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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #21

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Overwhelmed by the Flood Waters of God's Love

Romans 5:1-11 (2)

I don't know if you have picked up on this over the years that I've been senior pastor here at Bridgeway, but one of the primary things that I have tried to do is to prepare you for suffering. I know that sounds strange, but there is a reason for it. Suffering, more than anything else in life, poses the greatest threat to our belief in God's goodness. When stuff happens, painful, distressing, discouraging stuff, our instinctive reaction is to blame God either for causing it or for not intervening to make it go away. When that happens, we take offense at God. We become bitter and resentful, and our faith starts to dwindle and weaken.

That is why this passage in Romans 5 is so important. It's also important because it confronts us with what on the surface appears to be a series of contradictions. Maybe the word "contradictions" isn't the best way to put it. Perhaps I should say that what we read here is counterintuitive. In other words, it runs counter to how we think things should be. On the surface, it just doesn't appear to make much sense.

For example, we saw last week that because we have been justified by faith in Christ, we have peace with God. But if we are at peace with God, why doesn't he put an end to all our suffering? Why do we continue to encounter so much affliction and hardship and disappointment in life? Paul says we are at peace with God, but it seems as if we are still at war. It seems as if he does nothing to remove the barriers we face. In fact, it almost appears as if he deliberately orchestrates our trials and painful experiences.

Another example of what I have in mind is the way Paul says, on the one hand, that we are to rejoice in our suffering, and, on the other, that God has poured out his love for us through the Holy Spirit. If he really loves us, as Paul says he does, why must we continue to suffer in this life?

Related to this is the two-fold reference to our joy. On the one hand, Paul mentions our rejoicing in hope of the glory of God (v. 2). You will recall that by this he means we have a sure and solid expectation that when this life is over, we will in some sense enter into and experience God's glory. But if that is true, how can he then say, on the other hand, that we are supposed to rejoice in our suffering? Isn't the hope of God's glory the expectation that suffering will end? So, how are we supposed to rejoice in something that we simultaneously hope will one day forever cease? It seems as if we should despise suffering, knowing that one day it will all come to an end.

There is no escaping the fact that some things about Christianity are counterintuitive. On the surface, they just don't seem to make much sense. But a closer look will prove that they do.

The Counter-Intuitive Nature of Christian Experience

As I just said, Christianity is at its very core counterintuitive. What I mean is that Christianity runs contrary to what non-Christians think. If you talk to any non-Christian and ask them, "Does it make sense that we should rejoice in our suffering," they will first laugh in your face and then say, "No! Of course not!"

But it doesn't stop there. Ask them if it makes sense to say, on the one hand, that God loves his children and, on the other hand, orchestrates their lives in such a way that they frequently encounter tribulation and trials. Once again, they will loudly protest: "No! Of course not!" After all, if God really loves us and cares for us he will do everything in his power to shield us from suffering. At least, that's what our intuition tells us. But as I said, much of the Christian faith is counterintuitive.

We saw last week that Paul is unpacking for us a handful of the many blessings and benefits of having been justified by faith in Christ. Because Jesus endured in our place the wrath and judgment we deserved, we are at peace with God. In addition to that, we have been given free and unhindered access into the very grace by which God saved us. We stand in this grace. We are enveloped and saturated and sustained by this grace. On top of it all, Paul says in v. 2, we have the indescribably wonderful hope that when Christ finally returns, we will enter into and experience personally his glory.

So, think about it again before we go any further. The challenge for us, and especially for those who reject Christianity, is how we can be justified in God's sight, be at peace with God, be destined to share in his glory, and be the objects of his unimaginably great and wonderful love, all the while he orchestrates our lives so that we are faced with tribulation and suffering. If you've ever wondered what is meant by the word counterintuitive, that's it.

Joyful Boasting in Suffering (v. 3a)

Let's begin with a preposition! Those of you who have listened to me preach for very long shouldn't be surprised by that! It's the word **"in"** (v. 3a). What is the significance of saying that we rejoice "in" our suffering? Does Paul mean, *in spite of* our suffering, we rejoice? Or does he mean *in the midst of* our suffering, we rejoice? Or could it be that it is *because of* our suffering that we rejoice?

I think it is the latter. That isn't to say we enjoy suffering itself. We are not religious masochists. But we can exult or rejoice on account of our trials and adversities only because we know something that non-Christians don't. We know that suffering sets in motion or produces a chain of linked virtues, that ultimately produces renewed hope and assurance. Again, we see here the counterintuitive nature of Christian living. It would appear at first glance that suffering would undermine or at least greatly weaken our hope. But Paul says just the opposite!

"We rejoice in our suffering" (v. 3a). If it were anyone else besides Paul who had the courage to write such an outlandishly counterintuitive statement, I might be inclined to dismiss it and move on without comment. But it is Paul who said it, and we find similar statements in the mouth of Jesus, and James, and Peter. It wasn't so long ago that we studied the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. You will recall that twice Jesus said something similar to what Paul says here:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:10).

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11-12).

"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4).

“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

Now you might be inclined to respond to this by saying: “Well, it may be easy for Paul to write those words, but if you had suffered like I did you wouldn’t be so glib about pain and tribulation.” Well, the fact of the matter is that the reverse is true. It is we who have no idea what it is like to suffer tribulation like Paul did.

“(23) Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. (24) Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. (25) Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; (26) on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; (27) in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure (2 Cor. 11:23-27).

So what precisely do Jesus, Paul, James, and Peter have in mind when they speak of “suffering” (v. 3)? The word actually means tribulation or affliction, but it can encompass virtually anything we face that threatens to undermine our confidence in God’s goodness and sovereignty. I think the primary reference is to the hardships we endure and the opposition we face and the pain we suffer simply for being followers of Jesus, be it physical beatings or verbal assaults or financial loss or some form of “cancellation.”

Ok. Endure suffering? That I can understand. But “rejoice” in it? I can understand joyful boasting that one day we will experience God’s glory (v. 2), but how can Paul use the same word when it comes to our response to pain and suffering? Is he genuinely serious about this, and if so, how?

Sadly, when hardship comes our way, or when we lose a friend or a job or a lucrative contract because of our Christian beliefs, we tend to respond with resentment, bitterness, and anger. Or we doubt God, wondering if he is really good and sovereign after all. But Jesus and Paul and James and Peter tell us to rejoice when this sort of adversity comes our way. Why? How?

I think there are at least two answers here in the text. In the first place, we can rejoice in our suffering because no matter what we encounter that is painful and distressing, we encounter it from a posture of standing in grace (v. 2). We must always remind ourselves that whatever pain and tribulation come our way, they strike us as we “stand” in grace, covered by God’s unmerited favor and sustained by the power

of his Holy Spirit. In other words, the grace in which we stand does not work magically in our lives. Its power comes from truth. We see and know and believe the truth of what God says and in this way we find strength to hold on.

But second, we can rejoice in our sufferings because suffering sets in motion a chain of events that changes us and ultimately concludes in even greater hope. So, let's turn our attention to the first link in this chain.

Suffering Produces Endurance (v. 3b)

Suffering, says Paul, "produces endurance" (v. 3b). Those who suffer are "toughened up" (Schreiner, 263) so that they are able to bear up under the afflictions of life that come their way.

But don't overlook the word "**knowing**" in v. 3. Suffering accomplishes nothing good in us if we don't reflect on the fact that God uses it to build endurance and perseverance in our hearts. We can rejoice in our suffering **because we know** that God makes use of it to produce within us a never-say-die mentality. This sort of joy doesn't just fall from heaven like manna. It doesn't suddenly and surprisingly appear in our lives willy-nilly. It only arises within us to the degree that we know that the fruit of suffering is a strengthened will and an intensified resolve to never give up. This is the truth through which the grace in which we stand gives us strength to endure.

It seems as if not a day passes that I don't hear or read about another well-known professing Christian throwing in the towel, spiritually speaking. The language used to describe this today is, **deconstruction**. They don't grow or deepen in faith: they deconstruct. They abandon it. They turn away from all that God is and does, complaining that being a Christian doesn't pay off in this life. It doesn't answer all my questions. It doesn't protect me from opposition from my enemies. It doesn't guarantee health and wealth. So I quit.

Paul says that one way you resist the temptation to quit, one way you persevere and hang on and endure is by "knowing that suffering process endurance." Your faith and resolve to hold fast to Jesus get stronger the way fire tempers steel. The flames of affliction are designed by God to make your faith unbreakable.

Endurance Produces Character (v. 4a)

Here is the second link in this chain of transformation. Let me put it in the form of a question. Why should we place such high value on endurance? The answer is that “endurance produces character” (v. 4a). This is what Peter is saying in 1 Peter 1:6-7.

“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

Just as gold is purified of dross and every alloy when it passes through the literal fire in a furnace, so also your faith and confidence in God’s goodness and sovereignty deepens and expands when you persevere through suffering. And it is that enduring faith that Paul has in mind when he speaks of “character” (v. 4a). He means that our determination to stay true to the gospel and our strength to resist temptation grow and deepen as the fire of hardship and tribulation burn away the hypocrisy and superficiality of our relationship to Jesus.

At the end of the day, as you look back on what you’ve endured, you experience this surge of joy in knowing that your faith is real. Your relationship to Jesus is genuine and authentic and can persevere through anything the Devil and this world might throw at you.

Character Produces Hope (v. 4b)

The next link in this chain of personal transformation is that “character produces hope” (v. 4b). How so? When you are transformed by enduring faithfully in the midst of hardship it demonstrates to your soul that God is real and that your faith in his promises is not misplaced.

I can’t count the number of times people have said to me that they fear they aren’t true believers. They live in fear that they are hypocrites, that their faith is ill-founded and that this thing called “hope” in which they’ve put their confident expectation will never ultimately come to pass. But Paul says that one of the beautiful things about our endurance of trials and tribulations is that it builds in us an ever-increasing confidence that we *will* inherit all the promises God has made.

Our Hope will never Produce Shame (v. 5a)

Ok. But can we really know that our hope will not let us down? Can we really know with absolute assurance that God will come through for us on the day of judgment? Can we really know that his love for us is sincere and eternal and unchanging? Yes!

You don't ever have to live in fear that when you stand before God on judgment day that you will be filled with shame, consumed with regret, wishing that you had made another choice about whether or not to follow Jesus. People often live their lives consumed with the fear of exposure. They are terrified of being seen for who they really are. The prospect of shame is overwhelming. But that never has to be the experience of God's people. You need never live in anxious worry or doubt about whether or not God will be true to his word. How so? The answer is in v. 5.

The Experience of God's Love (v. 5b)

So let me put the question to each of us once again. How do we know that our hope in Christ won't fall apart? What assurance do we have that it won't turn out to be empty and vain? How can we know with any degree of confidence that the final judgment won't utterly destroy us? Paul says that we know and can be assured of our future because God has poured out his love for us into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Literally, the Greek text speaks of "the love of God" (v. 5). Other English translations are unclear whether it is God's love for us or our love for God that Paul has in mind. But the ESV ("God's love") is certainly correct, and for two reasons:

First, "the love of God" is designed to be a proof of the security of our hope. How can *our* loving God do that? Our love for God is fitful and often faint. If my hope is built on how well I love God, there are times when I would be quite hopeless. Second, verses six through eleven are an obvious expansion of the nature of this love in verse five. There it is clearly God's love for us as demonstrated by the gracious gift of his Son to die in our stead.

He tells us that God's love "has been poured into our hearts." The verb "poured out" is used elsewhere of the spilling of wine (Luke 5:37), the shedding of Christ's blood (Matthew 26:28), and of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 10:45). More graphic still is its use in Acts 1:18 of the fate of Judas: "Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels *gushed out*."

Paul is emphasizing the *unstinting lavishness* with which God has flooded our hearts with a sense of his love for us. "The hearts of believers," writes John Murray, "are regarded as being suffused with the love of God; it controls and captivates their hearts" (165). "Like an overflowing stream in a thirsty land," says Gifford, "so is the rich flood of divine love poured out and shed abroad in the heart."

This is an exuberant communication of God's love. The love of God, writes Charles Hodge, "does not descend upon us as dew drops, but as a stream which spreads itself abroad through the whole soul, filling it with the consciousness of his presence and favor." God wants *your* heart to be inundated by wave after wave of his Fatherly affection, so effusively poured out that you feel compelled to request that he pull back lest you drown in his passion! Paul is not talking "of faint and fitful impressions," says Packer, "but of deep and overwhelming ones" (*Knowing God*, 118).

The famous evangelist Dwight L. Moody (1837-99) knew precisely what Paul meant. Moody was always reluctant to speak of what occurred, but conceded to give the following brief account:

"... one day, in the city of New York – oh, what a day! – I can't describe it, I seldom refer to it; it is almost too sacred an experience to name . . . I can only say that God revealed himself to me, and I had such an experience of his love that I had to ask him to stay his hand. I went to preaching again. The sermons were not different; I did not present any new truths, and yet hundreds were converted. I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world – it would be small dust in the balance."

It's also important to note that Paul uses the perfect tense of the verb. This implies, Packer explains,

"a settled state consequent upon a completed action. The thought is that knowledge of the love of God, having flooded our hearts, *fills them now*, just as a valley once flooded remains full of water. Paul assumes that all his readers, like himself, will be living in the enjoyment of a strong and abiding sense of God's love for them" (118).

In other words, God's love doesn't leak! Unlike the waters of Noah that receded after a time, God's love remains perpetually at flood stage in our souls! The Holy Spirit works to evoke and stimulate in your heart the overwhelming conviction that God loves you. The amplitude and immensity of God's devotion is not abstract and generic, but concrete and personal, not for everyone in general but for *you* in particular.

It is difficult to describe more precisely what Paul is saying here. Perhaps this is because he's not talking about knowledge that we gain by inference from a body of evidence. Neither deduction nor induction can account for what he has in mind. Empirical observation doesn't yield the assurance of being God's beloved.

In other words, we aren't dealing here with a logical truth that can be concluded from certain premises. Let me explain that. We read in John 3:16 that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Thus, I can logically arrive at the conclusion that God loves me. Here's how. Major premise: God loves the world. Minor premise: I'm part of the world. Conclusion: Therefore, God loves me. And of course, that's true. Or again, how can I know I have eternal life? I can know it by simple logic. Major premise: God says that whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life. Minor premise: I believe in Jesus. Conclusion: Therefore, I have eternal life.

These are conclusions we draw from thinking. They are the product of unbreakable logic. And that is wonderful. But that isn't what Paul is saying here in Romans 5:5. He isn't talking about logic. He's talking about experience. He doesn't appeal to an argument, but to a *sensation* produced in our hearts by

the Holy Spirit. I know this makes some people uncomfortable. They don't like feelings. They don't trust emotion. But there is no escaping what Paul says.

Notice that he does not say that God has enlightened our minds to know that he loves us. He doesn't say that he has taught us by means of irrefutable reasoning that God loves us. He says, instead, that God has poured out into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit, the reality of his love for us. Not in our minds, but in our hearts. Not instructed or explained, but poured out.

This an altogether subjective, experiential reality. I earlier spoke of certain things about Christianity being counterintuitive. Well, this is profoundly intuitive. It is an awakening in our deepest emotions and feelings the reality of God's abiding and joyful affection for his children. You won't always be able to explain it in intelligible terms, but you know undeniably and inescapably in your heart that God really does love you!

That doesn't mean this love has no objective foundation. It most certainly does. The objective proof or grounds for this love is precisely what Paul will proceed to say in vv. 6-8. There he points us to the sacrificial, substitutionary death of Jesus in our place.

So don't ever think that your hope is only as good as your ability to experience or feel God's love for you. He most assuredly wants you to feel it, but even when you don't, you can know his love is real and sure and certain by reminding yourself of the lengths to which he went in making you his child: the death of his own Son on your behalf.

We will look closely at the carefully reasoned explanation of the objective grounds for our hope, namely, the death of Jesus, in a subsequent message. But here in v. 5 Paul is talking about an internal, subjective, experiential, undeniable surge of confidence that God not only loves us, but likes us!

God's remedy for your doubt and fear and anxiety is the work of the Holy Spirit in creating in your heart an irrefutable and inescapable sense of his love for you. This does not happen because of anything that any human being can do. I can't do it by preaching to you. You can't do it by reading about it. Only the Holy Spirit can do it. That is why Paul prays as he does in 2 Thessalonians 3:5,

“May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ” (2 Thess. 3:5).

If this experience is to be real and life-changing and deeply encouraging, God has to do it, and he does it by means of the Spirit within us.

And he can and will do it in the hearts of even the most abused and neglected of souls. Some of you have been so traumatized in your youth, or perhaps today in your marriage, that you find yourself seemingly incapable of believing that the holy God of Scripture cares anything about you. But the Holy Spirit can overcome and reverse whatever trauma you've endured and bring to your hearts the unshakable conviction that you are a beloved child of God. This experience does not come from being raised by

Christian parents. It does not come because you have a seminary education. It comes directly and immediately by something the Spirit does in your heart.

And we must never diminish or deny this experience simply because it is an experience. Remember: it is an experience that flows from a concrete, empirically verifiable, objective event that occurred in time and space history when Jesus gave his life for you on the cross. So you don't have to empty your mind or work yourself into an altered state of consciousness to experience this truth. Just look to the cross of Christ!

One final observation is called for. It is seen in the difference in the Greek text between two phrases that in English are the same. Notice that God's love "has been" poured into our hearts. And notice that this is through the Holy Spirit who "has been" given to us. You would think the "has been" in our English translation points to something identical in the original text. But you would be mistaken.

The Holy Spirit "has been" given to us all of us, at a singular point in time, once and for all when we first come to faith in Christ. But the experience of God's love that "has been" given to us through the Spirit can occur repeatedly throughout the course of our Christian lives. In fact, it can happen right now, today, even as we close in prayer. And that is what I am going to ask God to do for you and me . . . !