

## Jesus Dies on the Cross

How would you describe your relationship with God, right now today? If you were to look deep into your heart and honestly write down your feelings toward God, what would you say?

It might be that you're not sure if God exists. Or it may be that God seems very distant. Perhaps you question whether God could ever really love you, with all the bad things you've done, the sins you've committed. You may feel overwhelmed by the demands it seems that God is placing on you... And then, there's another possibility: you are experiencing the warmth of God's love in your life, the peace of God's presence.

This is the relationship with God that we long for, that we wish we could experience: the warmth of God's love, the peace of God's presence. Now, here's the amazing thing: In today's scripture reading, St. Paul promises us this kind of relationship with God. In his letter to the Romans, chapter 5, verses 1 & 2, he writes... (We're going to be unpacking these verses this morning, so I encourage you to open your Bible to Romans 5 and follow along. If you're using the Bible in the pews, it's found on page 980.) So, on p. 980, Romans 5: 1-2, we read this promise: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him, we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God." What a wonderful promise!

And it's not just a generalized theological truth—no, it's deeply personal, addressed directly to each one of us. It helps to read these verses by putting in your own name. For instance, I would read: "Therefore, since I, Dan, am justified by faith, I have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him, I have obtained access to this grace in which I stand, and I rejoice in my hope of sharing the glory of God." So, let's just take a minute here for all of us to silently read Romans 5: 1-2, putting in our own name and letting the meaning sink in to our hearts.

Wow! St. Paul's style of writing is to pack a lot of meaning into a few words. So, let's look at these verses in more depth. Right away, we realize that Paul is talking about the past, the present, and the future. Someone

has called this the “3 tenses of salvation.” In the past, we have been justified. In the present, we are standing in grace. In the future, we will live in glory forever.

The 3 tenses of salvation: In the past, we have been justified. In the present, we are standing in grace. In the future, we will live in glory forever.

As Christians, we can look to the past, and see that we have been justified. What does that mean? To be justified is to be set right with God, to be reconciled with God, re-connected with God. Because of our sins, we were separated from God, living in rebellion against him. However, God did not abandon us to this hopeless situation. Instead, because of his boundless love for us, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. Jesus died on the cross for our sins. His blood cleanses us, erasing our sin. Jesus took our sins to the cross, and when he died there, our sins died as well. Jesus replaced our sins with his righteousness, his holiness. So now, instead of being separated from God because of sin, we are reunited with God, reconciled with God. That’s what it means to be justified.

Another way to think about it is illustrated in the picture on the front of our worship program, our bulletin, this morning. The Lake Pontchartrain Causeway—23 miles long—is the longest bridge in the US. This is the only bridge which will get you from one side of Lake Pontchartrain to the other; you need to take that bridge. An even larger gap exists between God and human beings; our sins have caused this gulf, and we have no way to cross on our own. Jesus is the bridge. Through his death, he re-connected us with God.

In the past, we have been justified by Christ’s death. In Romans 5: 6-9, St. Paul expresses it this way: “While we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.”

Again, it helps us to understand the import of these words if we substitute our own name: “While I was still weak, at the right time, Christ died for ungodly me... God shows his love for me in that while I was yet a

sinner Christ died for me.” I encourage you to take some time this week to meditate on these words, to let them sink into your heart. One way to do that might be to write a letter to Jesus, expressing your feelings about his death on the cross to forgive your sins, to give you gift of justification, reconciliation with God.

Justification is the past tense of salvation. The present tense of salvation is “standing in grace.” Here and now, we stand in grace. Let’s look at Romans 5:2: “Through him [Jesus] we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.” What does Paul mean by these words, “we have obtained access”? He’s using a Greek word that means approaching the altar in the Temple. Paul is saying that Jesus opens the door for us into the presence of God. As believers, we live in the presence of God, experiencing God’s grace, God’s love, through the Holy Spirit. As believers, we sense God close to us, offering us strength, guidance, forgiveness, comfort.

The words of today’s Chancel Choir anthem, “Come, and Kneel at the Cross,” by Don Besig & Nancy Price, express perfectly this present tense of salvation, this “standing in grace” [or maybe we should say, “kneeling in grace.”]

When you are searching to find your way, filled with doubt, lost and afraid,  
Looking for help to renew your faith, come and kneel at the cross  
When you are troubled with pain to bear, all alone, no one to care,  
Needing to know there is someone there, come and kneel at the cross.  
Bring your heart and seek the Lord; leave your fears behind you.  
Hope and faith will be restored. At the cross, He’ll find you.  
When you’re discouraged by all you see, broken lives, people in need,  
Hoping for someone to hear your plea, come and kneel at the cross.  
At the cross, at the cross, feel God’s love surround you.  
Healed by grace, no longer lost, feel God’s peace around you.  
Feel God’s peace around you.

As Christians, we have been justified in the past, we are standing in grace in the present... and in the future... in the future, we will live in glory.

A grandmother tells how her 9-year-old granddaughter addressed a letter to God. On the envelope she wrote: “God... Pearly Gates... Heaven.” Then, she put a stamp on the envelope and put it in the mailbox.

However, it was returned to her. Someone at the post office had written across the envelope: “Nobody at the post office is headed that way. Sorry!”

As Christians, we have God’s promise that we are headed to heaven, that we will live in glory. In Romans 5:2 we read: “we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.” And then in verses 9-11: “Since, therefore, we are now justified by [Jesus’] blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Not only so, but we also rejoice in God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation.”

The question Paul is addressing is: “As Christians, do we need to fear the Final Judgment?” “Will God condemn us to hell?” Paul’s answer is “No, Christians do not face eternal damnation.” You see, through Jesus’ death on the cross, our sins were replaced by Christ’s righteousness. The bright & shining glory that we were created to have, which was then destroyed by our sin, was now restored in Jesus’ resurrection. That glory will shine fully in heaven. God has begun the process of restoring us through Jesus’ atoning death on the cross. In the future, God will complete that process as we enter our heavenly home. That’s most clearly stated in Paul’s letter to the Philippians (1: 6): “And I am sure that [God] who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

Through Jesus, God offers us a whole new way to be in relationship with him—a relationship characterized by love & joy—knowing that we have been justified, that we are standing in grace, and that we will live in glory forever.

How do we begin this kind of relationship with God? St. Paul provides the answer, clearly & concisely, a few chapters later, in Romans 10: 9-10: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.”

There are two requirements for a relationship with God. First, we need to speak the truth—out loud—that

Jesus is Lord. We acknowledge that Jesus rules over the universe, and that Jesus rules over our lives. And then, of course, we strive to put this into action, to follow Jesus in all we do. Jesus is Lord.

Second, we open our hearts to believing in Jesus' resurrection on Easter morning. God, by his power, defeated the forces of evil, of sin, of death. God brought Jesus back to life. On Easter, God won the victory. We put our faith in God.

This is the most important decision we can make in life: to confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and to believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead. If you have never made this decision, I invite you to do so today. And if you have made this commitment in the past, then I invite you today to renew your commitment to Jesus, our Lord & Savior. If you would like to talk more about this decision, I would welcome the opportunity to talk with you after today's service or in the coming week.

This is God's all gift to us, in Jesus Christ. When we make this decision, then we can say along with St. Paul: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him, we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God." (Romans 5: 1-2) Amen.