

A Sermon for DaySpring on All Saints' Day  
by Eric Howell  
*Solid Hope*  
Ephesians 1  
November 6, 2022

Today we hear from the book of Ephesians from the New Testament. It is a letter of encouragement and inspiration. Ephesians unlike many of the other New Testament letters and unlike a lot of communication doesn't say anything about any problems the recipients were having or causing. There's no "I love you, but . . ." going on here. It's just affirmation—of who they are and who God is. They are saints, and God is good. Now don't mistake that message as from someone who's not in touch with the troubles of life or someone who doesn't know them well enough to know that their feelings don't always match their reality. There's an intimate knowledge here both of human nature and of God's character. Instead of this letter plumbing the depths of particular issues, it just gives us what sometimes we just need. Some days, we just need to remember who we are and who God is. We are saints, and God is good.

I have a picture in my mind of what it looks like to receive something this rich and really take it in, even for just a moment. This summer, we met my brother-in-law at a famous pizza restaurant in Naples, Italy. He's gotten into pizza since Covid. He learned to make his own dough, he special-orders imported ingredients; fires up his own pizza oven. He knows pizza. Respect.

Pizza in Naples is to pizza what Texas is to barbeque. So, here's someone who knows and appreciates pizza, a real pizza critic, about to taste the best pizza in the best pizza city in the best pizza country in the world. He'd never been before so how fun was it for us to get to watch him. The thing is, it's just kind of a hole-in-the-wall place down a side street. No billboards, no dancing clowns out front, just a small sign and a door, and people lined up down the street waiting their turn. We waited in line for an hour or so and eventually sat and ordered. The pizzas arrived on the table. Everyone took pictures. Then he took his first bite. His eyes shut, his head bowed, his arms and hands went limp. Someone tried to say something to him, but with his eyes closed, he just held up his hand and said, "Hold on. I'm having a moment." The pizza critic became a pizza contemplative. This chapter in this book can feel that way if you can taste it. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

The opening chapter is a litany of bold and beautiful affirmations. We have a divine inheritance from God, a treasure prepared for us. We have hope in Christ and so can live for the praise of God's glory. The Holy Spirit is with us to guarantee this inheritance and our hope for God's glory until it becomes real in our lives.

And not only this, but Paul, who believes these things about God and about all Christians, also believes we are faithful and loving and gives thanks for us. We may not see ourselves that way every day, but it's good to know someone else can see when we can't. The Apostle prays for us

for a spirit of wisdom and revelation, that we would know hope, that we would know the glorious inheritance in the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of God's power.

That power worked in Christ to raise him from the dead and seat him at the right hand of God and that same power still flows from him who sits above all rule, authority, power, dominion, above every name, now and forever. All things are under his feet. He is head over all things, he is the head of the church, his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all.

This is really almost too much. Like a lavish meal in which each bite is more succulent than the last. God is good. You are beloved. God reigns; your lives have meaning and purpose in Him. God is powerful. That power runs through you.

I know this can all seem disconnected from daily life, these kinds of exalted theological affirmations. But there's a point here to all of this that is absolutely connected to daily life. You are saints, God is good. Because of that, we can have hope. We need it.

The letter opens by invoking grace and peace, but it's really about hope in the purposes of God in a world that doesn't seem like it's bending in God's direction.

The Ephesians, like all those 1st-century Christian communities, were just a small group of folks in someone's living room. A small community in a big city, in a big nation, part of a big empire. They had no power. They had no illusion of power. Between persecutions and troubles and their own personal doubts, they hardly had power over their own lives. But they'd found Jesus and staked their lives on their faith in him. They were clinging to a faith that at its root is based on an absurdly hopeful premise: Jesus Christ is raised from the dead and is seated at the right hand of God the Father.

This is all the hope they had, really had. That's important to realize in a time now when Christians seem to be tempted to confusion about where hope is found and about whether it is found by gaining and wielding political power. For Christians to put their hope there is to domesticate their faith in the one whose name is above every name. It's head-scratching to read a passage like this about Christ exalted above all things and then read the news about those today who profess the name of Christ and fly the banner of Christ above kinds of nationalistic conspiracy-theory-driven politics in order to cling to power or whatever else is thought to be fundamental to happiness or security. It's just kind of bewildering. Especially so because it doesn't elevate Christ. And it doesn't exhibit the character of the Christian life. And it doesn't lift the nation to its aspirations. It just drags everything down deeper and deeper into darkness.

The gospel is a light in the dark. Ephesians is so clear-eyed about the place of Christ above all rule and authority and about the place of Christians as the people of grace, peace, hope, and faith in the world. But history has shown how hard it is for us to remember. It is important to remember in a time when we seethe for power or despair its loss. Our hope still rests in the one who will still reigns above all rule, authority, power, and dominion now and every day this week

and this year and forever. Hope in these terms isn't a consolation prize for those who can muster some optimism. It's not the fortune cookie message, "Keep your chin up." And it's not to retreat to a quietism about the real, hard things in the world. But it's to say that no matter what you throw at it, Christian hope is solid as a rock and enduring as a diamond.

Paul prays that the church may know what is the hope to which God has called you. That makes all the difference. You are called to hope. Can you hear the difference there? Hope here isn't just a bland remnant of positive thinking when everything else is gone. It's a calling, a calling to be people of hope in a world that needs people of true hope.

The Christian life is the answer to the call to hope in Jesus Christ. Hope is not a vague optimistic disposition because the source and object of our hope is Jesus Christ who was not a vague and optimistic do-gooder, but the Lord of life who endured death and was raised from the grave.

Paul puts it like this: we who hope in Christ now live to the praise of God's glory. We hope so that we might live and that in living our lives bring praise to God whose glory is seen in the resurrection of Jesus.

Christian hope withstands despair at political outcomes and nonsense as heartbreaking and despairing as it can be sometimes. Because Christ is on the throne. Because Christ is on the throne, we can go on and on and on. The saints and martyrs of our faith teach us that all through history in every kind of culture and situation and trouble. They inspire us to remember we serve a God who is so much bigger than this moment in time. The world is in God's hands and so no matter how dark things may seem at any given time, the god of deliverance reigns.

For most people, most of the time, the issues of hope and despair aren't out there anyway in the news. They are in the relationships, in the heart, the home. Even there, Christian hope calls us on when we are about to give up because God's resurrection power moves in us and reminds us nothing in all creation, not even death can overcome the love that is God.

Christian hope, I think, is like what appears to be nothing more than a shabby little building the children enter in the Chronicles of Narnia. Not expecting much, they go on in and only then discover a vastness they could not have guessed. Lucy exclaims, "Why it's bigger on the inside than on the outside." Yes, came the reply, "something like that once happened on earth. In a place called Bethlehem, there was a tiny stable whose inside was bigger than its outside because that stable contained the whole world."

Hope endures because Christ is at the right hand of God. To some that saying sounds so remotely impractical that it almost has no meaning. But if that's so maybe it's because you don't need it yet. But when you do, on the day you do, remember, you are a saint in Christ called to a life of hope, and God is good.

