

EPISTLE READING: Romans 5:1-5

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Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access^[b] to this grace in which we stand; and we^[c] boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we^[d] also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

This is the word of the Lord

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Psalm 23

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The LORD *is* my shepherd;

I shall not want.

²He makes me to lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside the still waters.

³He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness

For His name's sake.

⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil;

For You *are* with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil;

My cup runs over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

All the days of my life;

And I will dwell^[a] in the house of the LORD

Forever.

This is the word of the Lord.

*“Enduring Hope

*There was once a little tree, Little Sapling, was his name. He didn't think life was fair. He felt so small in the forest with all of the other trees towering over him. One **spring**, a terrible storm blew into the forest. It rained and blew so hard that Little Sapling had to lie flat on the ground to keep from being pulled out by the roots! The next morning, he realized that all of the big trees had barely lost any leaves. They didn't think the storm was all that bad! “Not fair,” he thought. During the **winter**, Little Sapling experienced the severe blizzard which came, very hard. For days, Little sapling was buried under a huge drift of snow, and didn't know if he would ever see daylight again! When the snow finally melted enough that he could see out and listen to its tree family about the blizzard, they were talking about the beauty of the snow. From his vantage point, he didn't think that was very pretty. When **summer** finally came, the heat and drought were almost unbearable. Little Sapling's leaves withered up and he was so thirsty because his roots didn't go deep enough. All of the big tree's roots could reach down to get water. Their leaves didn't shrivel up. Life was very hard for Little Sapling. Many years later, when Little Sapling had grown up to be Mr. Tree, he realized however that he had survived many spring storms, winter blizzards and hot summers. He was now big and strong. All of the hard things he had had to endure in his life growing up had indeed made him what he was intended to be. The winds made his trunk sturdy, the snows had provided water for the shade of the forest, and the lack of rain made his roots to grow deep and straight.¹

*I rediscovered this little story recently. Its point...that one of the good things which God brings out of difficulty is the strengthening of our character and the gaining of a bigger perspective, is important to think on when we go through suffering. Paul provides this message, with an important theological nuance, in his letter to the Jewish and Greek Christians in Rome. These believers were obviously going through tremendous hardships, “persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword”, Romans 8 tells us. So, this morning, let's still our souls and come together to study the 5th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans.

¹A.J. Cosmo. *The Little Sapling*. (New York: Thought Bubble Publishing; 2012).

*At the beginning of the passage (vs. 1), Paul is reaching the culmination of what he's been teaching. *"Therefore, we have been justified by faith,"* he says. We've been made right with God, saved. And it's come as a freely given gift through Jesus. *Paul adds that...the first consequence of this justification is an inner peace with God. We don't need to fear or live beaten down with shame or guilt. Nothing ever can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. And the second consequence... *"We have the HOPE of sharing the glory of God"*. This is a firm and certain hope, not wishful thinking kind of hope. This is a blessed assurance that what belongs to Jesus belongs to us, including Jesus' inheritance of living forever in God's presence. ***In other words, what Paul summarizes in these introductory verses, is that the fruits of our freely giving salvation are that we enjoy peace in the present and certain hope for the future.**

*Then, Paul goes on to say that we should "boast" (rejoice) in this future hope, in our ultimate glory, and...that we also should rejoice in our sufferings! Wait! Wait! Really? We're to rejoice in the troubles, big and small, man-made and those of nature? Really? In all the acts of violence, oppression, persecution. In all the poverty, famine, and disease?"

"Yes, really." You see, the preposition which Paul uses is important! It's "rejoice IN our sufferings", not "FOR our sufferings". Never is suffering desired by God. God cries when we cry and hurts when we hurt. God in Jesus came to make certain we know that. Never does our God cause suffering nor ask that we celebrate it or even passively accept it. Rev. Tim Keller says, *"Our God wants us to meet and move through suffering without shock and surprise, without denial of our sorrow and weakness, without resentment or paralyzing fear, yet also without acquiescence or capitulation, without surrender or despair."*²

What Paul is saying is that we should rejoice IN our sufferings, sufferings which simply come, which simply come with being a fallen human in this broken world, with being a Christian, wading against the flow, for this rejoicing is part and parcel of our response to Jesus

² Tim Keller. "Enduring Suffering Without Losing Hope" <http://christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/january-february/time-keller-on-enduring-suffering-without-losing-hope.html?start=2/> (accessed 9-7-17).

when he calls us to pick up our cross and follow him.”³ It is a statement of triumph because rather than being destroyed or defeated by our sufferings, we, Christians, can defy and rise above them. *We can stand on the firm foundation of our faith and go through tribulations because, Paul says, suffering produces endurance, the strength to keep going forward. And endurance produces a stronger character, who we were intended to be. And character can move us toward an enduring hope, a confidence in the promise of God...the promise that evil does not have the last word.

*You remember that old African Spiritual, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen”? It goes, “*Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows but Jesus. Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Glory, Hallelujah!*” It’s a heart-wrenching, soul-stabbing hymn which was sung by slaves who, in their suffering, became focused on the nearness of Jesus, the One who suffered on the cross for them and was now holding them up and sharing their pain. It reminded them that on that first Easter morning, Jesus’ suffering defeated suffering and doomed evil forever! It encouraged them for they were destined for paradise, where there is no more tears, death, or pain. “*Glory Hallelujah,*” they sang. “*Glory Hallelujah!*” (pause)

*At the Presbyterian Seminary in Austin, there is a very large (10ft) stained-glass window which hangs over a wide staircase in one of the buildings. The window is called, “*Between Cross and Resurrection*”. It was made in memory of a beloved professor, Alan Lewis. I recall being so drawn to that window that sometimes I’d take the staircase just so that I could see its vibrant colors, which so often flooded the landing between the flights. I was also so intrigued that I read Dr. Lewis’ book, “*Between the Cross & Resurrection: a theology of Holy Saturday*” and understood then window to be all about Jesus’ suffering defeating suffering and dooming evil forever. For in it, the cross, the dark emblem of sorrow and pain, bends toward the Light of Resurrection morning, toward Jesus’ glory and our eternal hope. Can you see that?

Dr. Lewis, who while writing the book was diagnosed with terminal cancer, wrote, “*Looking back from the vantage point of the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter morning, Christ’s*

³ Garrett Green. Theological Perspective, Rom 5:1-8 In: *Feasting on the Word Yr A, Vol 3*; Bartlett, Taylor (eds). (Louisville: WJKP, 2011), 134.

*cross and burial seemed the end of him and the end of everything, certainly the end of hope in God's justice, love, and power. Looking forward, however, from the same place, we see another end of the world, the end of its darkness, death, and tears and the arrival-in-advance of heaven. The world of unforgiving legalism, and ungodly power, of suffering and pain, so jubilant and secure on Friday night, is on Sunday morning judged, condemned, and under threat of termination."*⁴ (long pause)

Brothers and sisters, from the vantage point of the Holy Saturdays in all our lives, when we feel the weight of having had to endure the inherent sufferings and turmoils, when we feel too exhausted to go on, we ARE, as Christians, at the very same time, leaning toward Easter morning with its eternal light and enduring hope. *From this vantage point, with God's love shining...pouring...down on us, we can indeed rejoice. Really. And what's more, we can answer the divine invitation to go forward to share our new-found freedom in the oft so hurting world. *Indeed, "*The love of God is so powerful that it sustains us through suffering and empowers us to act according to our faith and hope*"⁵

*So, this is how it is that we see neighbor helping neighbor, suffering helping suffering, in Rockport and Port Aransas, and Corpus Christi, Palacios, Refugio, Victoria, Houston. This is how it is that a man who bought the last generator in a Florida store, can give it to a total stranger whose father desperately needs it. *This is how it is that protestors who are being beaten and arrested can still sing, "We Shall Overcome". This is how it is that the mother whose child is murdered when a car is driven into a crowd can be a voice for peace and love, and a preacher in a war-torn country can stand in a bullet-ridden pulpit to preach on Sunday. *This is how it is that a woman with only \$40 to her name can put \$5 in the offering plate, and how a regular doctor ends up in Mosel, treating any patient that is brought to him. This is how it is that people like you and I can get up each day and begin again.

*So, take heart, Fellow saplings. Even out of great hardships, our God works his marvelous graces. Focus, then, and rejoice in the hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, in

⁴ Alan Lewis. *Between Cross & Resurrection. A Theology of Holy Saturday.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001).

⁵ Diane Givens Moffett. Pastoral Perspective, Rom 5:1-8 In: *Feasting on the Word Yr A, Vol 3*; Bartlett, Taylor, eds. (Louisville: WJKP, 2011), 134.

our sufferings, for we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope... and hope does not disappoint". Glory, Hallelujah!
Glory, Hallelujah! Amen