

Peace with God (Romans 5:1–11)

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Chapters 5–8 of Romans constitute a distinct section of the epistle, and for many people they are the clearest expression of the Christian gospel in the whole of the New Testament. Complete books have been devoted to these chapters, and the late Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones managed to preach no fewer than five volumes of sermons on them! Their riches are virtually inexhaustible, and as we look at them in the context of the letter as a whole, we need to bear in mind the importance which they have, and the influence which they have exercised in the life of the church.

Chapter 5 begins by taking up the theme which has dominated the epistle from the beginning. Once more we are reminded that we have been put right with God, justified or made righteous in his sight, because of the faith by which we have been established in a right relationship with him. In God's eyes what we *are* takes precedence over what we *do*, not because our works have no meaning in his eyes but because unless we are in the right relationship with him, acting for the right reasons, with the right attitude and in the right way, our deeds are without any real value. It was because Adam forgot this relationship with God and the limits which God had placed on his activities, that he acted outside these limits and fell into sin. We cannot really say that Adam broke God's law, because at the time there was no law to break. But the law after all, was only the expression of the relationship which God had always intended to have with his people, and man's inability to keep the law stems directly from the brokenness of his original relationship with God.

We need to be very careful about this, because in Romans there is a curious duality about the way the word *law*, and legal terms associated with it, are used. On the one hand, the law appears to be a negative force, exposing the extent of sin in our lives and condemning us in the sight of God. But on the other hand, the law also appears to be a positive force, revealing the extent of God's holiness and his desire to reconcile us to himself by allowing us to share in a righteousness to which we have no natural claim. Like the visitation of the Lord in the Old Testament, which came as both a blessing and a curse, the law comes both to condemn and to restore, to tear down and to build up, to turn the man of sin and death into the man of faith and eternal life. The reason why we insist that justification is by faith

is that sin is not an act against God's clear commandments but an attitude of disobedience, or rebellion, which leads inevitably to such acts. Because of this, justification can never be the result of an act, or work, even if this is an act of restitution or penitence. It must produce a change of attitude, what the Bible calls *repentance*. And this change of attitude, or change of heart, can come about only by the direct action of God in our lives.

The effect of man's disobedience was to establish a state of war between us and God. The deeds by which this state of war is made manifest are of little interest in themselves, and God can easily cancel out their effects. But the rebellion creates in man a spiritual condition which God cannot tolerate in a creature made in his own image. Human sinfulness is an affront to his majesty, both because it is a challenge to his authority and because it is a denial of his love. Now if God were a God of law only, a God who was determined to do no more than uphold his authority, he would have crushed man's rebellion in the bud and destroyed any possibility of revolt among his creatures. This is the attitude we find among human rulers or social systems which try to set themselves up in the place of God, and it is a logical extension of the claims they make for themselves.

But God is a God whose authority is manifested in love, which implies a restored relationship with man, not the suppression or annihilation of the rebellious creature. Therefore, in order to put an end to man's revolt, and to re-establish a state of peace, God must act in a way which reveals his love towards us. This he has done, says Paul, in and through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Here for the first and only time in the epistle we find the words God, Lord and Christ all closely associated with the name of Jesus. Christ, the Messiah or Anointed One, is the normal title reserved for Jesus in Romans, and it emphasizes the covenant offices which Jesus came to occupy and the tasks which he would fulfil in the course of his ministry. These offices, for which the anointing was the sign and seal of authority, were those of prophet, priest and king. Jesus fulfils the office of the prophet because he teaches a new and final interpretation of the Scriptures. He does this, however, not by revealing some new and very clever technique of literary or textual analysis, but by saying quite simply that the Scriptures speak about him. He is therefore not just the

prophet, but the message as well — the Word of God incarnate. Since the Bible was believed by the Jews to be the revelation of God, for Jesus to make this claim was the equivalent of claiming that he too, was God.

Second, as this chapter explains in greater detail, Jesus is also a priest — our great high priest in fact, who offered the once-for-all, final sacrifice needed to pay the price for our sins and to put us back into fellowship with God. But Jesus is not just the priest, he is also the sacrificial victim, thereby claiming for himself a power to forgive sins which belongs to God alone. Once more, we see that by his teaching and his work Jesus is in fact claiming to be no less than God himself. Third, as Paul will go on to say later, Jesus is the king, the lord of all those who have come to God by faith in him. But he is not just the king — he is also the kingdom, since to belong to God in Christ is to be incorporated into his mystical Body. This does not mean, as so many people today seem to think it means, that we must be united in one visible church structure or practise a kind of collective communion which is loosely described as ‘Body fellowship’. These things have their place, but to belong to Christ means above all to belong to God, to have peace with him and access into his presence. It is this which is the most important aspect of belonging to the Body, and we must constantly be on our guard not to let secular friendliness take the place of our primary relationship with God and our responsibility to him.

Access to God is in fact the very thing which Paul chooses to emphasize as the first consequence of the re-establishment of peace between us and him. Naturally it will be understood, as in fact it is expounded both here and in other parts of Scripture, that if Christ is the one who has brought us peace, he is also the one in whom and through whom we have this precious access to God. But although it is true that Jesus describes himself as the door by which we enter into the presence of God, we must not interpret this to mean that once we are inside his work is finished and we can settle down to life in the Spirit without any further reference to Christ. The one who is the way is also the truth and the life. He who is the Alpha, or beginning of faith, is also the Omega, or ending of it. The three pillars of our life with God which Paul mentions in the opening verses of this chapter — faith, grace and hope — are all rooted and grounded in Christ, the Lord of our lives and the only mediator between us and God.

Let us look now briefly at the principles on which our life in Christ is constructed. First, there is *faith*. For the Christian, faith is primarily a particular attitude born of a relationship which we have to God because of events in which he has revealed himself to us in the *past*. Faith takes us to the promises of Scripture, as these have been fulfilled in Christ. It takes us to his life and death, and especially to his resurrection and ascension, which

form the basis of our present experience of God. Our faith has a sure foundation because it is based on things which have happened, and these things give us assurance that God can and will bring the work which he has begun in this way to completion at the end of time. Those who say that it is not necessary to believe in a historical resurrection, that attempts to prove the Bible to be true in this sense are little more than a search for a crutch to lean on, and therefore in reality the very opposite of true faith, have not understood what Paul means by this word. For him, faith is not a feeling divorced from history, but an attitude of trust in God based on historical events. The difference is not one of words only. At bottom it is really the difference between faith in the biblical sense and faith as a work of the human mind and will — which in the Bible’s terms is no different from straightforward unbelief.

The second pillar of our life in God is *grace*, by which we mean the free favour which God has shown towards us in love, and which has established us in the relationship which we now have with him. Elsewhere, as in 1 Corinthians 13:13, Paul actually replaces this word with *love*, which gives us some idea of what is meant. Grace concentrates our minds, not on the past but on the *present*; it is the immediate source from which our everyday life with God now draws its strength. It is greater than the other two, not because it is more immediate to our experience, but because in its emphasis on the present it is really opening up for us a window into the eternal reality of God. If you think about it, the present does not really exist as a category in time at all. Time, in the strict sense, has only past and future; the ‘present’ is a dividing line between them which we have imposed on the time line, but which in itself does not exist!

Nevertheless, the present seems to us to be quite real, and even more real than the past, which we can no longer grasp, or the future, which is still an unknown mystery. Why is this? The answer must be that our awareness of the present does not come from time, but from eternity, which is always ‘present’. When God reveals his name, he does so in the present tense — I AM — not in contrast to the past or future, but as a revelation of eternity. It is because God’s grace, understood as his love for us, also has this quality as part of its essence, that we are entitled to say, as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 13:13, that it is greater than the others.

The third pillar of our life in God is *hope*, and this points us primarily towards the future. Hope is the natural complement of faith, since it relies on what faith has affirmed and completes the picture of God’s grace towards us. Hope is a major theme of Paul’s epistles, usually connected, as in Romans 13:11–14, with the return of Christ and the installation of God’s kingdom here on earth. In this verse, Paul does not elaborate on all that, but confines himself to the theme of God’s

glory. We know from other passages of the New Testament that this is shorthand for the same thing, since God's glory will be revealed in us at the return of Christ, but it is important to notice what sort of shorthand it is. It is an abbreviation which puts the emphasis on God, not on our future state of blessedness, and that, more than anything, sums up the true focus and nature of the Christian life.

It is interesting to notice that Paul, who refused to boast in the law or in the covenant status of the Jews, allows himself to boast when speaking of the covenant hope which we have in God. A critic might ask what the difference between them was, since it would appear that the essence of Judaism was also hope — hope that God would one day fulfil his promises to Israel and establish the Jewish nation in full possession of the inheritance to which it felt itself entitled. Yet although this is true, and there are certainly some similarities between Jewish and Christian hopes for the future, it is the difference between them which is ultimately more important. The hope of the Jews was centred on the nation, in other words, on themselves. They were to be the light of the world, the teachers of the Gentiles, and so on. The hope of the Christian, on the other hand, is centred not on the self but on Christ. He is not only the source of our hope, but its content as well. In boasting of it therefore, we are claiming nothing for ourselves, but giving all the glory to Christ, to whom alone it is due.

The character of a Christian's boasting is developed further in verse three. Here we read that the consequences of a Christian's hope for his everyday life and experience may be quite different from what he expects, and very different indeed from what most Jews thought was their due. For the way of Christian hope includes suffering, and a gospel message which omits this aspect is being unfaithful to the gospel which the New Testament proclaims. Today we are cushioned against suffering in our social life, and taught to regard it as abnormal. Christians often think that their faith entitles them to a carefree life, and this impression is reinforced by a kind of evangelism which presents Jesus as the panacea for human ills. Confronted as we are with this kind of teaching, it is both a relief and a useful correction to return to the Scriptures, and see how suffering fits into a kind of life that we are called to live in Christ.

The purpose of our suffering, says Paul, is that it teaches us patience. This is obviously true in a physical sense; if we are struck down by illness or if we break a bone or two, we have to take it easy, and we may find that all our priorities have to be thought through afresh. Many people can testify to the fact that it was during a period of enforced convalescence that they found the time they needed to come back to God and discover his love in a new and challenging way. Those with a permanent handicap or disability can often say with deep

feeling that it has been in the struggle to overcome it that God has become so much more real to them. One of the greatest mysteries of suffering is that it tends to have more of a negative impact on those who are forced to observe it in others than it does on those who endure it themselves. Perhaps this is because those who are merely observers do not benefit in the same way from the lesson of patience; indeed, they may become more impatient, if anything! As Christians, we need to remember that God never abandons his children, and that if he subjects us to one kind of trial, he will provide a compensation for it that others may not see or understand.

Physical trials are serious, but they are as nothing compared to the spiritual agonies which all of us are called to undergo from time to time. We may have to live in an unsatisfactory relationship with parents, a spouse or children who are not believers. We may be obliged to work with colleagues who do not share our faith and who have no idea why it is so important to us. Christian workers are often faced with what is perhaps the worst situation of all — wolves in sheep's clothing, devouring the flock from within by whatever means they can find to rob us of our joy and peace in believing. Churches, Christian organizations and even theological colleges can be torn apart by the same legalistic attitudes and lack of charity which characterized the Jews of Paul's day and which made their witness such a scandal to the world. In these circumstances, the patience of the true believer will be tested to the utmost, and only the grace of God will be sufficient to get us through the spiritual crises which we may well have to suffer.

But patience too, has its reward, and Paul is not slow to point this out. With patience comes experience, which in this case must mean an awareness, an understanding of what it is that we have been through. All of us have experiences of one kind or another every day, but how many of us can understand what is happening to us, learn from that understanding and put it into practice later on? Only patience and persistence can teach us that, and that is what Paul is telling us here. If we can learn to be patient, we shall learn what the meaning of our experience is, and we shall come to understand from it just how great and how real the hope is that we have been given in Christ. For at the end of the day we come straight back to hope, which never lets us down or makes us feel silly, because as we grow in it, so we see how the love of God is poured into our hearts more and more.

God's love comes to us by the work of the Holy Spirit, whom Paul mentions here for the first time in his epistle. It is interesting to note that the letter to the Romans is constructed in such a way as to introduce each Person of the Trinity in the context of the work of another. Christ appears to us in his glory at the very moment when Paul is explaining the plan and purpose

of God the Father in his work of creating and redeeming the world. Now, when he is talking about the saving work of Christ, Paul introduces us almost casually, so it seems, to the Holy Spirit who makes that work real in our lives. It is yet another reminder that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit do not live and act in sovereign independence of one another, but that the work of each implies the participation of the others, and that we need to know all three if we are to have an adequate picture of the God we serve and adore.

Having laid the foundation for our life in Christ, Paul goes on to explain what it is that Christ has done for us. He says that it was while we were weak, while we were quite unable to do anything to save ourselves, that Christ came to die for us the ungodly. Paul adds that this happened at the *right time*, but he does not explain his reasons for saying this. The writers of the New Testament were very conscious of the fact that they were preaching a new religion and that one of the most powerful objections to it was that it did not tie in with what either Jews or Gentiles had previously assumed. Whether one had a historical religion like the Jews, or a philosophical one, like most of the better-educated Gentiles, it was equally difficult to make room for the kind of change that Jesus had brought about. For the Jews, it meant abandoning the traditional understanding of their own history and culture, while for the Gentiles it meant anchoring their mental and ethical concepts in real-life events tied to the preaching and witness of Jesus. Thus we often find the New Testament writers insisting, openly or by implication, that Christ did not turn up by accident, but that his life and mission belonged to the eternal plan of God. On the other hand, it is never really explained why that particular time was the right one. Scholars sometimes put forward various suggestions, such as the fact that it was a time of intense contact between Jews and Gentiles, a time of relative peace and prosperity when the gospel could spread easily, a time when Judaism was about to branch off in another direction which would end whatever appeal it had to the Gentile world. All these answers are plausible, but none is given as such in Scripture. Once again we are reminded that the ways of God go beyond human understanding, and that we must first learn to know *him* if we expect to be able to translate that knowledge into an understanding of *them*.

The uniqueness and basic improbability of Christ's death, understood in purely human terms, is brought out clearly in verse seven. How many people would voluntarily give up their lives for others? There have been such cases, Paul acknowledges, but always because the person or the cause for which one is dying is superior, or thought to be superior, to one's own life. 'It is a far, far nobler thing I do than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known' — Sydney Carton's last words as he faces the guillotine in Charles

Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* are a fitting summary of what a substitutionary death can mean at the purely human level. But the case of Christ is not like this; in fact, it is the exact opposite! He did not volunteer to die for people who were better than himself, but for people who were far worse. Paul now reinforces what he said in verse six by being more precise about our spiritual condition. The weakness from which we suffer is not some kind of physical defect; it is sin. It was while we were still sinners, dead to God, that Christ came to die on our behalf. The nature of this sacrifice has no parallel in any human experience, and goes right against everything that comes naturally to us and to our way of thinking.

From this extraordinary event, Paul draws an equally extraordinary conclusion. If we were justified in Christ's blood when we were as undeserving as all that, how much more shall we be saved from God's anger? If God could reconcile us to him by the *death* of his Son — notice that this is the first time since 1:4 that Jesus is specifically called God's Son — how much more shall we be saved by the power of his *life*? This is the true ground for a Christian's boasting, that we have received God's reconciliation in Christ, which entitles us to look forward to his salvation from the judgement at the end of time.

Here we must pause for a minute and tie together the main threads of Paul's argument. Looking towards the past once again, we have the work of reconciliation which we experience through faith in Jesus Christ, who came to earth to die for us at a time when we had no claim on God's forgiveness at all. The reality of this past event and its effect on us points us now towards the future, where we find the hope of salvation from God's wrath, which will be revealed when he comes to judge the earth. Yet if we ask ourselves what the difference is between reconciliation and salvation, we find that there is no clear distinction between them in our minds. On the basis of the former, Christians do not hesitate to say that they have been saved — projecting a future event into the past. Likewise, if we are asked what the difference is between faith and hope, we find that whatever distinctions we make between them are largely notional. In practice, we cannot really explain the one without the other, because they belong together in a single, greater whole.

The answer to this curious problem must be that in Christ, past, present and future have been joined together in the eternal presence of God's grace and love. These are the words which cover everything, from beginning to end, and which provide the framework within which we can see faith and hope, reconciliation and salvation, as part of a wider unity — a unity which is revealed to us in the plan of God, worked out in Jesus Christ and sealed in our hearts by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.