

A Word of Hope

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Romans 15:4-13

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, 6 so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7 Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, 9 and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,  
and sing praises to your name”;

10 and again he says,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”;

11 and again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,  
and let all the peoples praise him”;

12 and again Isaiah says,

“The root of Jesse shall come,  
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;  
in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**GOD’S PRESCRIPTION**

I was a new pastor visiting an elderly member. When I entered her small mobile home I was shocked to see prescription medicine bottles all over the kitchen and the living room.

I wondered if maybe she had a problem with pills. And before I was even able to introduce myself she asked, “Do you have some old prescription bottles that I can have?”

My arched eyebrows must have conveyed my sense of alarm because she quickly added, “Oh, don’t worry. I’m going to take the label off before I use them.

I’ve been typing Bible verses and putting them into medicine bottles. Then I take them to the nursing homes and pass them out to families who are having problems.

I call them God’s prescription.”

I’m not so sure her project would pass the Presbyterian guidelines for the use of Scripture.

She did not consider the context of the passage.  
She did not think about the cultural situation when the passage was written.  
She did not know the genre of the passage.  
She did not consult the original languages. She had no clue about theology.  
She just took some passages of Scripture that meant a lot to her, painstakingly typed them, and cut them up into little scraps of paper.  
Then she dropped those scraps of paper into medicine bottles, labeled them God’s prescription, and took them to nursing homes. That was a lot of work.

I asked her why she did this, and she said that not long ago her husband had died of Alzheimer’s disease. She said that she got pretty desperate toward the end and then someone brought her a medicine bottle with one these “prescriptions.”

In that bottle she found a verse of Scripture from Isaiah that read, “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee, because he trusteth in thee.” (Isaiah 26:3, KJV)

During the dark time, this one verse of Scripture was like a ray of light. It gave her something to hold on to while the ground around her was shaking.

And in her time of trial she vowed that one day she would try and help others in the same way.

She made good on her promise.

But, she did more than pass out tidbits of Scripture in medicine bottles. She also talked with and supported families who were struggling with a loved one who had lost their memory.

I know from personal experience that it takes great courage to help others when the wounds of your own loss are still fresh.

All of this happened because one person used a verse of Scripture to give another person a word of hope. Maybe filling medicine bottles with Bible verses was not so crazy after all.

## SCRIPTURE AND ARGUMENTS

Quite often in the church we use Scripture in a different way. We use Scripture in order to win arguments. We've all done it.

We say, "Well you know the Bible says" ... and then we fill in the blank with our favorite proof text.

Maybe that's why we need so many rules about the proper interpretation of Scripture. Sometimes we use the text of Scripture as a pretext to say what we already believe.

And that can lead to some really big problems.

The Apostle Paul could remember a time when he read Scripture in that way. His knowledge of Scripture and his religious credentials were impeccable.

He thought that because of his training and tradition that his interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures was the only right interpretation. And he persecuted any who disagreed with him, especially Christians.

And then Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus. In a flash, Paul suddenly realized that he was persecuting God and God's people in the name of God and God's people!

So, Paul changed his view of God, and Paul changed his view of Scripture. He no longer saw Scripture as a way to prove his own point of view. He no longer saw Scripture as a word of judgment against his enemies.

Instead, Paul saw Scripture as a means of grace. Scripture was God's way of bringing salvation and forgiveness and hope to the whole world.

Instead of using Scripture to exclude people, Scripture was to be used as a way to include and welcome people into the kingdom of God.

That is the purpose of Scripture. Paul writes, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

Scripture was written to instruct us, to encourage us, and to give us hope. Scripture is not meant to knock us down. Scripture is meant to lift us up. If we do not use Scripture to proclaim a word of hope, we have misused Scripture ... no matter how many rules of interpretation we have followed. If we don't use Scripture to proclaim a word of hope, we've misused Scripture ... no matter how many degrees in theology we might have. You've heard it before but it's still true. The worst mistake we can make is to turn the good news into good advice.

## SCRIPTURE AND GOD

According to our passage for today there is a reason the Scriptures offer encouragement and hope. The God revealed in those Scriptures is a hopeful and encouraging God.

In verse 4 we read that "by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures" we have hope. And then in verse 5 God is described as "the God of steadfastness and encouragement."

The Bible is a word of encouragement and hope because it comes from a God who is by nature encouraging and hopeful.

God did not create the world and then abandon that world. God continues to support, uphold and encourage His beloved creation.

Our love is fickle.

But, in contrast, God's love is steadfast. Underneath creation are the everlasting arms that support and guide us all...all the days of our life and beyond our life.

We can approach life with a basic sense of trust because we believe that God is trustworthy. God is steadfast.

To put it another way: In Jesus Christ we see that God is not out to get us. In Jesus Christ we see that God is out to save us! (Guthrie)

## A COMMUNITY OF HOPE

That view of God as revealed in Scripture not only changes our minds; it also changes how we live.

If we believe in the God who brings us encouragement and hope we become encouraging and hopeful in our attitude toward others.

Paul makes this point in several different ways.

In verse 5 he tells us that this view of God enables us to "live in harmony" and glorify God with "one voice."

According to this passage the community of faith is marked by peace, joy and encouragement.

We act this way because in the Scriptures we have met the one true God. And the God we meet in Scriptures is peaceful, joyful and encouraging.

We have a sense of peace in our lives because we believe that God is faithful, and the Holy Spirit has convinced us that this is true.

We have hope because the God of hope has come into our lives.

## THE WORD OF HOPE

In order to really understand the gospel, we must understand that it is a word of hope for everyone. We cannot limit the word of encouragement and hope to just our people. It is for the world.

And the only way to “keep hope alive” is to give it away.

God gave us this word of encouragement and hope so we can share it with others. It is our job to bring light into the darkness.

How can we do this?

I have a very modest, old-fashioned suggestion. You might think I am naïve for suggesting this. But, here goes...

I think we need to memorize a verse of Scripture each week.

I know. I’m a dinosaur. You can download the whole Bible on your smart phone. There’s no need to memorize Scripture.

You can Google your favorite verse if you can remember a few lines. But, I still think there’s value in holding a few verses in our hearts.

We need to meditate on those words and let them become a part of who we are.

I once took a course from the Para church group, the Navigators. I memorized all kinds of verses, and to tell you the truth I have forgotten most of them. But, a few of those verses have stayed with me filling me with joy and peace and hope every day of my life.

Maybe if we just memorized one verse of Scripture each week, those  
Let’s try an experiment. I want you to write on the top half of your bulletin this Scripture reference, Romans 15:13. (You can also use your business card if you have one. On the side with writing just add Romans 15:13)

Now on the other side write the verse:

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Carry that around in your purse or you pocket. Try to memorize it. If you can't memorize it take it out and read it very slowly.

Meditate on each word and phrase.

Use this verse to compose a prayer. Use this verse to teach a Bible study or write a sermon. Put it on the business cards you leave at the nursing home or hospital.

Ask yourself: How might I look at the world differently if I believed the promise of this verse?

(You also have my permission to read that verse in the context of what Paul says about hope in the 15th chapter of Romans and what Paul says about hope in the whole book of Romans. He has a lot to say.)

But, just this one verse has a lot to say as well. It is truly God's prescription for hope. This verse reminds us that in the final analysis hope comes from above. Hope comes from God. Hope gives us peace and joy. Hope is a sign of faith.

And God is not stingy with hope. Hope abounds by the power of the Spirit. That truly is a Word of hope. May that Word lift you up in the days to come.

Amen.