

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Whole Lot of Hope

Romans 15:1-13

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (v. 13). That’s not just the end of today’s text. It’s also the conclusion of a long section of Romans where Paul has been working out some of the practical implications of his vision of the gospel. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then how should believers translate God’s grace into concrete action in daily living? What, for instance, does the lordship of Jesus mean for how God’s people should relate to the governing authorities? What does the lordship of Jesus mean for how Christians should live in harmony with others in the wider society? What does the lordship of Jesus mean for how Christians should live in harmony with each other?

This last issue—Christians living in unity with one another—is the culmination of Paul’s discussion. He has just spent a whole chapter helping the church in Rome sort out the things that matter from the things that don’t, especially when it comes to observing certain customs and religious traditions. Paul’s bottom line is that they should welcome and accept one another, just as Christ has welcomed and accepted them. When this happens, it brings praise to God. Jewish believers and gentile believers join with one another to glorify God in Christ. And what better way to bring that combined worship to a climax than with a prayer of blessing. So after the final hymn, Paul offers the benediction: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” And all God’s people say, “Amen!”

By voicing your affirmation of that blessing, you’re declaring that the God whom we worship and serve is a God who gives hope, a God who can be trusted with the future because he has already demonstrated his faithfulness through the death and resurrection of Christ. God’s will, revealed in Christ, is forgiveness and restoration. His purpose is to reconcile us to himself and to make us new. Indeed, to make the whole world new. A new world, where the righteousness of God reigns and human beings live in unity with him and with one another, as God has always intended. That’s the goal of God’s plan.

And the church is a critical part of this divine plan. The unity that God intends between himself and humankind, and among human beings, in the future, is supposed to take shape in the present, in the community of those who confess Jesus as Lord. In other words, the church is designed to be a sneak preview of what God intends for the world through Christ. Reconciliation and restoration are supposed to become a tangible, visible reality in our life together as the family of God.

This morning, we can rejoice and give thanks for the ways that God’s will for the world is already evident in the life of the church. And yet, we can also mourn for the ways that it’s not. Clearly, we in the community of Christ’s people have a long, repentant way to go in becoming a more faithful sign of God redeeming purposes. In fact, one of the reasons that Paul wrote this letter called Romans, and his other letters, was because God’s people still had a lot of growing to do into the fullness and likeness of Christ. There was, and still is, a

great gap between the church as it is and the church as God intends it to be. In that sense, the reality still remains a hope.

Not hope in the sense of optimism or wishful thinking, but hope in the more solid sense of assurance and confidence in the future, because of what God has already done, is doing, and will do, through Christ. Now that doesn't mean being naïve or disconnected from the pain and suffering of life in this present world. On the contrary, authentic, lasting hope faces squarely the world's brokenness and lostness, and still proclaims that because Christ is risen, the life-giving power of God will someday fully prevail over sin and death.

In one of the Charlie Brown comic strips, Snoopy is typing a novel. He begins his story, "It was a dark and stormy night . . ." This is the way Snoopy always begins his stories. Lucy looks at what Snoopy has written, then goes into a tirade, putting him down for using such a silly opening. Doesn't Snoopy realize that any good story begins with the words, "Once upon a time . . ." So in the last frame of the comic strip, Snoopy starts his story again. This time he's ready. He begins typing, "Once upon a time, it was a dark and stormy night." Like Snoopy, we Christians can't tell the story we have to tell without including the reality of darkness and storminess in the world and in our lives. But at the same time, we can't tell the story without also declaring that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has set salvation in motion, and the final chapter brings full deliverance for those who are in Christ.

In the meantime, we live by faith in the God of hope. That's the way Paul describes God at the beginning of his benediction. Then he closes the benediction with a reminder of where believers' hope comes from. That's because he wants the community of the faithful to leave God's house with a note of hope ringing in their hearts and minds. If they're going to move from worship to witness, and embody the gospel in their lives, individually and together, they'll need power from a source greater than themselves, namely, the power of the Holy Spirit.

Earlier in Romans, Paul writes about how the reconciliation between God and human beings is deeply personal. "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit," says Paul (5:5). In other words, knowledge of God isn't a matter of getting enough critical distance from God so you can analyze him and compile a body of data about his chief characteristics. No, knowledge of God is personal and relational. It's a trusting response to God's prior knowledge and love of us. And one of the signs of God's personal presence in the life of a believer is hope. Not hope as something that we generate on our own, but hope as a gift generated by the presence of God in our lives. "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (5:2b).

And this hope is nothing to be ashamed of. It's no illusion, no fantasy, no empty dream. This Spirit-born, Spirit-energized hope won't let you down. If Jesus is Lord and Savior of your life, God will finish what he has started. In the end, you, along with all believers, will be brought to resurrection life, the life of the world to come.

What does this life look like? What will it look like? When it comes to those questions, we certainly acknowledge the limits of our own understanding. As Paul himself reminds the Corinthians, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (13:12). But still, as I stressed earlier, the church, in its life together, is created to be a community where the life of God's new world, the new creation, is already taking shape, especially in our unity with one another. Where hearts and lives and voices are joined in praise of God, and where

barriers come down that separate us from one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, hope is happening.

To help us get a better handle on how the church practices hope and anticipates the life of the world to come, consider the following situation, envisioned by one preacher:

Imagine a family of four living in a modest home. It's a good home, and it meets their needs, but it's also far from perfect. The pipes are aging. The floors are scratched up. The walls have marks on them. The kitchen is dated. One day "Papa" or grandpa visits and tells them, "I am saving money to do a major renovation of your house. In 10 years I'll redo everything for you—new floors, appliances, wiring, roof, siding, and landscaping. Everything will be redone."

That night they celebrated and talked about their dream house. But after their beloved Papa left, they faced a dilemma: How do they live until the new house is ready? With some sarcasm, the oldest son says, "Who cares how we live? It's all going to get redone, so I say we trash this place and live it up." The daughter says, "We can just live here, but let's spend all of our time and energy dreaming about the house to come." The father says, "Well, I'm not fixing anything else in this house. If it breaks, it will stay broken. I'm not patching holes, I'm not sanding floors, and I'm not fixing doors. As long as the roof does not collapse, I am not touching it."

The family's mom listened quietly before saying, "Here's the thing: It will be wonderful to get a brand new home, but now, even before it comes, we have to live in this home like we are going to live in the brand new one. If we trash this house, we will just learn how to trash houses. We should dream and plan for the new house, but if we *only* think about the new home, we will miss the goodness that is still here. And if we never fix anything, we'll need to live with more things broken than are necessary. Seeing broken things will only bring sadness." She concluded, "So from now on you need to imagine like we are living in the new house now and live in this house just like we will in our new one."

That's solid guidance for how we should let our future in Christ determine and shape the way that we occupy the present. What we already have in Christ, and what we have been promised in Christ, generate our hope, and our hope energizes our lives and our mission in the present.¹

As we live out our hope, we can be assured that there's plenty to go around. Notice that when Paul prays for the Christians in Rome, he doesn't ask God to give them just enough hope to get by, though some days that's what's needed, and we'll certainly take it. Instead, Paul asks God to fill them with "all joy and peace", so that they may "overflow with hope." I like the way that Eugene Peterson renders Paul's benediction: "Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope."² Now that's a whole lot of hope.

The film, *The Hunger Games*, is set in a futuristic society called Panem. Every year the people of Panem are forced to participate in a contest called "the Hunger Games," in which one boy and one girl aged 12-18 is chosen by lottery from each of the twelve districts surrounding the capitol. They compete in a televised battle to the death, until a winner is declared.

In one scene, President Snow asks his chief Gamemaker, a man named Seneca Crane, "Seneca, why do you think we have a winner [for the Hunger Games]?" Seneca frowns and asks, "What do you mean?" "I mean," says Snow, "why do we have a winner? I mean, if we just wanted to intimidate the districts, why not round up twenty-four at random and

execute them all at once. It would be a lot faster.” Seneca Crance stares at him, obviously confused.

“Hope,” muses Snow. Crane, still confused, asks, “Hope?” Snow continues, “Hope. It is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot is dangerous. A spark is fine, as long as it’s contained.” Crane says, “So . . .?” And Snow concludes, “So, contain it.”³

The God who reconciled us to himself in the cross, who raised Jesus from the dead, and who has unleashed the power of the Holy Spirit among us, intends for us to be a fellowship of uncontainable hope. This God of hope has created us in Christ, and is forming us in Christ, to be people who spill over with assurance and anticipation of the day when Jesus will be fully revealed and acknowledged as Lord of all. Until then, we’ll live faithful lives, praising God with united voices, and pointing to what’s ahead in his purposes, so that others will put their hope in him too. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

¹ This illustration provided by Christopher Ek at the Preaching Today website. Accessed November 23, 2016 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/may/3051914.html>>.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 333.

³ Adapted from David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2013) 49. Preaching Today website. Accessed November 23, 2016 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/march/3032414.html>>.