

Where do we look for hope? When troubles come, where do we go for assurance and comfort? These are questions that are asked of us in our Gospel reading for today. In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus warns us very sternly about false sources of hope and the terrible consequences of placing our hope in them. Yet He also directs us to the true source of hope, through which we are blessed both in this life and the life to come.

So what are the false sources of hope shown in this parable? The first is that of riches. Jesus says, “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.”

This guy clearly has it made. He’s wearing clothing that’s both quite comfortable and very fashionable. Only the wealthy could afford purple clothing – making the dye was very difficult, and therefore very expensive.

As he wears these fancy clothes, he “feasts sumptuously.” For him, a feast isn’t an occasional celebration, a rare and joyous event. It’s an everyday affair. Another day, another feast.

No doubt he invites other well-to-do people over to his large residence – large enough to have a gate and a courtyard – and seeks to impress them with his fine apparel, plentiful food, and great wealth.

It seems like this guy has no problems, no worries. His basic physical needs, like food, clothing, and shelter, are all being met – more than met. If he needs anything, his riches will take care of that. If he needs someone to do something for him, he can pay for that.

Whatever concerns come up, money will take care of them. Money is his source of comfort, of security, of hope. As long as he’s got enough money, everything will be alright.

Except, there’s one problem money can’t solve, and it’s a big one: death. For all the riches this guy has, they can’t keep him out of the grave. Nor can they keep him out of hell. There, the man’s riches are shown to be useless.

On earth, he had lived a life of comfort and luxury. Now, he is in agony in the flames. On earth, he feasted extravagantly. Now, he can’t even get a drop of water to cool his eternally-parched tongue. On earth, he would have had many people coming and going, being a fixture of high society. Now, he is alone, spending all eternity with his despair, his regret, his anger.

He had put his hopes in money, and his hopes were utterly crushed.

Does this mean that money itself is evil? No, it doesn’t. God has granted riches to many people throughout the ages. Abraham, for example, was greatly blessed with wealth by God. Contrary to the popular misquote of the Bible, money isn’t the root of all evil.

The actual passage, from First Timothy chapter six, reads, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves

through with many sorrows.” When one loves money, rather than the Lord with all his heart, soul, and strength, and his neighbor as himself, it brings condemnation.

The rich man’s love of money and love of self, rather than love of God and love of neighbor, are seen in his callous treatment of Lazarus. He’s unwilling to spare anything to comfort or feed this poor beggar, because that would mean giving up some of what he loves, what he hopes in.

As St. John wrote in our Epistle reading, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

The words of Scripture are a warning and admonition to us as well. When God grants us wealth, in whatever amount, we must see it as a gift from Him and a tool to do as He desires of us. We use it to care for those whom God call on us to care for, such as our families, our churches, and our neighbors in need. We must never see money itself, and having more of it, as the goal, the thing we seek after.

When the pursuit of money leads to straying from receiving the gifts of God or failing to care for those whom God has placed in our lives, then money has become an idol. If we are more afraid of losing our income or benefits than we are of losing our ability to gather together as God’s people and receive His gifts, then money has become the thing in which we hope. And as with the rich man, hoping and trusting in wealth will lead to our destruction.

In addition to money, the rich man shows another false source of hope in this parable: hoping in signs. In hell, he tells Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers, for as he says, “If someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”

Apparently this rich man came from a family full of unbelief, and he wants his brothers to avoid the place of torment. What does he think will do the trick and lead them to repent of their sins? A great sign – someone appearing from the dead! Surely no one could ignore such a thing. They’d have to believe!

This might seem reasonable to our human ideas. After all, we tend to say that “seeing is believing.” The problem is, Scripture shows and tells us the opposite in many different places. Plenty of people saw the great works and signs of the Lord and still refused to trust in Him.

The Israelites who witnessed the plagues in Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea refused to trust that God would drive the other nations from the Promised Land, and so they refused to enter.

The people of Israel saw God send fire from heaven on Mount Carmel at Elijah’s request, but they refuse to restore the worship of the true God, fearing Ahab and Jezebel instead.

Jesus performs miracle after miracle, showing that He is one with the Father by doing the works of the Father, yet the Jewish leaders still want to stone Him.

The signs are always there to point to the Word, but if the Word is rejected, no sign can save on its own. As Abraham tells the rich man, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

We too have to be careful about putting our hope in signs. We might not be asking for something as extreme as the souls of the dead being brought back to earth, but there are still plenty of ways in which we want God to meet our burden of proof.

For example, we might think that, if God would just send fire from heaven to vaporize the headquarters of Planned Parenthood, then people would finally believe that abortion is wrong. Or if God would just cause our preferred candidate to get elected then we'd know that He is blessing our country. Or if God would just cure our loved one's cancer, then we'd never doubt Him again.

I'm sure you can think of other examples, but they all involve trying to bargain with God or placing conditions on Him that must be met before we'll fear, love, and trust in Him above all things. Instead of humbly trusting that the Lord's good and gracious will will be done, and that His will is always for our good and the good of all, we in pride think that God owes us, that His Word alone isn't good enough. And as with all things born out of pride, this attitude is harmful to our souls.

So then, if we aren't to set our hopes in having riches or in seeing signs, what are we to set them in? The answer is simple: God's Word. As Psalm 130 states, "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His Word I hope." Hoping in the Lord, trusting His promises – this is what faith is.

We see a wonderful example of this in our Old Testament reading. Abraham – still Abram at this point – is calling out to the Lord in his troubles. He asks when God will give him the offspring He promised. The Lord brings Abram outside and directs him to look at the stars. As many as the stars – which are too many to number – so shall his offspring be.

How does Abram respond? Does he demand a sign, perhaps that the Lord give him at least one child and then he'll believe about having as many offspring as the stars? No. Abram simply believes. He trusts that God's Word is true, that God will do as He has said, even though he can't see it. And because of his belief, the Lord credits Abram with righteousness. He is saved by believing in the promise of God.

True to his word, God would grant offspring to Abram, both the promised son, Isaac, and then also the innumerable people who are his offspring by sharing in his faith in the Lord. The countless stars Abram saw that night are reflected in the great, white-robed host in Revelation 7, which, like the stars, no one can count.

God's Word is full for examples of God keeping His promises to His people, even when it didn't seem that He could or would. Moses and the Prophets show this over and over again.

The poor beggar Lazarus would have had these promises to cling to in the midst of his suffering. He could know that he was a child of God and precious in God's sight, even when the world looked down on or ignored him. He could trust that, as God provided for His people in the wilderness, even as He let them hunger and thirst at times, God would provide for him, even as he hungered for the scraps that fell from the rich man's table.

And Lazarus could have the certain hope that, because the Lord was his Shepherd, the valley of the shadow of death would not be his end. His Good Shepherd would go ahead of him, through death itself, in order to bring him to the Lord's house, where he would dwell forever.

Through the Word, the Holy Spirit sustained that hope, that faith, in Lazarus's heart, until the day came when the holy angels brought him to where the promises were revealed in their fullness. Lazarus had hoped in the Lord and in His Word, and that hope was not put to shame.

If our hope is in the Lord and His Word, we too will not be put to shame. The many trials we face in this life have been faced by God's people of old, and just as He loved and preserved them, He will love and preserve us as well, for He is the Lord who does not change.

Are you worried about the political instability and uncertainty in our country? Go to God's Word! There He tells you, "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation." He also shows you how He has preserved His people through countless times of turmoil and war, the rising and falling of kingdoms. He will not fail to preserve His people still today.

Are you worried about the economy, inflation, or other financial concerns? Again, hear His Word that riches are not security, and then also consider that He has never failed to provide for His people's bodily needs. He has given daily bread, even raining manna from heaven or feeding thousands with a boy's simple lunch.

Are you worried about the continued survival of the Church as congregations age and shrink? Read in the Scriptures how the Lord does punish His people when their worship becomes hypocritical and their concerns worldly. But read also how where even two or three are gathered in His name, He is there among them, and that He has given His unbreakable promise that not even the gates of hell will prevail against His Church.

Are you worried about your own health, or that of a loved one? Hear in God's Word, not only that He is able to cure any disease, heal any condition, when He knows is best, but also that He has already established our days and the days of every person, and nothing can cut those short against His will.

Whatever worries you may have in this life, whatever needs may arise, go to God's Word. Hear the Lord Jesus tell you not to be anxious about the things of this life, for as He says, "The Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

The Word points us to that Kingdom of God, the realm of eternal peace and joy. It reminds us that whatever happens in this life, it will pale in comparison to eternity. Paradise has been opened for you by the cross of Jesus. The angels who were present at the empty tomb, who brought Lazarus into heaven, they will bring all God's people into heaven as well.

If we seek the things of this life – riches and comfort and our own understanding, like the rich man did – and put them above the things of God, then whatever joy we may have in this life will be forgotten in the torments of eternity.

But if we trust in the Lord and His Word, clinging to Him in times of suffering, then those sufferings will be forgotten in the eternal bliss of paradise. Riches and signs will fail, but the Word of our God will stand forever.

In the name of Jesus, amen.