

Be Joyful in Hope, Patient in Affliction, Faithful in Prayer

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 12:9-21

“Be Joyful in Hope. Patient in Affliction. Faithful in Prayer.” There are three separate instructions in our verse, and I will take them in the order Paul gives them. When you read them the first time, you might get the impression that Paul is giving random pieces of advice, but study them, and there’s a kind of logic here. My three points will not be balanced. I will spend lots of time on point one. Less time on point two, and even less on point three. “Be joyful in hope.” It all starts with hope. More than you realize, everything you do is driven by hope. How so? *Hope is a point on the horizon. When we hope, we set our heart on a point on the horizon. When we hope, we look into our future, and we see a point on the horizon, something good. And then we lean towards that point, we lean towards that good thing with our thoughts, our emotions and our actions.*

Whether you realize it or not, just about every action in your day is driven by hope. You get up in the morning and you decide to groom yourself. You clean your hair, you brush your teeth, you put on an outfit and you try to choose an outfit that looks decent. You check yourself in the mirror before you head out. Why? Because you are aiming at a point on the horizon, you hope to be presentable for human society. You hope for social acceptance and you know that first impressions matter. For you SERVE participants, this morning in the breakfast room, there was a moment when you made a decision based on your hope horizon. You had a tray full of food in your hand, and you chose where to sit. Maybe you chose to sit with a group of kids from another youth group whom you’ve never met before and you introduced yourself. Why? Because you are aiming at a point on the horizon. You hoped to meet people on this trip. Or maybe you sat with your own youth group members. Why? Because you were aiming at a different point on the horizon. You hoped to get to know people in your own group better over the course of this trip. Or maybe you deliberately chose a table by yourself. Maybe you are both an introvert and non-morning person and so the last thing you want to do is have to talk with anyone—especially some extroverted morning person. You hope to be left alone. When you do your algebra homework, when you take a part time job, when you call a friend to hang out on a Friday night, you live in hope, you are aiming at a point on the horizon.

Without hope, without that point on the horizon, we human beings wither. If you don’t have a point on the horizon that you’re aiming at your soul shrivels. You can see that sometimes. Sometimes when a person loses a loved one who was central to their hopes, maybe a spouse, they stop doing some basic things. Sometimes they stop taking care of themselves, they lose their appetite, they let their house get messy, the lawn gets shaggy, they wear the same outfit three days in a row. Why does that happen? Because all those things were part of a hope they shared with that other person. Now that the other person gone, that hope has lost its force. What do people say when that sort of thing happens to them? They say, “what’s the point?” When people lose their will to do basic self-care things they say, “what’s the point?” What they mean by that is that they have no point on the horizon towards which they are moving. They can no longer see any better future.

As we go through life, we will hope for thousands of things. We are constantly aiming at horizon points. Some of these will be small and ordinary. I hope I have fun at SERVE. I hope I

pass my chemistry test. Others will be large and central. I hope I get married. I hope I have a family. I hope my Mom's cancer is cured. I hope my children grow up to love Jesus. Some those hopes will be realized. We will reach that horizon point. Some of hopes will be dashed and it will be painful. Sometimes we will reach a hope only to realize it wasn't as satisfying as we thought it would be. We got our promotion! We got the house of our dreams! And it's just...okay.

Truth is, all hopes in this world will ultimately fail. Human hopes are bounded by time, space and mortality. Human hopes are hemmed in by that brick wall of death. No matter how noble they are, all human hopes will smash into the brick wall of death and they will be shattered...That's why some people say you shouldn't hope at all. Hope is dangerous. Hope will disappoint you. In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, when Andy arrives at prison, his fellow inmate Red tells him, "Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope will drive a man insane." And the philosopher Frederic Nietzsche says, "Hope is, in reality, the worst of all evils because it prolongs the torment of man."

Paul disagrees. He says, be joyful in hope, that's because Paul's hope is not a human hope. Paul's hope is the only hope that death can't touch. That's the hope of life in Jesus. All other hopes are bounded by space and time and mortality. But when your horizon point is set on Jesus who is in heaven at the right hand of God, you are anchored in an eternal place. I know this sounds like something out of a Marvel movie, but you can think of Jesus' death and resurrection as him punching a hole in space and time. The hard horizon of death is smashed to pieces. Jesus is born and an eternal being comes to live among us. Jesus resurrection smashes a hole in the brick wall of death and now we have a way through. Eternity rips through the surface of time, and now, in the words of 1 Peter 1:4, "we have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for us."

"Kept in heaven for us." That's another thing that's different about this hope. We don't just have this hope. This hope has us. All other human hopes are things we have to work towards. Financial success, school success—these hopes don't help you achieve them. They are just there out on the horizon and you have to climb up to them by your own strength. But this hope is kept in heaven for you! When you belong to Jesus, he's holding onto hope for you. He's keeping hope for you. He's making sure that hope does not die. He's beside you urging you along, he's in front of you showing the way, he's behind you pushing you. If you get lost, this hope comes to find you. If you fall down this hope will pick you up and carry you home.

That means when you have that as your horizon point, you are able to stand in the middle of all kinds of disappointment and loss and still have hope. When your hope is anchored beyond the horizon of this world, you learned the secret of being content in all things. That's a line from Paul right? "I've learned the secret of being content in all things, I can do all things through him who strengthens me." He wrote that in Philippians 4. Philippians is probably Paul's most joyful letter. That's the letter where he wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice!" "Do not be anxious about anything! Whatever is good, whatever is excellent or praiseworthy, think about these things!" Through the whole book Paul is joyful in hope. And do you know where Paul was when he wrote the joyful letter? He wasn't poolside at an all-inclusive Caribbean resort. He was in prison. He was in a place designed by the empire to smash hope. But that place couldn't take away Paul's hope because his horizon point was anchored in Jesus and Paul knew that this prison could not touch his hope. He would escape from that prison. Either he would be found innocent, or God would miraculously shake open the prison doors, or he would be executed and he would find himself face to face with Jesus.

Because Paul had this joyful hope, he was patient in affliction. You see how the two fit together? The horizon point in eternity helps you be patient in affliction. Patience really depends on hope. A 10-year-old kid is struggling with math. His dad is trying to help him as he figures out some problem and the child is getting frustrated. He can't get it. He blurts out "I'm terrible at math! I will never figure this out! There's no point! I'm hopeless." But then his Dad is patient, and says, "no, you can do this. You are smart. I know you can figure this out." And he pulls junior along until finally he figures it out. Do you see what happened there? The child loses his hope. He doesn't think he can ever get to the point on the horizon where he gets math. Dad is patient because he still sees the horizon point for his son. He believes his son can do math. It is hope that allows us to be patient in the affliction.

Patience needs hope and the greater the hope, the greater the patience. When you have an eternal hope, you can go down into some pretty dark and hopeless places, and live with patience and grace. That's a little of what you will be doing this week. You will be going into some places of affliction and need, and by your work and by your patience, your lives and your work will be a sign of hope. It's when we are patient and hopeful in places of affliction that we give the best witness to the love of Jesus. I think of Mother Theresa. I think you've probably all heard of her. She was the Catholic nun who worked in the slums of Calcutta, caring for the poorest of the poor. A central part of her work was a ministry to the dying. She would pick up dying beggars off the streets, and bring them into her ministry where she and her workers would care for them in the name of Jesus. She would wash their sores, feed them and give them dignity and love until they died. Her charity for these people who the society around them treated like garbage became famous.

Some people, including some Christian people, criticized Mother Theresa's work. They said, she shouldn't be caring for dying beggars; she should be helping get rid of the underlying causes of the poverty that puts them in the streets in the first place. Now, I am all for Christians working to get rid of the underlying causes of poverty. That's critical work. But this criticism is unfair. In some ways what makes mother Theresa's work so powerful was that it was pointless-pointless from a human perspective. If your horizons and hopes are only human horizons. If these people are just terminally ill beggars who are going to be worm food, why spend so many resources on them...But if your horizons are Jesus' horizons, you see them as creatures made in the image of God. Human beings for whom Jesus has died. And if you know anything about Mother Theresa, you know what she said when someone asked what she saw in these beggars that made her want to help them. She said she saw Jesus. See, there it is. She had a different hope, a different horizon, an eternal horizon and that's what she saw when she looked in the faces of the poor and that's why she was able to enter into their affliction with patience.

There's a saying that I love, that I used to have on my bulletin board above my desk. *Try to do something every day that would make no sense if God did not exist.* Now, you may think, that sounds wonderful, but what sort of things are you talking about? Well our passage gives some good suggestions. Blessing those who persecute you. Feeding your enemies. Honoring one another above yourselves. Those things that only make sense if God is real and Christ is risen. Actually you SERVE participants have some people in your midst whose lives meet that standard right now. I'm talking about your leaders. Many of them are giving up a week of vacation to do this. They could be vacationing on a beach with their family. They could be sleeping in. Instead they're sleeping on a floor in a church with squirrely teenagers. That makes no sense...why would you do that? You wouldn't, unless God is real and Christ is risen. And he is real. And he has risen.

I have one more saying left and no time to talk about it. That's "Be faithful in prayer." So important, but I have no time to talk about it other than to say, prayer is the thing that helps keep us hopeful in the middle of our afflictions. Prayer trains you to see your problems, and the world's problems in the light of God's eternity and in the light of his love and his power. To pray is to set your eyes on the one who is seated on the throne in the new Jerusalem, who is making all things new, the one in whom is all our hope.

So, as you young people go out into your SERVE week, and as all you other people go out into your serve week. May you be joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer. "And may the God 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."

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