

# "The Equation of Hope"

Text: Romans 15:4-13

May our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless each of you with his grace, mercy, and peace. Amen.

Dear Fellow Recipients of the first and greatest Christmas Present:

As we get older, we're supposed to get wiser. *Supposed* to. My experience is that when we get older, we get more fearful. We like to chalk this fear up to experience and call it "caution," but in the end it honestly looks more like just plain fear. Experience is actually both the outlaw and the sheriff here, in that it can both cause the problem and arrest the problem. Experience can actually lead us to worry *more* or it can offer us comfort and encouragement to worry *less*. The problem is the longer we live, the more we see. We see, time and again, that bad things happening to good people. We see the good and the decent – young and old - dying from cancer, breaking bones in falls, or trying to sort out their lives after sickness or family discord. We see loving parents searching for lost or abducted children, or hear of parents getting that "worst of all calls" in the middle of the night, and it begins to dawn on us that the same sorts of things could also happen to us. Not just to others, to *me*. The result is often fear and, at times, crippling incapacitating fear.

Yet this same experience throughout a lifetime *can* also – *should* also – leave us with a tremendous sense of confidence and encouragement. David, for example, was certainly a man who faced death, danger, and hardship often in his life. Yet toward the end of his life, what did he write in Psalm 37:25? **"I have been young, and now am old..."** (which means David had experience, but what did that lifetime of experience teach him?) He continues: **"Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread."** David's experience taught him the opposite of fear, which is that his God could be trusted.

So we learn that experience can produce fear or encouragement. That outcome (fear or encouragement) becomes even more important once we learn that *encouragement* is one of the main components of hope. This morning we will examine a truth identified in our text that we will call the *Equation of Hope*, which is: *Endurance + Encouragement = Hope*. The text that will guide and instruct us this morning is found in Paul's Letter to the Romans, the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 15:4-13** *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.* <sup>5</sup> *May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus,* <sup>6</sup> *that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* <sup>7</sup> ¶ *Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.* <sup>8</sup> *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,* <sup>9</sup> *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."* <sup>10</sup> *And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."* <sup>11</sup> *And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him."* <sup>12</sup> *And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."* <sup>13</sup> ¶ *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.*

These are God's words. We dare never forget that fact, nor lightly consider the implications of that truth. Each time we open our Bibles we are privileged to hear or read the very words of our God – words that are without error of any kind and that possess the power to turn us from death to life. To remind ourselves of this fact, so we begin with this prayer: **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

Problems are just the opposite of clothes. Clothes shrink in the dark (which is why they no longer fit after hanging for a time in a our closets) while our *problems* actually *grow* in the dark. The good news is that problems tend to shrink by the light of day. Unfortunately, our clothes never seem to recover.

I wonder how many here know exactly what I'm talking about. (The problem part, not the clothes thing.) I'm guessing most of you have seen relatively minor problems grow into full-blown catastrophes in the darkness of your nighttime brooding, only to see the mountain return to a molehill by the light of day. Worse still is when we actually create hardships in our own minds that have no basis in reality. Parents are especially good at that, imagining the worst as we wait for our children to make it safely back home. So easy to create mental scenes of mayhem, only to awaken to another morning of all's well. But doesn't God at times allow bad things to happen? Yes, but stress and anxiety do nothing to prevent them. As is so often the case, the real issue, the

real problem, is not so much reality as it is the fear and stress over what may or may not ever happen.

Again, I would guess the vast majority of you have been there. Bad things happen along the way that we simply cannot prevent. What we *can* control is how we react. We have the power to turn something relatively small and insignificant into a major calamity. With the dawn of the Information Age, even Christians are getting caught up in the fear and worry game. We hear about so many bad things – things that probably always happened around the world but that we just never heard so much about – and we imagine that sooner or later our number is going to be called and catastrophe will strike also in our lives.

What is so remarkable about this fear and worry phenomenon is that almost *none* of the things that cause us so much anxiety ever even come to pass. They are quite literally therefore figments of our imaginations; they are apparitions born of fear. Monsters under the bed. We stress about them simply because they *could* happen. Yet there is most often neither a basis *nor an end* to that sort of needless torment, for there is no end to the bad things that *might* or *could possibly* happen.

This is how experience serves as our own personal tormentor, when we allow our knowledge of what *could be* to threaten and intimidate us, leaving us fearful, anxious, and full of doubt.

Experience, however, can also – again, *should* also – provide tremendous encouragement and assurance. It is weakness of faith on our part that requires evidence before we place any real confidence in God's care for us – *throughout our time of grace on earth*. That's why it is often only the very old (those who stand at death's doorstep) who speak with confidence about how well God cares for his children. They can look back and recognize the perfectly consistent grace of God in their lives. Often it is only when the vast majority of life is behind us that we begin to feel comfortable in maintaining a confidence about the future. We need to come to terms this morning with the fact that the sort of existence wherein we are tortured by fear and anxiety is simply not acceptable. Our Savior deserves better from us. As to Thomas, so also to us he says, **"Because you have seen you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**

Our text offers us the only cure for such weakness of faith. It points us, as always, to the Word of God. To this end the first verse of our text tells us: **"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."** Do you see the problem with waiting until after our lives are just about over to have confidence that God will *always* take care of us? In that way we sinfully elevate sight or experience over faith. In other words, we begin to trust our God only after he proves to us – for an entire lifetime – that he is worthy of our trust. Our text is here offering a better way. The Holy Spirit is here telling us that that is exactly why he gave us the Bible. That's why he bothered to record all of those things that happened to other people, all of that history. He caused those events to be recorded and preserved **"for our instruction"** and so that we might have **"hope."**

What, exactly, does that mean? It means that we ought to be able to read about how God preserved David, and Abraham, and Noah, and Moses, and Daniel, and Joseph, and all the others, and to learn something about our God from all of that history. It means that young and old alike should be able to read the history of God's care for his children and to thereby gain a confidence concerning how God will also take care of me. That's exactly what our text is talking about when it says: **"that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."**

What kind of "hope" is Paul talking about here? It is certainly not the kind of hope the world knows, which is based on nothing but longing. *"I sure hope those lottery numbers come up big for me this weekend."* That sort of "hope" is just an expression of what they want to happen. It is a simple statement of will or desire.

Don't misunderstand. Hope is critically important to every human being. Without it, life would be virtually intolerable, and most would simply refuse to go on. My personal opinion is that the removal of every last vestige of hope will serve as one of the great torments and horrors of hell. Human beings can keep a stiff upper lip and work through some incredibly difficult times if they can just hold out hope. Remove all hope, and the human being no longer has the will to go on. Imagine such a loss of all will to resist or hang on, and then add to it the horror of knowing that the agony will in fact go on for all eternity. No reprieve and never any cessation of abject misery. Nothing will "get better" or improve, ever. As heaven will be infinitely grander than anything we can now imagine, hell will be infinitely worse.

When the Bible talks about hope, it is based not on the *wishes* of man, but on the *promises* of God. Biblical hope is a confident and certain thing, resting upon and grounded in that which we know cannot fail. This is the sort of thing that drives out fear, calms our anxiety, steels

our confidence, and shores up our resolve. It is therefore almost the exact opposite of the world's kind of hope.

But how in the world do we obtain a precious gift like hope – the kind the Bible talks about? Our text says that it is **"through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures."** These words we must understand if we are to gain the blessings God wants us to possess through the study of this particular text. Paul offered this familiar progression earlier in this same Letter: **"More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. <sup>6</sup> ¶ For while we were still weak (powerless) at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."** (Romans 5:3-6)

We learn several things from these words. First, that God's kind of hope is based always on a certain promise. The promise mentioned here is that when we were powerless, and at just the right time, **"Christ died for the ungodly."** This is, in fact, the very fountainhead of all true, real hope. This is the heart and soul of the Christian faith and **"the reason for the hope that is in us."** This simple statement clearly declares that we did not save ourselves. We were saved by the perfect life and innocent death of Jesus Christ. God the Father declared us to be not guilty of any and all sin because another paid that sin in our stead – Jesus Christ.

Look again at what those words are saying, and thrill to the hope that they produce. We did not and could not add anything to our salvation. Jesus did it for us when we had neither the strength nor even the desire to do it for ourselves. Not only that, but we know now that far from condemning us, our sin actually serves now to *include* us in the hope and promise of these holy words, for there we read that **"at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."** The fact that I have sinned means that Christ died also, therefore, for me.

What greater comfort could we *hope* to gain? This makes patient endurance so much easier for the Child of God. The examples in God's Word of this same sort of patient endurance now inspire and bolster our confidence – and fill us with hope. We can also then learn to have more patience with our fellow Christians, knowing that they to, having been redeemed by Jesus Christ, are also struggling through this life just like I am. So also our text reminds us: **"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> that together you may with one voice**

**glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> ¶ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."**

The result of all of this, again, is hope – our confident longing for that which is to come. Until that great coming of our Lord and our entry into his paradise, we pray also with Paul in the last verse of our text: **"May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope."** Amen.

## Scripture Readings

ESV **Isaiah 40:1-11** Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. <sup>3</sup> A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. <sup>5</sup> And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." <sup>6</sup> A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. <sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. <sup>9</sup> Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" <sup>10</sup> Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. <sup>11</sup> He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

ESV **Mark 1:1-8** The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup> As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, <sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" <sup>4</sup> John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

# ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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**The Second Sunday in Advent – December 6, 2020**

## The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

## The Opening Hymn – (See hymn sheet for alternate melody)

"Come, O Long-Expected Jesus"

## The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

## The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

**The First Lesson:** (Isaiah 40:1-11) How God longed to be able to speak words of peace and comfort to Israel. He could not because of their ongoing sin, rebellion, and idolatry. Still God held out hope to those who looked forward to the fulfillment of the Promised Messiah. We today read these words with the knowledge that they have found their fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

## Psalm 96 (Supplement page 26)

**The Gospel Lesson:** (Mark 1:1-8) In Advent we prepare to commemorate the coming of Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Savior. The Great Forerunner, John the Baptist, prepared the way for Jesus. In this he served as the greatest example of how human beings are called to draw attention not to themselves, but to reflect the honor and glory of our God. John the Baptist is held in such high regard, in part, because of the example he set by deflecting all attention to the One who would follow.

## The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

## The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 704 (Stanzas 1, 3-5) (Brown Hymnal)

"Oh Lord, How Shall I Meet You"

## The Sermon – Text: Romans 15:4-13 (Printed on the back of this bulletin)

**"The Equation of Hope"**

## The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

## The Post-Sermon Hymn – 702 (Verses 1-4 & 7) (Brown Hymnal)

"As Angels Joyed with One Accord"

## The Prayers

## The Benediction

## The Closing Hymn – 49 (Red Hymnal)

"Almighty God, Thy Word is Cast"

## Silent Prayer

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

## Attendance – Sunday (29) Average (30)

### This Week at St. Paul:

<b>Today</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	–Sunday School and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship Hour
	<b>-11:15 a.m.</b>	– Church Council Meeting
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>-5:45 p.m.</b>	– Confirmation Class
	<b>-7:00 p.m.</b>	– Midweek Advent Service
<b>Next Sunday</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	–Sunday School and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	–Worship Service w/communion
	<b>-11:15 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship Hour
	<b>-11:30 a.m.</b>	– Annual Voters Meeting

**CLC News** – Pastor Del Maas has returned the calls to Bowdle and Ipswich. Pastor Sam Rodebaugh is considering the call to Living Savior of Eden Prairie. Pastor Michael Gurath has returned the call to Redeemer of Cheyenne. Messiah of Hales Corners has called Teacher Paul Tiefel. Teacher Matt Thurow has returned the call to Trinity of West Columbia.

**Church Council Meeting** – The Church Council is scheduled to meet this morning following the worship service.

**Confirmation Class** – Parents and students please note that Confirmation Class for the next two weeks will begin at 5:45 p.m. Looking ahead, please let Pastor Roehl know if your students will be able to attend a class on Wednesday, December 23<sup>rd</sup>.

**Midweek Lenten Services** – Midweek Advent services are scheduled to begin this Wednesday. These services will again include both a liturgical worship element and a Bible study.

**Annual Voters Meeting** – The Annual Voters meeting has been scheduled for next Sunday, December 13, during the fellowship hour. All voting members of St Paul are encouraged to make every effort to attend this the most important meeting of the year.

**Podcasts** – Podcasts of the Sunday sermons are now available on several podcast platforms. If you cannot find it on the platform you use, please let the Pastor know and that platform can probably be added to the list.