

We are on week 4 of our series, “And the Band Played On”. A close look at a prayer by St. Francis Assisi. The first line of the prayer asks God to make us instruments of peace. Today we look at our next instrument, the harp and our mandate to bring hope. Where there is despair let me sow hope.

I know one thing that can bring me a lot of despair. Getting zinged by that diabolical invention.... autocorrect. Who else has been zinged by autocorrect? Here are some unfortunate victims of autocorrect:

Auto correct jokes slides – I’ll read through each one. Slight pause with each one.

Back to sermon slide.

Today we use the harp as our instrument to lead us into a discussion of hope. The harp is a huge instrument. Difficult to transport. Why might you ask. Let me describe it. It is triangular shaped with strings running at an angle down to its sound board. It’s frame is typically made of wood. The standard size of a harp is 6 feet tall, 4 feet deep, and it weighs 80 lbs. The strings of the harp are typically made from animal tendons. (Sorry animal lovers!) Each harp has anywhere from 40-47 strings.

Harps have been around for a while. Not quite as long as the flute, but I’d say since 3000 BCE is pretty old. Earliest discoveries of harps were found in what is now Iraq and Iran. Harps have been found in archaeological digs all around the world. The harp is featured as a symbol in several ways. In Ireland it is a political symbol and is featured on its coat of arms. In Christianity, harps have been attributed to heavenly visions where they are played by angels. It is mentioned in Genesis 4:21 as the instrument played by Jubal, son of Lamech. King David is often pictured with a harp.

One of the more famous comedian/harpist of the 1920's was Harpo Marx. His performances would include slapstick comedy followed by him playing his harp. Here is a clip of one of his performances.

PLAY VIDEO HERE to about the 1:17 mark

I think we can all agree that it isn't hard to look around and see despair. Some of you in this very room are feeling degrees of despair. And some of you have even shared that despair. Today we turn to Paul and his letter to the church in Rome for some help in turning despair into hope.

Let's talk about this letter for a moment. Romans is unique in so many ways. It is dubbed as Paul's greatest work. John Wesley considered it a collection of all the doctrines of the early church. Many of our most quoted scriptures are in the book of Romans. Romans contains verses that strung together are called The Way of Salvation. There is one other interesting fact about this letter. It's the only letter that Paul wrote to a church that he hadn't yet visited.

Most scholars agree that it was written during Paul's second missionary journey during the 18 months he was in Corinth. Paul himself says at the end of Romans that it was scribed by a believer named Tertius and delivered by another believer named Phoebe. The date of this writing is thought to be between 55 and 57 AD.

This leads us into our passage today, specifically verses 3-5. And not only that, but we^[d] also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Why is it so important to hope in God? We place our hope in parents, when we are young. We place our hope in our peers when we are teenagers, and we place our hope in our careers when we mature. Most of us will learn eventually about the futility of placing our hope in anyone or anything except Jesus Christ.

What could be sadder than to see someone's best hopes dashed to pieces. Doesn't that smell a lot like someone who hasn't learned to place hope in God? Don't just look at "THAT PERSON" Perhaps there are some of you sitting here who have invested a relatively small percentage of your total hope in God and God's will for your life.

Listen to what Paul says, "Character produces hope and such hope never disappoints." Paul knew something very important. A person with a Godly character has many reasons to become increasingly hopeful. So much so, he says in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, "Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day."

Godly character produces an increasing measure of expectation of what God will do, what God will do in us, through us, and with us. Hope boasts of our sense of worth, our confidence and our optimism.

Hopeful people have an eager expectation of God's continuous directing, protecting and fruitfulness. Spiritual hope helps us transfer our trust away from fallible humans and human desires toward the unfailing promises of God.

What if we asked the Lord to help us teach others about the many reasons to place more hope in God and less in other things.

Paul taught the Romans that hope is based in God's reliable attributes.

The best way a person can become more hopeful is to increase their intimate knowledge of the Lord's character qualities. What does this mean?

It means spending time every single day worshipping God for holiness, truth, love, grace, omnipotence, omniscience and all sufficiency. Spend time each day with God. There are a list of 85 attributes of God in key verses of scripture. Start looking for them. Go on a scavenger hunt.

What if. Gasp. You used a concordance to find key verses throughout the Bible that highlight the key attributes of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. David wrote in Psalm 43, “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.”

What if we asked the Lord to help us grow in hope as we grow in the knowledge of His character qualities.

Paul wanted the Romans to see that hope would grow as they meditated on God’s promises. Our hope is guaranteed by God’s promised love. This love is manifested through the more than 7,000 promises given to us throughout the Scripture. What if we were people who spend more time talking and thinking and reading about promises than problems.

In his 2nd letter Peter writes, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and Godliness through the true knowledge of Christ who called us by His own glory and excellence. Through these He has given to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

When we focus more on the promises of God and less on our own desires we will grow in hope. The most optimistic people in the world are those who see everything through the lens of the promises of God. Ask the Lord to help you meditate more on the promises of God and less on the desires of humanity.

Paul taught the Romans that hope that grows out of Godly character helps anyone adapt and grow in any situation. The great truth about hope in God is that it is not diminished by circumstances, criticisms or misfortunes.

Paul teaches us that tribulations have a way of producing a brighter hope that shines through all the darkness around it. Hopeful people in desperate times are given a greater opportunity to share their testimony of confidence in Christ.

Even though people of the world may mock our sincere hope, it is the light of Jesus that urges us forward.

I'm pretty sure none of us think about asking the Lord to allow hardships in our lives and yet we know at some point we will face exactly that. So what if we asked for those hardships to give us a greater platform to hold forth the hope found in the Word of life?

Paul taught the Romans that hope does not disappoint or delude or shame. Christians have a continual renewing sense of hope that transcends problems. God in His wisdom and love fulfills our hope as we have victory in Jesus regardless of our difficulties.

Yes, Church family, we can look forward to an eternity with Him, serving Him, loving Him, worshipping Him and being like Him. This is hope. This is what allows us to carry out all of our duties and challenges with the confident expectation that God is at work in us both to will and do of His good pleasure. This is how we move the needle from despair to hope.