

Hope and Joy and Peace!

Romans 15:1-13

What is it that you want this Christmas? As a kid that question seems easy. When you become an adult it gets much more difficult. We don't need much.

If we needed something we usually have already bought it ourselves.

We want to find something that those who love us can give us, but we don't really want them spending much money on us. And the things that we really want cannot be bought. And so, Christmas loses some of its magic. It is even sometimes said "Christmas is for kids." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Christmas is a time to remember the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ. And in embracing that hope - to know more peace and joy than as a child. I still remember the feeling of anticipation as I tore the wrapping off the presents. Sometimes I knew exactly what I wanted. Other times I was not sure, but I hoped that what I was opening would surprise me, and fill me with joy. Sometimes I was disappointed. Dress shirts were the worst. What small boy cares anything about a dress shirt? But very often I got the very thing that I wanted. A new baseball glove. A new sled. A model of an X-Wing fighter.

Of course, the joy would often wear off. Sometimes faster than at other times. Hopefully, you can still remember a time when your hopes were fulfilled, even for a short while.

Today's passage is about hope. True hope that produces peace and joy. Jesus not only took on our flesh, but he also suffered and died a cruel death, to guarantee peace and joy to all who believe in him. It was this same hope that motivated the saints of the OT.

Hebrews 11:8-10 ⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For **he was looking forward to the city that has foundations**, whose designer and builder is God.

Hebrews 11:13-16 ¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, **but having seen them and greeted them from afar**, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people

who speak thus make it clear that **they are seeking a homeland**.¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Hebrews 11:24-26²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter,²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for **he was looking to the reward**.

Hope anticipates. Hope looks forward to something. What is it that we are hoping for as believers? We hope for a home. A true home where there is no strife. A home that is full of peace and festivity. We hope for a reward. Not a reward that we earn, but one that makes every sacrifice that we have ever made as believers seem worthwhile.

We hope for a city with foundations. One where the good does not fade. One that offers true security. One that offers countless opportunity and variety without destroying solitude and peace. We hope for a better country than the one in which we live. I do not mean America. I mean this present world in which we live. We hope for a world where sickness and pain cannot be found. We hope for a country where evil of any sort does not exist. That means that the evil of our own heart is eradicated. No more losing your temper. No more acting out of selfishness. No more giving into fear and anxiety. No more parties where lots of people are having fun, but you are left out.

Full freedom to love and adore God. Perfect fellowship with other believers. No lying. No stealing. No coveting what others have around you.

The Carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem" says it well. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight. The greatest hope of all is that we will finally know God "as we are known by God." Every other hope is only precious because God himself will be at the center of every joy.

Do you ever stop to hope about these things that are yours in Christ? Are you too busy to look forward to them and to anticipate them? This Christmas Jesus invites you renew your hope. He calls you to be so full of hope that the grip of the present upon your heart is loosened.

In Chapter 14, the concern was to not place a stumbling block in front of the weak Christian such that they would sin by going against their conscience.

In Chapter 15, the concern is how to respond in a Christlike manner to the criticisms from those same people.

Read Romans 15:1-13.

We who are strong have an obligation
to bear with the failings of the weak,
and
not to please ourselves.
2 Let each of us please his neighbor
for his good,
to build him up.
3 For Christ did not please himself,
but as it is written,
"The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me."

Our duty is clear... to bear with the failings of the weak.

What does Paul mean by "the failings of the weak"?

He is not talking about slowing down on a hike because your partner cannot walk as fast as you. The weaknesses of the weak are directly related to the "reproaches" that Christ endured. The weak Christian attacks the strong Christian and "reproaches" him. To reproach someone is to express disapproval of them or their behavior. It is to criticize them and to look down upon them; to admonish them.

There are times when we need to be admonished. But in this case, the weak believer is expressing disapproval and criticism and disappointment that is unjustified. How does it feel when you are wrongly criticized? How is it that you want to respond? You want to lash out. You want to defend yourself and the best defense is a good offense.

You want to attack and find fault with them in return.

Paul gives you another option: bear with their criticism. Don't tear them down. Build them up. Find some way to please them for their good. By "please them" we are not being called to simply give into their wishes. But we are to find sincere ways to bless them so that they are built up in their faith.

“... the good we should contemplate is their religious improvement... It is not therefore, a weak compliance with the wishes of others, to which Paul exhorts us, but to the exercise of an enlightened benevolence; to such compliances as have the design and tendency to promote the spiritual welfare of our neighbor.” Hodge

Lashing out might make you feel better. But searching for a way to do them good so that they are encouraged to follow Christ is what God calls us to. Why should we be willing to do our duty in this? Because it is exactly what Jesus did in redeeming us. In order to save, Jesus bore reproach from those he came to save. How and when did Jesus do this? He did it throughout his ministry:

- His own siblings mocked him.
- The Pharisees accused him of being a drunkard and a glutton; and a breaker of the Sabbath. None of which was true.

He endured reproach as he hung on the cross:

- If you saved others, why don't you save yourself?

And he does it now when he bears with us when we wrongly criticize our brother or sister. The people who reproached Jesus were really reproaching God. But they took it out on Jesus. And Jesus endured it. Why? Because he had hope in the joy to come.

“He had power not to have been reproached, power not to have suffered what He did suffer, had He been minded to look to His own things.” Chrysostom

Jesus did not please himself, he endured reproaches, because he was hoping for something to come, something better. What was it that encouraged such hope in Jesus?

He was encouraged by the Scriptures, as we too must be. Paul alludes to this by quoting Psalm 69. Jesus was fulfilling Psalm 69 as he endured reproach.

Psalm 69 is a psalm of David. And David also endured reproach throughout his life. Jesus drew encouragement to hope as he meditated upon the life of David.

And Paul tells us that those same OT Scriptures were written, “for our instruction”. And being so instructed we might also be encouraged by them, to have hope.

4 For whatever was written in former days
 was written for our instruction,
 that through endurance

and
through the encouragement of the Scriptures
we might have hope.

In our Sunday evening Bible Study, we are studying 2 Samuel – the life of David. David experienced reproach early in his life as he ran from Saul. But he also experienced it later in his life as members of his own family sought to take the kingship from him. When his own son Absalom leads a successful uprising against David, David experiences cursing from a guy named Shimei as he flees Jerusalem. David could have easily killed this man. One of his mighty men, Abishai, asks permission to lop off the head of Shimei. Instead, David endures the reproaches. David sees that God may have purposes in allowing this man to curse him.

We see in David a good example of enduring the reproaches of others in the visible Church. And these reproaches are unjustified. David is a type of Christ in his attitude.

And this was written down for our encouragement. God often allows his chosen ones to be reproached unjustly. And here is where hope comes in. We must anticipate the faithfulness of God to right every wrong done to us. We don't have to defend ourselves. We don't have to criticize in return. We can bear with the reproaches. We can even do good to those who reproach us, because God will be faithful to right every wrong. We can "look forward to" this with certain hope.

If God was faithful to David, he will be faithful to us. We can trust God and have hope that he will make all things right.

Turn for a moment to 2 Samuel 22. At the end of David's life, he writes a song of Deliverance.

2 Samuel 22:47-51 ⁴⁷ "The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock, and exalted be my God, the rock of my salvation, ⁴⁸ the God who gave me vengeance and brought down peoples under me, ⁴⁹ who brought me out from my enemies; you exalted me above those who rose against me; you delivered me from men of violence. ⁵⁰ **"For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations,** and sing praises to your name. ⁵¹ Great salvation he brings to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his offspring forever."

At the end of David's life, he had a better perspective. The people who had reproached him were nowhere to be found. They were gone and David was still king.

Now, David's life was only a foreshadow. In his words, he points us to the final fulfillment of the Covenant Promises. David did not have to "fix" the reproaches. God would do a better job of it in his own time. David could bear with the reproaches. If there was revenge to be had, God would handle it. God would be able to bring David to his eternal hope, in spite of the reproaches. Those reproaches could not rob David of God's eternal plan for him.

And that is true for you as well. You must ask yourself this question, "Can the criticisms of my fellow believers steal the hope that I have in Jesus?" The answer that the Scriptures give to you is that they cannot. Your hopes are secure in Christ.

But in order to maintain our hope, we must learn to anticipate it. How do we do this? We have to spend time reading and meditating upon the Scriptures. We have to take the time to pray, pouring out our hearts to God, acknowledging to God our many disappointments with this life, but always holding onto the hope to come.

I am always amazed at how many of the Psalms begin with disappointment in present circumstances but then end with praise to God. Study of the Scriptures and earnest prayer are the means by which we are encouraged to hope.

Don't look at these duties as God trying to rob you of fun. They are the means by which through hope you can experience true peace and joy. And our hope is not only for our individual peace and joy. Paul makes clear in Romans 15:5 that our hope includes corporate peace and joy.

5 May the God
 of endurance
 and
 encouragement
 grant you to live
 in such harmony with one another,
 in accord with Christ Jesus,
6 that together you may
 with one voice
 glorify
 the God and Father
 of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The criticism of one believer does not have to lead to further criticism.

God's truthfulness is God's faithfulness. That which God spoke in the past to the patriarchs he will most certainly bring to pass. God's Word will never fall short. You can bank on His promises. In truth, salvation depends on God's faithfulness to fulfill his promises, especially his promises to Abraham.

The second pillar is equally important. That is the pillar of mercy. Salvation depends entirely on God's mercy. There are two sides to the coin of mercy. On the one side, we are not given what we deserve. Our sins deserve God's anger and wrath. But in mercy wrath is removed. On the other side, we are given what we do not deserve. We are given blessing, even though we have no right whatsoever to be blessed.

The coming of God into the world as a baby, uniting himself eternally to our nature, demonstrates both the faithfulness and the mercy of God. In Jesus Christ alone all our hopes for a home rely. Jesus has welcomed you in mercy. Welcome your brother, even when they have criticized you wrongly due to their own weakness. You may not think it possible that you both could praise God with one voice. The OT Jews would have never thought it possible that they could praise God together with Gentiles either. Yet that is exactly what happens in Jesus Christ.

The final verses of our passage are OT quotes pointing to the hope that Jews and Gentiles would worship God together.

As it is written,

"Therefore

I will praise you among the Gentiles,

and

sing to your name." Psalm 18:49.

"He (the psalmist) is contemplated as surrounded by Gentiles giving thanks to God, which implies that they were worshippers of God." Hodge

¹⁰ And again it is said,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles,

with his people."

This comes from Deut. 32:43 although in the English it is not as clear. The quote is taken from the LXX and is a call for Gentiles to rejoice with God's people.

And Douglass Moo rightly comments:

“So what the OT text calls on the Gentiles to do, they now, through God’s mercy to them in the gospel, are able to do – join Israel in praise to God.” Moo

¹¹ And again,
"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and
let all the peoples extol him."

This is taken from Psalm 117:1. But it is helpful to also read verse 2.

Psalm 117:1-2 Praise the LORD, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! ² For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD!

We see the two pillars again: faithfulness and mercy.
The final quote is from the book of Isaiah.

¹² And again Isaiah says,
"The root of Jesse will come,
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;
in him will the Gentiles hope."

Jesse was the father of David. That the Messiah of the Jews would be the root of Jesse indicates that the Messiah would be a son of David. Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s promise to save the Jews. But just as Jesus is the Messianic hope of the Jews, so he is also the hope of the Gentiles.

The root of Jesse would not only rule the Jews. He would also rule the Gentiles.

And when Simeon took Jesus into his arms when he was presented at the temple, he understood that Jesus would not simply be the one to save Jews, but also be the Redeemer of the Gentiles.

Luke 2:29-32 ²⁹ "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

It is not for us to bring this day to pass. We are not strong enough to bring our hopes to pass. We cannot fix the Church. But God can! And God will.

Our task is far more limited. We are to bear with the reproaches of our brother. We are to seek to please our brother and not ourselves. We are to build him up in Christ. We are to welcome him as Christ has welcomed us. We may not feel like welcoming them. But we do so with our eyes fixed on our eternal hope.

Present insult cannot steal our eternal joy!
Look at Paul's concluding prayer in verse 13.

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.

Whether or not you are in harmony with the weaker brother today... Whether or not the criticisms have ended... Whether or not anything has changed at all... Paul prays that they might be filled with all joy and peace in believing.

As you in faith place your hopes on the God of hope, may God fill you with joy and peace. How is this possible? How is it that you can have joy and peace now, even while there is no joy or peace in your present situation? You experience inner peace and joy as you become fixated on the hope that the Holy Spirit is working in you. You can rise above your present trials and know the joy and peace that passes all understanding.

You can in the depths of your soul taste the joys of eternity. The peace of which we yearn will never be fully found in this life. Only when we are feasting in our heavenly home will we have the peace for which our heart yearns.

But through hope, we can know that peace and that joy now. It is our privilege, because God took on flesh and blood and dwelt with men. So, while the presents under the tree may hold more hope for kids than adults, the eternal hopes that are ours in Christ are for children of all ages. In many ways they become sweeter with time.

So, have yourself a merry Christmas. Not because everything will be perfect. Not because everyone is in harmony with one another. But because you are encouraged to hope this season and throughout the year that Jesus really has guaranteed peace and joy for all who trust in him. And not even the reproaches of other believers can rob you of that hope.

