

## **Why We Can Live with Hope in 2021 and Beyond**

~Ephesians 2:1-10

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Once upon a time, there was a vast prison that held people from all over the world. Each person had their individual cell. But this prison was unlike ones we think of today. It was a huge prison with lots of room and common areas.

And life was actually pretty good inside the prison. Meals were okay. They allowed time in the common areas. People could meet up with their families. They could even have a party. The prison is so vast that it includes a mountain park. So inmates could go on supervised day trips out into the mountains to breathe some fresh air. But they always had to come back.

Yet, a cruel warden ruled the prison. He put on a smile when he saw the inmates. He pretended to care about their needs. But there's no doubt that he's in charge. He would never let anyone get out of prison on his watch. To ensure, this he had a legion of armed guards. They patrol the prison grounds. They sat in guard towers watching the walls. He even had patrols crisscrossing the region outside the walls to recapture any who would dare escape.

Though people live an okay life, some wonder what life would be like outside the prison. Yet they'd never gone out before. The guards

and some of the warden's favorite inmates say that outside is a wild and dangerous place where no one survives.

Yet there was a rumor about some castle or kingdom on the other side of the mountains. A good king ruled there. People supposedly lived and thrived under His rule and loved it. There's even talk of joy and fulfillment. But few inmates even whisper about the kingdom. If the guards heard you mention the castle, you could spend 30 days in solitary confinement for the first violation. If the warden heard about it, your punishment might go longer.

Yet every once in a while a graffiti drawing of a sparkling castle appears in a hallway. Or you hear screaming down in your cell block. And when you get let out the next morning, you see an empty cell where the scream came from. Prison guards are scrubbing off a saying. You get a quick glimpse of it – "Freedom for the captives."

Life goes on day after day, year after year for the inmates, until one day another rumor starts traveling through the cell blocks. Some fellow prisoner came to the warden claiming He had authority to release captives. The rumor grows. Finally, the rumor is confirmed. Someone did come to visit the warden. An inmate who cleans the warden's staff offices overheard the conversation. This cleaner was in the next office when this prisoner came to confront the warden.

He overhead this inmate announce that He had come to set the captives free. The cleaner heard the warden laugh. “No one will get released. Every inmate had done wrong in their lives. They had all sentenced themselves to life in prison. The only way they could get out of the prison was by giving up their own life – spilling their own blood,” said the warden.

The cleaner couldn't contain his curiosity. So he peered through a crack in the door.

He saw an amazing sight. The prisoner confronting the warden began to remove their prison clothes. Underneath were royal robes. This was no ordinary prisoner. This was the Son of the King from the castle over the mountains. So the rumours were true.

The warden was, at first, shocked. But then he seemed to regain his composure. He looked down at the prison garment now thrown on the floor. “Wait a minute” said the warden. “Prisoner 12/3/777. I know that number. You were that prisoner over in cell block 55.” Cell block 55 was notorious for being the roughest and poorest cell block in the prison. “I remember you trying to stir up trouble,” said the warden. “Didn't I sentence you to be executed?”

The warden checked his records. “Hear it is,” he scowled triumphantly. I have the order for your execution right here. You must

have played some trick. But you still are under my authority and I sentence you to death. Guards, take him away!” The guards surrounding the Son moved to take him away. But the Son simply said; “Stop,” they could not move. Then the cleaner saw the Son take out a key. He heard a sound he'd never heard before and never wanted to hear again. The warden screamed a terrible scream.

The Son held a key that the warden had only heard about. It was the costliest key in history. “I thought it didn't exist,” the warden gasped when he saw the key. “What did it cost to get it?” The Son explained that to purchase this key, one first had to live a life where you did not wrong. Then it required such a person gave up their life for the captive prisoners. This would secure their release.

The warden sneered at such an idea. Nobody would do that. Besides, even if they did, they'd be dead. No one would hear about it or act on it. And the warden declared he would find those guards who failed to execute prisoner 12/3/777.

But the Son replied that there was no need to search for the guards. They guards carried out their duties successfully.

“What do you mean,” said the warden.

“They executed me,” said the Son.

“How can that be? You're standing right here,” said the warden.

“Check your records,” said the Son. The warden went to his filing cabinet. He pulled out the file containing those executed in the last 3 days. Slowly he pulled out a piece of paper labelled prisoner 12/3/777. He scanned the form. “Execution completed,” it said. “Time of death – last Friday at 3 in the afternoon.”

“How can this be,” said the warden? How can you be alive if you were executed?”

“My Father, the King of the castle across the mountains, raised me from the dead. I now have conquered death, paid for sin and conquered you. I also have authority to proclaim good news to the poor on cell block 55. I have been sent to proclaim liberty to the captives. You cannot stop me. I will roam through your prison proclaiming this news to everyone. I will release anyone who trusts me.”

The warden smiled. “Why would you want to release them? They are a bunch of scum bags who turn on each other at the slightest opportunity. There’s nothing noble about them. You’d be wasting your time.”

The Son said; “I’m not releasing them because of any good they’ve done or their wealth, or their popularity in prison. I am offering them release by grace.”

The warden’s eyes flared with anger. “Grace. No one but weaklings talk about grace. The only way to earn any promotion to a higher class cell block is through works and the approval of others. Grace doesn’t get anyone anywhere,” pronounced the warden

“That’s true in your prison warden,” the Son replied. “But grace abounds in my Father’s kingdom. I will release anyone who puts their faith in me.”

The warden knew He couldn’t stop the Son from going through the prison with his key. But the warden still smiled. “Go ahead. You want to proclaim liberty to the captives. I give them a good life in this prison. A party here; a sightseeing expedition there and a full belly. They’re satisfied. Besides they won’t venture out beyond the prison. My patrols will catch them and strike them down.”

This time the Son smiled. “Yes, your patrols may harass them on their journey to my Father’s castle. But they will make it. My Father reserves a place for them in the castle the moment they trust me. I will not leave them undefended. In fact, my Father will provide them armor from His castle for their journey.

“He will give them the chest plate of righteousness to cover them. He will provide them with the belt of truth to see through your lies. He will give them shoes for their feet to ensure they can continue on their

journey with good news of peace. Your patrols may ambush them with fiery darts. But my Father will give them shields of faith to extinguish them. They will each receive a helmet of salvation which you will never be able to knock off. And My Father has fashioned enough swords of the Spirit for everyone. They will use them to find their way through the mountains and to the castle. On top of that, He has an extensive communication system that your forces cannot block. It's called the prayer network. They will have constant access to my Father and me through everything they face until they reach the gate into my Father's glorious kingdom. So I am going to now proclaim this news to the prisoners. Don't worry warden. I will come back one day and I'll be coming for you."

The warden said nothing as the Son walked out past the paralyzed guards. As soon as the Son left, the guards were released. The warden called all his staff in for an emergency meeting. The cleaner quickly got back to his duties and heard no more.

But everyone could see the warden's counteroffensive take shape. In some cell blocks, the warden funded lavish parties and getaways. So when the Son came by to proclaim liberty to the captives, most ignored him and continued to enjoy the party. In other cell blocks like block 55, the warden increased the misery component. He made life

harder for all who stayed there. Yet this mostly backfired because people in greater misery were much more open to release from the captivity.

The warden didn't worry much about the cellblocks filled with good moral people. He knew they wouldn't admit to needing rescue. They believed they could do it on their own if they really wanted to. Besides their good works earned some favor with the warden and they saw their lives improve a little each year.

In cell blocks where people might be more open to this release idea, the warden blitzed them with a public relations campaign. He slandered the King as evil and oppressive. He magnified the dangers of life outside the prison. He mocked the Son's message claiming that anyone who needed grace was just looking for a crutch in life.

Sadly many ignored the Son when He came with His offer of release and liberty. But some responded. Some put their trust in Him. He took them to the gates of the prison. Taking out the golden key, he opened the gate and walked with them beyond it. Outside, as far as the eye could see, suits of armor stood waiting to be sized and fitted for all who trusted the Son.

Once suited with armor, they began their journey together with others who trusted the Son. They faced trials and flaming arrows from

the warden's patrols. Yet they held their shields of faith together to withstand his attacks. They cried out to the Father and Son through the prayer network when they got lost. He guided them back onto the path. When the journey got hard, some thought about going back life at the prison. But others encouraged them to keep going. Sometimes the King would send messengers to show them the way or reveal His great love for them. Eventually, they all made it to the gates of the castle. The doors opened and they entered the kingdom of grace to live forever in His presence. The End.

Why can we live with hope going into 2021? God has released us from prison and equip and empower to keep on going until we arrive at our eternal home. God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. We find this glorious reality in the middle of a New Testament passage called **Ephesians 2:1-10**.

**2** And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. <sup>4</sup> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of

God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Verses 1-3 describe life in the prison. It is a life of death. I couldn't help but notice that many people think this dead existence is actually what life is all about – following the ways of the world; living in the passions of our flesh; carrying out the desires of our bodies and minds. Many would say, "That's true life. That's where happiness is found. Such a life brings ultimate satisfaction and joy." But only for a short while. It is a life in prison. It is a life we can't get out of on our own. We were dead in our trespasses and sins. We needed rescue.

Verse 4 contains a great turning point – "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us (then verse 5) . . . made us alive together in Christ." There's only one way to get back to life when you're dead. Someone else has to come along and make us alive again. That is what God did in Christ for us. He transferred us out of the realm of death and into the realm of life with and in Christ.

But God did not only make us alive in Christ. It's not like he released us from the devil's prison and then said "You're on your own." Nor did he call us to some odyssey and hope we make it to God's safe castle.

God has broken us free from that prison and already established our place in that safe castle. He has given us access to all the

resources of the castle; all the treasures; all the wisdom from its libraries; armor from its armory and everything we need to complete the journey to God's castle.

We see this in verse 6. "And he raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." So we have not only been raised to new spiritual life. We have been raised up with him and seated in the heavenly places. We have been decisively transferred from the realm of death to the realm of resurrection life. We still live in our mortal bodies on earth. But we are now citizens of heaven.

Here we experience new life and liberation from the powers which held us enslaved. One commentator puts it like this. The movement from the devil's kingdom to God's kingdom "is a movement

From death to resurrection life,

From trespasses, sins, sensual indulgence, and disobedience to good works,

From this present world-age to the heavenly realms,

From bondage to the forces ruling this world, to victory with Christ above hostile powers.

It is a movement

From the sphere of selfish autonomy to union with Christ,

From domination by the devil to a life controlled from start to finish by God,

From what humanity is by nature to what it becomes by grace,

From liability to God's wrath to experience of his mercy, love, kindness, and grace."

We see the move to this life in verses 8-10. Here the writer reflects on the grace of our salvation. He reminds us that we are the workmanship of God created to do good works.

From there, He will move into chapters 4-6 in Ephesians which describe the life and community of God's people in His kingdom. All the commands of these chapters are not moral imperatives that we just try really hard to do. They show the life of heaven's citizens. The Lord empowers and enables us to live like this. He certainly does command. But He helps us carry out these commands.

The letter concludes with the somewhat famous passage on the armor of God. Eph. 6:12; "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." This is the warden and his guards in our prison parable. God provides the armor. We put it on and stand firm while we journey on.

So no matter what 2021 brings, we can live with hope because God has raised us up with Christ and seated us in the heavenly places with Christ Jesus. We have a purpose for 2021 described in Ephesians 2:7 "So that in the coming ages God might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus." If you do nothing else this upcoming year but share with others about the grace God has shown you and the love He has for you, you will use 2021 well.

We can keep living with hope because we have seen God show up when the Word became flesh; God speaks up like He did when Joseph needed guidance for his life; God lifts up the humble like He did choosing Mary to bear the Lord; Jesus gave Himself up for us as the perfect high priest and God raised us up with Christ to the heavenly places and seated us with him.

Maybe you are here or watching and you still live in prison. You think that's all there is to life. But God has opened your eyes today to the possibility of transfer from the realm of death to the realm of eternal life. If you want to accept Jesus' offer, you must put the trust of your life upon Him. Through your faith, He will pour God's grace and love over you and rescue you from prison. So if you want to accept this call, you can do that now as we pray. For those of us already released, let us encourage one another to keep going on our journey to God's eternal kingdom. Let us thank Him for the armour and prayer network He provides. Let us do the good works He's prepared for us. Until we see Him again, face to face.