

Abound in Hope / Morning Service

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[0 : 00] I had some praise we stand. Our father now we pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit you would do in us what is impossible for us to do and that is that you would give us hope and we ask this in Christ's name.

Amen. Well if you would open up to Romans chapter 15 that Martin just read for us on page 949 you might think that prayer was a bit of an exaggeration.

That of course we can have hope of course we can generate hope but I want to tell you that's not true. We are in the season of Advent and there are four Sundays in Advent this is the second and we are following the readings which are given to us in the book of common prayer which were settled on but have been used for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years and all around the world by Anglicans and later you can look them up if you like in page 95.

To 103 that's where the readings are. But there are two surprises in these Advent readings. The first is you might think they would be about Christmas about Jesus first coming.

I mean Advent just means coming and so you expect the read the readings to be dominated by the first coming of Jesus Christmas but they're not. By far the strongest emphasis is on Jesus second coming.

[1 : 26] It's on the future. So in the gospel that we read today we heard the Son of Man is coming on clouds with power and great glory. And the reason for this the reason that these readings move toward the future is because we are hardwired to hope.

That real change in the Christian life. Real growth comes about when the presence of the future is made real in our hearts now by the Holy Spirit.

It's that experience that brings about change. And the second surprise is that tucked away in each of the readings and particularly the epistle readings are Christian habits, practices, disciplines.

Things that we do that help the presence of the future to dawn in our hearts so that we can have an ongoing experience drinking deeply of the grace of God.

I mean it's a bit hard to know how to respond to the grace of God isn't it? You know we've been preaching through the book of Revelation and I don't know about you but sometimes I think how do I respond to this? Sometimes there are disciplines, there are practices which are given to us which help what God has promised to become living realities now.

[2 : 54] So we all believe all sorts of things but how do my Christian beliefs become active in my life now? How do I practically respond to God's kindness and salvation?

And there are practices that are taught in the New Testament and in the Old Testament that are very helpful to us and have been a great gift to Christians throughout history. I mean you know Jesus, the disciples watched Jesus and he was just praying a lot and they said teach us how to pray and so he gave us the Lord's Prayer.

There's a habit for us. Or here's another habit for a Christian community. The apostle teaches us to confess your sins to one another.

He doesn't just mean here in a big group we're all saying the same thing. He means find someone in the congregation and confess your sins to them. Don't find a stranger, find someone you know you might have sinned against and then confess your sins.

How long since you've done that? Well these are not commandments. These are not, you know, ten new commandments. They're habits of the heart, habits of action. And you know the way habits work.

[4 : 02] They're like threads and you weave them together and they become string and then rope. And these habits that are in these readings become a very strong rope that bind us to the future.

And by these habits we're drawn closer to God and drawn along in our faith towards God. The habits and the practices don't make us Christian.

We're made Christian by God, by his spirit. But we plant the seeds of God's grace around our life and allow God to water it and to grow it. And it shapes our life for real change.

So last week Dan introduced us to the first one which was put on the Lord Jesus Christ. And today the habit, the discipline, the practice is set your hope fully on Jesus Christ.

And my text is one verse, the last verse of the reading. Romans 15 verse 13. Because I thought we'd take a break from doing two chapters a week. We're going to do one verse.

[5 : 01] And this is what it says. 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 or overflow in hope.

And this text shows us three things. Where hope comes from. How hope comes to us. And thirdly, what it looks like. So we'll just look at those three things. Where does hope come from?

Well, this is very obvious, isn't it? Hope connects us to the future. We hope for what is future. And so true hope, true hope can only come from God because only God knows the future and only God controls the future.

That's why the Apostle Paul begins this verse by calling God by a name that's nowhere else in the scriptures. He calls him the God of hope. And he prays the power of the Holy Spirit will help us to hope.

In other words, this kind of hope comes straight from God. It's based on the conviction that God knows and controls the future and that what he has promised is very good for us.

[6 : 12] And that he has the resources and the love and the faithfulness to make it happen. But again, this hope comes by the power of the Holy Spirit. You cannot generate it.

We can't work it up. It doesn't work like that. That's not how this kind of hope works. That's why I say it's impossible for us unless God does it.

And you might be worrying because the trouble about this is that our English word hope doesn't mean what it means in the Bible.

Our English word hope always has doubt and uncertainty about it. But the Bible use of the word is certain. So we use the word hope. I hope the Canucks win some matches and get to the Stanley Cup.

I hope it snows at Christmas time. You know, it's uncertain. There's doubt about the future. When the Bible uses the word hope, it's speaking about a life-changing certainty. And the action of hope is leaning forward, eagerly expecting it and bringing it back now, shaping the present.

[7 : 19] That's why false hopes are so cruel and dangerous. And I don't just mean walking, stumbling around in the woods in the dark, hoping there's a path in front of you and finding there's a 35-foot cliff.

We need to explore that a little more with Dan sometime. Those of you who are medical practitioners, you work very hard not to give false hope because it's terribly cruel to do that to people, raising their expectations.

And I think we live in a day and age where there is very little hope around. And we are, because we're hardwired for hope, we're desperate for hope. And so we create all kinds of false hopes.

And we so easily believe the false hopes of people around about us. We're experts at doing that. We're like gamblers, aren't we? You know, we keep investing in this thing which is a false thing, hoping we're going to get some big payday.

But in the end, we bring ruin just to ourselves and to each other. That's not the way hope, this biblical hope works.

[8 : 27] And if you notice in verse 13, what Paul does is he brings this hope in connection with faith. Faith. He prays the God of hope will fill us with all joy and peace in believing.

So that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we might have hope. Now, faith and hope are very closely tied together, but they're different, aren't they? Faith hears the word of God and believes the truth of what God promises.

Whereas hope seizes on the pleasure and the goodness of the thing that's hoped for and longs for it. Hope grows in certainty. It ascends and trusts in the now.

Hope grows in joy and courage and looks at the real goodness of what's coming. And that changes how I think now.

I mean, if you're, let's say you have a three-year-old in your home and you say to your three-year-old, I'm going to take you to the park after lunch. Presuming you're trustable and you've demonstrated some trustworthiness, the child will believe you and then the child will become happy.

[9 : 36] It's the happiness that is the hope based on the belief, you see. We had a wedding in our family recently. The day that our son and his bride decided to marry each other, the day they committed to marry each other, nothing really changed for them.

I mean, they were still single. They were still living apart. But everything changed for them. They were still living as individuals. But the belief in the future marriage started to bring delight and pleasure to all kinds of people, not just to them.

That's why Paul prays that the God of hope would fill the Romans with all joy and peace in their believing, in their faith.

Because there is a kind of believing that's not life-changing. It doesn't bring you joy and peace. You know, you can know stuff with your mind, but it doesn't really change you at the core of your being.

And if your hope, or if your faith, is not changing you at the core of your being, it's likely that your hope is not on God.

[10 : 45] It's on something else. If your faith is fretful and anxious, it's not directed to the promises of God. And just imagine two miners down a mine, and there's a big accident, big explosion in a cave-in.

And they are trapped in very separate parts of the mine. They have no communication with each other. And one miner receives some communication from the outside.

Both of them are without food or water or light. They're in the dark. But somehow the rescue teams get a message to this miner over here that they're close. They're working to bring him out.

They're working to bring his friend out. They know where they are, and they're coming for them. What's changed in his circumstances? Absolutely nothing. He's still underground.

They're still without food and water. But this news gives him hope, and he begins to become excited and joyful and peaceful because he knows he's going to be rescued.

[11 : 49] He's still in terribly uncomfortable circumstances, but now he's full of hope based on what he believes because he has heard the word. So you see, it's only the God of hope who is able to fill our believing with joy and peace.

Because what God promises, he is able to fulfill. He's able to give us joy in believing because he has promised us that one day we will see him face to face and we'll be included in his glory.

He's able to give us peace in believing because it doesn't matter what circumstances and the difficulty of them, I can trust him to bring me there. But the more I understand and believe his promises, the more my hope will grow strong, the more joy and peace will come in my believing.

That's where hope comes from. Secondly, okay, but how? How does it work? How does hope come to us? And the answer in verse 13 is very simple.

It is by the power of the Holy Spirit. The only way to abound, to overflow with hope, is if the power of the Holy Spirit does this in your life.

[13 : 01] And that's not because our hope is so puny and tiny it needs to be amped up by the Holy Spirit. It's actually the opposite. It's because our hope is so vast and strong and unimaginable and impossible for us that we'll see the face of God and be included in his glory that we find it hard to believe.

We just find it hard to believe it's so good. And so we need the power of the Holy Spirit to take our eyes off ourself and off the other hopes and onto this one vast and wonderful hope.

Again, you see, you can believe the creed. You can have all the right doctrine. But your heart still be full of anxiety. You can be angry and joyless because this joy and peace in believing is a bit of a barometer.

It's an indicator of whether we have really fixed our hope on the Lord Jesus Christ or on something else. And I know anxiety comes from all sorts of places.

And there's lots left over. But this is perhaps the most important place. The apostle gives us two clues about how the power of the Holy Spirit breaks through in our lives with hope.

[14 : 13] And the first is this, that we need to drink deeply in the word of God. I don't just mean reading occasionally like you might a headline or a blog or an email.

But I mean taking time, reading in the presence of God as a love letter from the one you were made for. Meditating, contemplating.

Meditating, how does this lead me to adore God? How have you revealed yourself? How can I, allowing your heart and mind to rest on the words, taking them in slowly. 20 years ago, I preached on John 5.

And I had always prayed when I read the Bible, teach me, help me to know more. And I realized Jesus says that you can search the scriptures in vain and not find Jesus.

And I realized that what I needed to pray for was to know him. And that has completely changed my own Bible reading. Look at verse 4, for example.

[15 : 14] Whatever was written in former days, the Old Testament, was written for our instruction. That through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

See, why is Paul directing them to the scriptures? It's because this is how the power of the Holy Spirit breaks through to us and spreads hope. Paul speaks about the scriptures as though they're a living beast.

That they come to us and when they come to us, they bring us encouragement. They strengthen us. The scriptures are the way that the Holy Spirit communicates hope to us.

Because in the scriptures, we taste and see that the Lord is good. He shows his character. He reveals his promises. And the Bible expects believers to be hungry and to be quick to obey what God says.

I'm not talking about an intellectual exercise. Gathering information. I'm talking about reading to know him. Not reading to have some magic experience of hope.

[16 : 22] But reading to know God who is the God of hope and gives us faith and gives us hope. You know, the Bible speaks about meditation. It's not the meditation you hear about today.

It's not, you know, looking at a black spot and emptying your mind. Meditation in the Bible sense is filling your mind with the word of God. Chewing, chewing, chewing. Like a cow chews its grass and cut over and over and over.

And if you just look, look from verses 8 to 12. That's what Paul's doing. He quotes four texts from the Old Testament. Chews them over, chews them over. He's modeling how to do this, you see.

And the reason he says, verse 8, he says, The nature of the scriptures is promise.

God reveals himself in promises and in keeping the promises. And our ultimate hope is that we will one day see him.

[17 : 28] We will be with him and we will know him. We'll see him as he is. That nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. There's nothing to be compared with the glory that's going to be revealed in us.

But if we want to know the power of the Holy Spirit in hope, we need to drink deeply of his word and seek God in his word. You need to make a serious commitment to this somehow. And the second clue is that we need to turn the word of God into prayer.

That's what Paul does in verse 13. I don't know if you noticed that or not. Verse 13 is a prayer. He's not actually, he's not making a big argument there. He's speaking to God.

May the God of hope fill you, he says. The God of hope. I mean, Paul takes all the vast theology of Romans up till now. You know, all the justification by faith and redemption through the atoning blood and the reconciliation and union with Christ and the law and the sovereignty of God, the no condemnation, the being transformed by the renewal.

It's all summarized in this one. It all comes to focus. It comes to action. It comes to reality as Paul prays. Because prayer, when we speak to God, it is a recognition that I can't do this.

[18 : 56] Prayer is always a recognition of our weakness and our inability. That this life-changing hope is not natural to me. And that all my positive trying and thinking can't bring me to this hope of God.

It can't give me the joy and peace that I was made for. So, again, if you want to have this power of the Holy Spirit, you need to get a prayer life.

You know, not delivering God your shopping list of needs for Christmas, but thoughtfully turning over in your heart what his word says into prayer.

Sitting with his word and speaking it back to him in adoration. I mean, it really is not too complicated. Just take verse 13. Take the first phrase, May the God of hope fill.

I encourage you to take five minutes on that today. Just take five minutes and see what you can worship God for in there. That God desires not just to scatter a little bit of hope to us, but he is the God of hope.

[20 : 00] Imagine having a God of hope who will fill us. And then we turn into prayer. God, I praise you that you're a God of hope. And as you praise him, seek him.

Don't ask him for the experience of hope. It's good to pray for hope, but don't ask him so that you'll experience hope. Ask him that you experience him and know him. He is our hope. Source of hope, how it comes to us.

What does it look like? Well, what does it look like when this kind of hope begins operating in Christian community? And the answer the passage gives us is it looks like Jesus.

When this hope begins to operate, we become more and more Christ-like. And Paul gives two illustrations in the passage. The first illustration is in verses two and three.

If I could just read those to you. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, the reproaches of those who reproach you fell on me.

[21 : 09] Hey, Jay, just imagine what it'd be like to be in a community of people where everyone lived to please the other. Everyone was patient with each other's failings and weaknesses and sillinesses.

And we took responsibility for ourselves. And every time you met another person, we sought to build them up and in their faith. I mean, that'd be just terrific, wouldn't it? Hope completely changes how we deal with each other.

And our ultimate hope is the most formative. It doesn't make us dreamy and useless. It turns us from self-absorption to be involved with others.

You know the writings of Viktor Frankl, who was a psychiatrist, who survived Nazi camps, Auschwitz and Dachau, and who wrote a book soon after the war called Man's Search for Meaning.

He says, hope of the future makes a key difference to the health and life of the individual and how he is engaged with others in the camp.

[22 : 15] I quote from the book, he says, the prisoner who's lost his faith in the future, his future was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold.

He let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay. And he says, we who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread.

They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man. But one thing, the last of the human freedoms, to choose one's attitude to any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

And that comes from hope. So that's how, I mean, the hope of glory forms us to be like Jesus Christ. And I think this shows itself in an attitude of generosity in trying to build up other people, caring for others.

Some hopes make us selfish, but the hope of glory opens the possibility and freedom to serve others. That's the first thing. And the second thing it looks like is endurance in suffering.

[23 : 31] Now, there's nothing wrong with having all sorts of lesser hopes. You know, I hope to have lunch with a friend on Tuesday, but it is the ultimate hope that is the decisive thing. And if you put your ultimate hope in anything other than God, if you put your ultimate hope in anything in this world, it will lead to a lack of joy and a lack of peace.

If we put our ultimate hope in our job or our status or our health or our family or our finances or our acceptance, the problem is all of these things are going to be stripped away. None of those things can face suffering and death.

There's only one hope that can face every circumstance, and that's our hope in Jesus Christ, because death and suffering cannot take it away. There's a preacher in New York called Tim Keller, and he uses an illustration of an army engaged in battle, and things look grim, and the army is losing, and they're going backwards, and they hear a distant sound, and it is the sound of vast reinforcements, a vast army who are coming to their aid.

They're not sure when, but they're certain they will come. And how that changes the soldiers now is they don't suddenly just relax, but it opens their hearts suddenly with courage and boldness, and they can now do deeds of bravery.

What faith does, faith in the word of God, opens our eyes to the invisible future. The future appears before the eyes of our heart. The Holy Spirit helps our spiritual ears, if you will, to hear the distant sound that God is coming, he will take us to glory.

[25 : 11] And in the midst of feeling weak and crooked and suffering, we can rest on him. And when we are hungry and thirsty, we know he fills us with good things.

And though we are in sorrow now, we live with this sense of joy inexpressible because of the ultimate hope. So, brothers and sisters, affix your hope on the Lord Jesus Christ and his revealing.

This is the Christian discipline. This is the Christian practice that's commended to us today. Pray that the God of hope would fill you with all joy and peace, and pray for others that God would do the same.

As you read and pray with each other, connect that future with your heart now. And I don't think this is something we can do on our own. We have to start it on our own.

But we can't do it on our own. Verse 5, May the God of encouragement and endurance grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together with one voice, you will glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 25] Let's kneel and pray.