

In the Certainty of Hope

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

INTRODUCTION

Well, today is the big day. Shortly after 6:30 p.m. EST, the Los Angeles Rams and the Cincinnati Bengals will play in Super Bowl LVI. Estimates are that more than 117 million television sets will be tuned in to see which team is successful.

- Bengal fans have waited 33 years for another chance at winning this game.
- However, among gamblers nationwide who plan to bet on the game, 55 percent predict the Rams will win. Only 38 percent pick the Bengals.
- I heard one sports commentator say that in order for the Bengals to have any hope of winning the game, Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford must throw at least two interceptions ... which he has a tendency to do in big games like this one.
- But beyond that ... there is no hope for a Bengals win. Or so the experts say.

Hope has been a pretty common word over these past two weeks as the hype for today's game has been building.

- I hope we win.
- I hope Joe Burrow doesn't get hurt.
- I hope the offensive line can block Aaron Donald.

When they use that word, they use it as our standard dictionaries define it. It is surrounded by other "feeling focused statements..." like this:

hope (*noun*): a feeling of expectation and desire for a thing to happen, as in *The detective looked through her belongings in the hope of finding a clue.*

Hope used that way has no certainty. No guarantee. Just hope. Just wishful thinking that things might turn out the way we hope.

In matters related to our faith, however, "hope" has the opposite meaning. Biblically, hope is about things that WILL happen. It is about things that are certain and guaranteed. Pastor John Piper describes it like this:

Ordinarily, when we express hope, we are expressing uncertainty. But this is *not* the distinctive biblical meaning of hope. ... Biblical hope is not just a desire for something good in the future, but rather, biblical hope is *a confident expectation and desire for something good in the future*. Biblical hope not only desires something good for the future — it expects it to happen. And it not only expects it to happen — it is confident that it will happen. There is an absolute certainty that the good we expect and desire will be done. (John Piper)

Our text today addresses the certainty of our hope. As you "hopefully" know by now – and I use "hopefully" in confidence that you do – these last few weeks have been focused around a theme of IN IT TOGETHER – things that make the church essential for believers everywhere. We cannot exist and thrive as the people of God without each

other. We are IN IT TOGETHER. And so it is with today's text. Take away the togetherness we share, and our hope will begin to wane. Without one another we inevitably move from "confident expectation" to mere "wishful thinking."

Earlier this week as I was thinking about ways to illustrate what happens, a word picture that could capture your thoughts. I found it when I hopped in my car and started it up after a day here at the church. Because my car had been sitting in the sun, the initial temperature reflected on my dashboard was in the mid-60s. Wow! I thought. That is wonderful! But as I watched, the temperature reading kept going down and down more than 20 degrees. My hope wasn't sustained.

Our text today tells us that we are IN IT TOGETHER, and the "it" is IN THE CERTAINTY OF HOPE.

When the Apostle Paul wrote the words of our text as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15, the Christians there were struggling with the certainty of their hope. You might remember that Paul started this church and served as its pastor for about 18 months. He had taught these Corinthian Christians the truth of the Gospel, including that the resurrection of Jesus was an absolute truth. Because of that, the resurrection should have been a certainty in which their hope could be firmly placed.

But in the years since he had left, things had changed. Look at verse 12:

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? (1 Corinthians 15:12)

Like the temperature gauge on my car, the certainty of their hope began to wane as some people in the group began to question whether or not that doctrine could possibly be true. Can you hear them? Rise from the dead? Really? How does that happen?

Paul had to address that problem, because our hope loses its certainty, it has pretty dramatic consequences in our walk of faith. Let me show you what I mean:

#1: OUR LIFE IN CHRIST LOSES ITS MEANING

Verse 14 reads:

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. (1 Corinthians 15:14)

So vital is the wonder of the Easter story that if it isn't true, we are wasting our time here. We might as well join all those people who view Sundays as a day for sleeping in and splurging on bacon for breakfast. Apart from the resurrection Christianity really has no meaning.

Dr. Kenneth Chafin was a professor of preaching at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He tells the story about a time in his teenage years when he read a pamphlet by a famous agnostic named Luther Burbank. The gist of the pamphlet was that the resurrection was impossible and that no thinking person could ever truly believe it.

Chafin read the pamphlet to his Aunt Bertie, with whom he was living at the time. According to Chafin, she “lacked formal training, had an excellent knowledge of the Bible and a profound faith in God.” She was making gravy in an iron skillet at the time, stirring it with a wooden spoon to keep it from sticking.

When he finished, he waited for her response. Without even looking up or interrupting her stirring of the gravy, she simply said, “Jesus either rose from the dead or He is a liar. If He didn't do it, this whole thing is a hoax.”

And she is right. That's why Paul made the point of telling his readers in the first 11 verses of this chapter about all the people who had seen the risen Christ. Do you remember what he said:

He appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me ... (1 Corinthians 15:5-8)

Those who deny the resurrection are simply wrong. But you will begin to believe faulty theology like that if you neglect the importance of being IN IT TOGETHER.

#2: WE BEGIN TO THINK “THIS IS ALL THERE IS”

Look at verse 18:

Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. (1 Corinthians 15:18)

If Jesus died and remained, then what hope is there for any of us? If the Son of God can't be resurrected, then neither can we!

I have friends who lived their entire lives proclaiming they did not believe in an afterlife. “This is all there is” they would say, and they really weren't open to hearing anyone else's opinion. Especially mine. When the wife died, the first question the husband asked me was “Where do you think she is?”

- Let me tell you ... that was a tough conversation.
 - If she was right, she is in a cemetery plot in Ferncliff.
 - If I'm right, she is someplace else, and given that she had no kind of relationship with Jesus, I'm not sure she is happy.

Those of you who have lost loved ones know the comfort and peace you have because you believe – and because that loved one believed – the words of Jesus:

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? 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)

But if it isn't true – if Jesus was not resurrected – instead of the comfort and peace you have, Paul says:

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:19)

So the CERTAINTY OF OUR HOPE pulls us toward the community of faith. It is in this community that we are reminded:

God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said ... "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Revelation 21:4-5)

#3: WE ARE CONDEMNED TO LIVE WITH OUR GUILT

Let me point you to verse 17:

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15:17)

Apart from the resurrection, there can be no forgiveness of sins. Jesus not only had to die, he had to rise again.

- Someone might object: The lambs in the Old Testament didn't have to be resurrected.
 - No they didn't. That's why you had to keep offering them sin after sin, year after year.
 - All those sacrifices did was create a temporary amnesty.
- But we have more than a problem with sin. We have a problem with the consequences of our sin:

For the wages of sin is death ... (Romans 6:23)

If our only problem was sin, we could continue to sacrifice lambs. But we would still die and face an eternity without God. Just six verses later in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul would point out:

The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (1 Corinthians 15:26)

Because Jesus was resurrected, death was defeated as well as sin. We who walk by faith in Jesus never need to fear it. Death is not our enemy, because Jesus already defeated it. Guaranteed. Your hope is certain.

APPLICATION

In 1834 an English pastor named Edward Mote wrote a hymn about the certainty of our hope. He described the experience like this:

One morning it came into my mind as I went to my labour, to write a hymn on the "Gracious Experience of a Christian." As I went up Holborn I had the chorus... within the In the day I had four first verses complete,

The hymn was originally published under the title "The Immutable Basis of a Sinner's Hope." You don't recognize that title, but you know the hymn:

My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

Refrain:
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand:
all other ground is sinking sand;
all other ground is sinking sand.

*Words: Edward Mote. Tune: William B. Bradbury
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Never doubt it. Your hope is certain.

Amen.