

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;<sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope.<sup>5</sup> 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.*

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

*<sup>9</sup>Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!<sup>10</sup> For 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!<sup>11</sup> Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:1-11)*

### **We Rejoice in God**

What does joy look like? This week, my son had to memorize the passage **“Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.”** Sometimes, joy is something that we shout, right? My last year at the seminary, a group of us went out on a warm spring day and played a game of softball. Now, softball is not my game. So, of course, I went way out into right field where no balls ever land. A couple of the guys couldn't help but laugh at me when some lefty knocked a ball way out there – and I actually caught it! They laughed because I couldn't help but let out a little shout of “Yes!” when I caught that ball. Sometimes, we shout for joy. But sometimes, our joy is much quieter. My grandmother suffered from Alzheimer's disease and she lay in a bed in her home for years mumbling to herself. When she died, my aunt said, “This is what we've been praying for.” There were tears at the funeral, to be sure. But we rejoiced that her suffering was over and that she had gone home to heaven. Joy looks different in different situations. This morning, we've gathered to consider our greatest cause for joy: Christ and all that he has done for us.

#### **I.**

The Greek language has a number of different words that can be translated as “rejoice.” The word that's used throughout this lesson literally means “to boast.” We boast in the hope of the glory of God. We boast in our sufferings. We boast in God. Now, rejoice is an acceptable translation, but God isn't talking about feelings as much as he's talking about our attitude and our actions. That matters especially when we suffer. **We rejoice in God because he works even when we suffer.**

But Paul doesn't begin with joy in sufferings this morning. He begins with our joy in Christ and our hope of eternal life. Having that hope of the glory of God is supposed to transform the lives that we live here. One of the ways that God's gift of heaven changes our life on earth is that it gives us the ability to rejoice in suffering. Paul says, **“We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”**

We rejoice not in the sense of shouting with happiness, but rather we're glad for what God is doing. In this life, suffering is a reality. God never promises us a pass on suffering while we're here. Instead, he promises us strength to deal with suffering. And he promises us that all suffering has a purpose in our lives. God uses it to refine our faith. He says that suffering produces perseverance. What does that mean? The Greek word means simply patience or endurance. Paul is talking about the ability to outlast the pain of this life. Suffering gives us that. After visiting hospitals or nursing homes, I often wonder if I would be able to show the same measure of faith as the person that I was visiting. Now, sometimes, when I visit people they are struggling with their sorrows. That's the whole purpose for having pastors come to you when life hurts. Our job is to encourage you with God's promises. But quite often, I'm impressed by the way that your faith stands up in those painful situations. I don't know if I would stand up as well.

That endurance comes from experience – or let's say, from an experienced faith. Being in a situation where your faith has to face hurt and the temptation to give up and then it clings to Christ makes that faith

stronger. So that endurance, that perseverance grows into character. The Greek word means someone who can withstand a test. Paul is picturing a steady process of maturing in the faith. The last step is simply hope.

Our society puts a lot of value on hope. But it means something different from what the Bible means. To our society, hope is a sunny belief that things could get better and it's the choice to cling to that possibility and not just give up. But in Bible, hope means knowing that our life will get better, because no matter what else is going to happen, we are going to live in heaven when this life is done. Hope means expecting God to keep his promises to love us, to care for us, to turn every hurt and sorrow into blessing. That kind of hope is the most mature kind of faith. It absorbs every shock to the system and every tragedy that this life dishes out, and it trusts that God will bring blessing.

That doesn't mean that the hope or the faith doesn't feel the hurt. All this comes from going through suffering. By definition, suffering hurts. But we rejoice in our suffering, not because we like pain, but because we know that God works in our pain and God is using even the worst things in our lives for our spiritual good. Paul says, "**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.**" Hope does not disappoint us. That doesn't mean that every solution we hope for in a worldly way will come true. Not everything we'd like to see happens. But God always comes through. When I was boy, my grandfather owned a farm out in the country. To get to it, he had to cross a ravine with a stream in it. There was this ancient, wooden bridge that he had to drive his truck across. He would slow down to about one mile an hour and you could feel that whole bridge move as he eased his pickup across it. But my grandfather trusted that bridge for decades. It never disappointed him. It swayed and it creaked but he always got to the other side. The more he used it, the more confidence he had in it. Our faith is like that. God has poured the Holy Spirit into our hearts through the gospel. The Holy Spirit keeps our faith alive, especially when the hurts and sorrows of this life challenge it. Those pains and hurts are the creaking and swaying of the bridge of our faith, a bridge that looks so weak and rotten that it couldn't possibly stand up. But hidden in that faith is the power of God. It does not disappoint us. God carries us through. Even more than that, God works through all those challenges to create a stronger, more mature faith, a faith that expects God to keep his promises, a faith that faces all that this life has to dish out and still clings to Jesus.

## II.

We rejoice in what God does in our hearts day after day. St. Paul points to another thing that we rejoice about: peace. Now, in this passage, he's not talking about feelings of peace. Certainly, inner peace is a great gift of God. But that inner peace is based on what we might call "outer peace." Paul is talking about the end of strife. He's talking about peace with God. That peace comes from what Jesus did for us. It is our greatest reason to rejoice. **We rejoice in God because he worked even when we didn't believe.**

Near the end of our reading, Paul says, "**When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.**" Think about that. There was a time when we were God's enemies. When was that? Do you feel like you've ever been God's enemy? What kind of a sinner would you have to be for that to be true? And finally, do we really believe that God is an enemy to anybody? Well, OK, maybe he's an enemy to child molesters and serial killers and drug dealers. But he couldn't be our enemy, could he?

Paul says that we were God's enemies. And that means that he was ours. Why? God hates sin. All sin. Not just really bad sins like child molesting. Every time we disobey him, he hates that. He is the enemy of every sinner. In the first part of the reading, Paul talks about being justified. The Greek word that he uses refers to a courtroom. We're justified when the judge's verdict is "not guilty." When God's verdict is guilty, then he's our enemy and he moves against us. He condemns us to hell forever.

This morning, we've been talking about people who face hurt and sorrow with a strong and clear faith, who have character and trust, even when they hurt. Well, the opposite of that is sin. When we whine, we sin. When we face adversity and we don't show patience or character or hope and we don't rejoice in the glory of God, we fall short of his standard of trust. What is our problem? What makes it easy for us to whine and complain and feel sorry for ourselves? Even if we don't vocalize it, where does bitterness come from? The temptation is to say that it comes from the situation, but that's only partly true at best. Lots of people who suffer terrible difficulties have a positive, trusting attitude. They show hope and character and endurance. If you're a person like me who has trouble doing that when things go bad, what is the problem?

Isn't the real problem pride? We wanted something better for our lives. We obsess about how bad we have it and we keep comparing our lives to people who seem to have it better. We think it's just not fair. If you

don't that's the real problem, let me ask you this: have you ever been feeling sorry for yourself and then encountered someone who's suffering much worse than you are? Have you ever felt bad about your attitude? Your pride just ran smack into God's call to humbly trust in him. The key to hope and character and endurance is humility combined with faith. When we don't have that humble, trusting attitude, then we have a problem with pride and pride is sin. Pride is the source of all the rebellion of our hearts. Pride is what led the devil to revolt against God and what led Adam and Eve to disobey him. The pride that lives in our hearts and makes us whine and complain and bitter is sin that God should punish in hell forever.

But Paul says that we are justified by faith. We were hauled into God's courtroom. The witnesses were called. The evidence was presented. And the verdict was NOT GUILTY. Why not? Because of the blood of Jesus. Paul says, **"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."** There was nothing we could've done to make it come out like that. We were powerless to live for God, powerless to have a better attitude about our lives, powerless to set ourselves free from the guilty verdict that hung around our necks and the hell that went with it. So Jesus stepped into our place and he died for us. He paid for our sin. He set us free.

Who would you ever be willing to die for? Paul says that maybe for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. If we could save some great, important person by dying in their place, some of us might be willing to do that. Paul doesn't talk about it, but there have been cases of parents dying trying to save their children or husbands giving their lives to save their wives. But how many? How many times has our natural fear or selfishness kept husbands from saving their wives or parents from saving their children? Even if we would like to believe we would die for the people we love, we don't know whether we'd have that courage.

Jesus wasn't dying for a great person. He wasn't dying for someone who loved him. He was dying for us, for sinners, for people who had turned their backs on God and lived as his enemies. And Jesus died to save us. He suffered the penalty that God's court has to impose on every sinner and because we did, we are free. And he did that because his Father asked him to. His own Father asked him to lay down his life so that ungrateful, sinful human beings can live. God loves us that much. Paul speaks of being reconciled to God: we were his enemies. Now we are his friends. Now we have the joy of knowing that one day soon, we will live with him. Even if these bodies die, we still will live with him in heaven. When Christ returns, we will begin an eternal life with our Lord.

Is there any greater reason to rejoice? Even in this sad and broken world, we have a reason for joy. There are going to be days when we want to shout for joy because of what Christ has done for us. There are going to be those days when we want to pump our fist and shout, "Yes, Lord!" And there are going to be other days here, days when suffering is molding our character, days when we have no choice but to trust God's promises, because what we see and feel is pain and sadness. But even in those days, our joy is real because our hope is certain. We do have a new and better life coming. We do have a reason to rejoice in the midst of sorrow. That reason is the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. My friends, rejoice in God. Amen.