

“... For Whom Christ Died”

Paul's fifth chapter in his letter to the Church at Rome is one of his great lyrical passages. His words express the intimate joy of his confidence in God. He places a good deal of emphases on “trusting faith” ... a faith that never could be produced by merely keeping the Law of Moses ... a trusting faith that gives us ... finally ... a peace with God, and in turn ourselves! Before Jesus came into the world, no human being could ever be close to God. Now when we realize that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... there comes into our life intimacy with God ... a new relationship Paul calls --- “justification.”

Can you think of any words you have read or heard or said that changed your life (*other than “I do!”*)? On the lips of the great Reformationist, Martin Luther, the words “justification by faith,” literally shook the foundations of the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century. Also, was while listening to a reading of Luther's *Commentary on Romans*, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, had his “heart-warming conversion experience.” Also, I must confess that Romans 4 and 5, and the words “justification by faith” were what led me to Christ ... led me from being a Baptist to a Presbyterian ... led me into the ministry. There is no wonder that Romans 4 and 5 are called the most important passages in all of Paul's writings.

Paul says that through Jesus, we have an “introduction” to God's grace ... a grace in which we stand and by which we are saved. The Greek word that Paul uses for “introduction” is a word that draws two wonderful pictures. First, it is a common word used to describe someone being ushered into the presence of royalty, as well as a word describing worshippers approaching God. It is as if Paul is saying *Jesus ushers us into the very presence of God. He opens the door for us to the presence of the King of Kings; and when that door is opened what we find is grace ... not condemnation ... not judgment ... not vengeance ... but the sheer ... the undeserved ... the incredible kindness of God.*

The second picture the word “introduction” paints is the place where ships come in ... a harbor or a safe haven. As long as we live solely dependent upon our own efforts, our life will be storm tossed; we will be like sailors challenged by a sea that threatens to completely overwhelm them. In this way, when we think of Jesus as an introduction to God's grace, we understand that we have reached a safe harbor; we know the calm of depending, not on what we can do for ourselves, but on what God has done for us. Because of Jesus Christ's “introduction,” we have entry to the presence of the King of Kings; we have entry to the safe haven of God's grace.

Unfortunately, this type of thinking has become more and more difficult for people in our culture to understand and accept ... as we have become a people governing our lives more by fear and hysterics than by faith ... more by achievement and material rewards than by trusting God. People of faith, we need to listen more closely to Paul as he explains to us *how* God ... in raising Christ from the dead ... changed our status. Once we were not God's people ... now we are “justified” children. At a great cost, God purchased a new status for us. No longer are we outsiders and captives to sin ... we are now forgiven and free ... we are now friends of Christ and children of God.

The Cross reveals to us that God's grace is not cheap, but grace purchased at a terrible price. And like the cross, justification is not an ending ... but a beginning. The *Doctrine of Justification by Faith* clearly sets forth Christianity as the religion of Christ the Savior. It radically undercuts self-righteousness and/or works righteousness. In fact, Paul is challenging believers to “dare to live in the confidence that we are justified by faith in God who gave and raised Jesus Christ.” Paul reminds the early Christians that now is not the time to back away from what they have heard and seen. Now is the time to stand and deliver ... to speak and to do the good news of the Gospel.

During World War II, Winston Churchill challenged the beleaguered British people with, “This is no time for ease and comfort. It is a time to dare and endure.” Churchill's words affirm the context of Romans 5. Paul is saying, “Dare to believe; then brace yourself to endure all the suffering.” Of course, Paul not only endures, but boasts of his suffering, largely brought on by his audacious faith. The truth remains ... since the beginning of Christ ... it is hard to live in this world and remain faithful ... it is difficult to believe in the face of all the suffering and pain that every believer experiences and must endure.

This world threatens to kill the spirit for living. This world burdens the soul and eats away at the core of our life --- even to the point that there are times we don't want to live any more. Paul addresses human suffering when he says "trouble produces fortitude." The Greek word that Paul uses for "trouble" literally means "pressure." I'll bet not a week goes by that you don't say to yourself: "I am under a great deal of *pressure*." All kinds of trouble pressure us week after week: the pressure of schedules; the want and trying to do too many things; the stress of sorrow and grief; the sense of unpopularity, loneliness, and isolation; the fear of worry, doubt, and disbelief; the pressure of expectations, deadlines, and failures.

For those who believe, Paul says that all that pressure produces fortitude. The Greek word for "fortitude" means more than endurance. It means "the spirit that can overcome the world ... the spirit that does not passively endure, but actively overcomes the trials and tribulations of life." A great poem I had to learn in ninth grade was *Invictus*, written by Henley, whose leg was amputated; as he faced the prospect of losing the other, he wrote:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be,
For my unconquerable soul.

Our faith calls us to dare and endure. During the Nazi regime, Kaj Munk was the flaming spirit of the Lutheran Church in Denmark. The Nazis killed him, but not before he had thundered from the pulpit: *What is the meaning of this absurd demand laid upon the Church, that it should be cautious. Was Christ cautious? Were the martyrs cautious? The truth is to be preached. It cannot be pickled. If it isn't used, it dies. And the most dangerous of all lie. ... is a dead truth. Let them come with their gallows and their stakes. We conquer by our death.* The Christ we believe in ... is the Christ that has come to us by the blood of many witnesses down through history.

Paul further writes that "fortitude produces character." Paul uses the Greek word for "character" that is used of metal that has been passed through the fire ... so that everything base has been purged out of it. When trouble is met with fortitude, a believer emerges stronger, purer, better, and nearer to God. Further Paul says that "character produces hope." Two people can meet the same trouble. However, one's trouble can drive them to despair, while the other's trouble can drive them to triumphant action. To the one it can be the end of hope ... to the other it can be a challenge to greatness.

One author writes, "I do not like crises, but I do like the opportunities they provide." If we allow our life's circumstances to beat us, then we have made ourselves such that when the challenge of the crises comes, nothing is left but despair. But if we insist on meeting life with our head up ... facing the challenge ... then when the crises comes, we will meet it with eyes aflame with hope. When we endure our tests, we will always emerge in hope. Paul's last statement affirms this: "The Christian hope never proves an illusion for it is founded on the love of God." When our hope is in the love of God, it can never be an illusion ... for God loves us with an everlasting love backed by an everlasting power.

Linda Ryan, a sportswoman and writer who died in the '90's, describes the last few years of her bout with cancer ... as a time when the only sport she could manage was kayaking. She went out daily on a lake near her home, and there she did not paddle but rather floated. She spoke of the lake as "God's lap" in which she was held. And she understood her death to be the time when the boat would be gone, but the lake still there. She endured by faith.

When we know what holds us up ... what justifies us, we are then living by faith and hope, and we are not afraid. One of the reasons we can dare and endure is the promise from God ... that we will be given the power ... the help and the helpers we need. When the world was at its weakest, God sent the greatest helper of all: Jesus Christ! From faith grows Christian living. Suffering, endurance, character and hope are realized by the Holy Spirit's outpouring of God's love into our hearts. Live this great truth. "For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly." We are the ungodly. We are the ones for whom Christ died. Dare to believe and endure by believing! Amen.