

Romans 15:1-13
(Psalm 42:5-11; Matthew 11:25-30)
“A Call to Hope”

Introduction

Paul has called us to accept one another in Christ, not to fight and divide over secondary issues, but instead to build one another up. He now appeals to Christ as the supreme example of one who laid aside his rights and made himself weak in order to save us. Jesus said of himself, “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). So Paul says of him, “Christ did not please himself, but as is written [and he quotes Psalm 69:9], ‘the reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me’” (15:3). In other words, if we are followers of Jesus, we are no longer merely living for ourselves, but rather for one another. Thus, rather than flaunting our freedom in Christ, we will take care not to cause one another harm in the choices we make.

Paul then makes a surprising connection: When God’s people live in unity, when people see the love we have for one another in a broken, selfish world, it gives people hope – hope that perhaps we are not abandoned to the relational brokenness, the selfishness and hatred, that too often mark our world. It is important that we not miss this crucial point. Hope is as necessary to the mental, emotional and spiritual health of a person as food is to the body.

In an often-cited series of experiments performed by Dr Curt Richter of Johns Hopkins University, a group of fierce, wild Norwegian sewer rats were shorn of their whiskers and dropped into a tank of agitated water. Within a few minutes all of the rats had died, not by drowning, but from heart failure. Richter concluded that the rats had lost hope and given up. So he took another group of wild rats, trimmed their whiskers, submerged them in the tank, but then rescued them, dried them off and let them rest. This was repeated and then the rats were left in the tank, where they swam for an entire day. Richter’s conclusion was that the second group had been rescued and so hoped that they would be rescued again. Dr Armand Nicoli of Harvard University wrote and spoke on the depressing effects he observed in those influenced by the teaching of Marx and Freud because, Nicoli concluded, both views lead to hopelessness.

Today, many look around at the mess we have made of our economy, of our neglected national infrastructure, at the dearth of challenging and rewarding jobs available to graduates, and at our dysfunctional political polarization, and they feel hopeless. All those who have placed their hopes and dreams in this present life eventually must contend with the realization that “here we have no continuing city,” and that all that we have build and loved and delighted in is doomed to pass away.

But Paul calls us to a vibrant hope that leads to joy and peace. How?

Body

1. What is hope?

Is it merely wishful thinking, an optimistic approach to life? No! In the Scripture, hope is faith directed toward the future. It is not hoping that one's dreams will finally come true, but rather *Biblical hope means believing that God will fulfill his promises*. The author of Hebrews links the two in his definition of faith: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," (Hebrews 11:1) and he then connects this hope to God's promises to his people.

Peter writes that God "has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for [us]" (1 Peter 1:3-4). Paul elsewhere writes to Titus that we are to live "godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:12-13).

Clearly, the focus of hope is on the future, but it profoundly affects the way we live today, because if we believe that, whatever we may be facing, God is working his purpose out through all the apparent mess surrounding us, and he holds our future in his hands, then we have a prescription for living lives of joyful confidence in the face of what might cause a hopeless person to despair.

2. What is the source of hope?

The ultimate source of hope is "the God of hope" (15:13), by which Paul does not mean "the God who hopes," but rather "the God who gives hope to his people." But how does he give it? Paul speaks of the two means God uses: The power of his Spirit (15:13) and the encouragement of his Word (15:4). It is the Spirit of God who brings to us all of the benefits of our salvation, all that Christ has won for us and all that the Father has graciously given. Until you have been born again, this living hope that sustains God's people no matter what may come is simply not yours and you cannot somehow work it up by your own strength. So if you do not yet know the Lord, cry out to him to send his Spirit and save you!

But many who have his Spirit within still lapse into hopelessness and despair because they do not give the Spirit the words to speak to their hearts, namely the words of Scripture. So, Paul says, "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (15:4). Until you begin

to steep in the Scriptures, you are limiting the power of God's Spirit in your life to fill you with his encouragement and hope.

3. What is the result of hope?

Not only do we experience the peace and joy that are the fruit of God-given hope, but something else quite wonderful happens: God is glorified. Paul writes, "that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (15"6). This is the chief end of human existence, as the Westminster Confession of Faith so aptly states it: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." So, as we live in joyful, hopeful unity with one another, we fulfill our purpose in bringing God praise and glory and give those around us a reason to believe the gospel of grace.

Conclusion

So, with the apostle Paul we pray, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (15:13).

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