

Hope in a World of Disappointment

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, brothers and sisters and friends. It's good to be here with you. My name's Josh, if you don't know me. Please do keep that Bible reading open in front of you, although we'll only be looking at a very small portion of it this morning.

I don't know what you're expecting for Christmas this year. Are you an optimist? Are you excited about Christmas, perhaps what's under the Christmas tree? Are you excited about New Year and what 2024 might hold for you?

Or are you a realist? Unfortunately, we live in a world of frequent disappointment, don't we? People disappoint, leaders disappoint. We disappoint ourselves.

Even Christmas disappoints. In fact, sometimes Christmas is the worst disappointment of all, isn't it? Because your expectations are so high. I think it's supposed to be a magical day of feasting and fun with all the family.

Perhaps you remember when you were a child, it did feel like that. And my kids were up at like 5 a.m. this morning. I shudder to think at what hour they will be up on Christmas morning. But once upon a time, I remember Christmas was such an exciting day to get up to.

[1 : 09] I was up at the crack of dawn, down by the tree, eager to open our presents. But perhaps now it's been a long time since Christmas felt like that for you.

Now you just know it'll be another day of drudgery. You'll have to drag yourself out of bed, grit your teeth and get through it. And when Christmas all goes wrong, it can be so demoralizing, right? If the family feuds, and not in that fun way that's on the TV. But if the family feuds or you're far away from home and lonely, it can feel so miserable.

I hope Christmas won't feel like that for you this year, but it might do. Because even Christmas disappoints. And perhaps you feel sometimes that even God is a bit of a disappointment.

I wonder if God has let you down this year. Of course, disappointment all has to do with expectations. What do you feel that God should be doing for you or in you?

[2 : 12] If you have unrealistic expectations of the Christian life, then you set yourself up for disappointment. One example I can think of is the problem of over-realized eschatology.

This is the trap sometimes Christians fall into, where they think that all the blessings of heaven, or all the blessings of the new age, we can have them all now, if only we'll have enough faith.

The technical term for that error is over-realized eschatology. You imagine we're at the end already. In the kingdom, the consummated kingdom. And it gets you into all sorts of problems.

It's most commonly associated with healing ministries, and the prosperity gospel, and the charismatic movement. And it sets people up for disillusionment and disappointment.

But on the other hand, surely God is supposed to make some difference in our lives, isn't he? And he has the power to. He's supposed to be loving and kind. And when we repent of our sins and put our trust in Jesus, isn't something supposed to happen?

[3 : 19] There is such a thing as under-realized eschatology. Where, as it were, Christians talk as if Jesus didn't really defeat our sins on the cross, and rise to new life.

Pour out his spirit so that we could be born again through his resurrection. And so people start to imagine that nothing really changes when you put your trust in Christ.

Becoming a Christian is just about becoming more socially conservative. Or it's like turning over a new leaf. There's nothing supernatural about it. But that isn't right either, is it?

I wonder if that's much more what we tend to be in danger of. But surely we want to testify to the awesome power of Jesus, his death and resurrection in our lives.

And we do want to testify to the fact that the gospel, the gospel truth, has set us free from our sins. Surely we want to tell people that by faith you can be born again.

[4 : 16] And that that is something far more wonderful than just turning over a new leaf. Or throwing yourself into a New Year's resolution. Or a self-help program. Or getting counseling.

Or anything else that the world has to offer. Come to Jesus. And you will not immediately be what you should be. But you will immediately start to grow and change.

By the power of the Holy Spirit in your life. You'll become better than you were. Fixed up, won't you? By the power of Jesus. But of course that brings us back to the subject of disappointment.

Because I don't know about you, but at least for me, very often, even though I believe in the power of Jesus in my life, I don't always feel it. Or see much evidence of it.

I believe in God listening to my prayers. I know he's up there. But the answer always seems to be no. Or at least very often.

[5 : 19] I'm trying to grow in godliness. But transformation seems very slow. Sometimes I seem to be regressing. I want to do something big for God.

Like Jim Elliot. You know? Or Hudson Taylor. Or George Whitefield. But somehow it feels like God has nothing interesting or exciting planned for me. So I don't want to fall off one way or the other into over-realized or under-realized eschatology.

But I do feel a sense of disappointment. Like my life is much more pathetic than I want it to be. Surely God is supposed to make a difference in our lives, isn't he?

And why does the Christian life feel so very similar to the lives of those around us? Do we have more joy, peace, or love than our neighbors? Sometimes it doesn't feel like it.

And honestly, at times, I feel like I don't know how much more of this I can take. And I'm too discouraged and disillusioned and disappointed to keep trying. Now, I'm hoping that that resonates with at least some of you.

[6 : 29] Or is it just me? But that brings us to the book of Zechariah. Because in Zechariah's day, I think that was how many of God's people were feeling. Disappointed by God's promises.

Disappointed by the times they lived in. And it was sort of a day of semi-fulfillment. A bit like our own day. So if you know the history of the people of Israel.

And I think I've got a slide for us here. You might not have seen this diagram before. It's meant to represent the progress of the kingdom of God in the Bible.

And if you know the history of the people of Israel. The glory days of the kingdom were under kings David and Solomon in about 1000 BC. That's just in the middle there where the star is.

That was a time when God's people were more numerous than ever. And more prosperous than ever. David and Solomon ruled with wisdom and justice under God. If you think about the promises to Abraham. All those promises seem to be coming true under kings David and Solomon.

[7 : 32] The climax of the Old Testament is really 1 Kings chapters 8 to 10. If you want to go and read it later. That's where Solomon builds the temple. He dedicates the temple. God comes to dwell in the temple.

The Queen of Sheba visits as a sign that Israel has become very significant on the world stage. God is dwelling among them. And blessing them and all the nations through them. But then after that things start to go downhill pretty fast.

The nation was split into two after Solomon's death. And most of the kings in both kingdoms failed to honor God. They led people into idolatry and sin. So throughout this period you get prophets like Isaiah and Micah and others.

Warning the people of God's coming judgment on the one hand. That one day God's patience would wear thin and he would punish them for their sins. While also at the same time pointing in the other direction.

Oh next slide actually. Yeah. At the same time pointing in the other direction as it were. About the glorious picture of life for Israel beyond the judgment. Beyond the punishment.

[8 : 34] Isaiah promised a day of rescue and restoration. A day of joy and gladness and comfort. Even as he was talking about the impending doom and judgment of the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

So in about 700 BC. The northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians. And the people were taken off into exile. In other words the axe did fall.

The judgment that the prophets had been warning about did finally come upon Israel. And they were in exile in Babylon for about 50 to 70 years. Until they were finally allowed to come home.

The dates are just a bit complicated. You have to say 50 to 70. Because they left in a few waves and they came back in a few waves. But anyway when eventually they did get released from exile. They were released by a Persian king named Cyrus.

It was in about 539 BC. And he published a famous proclamation. That all the Jews wherever they had been scattered. Were now allowed to return home and rebuild their homeland.

[9 : 41] Can you imagine the wild scenes? Just imagine that you were a faithful Jew in 539 BC. This would have been a day of enormous excitement and optimism.

Imagine getting up from your quiet time. You've just been reading the scroll of Isaiah or Jeremiah or something like that. You've been waiting your entire life for the reunification and the restoration of Israel under a new king.

Isaiah said a bloke named Cyrus would do it. About 150 years earlier. And then you turn on the news or you go down to the local marketplace and you hear this announcement.

There's a new king in town. Cyrus. And this is what he says. This is from the end of 2 Chronicles. Thus says Cyrus king of Persia. The Lord the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth.

And he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people. May the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up. In other words for all the Jews what this proclamation meant was.

[10 : 46] It's time. It's time to pack up. It's time to go home. It's finally over. The exile. God's judgment. It's time for the rebirth of the nation. Let's go back. And make the wastelands of Israel bloom again.

And rebuild the ruined city of Zion. Until it surpasses even the glory days of King David and Solomon. A day of great optimism.

Spectacular hope. Followed of course by spectacular disappointment. Because as you may know when the people did return all these grand promises seemed to fall flat.

Not Cyrus's promises but I mean God's promises. Jerusalem did not achieve international prominence or significance. The rebuild was fairly pathetic.

It was a huge disappointment. And it's into that context that God called Zachariah to come and prophesy. Now we're talking about 520 BC.

[11 : 51] So almost 20 years after Cyrus's edict. But the spectacular promises of God still had not been realized. Some of the people had trickled home. But by no means the whole nation.

The temple had still not been finished. The walls of the city were in ruins. In other words in Zachariah's day the people of Israel lived in a day of disappointment. I think on the diagram just to go back.

There's that tiny little uptick. You know that's it. They sort of made it. Made it home. In chapter 4 Zachariah famously describes his cultural moment.

As a day of small things. One commentator writes. Under the circumstances. It was easy for the people to conclude that theirs was a day of small things.

Zachariah chapter 4 verse 10. In which God was absent from his people. In such a context faithful obedience was viewed by many as useless. Pragmatically it made more sense to pursue the best life possible.

[12 : 54] In spite of the present difficulties. Well as I say perhaps if that's how you feel about our own day. Then this is the prophet for you.

Because it was into that context that God gave Zachariah a message of hope. A message about the light at the end of the tunnel. Reiterating. That it wasn't over.

And that God did have a plan to fulfill the great promises of Isaiah. And to far surpass the great kingdoms of David and Solomon. Now as I say.

We're not going to work our way through this whole chapter this morning. We are actually going to do that later at Unichurch. Later in the year at Unichurch God willing. We're going to work our way through Zachariah in the second half of the year.

But for now. I just want to focus on a couple of verses in this chapter. The two verses at the heart of it that prepare us for Christmas. It's there in verses 10 and 11. Zachariah says.

[13 : 51] Sing and rejoice. O daughter Zion. For behold I come and I will dwell in your midst.

Declares the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day. And shall be my people.

And I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. So into this day of small things. This pathetic and disappointing period in history. God wants to say four things to his people.

And if you're following along the outline. Hopefully you can see them there. Number one. Sing and rejoice. Sing and rejoice. Of course at the time. That would have seemed like an entirely inappropriate activity for God's people.

Perhaps 20 years earlier that was how they were feeling. But now they realized. They did not live in a great day. In a day of singing and celebrating. And yet.

Zachariah calls them to do that. And that's what faith is you see. Or what faith does. Faith is like a telescope. It doesn't always change our circumstances. But it enables us to see far beyond our present circumstances.

[14 : 56] Into the future that God has promised for us. As the author of Hebrews puts it. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. The conviction of things not seen.

In other words. In other words. Because God promises. Because God promises there will be light at the end of the tunnel. Those who believe his promises can keep walking through the darkness.

Without growing weary or discouraged or giving up.

Like Paul and Silas in prison. You can keep singing. Even in the midst of horrendous circumstances. It's almost as if we can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Even though we can't see it.

You know. It's too far off for our natural eyes. But faith allows us to see it. And so God said to the disappointed people of Zachariah's day. Sing and rejoice.

Faith looks like embracing your future now. And responding with joy to what will be. Even though we don't have to pretend that we're out of the tunnel yet. Number two.

[15 : 58] God wants to tell his people how precious they are to him. Notice how he addresses them in verse 10. Oh daughter of Zion. Although I think a better translation would simply be. Oh daughter Zion.

Right. Which is how the NIV has it. I don't think he's talking about Zion's daughter. But he's addressing Zion as his daughter. In other words. It's a term of endearment. And affection.

Of tenderness. God doesn't want Zion. Zion. The city of Jerusalem. Or the Jerusalemites. If it is to be taken as Zion's daughter.

But either way. He doesn't want Jerusalem to think of herself as abandoned. Forgotten. Forsaken. Orphaned. He wants his people to know that he loves them.

That they're precious to him. Earlier on in the chapter. If you cast your eye back to verse 9. You'll see God calls his people. The apple of his eye. That is his pupil.

[16 : 55] The most vulnerable, precious part of a person. You don't want anyone to touch it. It's very sensitive. Well that's how God feels about his daughter Zion. He's very sensitive about her.

Very protective. I know the feeling. He loves her. Brothers and sisters. He loves us. In a day of disappointment.

If this year has been a hard year for you. Don't forget how much our God and Father loves us. And if this Christmas. Or next year. All your hopes and expectations.

Fall flat. And you find yourself. You know. In the midst of. Deep. Despair. Or discouragement. Don't forget. He loves us.

We're precious to him. Thirdly. And here's where we really start getting to the heart of things. God wants his people. His precious people. To sing and rejoice.

[17 : 52] Because. Right. Notice the for. And notice the behold. There. In other words. Drum roll please. This is the big news. In the midst of disappointment.

God wants his people to know. That he is coming. For. Behold. I come. And I will dwell in your midst. Declares the Lord.

You know those self-help people. Those motivational speakers. Who try to inspire us. I seem to get bombarded with this stuff online. I don't know if it's because I fit a particular demographic.

Is everyone in my generation just. We don't know what we're doing. Or why we're here. I'm not sure. But anyway. But for some reason. I seem to get all of these things on YouTube.

And I've noticed that some of them. One strand of self-help teaching. That is supposed to motivate us. Is that no one is coming. No one is coming. No one is coming to save you.

[18 : 51] So get off your backside. And get to work. Right. And build your dream life yourself. Because no one is coming. Isn't the message of Christianity so strikingly different to that?

Thank God. The Christian message is about the fact that God is coming. And he's coming to save us. And we can't save ourselves. And it's about the fact that the God of the universe isn't just coming to save us.

But he's coming to live with us. Just think about that with me for a moment. The God of all the universe. Who is so high and mighty. Who is holy and transcendent. And infinite and incomprehensible.

That God wants to come and live with us. It's an extraordinary promise really. When you think about it isn't it? I mean why would God want to come and live with us? That he would even consider coming down to be here with us is mind boggling.

You remember how the psalmist puts it in Psalm 8. O Lord, our Lord. How majestic is your name in all the earth. You have set your glory above the heavens. Friends, when I look at your heavens.

[20 : 02] The work of your fingers. The moon and the stars which you have set in place. What is man? That you are mindful of him. And the son of man that you care for him. Perhaps even more than the psalmist knew.

We know just how small we are in the universe, don't we? There are trillions of stars. Billions and billions of galaxies. We are just tiny creatures. And God is the infinite creator.

Why would he want to come and confine himself to this tiny corner of the universe? Not to mention that we are poor, wretched, sinful creatures.

Isaiah puts it like this. We have all become like one who is unclean. And all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. Literally a menstrual rag. And that's all our righteous deeds.

All the good things we try to do are not pure and clean in God's sight. Of course because God sees all the ins and outs of our motivations.

[21 : 02] All the self-centeredness. All the ego. All the foolish thinking. I think we are quite a judgmental generation apparently. And we look back on the past and think, what were they doing?

But of course as they were trying to do good. They were doing so much harm. So often. And we are doing the same I am sure. Countless ways. When we think we are doing a good job. We are not. And Isaiah continues. We all fade like a leaf. And our iniquities like the wind. Take us away. But dear friends.

The startling message of the Bible. Is that despite how small we are. In this vast universe. Despite how sinful we are. Before God's holy righteous piercing gaze.

Even so. God chose not to abandon us. Or forsake us. Or forget us. But he chose to come here to us. And not just to visit. But to stay.

[22 : 01] To live among us. Someone is coming. It's not all up to you to turn your life around. And build your dreams. In the end you see that really is just the old message of.

Works. Righteousness isn't it? Self-righteousness. Righteousness by good works. Righteousness by human achievement. The Jews tried that for millennia. And failed.

It is oppressive. It doesn't help people step up. And take responsibility. It's crushing. No. The gospel that Zechariah preached.

And the gospel that we still need people to know today. Is a gospel about what God does for us. Not what we do for him. It's a gospel about God's grace.

That special kind of love God has for us. And an obvious part of loving someone is wanting to be together. God wants to be with us because he loves us.

[22 : 58] You know the classic airport scene. Right? When you're expecting someone to come home. Someone you love. The night before. You're busy at home cleaning up.

You make a sign. Big letters. Welcome home. I see them on the highway. You know as you're driving. Someone's vandalized public property. No. Someone's put up a huge sign.

Saying welcome home. So and so. And in the airport people are hugging and kissing. Because it's just so exciting to be together. Well according to the book of Zechariah.

God wants to be with us. Because he loves us. God wants to be with his people. And not just the people of Israel. Even in Zechariah's day.

God had the rest of us in mind. Which is the final point I want to draw your attention to this morning. Notice in verse 11. God wanted his people.

[23 : 57] The people of Israel. That when he comes. It will not be just for them. But for many nations. See verse 11. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day.

And shall be my people. This is great news for us Gentiles. Isn't it? For most of us here. This is the reason why. These promises mean anything to us at all.

In the Old Testament. For thousands of years. God chose and worked with one particular nation. The people of Israel. To them belong the adoption. The glory. The covenants. The giving of the law. The worship. And the promises. To them belong the patriarchs.

And from their race. According to the flesh. Is the Christ. Who is God. Over all. Blessed forever. Right? Paul says. Romans 9. And yet the good news of Zechariah too.

Is that even though Christ. Did come from the Jews. And first for the Jews. He did not come for the Jews only. Reading on in the book of Romans.

[24 : 54] Paul talks about God. Grafting Gentiles in. To the natural vine. That was the Jewish people. In our passage this morning. Zechariah talks about how many nations. Will join themselves. To the Lord.

It's a striking way of speaking. Isn't it? That language of attachment. Of unity. Like in a marriage. The two become one. A deep bond is formed.

By the covenant. Zechariah is promising the same thing. Not just for the nation of Israel. Many nations will come. And join themselves to the Lord.

And they will all be called. His people. All right. So let me wrap up. Let me just finish with a couple of. Reflections as we approach Christmas this year.

Again we're in the season of Advent. Millions of Christians around the world. And for generations and generations. Have taken this time. As an opportunity to remember. The coming of Jesus. Advent means coming.

[25 : 51] And it's not just about remembering. The coming of Jesus. As a little baby. It was always about remembering. The coming of Jesus. At the end of the world too. The second coming. Now of course we're not bound.

By human traditions. But both Jesus' first and second comings. Are worthy events to commemorate. So I think it's a great opportunity. For us to consider these things.

At this time of year. On the one hand. Let us remember his first coming. It is a reason to sing and rejoice. It is the ultimate demonstration.

Of God's love for us. That he came to rescue us. And to live among us. In the person of Jesus. He actually walked around. Palestine. Our other Bible reading this morning.

Was from Matthew's Gospel. When Joseph was considering. Quietly divorcing Mary. For her apparent immorality. Matthew tells us. Behold an angel of the Lord. Appeared to him in a dream.

[26 : 48] Saying Joseph. Son of David. Do not fear to take Mary as your wife. For that which is conceived in her. Is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son. And you shall call his name.

Jesus. For he will save his people. From their sins. All this took place. To fulfill what the Lord. Had spoken by the prophet. Behold. The virgin shall conceive.

And bear a son. And they shall call his name. Emmanuel. Which means. God with us. See friends. God always keeps his promises. He does love us. Just as Zachariah promised.

And the other prophets. Like Isaiah. Which Matthew is quoting there. God did come to live with his people. We see God's great love for his people. In the incarnation. And in Jesus ministry.

And of course we see it most clearly. In his death and resurrection for us. And then on the other hand. Jesus is coming again. If you find yourself.

[27 : 46] Like the people in Zachariah's day. Disappointed. By the days we live in. Tempted to think. What was it? That faithful obedience is useless.

Pragmatically. It makes more sense. Just to. Have your best life now. Try and build your best life here. Then take this as an opportunity. At Christmas time.

To refocus yourself. On the hope to come. Look forward to Jesus' second coming. Zachariah is telling us. To sing and rejoice. By faith.

Because God. Our savior. Jesus. Is coming. Don't forget. Brothers and sisters. In the midst of dark. And difficult days.

If you feel like this. Is a day of small things. In your life. Certainly. I think very often. The church feels. Pretty small. And pathetic. Is this really the kingdom.

