

This is sermon #12 in the series of sermons called “Reviewing the Basics.” And this will be the last sermon in the series. Today we will consider the question, “What is the Christian Hope?” One of the basics of the biblical message is that it is a message of hope. Hope for the future is not a peripheral part of the teaching of the Bible. It belongs to the very heart of what God is revealing to the human race in his word. That is not to say that the future is bright for every human being. There is the warning of eternal punishment for those who persist in their rebellion against God. But the Bible is certainly a message of hope for the followers of Jesus Christ and the good news that we are to broadcast to the world is that the biblical hope is available for all who would come to Jesus and receive the salvation that he offers to the world.

Now what this means is that the Christian life, as the Bible describes, it is very much oriented towards the future that God is working towards. And in this the Christian life is shaped by the very nature of the Bible which is the story of God’s plan of salvation and the hope that God is working towards has a pervasive presence in the story. One of the key drivers of the story is God’s promise concerning to the future and the people of God are always a people who are living in the light of God’s promise and looking forward to their fulfillment.

Now the biblical hope is a hope that is shaped by God and what God knows to be the ultimate good and blessedness for his people. It is not the only hope that exists among human beings. We are creatures of hope. We have the ability to imagine what our future might be like and it is quite natural for us to imagine a future that is better than today at least within the constraints of our understanding of the world.

One of the common ways of having hope for the people of the world is the idea of progress. Especially since the growth of science and technology in the past few hundred years, it is common for people to consider the progress that has been made in many areas and to have faith that that progress will continue and that the future will be better than the present. Many people view history in the light of the idea of progress and believe that humanity will continue to solve the problems that beset us and that over time things will continue to improve. That hopeful attitude towards the future of humanity is countered by fears of catastrophes which will bring about great hardship and suffering – such as the fear of climate change or nuclear disaster or a pandemic. So if you think about society as a whole there is both hope for the future which is rooted in what humanity may be able to accomplish, but there is also fear and pessimism which is rooted in humanity’s darker side.

Another common way of thinking about the future is the way that many individuals look at their own lives. Many people in our society believe that death is the end – that there is nothing beyond this life, but they have hope rooted in the goals they are working towards in this life. For many the hope is economic. They are working towards having more money than they have now and their hope for the future has to do with a more comfortable life and a well-funded retirement. And certainly, Christians share in that hope to some extent. The Bible does not say that it is wrong to work hard to get ahead and to save enough for a comfortable retirement.

But that is not the hope that permeates the message of the Bible. The biblical hope is focused on the future beyond this life. The Bible looks forward to the completion of God’s plan of salvation and that will happen at the end of this present age when Jesus returns and brings the kingdom of God in its fullness. And that gives a

forward-looking aspect to the Christian life. And that forward- looking aspect of the Christian life has a significant influence in how the Christian is to think about and value life in the present. A huge part of the biblical teaching on the Christian life has to do with how the hope for the future is to influence the way that the Christian looks at life in the here and now. And that is what we will explore in this sermon.

We will do that by looking at the two passages that we read as our Scripture reading. I want to do it that way because there is so much about this subject in the Bible and it will be helpful I think to consider two of the many perspectives that the Bible gives on this subject.

We will begin with Jesus' words in Matthew 6:19–21, "¹⁹Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." The contrast is between earth and heaven. Jesus is thinking in terms of this life on the one hand and heaven beyond this earthly life on the other. He is saying that our focus should not be on earthly treasures, but rather heavenly treasures. And the difference between the two is that earthly treasures decay and can be lost while heavenly treasures are not subject to decay or loss. Jesus is saying that should store up treasures that last – treasures that are permanent – treasures that will still be treasures in heaven.

Now they are both treasures. There are treasures on earth and there are treasures in heaven. There are many things that we can store up on earth that are valuable. As we live our lives on earth we accomplish things – we work, we live, we gather many things that are valuable – life is valuable and there are many good things. It is good to have family and friends. It is good to work and get ahead. It is good to accomplish worthwhile things. It is good to enjoy the good things that God gives us. But Jesus tells us not to lay up those kinds of treasures. He tells us to take into account the fact that the treasures that have to do with this earthly life do not last. They are vulnerable to loss. Indeed they will all be lost at death. Their value is temporary.

On the other hand, there are other treasures that continue to be treasures in heaven. And those are the treasures that we should be laying up. What are those treasures? They are the things that Jesus and the whole Bible urge us to pursue. These verses are part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Mount is about living the kind of life that is possible for citizens of the kingdom of God. Laying up treasure in heaven according to the Sermon on the Mount would be living the kind of life that Jesus is urging.

Jesus mentions a list of heavenly treasures in the beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:2-11: Having the kingdom of heaven, being comforted, inheriting the earth, being satisfied, receiving mercy, seeing God, being called sons of God, having a great reward in heaven. And the way to lay up those treasures is to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be merciful, to be pure in heart, to be peace makers, and to be persecuted for righteousness sake.

The Beatitudes give us a pretty good idea of what treasures in heaven are and how to go about laying up treasures in heaven. Jesus is talking about the kind of life that leads to heaven and he is describing some of the good things that will be experienced there.

So Jesus is telling us to live in such a way as to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven and not to focus our lives on laying up for ourselves earthly treasures. The great priority of our lives must be laying up for ourselves treasure in heaven.

Now to actually understand and put this into practice in our lives we must think of what Jesus is saying here in the light of a number of other central biblical truths. First we must think of what Jesus is saying about laying up treasures on earth and treasures in heaven in the light of the gospel message. The Bible does not teach that we can earn heaven by our works and so the first step in laying up for ourselves treasures in heaven is believing in Jesus and receiving the promise of eternal life as a gracious gift through faith. That is assumed in what Jesus is saying, but it is not spelled out.

And part of the gospel picture is that one of the fruits of believing the gospel is the renewal of life that Jesus gives to all who believe on him. The kind of life that Jesus is calling us to live when he speaks about laying up for ourselves treasures in heaven is a life that Jesus through his Spirit enables his followers to live. It is true that how we live this life matters as far as laying up for ourselves treasures in heaven is concerned, but it is vital that we understand that living that way is only possible for those who have trusted in Jesus and who have been renewed by the Holy Spirit.

Another thing to keep in mind as we apply Jesus' teaching about not laying up for ourselves treasures on earth, but rather laying up for ourselves treasures in heaven that Jesus is not saying that we should not enjoy this earthly life. Jesus is not saying that we should think only about heaven and separate ourselves as much as possible from this earthly life and its enjoyments and satisfactions.

The life that is the fruit of salvation – the life that flows from the gospel – the life that is pleasing to God – the life that lays up treasures in heaven is described for us throughout the Bible and that life involves things like work and relationships and getting ahead and enjoyment. To understand the kind of life that is pleasing to God we must take the whole Bible into account and the whole Bible teaches that this physical earthly life is good and that there is a way to live it that lays up treasure in heaven. The phrase that sums that up is living all of life to the glory of God. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

When Jesus tells us not to lay up for ourselves treasures on earth he is not saying that we should detach from this earthly life as much as possible. He is saying rather that we must live this earthly life in a way that is consistent with laying up treasures in heaven. And what that means in practice is to love God more than the things of this life and to seek to please God in the way that we live this earthly life. We must remember that this earthly life is God's idea. But it is possible to live this earthly life in a way that excludes God and it is possible to live this earthly life in a way in which God is at the center. What this means in practice is that God must be our greatest treasure. Jesus says in the last sentence of this paragraph, "For where your treasure is,

there your heart will be also.” And one of the most fundamental of all biblical truths is that God must be our greatest treasure. We are to love God with all our hearts. We are created for this and we are saved for this.

When we lay up treasures for ourselves on earth we are valuing the things of this earthly life more than God. God wants us to enjoy the things of this earthly life – but in such away that we enjoy him in and through them. That means enjoying the things of this earthly life with thanksgiving and treasuring God’s love and goodness in them more than the things themselves. We can enjoy a nice meal or a close relationship or a satisfying project with the deepest joy being in God’s love and generosity in them. We lay up treasures in heaven when we our relationship with God dominates and permeates the living of this earthly life.

Indeed at the heart of laying up treasure in heaven is to focus on enjoying that heavenly treasure now already in this present earthly life. One of the glorious truths of the gospel is that eternal life began with the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is the first fruit of the resurrection of all who believe in Jesus and what that means is that the new creation began when Jesus rose from the dead. That is why Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that everyone who is in Christ is a new creation. When we believe in Jesus we receive eternal life and eternal life is the life of the new creation.

What this means in the light of laying up treasures in heaven is that we begin to experience the treasures of heaven in the here and now and a huge part of the way to lay up treasures in heaven is to experience as much of the treasures in heaven as possible while we are still in this life. And at the very heart of all the treasures of heaven is worshipping and serving and pleasing God. It is being in the presence of God.

Think of the way the new creation is described in Revelation 22:3-4, “No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.” The greatest treasure in heaven is God himself – loving him, seeing his face, being in his presence, worshipping him and serving him. And that begins now already. At the heart of laying up treasures in heaven is enjoying the beginning of those treasures in the here and now and that involves living lives that are focused on enjoying God and pleasing him by becoming more and more like him through the enabling grace that flows to us through the gospel.

This is at the heart of the Christian hope. And you can see how having this hope profoundly affects life in the here and now. It means that we lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven rather than treasures on earth.

We turn now to Hebrews 11 and some of the verses that we read as our Scripture reading. Hebrews 11 is about faith. And the context has to do with enduring persecution. In chapter 10 the author is speaking about the persecution that the Hebrew Christians have endured. In verse 34 he says, “[Y]ou joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.” In verse 39 he writes, “But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”

And then chapter 11 begins with these words, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And then he gives a whole list of examples of people who persevered in their faith by looking forward in hope to what God had promised. And in connection with Abraham he describes him living

by a promise that was never fully fulfilled in this life and looking forward to the ultimate fulfillment of the promise in the life to come. Verse 10 "For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. Verse 13 describes the early believers as living as "strangers and exiles on the earth." And verse 16, "But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be their God, for he has prepared for them a city."

Now the application of this passage has to do with endurance in the face of persecution, but we can expand that to endurance in all of the challenges of the Christian life. The book of Hebrews is about enduring in the Christian life and not giving up and drifting away because of the difficulties. For the Hebrew Christians the difficulties had to do with persecution. But there are many other difficulties that we face in life. There is suffering in general which tempts us to give in to bitterness and just giving up in following the Lord. There is also the difficulty of struggling against sin and temptation. The Christian life is hard because it is a struggle against Satan's temptations and the sinful desires of our own sinful nature. In Hebrews 12:3 the author exhorts us to "Consider [Jesus] who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint hearted." That kind of hostility can come from people persecuting us as they did Jesus, but it can also come from the spiritual forces of evil warring against us by means of temptation. And we can become weary in the battle.

Endurance is an important biblical word because the Christian life is hard. It is warfare. It is a struggle. Peter in 1 Peter 2:9 speaks of "the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." And the way that the book of Hebrews encourages endurance is by reminding us of the hope that is ours on the basis of what God has promised us. So Abraham and the other patriarchs endured by faith in the city which God had promised, the better heavenly country. They realized that they were strangers and exiles on the earth, and they persevered through faith in what God had promised them beyond this earthly life.

And the greatest example of this is Jesus and so Hebrews 12:1-2 says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

So we are called to think of those who have gone before us who have endured suffering and hardship but who persevered in their faith by the encouragement of the joy that was set before them. And we are especially to look to Jesus as the one who endured the cross because of the joy that was set before him. So the hope for what God has promised for us in heaven and in the new creation after the return of Christ is an important encouragement for endurance in the struggles of the Christian life. And this involves a certain way of thinking about this life. It involves seeing this life as a pilgrimage. It involves living with the awareness that this life is fleeting, but also that the fullness of what God has promised to us lies before us beyond this present earthly life.

The one thing that God does not promise us is an easy pain-free life. God does give us many enjoyable things in this life, but there is also pain and suffering and struggle and disappointment. There is no promise of earthly comfort and a life without suffering. And struggle of one sort or another is part of God's program for us. And

the sweep of the biblical teaching on the Christian life is that this life is not our home – we are just passing through – and we are to be looking forward to the ultimate of joy and blessedness which is promised to us in the life to come.

Now this forward-looking perspective must be cultivated. That is the aim of Hebrews 11 and the biblical teaching about the hope of the Christian. The biblical teaching on the future is there so that we will think about it and ponder it to nurture the desire to experience the fullness of what we begin to experience when we are saved. We begin to experience delight in God and in Christ. We begin to delight in his goodness, and we begin to want to reflect that goodness in our own lives. And the Bible points us forward to the perfection of these things when God's promises are completely fulfilled beyond this life.

The way for the Christian hope to be a more prominent feature of our experience is for us to grow in our love for God because the heart of the hope is being with God. God has given us his word and he has also revealed himself in the creation so that we might know him and grow in our knowledge of him. It is interesting that the Bible does not give a lot of detail about what heaven will be like and the heart of what the Bible does say about it is that we will be with God – we will enjoy sinless fellowship with God – we will see him in a way that that is not possible in this life.

For instance one of the ways that the Bible speaks of the Christian hope is the imagery of the marriage supper of the Lamb. So we read in Revelation 19:7 “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready....” There is rejoicing and celebration because of the relationship between Christ and his bride. The great emphasis in the biblical description of heaven and the new creation is on the joy in the relationship between God and his people – Christ and his church. We see this in many places. Jesus says in John 14:3, “...I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” Paul in Philippians 1:23, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.” Psalm 73:25, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.”

Now that does not mean that the life in the new creation will be an eternal worship service. In God's original creation he gave humanity interesting and meaningful work to do in the context of a loving relationship with him. We can be sure that there will be something like that in the new creation. But the heart of it all will be living in the presence of God, enjoying fellowship with him, enjoying serving him and bringing him glory and enjoying his love and favor.

And so the way to strengthen our hope and to maximize its influence in our lives is to nurture our love for God so that we can identify more and more with the prayer of David in Psalm 27:4 “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.”