

We've come to the end of Romans! Well, not quite. We have another 1½ chapters to go. But 15:8-13 concludes Paul's message. He has discharged his burden, and rounds up his message with a prayer: *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* (Romans 15:13). Paul concludes on an incredibly positive note of hope. This hope is the outcome of his unwavering faith in God, and His Son Jesus Christ. This is the kind of hope we need because we are living in a world that is filled more with fear and anxiety than it is with hope. The hope we have in the things of this world is fragile at best. But the hope Paul is talking about is an eternal hope because it finds its source in the God of hope. We need this hope, not only for ourselves, but so that we can be beacons of hope in our families and community.

A beacon such as a fire is a signal, used as a warning or to pass on a message. These days a beacon is an electronic device that sends out a message. We need to be beacons of hope empowered by the Holy Spirit. I have borrowed this expression "Beacons of Hope" from this summer's Baptist's Together magazine. In it Lynn Green (BUGB General Secretary) writes an article entitled, "What does it mean to be Beacons of Hope in a world where hope is so often in short supply?" She quotes Romans 15:13, and says, "I believe that we are called to share and embody this hope that we have, more than ever."

But what is the foundation of this hope? Paul says, *For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised (the Jew) to show on behalf of God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs* (Romans 15:8). *For I tell you / say to you* is a way of making an authoritative declaration (cf Romans 12:3). He is still speaking to Gentile Christians (the strong in faith) about the not-yet-fully-believing Jews (the weak in faith), and reminding them that Christ came first as a servant to the Jews. Jesus was the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham and his offspring (e.g. Genesis 12:1-3), and the promised servant of the Lord (e.g. Isaiah 53). The blessings of God's promises could only really be realised when the enmity caused by sin was removed. This is what Jesus did when he gave up His life as an atoning sacrifice.

Jesus understood that He had come in fulfilment of the promises: *I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (Matthew 15:24). John understood that Jesus came first as a servant to the Jews: *He came to His own, and His own received Him not* (John 1:11). Although His own did not receive Him (as Paul has shown in Romans), it was the sign of God's truthfulness that He came to his own in fulfilment of the promises given to the patriarchs. God's truthfulness means His faithfulness.

But the promises given to the patriarchs always included the Gentile nations. Christ came also *in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for on behalf of his mercy* (Romans 15:9). Paul rattles off a string of Scriptures (in typical rabbinic fashion, cf. Romans 3:10-18) to prove his point. He demonstrates beyond doubt the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation. This was very important in the first century. We can imagine that these were some of the Scriptures Paul meditated on as he considered his ministry as an Apostle to the Gentiles.

He quotes **first** from Psalm 18:49, *Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name* (Romans 15:9). This is an indication of the final victory of God through His Messiah over all nations. Paul does not see this as coming through a destruction of the nations but as the nations are turned from their worship of false gods to bow the knee to the true and Living God.

The **second** quote is from Deuteronomy 32:43 (LXX), *Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people* (Romans 15:10). This verse foresees a time when Jew and Gentile will worship God as one community, one

family and with one voice. This represents the very heartbeat and burden of Paul's message in his letter to the Romans (cf Israeli-Palestinian conflict).

The **third** quote is from Psalm 116:1, *Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him* (Romans 15:11). This again envisions a time when all nations will praise the God of Israel.

The **fourth** quote is from Isaiah 11:10, *And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope"* (Romans 15:12). The root of Jesse refers to Messiah. This verse was of particular interest to Paul since Isaiah indicates that the Gentiles will place their hope in this Messiah. Since Jesus came 2000 years ago millions if not billions of Gentiles have placed their hope in Him.

Christ became a servant to the Jews on behalf of God's truthfulness, and for the Gentiles on behalf of His mercy. Truthfulness (or faithfulness,) and mercy (or loving-kindness,) are both words relating to the covenant. Our hope is based firmly and squarely on God's covenant faithfulness and mercy. If God is not truthful or merciful then we have no hope. But, *it is impossible for God to lie, so that, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this hope as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul* (Hebrews 6:18-19).

So how does this work out in practice? This kind of hope cannot be found outside faith in Jesus (Romans 5:1). So if you don't know Christ you do not have this hope. But Christ is near to each one of us and just a prayer away, *if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved* (Romans 10:9). This requires a sincere commitment. The Christian life doesn't really work with one foot in the kingdom and one foot in the world. The Lord calls us to commit to Him with all our heart, soul and might.

So Paul prays, *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* (Romans 15:13). He prays that we would be filled with joy and peace in believing. But how does this work when we feel like crying? How does this work if we are caught up in a hurricane like in the Caribbean and lose everything? How does this work in the face of serious illness?

In the Baptist's Together magazine Andrew Gardiner, who is the minister of Hope Baptist Church had to ask this question after being diagnosed with cancer. He describes the darkness he is in as *a horrible place of suffering*. He had to step back from leadership. But he says, *Just because I cannot minister as I did 10 months ago does not mean God has de-commissioned me! I'm still a man of God with a mission to fulfil, seeking to bring hope to a waiting world, where so much seems hopeless at this time*. He then goes on to share new opportunities the Lord has been giving him.

Sometimes it's in spite of difficulties and hardships (gritting our teeth) that we are able to be beacons of hope. But it is because of difficulties that we are able to minister hope; because we have found God in the difficult place, and allowed Him to fill us with joy and peace in believing. The exiles of Judah suffered terribly as their homes were destroyed. But it was to these same exiles that God promised, *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope* (Jeremiah 29:11). In Romans 5:3 Paul goes so far as to say that we rejoice in our sufferings because in the end it produces hope. The reason it produces hope is because we come to realise that God really is faithful; and he really is a God of loving-kindness; and this promise, *never will I leave you, never will I forsake you*, really is true. It's this that can make us beacons of hope in a world where hope is in short supply.