

*Take Him at His Word*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on September 4, 2022.

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,  
and sing to your name.”

And again it is said,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”

And again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,  
and let all the peoples extol him.”

And again Isaiah says,

“The root of Jesse will come,  
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;  
in him will the Gentiles hope.”

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 (Romans 15:7–13).<sup>1</sup>

Hope is one of the defining characteristics of the Christian life. It is not worldly wishful thinking but conviction that what God has promised will be fulfilled. Hope takes God at his Word. Christian hope is also future oriented. For example, in the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul explains, “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Rom. 8:24-25). Although we have not yet entered the heavenly realm, we know it exists, that it awaits us. Our Lord has promised us the kingdom, given us the guarantee of his Spirit, and is preparing us for glory.

Hope then is essential to our daily Christian life. On a daily basis we encounter pain and sorrow, but they do not define our perspective. Our days may be filled with disappointment and frustration, but they do not dictate our perception. We may encounter strife, even in the church, but it does not determine our point of view. Hope does.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Hope helps us rise above our circumstances, not on the shaky sand of optimism but fixed firmly on the character of our sovereign God and his special revelation. Indeed, “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” (Rom. 15:4). Hope divorced from the Word of God may be momentarily helpful, but the trials of life wash it away like footprints on the seashore. But hope rooted in the character of God and the surety of his infallible Word is as unchanging and eternal as the Lord himself. And so, we look to the Word, even as we do in this moment, and find that our God is faithful to his people, faithful to his promises, and faithful in his provision. The examining question for us is not does God keep his Word but are we taking God at his Word?

### **Faithful to His People**

Some translators place verse seven as the concluding sentence of the first paragraph of chapter fifteen, as the ESV translation does. But, there is a compelling argument that instead it begins the second paragraph. If this is the case, and I think it is, the verse may be translated, “Receive one another, then, just as Christ also received you, to God’s glory” (NET). Such a rendering should then lead us to ask, who are we to “receive”? In chapter fourteen, Paul commands the church, “Now receive the one who is weak in the faith” (Rom. 14:1a NET). Is Paul still addressing the strong to receive the weak, or has he broadened his admonition? I believe Paul is telling us more and teaching us something important about the church and the people of God, and through them about hope.

Paul points us first to Christ’s service to the “circumcised,” an expression meaning the Jew but also likely a veiled reference to God’s covenant with Israel, as circumcision was the Old Testament sign and seal of the covenant. Out of all the world, God set his favor upon Abraham, upon his son Isaac, upon his son Jacob, or Israel, and upon his children. And it was to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Jesus said, that he came (Matt. 15:24). And it is in this ministry that Paul describes Christ as a “servant...to show God’s truthfulness.”

What is this truthfulness? To answer this Paul points us to “the promises given to the patriarchs,” meaning Israel’s fathers, namely Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And what, for example, did God promise Abraham? The Lord promised,

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3).

And indeed God blessed Abraham, as he promised. But what about his promise to bless the nations?

To answer this we must first consider Paul’s use of the word truthfulness: What “truthfulness” would Christ serve to the circumcised? And what truthfulness, through them, would lead Gentiles, indeed the nations, to glorify God for his mercy? It is none other than the gospel of Jesus Christ—the Good News that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might

receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4-5), the Good News that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). And it is this gospel that serves as the door through which Jew and Gentile enter into the Church of Christ, united as the people of God through faith.

Therefore, the people of God are not identified by their ethnicity or nation but through faith in the Son of God. Just as “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Rom. 4:3), so we too, Jew and Gentile alike, “walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had” (Rom. 4:12). The testimony of Scripture is clear: “In hope [Abraham] believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your offspring be’” (Rom. 18). Let us remember then:

“the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:23-25).

As the people of God, this is our history, which we look back to and see God’s gracious favor, and in this we grow in our hope.

And as recipients of God’s grace, we “receive one another...to God’s glory” (NET), into the church. We “who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ...who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall...[creating] in himself one new man in place of the two...[reconciling] us both to God in one body through the cross” (Eph. 2:13-16). This God has done for his people, according to his Word, for he is faithful to his promises.

### **Faithful to his promises**

To emphasize his point further, Paul takes us to the Word quoting from the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, beginning with a paraphrase of 2 Samuel 22:50, “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” It is a verse taken from the conclusion of King David’s song of deliverance, a song in which he recounts the Lord’s faithfulness in saving him from his enemies, concluding with praise. But it is not private praise. It’s not a national anthem but a hymn of praise that David intends to broadcast “among the nations” or “Gentiles.” The “Great salvation [the LORD] brings to his king” (2 Sam. 22:51) is a testimony to the Israelite but also all people, “that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”

The second example Paul gives is not a song of David but of Moses, also a song of deliverance concluding with praise: “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” Curiously, Paul’s translation inserts the preposition “with,” implying a unity of praise, by Jew and Gentile alike. This makes sense when we consider Israel’s exodus of Egypt and entry of the Promised Land. Neither were private events for Israel’s eyes only. As Rahab the prostitute of Jericho confessed to the spies,

I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all of the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. ...for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath (Josh. 2:9-11).

The testimony of the miracles worked for ancient Israel were also “in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”

The third example Paul gives is from a short, two-versed psalm (Ps. 117), in which the psalmist sings, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.” But, it is the following and concluding verse, which Paul does not quote, that reiterates Paul’s theme. For what do the Gentiles, even “all the peoples,” praise the Lord? We praise him for the greatness of “his steadfast love toward us,” and his enduring “faithfulness” (Ps. 117:2). For, the testimony of his love and faithfulness were “in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”

The fourth and final example Paul gives is from Isaiah, and the most overt reference to Christ as “the root of Jesse,” the promised heir of David. He is the promised one who will “arise to rule the Gentiles,” notably in the victory of his resurrection from the dead. He is the promised one who is the hope of the Gentiles that we “might glorify God for his mercy.”

Paul’s four examples may seem redundant, but his message should be clear: Over and over again we see God’s faithfulness to his people, his faithfulness to his promises, through the perfect provision of his one and only Son. As this is true, when you and I are tempted to despair, when life is seemingly hopeless, let us turn our eyes from ourselves and our circumstances to God, who he is and what he has done. And we find this truth by going to his Word, reading of his faithful provision time and time again, that our hearts may be strengthened and our hope renewed.

### **Faithful in His Provision**

Paul concludes his appeal with a prayer. Drawing from Isaiah’s prophecy, that our hope is in the coming of the “root of Jesse,” Paul prays, “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.” It is not only a beautiful benediction but a prayerful summation of the hope-filled Christian life. For, our God is “the God of hope,” or the “God who gives hope.”<sup>2</sup> He is the source of our hope, not the world nor our neighbor, not our possessions nor our circumstances, but God.

Just this truth alone is hope-giving. In a world of constant change, in a life not guaranteed tomorrow, neither you nor I know one second of existence without change. We grew up, and we grow old, but our God is eternal (Isa. 40:28). He never changes (Mal. 3:6). Indeed, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). And though the “grass withers” and “the flower fades,” his Word “will stand forever” (Isa. 40:8). He who is “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps. 90:2), “the everlasting God” (Isa. 40:28), is true to his Word, as he said through David, through Moses, through the psalmist, through Isaiah. Our God is the God of hope, and he is not silent, nor is he absent.

He is the God who gives hope through the indwelling presence of his Spirit, yielding fruit in us through faith, fruits such as joy and peace. The joy we know in Christ is never circumstantial but is a God-given fruit of tranquility that transcends all conditions. Christians experience joy on sunny mountain tops and stormy valleys alike, because its source is not of us but in us through

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 880.

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the Spirit of Christ. Likewise, the peace we enjoy in the church, harmony among the beloved, is not manufactured nor imported but present in his presence. As Jesus explained, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt. 18:20). And so, Paul prays specifically that our God of hope will give these fruits through faith and with purpose: that we may “abound in hope.” The word translated “abound” means to “have an abundance,” to “be rich,” or simply to “have more.”<sup>3</sup> Paul’s prayer is that we have more hope today than yesterday with the evidential fruits of joy and peace of the Holy Spirit. What a beautiful petition to pray!

This is my prayer for you; may this be your prayer for me, that we who may glorify God as “one voice” (Rom. 15:6) may be filled with all joy and peace through faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit, that we may be brimming over with hope.

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick William Danker, Ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 805.