

# When Christmas Lets You Down - Hope

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[ 0 : 00 ] The reading this morning comes from Titus chapter 2 and starting in verse 11 we read, for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

This is the word of God. Great. Thanks, Angeline. Okay, a nice short scripture reading this morning. And let me pray for us and then we're going to dive in a little bit.

Heavenly Father, as we come before your word this morning, as we come before you, we pray that you will speak to us from your word. God, we want to hear what you have to say to us.

In the midst of a world that is full of so much pain and turmoil, a war-torn year that we've had, God, we long for the hope of heaven to break into our lives and into our city.

God, this morning as we contemplate how Christmas speaks to us about a true and abiding hope, we do pray for our city, God. We pray for the great city of Hong Kong.

[ 1 : 47 ] We pray that the city which is so starved of hope, which so many people do feel hopeless, we pray, God, that the gospel really will go out in our city. We pray for all the churches of Hong Kong, the English churches, the Chinese churches, Cantonese, Mandarin, all the various languages.

We pray, God, that whatever denomination, background, language, or culture, that the good news of Jesus, the hope of Christmas and the hope of the gospel will go into our city and bring hope to restless hearts.

And God, we pray once you start with us this morning, come and let your word find good soil in our hearts, let your word come and anchor our hearts. And as we lead it to Christmas, God, we pray that really the wonder of Christmas and the hope of Christmas will be true to us.

As we look at your word this morning, won't you speak to us? You know where each one of us are at. You know our fears and our joys. You know the things that are on our hearts. God, won't you meet each one of us in the room today?

Through your word and by your spirit, we pray. In your great and wonderful name. Amen. Amen.

Okay, so everybody knows we're one week out from Christmas. If you don't know that, I'm not too sure what to say.

[ 3 : 03 ] But Christmas is a wonderful time of the year. Lots of great things to enjoy about Christmas. For many of us, it's a time when work kind of slows down.

Some of us may be able to travel. Some of us maybe are going to see loved ones you haven't seen for a long time. Either you're going to go to them or they're going to come to you. It's a time of connecting with friends and meals and good food.

It's a time we think about those that are precious to us. And maybe we buy gifts for family or loved ones. For those that have children, it's a real magical time of year. It's full of wonder and fantasy and amazement.

It's a wonderful time of the year. There's another reason why Christmas is so wonderful. Why I love Christmas. And maybe this is because I'm a little bit more Western. But it's also the end of the calendar year.

I know obviously the Lunar New Year is a few weeks later. But it's kind of the end of 2023. And it's a time to reflect and think back upon what's happened. But it's also a time to dream and hope for a new year.

[ 4 : 13 ] It feels like every year Christmas comes and it feels like a blank canvas lies before me. A chance to dream again. To hope for all the things that this year didn't materialize and I hoped would have happened.

It's a time to think about what could possibly be. One of my favorite lines from the Christmas carols is from O Holy Night. It says, A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices.  
Or the weary world at the end of a weary year rejoices. For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.  
A thrill of hope.

The hope of a new day. A new year. A new realm of possibilities. For a weary and tired world. A worn out world. A war torn world.

Like we've had this year. A world that's full of brokenness and pain and sin. And there's something about coming to the end of the year and coming to Christmas. That as we look into the future and to the year ahead.

[ 5 : 16 ] We're able to say, The future still has hope. There's still possibility for goodness to happen. Joy is still possible. Hope is not gone. At Christmas we often talk about joy and peace and love.

But Christmas promises hope. Hope beyond a break. A new and glorious morn. But hope is a funny thing, isn't it? Because hope is immensely powerful.

And it can draw you through difficult and hard times. I think of Victor Frankl. The Jewish psychotherapist who was a prisoner of war in Nazi Germany.

Concentration camps in World War II. And he analyzed and he watched his fellow prisoners. And he wrote a book called Man's Search for Meaning.

And he recounts in this book how those prisoners that had hope. Hope that they would get through. Were much more likely to survive the concentration camps. Listen to what he says.

[ 6 : 13 ] He says, The prisoner who had lost hope in the future was doomed. With his loss of hope in the future, he let himself decline, becoming subject to mental and physical decay.

And yet he analyzed that those that were still able to find some kind of hope were much more likely to survive the hardship and the difficulty of the camp. And so hope is a really powerful thing.

It draws through the hard times and the difficulties. But hope is a double-edged sword, isn't it? Because hope can also be disappointing. How many of us here have really hoped for something? Maybe for a loved one's health to improve. Maybe to get through a cancer. And then they didn't. How many of us have hoped for a promotion at work?

Or to land that job? Or to get into that course? Or to start a family? And things haven't worked out the way that you had hoped. Hope can be immensely powerful.

[ 7 : 13 ] It can also be really disappointing. So here's the question. Is hope another one of those empty Christmas gifts that we open up only to find empty on the inside?

Kind of like when somebody gives you socks for Christmas for the 10th year in a row, right? It promises so much. And you unwrap, open it up. And it's like, oh, okay.

Here we go again. Friends, what's so hopeful about Christmas? And how can thinking about the old, old story of Jesus in the manger give us hope? Not just for this week, but this year.

And in fact, beyond this year, the decades to come. Has the reality and the message of Christmas, how's that going to help us this year when life gets tough? And when life isn't always that rosy?

Okay. To think about this, I want us first to think about the difference between the way that we talk about hope in kind of modern culture and the way the Bible talks about hope. And the Bible has a very different contrast to the understanding of hope from the ways we use it in modern culture.

[ 8 : 19 ] In modern culture, when we talk about hope, we tend to think about some wish or desire that future circumstances will be different or better off than they are now.

Right? So we talk about, oh, you hope that your kids will get into some school. You hope to get that promotion. You hope that your mom's health improves.

You hope that your boss approves your leave application. It's some kind of wish or desire that the future circumstances will improve or be better than they are now. And so the way we talk about it, it's kind of this desire that the outcome or circumstances will be better, but it's very uncertain.

There's nothing guaranteed about it. When the Bible talks about hope, it talks about hope in a very different way. The way that the Bible talks about hope of Christianity or the hope of Christmas or the hope of the gospel, it doesn't refer to a subjective wish or desire.

I hope I pass my exams. Tim. Rather, it refers to a settled conviction, a confidence that even though things may still get difficult, and in fact the circumstances may not get better, that somehow my life

is in the hands of a good and a sovereign God.

[ 9 : 35 ] Sovereign means in control of everything. And that this good and sovereign God will carry me through. Okay? Do you see the difference? When the Bible talks about hope, it's this settled confidence, this conviction, that actually despite the circumstances, the circumstances may not get much better.

Despite that, my life is in the hands of a good and a sovereign God who will carry me through the circumstances that I face. And therefore, that kind of confidence is rock solid.

It's secure. The first one is rather fragile. I hope I pass my exams. Well, maybe, maybe not. The second one is based on character and the track record of who God is. The first one is very subjective.

I hope I get a promotion this year. Maybe, maybe not. But the second one is based on an objective reality. This is who God is. And He's not going to change. And so you can bank your life on it.

Let me give you a very silly example. Okay? Let's say you are a sailor. You like sailing. Okay? And so you take your sailboat out into the water, and your worst nightmare comes upon you.

[ 10 : 44 ] The weather turns suddenly. The wind comes. The waves rise. And the worst thing that could possibly happen, your boat capsizes. And you're in the water, and you're all on your own.

And you are hopeless. Your only hope is that somebody comes and rescues you. Well, in the distance, way out there, you see a ship. And so you climb on top of the last kind of semblance of your boat.

And you take off your shirt, and you wave it around. And you hope against all hope that just maybe, just maybe somebody will see you. That's the first kind of hope. But what happens if you hear a helicopter coming over the horizon?

And it comes, and it sees you. And they throw a circle, you know, ring to you in the water. And you hear them saying over the megaphone, we see you.

We're coming to get you. We're coming back for you. Two very different versions of hope. One is, I hope somebody sees me. But it's very uncertain. It's not guaranteed at all.

[ 11 : 51 ] The other one is something, the concrete that you can hold on to. They've seen me. They're coming back for me. Friends, one kind of hope is optimism that things will turn out okay.

The other is a conviction that your life is in safe hands. The message of Christmas, the message of Christianity, the message of the gospel, is that, is one that abounds with hope.

Not a subjective feeling. Not a vague anticipation that maybe things will get better. The hope of Christianity is an objective reality that you can bank your life upon.

Because it's based on the nature and the character of God. So, how does Christmas help us to live with hope? Well, let me give us a couple of things we're going to look at this morning. Five things. Most of them from the scripture. A few others just thrown in for fun. Okay. Five reasons why we, or those of us that are Christians, can live with hope as we go into 2024.

[ 12 : 52 ] And if you're not a Christian here this morning, so glad that you joined us. I want you to listen to this through the lens of, what would happen if I were to become a Christian? How would this change my life?

So, let's look at it. First thing is coming. Okay. They've all got one word. Coming. Look at our passage. If you've got your bulletin, your Bible open, look at our passage. We're looking at Titus chapter 2 and verse 11.

And just the first few words. The Apostle Paul writes this. He writes this to this young man called Titus. He's leading the church in Crete. And he says, Titus, The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.

Okay. Let's just pause there for a second. The grace of God has appeared. Now, when Paul says the grace of God has appeared, he's not talking about, just talking about a religious concept. What's he talking about?

He's talking about Jesus. He's talking about a person, right? Jesus Christ has appeared. He's talking about Christ coming. What is Christmas all about? It's about God coming into our broken and hope-starved world.

[ 13 : 58 ] God has come. That's the point of Christmas, right? God himself has come. In John's gospel, John writes that Jesus was the light that came into a dark and broken world.

A hope-starved world. A world that had lost its way. Obviously, Christ had come to bring a sense of life, a sense of hope. But when God came to save us, he didn't just send an email.

He didn't just send a messenger or a message. He didn't just send a helicopter with a Coast Guard, you know, someone that throws a ring. God himself came into a hope-starved world.

And if you've been in church for a long time, that sounds very familiar, but I want us just to think about that for a second. Or maybe before we get there, imagine the scenario.

Imagine you're at work one night, and things at work have gone really badly, right? There's some client account. There's some financials that are in a big muddle.

[15:03] Things, you're in some mess. And your boss says to you, you better sort this out before tomorrow morning, right? And so you're at work. It's way past midnight.

You're all alone in your office trying to sort out this big mess, trying to fix this problem. There's nobody else with you. You're alone at your desk. For some of you, you don't need to imagine this too much, right?

This is your reality. And suddenly, the lift doors open, and out steps the president of the company. And he says, hey, I heard you're in trouble.

I know how to fix this problem. I'm here to help you. Okay? None of us can imagine that situation, right? That doesn't happen. The president doesn't come to the junior employee and say, let me help you with your problem.

It's a silly analogy. Friends, at Christmas, the being, the divine being that created galaxies and cosmos and solar systems, however many billions of years ago, who knows how many billions of years ago, hundreds of trillions of billions of light years away, this galaxy that's ever expanding, that we've only discovered maybe 1% of, we don't even understand most of how this thing works, this divine being who brought it all into existence out of nothing, this being whom we call God, this being has clothed himself in humanity in flesh and blood and entered into our world so that he can speak our language, so that we can know him and comprehend him to come and fix the problem that we got ourselves into called sin and brokenness and depravity.

[16:52] We rejected him and said, no thanks, we'll do life our own way, got ourselves in all sorts of mess and this, to say president of the universe's sacrilege, this divine being has stepped into our world and said, I'm here to help.

God has come. It's astounding. Friends, I don't know what troubles you're facing, what challenges you have on the horizon, what 2024 looks like for you.

Okay, the economy's not good. Okay, the Hang Seng is, who knows where it is. But this God has come, Emmanuel, to be with us. The hope of Christmas is not just a new leaf, a blank slate.

Let's hope next year is better than the last. The hope of Christmas is that God has come and willingly because he loves us. This is the hope of Christmas. But Christ's coming was not arbitrarily or out the blue.

In fact, it was the fulfillment of a promise. A promise, that's the second thing. I don't know what you think of the Old Testament. Next year, we're going to spend quite a lot of time in the Old Testament and our Bible reading plan and our preaching calendar for next year.

[18:08] Many people think the Old Testament is harsh, it's difficult, it's boring, it's full of laws and regulations and let's just skip over and jump to the New Testament. But the Old Testament is actually full of promise.

It's brimming with hope. It's promise that despite the brokenness of our world, God has not left us to ourselves. God is going to come. And the promise starts in Genesis 3, the first gospel, and it picks up again Genesis 12, Genesis 15, and Genesis 25, and then it gets to Exodus, which is all about promise, and then Leviticus, Leviticus 16, the day of atonement, and then Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and Joshua, and Judges, and all the way through Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the whole way through the Old Testament is promise after promise after promise that God has not left us.

And the Old Testament tells us a lot that God is going to send a Messiah King, a Savior, a Deliverer, a Redeemer, who will come into our world and heal us and put right what we have messed up.

And the Old Testament tells us a lot about this Messiah King. He'll be born in Bethlehem, the town of David. He'll be born to a single teenage mom. He'll be a descendant of King David, Israel's greatest but still deeply flawed king.

The Old Testament promises us that he will come and be humble and poor, nothing attractive, no status in society that we should naturally want to follow him. The Old Testament tells us that he'll be betrayed and rejected and denied by his own people, put to death and he will die but he won't stay

dead.

[ 19 : 46 ] He will rise again. And of course, the Old Testament predicts that he will bring goodness and salvation and hope to a world that is lost and without hope. Friends, you see the point?

Christmas is not just a cultural holiday like Mid-Autumn Festival or Dragon Boat Festival. It's not just a remembrance of a good day in the past like the 1st of July, Hong Kong Day.

Christmas is not just Christ randomly appearing out the blue like an unwelcome Christmas guest. He rings the doorbell and says, Surprise, I'm here. Christmas is God being good to his word, being faithful to his promise.

Christmas is God being faithful then he will be faithful now. Friends, God really did come into our broken world. Born in Bethlehem to a single teenage mom a descendant of David in poor and humble circumstances in order to be rejected, denied, betrayed by his own people, put to death and rise again and to bring hope to our world.

The hope of Christmas is that the same God who was faithful to his people through thousands of years of ups and downs and exile and Egypt and all the problems of life, that same God will be faithful to those who trust him.

[ 21 : 06 ] The hope of Christmas, the promise fulfilled. But that's not all. Look at, again, this passage with me in Titus. Look at how Paul describes Jesus.

He says, how does he describe Jesus? He says, For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. Christmas is about coming.

Christmas is about promise. Christmas is about grace. grace. If you're new to church or you're kind of newish to Christianity, grace is one of those words that Christians throw out a lot.

It's one of those very Christianese words. I'm sorry, we do that a lot. We use these really weird words that nobody knows what you're talking about. Grace is one of those words. But the reason is because grace is really at the heart of Christianity.

It's what the whole Bible is all about. Grace means a gift that is undeserved or unmerited. It's a gift that somebody gives you that you didn't earn or deserve.

[ 22 : 10 ] At the heart of Christianity is the fact that God himself has come to us, the Lord Jesus Christ, not simply to teach us or give us wisdom or give us some advice or how to live.

God has come to us to give us a gift that we could never earn, never deserve, never merit by our own favor. The gift of, what does he say here?

The grace of God has come bringing salvation, bringing forgiveness, bringing grace, saving us from our sins and our moral debt that we could be brought back into relationship with God.

Again, imagine the scenario with me. I've got lots of silly examples today. Imagine 2019, you leave the family business and you decide you're going to go out on your own, and you're going to start your own business.

So you put together your whole business plan, but you need some money. And so you borrow tons of money. You mortgage your apartment as max as you can. You borrow other money from the bank.

[ 23 : 12 ] You borrow money from friends and family. You borrow all the money you can. And you put together your business plan and look sound and you launch your business. All you need to do, you need to travel a bit. You need to get some clients.

And you launch your business November 2019 and January 2020, COVID comes. And COVID messes up everything. And your business plan sinks.

Can't travel. Can't go anywhere. Can't do anything. And suddenly, all those clients you hoped to attract disappear. And you're up to your neck in debt and you're in deep, deep trouble.

Right? You're in deep trouble and you have no hope of repaying your debt. And suddenly, someone appears. Someone comes to you bringing salvation in the form of a checkbook.

Right? Some family member or benefactor appears and says, I will write off your debt and save you. They come and they bring a salvation.

[ 24 : 12 ] They save you from what you could not save yourselves. Friends, the Bible says that every human being, all of us, have a moral debt that we could not pay back.

A moral debt to the God of the universe who made us to know Him and love Him and be in relationship with Him and live trusting Him and live on Him.

And yet, we've rejected Him and said, actually God, we think we're going to go our own way. We think we know better than you. And so, we've rejected Him, which is what the Bible calls sin, and

we're in deep, deep trouble.

We were dead in our sins. But look at what Titus says Christmas is all about. He says, the grace of God has appeared in the person of Jesus Christ, God Himself, bringing salvation and forgiveness for those who will trust Him.

Christmas is about God not giving up on us even though we had given up on Him. Christmas is about God not giving us what we deserve even though the history of humanity is that we have not given God the worship and the adoration that He deserves.

[ 25 : 19 ] Christmas is about grace. Grace. If you've got your Bible, look four verses down from the scripture we read. In chapter 3, verses 3, Paul says the same thing.

Listen to what he writes here. He says, For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to our passions and our desires and our pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

Can I say, oh that sounds a bit overboard. That doesn't really describe my life. Doesn't that describe much of our world? I mean just think of the office politics. Think of our war-torn world we've lived in this year.

Israel, Gaza, Ukraine. Hating one another and hated by one another. Led astray, slaves to our passions and desires. Spending our days in anger and envy.

But then verse 4, But when the goodness and the loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, when Jesus came, the loving kindness of God, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, not because we earned it or deserved it or merited it, but according to His own mercy.

[ 26 : 35 ] Friends, Christian hope is not based on wishful thinking or optimistic mindfulness. It's not based on the vague idea that God helps those who help themselves. It's based on a historical event that when we were neck high in our own moral debt and sin, the loving kindness and mercy and grace of God stepped into our broken, sin-infested world and came to heal us and bring grace, not because of what we deserved, not because we are good people, but because of His mercy and grace.

The grace of God came in flesh and blood. And look what Paul says. He says, this grace changes us. Go back to our original passage in verse 11.

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people, training us now to renounce that former life ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, godly lives in the present age.

Friends, here's the point. What is the basis of your hope next year or maybe for your life? Viktor Frankl reminded us, you've got to live with hope.

You live without hope, you're doomed. Mankind can't live without hope. But what is the basis of your hope? Is it that God helps those who help themselves? Is it if I'm a good person, God will surely pay me back?

[ 27 : 59 ] Friends, or is it the mercy of God, the undeserved grace and kindness of God himself who came into our world, the person of Jesus Christ? Jesus offers us something far more substantial, something far more objective and concrete.

It's a hope that's rooted in a historical fact of history that 2,000 years ago God came to us to die on the cross, to deal with our moral debt, to save us from the slavery of our sin, to change our hearts, to give us fresh hope.

But that's not all. The fourth thing is resurrection. Now, when you read the story of the early church and the book of Acts and the history of the early church, one thing that always astounds me is these Christians lived with, yes, remarkable hope, but unbelievable courage and confidence in the face of circumstances that were largely far worse than what we are facing.

So why is it that the early Christians could face the lions with such confidence and boldness and conviction? Why is it that they could allow themselves to be burnt at the stake and not deny their faith? Why is it that many of them were martyred and suffered immeasurable pain and yet did so with such conviction and assurance and hope?

One of the reasons is that we see is that they had seen and experienced the risen Lord Jesus Christ and they knew that his claims must have been true.

[ 29 : 29 ] Jesus Christ claimed to be the long-awaited Messiah King that the Old Testament had spoken about, but Jesus Christ also claimed that he would die and rise again. And so when the disciples saw that he did die with their own eyes and that he did rise again with their own eyes as

he said he would, it also gave them fresh confidence that he really was who he said he was, the Messiah King.

Because what it meant for them and what it means for those of us that are Christians, in this world, this world is no longer our home. And the things of this world and the people of this world are not the ones that define our hope and our status and our identity.

Your future is not based on the things of this world but on the God who died and rose from the grave. Listen to how the Apostle Paul writes it in 1 Corinthians 15, a very famous passage. He says, if Jesus Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our faith is futile. We're still stuck in our sins. In other words, there is no such thing as good news.

The good news is a farce, a joke. Then those who have died as Christians have truly perished. If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, if there's no such thing as the resurrection, we are of all people most to be pitied.

[ 30 : 51 ] He's saying, if the resurrection is not true, Christianity is wishful thinking. This Christian faith is just a farce, it's a delusion, it's a crutch just to help weak people get through life. But in fact, Christ has raised from the dead and is the first fruit, that means the first sampling, of those who have died and will rise also with him.

Friends, Jesus Christ came not just to give us this fragile, subjective feeling of I hope next year is better than this year. Jesus came to give us something concrete, something real, something of hope and conviction.

He conquered the grave and said, now those who trust in him, we don't need to fear the grave or the worst that the world can throw at us. We really can live radically different lives, full of hope, full of confidence that if God, this God, this resurrected, death-defying, grave-conquering, cross-conquering, sovereign God is for us, what do we have to fear?

I mean, if Christmas isn't real and the resurrection isn't a historical fact, let's just say it's some kind of parable, some kind of moral, folklore story about being gentle and kind and turning the other cheek and not getting back at your enemies.

If that's all Christianity, is why should we live differently? Why should we live upright, self-controlled, godly lives? But how does that give us hope when life gets tough, when the economy sinks and the job market is hard and your kids are not doing well, how does that give us hope?

[ 32 : 27 ] Some fabled event about a man who lived many years ago. No friends, Jesus was born to die but he didn't stay dead. he rose again and he came just as he promised bringing life and salvation and he died on the cross just as he promised and he rose again just as he promised so that now our lives can be full of hope.

Prince Christmas and Christianity, the hope of Christianity is rooted in a historical event, an event of history. It's not just some pie-in-the-sky philosophy or moral teaching.

It's a historical event that the history books affirm that there is reason for hope because Jesus came as he said and died as he said and rose again. One final thing.

Look at our passage again in Titus chapter 2. Paul speaks to Titus not only of the hope of Christ's first coming but even more so of the hope of his return.

He says, For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all people. Just by the way, when he says all people he doesn't mean absolutely all people.

[ 33 : 38 ] It means all those who hope and trust in him. All people as in not just the Jews, not just the one race, all people whether Jews or Gentiles, black or white, Chinese, rich or poor, moral, immoral, all those who come to trust in Jesus.

The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all those who trust in him. Training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions to live self-controlled upright godly lives. And then verse 13.

Waiting for our blessed hope the appearing of the glory of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ. Friends, next week we're going to celebrate Christmas proper.

Christ's coming and Christ appearing at his first coming. But Christmas also points us forward to another coming. the second coming. When Christ will return.

When Christ will come to our war-torn depressed world. Christ's imminent return calls us to live lives of hope and courage and faithfulness and conviction now in light of the fact that he will soon come back.

