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Hope! Romans 5:1-5

Last week we dove into a three-word phrase central to Paul's thinking: Justification by faith. Justification by faith means that God declares someone to be righteous even though, as Paul teaches us in Romans 3:23 "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." This gift of justification is available only one way. How? By faith! You can't earn it. You don't deserve it. Not even Abraham, the Father of the Jews, earned God's favor. There is nothing anyone can do to merit God's gracious gift of righteousness. It is only received by faith.

All this is interesting...but so what? Well, today we come to the "so what" passage in Romans. Let's see what difference justification by faith makes in our lives.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, 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.

Martin Luther said of this passage, "In the whole Bible there is hardly another chapter that can equal this triumphant text." It is as rich as fudge. Let's dig in. Did you notice the first word? "Therefore." What is our job? To figure out what the therefore is there for. And he explains in the next few words. "...since we have been justified by faith." See, it's not just Abraham Paul is talking about. He is talking about us, too. We, too, have been justified by faith in precisely the same way that Abraham was. But so what? What difference does it make? Well... a lot!

First, Paul says, we have "peace" with God. What is the Hebrew word for "peace?" Shalom! It means way more than not fighting. It means a state of contented wellbeing. We have a shalom relationship with God because of Jesus. And this is great news! Do you remember the word that described how God felt about our sin? Wrath! Paul spent two chapters explaining the reasons we deserve God's righteous judgment. But now, because we are justified by faith in Christ, instead of wrath...we live in shalom...in peace...with God.

But wait! There's more! Verse 2: Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only do we have shalom with God...we have what? Access to God! He's not just withholding his judgment from us...he's inviting us into the throne room!

Years ago I was in Edinburgh, Scotland at the same time as Queen Elizabeth. We knew she'd be worshipping at the Canongate Church so we went down and waited for her to arrive. I was right

behind the barrier; that was as close as I could get to Her Majesty. I even called out and got a picture of her waving at me. But what if I wanted to sit with her in church? What if I jumped over the barrier and tried to chat her up? No good thing would have come of that. But suppose Prince Charles and I were buddies...old polo-playing pals. And I said, "Hey Chuck, could you wangle a pew seat for me next to your mum?" Prince Chuck could pull off what I never could.

That's exactly what happens in this text. Because of our relationship with Jesus the Son, we have access into the very presence of God the Father. And by the way, that had never before been possible. Why? Because of the glory of God which Paul mentions in that verse. God's awesome, brilliant, overwhelming presence. Remember, Moses longed to see God...but he couldn't look upon the Lord because it would destroy him. God had to cover Moses with his hand so that he could draw near...and even then, when Moses returned from Sinai, his face was so radiant from the reflected glory of God that he had to wear a mask so that the people could bear to look at him!

That's the glory of God! His pure, perfect, overwhelming presence that we cannot even bear because of our sinful nature. If this seems hard to understand, think back to August. Remember the eclipse? The special glasses you had to wear in order to look at it? Why? Because our eyes are not made to look directly into such brilliance. We cannot bear it. Same thing with the glory of God. But now, Paul says...because Jesus's righteousness has covered us, now we have the great hope that one day...we can stand unharmed and unashamed in the glorious presence of God.

And notice that word "hope." Such a wonderful word! It appears three times. When we use the word "hope" we might mean wishful thinking. Cross your fingers and hope for the best. Knock on wood. "I hope so." But the biblical word "hope" means much more than that. It is a confident assurance. Something we cannot yet see but can be certain of. We cannot yet gaze into the glorious face of God. We do not yet know the complete sense of shalom that we will one day experience. But we can stand on...rest on...be certain of...stake our lives on...rejoice in the hope that one day...one day we will God face to face.

Okay...that's great. But doesn't it sound other-worldly? We sing, "In the Sweet By and By." Someday we will see God face to face...and that will be sublime. But we've got to live this life first. What does our relationship with God offer us here...and now?

This one might come as a surprise to you: "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings..." Okay, that's weird. We rejoice in hope...that we get. But "rejoice" in our sufferings? That word sufferings means trials, hardships, pressures. Any way you define it, it doesn't sound fun. It certainly doesn't sound like something we would rejoice in, does it? But Paul says, "Stick with me. Here's why we can rejoice in suffering. First of all, because suffering produces endurance." The Greek word for "endurance" is hupomanay. It is a great word! Endurance. Persistence. Perseverance. Fortitude. Hupomanay.

When I was youth pastor in Bakersfield, I tended to stir things up a little bit. (Imagine that!) As a result, I faced some opposition that was painful. One day someone gave me a poster: a cat dangling from a branch with the caption, "Hang in there, baby!" How many remember this poster? That is the image Paul is using here: hupomanay. Hang in there! Don't give up! Don't throw in the towel!

One year I visited India and learned of an evangelist who had gone into a particular village to preach the gospel. He was stopped on the outskirts, beaten and thrown into a vermin-infested hut. For six weeks he could be heard singing and praising God for his imprisonment. Finally, they let him out and

said, "Tell us about this Jesus who makes you so strong." The whole village came to Christ. That's hupomanay.

Hupomanay is tough and resilient and even defiant. Hupomanay is not passive submission; it is not meekly bowing to fate. Hupomanay means head thrown back, fire in your eyes, "Whatever this world dishes out, I can take it and more because 'Greater is he that is in me that he that is in the world!' Hupomanay!

Suffering produces endurance...and, he goes one more, "...endurance produces character." Literally, the word "character" is a Greek word that means "proof." It is used to describe something that has been subjected to a trial and passed the test. A metal that has been fired until every impurity has been removed. Pure, trustworthy, tried and true.

There is a theological word to describe this process. What? Sanctification. After we have been justified...which happens in a moment....God begins to sanctify us...which takes the rest of our life. God uses the suffering and pressures of life to align us to the character of Jesus. Nature offers a great illustration of this. The diamond. As you know, diamonds begin as lumps of coal. Under extreme pressure...and over a long period of time...the molecules in that coal realign and turn from this to this. That's how God redeems our suffering. It is the pressure he uses to realign our character to that of his Son, Jesus. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 3, "we are being transformed into his image from one degree of glory to another."

Can you think of another way that character is built in us? When we are spoiled? When everything comes easy? When we never have to face crisis or disappointment or loss? It is not the times of prosperity and peace that shape us; it is the seasons of hardship and disappointment and pressure that shape us into the persons we are, both for now and, even more importantly, for eternity.

And does anyone here doubt that we need more people of deep, enduring character? Men and women and young people who keep their word, who hold their tongue, who tell the truth, who do what is right, not what is expeditious; who do what is right even when no one would know otherwise; who fulfill a business deal even when it might mean losing money who are faithful to their marriage vows; who keep their promises to their children; who honor their parents.

When you face trials and pressures and in the strength of Christ, endure them, God uses those experiences to forge in you a purer and deeper and tougher soul. And notice how this brings us full circle: "...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."

Suffering drives the world to despair. When spouses leave, when businesses collapse, when cancer strikes...when every last counselor and doctor and banker has been exhausted and there is nothing left to do; when a crazed gunman walks into a church and mows down 46 adults and children...apart from Christ...only despair remains.

Yet Paul says that all of these sufferings...and remember, Christians were being mowed down by a murderous tyrant named Nero at the time of Paul...our sufferings can produce, not despair, but hope; a hope that never disappoints. Why? (Here's the punchline!) Because God has poured his love into our hearts through his Holy Spirit. This is the first time that the Holy Spirit appears in Romans and what a welcome introduction! The reason suffering can produce endurance that produces character that

produces hope is because of the life-giving, lavish Holy Spirit. The very Spirit of God...the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from death to life...he lives in us! And he lavishes us with the love of God. He doesn't drizzle it. He doesn't spritz it. He pours himself into our hearts...extravagantly.

If this is not true...then the sufferings of this world...the Sutherland Springs of this world...have no meaning whatsoever. They are irredeemably evil and wasteful. But Paul believes something much greater and richer than that. And he does so because the whole gospel is built upon what appeared to be a senseless and outrageous injustice. The foundation of the gospel is a crisis that appeared hopeless...which God redeemed against all hope. We believe in a savior who was crucified before he was glorified. We follow a savior who says, "If you would follow me, take up your own cross first." We serve a savior who once warned his disciples, "In this world you will have trouble but take heart, I have overcome the world!"

Don't you want to know that hope will have the final word? Don't you want to believe that your present sufferings are never wasted? That God uses those very sufferings to purify you, to conform you to the image of his beloved Son? Only the Christian faith makes sense of hardest things of life. Only the Christian faith can encourage us to "rejoice" in our sufferings because only we have the Spirit of the risen Christ at work within us, redeeming even that which seems utterly irredeemable.

On this Veteran's Day weekend, we honor those who have sacrificed so much to protect us and preserve our precious freedoms. And we know that many of these men and women suffer in ways we civilians will never understand. They return from battle with emotional, psychological and spiritual wounds that plague them and their families. Many of them never find their way back to wholeness and health.

That is why I am so excited about a new initiative being launched by our Celebrate Recovery Ministry. "Welcome Home" is a group open to all active military or veterans that will meet weekly to help them work through the unique sets of issues that result from their service to this nation. I'm proud that this church will be a part of helping our veterans to move from suffering to hope...in the power of Jesus Christ.

Every one of us will suffer, will face pressure and tribulation. Some of you right now. Your suffering can produce one of two results. Either it produces bitterness, disillusionment and despair...or it produces refinement...tempering...character and hope. Choose hope!