**Romans 5:1-11 (esp.1-4,10)** February 28, 2021

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 *Romans 5:1Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. 3Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

 *6You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. 8But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

 *9Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! 10For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**I.** “A few weeks ago my wife and I reconciled,” one guy says to his friend, “but I am still sleeping out on the couch.” His friend is wondering if they really are reconciled. Maybe the man himself isn’t totally convinced either.

**“We Have Peace with God” OR
“On Reconciliation and Sleeping on the Couch”**

 Sometimes the Christian life—not other people’s Christian lives, but our own Christian life—makes us wonder if God is really reconciled with us. Our reading boldly declares, ***“Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God.”*** For the first four chapters of this important doctrinal book of the Bible, the Apostle Paul explained what’s wrong about our natural relationship with God. He explained also how that relationship is healed through faith in Jesus Christ. Because that rift has been healed, since we are reconciled with God, this Scripture starts, ***“Therefore we have peace with God.”*** It’s not just a nice sentiment. It’s not a Hallmark greeting card. It is God’s declaration, spoken from heaven, set down in writing, sealed with the blood of Christ: ***“We have peace with God.”***

 That may look good in print, sound good when preached, but the facts on the ground don’t exactly support that. If God really is at peace with you, then why does he allow you to face so many stresses: sorrow, health issues, anxiety, social awkwardness, family troubles, etc. And what about when you start to suffer *specifically because you are a Christian*? If God really is at peace with you, then why doesn’t he do something and step in?

 This is the head-scratching experience of Christians of all times. Paul lets it slip in verse 3 when he mentions ***“our sufferings.”*** Even though he claims God’s approval and protection, he admits to his own ***“sufferings.”*** This experience of faith bleeds from nearly every page of the Bible. For one notable example, go to Psalm 23. If you took a poll of Christians familiar with their Bibles, I think they would vote that psalm as the most comforting spot of real estate in the entire Bible. It’s the one that starts *“The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want…,”* But even that most serene six-sentence poem can’t ignore the issue of ***“sufferings.”*** Do you remember verse 4: *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death?”* Remember that? How about verse 5, *“You prepare a table… in the presence of my enemies.”* Death is on his mind. His enemies are circling. Even in Psalm 23 personal sufferings dog the man writing the Word of God.

**II.** If we are going to explore this issue of sufferings, it is important to realize that there are different types of sufferings. If we don’t realize this, we’ll formulate one-size-fits-all answers that don’t fit all sizes. You could doubtlessly divide sufferings many ways, but I came up with four basic types of sufferings as they relate to the Christian life. Someone might not agree with this, or want to add a category, or divide them differently, but I think these are helpful. They help us wrestle with the issue of what are called ***“sufferings”*** in our lives.

 First are troubles that happen specifically because we are Christians. It’s the Christians and the lions in the Roman colosseum sort of thing. Jesus told his Twelve Apostles, *“You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death”* (Mt 24:9). The first sort of Christian sufferings are persecutions. We shouldn’t limit it to extreme physical violence. It includes bearing insults for your beliefs, being treated badly because of your convictions, whether convictions about God or convictions about how God wants people to behave.

 The second type of troubles are those you willingly impose on yourself because you are Christian. It’s not always a solid line between the first and second, but here is one example of what I am getting at: many Christians choose to give a tithe, 10%, of their income to supporting their congregation and denomination. When you give that 10%, your life is going to get a little less plush. You might have to buy a Focus instead of a Fusion, a Chevy instead of a Cadillac, retire in a two bedroom house instead of a 5,000 square foot mini-mansion out in the country. Sooner or later this thought is going to pop into your head, “If only we didn’t give so much to church, we could…” It happens in other ways: missing a promotion because you insist on Christian principles; losing a friend because even while you care for them you can’t condone their behavior. You get the idea. These “sufferings” happen because you choose to limit some aspect of your life in conformity to the will of God.

 These first two types of hardship, whether involuntary or voluntary, are included in Jesus’ words from the Gospel reading, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* Sometimes it is a cross others lay on us, sometimes it is one we take up ourselves. Either way, it is because we know that’s what Jesus wants us to do.

 A third type of suffering is not so noble. These sufferings are the consequence of our own foolishness or sin. Another example: In the Old Testament reading, Jacob was a fugitive. Remember how he had to sleep out in the open country with a rock for his pillow? Do you know why he was out there? He was running away from his brother who wanted to kill him. Do you know why? Because Jacob had tricked his brother out of the family inheritance. Yes, Jacob was suffering, running for his life, as a consequence of his own sins. The abuser does time; the workaholic goes through a divorce; the greedy loses respect. These are sufferings that come to even believers, not as a punishment for sin strictly speaking, but as a discipline, a call to repentance. We can actually be glad for sufferings like this because they call us back to God. (But here I get a little ahead of myself.)

 A fourth kind of suffering is the sort of suffering that happens to all people because we live in a fallen world. Believers and unbelievers likewise are victims of drunk drivers. Economic recessions impoverish God’s people as well as those who aren’t. Cancer, diabetes, Covid, happen regardless of our faith affiliation. And all of us, if Jesus doesn’t return first, will be laid to rest in the bosom of the earth.

 Basically, these are four types of trouble: those imposed on us because of our faith; those we choose because of our faith; those that we bring on ourselves through foolishness and sin; those that simply happen because we live in a sin-stricken world.

 Each of these is different. And yet, in different ways, it is very easy to look at each of these like that man thinking about his friend camped out on the couch: “So that’s what reconciliation looks like?” We think, ***“Peace with God?*** Wouldn’t peace with God mean that God doesn’t let these things happen? Shouldn’t peace with God mean that I have peace in my life?”

 This is one of the most frequently discussed questions in the Bible. Look into the Old Testament and hear Job wrestle with it. Read, even sing, Psalm 73, our psalm for today where the psalmist confesses, *“I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.”* Look at James chapter one; 2 Corinthians 4; John 9; most of the book of 1 Peter. (Incidentally, if you want a fifteen minute read on the subject, First Peter would be a great place to go, including this one, *“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you”* (4:12)). The Bible is almost obsessed with the question of suffering, especially the suffering God’s people experience.

 That is why people are drawn to preachers who say that if you give a dollar, God will give ten back. That is why people flock to preachers who say that God wants his people to be healthy, not sick. ***“Peace with God”*** is supposed to mean that we get a favorable treatment, that we don’t have to go through the wringer like the rest of humanity.

 Our reading, however, reminds us to rejoice in the peace we have with God, *and* the sufferings. Paul tells us that all *is* right when that is your reality. You can either have peace with God *or* peace with the world, not both. You can have short-lived comfort now that will disappear for eternity, or rejoice in sufferings now and rejoice even more without them forever.

**III.** Our reading answers the apparent conflict between ***“peace with God”*** and ***“our sufferings”*** with two things. First, sufferings *do* serve a purpose, and second, if we doubt God’s care in our troubles, then we need to remember how truly good he has been to us!

**A.** The second half of verse 3 and verse 4 remind us that sufferings do accomplish something positive. ***“We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”*** God is wise enough to make your sufferings serve your higher good. If you have ever accomplished anything in your life (and I don’t mean big stuff here; just even something little), you know the truth of this. If you have gone through boot camp, you know that ***“suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”*** If you ever had to care for a loved one day after day, week after week, you know that ***“suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”*** If you have ever been on a team, athletic, academic or otherwise, you know that ***“suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”***

 And since your hope is not a gold-toned trophy, or an employee of the month recognition, but an eternity in heaven, and a hope that you may be a shining example of God’s glorious love in a dark and despairing world, you actually rejoice in sufferings because you know that ***“suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”***

**B.** But is that reasonable? Is it reasonable rejoice when you suffer? Is it not more reasonable to think that maybe God doesn’t care? That maybe suffering sounds like God saying, “Don’t let it happen again…,” as if you have made parole but one slip-up and it’s back to the slammer for you?

 NO! Read verse 10. ***“If, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”***

 The point is this: If in our past God loved us gutter dwellers enough to die for us—notice how this reading four times refers to us: powerless, ungodly, sinners, enemies of God—if in the past God loved us enough to die for us and adopt us and pay the court costs and take up the responsibilities, now that we are his children, will he not much more be sure that sufferings will no more touch us than is beneficial to us?

 A husband sleeping on the couch? Maybe there is a very good reason. Maybe one snores loudly. Maybe his back condition only finds comfort on the couch. Maybe with differing work schedules, the only way they get the quality rest they need is in different places. I’m just making stuff up here. The point is that not all things are as they seem. For the Christian, sufferings are not the badness we think they are. They are what our supremely loving God allows to come in a measure he has chosen, for our good. And never forget that there is peace, reconciliation, forgiveness between him and us in Christ Jesus. Amen.