

A Future and a Hope

These days, it is probably true that the Bible verse that is misapplied more than any other is Jeremiah 29:11. Over the past 10 years or so, prosperity-gospel types have used it to “prove” that God is planning to give every individual Christian earthly riches and earthly happiness. When we read on a little bit, though, the passage starts to take on a different dimension. Look at Jeremiah 29:12-14. At this point, it becomes obvious that God isn’t addressing any individual at all. He’s speaking to His people as a whole. They have been carried into exile and are in an apparently hopeless situation, but God is still going to be with them and bless them.

Today, we still can take great encouragement from this. We aren’t in exile, but I think it is true that most of us don’t like the way things are headed in our country today. It’s easy for us to look at the moral decline around us and grow discouraged, but the most important factor in our service to God is not our circumstances. It is the blessing He bestows on those who seek it. This morning, then, I want to look at why we can be confident that we have a future and a hope too.

Our Advantages

I want us to begin this morning by considering some of our advantages that actually increase along with godlessness. The first is the promise that we offer of **FREEDOM FROM SIN**. Consider Paul’s words in Acts 13:38-39. Freedom from sin has always been part of the message of the gospel, but sometimes it is particularly appealing, and I think this is one of those times.

Let me explain. 75 years ago, it was still true that most people were basically churchgoing, clean-living folks. Today, that’s no longer true. As a result, people increasingly find themselves enslaved to sin, learning how awful sin is firsthand.

To pick just one example, consider the scourge of online pornography. Porn, like most sin, is addictive. It offers you the most pleasure up front and then gradually demands more and more in exchange for less and less. The result is that porn addicts find themselves trapped in sin, ruining their real-world relationships, seeking out ever more shocking and extreme things to feed their addiction, and not getting an ounce of real happiness from any of it. In that position, anybody with any self-

awareness will cry out along with the apostle Paul, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

The answer, of course, is the only answer that ever has been. The answer is Jesus, not only to the enslavement of pornography, but to the enslavement of any sin. Jesus can take away the guilt of our sin. Indeed, He can lead us to victory over sin. I guarantee you that in Columbia right now, there are people who are aching to be freed from their sin. They probably don't look like they stepped out of the pages of the church directory, but they are eager to hear the gospel.

Second, we offer **UNITY**. Look at Paul's observation about this in Galatians 3:28-29. Ironically, as our world becomes less like 20th-century America, it becomes more like the first-century Roman Empire. Enslavement to sin was a huge issue back then—just ask the church in Corinth. So too was isolation and division.

Both of these forces are at work in America today. Ironically, the social-media boom that was supposed to bring us together has in reality torn us apart. In place of real friends, people have online friends, and even those online friendships are only one argument away from being blown up permanently. Tweens and teens today are part of the most connected generation ever, but it is also the most isolated. Depression and suicide are epidemic among young people.

Even when people band together today, it often seems like they are drawn by hatred rather than love. The political environment these days is positively toxic. 15 years ago, I thought racism was on the way out, but now, it seems like it's becoming a more serious problem with each passing day. Everybody seems to want to divide up into their own hateful little tribes to battle the others for supremacy.

Once again, the only possible solution to the problem is Jesus. When we become one with Christ, we also become one with one another in Christ. During His ministry, Jesus brought people from mutually hostile factions to sit down at the same table, and today, He continues the same gracious work. In Christ, every Christian has a family, a place where they belong, where people will love them. In Christ, all the old divisions become far less important than the blood that unites us. The world outside is filled with hatred and conflict, but in the church, we can know love and peace. If you don't think people are hungry for that, you don't understand modern-day America at all.

What We Need

It's clear, then, that this present age offers many opportunities for the gospel. However, we need three things in order to take advantage of them. First, we need **LEADERS WHO LEAD**. We see this kind of leadership defined in 1 Peter 5:1-4. The difference between goatherds and shepherds is this: you drive goats, but you lead sheep. A Biblical shepherd, then, must be a leader. He doesn't lord it over the flock—that would be driving—but if he wants to be effective, he has to be out in front, both in his example and in his vision for the future.

I'm thankful to report, brethren, that in this church, we have shepherds like this. They're men who are concerned not only with the present, but also with the future. They're devoted to helping every member of this congregation grow spiritually, they're devoted to evangelism, and they invest a great deal of thought in making sure that these things happen.

However, the rest of us have to take thought for the future too. Our elders are fine men, but several of them are getting up there in years. I'm pretty confident that there were actually five men on the ark, and they were Noah, Shem, Ham, Japeth, and Bradley Dugger. I pray that the Lord will grant all of our elders many more years of service in His kingdom, but the reality is that they aren't going to be around forever.

They're going to leave behind some pretty big shoes to fill, and if we want this congregation to continue to have strong, Biblical leadership, the younger men here must prepare themselves to fill those shoes. Through study, prayer, and service, we must equip ourselves to carry on our elders' good work. That's the only way for this congregation to continue to prosper and have success.

Second, we must have **MEMBERS WHO FOLLOW**. Peter hits this one too, in 1 Peter 5:5. Because we are in a church with elders, we are called to do two things in particular: submit and be humble.

This sounds like the kind of Scriptural advice that we just brush off sometimes, but in reality, it has some far-reaching implications. We need to accept that God has made them, not us, the leaders of the church. We need to accept and be guided by their judgments about what is best for us and for the congregation.

Let's get down to specifics, starting with church attendance. There is no time that is wrong for us to assemble in God's name, but it's also true that

there is nothing in Scripture that requires us to have Sunday evening and Wednesday evening services. We have those services because of the elders' judgment that they will benefit us spiritually.

How do we handle that judgment? Do we say to ourselves, "If my elders think that it's good for me to be here, I'm going to be here."? Or, instead, do we say, "My judgment, which is that I should be at home watching TV, is better than the elders' judgment."? Friends, there are sheep that follow the shepherds to green pasture, and there are sheep that wander off into the wilderness instead, and fall off cliffs and get eaten by wolves. Let's be smart sheep!

Let's also do everything we can to help the elders in their work. For instance, I've seen ample evidence that our elders are committed to evangelism, but if they blow the evangelism trumpet and yell charge, but nobody follows, that's not going to be a very successful effort, is it? Their vision for this congregation is only going to succeed if we buy in, if we do all we can to lead our families, friends, and coworkers to the Lord.

Finally, if we want to have success as a congregation, we must have **FAITH**. Consider the Hebrews writer's words in Hebrews 6:11-12. If we want to inherit the promises, we have to be patient. We have to be steadfast in doing the Lord's work. However, we also must have faith.

The Bible contains countless stories about God's people. It records dozens of their successes and dozens of their failures. Through all those different stories, through all those different circumstances, there is one theme in common. It isn't that God's people succeed when they're strong in worldly terms and fail when they're weak. It's that they succeed when they place their trust in God and fail when they place their trust in themselves.

The rule is no different for us. We too will stand or fall depending on whether we walk by faith or not. We have to have faith that God is. We have to have faith that the Bible is His inspired word. We have to have faith in His pattern, and that if we follow that pattern instead of worldly wisdom, we will be blessed. Finally, we have to have faith that if we plant and water, He will give the growth.

Of course, faith is not just a matter of thinking and saying. Faith is a matter of doing. We can say all we want that God's way is best, but if we go out and live like the world, that's not living by faith. We can say that the gospel is the power of God to salvation, but if we never share the gospel with anybody, that's not living by faith. However, if we will only live out

what we believe, we cannot help but succeed.

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