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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #58

May 29, 2022

Abounding in Hope with all the People of God

Romans 15:8-13

There are numerous things that mattered greatly to Paul, a reflection of what matters greatly to God. It is God who placed these burdens on the apostle's heart that he in turn might place them on ours. Now, what "burdens" do I have in mind? What one critically important "thing" weighs so heavily on Paul that he would repeatedly call on us to embrace?

Unity! I could spend time citing for you numerous places in Paul's writings where he stressed this point, a few will have to suffice:

"Live in harmony with one another" (Rom. 12:16).

"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:5-6).

"Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace" (2 Cor. 13:11).

"bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2b-3; see 4:13).

"Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (Phil. 2:2).

And that's just a few of several dozen texts that speak of the vital importance of unity in the body of Christ. But why is unity in the church so important? What's the big deal? It's important because of the way it testifies to the saving grace of God in Jesus. When the world around us sees our willingness and ability to put aside petty preferences for the sake of loving one another, they cannot help but marvel at God and the way he has transformed us from selfish, self-centered egoists into people who defer to one another and honor one another and sacrifice legitimate liberties for the sake of the spiritual welfare of one another.

I've talked with enough of you to know that one reason why you came to Bridgeway was because of the painful wounds you endured in your previous church, wounds that were inflicted because of fighting and division and harsh judgments that professing believers would bring against others. I suspect that all of us who've been in the local church long enough can cite examples of the horrid ways in which Christians divide and criticize and undermine one another, all of which bring reproach on the name of Jesus.

Paul was not oblivious to this. I think immediately of the counsel he gave to two women in particular in his letter to the Philippians. “I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord” (Phil. 4:2). We don’t know what had put them at odds with each other, but it was significant enough for Paul to single them out by name and appeal to them to strive for unity.

Put yourself in place of a visitor to Bridgeway. What would you think if you walked into a body of professing Christians who were constantly bickering and biting each other, arguing incessantly about trivial theological issues, criticizing and denouncing one another? I suspect they wouldn’t stay long, and I know that the name of Jesus would suffer reproach.

Unity in Praise among the People of God (vv. 8-12)

These past few weeks we have witnessed in Romans 14-15 Paul’s concern for unity in the church at Rome. Believers there had divided. The strong were parading their liberty and looking down their noses with a patronizing air of spiritual superiority at the weak. The weak, convinced that the strong were on the path to sinful self-destruction, looked with judgment and disdain on those in the church who exercised liberty in matters that they were convinced were dangerous.

This division was probably a reflection of the suspicion that believing Jews and believing Gentiles had for each other. The Jewish Christians in Rome were probably still holding on to certain OT ritual laws and regulations concerning what was permissible to eat and drink and what days were to be treated as uniquely special and holy. The Gentile Christians in Rome, who were never put under the Law of Moses, felt no qualms and asked no questions for conscience’ sake about such secondary matters. This issue threatened the unity of the body in Rome, and thus threatened to undermine their testimony to the unbelieving community.

It is with this in mind that Paul turns his attention to the purpose of God in Jesus Christ with respect to both groups. In Romans 15:8 he plainly declares that Jesus came to serve his own kinsmen, the people of Israel, here referred to as “the circumcision.” All that Jesus did was to remind them that God would be faithful to the promises he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the patriarchs of the nation.

Here’s the way Paul puts it in Galatians 4:4-5, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law.” That is, God sent his Son as Jew into the world to serve the Jewish people. And that service was primarily seen in his making propitiation for their sins. In 2 Corinthians 1:20 Paul said this: “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.” Everything promised to Abraham is found and fulfilled in Christ.

But he is no less clear that in coming to this earth, living a sinless life, dying a substitutionary death, and rising again from the dead, Jesus was serving and ministering to the Gentiles as well. His goal was to save them so that they would live for God and worship and honor and glorify him for the mercy he showered upon them. This Paul makes clear in vv. 9-12.

The likelihood is that Paul quotes these OT texts that refer to God's saving work among the Gentiles because some of the Jewish believers in Rome doubted whether they were on an equal spiritual footing with ethnic Jews. Paul's point is simply that Gentiles who trust in Jesus, no less so than Jews who trust in Jesus, are saved and counted among the covenant people of God. Whether they are identified as strong or weak, as Jew or Gentile, together they are one people, called to celebrate and sing and glorify God.

Two more brief comments. First, Paul puts to rest any doubts that his Jewish readers might have about the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's saving purpose. And he does it by citing three parts of the OT. He twice appeals to the Psalms in vv. 9b and 11, specifically Psalm 18:49 and 117:1. He quotes from Deuteronomy 32:43 in v. 10, and then again from the prophet Isaiah in v. 12. The writings, the law, and the prophets are all called to bear witness to God's saving purpose among the Gentiles.

Second, the purpose of God saving us who are Gentiles (although of course the same can be said of God's purpose in saving Jews) is worship! Look at the repetition of language: "glorify God" (v. 9a), "praise" and "sing" (v. 9b), "rejoice" (v. 10), "praise" and "extol" (v. 11), and "hope" in v. 12. Everything else in life and ministry is subordinate to this. All we do and say and preach and pray is designed to enable you to celebrate and extol and honor and glorify God!

Paul's Prayer for Us All (v. 13)

Having made his point that all Christians, regardless of ethnicity, are together one people who with one voice glorify and sing to the one God of heaven and earth, he turns to pray for them. I must confess that this is one of my favorite prayers in the Bible. Perhaps only Ephesians 3:14-21 is more precious to me than this one.

And for what does Paul pray? What burdens for believers does he bring to the throne of grace? He prays for an abiding **joy** that no amount of family discord or financial pressure can undermine. For those who know and follow Jesus Paul also prays for **peace**, a tranquility of soul and spirit that has the power to overcome whatever turmoil and tragedy we've yet to face. And all of this is with a view to the impartation from God of **hope**; rock solid, confident assurance that what our God has promised to do for us, he will most assuredly and absolutely fulfill. Romans 15:13, as you can see, is all about joy, peace, and hope. And I assure you that if Paul prayed this prayer for them back then, you and I are justified in praying this prayer for ourselves and one another today.

Four Reasons why I love and appreciate the Prayers of the Apostle Paul

(1) **Prayers such as this reveal the heart of God for his people!** This is what God wants for you! He passionately longs for his children to experience an abundance of joy, peace, and hope, and in essence says: "Just to come to me and ask for these gifts and I will supply them in overwhelming abundance!"

(2) It is in Paul's prayers that I discover what was of greatest value to him and therefore what ought to be of greatest value to me. The apostolic prayers in Scripture challenge our priorities and strip away the veneer of superficial spirituality and expose our value systems. They reveal what we cherish, but shouldn't. They uncover what we shouldn't embrace, but do. If you want your spiritual world shaken to the core, compare what Paul prayed for with what you pray for. Paul's prayer is just one of many biblical texts that set forth who we, the church, are to be. It describes our values, our priorities, our goals. This prayer is gospel! It declares to the world: "Here is what may be found in Jesus Christ: joy, peace, and hope!"

(3) It is in Paul's prayers that I discover what only God can do for me. There are undoubtedly countless blessings and virtues and goals I think are in my power to produce. By looking at the apostolic prayers of the NT I see what I am absolutely dependent on God's grace to produce. After all, *if Paul thought something was ultimately ours to create or generate, he wouldn't bother asking God to do it!* Looking at Paul's prayers typically disabuses me of self-confidence and self-reliance and casts me on the strong arms of God.

A good example of this is seen in Paul's prayer for "joy". In the final analysis, only God can create joy in God. The psalmist prays: "Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us" (Ps. 90:15). To be satisfied with the beauty and glory of God (which is the essence of joy!) does not come naturally to sinful souls. By nature, we turn to anything other than God for the joy that he alone can give. The spiritual goals we long for are ultimately beyond our reach. The changes we desire in our hearts can happen only by a sovereign act of God's grace. That's why it's important to note how Paul refers to God: he is "**the God of hope**", not so much because he is the object of our hope, although he assuredly is that. Rather, he is the **source** of hope. If there is to be hope it must come from God.

(4) Fourth, prayer glorifies God by revealing the extent of my need and the depths of God's resources to supply them. Prayers like this reveal how desperately helpless we are and how infinitely rich God is. God is not glorified by my efforts to do things for him, but by my confession that he alone can do for me what my soul most desperately needs, and then through me what most blesses others and advances his kingdom.

Five Prayerful Requests

There are five things I want to share with you from this single verse, this short but powerful prayer of Paul.

First, God is no miser with his mercy. Note the words "fill", "all", and "abound". Paul prays that God will "fill" us with joy and peace, not simply "give" or "impart" or "enable" us to experience these blessings, but that he might "fill" us with them! His emphasis is on the effusive, generous, expansive abundant, overflowing, and measureless way in which God answers prayers (cf. Ps. 16:11). We don't simply "have" or "possess" these blessings: we are "filled" with them, inundated and awash and overflowing with them.

Note also that it is not “some” joy or a “fraction” of peace or “a small measure” of hope. Paul prays that we be filled with “**all**” joy and “**all**” peace Not just a little here and there but with the totality of joy and the entirety of peace. Furthermore, we don’t simply “hope.” Far less do we hang on by our fingernails. Rather we “**abound**” in hope! Again, Paul points to the lavishness of God’s grace. God is no miser when it comes to his mercy. This is no tentative, anxious, uncertain, doubt-filled wish. It is a prayer for the overflowing and effusive gift of God’s grace.

Second, Paul prays for joy and peace because he knows that pleasure in God is the power for purity. In yet another passage Paul stated clearly that his motive for ministry was the joy of God’s people (2 Cor. 1:23-24). Whatever decisions he made, whatever he wrote in his epistles, was always based on what he believed would best serve their *joy!* Paul had some harsh things to say to the Corinthians (deservedly so, I might add). His rebukes often stung. But his aim was always their *joy!* Paul didn’t discharge his apostolic calling to expand his personal power or to broaden his influence or to bolster his reputation or to increase his control but *to intensify their joy in Jesus.*

Paul can almost be heard to say, “Whether I’m rebuking you for sectarianism in the church (1 Corinthians 3) or laxity in moral conduct (1 Corinthians 5-6) or abuse of spiritual power (1 Corinthians 12-14), *my aim is your joy in Jesus.* Whether I appeal to you to be financially generous (2 Corinthians 8-9) or warn you of false apostles (2 Corinthians 11), *my aim is your joy in Jesus.*”

If Paul had been pressed for an explanation, he would have said: “I’m always aiming for your joy because apart from your souls relishing and resting in the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ, you don’t stand a chance against Satan.” I believe Paul would have answered like the good Christian hedonist that he was: “I aim for your joy because God is most glorified in you when you are most pleased and satisfied and at rest in the plenitude of his beauty that can be seen in the face of Jesus Christ.”

God’s commitment to our joy in Jesus is motivated, at least in part, by the fact that ***Satan is no less committed to our joy in the passing pleasures of sin*** (cf. Hebrews 11:25). The diabolical strategy of the enemy is to seduce us into believing that the world and the flesh and sinful self-indulgence could do for our weary and broken hearts what God can’t. This is the battle that we face each day. We awaken to a world at war for the allegiance of our minds and the affections of our souls. The winner will be whoever can persuade us that he will bring greatest and most soul-satisfying joy. That is why Paul labored and prayed so passionately and sacrificially for joy in Jesus in the hearts of that first-century church.

The reason Paul prays for joy in Rome and labors for joy in Corinth is because of what he wrote to the church in Ephesus! In Ephesians 4:22 he referred to “deceitful desires”. They are called this because they lie to us and deceive and mislead us about the superiority of what they can do that God supposedly can’t. “‘Deceitful desires’ can trick us into feeling that sinful thoughts and acts will be more satisfying than seeing God. This illusion is so strong it creates moral confusion, so that people find ways to justify sin as good, or, if not good, at least permissible” (Piper, 102).

So, then, ***what precisely are “joy” and “peace”?*** I assure you it has nothing to do with the transient feelings of holiday euphoria experienced by those people in the shopping malls before Christmas. Joy and peace are not some superficial psychological giddiness that comes from reaping the material comforts of western society. There are countless feelings and passions and desires that arise in our hearts that are not the fruit of light in the soul. Paul wants nothing to do with them. ***The joy for which he prays is a deep, durable delight in the splendor of God that utterly ruins you for anything else.*** It is deep, rather than the superficial so-called “joy” that only scratches the surface of your soul. It is durable in that it survives the worst of circumstances in life.

Joy is experiencing a spiritual taste for the glory of Jesus. This joy has an “expulsive” power: it drives out all competing pleasures and leads the soul to rest content with the knowledge of God and the blessings of intimacy with him and companionship with Jesus. This is the kind of joy that rather than being dependent on material and physical comfort actually frees you from bondage to physical comforts and liberates you from dependence on worldly conveniences and gadgets and gold.

There’s something a bit odd and even ironic about this joy. Although true joy is an experience, it is deep and solid and firm and substantive, not fleeting and flippant and superficial. We know this because the Bible describes joy as flourishing in the midst of suffering (see Rom. 5:3; 1 Pet. 4; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Cor. 8:2).

My point is that there is a world of difference between joy in God and joy in the comforts God gives. We are grateful for the latter, but our joy is in the former! True spiritual, biblical joy is not the product of the human will in response to pleasant circumstances. It is the product or fruit of the Holy Spirit, and that is why Paul asks God to generate it within our hearts.

So, what about “peace”? The peace for which we are to pray is not the objective peace with God that Paul describes in Romans 5:1, but an inward, subjective, experiential state of mind and spirit. ***Peace is confident repose in the truth that what God has promised he will fulfill; it is the restful assurance that nothing can separate us from love of Christ.*** It is that glorious work of the Spirit in my heart that says:

“A sudden tornado may sweep away my house and family, but nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus!”

“A terrorist may separate my head from my body, but nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

“An incurable disease may ravage my body, but nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

“An unfaithful spouse may walk out on me, never to return, but God will never leave me or ever, under any circumstances, forsake me.”

This is Christian Hedonism: a joy and delight and satisfaction in God so deep and unmovable and indelible that no amount of suffering can shake it or induce me to take offence at God!

Third, pleasure in God is the fruit of faith in God. It is from or through the Scriptures that joy and peace arise. Why do I say this? I say it because Paul prays in Romans 15:13 that God would “fill you with all joy and peace ***in believing***, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” The phrase “in believing” could as easily be rendered, “as” you believe or “because” you believe or “in connection with” believing. In any case, the point is that God will most assuredly ***not*** fill you abundantly with these if you ***don’t*** believe. Both joy and peace are the fruit of *believing*, which in turn yields hope.

But believe what? Belief is confidence placed in the truth of what God has revealed to us in Scripture about who he is and our relationship to him through Jesus. The “believing” Paul has in mind is confidence and faith and trust in (1) the person of God revealed in Jesus, (2) the promises of God articulated in

Scripture, and (3) the power of God by which he makes it all come to pass. Belief does not plant itself in mid-air, but in the firm foundation of inspired, revelatory words preserved for us in the Bible.

And it's not just joy and peace that come from believing God's Word. The Word of God is the spring from which the waters of *faith* arise. Paul says in Romans 10:17 that "faith comes from hearing" and that hearing comes "through the word of Christ." People are drowning in skepticism and suffocating from doubt. They desperately need faith, but it doesn't just happen serendipitously. Faith doesn't miraculously appear out of thin air; ***it comes only if and when we hear and treasure the word of Christ.***

How often have you found yourself on the verge of saying: "God, I'm about to quit! Give me strength to endure. God, I'm inconsolable. Give me encouragement." Then we stand, waiting with open hands, looking to heaven. No! If you need encouragement and the endurance to persevere, turn to Scripture and let the Spirit of God awaken your heart and fill your soul with the revelation of God and his work for you in Christ. The problem is that people want joy and peace *without believing*, or at least without the hard work that true believing requires. They expect it. They pray for it. They are angry with God when it doesn't happen.

This is what Jonathan Edwards had in mind when he spoke of the necessity of "***laying ourselves in the way of allurements,***" i.e., taking steps to posture our lives in that place where the Spirit is most likely to energize faith. And that place is not only the sacraments and worship and prayer but preeminently the Scriptures.

The way the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the Devil are defeated is to hear and believe the Word of God when it says that God and his ways are more to be desired than all that sin can offer. When sin confronts you with a strong and attractive and appealing promise of satisfaction, stand firm and let the promises of God do battle on your behalf.

How, then, are we to get "joy" and "peace"? (1) Cry out to God that the Holy Spirit would stir up within our hearts and kindle afresh a flame of fascination and delight and satisfaction in God. (2) Pray that God would energize our hearts and minds to explore deeply the revelation of God and all he is for us in Jesus as set forth in Scripture.

Fourth, the purpose of pleasure in God is hope in God. Why do we lack hope? Could it be because we've been "burned" by putting our confidence in something that we really didn't need in the first place? We "hope" for a good paying job when we graduate. Some are "hoping" for a husband to wake up spiritually and get off the couch. Others "hope" for some way to cover next month's car payment. But in the end, all we need is Christ. He is the object and focus and obsession of our hope:

Paul applauds the Thessalonians for their "steadfastness of hope ***in our Lord Jesus Christ***" (1 Thess. 1:3). What is our "blessed hope"? It is the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, ***Jesus Christ*** (Titus 2:13). We are to "hope ***in Christ***" (Eph. 1:12). The mystery of the gospel is "***Christ*** in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

John Piper put it best when he said, “Sometimes what we need from the Bible is not the fulfillment of our dream[s], but the swallowing up of our failed dream[s] in the all-satisfying glory of Christ” (101). The reason that may not resonate with our souls or sound very encouraging is because we really don’t believe Jesus Christ is all-satisfying. We don’t savor him. And we don’t savor him because we don’t see him, and we don’t see him because we fail to look upon him as he has revealed himself in holy Scripture!

Hope is ultimately beyond our ability to produce. When we do try and create it or crank it up, it either degenerates into presumption or soon gives way to despair. But in this prayer in Romans 15:13 we are protected from presumption by Paul’s emphasis on “believing”. In other words, the revelation of God which we believe and trust establishes the boundaries, parameters, and the limits of what we may justifiably hope for. ***Joy and peace come from trusting only in what God has promised.***

Fifth, there is no hope for hope in God apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. If you feel utterly exhausted, both spiritually and physically, and are on the verge of despair because nothing you can do will avail to awaken hope in your heart, you are in precisely the condition where God can perform his most glorious work in you. It isn’t your will power or good intentions or New Year’s resolutions that will bring hope. It is the Holy Spirit! It is the power of the third person of the Trinity!

The Spirit of God does far more than merely perform miracles and signs and wonders. His work goes beyond that of setting people free from demonic oppression. Yes, he imparts spiritual gifts and converts the lost and causes people to be born again unto faith in Christ. But never lose sight of the fact that it is the Spirit and the Spirit alone who awakens and sustains genuine hope in your heart.

Conclusion

These past few years may well have been a horribly taxing and depressing time for many of you. But here’s the indescribably good news for those who know and follow Jesus: our God is the source of hope, and he is unstinting and lavish in his desire to fill you up with joy and peace as you trust and treasure the truth of all that is revealed in his Word, and the Holy Spirit will never disappoint you but will graciously and powerfully awaken and sustain genuine hope in your heart, that you might forever enjoy all that God is for you in Jesus.

“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!”