

## “The Dawn From On High”

Do you remember what it was like as a kid, waiting for Santa to come? Hoping and hoping that he'd bring you the present or the presents you wanted so badly! Some of this hope is expressed in children's letters to Santa:

“Dear Santa, I need a new skateboard for Christmas. The one I got now crashes too much. Band-aids would be OK too. Avid.”

“Dear Santa, I lost my list of toys, so please just send me the stuff that you forgot from last year. Todd.”

“Dear Santa, I am not eating my boogers anymore. So now you can bring me some toys please. I want a cat toy that plays with you. Thank you, your friend Rayne.”

“Dear Santa, I would like just one of everything. Thank you. Nancy.”

“Dear Santa and helpers, I have been very good this year. I am expecting a little sister. I don't want her. Mommy says her will be fun. I heard girls stink. I will trade you my sister when she comes from the stork for a elf. I want a race car and a Garage set for Christmas. There will be sugar cookies and burritos waiting for you. Thank you, Santa. Craig.”

One girl was concerned about the logistics of getting Old Saint Nick into the house: “Dear Santa, how will you get into our house this year? We don't have a chimney and my father just installed a very expensive security system. Julie.”

One girl, Megan, really, really hoped for a dog the most. Her letter included these words: “The thing I want most is a dog. dog. dog...I would even trade my one and only mom for a dog.”

One kid started his letter to Santa this way: “Dear Fatty.”

One little girl had a different perspective on Santa and Christmas: “Dear Santa, I want to thank you for giving me my Grandpa back to me last Christmas, he came home Christmas eve, but sadly he died January 1. But you gave me my special gift, my Grandpa for Christmas. Thank you. I live with Grandma and we are OK. All I want is frozen shoe's and a outfit. Thank you. Love you. Sara.”

Illust. The weeks before Christmas can also be a time of hope for *adults* too. Will I get that engagement ring? Will that member of the family I love be able to get home for Christmas? Will my wife buy me that tool I want so much? *Christmas is a time for hope!*

One of the great struggles in life is whether we live with hope or despair. If you're kind of a negative-minded person, if you're looking for a reason not to be very hopeful, you don't have to look very far: The national debt, that threatens the very foundation of our nation's economy. The war in Ukraine that just goes on and on. The rising threat of China and Russia and North Korea and Iran. Inflation, and the high cost of just about everything in our own country.

Following the recent election results, millions of Americans are exuberant, and hopeful that this election will “Make America Great Again”. And other millions of Americans are fearing for the continuing existence of our democracy!

The question of whether we live with hope or despair also has a personal face to it. Sometimes what life throws at us has a way of pouring cold water on our hopes. I recall a conversation I had with a lady who was told by her husband (out of the blue) that he had been “going through the motions” for most of their 22 years of marriage, and he wanted out. I could see the hurt and despair on the woman’s face.

Maybe some of us here, as we approach Christmas, are feeling rather hopeless: the loss of a loved one, health issues, loneliness, whatever. Often behind our smiling faces and public demeanor are feelings of quiet despair.

*But the message of the gospel is a message of hope.* The Scripture lesson today is from Luke 1. It relates to the birth of John the Baptist. He was the one who came on the scene before Jesus, announcing Him as the Messiah. “Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his child David’” (Luke 1:67-69). Then Luke continues: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:76-79).

I want to lift out the phrase: “The dawn from on high will break (or “has broken”) upon us” (vs. 78). The *dawn...from on high!* That’s a symbol of *hope!* When Jesus, Messiah (God’s anointed one) comes, He will bring in an age of hope. *People who follow Jesus are meant to be people of hope!* Let’s look at some ways this plays out.

*Christian hope is rooted in God.* Some years ago I attended a luncheon at Council for Relationships in Philadelphia, where I did my training for psychotherapy. Somehow those around our table began to discuss religion. One lady told of her inability to accept much of traditional religion. This intelligent, gifted professional lady said this: “I put my hope in Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party.” I couldn’t believe it. Whatever President’s name you put in there, whichever political party you plug in, is that where you put all your hopes for yourself, the country, the world? Christian hope is rooted in *God* – not *people*. Secular hope, worldly hope, is not enough!

United Methodist pastor and author, William Willimon, tells of a spring afternoon in 1968, when as a college senior, he drove from his college to a big theological conference at Duke University. It was a conference on “The Theology of Hope.” He said he doesn’t remember much about the conference, but he remembers a talk by Harvard theologian, Harvey Cox. Cox had written a book called *The Secular City* (I remember that book – it caused quite a stir). In that book Dr.

Cox said we modern people at last had come of age, that great new era was dawning, a day when the cities of American would break forth into spontaneous love and joy. Right after Dr. Cox finished speaking, someone came to the podium and announced that Dr. Martin Luther King had been murdered in Memphis.” Are our cities today defined by spontaneous love and joy?

Christian hope is rooted in God – the promises of God, the faithfulness of God. The writer of Psalm 71:5 said, “For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth.” For *Christians, followers of Jesus*, our hope is especially based on what God has done for us in Christ! The Apostle Paul begins his letter to Timothy, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by command of God our Savior, and of Christ Jesus, *our hope*” (1 Timothy 1:1). It is the whole Christ Event that’s the basis for our hope: Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and coming again in glory!

*But also, Christian hope is an ultimate hope that transcends this world.* Theologians call it “eschatological hope”. Eschatological refers to the “end” “the end of time”. If we look at the New Testament and what it says about a believer’s hope, we see things that place it in the *future*: it is hope for eternal life, sharing the glory of God, receiving our inheritance from God, being changed into Christ’s likeness, looking forward to the redemption of our bodies. These things, when complete, all take place *at the end of time, when Christ returns*. In fact, Titus 2:13 refers to Jesus’ return in glory as “our blessed hope”. His coming again is when our hopes are fully realized!

See, Christian hope is different from the normal hopes that we have: we hope we can get good seats for the show, we hope to get a pay raise or a better job, we hope the hurricane predicted doesn’t hit land, we hope that a certain family member can make it home for Christmas. Whether we’re a Christian or not, we all hope for certain things in life, but we don’t have the guarantee that these hopes will be realized. We hope for a good biopsy report, but it isn’t good. We hope that our kids turn out ok, but they give us all kinds of grief. We hope our investments show significant gain, but there are losses. But *Christian hope* doesn’t rest on these uncertainties - because not much in this life is certain and guaranteed.

*Christian hope is ultimate hope. That at the end of history, Christ will come again, God’s kingdom will fully come, and God will fulfill everything He has promised!* If we’ve received Christ, and Christ dwells in us, we will share in the glory of God forever, in His kingdom and in His presence. It’s kind of like the realism Jesus expressed, when He said, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). *In this life we don’t get everything we hope for; but in the life to come, we get everything God has promised.*

So, maybe you’re thinking, “Whoopee doo! Like all I’ve got to hope for is some “pie in the sky when I die” kind of thing. But, here’s the thing: *Having ultimate hope does make a difference in how I face life.* Going back to those words of Jesus, “In the world you will have tribulation”, He preceded those words with these: “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have *peace*. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Having ultimate hope in the Lord can give us a peace when our earthly hopes are not

fulfilled. Even if my fondest hope is never fulfilled, I can have God's peace in the midst of my disappointment - the peace that passes understanding.

*Having ultimate hope in the Lord can also keep us from total despair.* If all of our hope is based on getting everything we hope for, that's a very precarious place to be, isn't it! And it can easily lead to despair. Having this ultimate hope in God and His promises can cushion the blows, and heal the disappointments in life. It can provide kind of an anchor to keep us from falling apart. Hebrews 6:19 tells us that! It says, "We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor for the soul."

Christians, as well as unbelievers, can experience deep disappointment. We want to marry, or marry again, and it never happens. We lose our job, or our health. We never can afford the dream home or car we hope for. But God can be there in the disappointment – reassuring us of His love, comforting us in our disappointment, encouraging us to keep on keeping on.

And even sometimes God takes the failures and disappointments of life, and weaves them into His loving purposes for us, and all creation, bringing good out of loss. The Apostle Paul reminds us of this: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

A single mom who had to work long hours to support herself and her children still earned barely enough to pay the bills. But she regularly bought a lottery ticket. After watching the woman spend another dollar on a lottery ticket, a friend asked her, "Why do you waste your money on a lottery ticket when you can hardly make ends meet?" The single mom replied, "Yeh, I buy a ticket every day. But a dollar is not too much to pay for 24 hours of hope."

I think we "get it", and understand. But it's sad. "24 hours of hope". In Christ, we have much more than a patchwork of "24 hours of hopes." We have a hope that runs deep and is filled with certainty! A hope that encompasses all eternity. It's pretty much summed up in the words of Colossians 1:27: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

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