

**Sermon Series: “The HOPE of Christmas”
“Everlasting”
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Sunday, December 19, 2021**

Have you ever had something that lasted a long time? E.g., I recall talking to the Mennonites, Aaron Nolt, who had an 18-wheel trucking business, and I asked him how many miles he would get on his trucks, and he said about a half million; I asked what they did then, and he said often they would have the engines re-built and use them again! I thought that was pretty impressive, until I started racking up mileage on my 2009 Honda Odyssey, and I now have 285,000 miles— and I cannot wait to get to a half million, and then re-build the engine! Actually, we might just decide to forego that last bit of the re-build. But it is nice to think of some things as lasting forever, but we live in a world where things not only don't last forever, but are intentionally planned not to last forever. It is a business model called “planned obsolescence”, whereby a product is produced with an artificially limited life, so that the customer will feel the need to buy the product again with adjusted/improved features. We see that with things like dishwashers, microwave ovens, computers, printers, and so on. We even see it with cell phones. E.g., earlier this year I went to my cell phone provider to trade in my cell phone to get an improved one, as my was not working well, and I was told my cell phone was so old that it was no longer deemed worthy of their return program— which meant I got nothing for it! Another part of life that has a limited “shelf life” is people— and at this time of year, we especially miss loved ones who have passed away. Wouldn't it be nice for something to last forever? Well, the hope of Christmas provides that.

CONTEXT: The Assyrians are on the move to conquer Israel and Judah, but in the midst of this dark time in Jewish history, Isaiah is bold enough to provide a message of light and comfort and hope for the future in a coming child.

READ Isaiah 9:6-7. “Isaiah’s promise from the 700’s BC of an extraordinary child has an unusual aspect to Him: eternity.” We see this in two parts of our brief passage. In v 6 this child is called “Everlasting Father”, or “forever Father” (אביעד) and His Kingdom will be installed and strengthened in justice and righteousness “for now and forevermore (מותה ועד עולם) is literally “forever for all time”. E.g., I am reminded of a stand up comedian named Father Guido Sarducci from the 1970s and 1980s and beyond, who said about the Bible that often you read “forever and ever”, and he said he was a bit confused by this because really all one needed to say was “forever”— was the “ever” afterwards really needed? The answer is that the wording of “forever and ever” or “forever for all time” is really just a way of emphasis. I.e., this Davidic Kingdom about which Isaiah is speaking is really going to last! And in a world of impermanence, that is really good news! This idea of a forever Kingdom is picked up in the gospel message of Jesus.

READ Romans 6:20-23. In the context Paul is talking to the Romans about their lives prior to coming to Christ and where they are now. “In Romans 6 Paul essentially breaks up humanity into two ‘camps’— those who are slaves to sin and those who are slaves to God/righteousness. Is this way of understanding humanity petty or profound?” By petty I mean of little importance or trivial. We tend to think of people’s relation to God a little more broadly, like at least three categories— those not with God and slaves of sin, those with God and slaves to Him, and those who are in the happy in-between. E.g., I recall years ago hearing a mother who was a Christian talking with her children, and the children were

asking her about whether their father was going to heaven since he was an adherent to another world religion, and the mother assured her children that he was going to heaven, that he was a good man even though he was not following Jesus. I don't think Paul would have agreed, nor would Jesus. We recall in Matthew 7:13-14, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it." We talked last week about how our default in the way we think and live is a life in the flesh, where our natural desires in life are self-seeking, self-protection, self-enhancement, self-pleasure. We can all relate to that—I know I can. Someone who is a slave to sin is not necessarily an axe murderer or thief. It is more often a person who just simply lives ultimately by his or her own rules, independent of God, in a life of self-satisfaction. The believer, though, has died to his or her own rules, has become dependent on God, in a life of self-satisfaction. I have seen the two expressed in the world of biblical scholarship. E.g., I recall when I was in my doctoral studies I went to an academic conference called the British New Testament Conference, and there I met a post-grad from Cambridge University, and he and I were researching on similar areas in John's gospel, and he referred to the High Priestly Prayer in John, and I was confused and had not heard of the High Priestly Prayer and asked him where that was, and he was rather arrogant in his response because I did not know and he did, and answered me in a belittling way. I recall thinking how rude he was, and how much I did not like the guy—and yet here he was preparing for a career of teaching the Bible to university students! When we are slaves to sin, we are so centered on self that even Bible teachers can undermine the teaching of the Bible and its wonderful message of salvation. The result is a life with things for which we are ashamed, things that lead to death. E.g., contrast this guy with Dr. Roger Nicole, an internationally-

known theologian who taught me in seminary and was close to his retirement years. I recall one day I was studying in the library in the seminary when I heard a couple of people walking through the aisles of books, and I turned and saw Dr. Nicole on his hands and knees helping a first-year student find a book. Dr. Nicole was known as a very godly man, and it showed that day through his humility to be troubled to help a young student. Being a slave to God and righteousness is the harder way, because nothing is about us and everything is about Jesus, but it is the way that leads to life. The two ways of which Paul speaks is not petty, trivial, but profound, and true.

READ vv 22-23. “Paul could perceive the consequences were of utmost importance to observe: death or eternal life!” This death has both the aspects of this world and the next world— this world in that the consequences of sin involved things for which we are ashamed— a personal death of character— and in the next world in that the consequences of sin is a spiritual death void of God, the One for which we were created. The same is with eternal life-- we as believers experience eternal life today in knowing God and His power to transform our characters and make us like Him, and in the life to come where we will live forever in the joy of presence of God. That is the ultimate hope God has provided for me and you. Unfortunately, many in academia, even in the church, try to explain away such things as Jesus’ resurrection— with reasoning such as, the bodily resurrection is a miracle, and we in the modern world all know miracles don’t happen, so the bodily resurrection of Jesus did not happen. E.g., the Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, who died earlier this year, gave a new meaning to Jesus’ resurrection. He once taught at Harvard Divinity School as a visiting professor and is a radical skeptic of orthodox Christianity and wanted to re-define Christianity, and he wrote, “Resurrection is an action of God, who raised Jesus into the meaning of God. It therefore cannot be a physical resuscitation

occurring inside human history” (from *Here I Stand*, p. 453). So God raised Jesus to give new meaning to life and God, that God can make people have new lives turned around with renewed meaning; but a bodily resurrection of Jesus in human history did not happen; only the *idea* of resurrection happened, where people’s hopes and renewed personal meaning have resurrected. That type of symbolic resurrection has little meaning for the person facing his or her mortality; only in the academic world can such abstraction, it seems, have any importance. E.g., I am reminded of our beloved brother Roger Cull who died the day after Thanksgiving; I recall talking to him at his bedside in the hospital when he was unsure of his diagnosis and he told me he was not afraid to die— he wanted to stay here and be there for his family, but he knew being with the Lord would be wonderful. He got out of the hospital and told our men’s Bible study group the same thing. It is the hope of the resurrection that has sustained us in this church in losing such beloved brothers and sisters over the years. It is a hope for us today, as we look forward to God’s eternal Kingdom in Jesus.

“Do we live with this hope in our minds and hearts?” The best way to know this hope and lose the fear of death is to know Him, to know Jesus, and His power in our lives. We all fear death to a certain degree, and I know that fear. As I have prayed about that fear, I have sensed the Holy Spirit showing me the path to overcoming that fear— that the more I know God, the less that fear will exist for me. Dying is something we have never done or experienced. It is like any big decision we may make— buying a house or getting married. We research the decision and get to know the person, and then when it comes to making a decision we feel confidence, as Elena and I did before we got married-- we had dated for four years before we got married. This is the hope God wants us to have and cherish in our Christmas celebrations this week.