



Marks of the Christian 3: Hopefulness

Romans 12:12

Rev. Fred Greco

If you have your Bibles with you, I would invite you to turn to the book of Romans once again for the twelfth chapter. We have camped out here for a while in the twelfth chapter. We've moved somewhat rapidly through the book of Romans. It may not seem like it...I think we're in the 50s in terms of the number of sermons in the book of Romans...until you look and see that some ministers will preach 100 or 150 sermons in the book of Romans.

We are going to look this morning at just one verse, verse 12, but in order to give us the context for this, we're going to start our reading in verse 9, because verse 12 is a part of a series of a list of marks of the Christian. We're on the third mark this week, but we're going to begin our reading at verse 9. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Romans, chapter 12, beginning at verse 9:

“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Lord, we ask this morning that you would open up your Word to us, Lord, that you would show us the marks of a Christian, which are nothing more than the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, making us more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you, O Lord, for that work. We thank you that the work of our Savior is completed, that we are redeemed, and we thank you that you are making us fit for heaven. We long for the day when our Lord will return, when our hope will be consummated, and we will dwell with you forever. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

In this twelfth chapter of the book of Romans, Paul is giving us direction about how to live the Christian life. Remember that he starts on the foundation of what Christ has done, pointing back to that great teaching he has given us in Romans 1-11 with that great word *therefore* in verse 1. That word *therefore* is a placeholder for everything Paul has taught us in the first 11 chapters. You can imagine it's much easier for Paul to say, "Therefore" than to breathlessly repeat everything he said.

We can't forget that connection, but this is more than merely direction. Paul is giving us a description of the believer in Christ. What Jesus has done in saving the believer is more than rescuing from hell. He has forever changed who the believer is. The believer is *transformed*, to use Paul's word in verse 2, and that means that as others look upon the believer, they should see certain changes. They should see the believer in Christ becoming more and more like Jesus.

We saw several weeks ago that the main mark of the Christian was *love*. Love governs our attitudes, it governs our reaction to circumstances, and it governs our reaction to people. Then we next looked at a trio of directives in verses 10-11 that show the Christian is to be *selfless*. We are to put others first, Paul said. We are not to focus on ourselves, but rather we are to be directed to the Lord.

This week, we look at a third mark of the Christian: *hopefulness*. Hopefulness is more than an attitude. It is a worldview that is grounded in what Jesus *has* done and what he has promised *to* do. We see this in three directions Paul gives in verse 12. First, Paul tells us we are to be *rejoicing in hope*. Then he tells us we are to be *enduring in tribulation*. Finally, we are to be *constant in prayer*. Rejoicing in hope, enduring in tribulation, and constant in prayer.

Rejoicing in Hope

So, let's begin by looking at Paul's first phrase, that we are to be rejoicing in hope. This is not a new subject for Paul. Hope is one of the three great virtues of the Christian that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13. Along with faith and love, hope characterizes the believer. These three virtues set the believer apart from others around him.

Now, we always have to remember the sequence here. It is not as if someone obtains faith, obtains love, and obtains hope, and *then* they are accepted by God. Rather, instead, Jesus saves sinners, and *because* of that salvation they experience faith, love, and hope. Paul talks about hope in virtually every one of his letters. He does so in three ways, typically.

He talks about his *own* hope, what *he* is looking forward to. He talks about the hope Christians have. Often, in these first two instances, he uses *hope* as a verb. "I hope." "You hope." He also talks about hope as something we possess, a noun. The best example of this is in Titus, chapter 2, where he writes about our blessed hope, and our blessed hope is the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul has also written about hope earlier in the book of Romans. It is part of the *therefore* he's referring to in verse 1.

Specifically, in Romans, chapter 5, he tells us we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Then again in Romans, chapter 8, he says it is in this hope we were saved. What I want us to see here is that this is not new for Paul to talk about hope. Hope is not just practical advice to Christians, although there *is* some practicality to Paul's statement here in chapter 12. Hope is a part of the foundation of what it means to be saved.

Now, often, the best way to understand something is, first, to put out of our minds incorrect notions we have of something. We need to be corrected or disabused of a false view of something before we can accept the true view. So, let's think for just a moment about what hope is *not*. Hope is not cheerfulness. You see, some think hope is a general spirit of cheerfulness, an attitude that life is good. They act as if hope is a smiling face, that to be a Christian is to always be happy, to act as if life is always good.

This is not what Paul is talking about. Paul had great hope. As we said, he's talking about it all the time, yet Paul was also a realist. Paul experienced, for example, the sadness of conflict; specifically, conflict in the church. You might think that if anyone would be free from conflict or conflict in the church it would be a guy who's writing the Bible. How do you disagree with someone who's writing the Bible? Well, it happens.

Just think about the split he had with Barnabas. Think about Paul's letter to the Galatians, how he had asked them why they had so quickly gone away from the truth he had taught them to another gospel, or think about his letter to the Corinthians where Paul pours out his soul about the pain he has experienced because they have established that they don't trust him, that they think he's somewhat of a lesser apostle, a lesser teacher.

Paul didn't just experience conflict; he also experienced failure. Think about Paul's time in Jerusalem. Paul went to Jerusalem to bring a monetary offering for the church in Jerusalem, and he is there only a very short period of time and has to flee to the refuge of Rome and Roman law to escape being killed by his own people, the Jews. We could easily describe that trip of Paul as a failure. He wasn't able to unite the church. He wasn't able to worship. He spent the next several years in prison because of it.

Thirdly, Paul had also seen theological error and heresy even amongst those whom he taught. Can you imagine the pain Paul would have experienced when he's describing two of his disciples, two of the men whom he had instructed in the faith, Hymenaeus and Philetus in 2 Timothy 2, when he describes them as those who have swerved from the truth?

These were men Paul had poured his life into, whom he had taught, and now they were teaching contrary to the Word of God. They were actively fighting Paul and rebelling against God and his Word. Then there's Demas, who was with Paul in various places on his missionary journeys, but at the end of his life, Paul writes that Demas had left the faith because he had too much love for the world. Paul was a realist because he experienced pain and difficulty.

Now, it is important for us to understand that hope is not general cheerfulness, because if we fall for that line of thinking, we begin to think God owes us a life of happiness and ease. We begin to think *that* is what is the mark of a Christian: happiness and ease. But it's not. If we think that, when life gets hard, when we need the Lord the most, we will doubt our relationship with the Lord. Hope is not cheerfulness.

Hope is also not optimism about the future. It is not a hopeful outlook or an optimism about what the future will bring. Now, I am not saying it is wrong to be optimistic. The pastor is not here telling you to go home and always see every glass as half empty, to be a pessimist. I'm not saying that. You could be optimistic about your future, you could be optimistic about your family, you could be optimistic about your job, but that's not what Paul is talking about here.

You don't have to be in an upwardly mobile job, you don't have to have a great marriage, you don't have to have successful children to be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. Some of the greatest examples of believers are those who lived in times and circumstances that could best be described as *soul crushing*. In fact, even today, the vast majority of Christians live in countries where they are persecuted and where they have little optimism about their worldly prospects. They don't expect promotions. They don't expect fame. They don't expect wealth.

If Paul were talking about hope as optimism for the future, he would be making this mark of the Christian dependent on our circumstances rather than on the work of the Holy Spirit. Even unbelievers can be optimistic

about the future. We see that all the time. But the Christian is called to be transformed, to be different from others around them.

So, what is this hope, then? In summary, this hope is a confidence in what the Lord has promised beyond what we can see in our current experience in the world. The Christian is not bounded by circumstances. He's not limited by the current state of the world or of his health or of the quality of his opportunities. No. The Christian looks to *the* hope. Note the article. It is a *specific* hope. It is the same hope for every believer. It is a hope founded in Jesus Christ.

In this hope, we have a right view of the world. Because our hope is founded in Christ, we are able to hear Christ's word about this world. The Bible describes this world as a place that is fallen, sinful, even evil. The world has been damaged by sin since Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden. If you think about it, the whole story of the Bible is filled with sin...lying, theft, murder.

Think about the flood. Think about the Tower of Babel, the Assyrians, the Babylonians. But it's also not just the bad guys. Think about the good guys. Abraham was a liar. Moses was a killer. David was an adulterer. All of history backs this up. All of world history is filled with wickedness and evil. Even yesterday, we were shocked once again by two mass shootings in this country. The world is an evil, wicked place filled with sin.

What is important here for us is to realize what the world is like but not to stop there. Our hope is also grounded in the fact that we realize what God's purpose for the world is. The story of sin and evil is not the end of the story. God has a purpose for this world, and his purpose is not a gradual improvement. Some people think their hope is founded in that the world will steadily get better and better and better, but the Bible tells us often the opposite, that the world is getting worse and worse.

Paul says in 2 Timothy 3 that the spread of godlessness in the world will increase. Our Lord Jesus Christ says in Luke, chapter 18, "When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith in the world?" So we have no promise in God's Word that the world will get steadily better, improving. No. God's plan is not improvement; it is redemption.

Our hope is not that God will simply fix the problems of this world but that he will overcome the wickedness of the world and establish his kingdom, one of righteousness and truth; that God will call out for himself a people from the world and establish his own kingdom. Peter puts it *this* way in 2 Peter 3: "But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." That is the hope of the Christian. We wait for God to fulfill his promise.

So this hope leads to action. We are not to isolate ourselves and be unconcerned about what is happening. As we wait for that blessed hope, we are to renounce ungodliness, Paul tells us in Titus 2, and we are to renounce worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age. Because we have this hope in us, we purify ourselves, John tells us in 1 John 3. Do you have this hope? Can others see this hope in you? Paul says that *should* be the case.

Enduring in Tribulation

The next directive Paul gives is "Be patient in tribulation." You may recall, as we've seen this list of directives in chapter 12, that Paul uses a short combination of a noun and a verb. The noun gives the context for his directive, and the verb gives the action. We've seen "In honor outdo each other" or "In spirit be fervent." Here we have "In respect of tribulation be patient."

The interesting thing is that Paul just assumes the Christian will have tribulation. There's no limiting factor. He doesn't say, and I must confess it would make me feel better in my flesh if he had said, "If tribulation should happen to come upon you, be patient," because then I could say, "Well, maybe it will come on *you* instead, on *you* and not me." But that's not what Paul does. This directive is in a list of other things that are assumed to be a part of the Christian life.

It's not as if we can live and not experience service to the Lord or that love is only for some Christians or that only a few Christians have hope. No. This applies to *all* Christians. That's why it's a mark of a Christian. All of these things are a part of what describe a Christian. There is a direct connection here between hope and tribulation. It's not an accident that Paul takes it up here. Tribulation and sufferings have a direct effect on our hope.

Paul writes *this*, you recall, in Romans 5:3-5: "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings [tribulations], knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Tribulation contributes to our hope.

What, then, is tribulation? Well, in the most basic sense of the word, it is something that puts pressure on you. The Greek word means a pressing or to press upon or pressure. Our English word comes from a Latin translation of this Greek word. There was an instrument in Latin called the *tribulum*, which is where we get *tribulation* from. The tribulum was an instrument that was used to produce flour from grain. What it did was it put pressure on the grain to produce that fine flour.

I don't know if you know this. I'm sure the ladies know, but, men and kids, let me tell you. You cannot grow white powder and put it in a sack and call it *flour*. You grow grain, and it doesn't look anything like flour. What you have to do is to press it and crush it and grind it over not just moments but over an extended period of time to produce the flour.

This helps us to see a picture of tribulation. Often, when we think of tribulation, we think of one cataclysmic event... a church being burned down, families being swept up and sold off into slavery. Certainly, that *is* tribulation, but that is not *all* of tribulation. Tribulation is also the daily pressure and grind that is upon the believer because he follows the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul understood this well. All you have to do is read 2 Corinthians, chapter 4, or 2 Corinthians, chapter 11, in which he recounts all of the pressures and hardships that had come upon him. So it is with tribulation in life. It's not limited to these horrific kinds of persecutions we hear about in Africa or in China or in India. It certainly

includes that, and those are clear examples of tribulation, but it also includes these continual daily pressures that believers experience.

It includes difficulties at work, which we see more and more as believers resist the spirit of our age of sexual anarchy and rebellion against God. It includes challenges you face in your family and in the relationships and friendships you have because you follow Jesus. It even includes the pressures brought on you as you make every effort to resist sin and to cultivate holiness in your life. These are tribulations.

What, then, does it mean to be patient? How are we to be patient, as Paul asks us? Well, this word is an interesting word. *Patient* really doesn't capture the whole of its meaning. This is often the case when you're translating from one language to another language. *Patience* captures an aspect of this word but not the entirety of it, I think because we have our own view of what *patience* is.

What do we think patience is? Kids, what does it mean to be patient? When are you asked to be patient? My guess is it's usually something like when it's your birthday or Christmas and you're ready to tear open your presents and Mom and Dad say, "No. Be patient." What *patient* means is sit there and wait, and wait for it to be over, and hope that time doesn't stand still while you're waiting. Right? That's what we think of patience as.

It's like time is standing still and it takes forever to get past, but there's more to this word than that, than the waiting. The root of this word means to remain or to stay behind. From that we get the idea of maintaining a course of action or maintaining a belief in the face of opposition. We might further translate it as to hold your ground, to be steadfast, to endure.

Now, both of these aspects are important. It's not just enduring. It's not just gritting your teeth and getting through it. It is being steadfast in the face of what must be endured. That's what Paul is calling us to. We might think about it in two aspects. There is a negative and a positive aspect to patience. The negative aspect of patience here means that we are not to be shaken. We are not to give way. Paul is telling you that you will have bad things in your life. Pressures *will* come upon you. It's not that they *may*; they *will*.

You will have pressures that will come upon you *because* of your faith. This is the opposite of what many so-called preachers on television will tell you. They say that being a Christian means all happiness and perfect health and wealth, and if you have any problems, well, then you know what? It's *your* fault. You just don't have enough faith. If you had enough faith, then you *would* be happy and wealthy and healthy.

Don't believe that, because that's not what the Bible teaches. That's not what the Bible says. None of that is true. What is true is what Paul says here by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that you *will* have tribulation. When those pressures come, you are not to give in to the sinful human nature. You are not to grumble and complain. You are not to be shaken. The mark of the Christian should not be grumbling or complaining. You're not to have your faith crash on the rocks of tribulation.

But there is a positive aspect of being patient as well. You should not be surprised by tribulation. What that means is you cannot have a romantic view of salvation, which has no place for struggles or trials or doubts, as if to be a

Christian means I will never have difficulties, never struggle, and never doubt anything. That is a false romantic view.

You might think of it *this* way. Not every young couple, but many young couples before their wedding have an idea of what marriage is like. When you speak to them and ask them things like, "How are you going to deal with conflict when you have a fight?" they look at you with incredulity and say, "We're never going to fight. What are you talking about? We're going to be married, and we're going to be together, and we're going to be happy, and it's going to be perfect." And you wonder when the other shoe is going to drop.

Before the wedding, often we have a view of marriage. Again, not everyone, but it's easier before the marriage to have that kind of a view of marriage, because once you get into a marriage you realize that there *is* conflict, that there *are* difficulties, that marriage *isn't* perfect, but what you also realize is that one of the best parts of marriage is going through the bad parts together. They shape you as a couple. They stoke the fires of love you have for your spouse when you realize that you're in this together, that you couldn't make it through without your spouse.

No one says when they're on their wedding day, "Oh, I hope we fight every week. Oh, I hope we have bankruptcy. Oh, I hope I lose my job." No one says that, at least no one who's not crazy, but when those things happen to you, you'll be ready for them because you're committed to each other. This is also true of the Christian life. No one walks into a business and says, "Excuse me. I haven't had my fill of tribulation this week. Could you persecute me somehow? I'm not sure how, but please do that for me."

No one does that. No one asks for persecution, but when it comes, we have to remember that being patient in tribulation is being like Jesus. All you have to do is look at the Gospels. Jesus is persecuted, Jesus is given trials, Jesus is attacked, and in every instance, Jesus is patient. Have you noticed the only time we have recorded of Jesus righteously losing his temper is when he's in full control? It's not when he's being persecuted or attacked. It's when he sees that his Father's house has become a house of buying and selling.

I can't imagine going five minutes without losing it on the Pharisees. Can you? Yet Jesus puts up with them over and over and over again. He is patient. So if we are patient in our tribulations, we're being more and more like Jesus. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Jesus tells us in John, chapter 16, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you *will* have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Now, it's not hard for us to see from our perspective that tribulation is a bad thing, yet Paul tells us that it is normative, that it is normal for the believer. Why is this the case? Why does God allow tribulation for his children? I could think of at least two reasons. The first is that tribulation teaches us. Tribulation teaches us what nothing else could. God has designed tribulation for our good, and we must see that nothing else would suffice in those instances.

It teaches you about yourself. Nothing shows you your pride, your self-interest, like tribulation. It also teaches you about the world. When life is going well and everything is at ease, we can be tempted to view the world as a pretty good place. We can be lulled into a sense of comfort, but the world is not our home. We need to be taught that

the world is a place of sin and rebellion against God. It is a place in need of redemption, and tribulation teaches us that.

Tribulation also teaches us to sympathize with others. The best person to sympathize with someone who is suffering is one who has suffered. Just think about it *this way*. Who can best encourage and sympathize with someone who is going through a difficult sickness? It's someone who has been through a sickness. They know what it's like. They can enter in. So tribulation teaches us to sympathize with others who are suffering.

Tribulation, secondly, focuses us. It points us in the right direction. When this world loses its charm for us, we cannot help but focus beyond it. Tribulation makes you think more and more of heaven and more of the glory of God he has prepared for you. It reminds you that you are not as you should be and you are not as you *will* be, that God is working in your life to make you more and more like Jesus.

"In this you rejoice," Peter says, "though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials [tribulations], so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Constant in Prayer

The third directive Paul takes up is regarding prayer. Again, our short phrase here with our noun and our verb is "In respect to prayer, be constant." Prayer also here is just assumed, just as much as tribulation is assumed, just as much as hope is assumed. As a matter of fact, tribulation, hope, and prayer often go together. It makes sense, because how horrible would tribulation be if we had no hope, and how defeated would we be in the face of tribulation if we had no resource of prayer to go to?

Paul tells us over and over again to continue in prayer. In his letter to the Thessalonians he writes, "Pray without ceasing." This is a general command from Paul. Have you ever wondered why he gives this command? I understand that we read it and we acknowledge it's good because it's in the Bible, and the Bible tells us we're to do it, so we should do it. I understand that. But have you ever thought why for *our* sake Paul tells us to pray without ceasing?

He's doing the exact same thing here with just slightly different words, but he's also giving us the context for this continual prayer. We pray in the context of tribulation that we experience, and we pray grounded in the hope we have. Tribulation *forces* us to pray. Hope *allows* us to pray. Prayer prepares us for the struggles of life and gives us strength in the midst of those struggles.

Paul puts it *this way* in Ephesians 6: we are to be praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication. This word here that Paul uses, to *be constant*, helps us to understand how prayer helps us. To be constant means more than a timeline. It means more than praying all the time. It has that element, but it means to be devoted to or to be busily engaged in. In this way, it actually reminds us of that verb to be *patient*. It is something we are to continue in.

We are to continue steadfast in prayer and never to think that prayer is unimportant or unhelpful. Why? Because the alternative to prayer is to give up. Have you ever been in a circumstance in which you've had to give up? Maybe

you were headed to an event and you were behind on schedule. You're busily getting ready and getting everybody in the car, and you get out and get on the road, and you hope that if everything goes perfectly and you hit every light and you make the exit you'll get there only a couple of minutes late.

You get out, and the road is a parking lot. The cars aren't moving. You say to yourself, "Well, maybe traffic will get going. Maybe it's an accident and they'll clear it. Maybe somebody will go on the shoulder. Let's just see how it goes for the next few minutes." Fifteen minutes go by and you don't move at all. I don't mean this "foot on the brake, foot on the gas" thing. I mean you don't move at all. Then more time goes by, and then you realize there is no way you're going to make this event. "It's over. I give up."

That's a pretty depressing and discouraging feeling, isn't it? Would you want to live your life like that, always discouraged, defeated, and depressed? Because that's the alternative to prayer, Jesus says. In Luke, chapter 18, he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray (very similar language) and not to lose heart. To lose heart means to give up.

If you don't want to give up, if you don't want to lose heart, Paul is telling you to be continual in prayer. Prayer is the only way, spiritually speaking, that you can remain on your feet. Your circumstances will not keep you on your feet. You will have days or years that make it seem like the heavyweight champ has hit you with a left hook. Your circumstances cannot keep you sound. Only prayer can.

Why would you not pray? Would it be because you're lazy? Would it be because you're unaware of the conflict the Christian life is? Brothers and sisters, the Christian life is a fight. That's what we're told. Paul tells Timothy to fight the good fight of the faith. The life of a Christian is a battle. Do not give up. Do not be overcome. The only way you can do that is by prayer, by relying on the Lord and on his strength.

What does this look like, then? Well, it is not a mechanical duty. It is not merely scheduling instances of prayer throughout the day. The sum of prayer is not setting up reminders on your smartphone to pray and then stopping and checking a box. Again, hear me. Scheduling prayer is a good thing. Reminders to prayer are a good thing, but it cannot stop there. It cannot be a mechanical duty we just go through.

Prayer is going to the presence of God. It is to go before him who is the source of our life and our hope. We go to the Lord so we know he is there. That sounds awfully simple, doesn't it? But by going to the Lord in prayer, we become aware that he is there. How would we face tribulation if we didn't know God is with us?

We go to the Lord in prayer also to remind ourselves that he has protecting power. It's not just that he's there. He's also *for* us. But not just that. God has all the power to see us through, to see us past this evil world to the realization of our great hope.

In conclusion, what is your great hope today? Is it that the right people will get elected or that technology will eventually solve all of our problems or just that bad things will pass you by and leave you unharmed? Paul tells us the mark of a Christian is to have hope...hope in the midst of struggle, trials, and tribulation, a hope that points us to the one who has saved us, the one who is in relationship with us, the one to whom we can go in prayer.

Our hope is not in things. Our hope is not in circumstances. Our hope is in the Lord. It is in the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you have that hope today? If you don't, you can. There is no one like Jesus. Jesus brings hope, because the great hope of all humanity is the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our hope is found in Jesus. If you know Jesus today, then you should grab on to the hope that comes from him. There is no greater hope than knowing that Jesus is returning for his own. Amen?