

## 1 New Year's Eve – Romans 8:31-39

I suppose one way to tell if someone is an optimist or a pessimist would be to see how one reacts to the New Year. Do you see the New Year as a new opportunity to develop better habits, work toward your goals, or enjoy another year of blessings? Or do you see the New Year as a sign that another year has come and gone in which you didn't accomplish what you wanted to accomplish, didn't read the books you've been meaning to read, didn't get the promotion, or didn't kick the bad habit you wish you wouldn't have started? But whether you are an optimist or a pessimist doesn't quite touch on the message of Christ our Savior. Jesus gives us much more than optimism. He gives us hope.

Of course, it's good to be optimistic. But the optimist is not much different from the pessimist if his positive attitude is based merely on his own good vibes and happy thoughts. If you don't have the hope that Christ gives, then your positive attitude amounts only to a cold rationalism, dependent on speculation, guessing, and the cleverness of your own thoughts. Optimism looks for the best possible result. It is a determination to make the best out of every situation. But optimism, by itself, is not much different than pessimism if it relies on human reason and strength.

Optimism can also be deceiving, assuming that anyone who speaks of sin, error, or judgment is just a gloomy pessimist. Let's say you go to a church service with seemingly nice music, touching stories of charitable acts, and everyone seems really happy. But then someone gets up on his hindlegs and points out that none of the messages in the songs or the preaching talked about sin, God's judgment, Jesus' atonement, or the assurance of forgiveness, life, and salvation. The optimists in the room say that this guy is just being a pessimist. He's being negative. He's raining on our parade, dumping in our punchbowl, and being a regular buzz kill. But this isn't true. Pointing out the reality of our sinful condition, God's judgment, and our need for mercy and forgiveness in Christ is not pessimistic. The New Year certainly is a sign of a new beginning, a reminder that God has given us another year. But it is also a reminder that things are passing away. One more year is in the books, soon to be forgotten. The years of our life are seventy or even by reason of strength eighty, and they are but a breath before the Lord. All flesh is like the flowers in the field, which blossom for a time but then fade away, and their place knows them no more.

It's good to resolve to do good in the coming year, to examine your life, strive toward better habits, and pursue good things with a positive attitude. But to do so while ignoring the darkness of sin and God's judgment is not wise. In fact, it's completely void of hope.

The hope we have in Christ transcends what our human reason and feelings can muster up, however positive the vibes may seem. Our hope for the future is based on what already has been prepared in full. God's Son has become a child. He has given himself entirely for us. He has faced our sin head on, condemning it fully in his own flesh. He is the eternal pledge of God the Father that he is for us, on our side, working all things out for our good. In him we have the assurance that God has chosen us from before the foundations of the world. He has predestined us to be conformed to the image of Christ. So no matter how dark the coming year may be, we know that Christ, the true Light, has borne that darkness in his own body. And he shines his light upon us. No matter how much you have fallen short in the previous year, the

blood of Jesus covers your sins. God continues to call you to himself by this eternal Word, declaring you righteous, and promising to share his glory with you.

This is our hope. We don't see it yet. In fact, hope that is seen isn't hope. But we wait with patience and confidence in what God has prepared for us in Christ. We have hope for the new year. This is more than just a positive attitude. It's simply true. It's an objective reality. We have hope for tomorrow and the days to come, because we know what God has prepared for us who love him and have been called according to his plan and purpose.

A carnal optimism says, "Let's all think positive thoughts." But hope says much more. Hope says, "If God is for us, then who can be against us?" Hope is convinced that God will not withhold anything good from us, because he didn't even spare his own Son. He gave us everything he has. How could he not with him give us everything we need? Christ has died, silencing the accusations of the law. So who can condemn us or accuse us of anything? Christ has been raised, seated at the right hand of the Father, pleading for us. How can anyone or anything separate us from God's love?

Optimism is, on the surface, fine and good. But hope is even more daring than a basic optimism. Hope is convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love. Hope is beyond positive. It is a bold claim to the heavenly inheritance, staking everything on the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ the Lord. It makes foolish the wisdom of the world and pessimistic the optimism of this age. The earthly optimist imagines all the people living in harmony. But heavenly hope lays hold of the eternal lordship of Christ the Savior who has taken away the sin of the world and reconciled all sinners to God. Carnal optimism makes the best out of what people see and understand right now. But hope rests in the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding. He who hopes in Christ expects his return at any time. With your belt tightened and your lamp burning, you look forward to what nothing in this world can possibly offer you.

You can therefore resolve to be more disciplined, develop better habits, read more, work your body and mind more. But you don't need to make this resolution with a frantic reliance on your own reason and strength. You know what God has stored up for you in Christ. So regardless of what your resolution might be, seek this first above all things. Seek Christ's kingdom and his righteousness. Make it your goal to read through the Bible or at least become more familiar with the Gospels and a few other books of Scripture. Make it your goal to cast your worries and anxious thoughts on God through prayer. Make it your goal to ponder in your heart the great and comforting mysteries of the Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, the sacraments, and all of God's precious promises in Christ. Then go and plant your garden, read your book, get in shape, or whatever it is you have resolved to do. If the Lord wills, you will do it. In the meantime, you know what God's will is for you in Christ. Your hope is built on what he has prepared for you and continues to deliver to you in his Word.

It's possible that in the coming year you will be mistreated, lied about, insulted, or even physically harmed because of your confession of your Savior. You will battle against your sinful desires. The devil will continue to try to lead you away from Christ. No matter how much you resolve to do, these enemies will still wage war against your soul. But what is all this to your Christian hope? The optimist and the pessimist might call it a buzz kill. But what is it to hope if

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you are killed all day long for the sake of Christ? What is it to you if you must go forth into the new year like a sheep before the slaughter? He who loved you and gave himself up for you helps you win an overwhelming victory over all these things.

To have Christian hope is more than being optimistic. It is being convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, nothing present nor in the future, no powers, nothing above or below, nor any other created thing can ever separate you from God's love. This is because God's love for you is grounded in Christ Jesus your Lord who gave his life for you. This is therefore what your hope is grounded in. It is grounded in Jesus.

Consider this precious name of Jesus as you enter the new year. It means the LORD SAVES. The name was given to him on the eighth day of his birth, the beginning of a new week. So on this beginning of a new year, we remember that Christ has given us a new day, a new week, a new birth, and a new life. This is hope, which does not put us to shame. Amen.