

**Romans 15:4-6** *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

In the summer of 2017, two longtime commercial fisherman—John Aldridge and Anthony Sosinski—set out to fish from Montauk, Long Island. About 40 miles offshore, Anthony was sleeping below deck while John started to get things ready for the catch they would soon haul in. He was pulling back on a handle with all his might when it snapped, sending him sprawling backward and right off the back of the boat. The boat was on autopilot so it just kept cruising. As soon as he resurfaced from under the water, John began screaming, but there was no way Anthony could hear him. He was alone, treading water in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean without a life vest 40 miles offshore, thinking this was the way he was going to die. If ever there was a hopeless situation, this was it.

Then John got an idea. He realized his boots were buoyant. He took one off, emptied it out, and plunged it back into the water so that it created an air pocket. He stuck his boots under his arms as flotation devices so that they would help him stay afloat. Maybe there was a flicker of hope. With that, he started setting little goals, beginning with just staying alive until morning. Four hours later, Anthony woke up and realized John was gone. He found the broken handle and knew what John must have been doing when he went overboard, which meant he knew the ocean depth of where he would have been doing it. He called the Coast Guard who began their search procedures, even though they admitted they didn't have much hope of finding him in so much open water.

John made it to the morning and tried to keep his hope alive. Yet as the hours passed and there was no sign of help, it started to wane. Out of nowhere, he spotted a fishing buoy. He was able to reach it and climb onto it. His hope again began to grow. Less than an hour later, a Coast Guard helicopter flew nearby and spotted John waving and splashing. They were able to pull him to safety. Miraculously, John Aldridge had survived. What an amazing story. If most of us were out there bobbing alone in the middle of the ocean, we probably would have given up hope that there was even a chance—a sliver of a chance—that we would survive.

Stranded all alone, bobbing in the water without a life vest, 40 miles off the coast, and very little, if any, hope of being rescued. We've been there. We know exactly what that's like, drowning in our sins, all by ourselves, with no hope of rescue. How helpless we feel trying not to do the same thing we've done again and again and then doing it. The guilt from hurting someone we love because of something horrible we did or said can be overwhelming and stifling. Every week we promise to God that we are going to go out of his house and live totally and completely for him this week doing everything to please him and for his glory only to fail miserably and have to admit that to him week after week. If this is all we knew, the concept of Jesus returning to this earth would be scary to say the least. If this were the only thing we knew, all we could be confident in about the future is the judgment and condemnation we will face as we stand before Jesus.

Maybe the troubles and difficulties that are surrounding you leave you feel like you are floating in the ocean lost at sea with no help. Life in general, but especially this time of year, is full of stress and anxiety. There is so much to do and so little time to do it. There are so many responsibilities that weigh down on us. We have so many decisions to make with huge consequences to consider it can be debilitating. Trying to get the kids to every one of their activities, the stress of deadlines at work, the frenzy of the house work and the different clubs and activities that beg for our time. All of it can leave us without any hope of ever getting out from under it.

Hope is like that. Hope has been described by some as a confident expectation in the future. In our earthly vernacular, hope is the idea that you are looking forward to the future with enthusiasm, confidence, and expectation. Yet often, like with John Aldridge, hope is a wish for some uncertain outcome in the future. You hope the electricity will come back on in a short time after a hurricane but you really have no idea. You hope the percentage they give you for beating cancer means you have a good chance of actually beating it, but you don't know for sure. We hope it stops raining. We hope the in-laws leave soon. We hope the holiday pounds will shed off nice and easy. We hope we won't overspend with our Christmas gifts. We hope the kids adjust in a new school. Hope is fickle. It can be misplaced. It can disappoint.

So maybe we have a difficult time when we hear that Advent is a season of hope. It is a season that links the past, present and future. I've heard it said recently that Advent is a collision of the past and future in the present. During Advent, we prepare to look back into the past and celebrate when Christ first came into this world to keep God's promise and rescue sinful humankind from their sin. We also look ahead to the time when Christ will come again as he promised and prepare ourselves to stand before him face to face. Only as we look ahead to this time when Christ will come again, we don't do so with our hope as a wish for something uncertain to happen in the future. That Jesus came the first time as God promised and made possible our salvation with His life, death and resurrection gives us certainty and confidence that he will keep his word and come again as he promised and take us to be with him in heaven.

This is what makes our Advent hope certain—it isn't based on percentages or probabilities. It's based on promises. On this earth, most of what we call hope is based on probabilities. I think I have a really good shot at this promotion. I think if I put this much away in my 401k and it grows at this interest rate I should have enough to retire on. But this is all based on probabilities. It is based on a wish and hope that may or may not come true. Whether it's a person or a thing, a system

or a spouse, whatever it is, you're banking on probabilities. But that is not true when it comes to the God of hope. When it comes to God, we are banking on promises God himself has made. This is what gives us confidence as we look forward to our God returning. We aren't afraid to stand before him. We aren't afraid of the concept of judgment. We have his promises recorded in the scriptures which tell us we have nothing to worry about—our sin has all been taken care of for us.

Think of some of those promises we base our hope on. They are promises many of us had memorized from little on. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* *"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."* *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."* *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* These are just a few promises from God, but think of the hope they give us. Jesus will return. You are not condemned in Christ Jesus. You really are forgiven and cleansed of your sin. You will be made new. You will receive a reconciled and fully redeemed and resurrected body. All of this will happen. It's been promised to you by God. You have hope for an eternal future with your God in heaven!

This not only gives us confidence in what is to come, it gives us hope for our present. Just look around at your life. What if this was all you had? What if this was all you had to look forward to? Any hope you had for things to get better rested squarely on your shoulders. Either you have what it takes to make everything work out so things get better or you don't. That might not give you much hope. Some things you have control over. Some things you don't. You might have control over your own business and be able to make solid decisions which propel you forward to success. But even then there are outside circumstances which are beyond your control. You have control over how you raise your children but you don't have control over the decisions they make, especially when they are out of your house. You can certainly take care of your body the best you can by watching what you eat and drink and making sure you exercise, but disease, illness and troubles can still come over which you have no control. It would be horrible if any hope we had for things to get better rested entirely on our shoulders. Even if we could make things better, we know we can't make them perfect. You could make lots of money to take away some of the problems of life. But often this just creates other problems.

Being certain of what Jesus did in the past and confident of what he will do in the future gives us hope as we look at the present because we know we can rely on the promises our God made. And those promises too are many throughout the scriptures. *"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him."* *"God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."* *"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* *"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand."* Again, these are just a few of the passages which God shares with us. But they are certain and true and give us hope—a sure and certain expectation of the future—God will be with us, watch over us, take care of us and lead us through this earthly life until we join him in the mansion of heaven.

I follow a national football writer who often has to calm fans down throughout the football season by saying, "Help is not on the way." In other words, in the middle of the season, very few people are available to be signed who will greatly help a struggling football team. When the average fan wants to spend time and money looking for a solution on the outside, he has to bring them back to reality and say, "Help is not on the way." The team has got to figure out and solve the problem by themselves. They have to look internally at themselves to right the ship. That might be reality, but it doesn't give a fan much hope.

Thankfully, this isn't the way it works for us spiritually. You have hope. Help has come in the form of our Savior Jesus which means we have hope now and will have that hope for a certain and victorious future. As you ponder the coming of our Savior Jesus, confronted with the problems and troubles of today, find your solace and relief in the words of God on the pages of the Bible. These promises from God not only will help you to persevere through whatever you face and give you encouragement no matter what confronts you, they will give you hope as you look to the future. Look forward to the future confidently. In Jesus, you have hope! Amen.