

Title: Abounding in Hope
Biblical Text: Romans 15:8-13
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Romans 15:8-13

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." 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.

In 2004 Loyola University published a faculty paper comparing optimism and hope. While these terms are often used synonymously, psychologist concluded that *"hope focuses more directly on the personal attainment of specific goals, whereas optimism focuses more broadly on the expected quality of future outcomes in general"* (273). In other words, optimism is focused on particular outcomes while hope centers on something which endures and is unthreatened

despite unforeseen outcomes. While the optimist always insists good *will* happen, the one who has hope insists all shall be well even if bad things happen.

Optimism is often a disconnection from reality.

Hope is a deep appreciation for what is true and beautiful.

Arthur Brooks writes for *the Atlantic* and hosts a popular and insightful podcast called *How to Build a Life*. As he reflected on this research, writing on the same subject, he observes that having hope is not just nice to have. But research indicates that hopeful people (in contrast with pessimistic and positive people) are more productive at work, physically healthier, and more equipped for academic achievement (*Hope Is Better Than Optimism*, September 23, 2021).

Hope is transformative, and an indispensable part of being a whole and flourishing person and community. It's much more than thinking happy thoughts and manifesting our best life. So, *what exactly is hope? How do we live with hope? What's the basis for hope in the Christian faith? And is it any different than what Loyola and Brooks are reporting?* That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about hope. I want to talk about why optimism will always lead to disappointment and discontent ... and why hope, God promises, *will never put you to shame* (Romans 5:5).

Here's how we'll walk through Paul's lesson today ...

- The *substance* of hope.
- The *evidence* of hope.
- The *result* of hope.

Movement 1: The Substance of Hope (v.8a, Romans 4:18, Philippians 2:7-8, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Paul first introduced his readers to the theme of hope back in chapter 4. He did so through the story of Abraham. He explained that, *Read Romans 4:18 ... "In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, 'So shall your offspring be.'"* If you remember, God told Abraham that he was going to be a father. But he was nearly 100 years old. So, he had a hard time believing God. Optimism, especially spiritual optimism, teaches us to think happy thoughts and act like you don't have doubts. *Right?* Optimism often has to disconnect from reality and feelings and thoughts about reality. Yet, Paul tells us that instead of shallow positivity, Abraham reached for hope. While optimism buries questions with smiles, hope welcomes even grows with curiosity.

Hope in the original language is the verb *elpis* and the now *elpida*. The root word is grounded in the idea of profound certainty. Deep assurance has always been part of the Christian story. Historian Kyle Harper explains that one of the reasons the early church was able to endure through generations of unthinkable suffering,

mistreatment, and violence was that they learned to "*orient one's life towards the larger story, the cosmic story, the story of eternity*" (*Hope in Time of Fear*, xix). They didn't think things would get better. At least, not in this life. Rather, they had hope in a bigger story. They faced the reality of suffering with an ethic that suffering was and is momentary. God was greater than their suffering and he was using their suffering for their good and his glory. Abraham faced the reality of his old age with an ethic that God was and is powerful beyond his comprehension. You see, it's a profound certainty ... not disconnected from reality, but a deep appreciation for what is true and beautiful despite circumstances and outcomes.

That's the way I want to live. *How about you?*

It's this idea of hope that Paul brings to his readers again in chapter 15. He begins this portion of his treatment of hope with a reflection about the *substance* of hope. That is, what is the object of hope ... *who and what is the foundation for the way we live?* Look at v.8. ***Read Romans 5:8a ... For I tell you that Christ became a servant...*** Hope is not an idea. Hope is a person. Christ himself is the *substance* of our hope. More to the point, the Son of God in the flesh, is our hope. The Lord of the universe became a servant. Paul says in Philippians 2, that Christ ***Read Philippians 2:7-8 ... emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*** When Paul says Christ became a servant in Romans 15, he's not only saying that the Son of God

became a human being ... but also that as a human being he died ... and his death was a substitutionary death—he died for us.

This is why the fact that Christ became a servant is the *substance* of hope. He is not simply wishful thinking. He's not a spiritual crutch. Christianity is not about optimism. We have hope. No matter what our circumstance might be or how bad things might get, in Christ we're safe, we're protected, we're forgiven. We're good. In Christ, the truest and more important things about you are secure. *Are you with me?* No need, suffering, pain, loss, or devastation can undo who Christ is and what Christ has done.

This is not just optimism or a nice way of thinking. This is not disconnection from reality. This is a deep appreciation and grounding in what is true and beautiful. Or as Dr. Timothy Keller often explained ... Christian hope is historical, reasonable, and intellectually satisfying.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth from Ephesus in about A.D. 55. That's less than thirty years after the death and resurrection of Christ. *Why's this important?* Well, listen to how he writes to Corinth about our hope. ***Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 ...***

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen

asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. Okay, so Paul, again, only thirty years since Jesus was walking on earth, claims that not only did Jesus die for our sins, but that he rose on the third day from the dead. Then he lists three people by name, the disciples, and over five hundred people who saw the resurrected Lord ... most of whom are still alive. In other words, *if you are having a hard time trusting this hope, this idea, this report ... go talk to them.*

Now this is bold enough, but let's think about this some more. Jews didn't believe in bodily resurrection. Nor were they oriented toward superstition or personality or their Law being messed with. Yet almost over night, the events of Jesus' death and resurrection caused a mass conversion of countless Jewish people. Not only so, but Jesus had a ton of enemies who would have been more than eager to squash any resurrection rumors. Yet with every opportunity to easily debunk Jesus' resurrection, the Roman authorities and Jewish elites and the masses of first-century Asia Minor could not stop the church from growing. The only thing that squares the events of history and the only answer which is most intellectually satisfying is that Christ became a serve. That Jesus died. That he rose in victory over Satan, sin, and death. The only thing that makes sense is that he is really and truly the *substance* of our hope.

Movement 2: The Evidence of Hope (vv.5-12, Romans 1:16, John 14:9, 2 Corinthians 1:20, Ephesians 4:4-6)

Having established Christ and his work as the *substance* of hope, now Paul proves it. He helps his readers understand how Christ gives us hope by presenting the *evidence* of hope. ***Read Romans 15:5-9a ... For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.*** Okay, so when Paul says that Christ became a servant to the circumcised, he's talking about the Jews or those who identified with the old covenant of the law. (Circumcision was a mark of the old covenant as we believe baptism is a mark of the new covenant.) But by the end of the passage Paul explains that this was all in order that the Gentiles, or non-Jews (every other people and ethnicity), might know and love and follow God too. That's the new covenant of grace. Herein lies the *evidence* of hope ... us. We are the living breathing evidence of the hope of Christ. More to the point, the fact that few of us are Jewish by birth or culture testifies to the power of Christ inclusive hope.

Christ is hope for all people.

The good news is for everyone who believes.

Tracking with me?

The gospel's diversity and universality has been a primary theme of Romans. Paul began the letter by celebrating that, ***Read Romans 1:16 ... For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*** The hope of Christ is for Jewish people. The hope of Christ is for the nations. The hope of Christ is for the person who grew up

in a religious environment and thinks the more good they do and the more truth they know, the more loved and acceptable they are. The hope of Christ is for the person who did not grow up religious at all, but rather part of a pluralistic world that centers things like tolerance and self-actualization and love. Isn't that good news? Some of you grew up in a loving home that pointed you to Christ on the regular. Christ is for you. Some of you grew up in the exact opposite environment. Christ is for you. Some of you have stayed close to Jesus your whole life. Christ is for you. Some of you have taken a much more challenging and questionable route. Christ is for you. Some of you are here because you believe. Christ is for you. Some of you are here because you are curious. Christ is for you. Some of you are here because you're out of options. Christ is for you.

Paul is saying, *Christ became a servant for all kinds of people*. Now he proves it. He details this evidence in three ways and then backs it all up by opening up the Bible to his readers ... look again at v.8 ...

- First he says Christ's servitude shows God's truthfulness (v.8b). You see that? ... to show God's truthfulness. Through Christ we see the truth and beauty of God himself. That's why Jesus told his disciple Philip that, **Read John 14:9b ... Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.** Through Christ we see God's nature, quality, and character. Through his service Christ make one people out of many, demonstrating to us the love, power, mercy, grace, and familial affection of our Heavenly Father. Knowing that in Christ we see and

know God, we are given relationship and grounding for any circumstance we might face.

- Then Paul tells us Christ became a servant to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs (v.8c). You see that? ... in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs. When Christ showed up, all the promises of God were fulfilled. **Read 2 Corinthians 1:20 ... For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.** God's promises are evidence of our hope. Knowing that God's promises are always fulfilled in Christ, we don't have to be optimistic. We can be hopeful.
- Finally we're told Christ became a servant so the Gentiles would glorify God (v.9). You see that? ... and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. This new people manifests God's character and proves he keeps his promises. **Read Ephesians 4:4-6 ... There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.** God's redeemed and diverse people are evidence of our hope. That we are a people who don't have to put on plastic positivity or manifest our own future. We are family who belong to a good and loving Father.

Paul then canvases the Scriptures to connect the dots for his readers. And his quotes are intentional. The Old Testament is comprised and organized in five basic categories: Law, History, Wisdom, Major Prophet, and Minor Prophets. Now listen to Paul's references, *Read Romans 15:9b-12 ... As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."* First Paul quotes from 2 Samuel, *that's History*. Then from Deuteronomy, *that's the Law*. Next from a Psalm, *that's Wisdom*. And finally from Isaiah, *that's a Major Prophet*. Between the lines Paul is saying that all of the Old Testament testifies to our hope. At every turn God has promised, explained, and made a way for Jews and Gentiles to made into the family of God. That's the *evidence* of our hope in Christ.

Movement 3: The Result of Hope (v.13, 1 John 4:15-18)

Now, we should talk about something. If the *substance* of our hope is so solid and the *evidence* of our hope fills up the pages of Scripture and history, *why is it so hard to live with hope? Why are we so prone to settle for things like optimism or positivity?* Well, Arthur Brooks believes it's because we have not made a home for hope. Emily Dickinson's had this unearned vision of hope. She conceived of hope as a bird "*That perches in the soul — / And sings the tune without the words.*"

Brooks adds, "*hope requires that we make a nest for it, and put out some tasty birdseed too. If we work for it and it indeed alights in our hearts, there's no sweeter song in a dissonant world.*" So, we don't have hope because we have not made a home for hope to rest. If that's true, I'd like to offer a slight revision. I think a home for hope has been created within the human heart. Philosopher Blaise Pascal called it a God-shaped hole in the heart. I think that's what Scripture teaches us too. But hope's home has been occupied by fear.

Until we deal with fear, we can't live with hope. That's why we settle.

Fear took up hope's home in the Garden with our first parents, Adam and Eve. They walked with hope and yet they were still gripped with fear. You see, they couldn't envision a good future without taking control of their own lives. They settled for optimism. They settled for positive wishful-thinking. Believing they could eat the good looking fruit and that it would give them a new identity as gods unto themselves. *With me?* They were afraid. They were worried that God was withholding from them, not letting them become all they could be, not enjoying all they could enjoy. They were afraid they were missing out. They were afraid. We often are too. That's why we try to be optimistic ... that's why we try to manifest things ... this is why we're prone to ignore reality by clinging to positivity. We're afraid. Hope's home is occupied by fear.

We're afraid of being known, because we might be rejected. We fear for our children's safety and provision. We're anxious about how much money we have, or

don't have. We're nervous about work and family and spirituality. I know I am. We are so gripped by fear that it has become the air we breath. It's the water in which we swim. Fear is the wind at our backs which drives our decisions and momentum but we don't even perceive its presence. And so we reach for optimism and positivity without even realizing we're asking them to pacify our fears. Of course, optimism and positivity are not bad. They are simply bad substitutes for hope. And so, as in the previous passage, Paul finishes this portion of his letter by praying for us. ***Read Romans 15:13 ... 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.***

Notice, he prays for peace and joy. He's asking the God of hope, by the power of his Spirit, to help us abound in hope. But first, in order to live with hope we need peace ... we need joy ... these are the very things which fear steals from our souls. You see, fear never lets us sleep. *Have you noticed this?* When we are fearful about the future or worried about our well-being, we don't rest. The unknown keeps us awake as we try to solve our own problems. Fear never lets us rejoice either. After all, even if today is good, tomorrow will probably be awful. In order to have hope, we must have joy and peace. And in Christ, Paul says, we are filled with them!

Christ is our peace because he has faced every fearful future and sealed our fait in grace.

Christ is our joy because he has purchased for us a brand of gladness that shows up even in suffering.

Therefore Christ is our hope, not because he makes every situation favorable. But rather because despite our circumstance we can live with a deep appreciation for the true and beautiful. We can stand in reality and not fear tomorrow.

This is the *result* of hope. The *result* of hope is that fear is driven away by Christ's love. The Apostle John explains this beautifully, *Read 1 John 4:15-18 ... Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.* We live can live with assurance ... joy ... and peace.

Why? Because hope is a person. Jesus Christ ... the one who drives our fear with his love. *What's got you worried? What's stealing your joy? What's attempting to rob your peace? What fear is occupying hope's home?* In our flesh, like our first parents, we're tempted to drive away fear with positivity and optimism. Not bad things, just ineffective against fear because they are not dealing in reality, focused on circumstance not being. So, invite Jesus into that space. Ask the Spirit to fill that space with his joy and peace. Allow his perfect love to confront your fear so you can abound in hope.