



November 18-19, 2017
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Saved By His Life Romans 5:6-21

I have some unsettling news to share with you this evening/morning: Pastor Ellis and his family are vacationing in England right now. Friday, they went to the American embassy to renew their visa so they could return to the U.S...and were stunned to be told that their visa was being denied. And that denial cannot be appealed. At this point, we are working with attorneys and our denominational leaders to determine the best course forward, but obviously, we need your prayers! We will do everything we can to get them home, but for now, the Whites are not returning. I will keep you apprised.

As you can imagine this news stressed me out. But I tried as quickly as I could to return to last week's passage in Romans 5. Remember, the "so what" passage? Now that we have been justified by faith...now that God has declared us righteous in his sight because of the work of Christ, even though we deserved his condemnation...what difference does this make? What difference does it make that we have been justified by faith?

As we learned, this has both a "someday" and a "right now" impact. We have the assurance...the "hope" as Paul puts it...that one day we will stand in the glorious presence of God without fear of judgment or punishment. That is good news! But it's not JUST about what will happen in heaven. Paul also says that because of our righteous standing before God, we are able to face THIS LIFE and its sufferings...the tribulations of this world...the injustices of this world... with "rejoicing" because God uses trials to strengthen and shape us into the persons he created us to be.

So, on this weekend when all of our Chapel Hill lives have been upended by this unexpected bad news, I am claiming God's promise. I choose to "rejoice" in this trial...this tribulation...because I choose to remember that God is control, that this has not caught him by surprise and that he will work it out for his good. But I certainly know what I HOPE will be the outcome of our prayers. That our dear White family will return and resume their ministry among us.

Let's recite that verse together as an encouragement: "...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.

Last week I told you that Paul introduced a new topic in the verse I just read. What? The Holy Spirit! For the first time, we are told that when we receive God's gift of grace by faith, what we are really receiving is a person: the third person of the Trinity. The very Spirit of Jesus...the one who raised Christ from the dead... is now at work in our hearts transforming us into the persons we were created to be.

But actually, in that same text, Paul introduces another brand new topic for the first time: See if you can spot it: "...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." Did you spot the other newcomer? LOVE! This is the first time Paul writes of God's love! We've heard about his wrath. We've heard how God's wrath is appeased through the propitiation of Christ and how we are justified by faith. But for the FIRST time...we hear the REASON for all this: God's love! As John's gospel puts it: "...God so LOVED the world that he gave his only begotten son..."

Do you remember the Greek word for this kind of love? Agape. Agape is the highest form of love. Jim Edwards says this: "[Agape] is not conditional love; love "if"; it is not earned love; love "because of"; but unwarranted love, love 'in spite of.'" ¹ Paul spent four chapters explaining the sacrifice of Jesus for us. Now we discover the motivation behind it: God's incredible, selfless, unconditional, undeserved love for us. Isn't it wonderful to be able to say this: God loves me! Say it!

And just in case the magnitude of this love is not clear to us, Paul goes on to illustrate:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

On the night before Jesus was crucified, he gathered the twelve in an upper room. And in these final moments he spoke these very familiar words: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man _____" Can you fill in the blank? "...that a man lay down his life for his friends." And who can argue with that? What act could demonstrate a person's love more powerfully than the laying down of one's own life? There are people in your life... family... friends...for whom you'd be willing to risk your life, I'll bet?

Years ago we were on one of my history tours in London. Most of our group was on the first floor where I was teaching. But Cyndi and our jet-lagged nine-month old, Rachel, were in our room on the 11th floor, grabbing all the sleep they could. Suddenly, the fire alarm went off. Everyone rushed outside of course...except for one person. Guess where I went? Up the stairs ...to my family. I know...it was stupid. But Cyndi was exhausted and I was afraid she might not wake up. And when I hit the fourth floor, I smelled smoke! There really WAS a fire. So I continued racing up the stairs. A hotel employee tried to stop me; he was not successful. Finally, I reached the 11th floor, rushed to the room, opened the door... and they were gone. So...I grabbed my computer. Why not, right?

Back outside, two of our ladies chided me for my stupidity. And of course, they were probably right. But you know what? Not a single man in the group said anything. Because each of them was thinking the same thing. "I don't care if it was stupid. If that was my wife... my kid up there, you couldn't keep me out."

There is something reckless about love that sends you into harm's way to save those who are precious to you. Something stupid, perhaps, about love that throws caution to the wind and plunges in to save the object of its affection. You dads know what I'm talking about, don't you? And frankly, if the shoe was on the other foot, is there a momma bear in this room who wouldn't do the same thing for her kids? Maybe not your husband...but for your kids? Why should such actions of a loving parent be a surprise? Love does surprising, reckless, irrational, sometimes stupid things.

"Greater love hath no man than this...that a man lay down his life for his friends." Who could disagree with Jesus on this? Well...Paul does. The love that sacrifices for friends or family is great love...but not the greatest. It's as if Paul says, "Lord...I HATE to disagree with you, but there IS a love greater than the one

¹ James Edwards, *Romans*, p. 138.

you described. Here it is- 5:8: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!"

That is agape love. Jesus speaks of giving our life for our friends. Paul concedes that MAYBEsomeone would die for a good person. But God's love goes further still. Notice what verse 6 says about OUR condition when Christ died for us.

First, we were "weak." Another translation is, "helpless." "...WHILE we were helpless Christ died..." Paul has already made it abundantly clear: we are helpless, absolutely powerless to do anything about sin's grip on our lives. Benjamin Franklin once wrote: "God helps those who help themselves." We Americans LOVE that idea. But it isn't Christian. It is Deist, which is what Benjamin Franklin was! In fact, it's the opposite of Christian. God doesn't help those who help themselves. No! Paul says, "God helps those who COULD NOT help themselves." The helpless. The weak. The desperate!

Let me finish my hotel story. Someone had started a fire in the laundry chute. They put it out, the smoke cleared, and we were allowed back inside. All was good. The next day, as we got ready to leave, I turned the knob on our door...and it fell off in my hand. I could not get it back on and I could not get the door open. We were trapped. I had to call the desk and have them send someone to get us out. And you know what I was thinking, right? "What if the fire had been more serious? What if Cyndi had gone to open the door and the knob had fallen off in her hand then? They would have been trapped. There was nothing she could have done. Only someone from the outside would have been able to save them."

We were trapped, beloved. Trapped by our sin and brokenness. And there was no saving ourselves. We couldn't have done anything about it even if we wanted to.

And here's the second piece of bad news about our condition: we didn't want to. "While we were helpless, Christ died for the ungodly." Who did Christ die for? The UN-GODLY. The "unfriend" of God. We who had turned our backs on God. Who decided we didn't need God. Paul states the thesis and then elaborates. MAYBE someone would die for a good or righteous person...MAYBE. But "God shows his love for us in that WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS Christ died for us! DO YOU GET THAT? While we were God's enemies...while we wanted nothing to do with him ...while we were worshipping idols...in THAT condition, Christ died for us.

God didn't look down and say, "Hmmm, who is at least trying to love me; who is at least trying to obey my laws; who is at least trying to live a righteous life? Who is at least trying to be my friend. I'll send my son to die for THEM. But to hell with the rest of them." No. How does God prove the greatness of his love? By sending his son to die for the people who hated him; who turned their backs on him; who had no use for Him; who killed him! "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."

This has been a particularly sleazy week in the news, hasn't it? More and more accusations being made about the sexual behavior of famous people. I'll bet that there are a LOT of public figures getting nervous. Because THEY have humiliating photos and episodes from their past that they would prefer not come to light. But before we point at Al Franken or Roy Moore, may I just ask this? Is there ANYONE here who doesn't have stuff hidden in the junk closet of their lives... stuff that, were it to be pulled out and put on display, would humiliate us? I do! There are things in my past of which I am ashamed. WHO among us would like a spotlight shined on our stupidest, most shameful moments? But Paul says, even under the spotlight of divine scrutiny...even when God saw us in our slimiest and most shameful state...it was exactly then that God said, "I STILL love you...and I will STILL send my son to die for you.

That is amazing love. And the result of that love leads us to another new idea that Paul introduces three times in the last two verses. Listen for it:

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Did you hear the new word? Reconciliation. Reconciliation is language of friendship. Reconciliation is bringing FORMER friends back together again. Earlier I reminded you of Jesus' words in the upper room: "Greater love has no man than this; that a man lay down his life for his friends." Do you remember his next four words? "You are my friends..." "You are my friends," says God to us!" We were alienated from God by our sin...yet through the death of Jesus, we are reconciled! Restored to friendship with God. God is your friend! Isn't that great?

But wait! There's more! Not only were we made God's friends through Jesus' death, God pours out blessings on us through Jesus' life. His resurrection. Follow Paul's logic in verse 10. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. When did God send Jesus to die for us? When we were his enemies. What happened as a result of Jesus' death? We became God's friends. Now if he was willing to send his son to die for us when we were his enemies...how much more is God willing to bless us and work out his salvation in our lives now that we are his friends?

Last week we celebrated Veteran's Day. Let me ask this World War II question: What was the distinction of being our defeated enemies? Did we crush them? Did we demoralize them? Did we eliminate their culture and take over their land and resources? Far from it! When surrender came...when peace finally came, not only did we stop fighting, we poured billions of dollars and millions of man hours into rebuilding those countries! To the point that now, our defeated WWII enemies are in a better economic state than our allies.

God doesn't want just to make peace with us through the death of his Son and be done with it. He wants to reclaim us as his FRIENDS and pour his resurrection blessings into our lives.

This whole mess with the Whites is particularly painful because they long to be here... back home... back with their family and friends. I hear it in their voices. They long to be returned to their Chapel Hill family. Problem is, there appears to be little they can do. The denial letter says there is NO appeal possible. For now, they are trapped. Our best hope might be an intercessor; a hero. Someone from the State Department who can step in and say, "I don't care WHAT the law seems to say, I want them back home." That's what they need!

While we were helpless...while we were separated from God...while we were on the wrong side of God's law with no possible appeal...our hero stepped in, offered his life for ours and said, I want them back home! So that that might become the friends of God! Who here DOESN'T want to be a friend of God? Who here DOESN'T want the resurrection blessings of Christ poured into their life to make dead things alive? Deadened conscience. Dead relationships. Dead-end futures. Deadly resentments. The dead weight of guilt. Even the death of a dream.

Only our hero can do that. And he has done that. For you and for me. Will you believe it?