as an apostle, or in his preaching style, or in his personality, or in his unique spiritual gifting, but solely to the extent that he lives in self-denial and in imitation of Jesus Christ. It's as if he's saying, *“Imitate me in precisely those areas in which I am nothing and Christ is all!”*

And don't forget that he has just confessed his own imperfection. He is all too keenly aware that he has not fully arrived. Thus, it is in the context of his own humility and self-awareness of his own shortcomings that he calls on others to imitate him.

He also acknowledges that this may be difficult given the fact that he's in prison and they are in Philippi. So he encourages them to fix their eyes on others more close at hand, perhaps Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-30) or even Timothy whom he is sending to them (Phil. 2:19-24).

We must never forget that sometimes truth and goodness and holiness are *better caught than taught*. So let me encourage all of us today to ask this question of ourselves: With whom do we “hang out”? Whose conduct do we study and imitate? Whose lives are serving as a model for our own? Is it some self-serving, egotistical athlete, or a morally degenerate actor or singer, or a multi-millionaire business executive whose ethics give pond scum a bad name?

Find those in whom you see Jesus Christ and “hang” with them, imitate them, and let their lives exert a positive and constructive influence on how you think and talk and live.

One more thing. I've said a lot about the importance of having godly, Christ-like role models in your life. But *to what extent are you yourself a role model for others?* Is this a goal you've set for yourself? Are you at a point in your relationship with Christ where other Christians might begin to look to you for advice, wisdom, and a pattern to follow? If not, why not?

When Corrupt Role Models Abound (vv. 18-19)

I just mentioned a few of the so-called “role models” in our society who ought to be ignored rather than imitated. Well, there were quite a few back in the first century as well, and Paul describes them for us here in vv. 18-19. But remember this: there are people today, professing Christians no less, who fit the profile that Paul sets forth in these verses. So don't think for a moment that this was only a problem for the Philippians back then. It's our problem as well.

Paul describes them in five ugly phrases. But before I explain them, notice three other things.

First, Paul says there are *“many”* of them (v. 18a). They aren't few and far between. They were everywhere in the ancient world, and they are everywhere today. Beware!

Second, their presence and influence moved Paul to *“tears”* (v. 18b). It's hard to know what it is precisely that caused him to weep. It may have been the destructive influence these people exerted on the Philippian Christians and other believers whom Paul loved. Or it may be that Paul actually wept for these very individuals who lived in

such immoral and destructive ways. Perhaps he wept for their salvation. Perhaps he was heartbroken and devastated with the thought of where their lives would ultimately lead them.

Third, a lot of debate has swirled around the attempt to identify these people, with little success in my opinion. But there is every reason to believe that these were professing Christians; not truly born again, but claiming to be; people who infiltrated and were active in the church in Philippi. So, in case you're wondering, *is it possible that people like this might exist at Bridgeway? The answer, sadly, is yes.* In any case, let's take note of them.

(1) They "walk as enemies of the cross of Christ" (v. 18b). What does this mean? Please note that they aren't merely enemies of Christ, but of his **cross**. They didn't deny that Jesus was crucified. They simply hated and resisted what it meant. They were offended by the idea of a *crucified Messiah*. They were offended by the suggestion that they were so sinful that nothing short of death on a cross was necessary to save them. They were offended by a salvation that was all of grace and excluded what they believed was the merit of their own good works. They were offended by the cross because it stands as God's repudiation of all human wisdom and power and pride.

There are "enemies of the cross of Christ" today as well. Perhaps none are more dangerous or misguided than those who mock and ridicule the concept of penal substitutionary atonement, calling it "cosmic child abuse." There was a time when only atheists or theologically liberal critics denounced substitutionary atonement. But now we hear it from those who say they are evangelicals!

(2) "Their end is destruction" (v. 19a). This statement clearly tells us that Paul viewed them as only professing believers. They are not born again. They will ultimately suffer eternal condemnation.

(3) "Their god is their belly" (v. 19b). These aren't people who through grace and self-discipline have brought their fleshly appetites under control. Quite the opposite. They are given to such self-indulgence that they've effectively enthroned their own fleshly desires as god of their lives. They don't serve Christ except when it's convenient and will gain praise from others (cf. Romans 16:17-18). Whatever their bodies crave, they feed. Whatever sinful inclination they feel, they embrace. Whatever immoral hunger their souls may sense, they indulge. ***When the fleshly appetite cries for satisfaction, they bow down and obey it. They in effect worship their own passions and desires and lust.***

(4) "They glory in their shame" (v. 19c). Whatever is shameful, they glorify! The very wicked and perverse behavior that ought to bring conviction and shame, they promote and praise and take pride in! It's one thing to sin. We all do that. But it's another thing when, rather than feeling conviction and pursuing repentance, a person elevates and promotes and flaunts their sin.

(5) Their "minds" are "set on earthly things" (v. 19d). They don't simply "think" on earthly things. They are obsessed with them. They are fixated on the here and now to the exclusion of eternal and heavenly realities.

If I were to stop there, I can well imagine you might react by saying, "Sam, what a downer! How horribly pessimistic! Man, I came today for some encouragement and all I've heard is how many rotten, self-absorbed jerks I should avoid!"

I understand. So did Paul. That's why he turns immediately to speak words of indescribable hope and joy.

The Power of Hope in the Power of Christ (vv. 20-21)

The **contrasts** are striking, indeed breathtaking!

They are enemies of the cross and their destiny is destruction. Our joy is in the cross and our destiny is deliverance.

They are devoted to indulging the body and make a god of its appetites. We look forward to the transformation of the body by our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Their citizenship is exclusively this-worldly. Ours is primarily other-worldly.

They set their sights very, very low, and focus only on earthly things. We set our sights very, very high, and look expectantly to the heavens for the return of our Lord.

Let's unpack Paul's words and find encouragement in their truth.

(1) "Our citizenship is in heaven" (v. 20a).

Note the present tense! We are already citizens of a heavenly commonwealth. This isn't merely a future inheritance but a present experiential reality.

(2) From heaven "we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 20b).

What is the supreme attraction of Christianity and more specifically of your heart and soul and mind? Is it the transformation of your body that Paul mentions here? Is that your highest hope? Is it walking on the streets of gold and being reunited with friends and family who've already died? Is it mingling with myriads of angelic beings and traveling at will throughout the distant galaxies billions of light years away?

I'm actually looking forward to all those things, but they pale in comparison with the preeminent desire of my heart, and I hope of your heart: **seeing and being with Jesus Christ! What makes heaven heavenly is that Jesus is there for our everlasting joy and satisfaction!**

And don't miss Paul's emphasis here. We don't merely await or look for but more literally we "eagerly await with joyful expectation!" The attitude of the believer to the return of Christ is one of loving, anxious expectation. We are, as it were, standing on tip toes in the hope of seeing Jesus soon. Are you?

(3) Jesus Christ will "transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (v. 21a).

How many of you live in constant depression because you hate your body? You hate your appearance, your size, your color, your hair. You think you're either too tall or too short, too thin or too fat, too weak or too strong. Worse still, you hate what your body does. You hate how it feels. You despise disease and weakness and fatigue and pain and discomfort and death. But how do you respond to this? Does it rob you of life and joy and service? Or does it cause you to fix your eyes on the heavens and the return of Christ who will finally, fully, and forever change your body into one that is fit for the glories of heaven and the kingdom of God?

So don't ever forget that **you will live for eternity in a body, a glorified and redeemed body, but no less a body.** Our existence will not merely be spiritual but gloriously physical forever!

(4) He will do all this "by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself" (v. 21b).

What "power" is this by which Christ subjects all things to himself? It is certainly the power of God. He is God. **This is the power that in eternity past looked into the darkness of nothingness and said: "Let there be light!** And there was light." This is the power that called **trillions and trillions of stars** into existence out of nothing and placed each one in the unimaginably distant reaches of the heavens above and said, "Stay there!"

This is the power that **parted the Red Sea** and caused **manna** to fall from heaven and made the walls of **Jericho** collapse at Israel's feet and preserved **Daniel** alive in the lions' den and enabled a **virgin** to conceive and give birth and **subdued demons** and **calmed the sea** and **cleansed the lepers** and **raised the dead** and **sustained Jesus** as he hung on a cross for your sins. This is the power that took hold of **your life** and redeemed you from sin and wiped clean the guilt of your soul and gave you his Spirit to dwell within. This is the power that will one day appear again and **destroy God's enemies and deliver God's people** and **raise and transform and glorify our bodies** to be like his own.

This is the power of Christ in which we have placed our hope!

But *how far* does this power extend? What is the scope of its rule and reign? “*All things,*” says Paul, are subject to him! We do not see it as yet, for his enemies and ours still exist. But they are not winning now nor will they ever prevail. The power of the kingdom of Christ Jesus is manifest now, in this age, through the *preaching* of the gospel and the *salvation* of sinners and the way in which God’s people *humbly submit to suffering and persecution*. The power of Christ is seen when we *do not seek vengeance or retaliate or return evil for evil*, but rather entrust our lives to him who is able to deliver from death. The power of Christ is seen *when a suffering saint refuses to recant his faith* but remains entranced by the beauty of Christ in the face of global ugliness.

Although you do not always see this power at work, I assure you that *the power of Christ keeps every proton and electron and gluon and quark in precisely that place where they must be so that this physical universe can exist*. Paul said it in Colossians 1:17 – “And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” The author of Hebrews said it as well – “he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (1:3).

And rejoice in the *duration* of Christ’s power: it will never, ever end! In Revelation 11:15 we read that “there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.’”

In this life it’s often hard to be happy when you hurt. In heaven, with new and glorified bodies, there will be no fatigue, pain, discomfort, chronic aches or itches. There will be only pure physical pleasure with no bodily obstacles to diminish our ability to see and feel and hear and touch and taste and smell the glories of paradise. Now, on earth, physical pleasure often competes with spiritual happiness, but in heaven they are one! The physical and emotional and intellectual pleasures of heaven will infinitely exceed the most ecstatic of physical and sensual pleasures on earth.

In the age to come there will be *new faculties of mind* to think and to comprehend the majesty of God. There will be *new senses* that enable us to see and feel and hear and taste the limitless beauty and sweetness of all that Jesus Christ is.

There will be no bodily lusts to defile your heart, no physical fatigue to cloud your mind, no wicked impulses against which you must fight, no dullness of spirit to hold you back, no lethargy of soul to slow you down, no weakness of will to keep you in bondage, no lack of energy to love someone else, no absence of passion to pursue what is holy.

Insofar as our bodies will be glorified in heaven and thus delivered of weakness and frailty and obscurity and our senses all heightened and magnified and their capacity to see, touch, feel, hear, and smell greatly increased and no longer hindered by disease or distraction, our experience will be indescribably joyful.

And what precisely is the *practical benefit* of thinking on these things and fixing the eyes of our hearts on the heavens from which Christ will return? This is what gives us the power not to indulge ourselves in the way the people described in vv. 18-19 do. Listen to how John put it – “We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. *Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure*” (1 John 3:3).

For many of you who feel trapped in almost unbearable pain or circumstances you can’t control, this may be the only thing that keeps you from suffocating in despair. You must remember that *what you are experiencing or suffering now is not the final word*. It is never ultimate. It will not prevail.

Whatever enemies are making life miserable for you, they will be defeated. Whatever bodily pain won’t go away, eventually will. Jesus will defeat every opponent. He will reveal every lie. He will vindicate every truth.

I hope and pray that knowing this to be true and putting your hope in the promised power of Christ will enable you never to quit.

Do we not all in certain ways, at times, and to varying degrees commit the same sins of which Paul accuses these enemies of the cross? Have we not at times made our fleshly appetites and desires into a god? Have we not at one time or other gloried in our shame? Have we not set our minds on earthly things?

The difference is that *we yet have hope!* We have hope that this body of flesh and this fallen mind will one day be transformed, set free, delivered, and gloriously raised to new life.

Finally, never forget that this power in which we have put our hope, this hope for what Christ will one day do in power on our behalf, is *not merely a future expectation: it is a present reality!* You can experience it today! Thus Paul breaks forth in doxology:

“Now to him who **is able** to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to **the power at work within us**, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21; see 1:19-21).

This, then, is the power of hope in the power of Christ. As I said at the start, I can live without a lot of things, but not without hope. Does this hope reside in your heart? Does this hope energize your spirit? Does this hope give you reason to get up each day and face seemingly insurmountable problems and pressures? If it doesn't, it can, starting right now.

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