

Preparing Our Hearts for Easter

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Reading from Romans chapter 5, starting at verse 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 boast in the hope of the glory of God.

³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.

⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to 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 person, though for a good person 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.” (Rom.5:1-8 NIV)

One of the most beautiful passages in the book of Romans!

It truly sums up the corpus of Christian Theology - the situation, the solution and the result all wrapped up neatly in those 8 verses.

As we approach Easter these verses occasion a discussion on the core foundational elements of Christianity - grace, faith, salvation, hope and love.

For Christianity, Easter is a powerful story which tells of God’s incredible love for creation, for you and I, and the amazing consequence of placing our faith in God - resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus is an example, the first of what is to come later for us.

In the meantime, as Paul notes in the passage we read today, and for many of us who have experienced glimpses of that resurrection life - experienced as an otherworldly peace, hope and love - here and now - faith in Jesus Christ enables one to participate in what God had prepared for us now.

Many people have asked why I do what I do, why I’m a minister, why I am a Christian - what value does religion actually have anyway?

That’s a great question - and my first answer to that is not because I love religion or believe religion will save the world

It’s because of what I’ve experienced when I placed my faith in Jesus in a desperate cry for help.

In that moment I experienced that love and peace and joy which is otherworldly - a powerful experience as real as the chair I'm sitting on, as real as the world we live in.

The words in Romans Paul speaks of are not the source of great imagination but of genuine experience.

Not only Paul, but the Gospel writers, the disciples, early church leaders - people throughout history and today who have had similar experiences when placing their faith in Jesus Christ.

And not only at that moment, but other moments throughout this journey.

Christianity is not about living up to a standard, but engaging by faith with a living God - steps of faith that when real and genuine produce lives of love for one another - made possible by an inner peace, an inner security only once experienced frees us to love without conditions.

Selfishness pulls us back into self protective behaviour, drives our insecurities and gives us a false sense of power - the power of control - control we use to self-fulfill.

This battle between faith and self-fulfillment is so perfectly explained in Christianity - along with the solution to our failures in our battle between the two - which is the deep unconditional love of God for us all.

Let's take a look at this beautiful story as told in Romans 5, starting at verse 1 and 2 where it says;

"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."

Justified - this is to be cleared of all charges and punishment.

Not by anything we have done, not by our moral effort, not by our being good people and living up to a standard - but through faith.

Fait is intimate trust.

Trust with all we long for, the very seat of our dignity and desires which determine all our thoughts - this is the place of faith, the place of trust God has called us to.

We are justified through faith - the point being it's not something we did to earn our freedom - faith is a response to what God has already birthed in us.

Trust is not blind - it is based on a track record.

God in history has shown to be trustworthy - the only one who knows us so intimately - even better than ourselves - who better to trust with all we long for, hope for and desire?

The result of this faith is not only justification before God, but we experience peace.

All anxiety is washed away - there is no more guilt, no more stress, no striving - connection with God brings peace.

I really like how Gerald Cragg in the Interpreter's Commentary draws out the full meaning of peace where he says; *"Peace is not only cessation of hostility, but is the experience of creative harmony - inner security and serenity."* (pg.451)

This is a spiritual experience of an other-worldly reality.

It's not a peace this world can bring us, but is only experienced in God.

Access to this is by faith.

Faith is the access by which we experience this - but it's deeper than peace - peace is the by-product of something much greater - the very presence of God.

As we read in verse 2 where it says, *"we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand."*

Grace - what is God's grace?

Grace is God freely extending toward us, reaching to us. Because God is disposed to bless and be near us.¹

To stand in God's grace is to say yes to God's reaching out to us - this is done by taking those steps of faith.

What is your image of God?

Is it one of grace?

Do you see God as continually reaching toward you? Deeply desiring to bless and be near you?

How many of you have seen or see God as a distant judge, watching to see who steps out of line, quick to dole out deserving punishment?

That is a human construct of God.

A Biblical construct of God is one of grace - always extended toward us, always reaching to bless and be near us!

Continuing on to the end of verse 5 we read: *"And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;*

¹ Grace, HELPS Word Studies, Bible Hub.

⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

We boast in the hope of the glory of God - the glory of God is his infinite, intrinsic worth.

We are of infinite and intrinsic worth because that is who loves us.

For those who have connected to God through faith, we are filled with this huge sense of worth - we discover how incredibly important we are - not by virtue of what we can do - but by virtue of being loved by the only one whose love truly matters.

So many of us find our worth by being needed by others, or by what we can give to others.

These are all good things, but do not possess worth intrinsically.

Some of us have skills - like doctor, or nurse, or an electrician, or computer skills, computer programming, or athletics - hockey player, football player - when we use our skills we have a sense of worth.

In our day to day jobs we have a sense of worth - we are needed to complete tasks.

Or perhaps our self worth is found in being needed to give - to provide for our family, to take care of a child.

Some of us find our worth in giving - what can I do to be of value - I can help, I can give of my time and assistance.

We all need to be needed - however, a true sense of worth is intrinsic because we are designed to be connected to the one of infinite and intrinsic worth - God.

We are designed to be in fellowship with God, and when that fellowship is broken, we seek desperately to define our worth elsewhere.

People who lose all their money can feel devastated - an existential despair which has driven many to suicide. Their sense of worth was in the wrong place.

People who break up in a relationship are often lost, lose the desire to live - their worth was found in that other person, not the one of intrinsic worth.

When people lose their jobs many feel useless, worthless - so many times our jobs define our worth. Many are lost in retirement, because their sense of worth had been misplaced.

To share in the glory of God is to discover our worth - which is infinite, intrinsic and rooted in love without conditions - that is, our worth is not dependant on our performance, but on the nature of the one who loves us.

The next verses, verses 3 to 4 need to be considered with thought as it says; *“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.”*

That word glory in *glory in our sufferings* in verse 3 is not the same word used for God’s glory in verse 2.

Be very careful with this verse, it is not saying be happy you have trouble, but be glad that you have the resources to bring you through trials and difficult times.

The word for glory in that phrase ‘we also glory in our sufferings’ means to have the right base of operation to deal successfully with a matter.²

Paul is saying we have what it takes to get through difficult times, so take courage when you find yourself in such situations - call on God, for God knows when you are in need of help, strength and comfort.

This process will reveal one’s true character, reveal genuine faith as the process weeds out those who are false or profess to have faith for pretense.

Never should we say, ‘Yay, I have trouble!’

As Gerald Cragg points this out as well in *Interpreter’s* when he says; *“Paul does not mean that we rejoice when surrounded by affliction. Suffering in itself does not necessarily strengthen character; it may simply break and embitter one’s spirit.*

Out of his own experience Paul is assuring his readers that the things we usually account as deterrents can be transformed into means of strengthening character.” (pg.454)

It’s unrealistic to expect anyone to be happy in suffering or be glad for it. That’s not what this text is saying.

To ‘glory in our suffering’ as Paul says here in our verses is to recognize we have a resource to help us through - so be encouraged, head up, you can get through this!

As Paul has mentioned, it is by the experience of the Holy Spirit which has poured out God’s love into his heart to strengthen him, to encourage him, to remind him of what’s most important - God’s love for him.

This is not false hope to get through tough times - this was experiential in the life of Paul and many believers.

Sometimes when I am disappointed with life, or with myself, or unable to find a solution to an issue or problem - faced with a challenge in life, it’s often when I reflect on those experiences of

² Glory, καυχώμεθα. HELPS Word Studies, Bible Hub.

God that snap me back to reality - give me perspective on what's most important - and brings peace back to my mind and being.

And I believe this is what helped ground Paul as well which enabled him to do the incredible things he did and enabled him to persevere through the incredible suffering and hardships he experienced.

He reflected on these experiences with God, the incredible sense of worth, and love and peace which came flooding in during circumstances which would otherwise have driven a person mad.

He puts words to that love from verses 6 to 8 where we read; *"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 person, though for a good person 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."*

There's the why and the central determining motive of our lives and for our lives - God's love.

Have you ever noticed in all of our story telling, the greatest act of love is for someone to give their life so another can live?

As Douglas Moo in the New International Commentary points out; *"The pinnacle of human love is the giving of one's life for a person one is close to - a spouse, child or friend."* (pg.307)

It's in all of our story telling - all of our movies.

We just watched the Star Trek series, *Picard*.

As many of you know one of the characters, Data, had given his life to save Picard in the previous series *The Next Generation*.

Data was an android who wanted to be human.

One of the defining elements of being a good human is to possess self-sacrificial love.

Data demonstrates himself as an ideal human by sacrificing his own life to save Picard.

This element is drawn out in the newer Star Trek series, *Picard*.

Now, just because I have used Star Trek to illustrate a truth does not mean I believe Star Trek is literal! Although I wish it were 😊 (Haha, throw back to our recent Jonah series)

And so we should not be surprised to see that God demonstrates his love for us by giving his own life.

This love of God for us is compared to the self sacrificial love we are familiar with as humanity - but the love of God takes it further.

Great love is seen in humanity as one gives their life to save someone they love.

This is not unusual - a tremendous display of love, but not unusual - but to die for someone who is not good, who is undeserving, who does not have a special connection to you - that's beyond what we would expect as humanity.

Paul is showing how deeply God does love us - the lengths to which God was willing to go, a demonstration of how much we are loved.

I love what it says in verse 8, that God demonstrated his love for us - the cross is a demonstration, to teach, to show and prove, to establish and exhibit his love for us.³

Just as we see in our stories, to die for someone is the ultimate proof of their love for another.

Yet we doubt God's love for us.

We do not trust in God's love for us.

Easter is a love story - the love of God for us.

Could God have done it another way?

Good question.

Maybe.

Probably.

The way God displayed the deep, passionate, willingness to sacrifice one's self in love, is powerfully demonstrated to humanity in terms we can understand.

Family, sending one's child in sacrificial love, suffering a brutal death.

Powerful love needs a powerful demonstration in terms we can understand to help us grasp even a glimpse of God's love for humanity.

What better than the love of a parent for their child, and what incredible pain for love to endure, to be displayed, than that of a crucifixion.

And this is more than a display of love - it was a rescue.

A painful, costly rescue - one that would not happen were it not for love.

For we were powerless, unable to save ourselves - without the resources necessary to fix ourselves - we need a Saviour, and that Saviour is Jesus Christ.

³³ Demonstrate, HELPS Word Studies, Bible Hub.

We do not realize how far we are from what God intended us to be - until we experience a taste of our potential which comes through faith.

When we connect with God, even only for a moment, when we experience the Kingdom of God as Jesus described, even only for a moment - do we realize how helpless and powerless we truly are to save ourselves.

This reality is hidden from us until we know of Jesus or on the cusp of taking that step of faith, for to discover this reality without a Saviour would drive a person insane with despair.

All of us underestimate the dire situation we are in.

All of us overestimate our ability to manage the situation.

And all of us underestimate the love of God for us.

This love which is there to free us to trust - a faith that reconnects us with the reality of God, bringing hope, peace, joy and love.

This Easter, let us take time to contemplate God's love - the incredible sacrifice and display given for us.

Amen.