

HOPE: For Christians The Best Is Yet to Come

Theme: We can count on God to infuse the hope that the best is yet to come.

Text: Romans 8:18-25

Series: What Can We Count on From God?

It is rare moment when I stain the sport's section of the newspaper with tears, but I did so years ago when reading Bud Geracie's account of professional baseball player Brett Butler's battle with cancer and his testimony of hope in the Lord. Geracie, a sports writer for the *San Jose Mercury News*, began his article with a sneer at Christian athletes in general. He stated his disdain for boisterous Christian athletes who invoke the name of Jesus as the reason for their triumph.

But then his tone dramatically changed when it came to the then L. A. Dodger centerfielder. *"Then there comes a guy like Brett Butler, and you can't help tuning in. You hear him out. You want to listen. You're interested in what he's saying about his God, because... You know, he just might be on to something here."* On May 21 of 1996 Butler had a plum sized tumor removed from his tonsils. The diagnosis was *Squamous Cell Carcinoma*. Butler said of his initial reaction to the news as a test of faith, *"I failed miserably. When I first heard 'cancer', I got mad at God, I questioned God. I think we have a right to do that. But once you've given your life over to Him, as I did in 1973, I didn't give it with a closed fist. I gave it with an open hand. My life is yours to do with what you want. Now, as human beings, we look at death as losing. Paul says in the Scriptures, 'To live is Christ, to die is gain.'"*

After the surgery to remove the tumor, Butler endured 32 applications of radiation therapy in 44 days. Miraculously he returned to the team less than 4 months on September 6, 1996 and singled in his first at bat. But just five days later a pitch broke Butler's left wrist. *"I cried at the hospital when they said it was broken. But I got this... this peace. It was like the Lord saying, 'Brett, you did everything I've wanted you to do. You glorified me. You lifted me up; you did everything. And now you must rest.'" It now has been over 10 years since the initial diagnosis and treatment, and Butler is cancer free to date. Though there are no guarantees in this life for how long we have. But Butler says, "God gave me nothing that I wanted but everything I needed. I didn't want cancer. But I can tell you, I have been blessed through this cancer... Twenty years ago, I couldn't have handled this; I couldn't have done it. But this was step by step. He gave me just enough to get through it."*

Geracie wrote, *"Some said Butler's experience was causing them to re-examine their lives, their beliefs, their faith. I know one such person for sure. When Brett Butler talks about God, I just can't help tuning in."*

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What's the difference between the way some athletes talk about God that tunes Geracie out, whereas Butler's God-talk causes him to tune in? There is something about transcendent hope in the midst of life's setback that speaks to the heart of the skeptical.

This leads us to the question that we exploring during the Sundays of January: **"What Can We Count on From God?"**

Another way to ask this question is—what is the sure foundation of our confidence in God that will serve as the bedrock of our life? What are the fundamental, immovable building blocks of our faith that we need to put in place?

So far we have looked at two immovable building blocks that serve as the foundation of our lives. The first truth, that sometimes seems like it goes against all outward evidence, is that we are loved by God. We don't seek confirmation of God's love through circumstantial events. We look instead to the evidence of the cross of Christ and the internal presence of God's Holy Spirit, who is the love of Jesus ever abiding in us. We noted that the apostle Paul never viewed his troubling circumstances as signs that God had abandoned him. He experienced an internal embrace regardless of the quality of life threatening events he faced. The second building block for our sure foundation has to do with being clear about God's purpose for us. Why are we here? The purpose of our existence, the goal of the Christian life is to become like the One we follow. The apostle John summarizes well our the themes of our first two weeks and leads us on to our focus on hope this morning, when he writes in his first letter, **"Dear friends, now we are the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He [Jesus] appears, we shall be like him" (I John 3:2).**

The third building block in our foundation is hope. What is hope? It is the belief that things are going to get better than they are today.

We can't live without hope. It is the fuel on which the human heart is run.

- Hope is what prompts a man and a woman to stand at the altar and say, "I do."
- Hope is what causes that same couple, years later, after promises have been broken, to give their promise another try.
- Hope is why we have hospitals and universities.
- Hope is why the Cubs go to spring training.

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This leads us to our theme of the morning: **Followers of Jesus can count on...Hope: For Christians the best is always yet to come.**

We turn to **Romans 8:18-25** to find the basis for this hope.

What is the broad frame of reference out of which Paul speaks? Hope for Paul is bracketed around ultimate outcomes. I said two weeks ago that there are a couple of fundamental perspectives about life that shape Paul's view of the world that we just don't get. The first one is that the experience of the love of God is not connected to favorable circumstances in life. He never complained about his horrendous human conditions nor seemed to see these as reasons question the love of God.

The second perspective that we just don't get is Paul's view of reality. **"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us"** (Romans 8:18) What is really real? If you put our present suffering/struggles/battles up next to unutterable splendor of God's radiance, suffering shrinks in comparison. The phrase **"not worth comparing"** means that whatever the hardship, it does not weigh nearly as much, nor come close to the value of the wonder that will envelope us. In II Corinthians 4:17, Paul calls what he is going through as **"light, momentary afflictions"** in comparison to the **"eternal weight of glory beyond measure."** **"Light momentary afflictions!"** You have to be kidding. Paul survived events of physical, psychological, and spiritual trauma that would break most of us. Paul inverts our understanding of reality. According to Paul this life is just temporary, transitory, the showlands, a hologram in a sense. We live for another world. **"For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal"** (II Cor. 4:18). The really real is the hope in the new world that is yet to come.

This morning I am asking us to raise our sights. Get our eyes for a moment off the immediate. We have shrunk our gaze to this present life, as if we think this Christian life is about having *your best life now*. Paul is clearly saying that our best life isn't now. There is a hope, a vision of the future that can enliven our spirits and thrill our hearts. Lift your eyes to the horizon, and see what is to come. The irony is that when we know that our future is secure and there is a life of fullness awaiting us that we then are set free **"to have life and to have it abundantly."**

Upon what does Paul base this hope? In our text Paul speaks of two interconnected movements of hope. God will redeem his creation at the same time as He gives us our new, eternal bodies. **"The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed"** (Romans 8:19) What does this mean? It means that a new environment is needed as a setting of a new people.

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So the first movement of a restored created order is tied to creation of a people who will inherit eternal bodies.

I love the sense of anticipation that Paul attributes to the physical creation. Paul ascribes personal qualities to the physical order. He says that creation “waits in eager expectation.” One of my favorite scenes of eager expectation occurs at airport reunions. We watch television exposes of twins separated at birth who are now to be reunited as adults. One waits for the other with craned neck as the passengers deplane. The delight of recognition is completed when they fall into each other’s arms with a sustained embrace. The creation stands on tiptoe in anticipation of the revealing of the sons of God. Are we so tied to the good life, that we do not even long for what will be?

Paul teaches us about hope even of a redeemed creation. “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the One who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:20-21). God is deeply concerned about the material or physical world. It has been said that Christianity is the most material of all the religions. The Lord is the author and the redeemer of the created order. There will be a new heaven and *a new earth*, the Scripture promises.

What we see in the convulsive nature of the physical world is the result of the Fall of human beings into sin. Creation was corrupted when humans rebelled against God. Genesis 3 teaches us that because we turned against the Creator, a rift with our environment ensued. As a result there is little correlation between perspiration and productivity. All of us have had those days when they came to an end we said, “What do I have to show for this day’s efforts?” The citrus farmers in California are especially feeling that now.

Hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes, etc. are creation’s witness to the fall of humanity into sin. God subjected all of creation to this futility, waiting the redemption of human beings, when harmony between humans and creation will be restored.

The redemption of creation, Paul says, will occur simultaneously with the redemption of human beings. “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:22-23). God has put enough of eternity in our hearts that we long for more. Paul compares the ache in our spirit to longing for deliverance from the pains of childbirth. Admittedly, I know very little about that. My wife tells me I am such a wimp that I would never make it through childbirth. But I do know a little of

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what Paul is saying here about **"the firstfruits of the Holy Spirit."** When we come to Christ we receive new life within. Paul in the book of Ephesians says that the Holy Spirit is a deposit, a down payment on what is come to (Ephesians 1:13-14).

We have tasted what is to come, but have not fully entered into it. There are times when I have argued with God and said that he has played a dirty trick on us. Though these bodies of ours wondrously contain the presence of the Holy Spirit, and what an awesome thought that is, we are still subject to decay and corruption. I often don't feel well suited to sustain the glory. It is all too fleeting.

C. S. Lewis in his wonderful sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, captures this longing to have the kind of bodies that can truly contain the glory of God.

"At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of the morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. [And here is the line I love.] We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in." This is the Christian hope.

We are left with the gnawing feeling that there is something more somewhere. Yet now **"we cannot mingle with the splendors we see."**

- A satisfying meal that excites the taste buds is but a fleeting pleasure.
- A time of laughter and great fun with dear friends fades into the daily humdrum of responsibility.
- A sense of God's spine-tingling presence at the sight of a Hawaiian sunset passes through our spirit in an instant and it is gone.

This is the temporary, longing for the permanent.

We Need New Bodies

The reason we cannot sustain the pleasures of God is that we not have the right equipment. These bodies cannot fully hold what God intends. **"We await eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies"** (Romans 8:23b). I remember when I turned 50, I heard from many of Job's comforters that I could expect my body to fall apart. These bearers of glad tidings, reminded me that I will need a new body. It was as if people were saying, **"my body has been feeling its aches and pains, I hope yours in not far behind."** Now that I am about turn to 60, Job's comforters, I am sure, will be urging me to buy my burial plot.

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Paul is far more hopeful. On our graduation day, we will receive the same kind of eternal bodies that Jesus Himself assumed at his resurrection from the dead. The Christian hope is the resurrection of the body. This is in contrast to a pagan notion that has infiltrated Christian theology. The pagan view that we have adopted is *the immortality of the soul*. It is rooted in the Greek understanding that the body is an enemy to be escaped. The soul is pure divinity and the body is the prison house. No, a thousand times no. The Lord created us as physical beings; Jesus came fully in human flesh. We will be raised bodily, and given a physical nature that is imperishable that will contain the light of God's glory.

Upon what is the hope based? Wishful thinking? Hope-so dreams? Just a nice idea?

Hope of new bodies is rooted in two historical events which define the meaning of this life. The death and resurrection of Jesus are basis for hope. We wait for the blessed hope that all will be made new because Jesus promised it and confirmed it through his death and resurrection. A promise is only as solid as the good intentions and the competence of the one who makes it. The sign above all signs of God's good intentions, of his love for us, is the cross upon which Jesus of Nazareth was nailed. The Cross signals that the Maker of the Universe chose to die on behalf of His creation in an incomprehensibly horrible manner to save the world from its own self-destruction. But good intentions only go so far. Competence to make a difference is what counts. If God cannot translate those good intentions into overcoming the disaster we have made of this world, what good is it? Lewis Smedes puts the competence of God like this, *"It is that baffling but wondrous thing that happened one early morning as the fingers of the day's early light were filtering through the flora of a burial garden in Jerusalem. The thing happened when the life-birthing energy of the universe's Maker began to pulse inside the dead biological remains of the very Jesus whom God had apparently abandoned two days before. The cells regenerated themselves and He, body and soul, came back to life."*

The stake of hope planted in the ground of human history is the sacrificial death of Jesus followed by the entry into a new order of existence that marks our future. This is the basis for dreams and hopes in this life and the One to come.

Hope Is the Ability to Dream Even in This Life About New Future

Bishop Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of South Africa had a grasp like few seem to have had on the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the midst of an apartheid South Africa. In a time of total blackout of optimism, without one credible piece of evidence to show that things were ever going to change—here he is, exploding with hope that a new world was coming:

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"The resurrection of Jesus is our guarantee that right has triumphed and will triumph over wrong, that good has triumphed and will triumph over evil...that love has triumphed and will triumph over hate. You and I know...despite all the evidence to the contrary that we, black and white together, are one in the Lord, and we will hold hands, black and white together, with our heads held high as we stride into the glorious future which God holds out to us."

The Lord follows crucifixions with resurrections. Though there may be no earthly reason to believe something can be different, Christians can dream it, because God's way is to explode light out of darkness. We can see beyond what is. More about this next week.

The Best is Yet to Come

The ultimate Christian hope is what waits us beyond this life. Our hope transcends this life, because this life is transitory, the substance is to come.

A woman was diagnosed with cancer and told that she had only three months to live. She needed to prepare to die. So she went to her pastor to talk through her funeral service. She chose the songs to sing, the Scriptures to be read, the words to be spoken; and she said she wanted to be buried with her favorite bible verses.

Before she left she said to her pastor, "One more thing."

The pastor replied, "What's that?"

"This is important. I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand."

The pastor thought, now I have heard it all. She explained, "In all my years going to church functions, whenever food was involved, my favorite part was when whoever was cleaning the dishes off the table from the main course would lean over and say, 'You can keep your fork.'"

"It was my favorite part because I knew that meant something great was coming. It wasn't Jell-O. It was something with substance—cake or pie—biblical food."

"So I just want people to see me there in my casket with a fork in hand, and I want them to wonder. What's with the fork? Then I want you to tell them, something better is coming. Keep your fork." The pastor announced at her funeral that she wanted everyone to know that this was not a day

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of defeat, but a day of celebration. The real party is starting. Something better is coming.

Do we get this? Paul saw what was coming as more real than what was present. He had a hunger to see His Lord face to face. This was a hope that caused everything else to be put into perspective. Can we lift our eyes, raise our gaze; can we get beyond the comforts and pleasure of the here and now for a moment, to allow the pleasure of the face to face presence of Jesus to ignite our hearts with hope? The next time you pick up that fork at a meal, think "keep your fork." Then let a smile of hope cross your face.

What Can We Count on From God? *Hope: For Christians, the Best is Always Yet to Come.*