

Faith Walk! - Sermon Discussion

Date : 20 Feb 2022

Sermon Title : Hope or Hopelessness

Speaker : Rev Eddie Ho

Text : Romans 15:4

INTRODUCTION

Romans 15:4 is part of an excerpt of a letter written by Paul to the church in Rome 2000 years ago. The Roman Empire was a world superpower and the city of Rome was the political epicentre of the world. The church in Rome was founded by Jews who had returned from Jerusalem in AD 30-35 (Acts 2:5-11) and so was made up of Jews who had received the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem, and Gentiles who joined them. The Jews did not think that they were starting a new religion but instead thought of themselves as starting a new denomination of Judaism which practices Jewish customs and traditions.

In 50 AD, the Roman Emperor Claudius ordered all Jews to leave Rome (Acts 18:2). Hence, only the Gentile Christians remained in the church in Rome after that. When the Jews were forced to leave, the Gentile believers continued to meet and share their faith. In the absence of the Jewish believers, the church grew with many more Gentile believers. However in 55 AD, Claudius reversed his previous order and many of the exiled Jews began to return to Rome. The Jewish believers returned to a church which was filled with Gentile believers who had developed their own practices, customs and traditions. This created tension and the church was divided regarding whether the Gentile Christians should follow Jewish laws and customs.

Hence in Acts 15, Paul declared that the Gentile Christians were cleansed because of their faith in God, and were not required to follow the ceremonial laws of the Jews, which were not applicable to them. This leads us to consider then if the writings and teachings of the Old Testament are relevant to Christian believers. It is also important to note that during Paul's time, the only teachings available to Gentile believers were that of the Old Testament as the Gospels had not yet been canonized.

a) Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us

The Old Testament contains the chronicles of the history of the Jewish people, and details how God delivered them from slavery and provided for them in the wilderness. How are the laws, history, poems and songs found in the Old Testament relevant to us as Christ followers? It is relevant as God uses it to paint a picture that reveals:

For we walk by faith, not by sight. 2 Corinthians 5:7

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- Who He is
- What He is like
- What is in His Heart
- Who we are and our fallen nature
- What we have missed out because of sin
- What He is doing to restore us and redeem us from destruction.

As we read the Word of God, we need to listen to God and reflect on what He is trying to say to us.

b) Everything that was written in the past teaches us endurance as we face our trials and tribulations

In the infamous “Hope Experiment” conducted by Dr Ritter on wild and lab rats, the experiment showed that when submerged in a cylinder of water, wild rats only lasted for 15 minutes before they drowned whereas the lab rats survived 2 days. In the next phase of his experiment, at the 15-minute mark, Dr Ritter saved the wild rats by picking them up and feeding them before they were dropped back into the water. This time round, the wild rats lasted for 60 hours. Dr Ritter explained that the wild rats lasted for 60 hours in the water as they had been saved once and hence when they were thrown back in the water, they clung on to the hope of being saved again and endured for a much longer period.

The lab rats on the other hand were able to endure for up to 2 days as they had been well fed and kept safe by the lab assistants. They endured because they clung on to the hope that the lab assistants who had cared for them would be able to save them while the wild rats were able to endure longer because they hoped that by enduring, Dr Ritter would save them again. Dr Ritter attributed this stamina that he saw in both the lab and wild rats as “hope”.

- If the rats were able to endure and survive with such a hope, how much more can believers learn endurance as we lean on the eternal and enduring hope that is found in God.

There is an uncanny similarity between the predicament of the rats and the Jewish people. The Jews are one of the most persecuted people in the history of mankind as they were oppressed, afflicted and persecuted. In the Old Testament, they were enslaved by the Egyptians, endangered by the Assyrians, exiled by the Babylonians, tormented by the Greeks and scattered by the Romans. Throughout the ages, they were also expelled by England, Poland and Russia, and in the twentieth century, more than 6 million Jewish lives were also lost during the Holocaust. Yet in the midst of all their tribulations, the Jews persevered and outlived all their persecutors.

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In the Festival of the Passover, each Jewish family would sit down together for a Passover meal and the story of how God had saved and redeemed their ancestors would be re-told and shared. Every Jew in every age knows and expects the promise of the Saviour and Messiah to be fulfilled.

The Scriptures tell us what God promises and we can expect Him to fulfil His promises and this brings us hope and this Biblical promise had encouraged the Jews to persevere for more than 3000 years.

c) Everything that was written in the past gives us hope

If Jewish people are like the lab rats taken care of by God in the Old Testament, then we Gentiles are like the wild rats who have been grafted into God's care in the New Testament.

All of us go through different kinds of struggles; some of us struggle with our studies, with failures or keeping up with the demands of life. It is human for us to focus on the problems we face but if we were to take time to pause and be still, and allow God to speak to us, via worship and His Word, we will see that God has something to tell us.

- The Jewish Passover meal that Jesus celebrated on the night He was betrayed is the basis for our weekly Christian worship service. As we gather, we are sharing a meal together through our worship and the celebration of the Lord's Supper, remembering and proclaiming the mystery of our faith – that Christ lived, died and rose again. This is a fulfilment of God's promise to us in the Old Testament as Jesus died for all of us so that we may be redeemed.
- The prophecy in Isaiah 11:6-9 is both a metaphor and a promise of what is to come. It is a beautiful picture of the hope and *shalom* peace we can experience in the future, where there is no fear of violence or discrimination, evil or oppression, sickness or hunger.

Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it. We need to look to God as He gives us hope. Jesus' promise to us, the hope that God has given us is one of *shalom* peace. (Isaiah 11:6-9)

CONCLUSION

God has given us a sure and steadfast hope that we can hold fast to as we live in the world today. We do not have to experience fear as God is with us and He will bring His promises to pass. Let us continue to learn from God's Word so we may be able to endure all trials through its encouragements as we hold on to the hope that we have in Christ Jesus.

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As a group, spend some time to share your success and struggle in fulfilling what you/your group had committed to do at the previous meeting.

A. Review Sermon Content

Purpose: Reflect on one key takeaway.

Appoint someone to read Romans 15:4 twice, slowly.

1. At the end of the reading, the reader will say, "This is the Word of the Lord."

All to respond, "Thanks be to God." Our response reminds us that this is the Word of the Lord. Just as God had spoken to His people in the past, He is still speaking to us even today, right now."

- a. As God's Word was read, how has this verse spoken to you?

- b. (i) What is the key takeaway for you from the sermon "Hope or Hopelessness"?

- (ii) How will you align the way you live to your key takeaway?

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B. Relate Sermon Content

Purpose: Relate with the Truth and Resolve for Transformation.

- 2a. How does knowing that “everything in the past was written to teach us” change your perception of and approach to reading God’s Word?
- 2b. (i) How has God’s Word taught you endurance?
- (ii) What are some challenges you will face in learning endurance from Scriptures?
- 3a. Reflect on your life journey and identify an area in your life where you had experienced or are experiencing a sense of hopelessness.
- 3b. (i) What are some factors that cause(d) you to experience this hopelessness?
- (ii) What encouragements from God’s Word are able to help you overcome this sense of hopelessness?
- 3c. How can your group members encourage each other to achieve 3b(ii) above, for the following week(s) till your next meeting?

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C. Testimonies and Prayer

Purpose: Give glory to God and seek Him.

4. Share your personal experience on how anchoring on God's Word has given you hope in a challenging or hopeless situation.

OR

Give thanks to God that you can have hope because He is faithful and fulfills His promises.

5. With a prayer partner, bring all that have been shared in 3b and 3c to God, asking for the Holy Spirit's revelation on areas in your life where you may need to experience the hope that comes from God's Word. Pray for your group and our church to commit and keep each other accountable to learn from Scriptures the endurance and encouragements that might provide us with hope that comes from God.

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