

The God Who Saves Us

Romans 5:1-5

John Breon

On this Trinity Sunday, the first thing I want us to see in this passage is the mention of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Salvation is the work of God the Trinity. "Trinity" is the Christian way of talking about the God who saves us through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Salvation is based on and grounded in the Father's love. Salvation is put into effect in this world, in this time and place, through the death of Jesus Christ, which expresses God's love in history. We receive and experience salvation through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit enables us to know God's love and to love God in return. Salvation is about being restored to the image of God who is a community of love. We start learning how to live rightly in loving relationships. We become part of the community of God's people, the church. And the church in the image of God is a loving fellowship that's open to include others just as God opens the Trinity's fellowship to include us.

God welcomes us in grace. Paul uses an interesting phrase here when he says that by faith we have "access to grace."

Philip Yancey tells about a conversation overheard on a bus. One person was reading a book, *The Road Less Traveled*, by psychiatrist Scott Peck. The person across the aisle asked what she was reading. She said, "A book a friend gave me. She said it changed her life."

"What's it about?"

"I'm not sure. Some sort of guide to life. I haven't got very far yet." She began flipping through the pages. "Here are the chapter titles: 'Discipline, Love, Grace'"

The man stopped her. "What's Grace?"

"I don't know. I haven't got to Grace yet." (*What's So Amazing About Grace?* 29).

How about you? Have you got to grace yet?

Paul says that through Jesus we have access to grace. We can get to grace through our Lord Jesus Christ. If you're trying to get on a freeway,

you may drive on an access road. If you're trying to get into a certain website or computer program, you may be given access to it. In the Old Testament, if you approached the altar with a sacrifice, you had access to the Temple and the altar. Now, Jesus gives us access to the grace in which we stand. It's like Jesus has ushered us into a room where we stand in God's presence. Grace becomes the environment where we live.

But what is grace? We talk about it and sing about it a lot, but what does it mean? Biblically and theologically, when we talk about grace, we mean *both* gift or blessing or favor *and* God's active and powerful love at work in our lives and in the world. Grace is God's undeserved favor and love for us. Grace is also God's loving Spirit present and active in us.

In the first four chapters of Romans, Paul has explored the need for grace and a particular gift of grace—the gift of right relationship with God, righteousness, justification, justice. He has talked about being “justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (3:24). And he's explored what justification means.

Now, in chapter five, he recaps what he has been saying and introduces where he wants to go next. He will describe the new life that comes in this restored relationship with God.

“*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith.*” This is shorthand for the fuller expression, *justified by grace through faith*. He's saying that we are out of line with God's character and purposes, we fall short of God's glory, God's intention for us, and we can't recover on our own. Because of sin, we can't fulfill God's intention for us, we can't relate to God rightly. But God has made a way to restore us and bring us into right relationship. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God is able to remain just and to justify those who have faith in Jesus. God maintains justice, but God forgives those who are unjust when we repent.

Having been put right with God on the basis of grace by faith, we now have peace with God and we are to live in peace with God. To be justified is to have peace with God. We are no longer rebels, resisting God and running from God. Instead, we are reconciled to God.

This peace with God comes through our Lord Jesus Christ (and Paul will remind us in a little bit—verses 6-11—what Jesus did to bring us peace

with God). And it's through our Lord Jesus Christ that we have access to grace in which we now stand.

Being justified, having peace with God, standing in grace all describe this new relationship and new life we have with God through Jesus. So the past is covered and the present is filled with grace and faith and peace and righteousness. Now Paul looks to the future. The result of past justification and the present standing of grace is the future hope. He says that we boast in, or rejoice in, or celebrate "the hope of the glory of God."

Our hope is the glory of God. This glory includes the ruling and stewardship of creation that God entrusted to humans in the beginning. Adam's lost glory is regained in Jesus. This is the royal priesthood, the calling to be genuinely human, that we find all over Scripture. The glory here also refers to the return of God's glory to dwell with God's people after the long years of exile. The living God himself comes to dwell in us, fulfilling his ancient promises. God's glorious presence is already at work in our hearts and someday it will flood our whole being and all of creation. This is the hope that inspires confidence and joy (N.T. Wright, *After You Believe* 176; "Romans," *New Interpreter's Bible*).

Hope in the New Testament is not wishful thinking, but confidence that God will remain faithful and will keep his promises. That's the hope we live in as God's people. And Paul says that's something to boast about. This is not prideful bragging, but celebrating God's faithfulness and the glorious future we have in store and the hope that the God of hope causes to overflow in us (Rom 15:13).

But Paul is also realistic. He knows that life is not all sweetness and light. He knows the glorious future has not yet arrived. Although we live in a new relationship of grace, there's a long journey through the wilderness before we reach the promised land.

In this time between the beginning of God's salvation and the final fulfillment of our hope, there is suffering in this world. There is opposition to the gospel and to God's ways. There are natural disasters like tornadoes. As Paul will say later, the whole creation groans in frustration and pain. We ourselves groan as we await the fulfillment of our hope. But at the same

time, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words can't express (8:22-26).

So Paul says we not only celebrate the hope of God's glory, but we also celebrate our sufferings—or boast about or rejoice in our sufferings. We may think, "That's too much, Paul! How can you say that?"

He can say that because he's speaking from the perspective of faith. Faith sees that suffering can aid God's grace rather than oppose it. Grace can transform suffering and can lead us from suffering to glory because grace can use suffering to produce perseverance or endurance. And endurance can produce character. And character produces hope. Of course, this progression is not guaranteed or automatic.

By itself tribulation does not necessarily produce perseverance; it often produces bitterness and resignation, and hardship may produce hardness instead of character. Perseverance, character, and hope are marks of grace, and they develop only where the believer stands justified before God and responds to them in faith. (James Edwards, *New International Biblical Commentary: Romans*)

Suffering is real. We don't try to deny it or make light of it. And suffering is a given in this world at this time. In light of the devastation in our state last week from tornadoes, we need to think about this. Are natural disasters like the tornado in Moore God's doing? Some might say they are, but I don't think so. Saying that God does those things is a misunderstanding of God's character, God's sovereignty and God's power.

Once in college, some of us were having a theological discussion (actually, as majors in theology or ministry, this wasn't uncommon). During this particular discussion, my roommate said, "God does everything." And, in my most sensitive and understanding way, I said, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!" Later, I came up with a better argument. I should have asked, "If God does everything, who sins?" Does God sin? Do we really want to say that God causes sin? Along the same line, do we really want to say that God causes horrible things like killer tornadoes?

We might also ask if such devastating events are God's will. Does God want them to happen? Again, I have to say no. Just because something happens does not mean it's God's will. And, God seems to will some things that don't happen. I believe this is because God has allowed some freedom to human beings and to the rest of creation, the natural world. In choosing to create and to have real relationship with creation, including us, God has put some limits on himself.

Leslie Weatherhead, a British Methodist pastor, wrote a book during World War II called *The Will of God*. He distinguishes between God's *intentional will*, what God wants to happen; God's *circumstantial will*, how God responds to our choices that may not be what God intends; and God's *ultimate will* that God will bring about in the new creation and the fullness of God's kingdom.

So God is not the source of suffering, but God can use it to help us grow and develop and come closer to God's glory. Our perspective and response affect what our experience of suffering does for us.

As we stand by faith in grace, in the presence of God, suffering or tribulation produces in us endurance, perseverance, and patience. We continue to stand in grace without dismay. I like how the prophet Isaiah said it to King Ahaz: "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all" (Isaiah 7:9).

Character grows out of patient endurance. Character is important. God is reshaping us into his own image that he created us in. That image was damaged by sin, but it's being restored in Jesus Christ. It matters how we live after we believe and are justified. It matters what kind of people we are in this time between initial salvation and its final fulfillment. God wants to produce in us character like that of our Lord Jesus. This is tried and tested character that is mature and able to deal with struggles and opportunities in life.

In January of 2009, an airliner piloted by Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, was taking off from LaGuardia Airport in New York and ran straight into a flock of Canada geese. Both engines were damaged and lost power. The plane at that point was heading north over the Bronx, one of the city's most densely populated areas.

Sullenberger and his copilot had to make many decisions and perform many tasks in just two or three minutes. They didn't have time to consult the airplane's manual or review emergency procedures. They had to act out of knowledge and experience they had gained and developed over time. Their wise and courageous choices had become "second nature" to them. That's what we mean by character—able to do almost naturally what needs to be done in a situation (Wright, *After You Believe* 18-21). In grace, we are learning to respond to life and suffering and opportunity and other people in the way Jesus would respond. We are becoming the kind of people who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.

Developing that kind of character is the path to hope. The goal of this process is found in the hope of God's glory. Again, God's glory is seen as we fulfill what it means to be human, to be all that God created us to be. God's glorious presence in the Holy Spirit restores what sin corrupted. God's glorious presence indwells us now, and holds the promise that it will someday flood our entire being and fill the whole Church and cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. That hope strengthens us in times of suffering and struggle.

We can try to understand and explain how God works and why things happen the way they do. But all those explanations fall short. Emil Brunner, a Swiss theologian, once said that the church does not have an explanation for why there is evil and suffering, but we have the promise of God's kingdom and the hope of eternity with God (The quote is, "Faith knows no other theodicy than the Eschatological Hope." *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation* 268).

This hope is not cause for shame, but for confidence and rejoicing. At the final day, the day of judgment, we will not be put to shame, we won't be disgraced, because God will keep his promises.

We know this because of what God has already done for us and given us. We know that our hope will be fulfilled because we know God's love. We know God's love now because the Holy Spirit pours out the love of God in our hearts. The Holy Spirit is the gift of God's own personal, powerful, loving presence in us. And God through the Spirit pours his love in our hearts. We are assured of God's love for us by the work of God's Spirit in us.

At the same time, the Holy Spirit inspires us to respond to God's love. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). The Holy Spirit enables us to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

We not only know the love of God in our hearts, but we see the love of God demonstrated in history. Paul will go on to talk about how God demonstrated his love for us in the cross of Christ. Then he brings this whole section to a crescendo of praise by describing the benefits of what God has done in Jesus. We have been justified by the blood of Jesus, put right with God through his sacrifice. We will certainly be saved from God's wrath through Jesus. Jesus died for us when we were weak, ungodly, and enemies of God. If God would reconcile his weak ungodly enemies to himself through the death of his Son, how much more will he save us through the life of his Son. So now, not only do we boast in or celebrate the hope of God's glory, not only do we boast in or celebrate our sufferings transformed by grace, but we also boast in and celebrate God through our Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

A young boy responded to the invitation at an evangelistic crusade. He said, "My mom loves me and I love her back. My dad loves me and I love him back. It just seemed that if God loves me so much I need to love God back."

Do you know God loves you? Do you really grasp that reality? God longs for relationship with you. And so many of your longings are really for relationship with God. Jesus would rather die than live without you. And the Holy Spirit is here, now, ready to make that relationship real for you, ready to usher you into the grace of God as you enter by faith and live in hope.