

Opening Reading

Romans 5:1-5 (CSB)

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 We have also obtained access through him by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we boast in the hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

CONTEXT

- Our preservice reading came from Romans 5, in which Paul begins the discussion about *the hope* that is produced as a result of our justification by faith.
 - That discussion culminates here in Chapter 8...
 - Since chapter 5, Paul has explored and explained why and how justification and hope play out, moving from our bondage to sin and death in Adam and the Law, though the internal battle of the soul between things of the flesh and things of the Spirit, all the way to our freedom from condemnation and new life in the Spirit...
 - Last week Jeff preached on verse 12-17, showing us that we are adopted into the family of God...
 - We call God our Father... We have a fundamentally new identity...
 - This is a cause for great hope and rejoicing...
 - But as those of you who have adopted or have been adopted know... even when an adoption is official... there are still consequences from the past, from the former order of things, that have long enough fingers to reach into and effect the new order of things...
 - It is the same with our spiritual adoption...
 - We are going to look today at the tension the Christian experiences while they remain in a fallen world... the tension between the "what was," "what is," and the "what will be."
 - READ WITH ME If you will from Romans Chapter 8, beginning in verse 18...

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God's sons to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of him who subjected it—in the hope 21 that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage to decay into the glorious freedom of God's children. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains until now. 23 Not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom 8:17-23 CSB)

- This morning we are going to see that the main point of this passage, which continues on through verse 27, is this: ***The Spirit-filled life, in an age of suffering, is fueled by the hope of glory and by prayer.*** (Repeat)
 - Paul illustrates this in verses 18-23 by highlighting two of our points this morning: First, that suffering is our present reality and second, glory is our future reality.
 - He then goes on in verses 24-27 to highlight hopeful prayer as our present access to that future reality.
- **Suffering is our present reality (Romans 8:18a)**
 - It is an undeniable fact that human existence is characterized by suffering.
 - So much so, that the majority of technology that become ubiquitous, widespread in the culture, serves to directly mitigate our struggle and suffering...
 - For an easy example: A chair...

- Healthcare is a 2 Trillion dollar industry, and exists to do what? Address conditions which produce suffering... to prevent and cure dis-ease...
- And suffering is not a contemporary issue...
 - It is one of the primary subjects of art and literature in nearly all cultures.
 - Artists and writers ask why do we suffer? What is the nature and expression of suffering? What does it do to us?
 - The story of Job is ANCIENT... one of the oldest stories in all of humanity...
 - Chapters 3 through 37 are almost entirely focused on the cause and nature of suffering...
 - So, Paul here in Chapter 8 is not suggesting that suffering in this present time is going anywhere...
 - But the suffering of the present time he addresses is not exclusively human suffering...
 - He addresses Creation and Humanity as two unique entities and describes the nature of both groups suffering.
- Creation suffers futility, groaning with anticipation of our restoration (Genesis 3:17-19, Romans 8:19-22)
 - Romans 8:19-22

19 For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God’s sons to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of him who subjected it—in the hope 21 that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage to decay into the glorious freedom of God’s children. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains until now.

 - So we see here that Paul, and scripture in general, makes a distinction between humanity and the rest of creation.
 - If you affirm a biblical anthropology, or doctrine of humanity, this is not a controversial statement.
 - But... to a naturalistic worldview, which much of our culture embraces... this is indeed a controversial or even repugnant thought.
 - Much of the environmentalist movement in the past 50 years has been centered on either deconstructing the concept that man is something distinct from nature or redefining humanity as something lesser than nature.
 - But Paul, in highlighting that creation is subjected to futility, is at the same time affirming that the creation was made with a purpose.
 - Creation is suffering under its inability to fulfill its purpose...
 - And what is that purpose?
 - Genesis reveals it was to serve humanity...
 - To serve humanity by providing sustenance...
 - To serve humanity by being the venue that hosts the interactions between God and man...
 - To serve humanity by responding to humanity’s cultivation of it...
 - But it was subjected to futility in this purpose...
 - How did this happen?
 - Gen 3:17-19

And he said to the man, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘Do not eat from it’: The ground is cursed because of you. You will eat from it by means of painful labor all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. You will eat bread by the sweat of your brow until you return to the ground, since you were taken from it. For you are dust, and you will return to dust.”

 - Do you see that? The earth is cursed by God because of Adam’s sin... cursed to now battle against humanity rather than provide for it...
 - To bring forth thorns and thistles instead of fruit and flowers.
 - To resist cultivation.
 - To rebel against humanity’s authority over it

- This is why bees sting us, floods and fires destroy our cities, and disease destroys our crops..
 - God cursed the earth... subjecting it to futility of purpose... and the earth has obeyed.
- But we also see that Creation is not indifferent to this state of hostility
 - The creation is GROANING... like Eve, forced to groan in pain during childbirth... waiting for the images bearers of God to be restored to their intended role...
 - Adam was cursed to labor to survive... and to die and return to the dust of the now cursed earth...
 - So certainly, humanity suffers consequences from Creation's curse, but humanity's suffering is something uniquely different.
 - Not only does humanity suffer death
 - Not only does humanity suffer at the hands of a now hostile creation...
- Humanity suffers exile, groaning with longing for our final reconciliation (Genesis 3, Exodus 2:23-25, Romans 8:23)
 - At the end of Genesis 3 Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden of Eden because of their sin...
 - In that exile, all of humanity is sent out from this meeting place with God... sent out from a state of fellowship with him...
 - Out into the wilderness where suffering and struggle is the order of the day...
 - Out where groaning under heavy burdens is the norm...
 - And this is one of God's purposes for suffering... to bring us to a place where we hate our sin so that we cry out to God for rescue...
 - And as Exodus 2 reveals... God's ears are particularly tuned to the groaning of his people struggling under heavy burdens...
 - So he has sent a deliverer in the person of Christ, whose yoke is easy and burden is light
 - And he has begun the work of restoring God's kingdom on earth through Jesus
 - And God as adopted us into his family and vocation and given us his Spirit as a down payment on the completed project of restoration...
 - But that does not mean that our exile has fully ended yet, and that we no longer experience any form of suffering.
 - Romans 8:23

Not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.
 - I actually preached from this text at the beginning of the year for the New Year sermon.
 - In that I pointed out that the reason we make resolutions to change things about ourselves is that we have an intrinsic knowledge that we are not what we could be or someday will be.
 - We long for our completed adoption, the redemption of our bodies.
 - We long for the day when decay no longer fills our bodies with pain and weakness
 - We long for the day when sinful rebellion no longer cripples our hearts and relationships
 - We long for the day of when returning to the cursed dust of the earth in death is no more
 - Much of our physical, mental and emotional suffering centers around these longings...
 - And so we groan, alongside creation, because suffering IS our present reality.
- **Glory is our future reality (Romans 8:18b)**
 - The human race's obsession with finding ways to alleviate suffering is rooted, not just in the fact that suffering is unenjoyable...
 - ...but that is literally not what we are designed for.
 - We are created for something different.
 - When the vision in our eyes degrades after a lifetime of seeing clearly, we know that there is something cosmically wrong about that. Our eyes were created to work.

- When everything in a system that could go wrong does go wrong at exactly the worst moment, part of the frustration of that moment is the knowledge that there is an ideal way that system was created to operate and it is not.
- And when we are faced with human suffering, when we walk down the street and see that homeless person begging or hear news of someone's abuse or enslavement or see nations attack one another, part of the feeling that rises in us is the sense that it ought not be.
 - It ought not be that someone created in the image of God exist in such dire straits.
 - It ought not be that parents or spouses betray their children and wives and husbands.
 - It ought not be that nations go to war, rejecting the peace that God intends to expand across the earth.
 - We were created for something different and we know it.
 - And praise be to God that in the work of Christ Jesus both creation and humanity are being returned to the glory of their design.
- And we see:
- Creation's return to glory is restoration of purpose (Isaiah 11:6-9)
- This concept of creation longing for a restoration of purpose is not an invention of Paul
- It is a common theme throughout the Old Testament that a part of God's salvation, would be his restoration of the Creation to an Eden-like state.
 - God expels the Canaanites from the Promised Land because their wicked actions were causing the land to be defiled and he was restoring it for His Holy purposes.
 - The Sabbath laws for the land in Leviticus 25 were partially about allowing for the soil's restoration...
 - Isaiah reveals that the creation suffers, it mourns, as a consequence of the fallen state of things. But God will restore the creation...
 - Isaiah 11:6-9 CSB
The wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the goat. The calf, the young lion, and the fattened calf will be together, and a child will lead them. The cow and the bear will graze, their young ones will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like cattle. An infant will play beside the cobra's pit, and a toddler will put his hand into a snake's den. They will not harm or destroy each other on my entire holy mountain, for the land will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the sea is filled with water.
 - This is certainly a picture of the creation restored to its purpose...
 - Shalom is restored between all creatures.
 - The once cursed ground is again providing all that the creation needs.
 - Humanity's presence and activities are no longer resisted.
- This is creation's return to glory!
 - And as creatures, humanity certainly benefits from this, but this restoration comes as a result of humanity's return to glory... AND
- Humanity's return to glory is reunion with God (Romans 8:18b, 24 & 25, Revelation 21:1-4)
 - Romans 8:24-25 CSB
Now in this hope we were saved, but hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? Now if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with patience.
 - What hope is he talking about here?
 - The hope of final redemption? Our perfected adoption?
 - And what does he mean that in this hope we were saved? What about grace and faith?
 - The lynchpin of salvation is not faith itself, it is the OBJECT of our faith, Jesus Christ.
 - The focus of salvation is not grace itself, it is the GIVER of that Grace the trinitarian God.
 - So the HOPE that saves us is not the mere act of hoping, it is the object of our hope.
 - Paul clarifies this in his letter to Titus when he writes....

- 11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.
 - We are longing for this blessed hope.
 - When Kristen was 23 her father Jeff died suddenly of a heart attack...
 - Jeff Roach had put his faith in Christ Jesus, and his family would tell you that he had eagerly waited with patience for the blessed hope.
 - So in the moment of his death he returned to glory! He was reunited with God, set free from sin, set free from the bondage to decay!

- And brothers and sisters that is what awaits all who have put their faith in the blessed hope....

- Revelation 21:1-4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look, God's dwelling[b] is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away.

- This is what our souls are longing for, this is the glory of humanity in the future, we are reunited with God.

- So how would Paul have us live in the tension between what has been and what is and what will be?

- What does eagerly waiting with patience look like in an age of present suffering and with a hope of future glory?
 - Well... Paul implies that it is a life characterized by prayer.

- **Prayer is our present access to our future reality (Romans 8:24-27)**

Now in this hope we were saved, but hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? Now if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with patience. In the same way the Spirit also helps us in our weakness, because we do not know what to pray for as we should, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with inexpressible groanings. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because he intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

- Paul assumes in this passage that we will be praying, even though we don't necessarily know exactly what to pray for.
 - He makes that assumption because:
- Prayer is a fundamental expression of our hope and faith in God (Heb 11:6, Jas 1:5-7, Jas 5:13-18)
 - I have been involved in ministry, volunteer or vocational, for nearly 15 years.
 - In that time I have been part of some prayer movements that significantly changed my life and the life of my family members.
 - I have also been part of some churches in which prayer was an afterthought or even nonexistent.
 - Trying to write prayer into the DNA of a believer or a church who has gone a long time without cherishing it is harder than almost any other work in ministry.
- Yet it is the most basic of all the spiritual disciplines and the foundation on which the rest of them are built!
 - The very act of prayer is an act of faith!
 - It is a demonstration of the belief that God is who he says he is and does what he says he will
 - It is an act of faith to approach a righteous God, who could condemn us in His Holiness, but who has assured us that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

- And faith PLEASES God.
 - Hebrews 11:6 makes it plain that it is impossible to please God without faith.
- And because prayer is such a baseline expression of faith it should be as natural for the believer to pray as it is to draw breath...
 - But it's not. It's difficult... feels useless sometimes... or overwhelming... or confusing...
 - If I ask people "Why don't you come to the corporate prayer service once a month?" Most common answers are:
 - #1 I have other things I think are more important.
 - #2 It is intimidating because I don't know how to pray well.
 - This passage is revealing that NONE of us know how to pray well, yet we are still invited by God Himself to participate in prayer!
 - Because in addition to being a baseline expression of hope and faith in God:
- Prayer is an exercise of mystical union with God (John 14:18-26, Rom 8:34, Eph 6:8, Jude 1:20)
 - The doctrine of mystical union is simply the biblical concept that we are not just forensically in union with Christ, or just a future promise we will be united with Christ... it is the concept that we are ACTUALLY now in REAL union, REAL relationship with Christ.
 - We become members of Christ's body, Christ's life indwells and animates us through the Holy Spirit, it is both a personal and corporate union and it is a union producing faith in us so that we exercise that faith in ministry to God and others.
 - And it is mystical, it does contain an element of spiritual mystery and wonder!
 - Read John 14 and tell me there is no spiritual mystery to what Jesus is saying.
 - It's mysterious but its true.
 - And prayer is an exercise of that mystical union.
 - Let me paint a picture of what is happening when the believer prays:
 - The believer approaches God in faith and hope to lift up our weakness to him. The Spirit, which dwells within us and knows our mind, begins to intercede for us with groanings that surpass anything we could muster. And who else is interceding for us? Christ Jesus himself, who is seated at the right hand of the Father. The same Christ and Father who sent us the Holy Spirit as the firstfruits of our reunion with God, that Spirit who is now praying on our behalf as we draw near to God.
 - I DON'T KNOW HOW ANY OF THIS WORKS.
 - But this mystery, both the mystery of the trinity and the mystery of our union with Christ, is what the believer is brought into by prayer.
 - So when we encourage you in the practice of private prayer, or when we invite you to the prayer meeting, we are not inviting you to a dreary obligation of mere Christian duty!
 - We are inviting you to participate in a moment of reunion, a moment of glory, in the presence of God Himself!