

WD September 19, 2022

“Hope Is More Than a Four-Letter Word”

Most of the time when I hear the word “hope” it is often a word that expresses a wish more than a conviction. I myself have said, “Boy, I hope that I get there on time.” And how often I’ve heard the phrase, “I hope so” in response to something that we may want changed such as an illness. Or we may hear it said when we have doubts. “I hope my new dishwasher lasts longer than the last one.” In this regard I’ve also heard some long-time Christians say, “I hope that I will get into heaven.” A question mark is left upon what should be a statement of faith in Jesus. Hope is one of those words that many have lost touch with as it was intended from scripture.

This morning I would encourage you to consider Romans 5:1-5. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”

First, notice the confidence of the writer of Romans, whom I believe to be Paul. Paul is not wishing he has peace with God or doubting if Jesus loves him. Paul who often calls himself ‘the worst of sinners’ because of his former persecution of the church could have had all kinds of doubts about his own salvation. He could have wondered if his sins were just too big for Jesus to forgive. A friend of mine who struggled with alcoholism often wondered if he would ever be forgiven by Jesus because he believed his deeds to be unforgivable. He like many was often tortured with doubts.

But let’s notice two words, “We have...”. We have peace (present tense) with God meaning our sins are forgiven in Jesus, justified through faith. And we have access by faith into this grace with we now stand. It’s all present tense stuff. It is a current event. It is not a wish or a doubt but a reality. Faith in Jesus becomes the key that unlocks the front door and gives access into the Father’s House.

It goes on. “And we boast in the glory of God.” Yep! Who doesn’t like to boast in the glory of God. But then begins the hard part. “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings.” Really? Yea, not my favorite idea either. But Paul understands better than most that suffering is just a fact of life. For example we remember 2 Corinthians 11:24ff where talks about what he has had to suffer. Whipped five times, beaten three times with rods, pelted with stones once, three times ship-wrecked, in constant danger from multiple angles, hungered, thirsted...Paul understands sufferings. But he boasts in his sufferings because more than at any other time, in his weakness he sees that Jesus’ strength has been doing the heavy lifting the whole time.

The same idea is here in Romans 5. “We also rejoice in sufferings because...” That word ‘because’ signals the reason suffering becomes such an asset. It produces something. First, it produces perseverance, *hupomonē*. It is often translated patient endurance. I, however, often translated it stretched; stretched to one’s limit without breaking.

Consider an illustration Curt Paul Richter was a Harvard and Johns Hopkins educated biologist, psychobiologist and geneticist, who served for many years as director of Johns Hopkins’ psychiatric clinic, where he served until becoming professor of psychobiology in 1957.

He made many important contributions to the fields of biology and psychobiology. One of his most famous experiments involved drowning rats – a study which, today, would probably land him in jail for animal cruelty.

He knew that rats had a reputation for being able to swim for exceedingly long periods of time (in excess of 50 hours!). Yet when he placed rats in a tightly confined bucket of water, they quickly discovered they had no means of outlet, no means of relief, and literally gave up, allowing themselves to simply sink to the bottom, and drowning, on average, within about 15 minutes.

He knew they had the “physical” ability to continue swimming much longer, so concluded they must have felt both helpless and hopeless. So, he tried again, this time pulling the rats from the water once he saw them beginning to struggle. He let them rest for a short time before returning them to the bucket. They once again began swimming, testing the confines of their surroundings, but instead of giving up and allowing

themselves to sink and drown, they kept swimming! And swimming! And swimming! Many swam up to 60 hours until their bodies could simply no longer endure.

What was the difference between these two groups of rats? Richter concluded the difference was **HOPE** <https://www.vailhealthbh.org/about/news/wolfington-the-power-of-hope>. “Just keep swimming”.

We know the old saying; “I’m just keeping my head above water.” Well, this wasn’t said by rats but by people who struggle and suffer. The rats also remind me of the seven missionaries in 1993 (including Don Wharton, a friend of Grace and someone I have known since I was a youth) who were on their way back from Russia to Alaska. Their plane ran out of fuel and crashed twenty miles shy of Nome into the Bearing Sea. Miraculously they waded in frigid waters for over an hour. I say “miraculously” because most often perish after minutes of exposure. But they waded together, shouting scripture and prayer. They just kept swimming until their rescue by helicopter. All survived. Amazing! But they persevered; stretched to the maximum limit.

From being stretched to the max develops character. Here is a word that means something was tested and found to have great value. A lady I know once took a family ring into a jeweler to have it appraised. Turned out that her ring which had been stored hanging in a box of old jewelry on a safety pin was worth thousands. She had no idea. Character is a word similar to something being appraised. Once we are stretched to our limit we realize as Paul did that the Lord has given us a great deal. “Maybe I do have a faith that overcomes the world.” And, if I can endure so much and overcome so much then I develop a thing called hope.

Hope well-placed changes us. It motivates us to keep swimming and keep anticipating what is promised. It also changes how we see ourselves. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, we don’t just do work for ourselves but whatever we do we do to the glory of God. We see ourselves as part of Jesus’ family.

Hope changes what is important. When we know we have a secure future we tend to value the Word more highly. The Word that speaks about loving our neighbor becomes as important as being raised with Christ. And in this we also tend to value others more highly and see them as Jesus does. In other words, we are more likely to invest as Jesus did in people. We are more likely to speak kind words, show kindness, and practice the faith in very real ways.

Finally, hope is empowering. Hope reduces fear of the unknown. Because of our experiences Jesus looks bigger than our giants. Just as David recalled how the Lord helped him take down the bear and the lion the Lord would help David take down the giant. Experience created a fearless hope. Paul’s hope in Jesus was confident and certain. I pray that your hope in Jesus would empower you in the same way. May the Lord empower you to be fearless, bold, and enduring so that when you may get stretched to your absolute limit you see God’s grace at work with greater certainty and faith. Nothing of this world can take away what God promises in Jesus. Since Jesus is for you. Nothing can stand against you.

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John 3:30