

Yakhal (Hope)

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Psalm 39:7. The Bible Project

Prayer of Illumination

Speak to us, Lord.
Speak to us in the waiting, the watching,
the hoping, the longing,
the sorrow, the sighing, the rejoicing.
Speak to us by your Word in these Advent days,
and walk with us until the day of your coming.
Amen.

Introduction

This is what sets our hope apart from other hopes out there: Hope believes that God can do surprising things. Anything is possible with the God of the impossible. And so, our waiting is fused with expectation. We imagine a future that's different from the present because of God's faithfulness in the past. We look forward by looking backward. Optimism is the hope that circumstances will change. But hope hopes in a person. We trust in a person, Jesus the Christ,

who defeated death and lives. Because he lives, we live. And he's with us—even in our waiting. As Jesus says before his return to the Father, "*Lo, I am with you always.*" Even though I'm leaving, I'm with you every step of the way. And I'm coming back for you again.

Advent Video: "*Yakhal: Hope*" from The Bible Project

<https://youtu.be/4WYNBjJSYvE>

Scripture: Psalm 39:7 (NRSV)

And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Yakhal (Hope)

In Irishman Samuel Beckett's two act play "*Waiting for Godot*," the characters Vladimir and Estragon are both waiting for the appearance of the mysterious character Godot. A messenger announces word that Godot's not coming today, but he will be there tomorrow. So they continue conversing, waiting, and meeting other characters. The curtain falls at the end of the first act, but no Godot.

In Act 2 the next day, Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait for Godot. As they wait, their discussions about life and death continue—sharing about their woes and difficult situations. Is life worth living? And what is their purpose here on planet earth, anyway? They assume there's meaning, but they look to Godot for enlightenment. Once again in Act 2 a messenger announces Godot is not coming today, but he will tomorrow. The curtain falls at the end of the play with only Vladimir and Estragon, and no Godot.

As you get to know the two characters over the course of the play, they take on a nobility that wasn't first apparent. They find meaning in their waiting, even though their savior was a no show. They are still waiting, Beckett seems to be saying, and will *always* be waiting. It's their job to find hope and meaning—on their own.

Most readers believe that Beckett's Godot was referring to God. That God is either absent from human existence or non-existent. But as believers, we have a different experience of God. Yes, there are times when God feels absent and we wait. And there are times it seems our appointment with God has been cancelled. So we wait, but we wait with hope.

We have hope because we know that our Savior showed up. God was in Christ reconciling the world, Paul says. Christ came on the scene and was born in Bethlehem. Grew up in Nazareth. Was crucified in Jerusalem. And after his resurrection, he went ahead of his disciples to meet them in Galilee. And he will come for us again.

Hope described in the Scriptures is waiting on a person. Forty times in the Psalms, including in today's reading, there is mention of waiting for God:

And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you.

The hope of our life, our shelter is found in God. In *you* rests all my hope.

What I love about hope is that we can be totally honest about our situation. We can have hope, even if there's no evidence things will get better. When you read Psalm 39, the speaker is wrestling with and pleading for hope. It's a season of waiting, of loneliness, silence, ambiguity, and fragility. There's no spinning or sugar coating going on. He even says, "Look away from me God, I'm crushed by the blows of your hand."

But then there's a divine breakthrough—the psalmist says two beautiful words: AND NOW.

And now my Lord.

Who is his question addressed to? God! And it is only God who can answer his question. In fact, God IS the answer to his and our question.

This is what sets our hope apart from other hopes out there:

- Hope believes that God can do surprising things.
- Anything is possible with the God of the impossible.
- You are my hope, O God.

And so, our waiting is fused with expectation. We imagine a future that's different from the present because of God's faithfulness in the past. We look forward by looking backward.

Optimism is the hope that circumstances will change. But hope hopes in a person. The Scriptures share that our hope in Christ is a living hope, or as the KJV puts it, a "lively" hope because of the resurrection. We trust in a person, Jesus the Christ, who defeated death and lives. Because he lives, we live.

And he's with us even in our waiting. As Jesus says before his return to the Father, "*Lo, I am with you always.*" Even though I'm leaving, I'm with you, and I'm coming back for you from the future.

Hope believes that we'll be able to get a handle on things eventually—even if things are getting totally out of hand. When Thomas Jefferson was nearly 70 years old, he put down in writing some advice for his granddaughter Cornelia. It survives today and is known as "Canons for Conduct" or "Twelve Rules for Practical Life."

Most are very clear:

- *Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today.*
- *Never spend your money before you have it.*
- *Pride costs us more than hunger, thirst, and cold.*
- *When angry, count to 10 before you speak. If very angry, count to 100.*

But there's one that's a little obscure: *Take things always by the smooth handle.*

What does that mean: "Take things always by the smooth handle?" Jefferson was alluding to the philosopher Epictetus who said, "Every event has two handles: one by which it can be carried and one by which it can't." There's the rough or rickety handle. And then there's the smooth or sturdy handle. When you're losing your grip—wait and keep looking for the smooth handle. Choose the handle of gratitude over the handle of grumbling. Choose the handle of appreciation over the handle of anger. Hope keeps looking to God for that smooth handle to appear. And through it all, we know that we're in the grip of grace. God won't let us go. And with Christ, we can handle what comes our way—even if that smooth handle hasn't emerged yet. Wait, hope. With Christ, we can have a good grip on things.

Hope also anchors us, giving us not only a good grip, but firm footing—even when we're being tossed to and fro by life. The book of Hebrews memorably likens hope to an anchor—a "*sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.*" (Heb. 6:19) The anchor was one of the most common symbols used by Christians in the early church. The anchor reminds us that we can be anchored—even in the midst of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, even when we're pummeled by wave after wave of coronavirus variants, and doubts and fears about what's next. Hope gives us stability and ability in the midst of instability.

The anchor of hope keeps us from losing our moorings or crashing into the rocks relationally or spiritually. You can't see the ocean floor that the anchor rests upon, but you feel the effects of it. It's real, even though you can't see it. Unseen hope grounds us when we feel like we're lost at sea. Hope will get us to safe harbors and hope will help us not only stay afloat... but even enjoy the voyage there.

Hope is one of the three greatest gifts according to Paul: Faith, Love, and what? Hope. Hope endures. Hope remains.

Open the gift of hope this Advent—the presence of Christ.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *The Bible Project* "Yakhav (Hope)" image

"Advent Word Series" video: <https://bibleproject.com/advent-word-series-churches/>

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