

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Hope Defined
Romans 5**

The Bible is written in two parts, the part we call the Old Testament from the beginning of the world until the time of Jesus and the part we call the New Testament, which is the story of Jesus and then the early church. We usually think that the New Testament, the story of Jesus, starts with the stories about Jesus, the ones we call the Gospels. But if church scholars are to be trusted, probably the very first words that were written down in the New Testament were not the Gospels, they were still being talked about, but rather letters that leaders of these new groups of Jesus-followers would send to the brand new folks they left behind when they went to start another group. The very first of these letters probably was written somewhere in the late 40's AD and sent to a small church in Turkey called Thessaloniki. It's the first Letter to the Thessalonians. The very first words in the New Testament that were written begin this way.

³We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ [1st Thessalonians 1:3].

This theme is repeated famously later on, right?

¹³Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love [1st Corinthians 13:13]

Right from the beginning, the letters to the new churches talked a lot about faith at all different times in all different ways. We talk about faith and we talk about God. That's why we are here today. And society in our world gushes about love, but hope is just as essential. Hope affects our lives. Every life in this room will have to deal with adversity and our responses to that adversity will change everything. I've come to believe that the very best time and place to find hope is during Lent because Lent is the journey of life. Jesus invites us on the journey of life to the cross, through life, through the ups, the downs, the hard, the good, to the cross to death. It's the journey we all take until our death and then we have the promise that that is not the end of the story. There is life beyond death. So if we are to find hope, the walk to the cross is a perfect place. It is an important place because if you do not find hope, everything changes.

There was a young man named John Toole. He had recently left the Army as a veteran and felt he had a book inside of him. He wrote it and thought that the work had some promise so he shopped it around to different publishers. He received rejection after rejection, but he kept trying because he really believed in this book. Eventually the continuous rejection finally wore him down; it broke his heart and he gave up. But, of course, his mom never gave up. His mom just kept shopping the book from publisher to publisher having no luck until finally, years later, she pushed her way into the office of a professor at a New Orleans university. She said, "You are a

writer. Maybe you would like this.” He agreed to read the manuscript, loved it, and sold it to Louisiana State University Press. Nobody had any idea that that manuscript would turn into a bestseller on 10 different lists. In 1981, John Toole’s book *A Confederacy of Dunces* would not only be on top of the bestseller lists, but it would win the Pulitzer Prize award for fiction. Unfortunately, John could not accept the award. His mother accepted it for him because when John Toole had his dream crushed in 1969, he gave up on more than his dream. Defeated by rejection, he took his life just 11 years before his book would surpass his wildest imagination.

Hopelessness precedes destruction. It says, where there is no vision, people perish; where there is no hope, people die. Discouragement is a killer. When hopelessness comes knocking at your door, when it comes rapping at your door, how do you keep it at bay? One of my friends unexpectedly lost his job this week. How do I offer hope that is more than *Pollyanna*, more than *the sun will come out tomorrow*? The power of positive thinking is not hope. This is the season our kids, our high school seniors, dread receiving letters from colleges. They are waiting and waiting and waiting, but they hope and they dread. How do we help them?

I’m going to start this series with three things that I’ve learned about hope that I hope we can all learn or remember today. They are from a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to one of those little gatherings of followers of Jesus. He didn’t even know them. They were in Rome at the other end of the world, but he knew he was going there so he wrote a letter to introduce himself and in the middle of the letter, he talked about hope. He said,

5 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us [Romans 5:1-5].

Real hope exposes all the substitutes that we offer.

- Some of you think you are hopeful people, but I think, frankly, you are not so much hopeful as you are self-reliant. American self-reliance is a great trait, but it is not the same as hope. It is “I will get through this. I will make it.” Hope actually depends on somebody else. Hope is not self-reliant. **Hope is dependence on the outside.**
- Also our hope is not an emotion. “Oh, she’s so hopeful. She is never down.” Hopeful people get down. Hope is not optimism. It is not an emotion. We sing that the sun will come out tomorrow. That may be a freight train. It may be getting worse before it gets better. Hope is not an emotion. **Hope is a change in character.**
- And then I think another fake hope is looking at the world and saying, “Well, it’s sorta karma. You know, you get the bad and then the good will come. You get the good and then the bad will come. We’ll go into the bad so the good is going to come.” I don’t believe the world operates on karma. I don’t believe that there is a guarantee that if we do good, we will get good, that there is a promise that things will balance out. I believe that **hope is endurance.**

So what is hope? If we are going to talk about it for a month, what is hope? One of the Old Testament prophets is named Jeremiah. He is called the Whining Prophet or the Weeping

Prophet because his book is filled with woe, but right in the middle of his book, he talked to God about hope. Jeremiah 14:22 says, “God, our hope is in you.”

²² Do any of the worthless idols of the nations bring rain?
Do the skies themselves send down showers?
No, it is you, LORD our God.
Therefore our hope is in you,
for you are the one who does all this.

He uses a noun formed from the Hebrew root *qwh* [koh] meaning trustworthy. Essentially, Jeremiah is saying that Israel's God is worthy of trust. He is teaching that God is the hope of Israel. Hope is the gift that God offers us, to trust Him while we are waiting. Hope is more than an emotion. It can be learned. The last thing anybody needs is “Oh, I feel so hopeful.” The last thing anybody needs is a shot of hope in the arm, a temporary high followed by a crash. If you get one of those, after you crash you will feel twice as bad. Instead, what you need is to learn to rest in hope, so that hope for you is a foundation—like Jody Phenow was talking about. Hope can be built on your foundation. Then if the fire comes, it exposes a foundation of hope. Hope rests on the goodness of God. Paul says,

² . . . we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God [Romans 5:2].

We feel that we have come to see that God is there. God is real and God is almighty and God is good and God is loving. My hope rests in the glory of God. I believe that people thrive for one reason. They commit to things that produce inner strength and hope that has a sure foundation.

You think hope doesn't make a difference? I think you know instantly that hope makes a difference. Think about this. Two people are coming through two doors toward you. One is the most life-giving, hopeful person. When you are with that person, you leave feeling better. You feel like life has meaning. When you leave that person, you feel like you have just been given a gift. The other person walks toward you and is a walking Eeyore. “How are you?” “Uhhhhh, haven't died yet.” And that's the highlight of the conversation. One is filled with hope; one is hope-less. Who do want to spend time with? Picture what happens when a person of genuine hope comes into your life. All it takes is one person and everything changes.

Hope is the foundation that rests on the goodness of God. Then, I believe hope comes into sight and emerges through the endurance of suffering. When you endure suffering, the apostle Paul says we know that

³ . . . suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope [Romans 5:3-4]

Sometimes the only thing in life you have is how you are going to respond. How will you respond to this? Hope is central to that response for people of faith. During hardship, during times of painful prolonged suffering when you see no relief on the horizon, people of faith turn their faces toward heaven. People turn to God and hope emerges. It is not avoidance of reality. It is not a childish pie in the sky until you die. Hope is belief in the goodness of God, belief that the power of God is with you regardless of the circumstances. Hope rests on believing who God is. Hope emerges as you endure suffering because as you endure suffering, you change. As

you endure suffering, you do what Friedrich Nietzsche called obeying in a long direction. Nietzsche was a philosopher in the 19th century. He said,

The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; there results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.

“A long obedience in the same direction.” Whether I feel like it or not, I am committed to this. I will obey it regardless of what happens. That results and has always resulted in the long run in what makes life worth living. A long obedience. Are you enduring? Are you getting up and obeying what you know to be true? It is not changing your circumstances. It is God changing you. “A long obedience.”

The Irish rock star of U2, Bono, the activist, has said that if he ever gets a tattoo on his arm, that's what it will be, “a long obedience in the same direction.” Either it has to be written very small or he has to have very long arms, but it would be a great thing to have at my core. I will obey for a long time in the same direction. I will endure, I will wait for what's next, I will persevere. That is the lesson Moses cannot learn until he is out of the desert. That is what Joseph doesn't discover until his brothers throw him down into the well. Hopefulness is the lesson that David learns while hiding from Saul in a cave and it changes him. You lock somebody in a prison and you beat him up and you shipwreck him and you get the apostle Paul. You raise somebody in abject poverty who has a distant father and a dead mother and a dead stepmother and you get Abraham Lincoln. You burn a young man so badly the doctors say he will never walk again and you get Glenn Cunningham, who 15 years later set the world's one-mile record. You have a poor black woman living in a society filled with discrimination and you find Rosa Parks sitting down and refusing to move for justice. You torture him in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp for 3-plus years and Louis Zamperini is unbroken by life; he was given hope by God that allowed him to forgive and move on. We call those people saints. We call them saints not because they are better than anybody else, but because they are just people who remind us of the power of God-given hope. Hope calls you to be present in the present, to be here now, not pie in the sky, not the sun will come out tomorrow. Hope calls you to be present here, whatever that is for you, whatever that is for me, to embrace it and, if need be, to endure.

In the weeks ahead as we explore hope, we want to share how hope grows inside us. We want to see where hope can be found. We want to see what the enemies of a hope-filled life are that leave us hope-less. But for today, I want to start with offering you the idea that hope is God's gift to trust Him while you wait, to continue a long obedience in the same direction. Hope rests on the goodness of God. It emerges in enduring suffering, but what does hope depend upon? Paul ends by saying,

⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us [Romans 5:5].

I believe that hope cannot flourish or be sustained without trusting that God loves you no matter what. God's love has been poured into our hearts. No matter how long you have to wait, no matter what you're living through, our God will never let you go. Have you experienced that love lately, or ever? I have to tell you, you cannot grit it out. You cannot suck it up. You have to receive God's love to receive God's hope. Here is the path of Lent to experience more and more

of the depths of God's love and grace, giving us hope that can never be overcome, because God's love will never let us go.

I would like to bring this home. I'd like to have you think of a situation that feels hopeless for you. It may be a relationship. It may be a job. It may be a health situation. It may be your location. Where is the place in your life where you feel not just defeated, not just hurting, but that you feel is hopeless? Where you are about to despair or lose hope?

My best friend was the chairman of the board of a big organization we were both a part of. As part of a crisis, I participated in asking him to step aside. He had done nothing wrong, but we felt like we needed a new face. He felt hurt and betrayed and that he could no longer trust me. Our friendship is shattered and I can't do anything to fix it. I have to sit here in hope that God will do what I cannot and continue to show up. That's what I am going to pray for. Let's close our eyes.

In this silence, I'd ask my sisters and brothers to think of a place in your lives that needs hope, where you feel hope-less. Is it possible that today you could ask God's love to come to that part of your heart? Just ask for it and see how or when God might show His love in that part of your heart.

Lord, we don't think there are magic bullets of hope, but we do believe there is a God of love whose power is limitless. We believe that one day You will create a new heaven and a new earth, a realm where there will be no more weeping, where infants don't die and people are not slaughtered on the beach, where people don't lose their jobs or their loves, a realm where the wolf and the lamb will feed together. But we live today in a broken world and until that day comes, let our hope rest in Your goodness and emerge in our endurance and let our hope depend on Your love. Amen.

A postscript from John Crosby:

"I'm encouraging our congregation to get and read [The Hope Quotient](#) by Ray Johnston (available in our bookstore). The overarching theme of the series and many of the illustrations are found in there; solo deo Gloria!"