

## Daily Devotions with the Dean

### The One Certain Hope

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For these two weeks, we are taking a thematic approach to Paul's Pastoral Epistles, his letters to Timothy and Titus. First, we are looking at the way the apostle addresses our deficits in faith, hope, and love. Second, we will take up the way Christ teaches us godliness, temperance, justice, and courage. Finally, we will think about what Paul describes as the positive aspects of faith, hope, and love in these letters.

Today, Paul addresses flawed "hope." One way to think about his subject is: "Hope: what it isn't."

My black Labrador retriever, Lipton (no longer with us), always reminded me that we are creatures of hope. Every morning was Christmas morning for Lipton! He woke up each morning thinking that day was going to be the greatest day—the greatest breakfast, the greatest walk, the greatest play session, the greatest car ride to the greatest destination! Lipton was inspiring for me—always keeping before me the way that hope motivates vibrant living.

The Christian faith is nothing if it is not a life of great expectations. As Luke describes it in his gospel: that first Christmas morning infused life with anticipation of profoundly good things: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth!"

### **Flawed hope**

Paul is concerned that some Christians in Ephesus where Timothy is ministering have gotten hope wrong, however.

Some of them are wealthy and are tempted to place their hopes in their riches. As Paul advises in 1 Timothy 6:17, "As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." In Luke's gospel (and remember that Luke and Paul were traveling companions—they must have had lots of time to compare notes), Jesus warns

about building bigger barns (Luke 12). In contemporary terms, maybe “building barns” means building an investment portfolio or living from one vacation to another. Maybe it’s the addiction of buying one thing after another, always anticipating a delivery from Amazon. It is all, as Paul sagely observes, so uncertain. A matter of misplaced hope.

Some people in Ephesus, perhaps the same people, are declaring the general resurrection to be a past event. Paul denounces certain teachers “who have swerved from the truth, saying resurrection has already occurred” (2 Timothy 2:18). In the next generation, the apocryphal Acts of Thecla riffs on this theme, positing that “resurrection” takes place in having children — which is ironic, because in Paul’s day, the temptation was to denounce marriage. Paul was dealing with people who denied resurrection so they could have their “best life now.” Unencumbered by children, unencumbered by domestic obligations. Free, like Demas, to “love this age” (2 Timothy 4:10).

It’s a problem Paul had countered earlier in his ministry with the Corinthians. Somehow the Corinthians had persuaded themselves that being in God’s “new creation” meant there was no resurrection still ahead, and so they also were demanding their “best life now.” They were suing each other, competing to show the superiority of their spiritual gifts, bragging about their spiritual mentors, letting the “haves” of the congregation display their dominance over the “have nots” at the “Lord’s Supper.”

### **Fixed hope**

In the very first sentence of his first letter to Timothy, Paul announces his intention to recalibrate Ephesians’ hopes, calling Christ Jesus: “our hope” (1 Timothy 1:1), a unique title in the New Testament. In Colossians 1:27, Paul uses similar phraseology: “Christ in (or among) you, the hope of glory.” But here in 1 Timothy it’s a straightforward title: our hope. It’s the opening of an *inclusio* he will close at the end the letter, with his warning about hope “in the uncertainty of riches.” Throughout 1 Timothy, Paul offers Christ himself as the one certain hope.

For Paul, not to have a resurrection to look forward to is not to have Christ. Plain and simple. Christ himself is our hope, says Paul.

By referring to Christ Jesus as “our hope,” Paul mirrors the way the Greek translation of the Old Testament calls the Lord (Yahweh) his people’s hope (e.g., Jeremiah 17:13). Paul can do so because he presupposes Christ’s deity. This allusion to Christ’s deity is especially attention-grabbing at the beginning of this letter, because, as we shall see, it is Christ’s humanity (“one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human”) that Paul feels he needs to stress to the Ephesians. More about that in next Wednesday’s devotional. But for

now, Paul's point is that Christ gives us so much more to hope for than anything or anyone else. All other hopes besides Christ himself are lesser hopes.

Second, Paul wishes to insert an element of futurity into Christian existence. Hope that is seen is not hope, he says elsewhere (Romans 8:24). Hope hopes for what is not yet here. What the your-best-life-now Christians in Ephesus need to see is that living heaven's life on earth now means patience, it means suffering, it means endurance, it means waiting, it means not insisting on your own way. Hope takes the long view in the now, gladly and patiently, if expectantly.

So, yes, my black Lab Lipton was right. Every day is Christmas, because every day is filled with the hope of finding my "best life now" in the power of Jesus's resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings.

Be blessed this day,

Reggie Kidd

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