

Sunday, January 13, 2013

INTRODUCTION

Romans 15:13

If the truth were known, far more people are beginning this year with fear rather than hope.

Philosopher Immanuel Kant said all the questions of human reason and speculation are combined into just three basic questions everyone must answer: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?

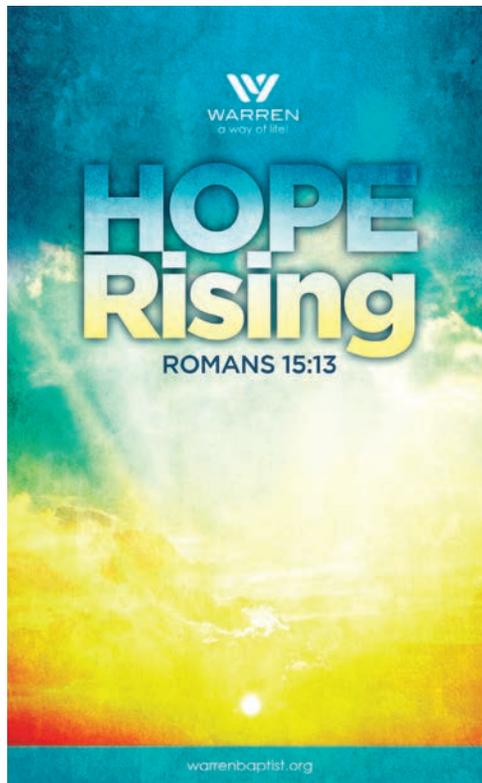
Hope is a simple four-letter word combined to make one of the most vital and powerful words in the human language. Hope is needed in the life of every person. It is like oxygen to the soul. You cannot live or sustain life without hope. Yet fear prevails in the hearts of so many people today.

This is the thirteenth year in the 21st Century. Many people think “13” is the number of bad luck; it somehow carries an omen of uncertainty or suspicion. For example, some people don’t get on an elevator that has a 13th floor or fly on an airplane with 13 in the flight number. There is 1313 Mockingbird Lane, Friday the 13th, 13 black cats, and so on.

There are also those who believe 13 is actually a number of luck and blessing. Taylor Swift, the highest-paid celebrity under 30 years of age, actually has the number 13 drawn on her hand. She was born on December 13, 1989. Her first album went to gold in 13 weeks. Every time she won an award, she was either on the 13th row or on the 13th seat or row M, the 13th letter of the alphabet. For Taylor Swift, 13 is a good number.

For those of us who hold the promise-book of God in our hands, 2013 is neither a year of fate nor luck. It is a year in which we can build our lives on the truth of God’s Word. The Bible is a book filled with hope!

“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 ESV).

Romans 15:13 is going to be “our verse” throughout 2013. I want you to read, memorize and meditate on it. Ultimately, my prayer is that you would experience this verse because it captures the essence of the fullness of what being a Christian is all about—living and abounding in hope.

Interestingly enough, the word “hope” appears 13 times in the book of Romans (English Standard Version). Throughout 2013, we will look at all 13 references to find the reiteration, underscore and exclamation of life: we are never beyond hope! In life’s deepest pits, darkest hours and most demanding moments; in disaster, difficulty, disappointment, danger, despair, disease, defeat, and even death; we are never beyond hope!

Father, I pray You will stir the truth of this hope in our hearts. I pray for people who are experiencing desperation, devastation, disappointment or discouragement in their lives today. I pray for those who have tasted and felt the grief of death or darkness. Lord, for every person who hears my voice today, I pray there will be a revival of hope, and I pray it in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I believe we desperately need a revival of hope in our homes, in our church and in churches across the landscape of America. It is tragic to see many living without heart and losing hope. If I had to choose one thing I believe America needs today more than ever before, it is a renewal of hope—not in government or politics, but a hope built upon the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Far too many people look like helium balloons on the morning after a birthday party—sagging, sinking and shamed. They have lost hope, but look carefully. What does Scripture tell us?

“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 ESV, italics added for emphasis).

The hope that is rooted in God fills and sustains. It is a hope expressed in joy and peace. It gives purpose and enables you to face life’s struggles with confidence.

Romans 15:13 comes near the end of one of the most powerful and persuasive passages ever written to describe the validity of the Christian faith. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome during a time when conflict between culture, philosophy and faith has been unparalleled in history. Paul wanted the Christians in Rome to understand they had hope through the power of the gospel.

Romans 15:7-13 provides the summation and apex of the entire book of Romans. Most Bible scholars agree Paul concludes the book in Romans 15:13 with this powerful benediction: “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 ESV). Done! Then in the following chapters, Paul adds a postscript and includes several statements and instructions.

What is a benediction? It is an expression or communication often used in the closing moments of a

worship service. It is an act of blessing, expression of gratitude or praise for God's favor and faithfulness. It is the opposite, yet the complement to a salutation.

In the story, *Charlotte's Webb*, Charlotte was known for saying, "Salutations." Charlotte explained, "Salutations is just a fancy way of saying hello." In the same way, benediction is just a fancy way of saying goodbye.

As your pastor, I want to pronounce a benediction over your life as we begin this new year: "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 ESV). I pray this happens in the heart of every person who walks through the doors of this church or watches on television.

Several months ago—July 5 to be exact—Dr. O.S. Hawkins, a friend, mentor, leader and pastor I love and have admired for many years, sent a question to those who follow him on Tweeter. He wrote, "If you could only have one book of the Bible to study for the rest of your life, which one would it be?" I responded immediately with one word: Romans. No pause. No doubt.

My response began a series of thoughts in my mind and a stirring in my heart. I thought, "*If I can so quickly identify what I know to be the book I would spend the rest of my life reading, why wouldn't I devote one entire year of my life and ministry in study and teaching from that book?*"

While 2013 is "The Year of Fear" for many, it is going to be "The Year of Hope" at Warren, a year built upon the greatest foundation of our faith: the truth of the Word of God found in the book of Romans.

"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" (Romans 15:4 ESV).

The book of Romans fills our hearts with hope! We need to have confidence in the hope of the gospel of Christ.

Peter, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, said, "...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect..." (1 Peter 3:15 ESV).

Some people do not know the reason for their hope. The Bible describes hope in terms of faith.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 ESV).

As believers in Christ, we live life on two planes: (1) the life we see and experience everyday and (2) the life to see beyond and rise above.

According to the Bible, hope can simply be defined as *confident expectation*.

Biblical hope is not optimism, although it certainly gives optimism. Hope is not hype; it is help in every part of our lives. Hope is so much more than positive thinking; it is the recognition that we have been given and guaranteed a future because of who God is and what He has done for us.

The Apostle Paul said, "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" (Romans 8:24-25 ESV).

Have you ever planned a dream vacation, a place you dreamed of going for many years? You confirmed the date, made your plans and purchased tickets. As you got closer and closer to departure, weren't you more energized because you were living forward? If you are like me, you got more things done in a week than you could in a month because you were leaving, you were getting out of here, you were "blowing this joint." Your dream was about to be fulfilled. Isn't it amazing how expectation creates a sense of

productivity and focus in life? That is exactly what our hope does in Christ.

"Hope, the guaranteed expectation enabling believers to look forward with joy, is in truth one of the greatest themes of Christianity and one of the supreme gifts of God." —J.I. Packer

The book of Romans clearly outlines the certainty of the Christian hope based on God's purpose and promise. I want you to know this hope, share this hope, embrace this hope and live this hope. I want hope to be a way of life like it has never been before in your heart.

Here are four observations from this passage:

"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 ESV).

HOPE RESTS IN A PERSON

"the God of hope"

The person on whom your hope centers is God. The *source* of your hope has everything to do with the *strength* of your hope. If your hope is based on a weak source (e.g., money, government, jobs, possessions, friends), then the outcome will be disappointing. But when the source of your hope is strong and the character of your hope is sure, then you quickly learn that your hope brings joy even when everything else goes wrong. You are connected to the right Person. You have the right relationship. In the Bible, everything starts and ends with God, the God of hope. Therefore, biblical hope is a hope that rests and is rooted in the person, character and nature of God.

HOPE PROVIDES PERSPECTIVE

"believing"

Hope is what allows you to see life differently. Being a Christian in no way insulates or isolates you from struggles

and injuries. Just this week, I was in a hospital room with a couple whose 31-year-old son was at the point of death. We had a family in our church that experienced a murder in another state. Another family lost a family member in a horrible accident. We have people facing cancer, surgery and various illnesses. As a Christian, you will most likely experience sickness, death, struggle and pain.

Struggles in this life can dim and darken your sense of hope if you only look at your circumstances. It is like a dime to the eye. Although the dime is the smallest coin in circulation, it literally can bring an eclipse of almost all light to the place of darkness when you place it in front of your eye. It is the same when you focus on circumstances. Before you know it, you can't see. Everything is dimmed and clouded and shadowed. It is the renewal of hope found in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ that helps you see beyond your circumstances.

"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" (Romans 15:4 ESV, italics added for emphasis).

Did you notice the words endurance and encouragement? Both are experienced in life. Some circumstances have to be endured and encouragement is needed, but *through... the Scriptures we might have hope*. God has given you His Word as a great source and help of hope. God is the God of hope!

"And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6 ESV).

When your hope is in the Lord, there is an entirely new sense of perspective and example. Where is your focus during life's deepest hurts and heartaches? Look at the promise of hope found in Romans 8:28:

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good,

for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28 ESV).

God is the God of hope! His purpose and plans work both for His glory and ultimately for your good. Billy Graham, listed in the top three most admired Americans in 2012, once said, "I've read the last page of the Bible. It's all going to turn out alright."

You are never beyond hope!

"Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" (Romans 12:12 ESV).

HOPE ENHANCES PERFORMANCE "abound"

When you believe in God—who He is and what He has promised—and when you trust in His power and love, you have hope that enables you to abound in life.

I have heard when athletes come together and work as a team, their talents combine to create a synergy of forces known as *playing over their heads*. Since their combined strength is so much greater than their individual talent, they have greater impact working together. When you embrace this hope and know the power of the Holy Spirit, you will be spiritually energized and empowered.

Did your New Year's Resolutions include dieting this year? If you are like me, it only takes about two or three weeks to get to the place where you need some "hope revival" in your life.

I heard about a man who resolved to lose some weight. He went to a restaurant and the waiter asked, "What would you like?" The man ordered boneless, skinless chicken with broccoli, but then put the menu in front of his face and whispered, "But when you come, bring lasagna and garlic bread by mistake."

There was a wife who watched her husband lean back in his recliner and said, "No Harold, the use of the handle on your recliner cannot be counted as exercise equipment."

There was also a man who tried to encourage his wife when she expressed interest in exercising and losing some weight. The man asked, "Honey, how is it going?" She answered, "Well, it's going fairly well. My doctor told me I needed to start very small and gradually work my way up to it, so today I drove by a store that sells sweatpants."

As hard as it is to diet, there comes a moment when you step on the scale and notice a few less pounds. Your clothes begin to fit a little better. Someone asks, "Are you losing weight?" It is like a revival of hope. It is worth it! Hope has an incredible ability to change resolve and attitude.

This is not hope that comes from personal will, grit or resolve; it is not sourced through you. I am talking about a hope the Bible promises you can have and know that is sourced in God and realized through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

I do not say this to be disrespectful, but the Holy Spirit is like helium in your life. When the Holy Spirit is in you, the Spirit lifts you up to defy the gravity of adversity. The Holy Spirit empowers, changes and strengthens you on the inside. And He empowers you to share hope with others on the outside.

Our world needs hope! Life is not just about our problems, needs and burdens. For example, in 2008, Warren engaged in a mission endeavor in Swaziland, one of the most needy and impoverished areas of the world suffering through disease and loss of life. The people of Swaziland needed hope, so we embraced and became involved in a mission there. Over the years, we have shared and framed our ministry in Swaziland around one word, *litsemba*, which simply means *hope*.

Today, many of you provide hope by sponsoring almost 300 orphan children at various care points in Swaziland. These children receive food, clothing and shelter, but more importantly, they receive the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ through Bible teaching and instruction in their own language.

C.S. Lewis, the Oxford scholar, once said, "A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history, you will find that Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most about the next."

One of the reasons I believe the penetration of the church is anemic and weak within the culture is that we have lost hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to regain and revive our hope through the Scriptures and the God of hope.

HOPE BRINGS PEACE

Let's look at this passage again: "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 ESV, italics added for emphasis).

There is an inseparable joining of words in this verse: hope, joy, peace. If you have hope in God, you will have joy and peace. The authentic hope we have in God—whose nature and character are to do what is good and what brings glory—will ultimately give us a total sense of satisfaction. To paraphrase the Apostle Paul: May you be totally, spiritually satisfied because of the hope you have.

That is my longing and passion. That is my desire for you. May you understand what it means to be saved today. May you understand what it means to be saved someday when we see Christ. May you live out your salvation as a way of life, filled with hope. May you be a "helium balloon," walking around the city in the midst of people who are sinking, sagging and shamed by what has happened in their lives. Hope!

Hope Brings Joy and Peace in Adversity

"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for

you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:1-4 ESV).

Hope Brings Joy and Peace in Stress

Anyone stressed today?

"You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you" (Isaiah 26:3 ESV).

Hope Brings Joy and Peace in Loss

Jesus said, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be

also. And you know the way to where I am going..." (John 14:1-4 ESV).

Jesus continues, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27 ESV).

We are never beyond hope!

"Other men see only a hopeless end, but the Christian rejoices in an endless hope." —Gilbert M. Beeken

"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 ESV, italics added for emphasis).

Father, I pray You would let this hope be revival in our lives, presence in our hearts and help for every need today. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

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