

The Advent of Hope

Romans 15:4-13 (NIV)

⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. ⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹ and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name." ¹⁰ Again, it says, "Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people." ¹¹ And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him." ¹² And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope." 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.

What do you think of when you hear the word "hope"? Is it simply a wish with no guarantee of the outcome, like "I hope it doesn't snow today?" or "I hope that I get a new phone for Christmas?" Is hope something to look forward to, a feeling of optimism, a good thing that you expect to happen? This is the kind of hope we have to have to thrive because it is this certain expectation of something that is yet to come that gets us through today.

But when does hope die? (That's a dramatic turn, isn't it?) Just as last week we talked about things that take away our joy, but there are also things that kill our hope. Maybe the most obvious enemy of hope is when an expectation is not met, that the day something was promised to happen came and went and you were left wanting, lacking, disappointed. It's like the day you expected your package from Amazon to arrive, but it wasn't there at lunch and it didn't come in the afternoon. You waited until evening, checked the tracker and the status still said "arriving today." Hope died when you looked one more time outside your door before going to bed. The day was over. No package.

Hope lives or dies pretty much on the expectation of timing – how long do I expect this to take. When it comes to our spiritual life, we are probably asking ourselves how long does it take to overcome the sin that we do, sin that we are addicted to?

Addiction is kind of hard to define. You get medical jargon talking about brain stimuli and disorders and things like that, especially with substance addictions like drugs or alcohol. But can we define addiction more simply as the overuse and abuse and subsequent dependence of gifts from God – something that we come back to time and time again in a way that makes us feel good, gives us a "high," but is ultimately bad for us when it rules our lives, becomes our god, the most important thing in our lives to the detriment of everything else. With this understanding, pretty much anything can become an addiction – whether things we know are bad like illegal drugs, drunkenness, sex outside of marriage or things that are usually good like food, cleaning, work, gaming, or our phones.

If we take the time to look at our lives, every single one of us will confess an addiction of some shape or form. We fight against these things that try to take over all of our life priorities. But, as it often is with addictions, we eventually lose the fight. We give in. We resist for a while only to fall down once again. For the alcoholic, it's the one more drink, even though you've had more than you should have and the buzz is pretty high. For the glutton, it's one more piece of pie, even though your stomach is already full and it doesn't taste as good this time; you're just eating it to eat it. If it's sex, it's that one more video, even though you know you should have shut down your computer an hour ago; but you are entertaining that one more lusty glance and fantasy. If it's work, it's breaking that promise to be with your family so that you can put in more time at work even though you could do it another time. Each time we lose one of these fights with temptation, our hope of overcoming it dies a little bit more.

Paul knew that the Roman Christians were falling for addictive sins. He himself, the great apostle Paul, was not immune. In chapter 7 he wrote, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (Romans 7:15) We all know the same struggle. But the Apostle Paul goes on, though, to tell us that there is still hope. He wrote in our verses today, "Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope." (verse 4)

When we are feeling hopeless, like we will never overcome our temptations, that we are addicted to a particular sin, Paul shows us that Jesus Christ endured for us. "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed." (verse 8) Jesus became a servant for you and me in order to fulfill God's promises. He made sure that everything that God said he was going to do he actually did do. He made sure to complete his mission of living perfectly where we fell into temptation, to offer his perfect life in substitute for ours. He overcame sin when we did not. He conquered the devil when we listened to him. He endured as our servant so that by his perfect life and his innocent sacrifice on the

cross he now accepts us, just as we are. He takes us hopeless addicts to sin and forgives us, makes us new, makes peace between us and God. He changes us so that we have hope, hope because we are not bound for sin, hope because our Savior overcame sinful addictions for us.

In the advent of this hope, what do we do? We do not all wrestle with the same addictive sins. This makes it hard for us to relate when we see people sinning in ways that we ourselves don't, when they can't kick a habit that we easily put down. I can put the beer down and never pick it up again, but not my dad. I am reviled and find nothing appealing with pornography, but my husband struggles to stay away from it. I have no interest in video games, but my son gets a high from playing and it's hard to pull him away. I could care less about having a smartphone, but my wife always seems to always have it in hand. If we are strong in one of these areas and see one of our brothers or sisters in Christ struggling, then God calls us to bear up with them. God commands us to build them up, use our strength to make them strong, our strength to help them fight temptation to addictive sins. Instead of casting them aside like hopeless cases because they can't put down this specific sin the way that I can, I renew their hope with the hope God gives me.

This is what Paul is calling the Jewish Romans Christians to do with the Gentile Roman Christians. Instead of the Jews looking down on the Gentiles because of their spiritual advantages to their heritage and upbringing, remember what God has taught in the past. Remember how so many times he told us that he is the Savior of the Gentiles as well as the Jews. If God sees them that way, how can you or I see them any less? Don't treat those who struggle with sins as being hopeless cases no matter how many times they sin. Instead, build them up.

Well, how? By praying for them, or, maybe more importantly, praying with them. Pray for them and don't give up, even when they relapse. Pray day after day because God promises to answer our prayers and he likes us to be persistent. He gives us hope that these prayers will work because our trustworthy, promise fulfilling God always does what he says he's going to do, and he says that he answers our prayers. This gives us hope that he will intervene and be strong for us.

We also build up our brothers and sisters in hope in Christ by sharing with them the Word of God that has gotten us through hard times, helped us with our sinful addictions. Here are a few encouraging Scriptures meant to give us hope even in hopeless cases. 1 Corinthians 10:13 – "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it." This means that God is in control of even the temptations that come our way. He has freed you and me from the chains of sin. We are not bound to fail like a hopeless case. In fact, God never sets us up to fail. Instead, what he is often trying to teach us is, 2 Corinthians 12:9, that "'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." I'm not enough to overcome my sinful addictions, but my God and his grace that he richly pours out on me is. This changes the hopeless situations to ones filled with hope, as Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." (Mark 10:27) In Jeremiah 29:11, God told his people, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." This is true even through the bad times, the times when you feel like you are losing hope, because "[Jesus is] with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) As Psalm 23 taught us, he is going to shepherd us through everything – times of good and times of bad. When we get discouraged, when we lose our will power, when we fall into temptation, as hope starts to die, our Lord is right there to pick us up and renew us over and over again as he says in Isaiah 40:31, "Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

Passing on this hope through endurance is going to have variations of us as Christians getting together. Maybe it's meeting with the pastor, having him build you up and encourage you with God's Word and prayer. Maybe it's sitting down one on one with another of your fellow believers, looking for these encouraging words of God that were written in the past for us. Maybe it's meeting with other brothers and sisters in Christ who struggle with sinful addictions like you do. This is what our Tuesday night recovery group does. Our hope is rekindled as we share the wonderful Word of God that shows us our Savior who endured as our servant so that we know that we are forgiven and accepted by God, no matter how many times we fall. There is hope for all of us.

God gave us his Word to encourage us through the endurance of others, namely through the endurance of Christ as our servant who fulfilled and kept all of God's promises to us so that he has accepted us, covering over all our faults and flaws and forgiving all our sins. This means that we can always look forward to his words and his promises to be kept. He will never let us down. This is what gives us hope, renews our hope even in hopeless cases. This is the advent of hope. Amen.