

Hope, Endurance & Prayer

Gospel Culture, Part 5

Romans 12:12

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As you know, Pastor David has prioritized Scripture memory, and the way we're preaching through Romans 12 is giving you an opportunity to memorize it as well. This week we're in verse 12, which has 11 words that include three exhortations, which focus on three themes: hope, endurance and prayer.

Remember that we're about three-quarters of the way through Paul's letter to the Romans. So while this verse could stand alone, it needs to be considered in its context. Chapter 12 begins with the word "therefore." So, in light of God's mercies that have been described in chapters 1-11, Paul now lists what our responses should be. There are about 20 admonitions in chapter 12 that are relevant to the church as a whole, as well as to individual Christians. These pithy exhortations aren't just an afterthought; they are directly connected to the story line of the whole letter.

Paul assumes here that his readers are already believers or have responded to the message of the gospel he's presented in the earlier parts of this letter. He has explained at length how all are sinners and in need of redemption, and how through Christ we can now be justified by faith, adopted into God's family and filled with the Holy Spirit. Paul also speaks of how the church is now made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

Remembering how God has redeemed us, how He loves us and how He promises to be with us, Paul is now describing what it should look like for us to love Him and live for Him. This is what it means to follow Jesus. Think of the picture we have in the story of Israel's rescue out of Egypt. Once they had been freed, God gave them the Ten Commandments to provide the means by which they could express their love and loyalty to Him.

If we look back to Romans 1:5, we'll see that Paul says, "*We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations.*" Chapter 12 then is part of Paul's purpose, as he describes what that "obedience of faith" should look like. I'm going to read Romans 12:9-13 again to give us the larger picture:

⁹ *Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.*
¹⁰ *Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.* ¹¹ *Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.* ¹² *Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.* ¹³ *Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*

Let's pray.

Lord, we pray that what You purposed in this text—to “bring about the obedience of faith”—would be true as we study Your Word. We pray that Your Spirit will instruct us and show us any way in which we are languishing in our trust in You. May we become a people of faith and constant prayer, by Your grace and goodness. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

This trilogy of words—hope, endurance and prayer—are profound. They are “Christianity in brief.” They're also natural partners. Hope helps us endure during difficult times, and we are sustained through the prayers of God's people. But just as they naturally stand together, they will also naturally fall together. So prayerless people often lose hope and are prone to give up in times of trial.

I recently read an interview with Bart Ehrman, a professor at North Carolina University, who claims to have had a born-again experience and who has studied at two Christian colleges. He has also been a pastor. But later in life, he turned his back on Christianity and now debates and teaches in a way that undermines Christian truth. In this interview, Ehrman said what led him away from the Bible was not academic scholarship. It wasn't an intellectual decision. Rather, he was drawn away by the present reality of suffering. If God is active in our world, why does suffering still exist? As he explains, “I got to a point where I didn't believe anymore.” We can imagine the impact his doubt had on his college classroom students. But remember, not all doubt is created equal.

Doubt has a place in all our lives. For example, when the “check engine” light on our car dashboard flashes, it doesn't mean you have to pull off the road and call a tow truck immediately. My car's light has been on for months and the car is working fine. But the point of that warning light is that it's time to consult a mechanic or at least look under the hood.

That's where doubts actually serve us well. They're to be taken seriously and not ignored—but they're not the same as unbelief. So we can definitely discuss our doubts here in the church. But we should realize that they're indicators, pointing us to look deeper for resolution and truth. We can be a community that helps one another engage our doubts. But can you imagine a high school senior entering Ehrman's classroom with only a minimal Sunday school

education? They could easily be given a university-level question about God that punches a hole right through their faith. We must be grounded in the truths of God's Word.

Beyond intellectual doubts, there are also emotional doubts, what C.S. Lewis called "the rebellion of your moods." Emotions can hijack reason and even take control of our minds. Perhaps you've fallen into sin and all of sudden you are overwhelmingly discouraged. You convince yourself that God can no longer love you; that He's done with you. You forget the power of the gospel and God's promised forgiveness, then you're taken down simply by what you feel.

When these intellectual or emotional questions start to rule our thinking, Os Guinness gives us some good suggestions. First, he suggests we get some sleep. Then he says, "Train your faith to be rooted in Who God is and what He's done." That's where our hope lies—in the depths of Who God is.

If I were to tie together the three themes of Romans 12:12, I would say our endurance through hardship is based on our hope that is sustained through prayer—our own prayer and the prayers of God's people. Let's look at three aspects of hope:

- Hope that stimulates joy.
- Hope that endures trials.
- Hope that is sustained through prayer.

Hope stimulates our joy in God.

In our vernacular, sometimes we use the word "hope" to mean wishing. "I hope it warms up. I hope the Nigerian girls win the Olympic bobsled event." (I really do—I think that would be great.) We emotionally desire a certain outcome. But that's not how Paul is using that word. He's talking about a specific Christian hope that is connected to God's character. Our hope is grounded, established and certain because of Who God is. We draw our hope from what we have seen in the past, then hope impacts our present choices and actions, then we look at the future through the lens of hope.

Hope not only helps us endure our trials, but it actually stimulates joy in the middle of our difficulties. We find this in Paul's words in Romans 15:13: "*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.*" Here we see that the source of our hope is the God of hope. And through the power of His Holy Spirit, we too can abound in hope. Just as faith is a gift, so hope is also a gift from God. If you feel your hope is wavering in the middle of a dark circumstance, go to the God of hope Who will fill you with hope by the power of His Spirit.

Look also at Romans 15:4 to find another source of our hope: "*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.” If we put this together, God through His Spirit illuminates His Scriptures to give us hope. If hope ultimately rests on our knowing the character of God, then the Word is where His character is revealed to us.

Think about the big story in Scripture. God created a perfect world, sin entered through Adam and Eve, then God’s response was to give them a promise—a hope—that He would ultimately redeem a people for Himself. The more familiar we become with this story, the more we can see the hope God brings. Over and over we see that in spite of God’s fierce anger at sin, He continues to pursue people in mercy, calling them back to Himself through faith and repentance. When you know God is going to make all things right, that He had a plan which was completely fulfilled in Jesus Christ, it draws you powerfully to hope. To the degree you become anchored in the story line of Scripture, your hope becomes secure.

Then even when your circumstances appear to contradict the promise, you can trust that it is still being fulfilled. While our emotions and doubts threaten to ransack our confidence, our hope in God and His Word will go deeper and give us the ability to see beyond them. When God is the source of our hope, it creates a present and living power that enables us to endure. Even as we see a world that is coming undone—with mass shootings, the breakdown of society and other forms of blatant evil—our hope is anchored behind the veil in Jesus Christ Himself. We can cling to the God Who is clinging to us. As Paul said in Romans 8:28, *“we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”* We may not see how everything is working together, but we know the God Who is able to do it.

Some of you may remember in the “Lord of the Rings”—after the bad guy was defeated and the ring was thrown in the fire at Mount Doom—how Sam Gamgee said, “All sad things will become untrue.” We too can wonder how real history is going to end. What will be the final story line? This is where the book of Revelation brings real encouragement, for we know our hope is based on the promise that God will not only bring good into the world, but He’ll even make all sad things untrue. He will do something profound in the new heavens and the new earth, and we can trust Him.

This living hope is part of our birthright as new creatures in Christ. We don’t see Jesus, but we believe in Him and love Him. We are able to rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Peter 1:8) because the Spirit is giving us the ability to see beyond our circumstances. That’s what it means to be a Christian. We must choose to allow our hope to stimulate joy even in the presence of doubt or sadness or grief.

So the first exhortation in Romans 12:12 is, *“Rejoice in hope.”*

Hope helps us endure trials

Paul's second exhortation is, "*Be patient in trials.*" This is a hope that helps us endure hardships and afflictions. We are admonished to be patient when everything around us seems to be caving in. Why does Paul pair the word "patient" with tribulation and affliction? I would say it's because very few trials are short-lived. They all seem to be long, if not lifelong. We live between the resurrection of Christ and His return. We're right in the middle of pain and suffering until He comes.

Whether it's a disability, a conflict that never seems to be resolved or a grief that will always remain in your life, all of these are long term and require patience. Patience is a gift from God and one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). To abide in hope during trials is more than we can achieve on our own. The perseverance we need has to come from God. The trials and temptations in our lives will overwhelm us unless He is with us. Otherwise we will eventually give up.

Patience operates at several levels. Much of it operates on an individual level, but this exhortation also applies in the context of the local church. That means we also need to have patience with one another. There are some in our midst who are experiencing deeper and longer lasting griefs than our own. We need to continue to encourage and pray for each other, even when our own lives are less troubled.

For example, how many of us are still thinking about the impact of Hurricane Harvey? Most likely we aren't thinking about it. But when it hit last August, with three to five feet of rain and over 300,000 damaged properties, it was one of the most expensive natural disasters in recent times. Today there are still over 3,000 families who don't have a home. But I had forgotten. I moved on. There are still churches doing ministry there. There are people who are still suffering and could use our prayers and assistance. These are good reminders of how we as a church need patience and endurance to care for one another.

But how does hope work? How does it help to get us through trials and tribulations? In Tim Keller's book [Making Sense of God](#), he gives us a really pithy example of how hope gets a person through their trials. Do you realize that the suicide rate between 1999 and 2014 went up 24%? During that same time period, there was a dip in America's population because of all these suicides. We can conclude that a lot of people are not persevering through their pain. Instead of being patient through tribulation, they're giving up.

Some experts might speculate that it was connected to the economic downturn or related to poverty. But when they looked at who the people were who committed suicide, they often were not dealing with poverty. Rather, the common trend was hopelessness, something that has

gripped so many people in our time. If a person has no hope for the future, how can they persevere through pain and hardship? Will they want to go through the pain if the future seems hopeless? Will they want to end their life early?

In light of that, imagine two women who applied for and were given the same factory job. Everything about them was the same regarding their socio-economic status, educational level and skill set. They even had very similar personalities and temperaments. The job was not complex or especially challenging. They were to put part A into slot B and then pass it on to the next person—over and over again. There was, however, one difference between these women. The first woman was told that at the end of one year, she would be given a \$30,000 bonus. The second woman was told that at the end of one year, she would be given a \$30,000,000 bonus.

After a couple weeks, they were both on their lunch break. The first woman said to the other woman, “I hate this job. Isn’t it driving you insane? It’s so tedious.” The second woman responded, “I don’t know—it’s not so bad.”

Of course, the point of that illustration is not that hope comes from getting a high bonus. Hopelessness can be felt by people who are making very large salaries. Rather, it points to the value and power of a future hope. We need to grasp the power of understanding what lies in our future. How much time do we spend considering God’s promise to fulfill all things? How much does that drive your present level of joy?

A person’s worldview significantly impacts their attitude toward present realities. If your worldview is atheistic, then suffering has no value. If you have an Islamic worldview, everything is already written—that’s fatalism. If you have a Hindu worldview, suffering is just bad karma. We need to think about how very attractive the Christian worldview is. We believe that one day God will restore all things and reconcile this world to Himself.

This gives suffering a very different significance. Even when we don’t understand it, we are able to trust Him because He is good and He has a perfect design for our future. This helps us press on through our suffering and struggles. In this way, God’s grace shapes our present responses to our circumstances.

Hope is sustained through prayer.

Paul says, “*Be constant in prayer*—that is, pray at all times. This is a very practical point. I think Paul is picturing a house church praying for one another and praying alone. Hope and endurance cannot come apart from prayer. Even though the power of the Holy Spirit is compared to fire and wind, prayer is still necessary. It may be hard for us to understand why the mighty sovereign God still calls us to pray. But yes, we’re commanded to pray—at all times. Even

though God is in control, we are still required to consistently pray. Are we constant in prayer? This is challenging to us.

Earlier in Las Vegas and now in Florida, I'm hearing of churches opening their doors to the public for prayer vigils, resulting in some profound ministry opportunities for those who are suffering and struggling, who are at their wits' end. "What happened? Is there a God? Where can we turn?" That's where the church has real answers. In the middle of all the discussion about gun control or mental illness or school security—all of which has its place—the church exists to show compassion and bring people to a place of hope through Christ. That's our calling. These are the conversations we need to be having.

Think about this on two levels. Because of God's common grace, there can be "horizontal hope" —a real place of human comfort through compassion and caring help. Even a year later, it's good to see how people are dealing with their very real losses. If you were to look for something like a TED Talk about finding hope in hopeless situations, you'll find dozens of such resources. Most people find hope through the kindness of someone else. It's part of God's common grace, which should definitely be found in the church as well. We should be touching people's lives, opening our doors and serving them.

But what's interesting about prayer is that non-Christians can't pray. So this is an additional special grace, a source of power Christians have so that we can bring into people's lives. Why is this so important? Because God answers prayer. He hears the prayers He exhorts us to pray. Jesus gave us some very strong parables on the subject of persisting in prayer. He gave us the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew 7:11, He says, "*How much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*" He told us to ask, seek and knock (Matthew 7:7-8)—that's continuous, persistent prayer. When we are in Christ, the Father sees us as He sees His Son and He will answer our prayers. This is something we can bring to a situation that the world can't bring.

We should be doing tons of horizontal ministry, which can be rich and life-giving. But we can also pray. We can be asking God to open eyes, ears and hearts as we minister. We can even pray this way publicly. Even some schools are opening their doors for those who want to pray. Very few people refuse to let someone pray for them. We can always ask and very likely the response will be, "Yes!" We need to include prayer in our ministry to people, praying in the name of God and giving glory to Him. George Whitefield, the 18th century evangelist, said, "Prayer is an antidote against every evil." We're praying for God to work, because He answers prayer and He cares for us.

Paul also discusses this connection between hope, patience and prayer in Romans 8. In verses 24-26, he says:

For in this hope we were saved. 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. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

Especially in times of affliction, especially in times of suffering, when we don't know how to pray, this promise of the Spirit's help is comforting. When others share their doubts, struggles and suffering with us, it may not be so important for us to give them answers or advice as it is to pray with and for them. Our compassion can be expressed through our prayers.

It might even help to keep notes or a journal to remind us to pray for one another specifically. Or you might pray for your neighborhood on your daily walks. Pray for your kids. Not only is suicide increasing in our times, but we're also seeing a whole generation of people who are losing hope in the church. They're not interested in Christ. How much are we burdened because of this? Are we burdened enough to intercede, asking God to work in our schools? It's only when we pray that we can see how powerful and effective prayer can be. It can open hearts.

Praying at home is great but praying with others is also very important. Remember, the exhortation in today's text is in the context of the church. We can pray in the powerful name of Jesus. The Spirit helps us to pray and our Father in heaven hears and He answers our prayers. He is good and we can call on Him.

We're going to try this now. Pray for the person next to you. Pray for the people in Florida who lost 17 students. Think of how many families were impacted by that act of violence? Pray for the churches there who are ministering to them. Also pray for the Leeper family, as Holly's father died on Wednesday and the funeral will be tomorrow. Pray that God would encourage and comfort them. Or maybe there's something on your heart, a burden you're carrying. Turn now to the person next to you and pray for a minute or two, then I'll close in prayer.

Father in heaven, we thank You for hearing our prayers. We lift up those around us who are suffering, that we would be patient in endurance and giving hope to one another. We pray for our fellow Americans in Florida, that You would strengthen them and that You would be glorified in that event. Help the churches and other organizations as they minister to those who are

hurting. We pray for our own schools here, that by Your Holy Spirit You would protect our children from this kind of evil.

We also pray for our youth as they graduate and move on to college or careers. Help us as a church to do what we can to help our young people become excited about their faith, to walk with You and not turn away. May they be open about their doubts now, and may You minister to them. Thank You that we're a church, not with all the answers, but that believes You're a living God. We thank You for the Bible that is true in every way and draws us to build our confidence in You.

Thank You for our time together today. We pray for the Leeper family, that You would strengthen them, especially as they minister to their extended family. Thank You, Jesus, that You're for us and not against us; we know that all this is because of what You've done. In Christ's name. Amen.

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