

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

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

The Peace Process

I – Peace Already Established With God

Dear Friends in Christ,

The first I remember about a peace process was sometime in grade school, and my father was watching the national evening news. He was very interested in three men shaking hands on the television – the leaders of Egypt, Israel and the United States. I really didn't understand what all the fuss was about, just three men shaking hands. It was back in 1978 at a place called Camp David. For the first time in decades, there was hope that peace would break out in the Middle East. Since that time, for well over three decades, I doubt that a single month has passed without hearing something of the Middle East peace process, a process with promising prospects back in 1978, but whose fruit has yet to ripen. Sometimes a peace process is just that – a long drawn out process.

When it comes to us and God, and our broken relationship—remember, the reading says that we are by nature God's enemies—when it comes to our relationship with God, people often approach it as peace process negotiations. I'll do this for you God, you do that for me. Protect me now and I'll get to church more often. Help me through this financial difficulty and I will behave myself. Etc. It's like we think we have something to offer God at the bargaining table.

Verses seven and eight of our reading give us a different picture of the peace process between us and God. It starts by saying, "**Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.**" Okay, if someone would die for a good person, and Jesus died for me, he must have seen something good in me, something I had to offer. Isn't that what you would expect as the end of this line of argument? Isn't that what a soldier thinks, "I am willing to die for this wonderful country that I call home. I will defend my family and home. They are worth defending!"

But that is *not* what God says here. "**For a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us... When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.**" (7-8,10)

God's Word today reminds us that our peace process with God, was not the normal long drawn out peace process. He did not sit down at the bargaining table with us to see how things could be worked out, step by step, concessions and compromise. No. God came to the table, laid the papers out and said, "All the disputes we had – all the times you attacked my glory, all the border disputes about whether or not I had a right to rule your life, all the times you insulted me publicly and privately, all the damages you caused to other citizens of mine, all that and more, I have forgiven you. I have paid it all. There is now peace between us. Jesus has already died for that." We didn't even get to open our

mouths.

Now let us add this to the surprise of it all. Not only was the price of peace paid when we were still God's enemies, it was paid for all people. It is a difficult thing to forgive someone who has sinned against us, but it certainly is easier when that person expresses his remorse. But how would you feel about forgiving someone who looked into your hurt eyes, heard about your ruined life, and then said, "I don't want your forgiveness. In fact, if I could ruin your life again, I would do it again!" That—that would hurt. And yet that is the situation Jesus addressed when he died on the cross. Jesus died for the sins of the world. And it didn't matter if people would believe it or not or want it or not. He just did it. He knew that most people in the world would reject the gift that cost him his life. "I don't expect it, want it or need it, Jesus," is the most common response. But the gift still has been given.

When people start to talk about the good things we need to do to be saved, this is a good place to start. "***When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him.***" We were not even interested in peace when he unilaterally issued the peace treaty. We had the gun in hand, the knife strapped to our body, the intense alert eye of a combatant, wearing the camouflage, and God walked up to us and told us the war was over. The two sides were reconciled.

In Jesus we are, (to use a good religious term), "justified." That word is a word we do not often use in ordinary life. This word describes a judge who looks at a criminal, a guilty criminal at his sentencing date, and says, "You are now free. Your debt has been paid. You have no debt or punishment outstanding. Next." With the payment offered by Jesus, God judges us sinners the same way, "Your debt is paid. You contributed nothing, Jesus made full payment." God declared peace unilaterally in Jesus Christ. We did nothing, we contributed nothing. That is what the angels sang about at Christmas when the Savior came: "He brings to *earth peace to men on whom his favor rests*" (Luke 2:).

The first verse of our reading pointed that out. "***Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ***" (1). And because of that peace "***we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.***" Peace, rejoice, hope. Peace means that our past is settled with God. Rejoicing means we have joy now. Hope expects something wonderful in our future.

II – The Ongoing Peace Process in Our Lives

With all of these great positive things, you expect Paul to keep on writing about a rose-tinted pie-in-the-sky life that the Christian has because Jesus died for him. In fact that is what a lot of people tell us.

A great many people have the "Think positive" view of life. Just think positive and things will turn out well. There is a grain of truth in there, but not all positive thinkers have wonderful lives. Many other people have in mind the employer-employee relationship with God: if I give God an honest day's work, he is going to give me an honest day's pay. Or maybe because he is such a generous God, he will positively bury me in material blessings, but I still have to make my contribution. There is less truth in that one.

We have been justified. We have peace, joy and hope. Then Paul throws the curve ball, "***But we also rejoice in our sufferings.***"

The peace process between us and God is already complete. Thank you, God! But it has not brought peace to all aspects of our life. We still and always will live in a world affected and infected by sin.

Verse 3 does not promise a life of easy blessings in this world. He doesn't promise positive things for positive thinkers, or that God will give great earthly returns on our spiritual investments. It doesn't say it will or won't happen because that really is not the point. The point is that *it is a given*, it is an assumption that Christians, like other people—maybe even more than other people—will have sufferings.

We see and feel it in our world. Recently someone said that virtually every single place in this world is a more dangerous place than it was five years ago. Don't know how you can measure those

things, but most of us at least feel that way. Locally, go to Louisville and listen to the police chief and his anxiety over the fact that there are seven times more murders this year than at this time last year.

We feel it on a personal level. Young people have social, school and family issues that face them every morning when they get out of bed. Young adults have to find a place in life, a job or a career in a doubtful job market; middle aged people stress out about holding on to their job, the welfare and future for the next generation; older people have a host of insecurities with health and retirement – and I have only painted with the most broad brush. Your own anxieties run much deeper, are sketched in more detail, and painted in more color than the grayscale rough draft I just handed you.

Our first reaction to problems, at least in America, is to analyze the problem, the suffering. What went wrong? What did we do? How can we fix it? And there is the opposite extreme of not addressing the problem at all – ignoring it, hoping it will go away or someone else will solve it. God's Word tells the Christian that more important than finding a solution is the attitude we can have, "***We rejoice in our suffering.***"

It is not that we actively search out suffering. It is not that we say, "I like suffering." And we certainly, like Jesus himself taught us, do pray that suffering will pass us over or leave us. But all the while we continue to "rejoice in our suffering." Just because times are tough doesn't mean our hymns to God are silenced. We believe that his goodness extends beyond what we humans define as "good".

Perhaps the best reason for continuing to rejoice is explained in verses 3 and following: "***We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.***" Listen again to that progression, maybe even follow along in verses 3-4. "***We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.***"

When we have sufferings, we develop perseverance. There is a stick-to-it-ativeness that God builds up in us. We learn to keep trusting in God when the times are hard. We more regularly turn to God in our difficulties, and more and more so our trust in him grows beyond words to conviction in our hearts. This perseverance builds character.

Character means that not only do we have a conviction about God, but our entire personality and character resembles God in growing amounts. Such a person has hope, because he knows that God has promised an eternal life.

Hope inspires a person to rejoice in those sufferings. There we reach peace with the life that we have in this world. Not that the problems go away, but that with the Christian hope of eternal life, the problems are only a bit of untasty vegetable before the ice cream sundae.

This peace process is most certainly a process. And not unlike the Middle East peace process, it will continue as long as I live, and as long as each of you live. When we look at the difficulties of life through God's Word, and look for God's answers rather than the world's answers, God's Holy Spirit gives perseverance, character and hope. With that knowledge of what awaits us, we can have peace in all difficulties and sufferings.

We can wait through this peace process because of the other peace process already completed by our Savior. Amen.