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CAN DISNEYLAND BE A GOOD PLAN?

Romans 15:7-33

Recently I had to drop by Michael and Carissa’s house to pick up my I-Pad, which I had left there by mistake the day before. When I walked into their house and Wesley saw me, the first thing he said was, “Where’s Nana?” No, “Hi, Bapaw,” no “Bapaw’s here,” not even a “What you doing, Bapaw?” Just, “Where’s Nana?” Now we know who matters. It’s not Bapaw. When Laurie shows up at either home of our grandchildren it always results in great rejoicing by the kids. There is little, maybe nothing, that can compete with Nana. There is a sign hanging on our refrigerator, an homage to Laurie written by Ella, our oldest grandchild. It says, “Best Nana ivr.”

I live forever in Laurie’s shadow. I am almost invisible. I’m okay with that, because I understand it. Laurie is way more fun that I am, which is not surprising because she is more fun than anybody I know. It’s not just our grandchildren that feel that way. Friday morning we were starting out to take a walk. As we headed up the street we saw our neighbor, Keith, and his toddler son, Caden. Caden immediately gravitated to Laurie. He wanted her to take him across the street to the tot lot. Kids just love Laurie. There’s rejoicing at our house when Laurie comes home after being out, because it means my day just got way better. I get to be with her. We recently celebrated our 43rd anniversary. I’ve been incredibly blessed to live for 43 years enjoying her. At our anniversary I reflected on how close we came to not being married, and on how much emptier and far less joyful my life would have been had we not married. There was a moment in our relationship before we got engaged when Laurie got spooked by the whole thing and wasn’t at all sure about me. But she wasn’t quite ready to ditch me either. After she expressed her doubts she asked me if I was going to give up. I asked her, “Is there any hope for us? Or are you telling me there is no hope and you want me to get lost?” I know, it was kind of pathetic. However, she said, “There is still hope.” I told her, “As long as there’s hope I’m not going away.” It sounds a bit like the line from *Dumb And Dumber* when Lloyd Christmas said to Mary, “So you’re telling me there’s a chance.” But because there was hope, I didn’t give up. And because of that I didn’t miss the biggest blessing I could ever experience.

Hope is crucial. One psychologist said that we can’t live without it. Today we’re going to think about hope. We’re going to look at Romans 15:7-33, but focus primarily on verse 13.

In this section Paul began to wrap up his letter. He concluded his discussion of unity despite differences by saying, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you” in verse 7. He quoted several Old Testament verses that make it clear God’s plan all along had been for Jews and Gentiles to be in his kingdom. Then he began to discuss his ministry and his plans. He wanted to bring the good news of Jesus to people who had never heard it before. He hoped to visit Rome while on his way to Spain. At that time Spain was pretty much the “end of the earth.” It was the western edge of the known world. Paul was in the process of raising money from the Gentile churches to help the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. He intended to deliver that gift, then go to Rome and Spain. Before he discussed those plans though, he wrote in verse 13, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

HOPE IS CRUCIAL

Hope is huge for all of us. Psychologist Shane Lopez was widely recognized to be the leading expert and researcher on hope. He wrote a book titled, *Making Hope Happen*. In it he said, “How we hope determines how well we live our lives…Hope is the leading indicator of success in relationships, academics, career and business, as well as of a healthier, happier life.”

We looked briefly last week at Isaiah 40:30-31. “Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” The reverse of those ideas is also true. Those who do not have hope will grow weary. They will stumble and fall. They won’t soar like an eagle, they’ll drop to earth like a rock and land with a thud. They may run for a little while, but they will run out of gas.

I can remember several things I set out to do at various points in the last 15 or 20 years. At one point I decided I should learn Spanish. I have learned 3 languages beside English. In high school I learned German. In grad school I learned ancient Greek and Hebrew. Unfortunately, my knowledge of those languages has proven to have some limitations. I never really got a good grasp of German. It baffled me how nouns that were the names of inanimate objects could have gender. How could a thing like a rock or a door be feminine or masculine, and how could you tell which it was? It also confused me that the Germans have several different words for the word “the.” So I always felt a bit lost in that language. I did not run into a lot of Germans that I could converse with, so you can see why my tenuous grip on that language faded to almost nothing in fairly short order. About all I have left is things like “warte mal, ich habe meine heft nicht,” which means, “wait a minute, I don’t have my notebook.” It’s not very useful.

As for Greek and Hebrew, I still have a decent handle on Greek, but Hebrew has been seriously eroded, almost to nothing. But again, even if I had a firm grip on them both, they are not spoken languages today. So I thought it would be a good thing to learn another language that I might actually be able to use. Hey, I already have learned 4 languages, so what’s one more?

Another project I undertook at one point was to try to learn how to play drums. We often seemed to need drummers on our worship team so I thought maybe I could help out if I could learn how to play them. I borrowed some sticks from church, began watching videos on the internet and set out to become a drummer. As you probably know, I co-authored one novel, and then wrote two others on my own. After I finished the last of those I had some ideas about another book, and considered launching another project. I enjoyed the process of writing, though it was hard, so why not do another book?

Here’s the sad tale of those 3 projects. I never finished any of them. I didn’t get very far on Spanish before I realized how much time and effort it was going to take to actually do that. The thought that I was not going to be able to pull it off began to creep in. Once that thought took hold I lost hope that I could actually achieve my goal. When I lost hope, the project was doomed. I gave up. The exact same thing happened with the drums. I had some pads I was using at home as substitutes for drums. But at the time we still had our dog, Luke. Every time I started practicing, he would go crazy barking. So it was his fault. Actually it wasn’t. Drummers have to be able to do something different with both hands and both feet. I could not coordinate all four doing different things. I lost hope that I would ever be able to master those skills. When I lost hope, I quit. On that third project I figured I could write another book. I’d already proven to myself that I could do it. However, what I hadn’t proven was that anybody besides my wife and my brother would ever read the book. I lost hope that I could ever sell books to any more people than I could count with the fingers on one hand. That project died before it even got started.

Without hope, we won’t accomplish anything. But verse 13 points out something that is even more important. Paul prayed that the God of hope would fill us with all joy and peace. There is a connection between hope, joy and peace. Paul linked those because without hope, there will be no peace and no joy. Hope is essential to peace and joy.

Wait, in your sermon a couple of weeks ago you said that righteousness was necessary for peace and joy. Now you’re saying hope is necessary for peace and joy. Which is it, Rick? Remember that there is a difference between necessary and sufficient. Righteousness is necessary for peace and joy, but it is not sufficient to produce it all by itself.

Imagine that you are baking a yellow cake. I’m not a big consumer of sweets like cake, but I confess I do like yellow cake. You have eggs, milk, butter, all of which are necessary for making yellow cake. You can’t make it without them. But they are not sufficient for making that cake. You also need flour. You will only have sufficient ingredients when you have all of those. Righteousness is necessary to have peace and joy, but so is hope. Without hope there will be no peace and joy. You need all the ingredients. Without hope, all we are left with is despair. If we are to have peace and joy, if we are ever to accomplish anything in life, we must have hope.

HOPE IS NOT MAGIC

Some people say if we will only hang on to hope then we will be able to achieve whatever we set out to do and we will have the life we long for, filled with joy and peace. You hear something akin to that a lot in our culture. Hang on to your dreams, which are forms of hopes. Never give up on them. If you follow your dream there is no limit to what you can do. However, as nice as that sentiment sounds, hope has limitations.

In Romans 5:5 Paul said, “Hope does not put us to shame.” Several other translations phrase that, “Hope does not disappoint.” I think that’s better. So the question is, did Paul intend that as a blanket statement? Hope will never disappoint us. It is the magic elixir that guarantees success. I submit to you that he did not intend that as a blanket statement about all hope. In his excellent commentary on Romans New Testament scholar and professor Douglas Moo said we should understand this to say, “*This* hope does not disappoint.” He said that because some hope will disappoint us. A particular hope Paul was referring to is the one that will not disappoint. He said that because some hopes will disappoint us. That’s an important fact we need to remember. Lots of hopes will end in disappointment.

Coming in to this season I had great hope for the San Diego Padres. Though there was disappointment that their great player, Fernando Tatis, would miss part of the season, they looked to be a really strong team, one that would get even stronger when he joined them for the second half of the season. They started very well, but many of their players have underachieved, and for much of the season they have just kind of treaded water. Ah, but just wait until Tatis comes back. Yeah, about that. That hope disappointed, because he’s not coming back this year due to some really dumb choices he made. But then hope burst into life again when at the beginning of August the Padres traded for 4 players that I was sure would transform this team into a juggernaut. They were all proven Major League stars. The centerpiece was Juan Soto. He has been generally recognized to be a generational talent, one of the best hitters in baseball. In his first 3 years in the big leagues he has accomplished things that put him in line with great players like Ted Williams, Hank Aaron and Mickey Mantle. Hope exploded. There would be no stopping the Padres now. It’s been 7 weeks since those trades were made. In that time Juan Soto has been a well below average hitter. The team as a whole, far from being a juggernaut, actually has continued to be just a so-so team that appears to be going nowhere. That has been a reminder that hope can, and often does, disappoint.

How many of us would say that our lives have gone the way we hoped they would? Not many. If you interview kids and ask them what they want to be when they grow up, many will say they hope to be professional athletes, or singers, or dancers, or actors, or veterinarians. How many of those hopes are going to be fulfilled? Not many. Most of them will be disappointed.

I quoted Shane Lopez earlier. He was the psychologist who was known to be the leading expert on hope. He said that hope was key to living a happy, healthy life. Sadly, he struggled with depression throughout his life. I assume that is what led him to focus on hope as his life’s work. He wanted to find the thing that would enable him to deal with depression. He didn’t find it. He ended his own life when he was 46 years old.

Hope itself, while hugely important, is not a force that by its mere existence can guarantee life, peace and joy. Hope can and does disappoint. Hope is somewhat like faith. It is a wonderful thing, but its value is dependent upon its object. Faith in something unreliable will not be of much value. Neither will hope in something that can disappoint us. It only sets us up for a letdown. That’s why Paul said, “this hope does not disappoint.” Some hopes will, but Paul was referring to a hope that would not disappoint. What is that hope?

HOPE FROM GOD IS POWERFUL

Notice that Paul says that God is the God of hope. Consider what it means when you say that God is a God of holiness, or a God of love. It means those qualities always characterize him. Whatever God does, he is always holy. In all that he does, God epitomizes love, for love is his motive for everything he does.

To be the God of hope means hope also characterizes him. Wherever he is, there is hope. He brings hope to every situation. Our son, Toby, has an impressive memory. I am continually amazed at how much information is stored in his brain, and how he can access it. One of the less significant examples of that is his knowledge of *Star Wars*. He has encyclopedic knowledge of all things related to the now voluminous *Star Wars* canon. I once referred to him as the King of Star Wars Trivia. Being the king of it means he does it better than anyone. Being God is bigger and better than being king. Being the God of hope means he is better at it than anyone else. He is the utterly certain source of hope, and it is hope that will never disappoint. Where God is, there is hope.

How do you think of God? A. W. Tozer said that your view of God is the most important thing about you, for it will determine what kind of person you are. I’m not sure that many people think of God as the God of hope. Yet throughout the Bible God is continually linked with hope. In Psalm 39 David wrote about how fleeting our lives are. He said in verse 5 that they are like “a mere handbreadth.” He said, “Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure.” How substantial and long lasting is a breath? It is momentary. David said that’s what we’re like. But then, despite that melancholy description, he wrote in verse 7, “But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.” In the uncertainty of this life, in its fleeting nature, what we can hope in, is God, the God of hope. Psalm 65:5 calls God, “The hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas.” Psalm 9:18 says, “God will never forget the needy; the hope of the afflicted will never perish.” No matter how afflicted we might feel, no matter how needy we are, God is our hope. He will never forget us, and because of that our hope will never die, it will never fail, it will never disappoint.

God is not the God of condemnation. He is not the God of disapproval and disgust. He is not the God of failure. He is not the God of abandonment. He is the God of hope, and this makes life hopeful. We can be hopeful, joyful, at peace, and optimistic about life because this is who God is. He is the God of hope. That is his character, and he never can be anything other than the God of hope.

Of course, we still need to be clear on what that hope actually is. We naturally go to the idea that if God loves us, then surely he will bring only good into our lives. Our hope is that he will not allow any terrible thing to happen to us. He will bless all our endeavors and will see to it that things always work out in our favor. This is what we naturally hope for. We want life to be pleasant, not painful, fun, not frustrating, terrific, not tragic. We think putting our hope in God means hoping and expecting that he will make that happen the way we want. But even in this passage that we are looking at we see an example of the fact that this is not what God means when he tells us to put our hope in him.

Paul told the Romans that he was going to Jerusalem to deliver financial help to the church there. He knew he was hated by the Jewish establishment. He had been one of them, the most militant of them. Then he had that dramatic moment when his life was forever changed by his confrontation with the risen Lord Jesus Christ whom he had so despised. Now he was the loudest voice proclaiming that Jesus is Lord. And he was teaching that anyone and everyone could enter the Kingdom of God totally apart from the Law of Moses. To the ancient Jews he was the worst, a traitor and a heretic. Paul knew going into the center of power for those people was light years beyond risky. It was dangerous. So in verse 31 he asked the Roman believers to pray for him. “Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem maybe favorably received by the Lord’s people there.”

What happened? Acts 21 says when he was recognized in Jerusalem, some people stirred up a crowd against Paul. Verses 30-33 say, “The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers they stopped beating Paul. The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains.”

Paul prayed and asked others to pray that he would be kept safe from the Jewish people in Jerusalem. That was his hope. Was that hope fulfilled? I wouldn’t call being beaten and almost killed, then being arrested and put in chains, where he would be kept for years, being “kept safe.” What happened was not what he hoped and prayed for at all.

There is a plethora of things that we hoped for in our lives that did not go anywhere close to what we hoped. When Laurie unexpectedly gave birth to our son, Joel, two months early, we hoped that he would be all right and would grow up to be just fine. We didn’t get what we hoped. He wasn’t fine. He had a congenital heart defect that was life threatening. He didn’t even make it to 4 months. I hoped my dad would live a long time. That didn’t happen either. He died when he was my age right now. I could go on at great length about things I hoped that have not happened, and so could you.

Every now and then you’ll hear people say “everything happens for a reason.” I believe in the larger scheme of life, that’s true. But I also know that we may never know what that reason is in this world. I’ve mentioned before that years ago I sustained a blow to my head that gave me a severe concussion and damaged my ear. I’ve had some loss of hearing in that ear and a ringing in my ear ever since. That’s been well over 4 decades ago, and I still have no idea why that happened to me. Laurie had to go through years of dealing with bleeding problems due to some fibroids she had. We have no idea why she had to deal with that. Our son in law, Michael had to go spend the good part of a year in combat in Afghanistan. I still don’t know what the reason for that was.

The epitome of suffering, Job, went through an unimaginable ordeal. Was there a reason for it? Yes, there was. But here’s the important point: He never knew what those reasons were. He never got an explanation for why he went through all that suffering. And we may not either.

So that brings us back to the question, what does it mean for us to hope in God? If it’s not that he’s going to make our lives go smoothly and nearly painlessly, then what is it? What can we hope for? There are several things we can hope in God. I will point out a few today.

*We are in God’s kingdom in Christ*

There are many implications of this truth. But there are two crucial ones I want to highlight today. The first is that we are loved, valued, and accepted by God. We have been brought into his kingdom, and he delights in those who are in his kingdom. We do not have to fret over our worth, or whether we are good enough or acceptable. Our hope is in God’s grace in Christ. In that we can completely be at rest.

The second implication of being in God’s kingdom is that our hope is an eternal one. Titus 2:13 says we “wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” Our most blessed hope, in other words, our best hope, is not rooted in this world. That’s good, because this is a broken world, infected with evil. That evil is going to touch everything that happens in this world. It is going to taint it or foul it in some way. That’s part of why so often our hopes are disappointed. Nothing in this world will ever quite live up to the hopes we have for it. The only way our hopes can come to fulfillment is if they are not in a broken world tainted by evil. They need to be rooted in God’s kingdom, a place where there is no death and God will wipe away every tear.

*Our lives mean something*

There is a YouTube channel that is titled Pursuit Of Wonder. One of the videos on it explores existentialism. Here is what that video says. “At birth it’s as if we are all given a slab of clay. We get to choose what to mold it into. However…there is no right or wrong way to mold the clay. Rather there are endless ways, all equally absurd, all equally meaningless.”

Well, there you have it. You can do whatever you want with your life. There’s no right or wrong way to live it. But there’s a catch. It doesn’t matter what you do, because none of it means anything. It is all absurd and empty and pointless. Without God as the focal point, that is where we will necessarily end up.

Back when I was in grad school I worked for part of the time in the college ministry at a mega church I attended. During the summer we had a ton of activities for the kids in the ministry. One of them involved going to an inner city ministry for a day to help out. One of the other staff members set this up. He had coordinated with the ministry. They knew we were coming. However, when we got there it became apparent that they weren’t prepared for our group to be there. The people we dealt with looked around trying to find something for us to do. We ended up doing tasks that were basically made up to occupy our time. We could all see that there was little or no point to it. That event was probably the biggest fail of the summer. The kids had given up their day to help in a ministry and wound up doing things that were pointless. It was obvious they considered the whole thing to be an ordeal. Here’s the problem for us. If our lives are empty and meaningless, if everything we do is just made up to occupy our time here with no real point to it, then our lives will just be a tiresome ordeal.

One reality that we all face is that life consists of a lot of routine activities that are the very opposite of world changing. I thought of this while mowing the lawn recently. I don’t like mowing the lawn for several reasons. The biggest is that it is a risky endeavor for me. Working in the yard has significant risk of provoking a big allergy attack that can make life miserable for me for weeks. If I had a hazmat suit I’d wear it. I don’t, so I do my best imitation of one that I can. But the other factor is the pointlessness of the whole endeavor. It feels pointless because our yard has zero resemblance to a beautiful lawn. No matter what I do, I fail to create the lawn of my dreams. Worse, I know that in a week it will need mowing again. So it is just an annoying, repetitive chore. But the Bible tells me everything I do has significance. I can do it to God’s glory, live in his presence, and rejoice in all he has given me, and it all means something. An even worse chore is filling out IRS forms, but even that can be done to God’s glory and have meaning.

James 1:12 says, “blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” There is a reward ahead in God’s kingdom for those who are faithful to the Lord. That tells us our lives do mean something.

*God has a plan that is good*

Ephesians 1:11 says we are “predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” God has a plan. He is working, even when we can’t see it. That verse says his plan encompasses everything. No matter what is going on, God has a plan, and according to Jeremiah 29:11, it is for our good.

Our little grandson, Wesley, just had his third birthday. Michael and Carissa had a plan to do something special for him. They were going to take him to Disneyland for the first time. I wondered how that was going to go. Wesley is a child of the pandemic, meaning he hasn’t been around people much. His natural personality is quite timid. I thought it entirely possible that the crowds and activity at Disneyland would overwhelm and intimidate him. I thought that might be over after a couple of hours. They explained to him that they were going to go to Disneyland and see Mickey Mouse, and that Hunter, his baby brother, would stay home with Nana and Bapaw. He thought about that briefly, then said, “I stay here with Nana.” Given the choice to go to Disneyland or stay with Nana, he would go for Nana every day. But Michael and Carissa, his wise parents, had a plan, a wise plan. So off to the Magic Kingdom they went. Early in the morning they sent us a picture. It was obvious Wesley was not happy in the Happiest Place On Earth. I thought, “Uh oh, this is what I feared.” However later in the day they sent another picture, and in this one Wesley had a huge grin on his face. He was having a blast. In the evening it came time to go home, but Wesley said, “Let’s stay at Disneyland.” His parents had a plan. It was one he didn’t understand, so he didn’t think he liked it. But it turned out to be wonderful.

So it will be for us. It may or may not feel wonderful in this life. But we can know God’s plan is for our good, and there will come a time when we see that good. In the meantime we live with our hope that God has a good plan.

*God will always bring good out of everything*

This is a little bit different than the previous point. This is what we were told about in that famous verse, Romans 8:28. God will somehow bring some good out of everything that happens to us. He will never waste anything that happens in our lives. This is what we can hope in. Whatever happens, whether we see what it is or not, God will use everything for our good in some way.

CONCLUSION

My first few years after college I worked in a ministry to college students. My supervisor the last year I worked there wasn’t a fan of me. It became apparent that he didn’t really want me on his team. As a result I was assigned to a new job that I had zero interest in doing. It felt like a real slap in the face. I had been thinking about changing directions in my life. That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. I left that ministry and went to grad school. That event, which felt unfair to me and felt like a bad thing, was pivotal in sending me off on a path that I was certain I wanted no part of, but ended up being my life’s work. The big surprise in that episode was that action by that man led to me being in the place where I met Laurie. Had it not been for those events, I never would have known her. It took what felt like a disappointment to set up the greatest blessing I have ever experienced, being married to Laurie.

Philip Yancey wrote a book titled *Disappointment With God*. People become disappointed with God because they put some hopes in him, and those hopes were not fulfilled. It is crucial that we hope in God, but we hope in things that he has actually promised us. If we hope in things that he hasn’t promised to give us, we will end up disappointed with him. So we put our hope in being in his eternal kingdom, in his love and grace for us, in the fact that our lives have meaning in him, in his good plan for all things, and in the fact that he will bring good out of whatever happens to us, whether we see it or not.

I mentioned right up front how I was able to continue to develop a relationship with Laurie because there was hope. It led eventually to me asking her to marry me. We just finished some sessions with a young engaged couple in preparation for their wedding next week. They told us how he proposed. He had an elaborate plan, complete with a thoroughly rehearsed speech. I asked Laurie to marry me while sitting in a car in the parking lot before school. I didn’t have a speech, or a ring, because I didn’t intend to propose. I was shocked that she said yes. We had hopes for a lot of things in the future. Some have happened, many have not. But what has been best about this long journey we have been taking together is not things we hoped would happen. It has been the relationship. It has been knowing Laurie, being loved by her, sharing life with her. This is our hope with God. Yes, we hope for many things, but the best hope is knowing God, being loved by him, going through life with him.

In the *Star Wars* sequel *The Last Jedi*, there is a moment when the foul and evil emperor Snoke says to Kylo Ren, “Skywalker lives. The seed of the Jedi lives. As long as he does, hope exists in the galaxy.”

Blogger Major Dalton wrote of life in this world, “Hate reigns, lies rule and fear sits as a monarch in the hearts of those who have surrendered to despair. But there is a rebellion subverting the hate, lies and fear. A counter cultural existence led by a lowly Galilean carpenter. Some believe he died long ago. But he lives! And because he lives, hope exists.”