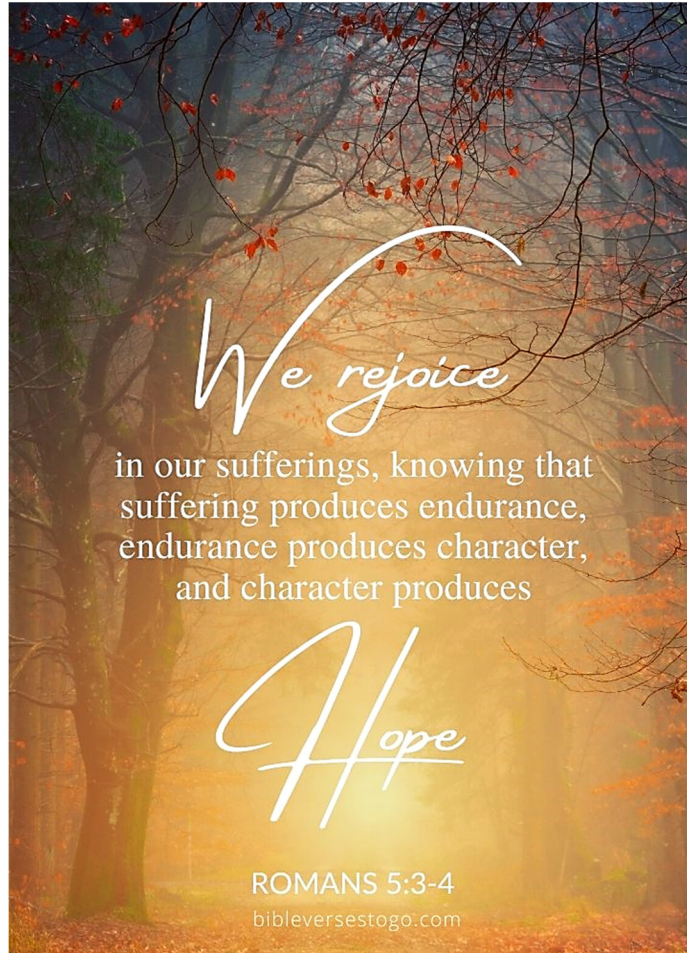


God's Extravagant Love

by Rev. John C. Cheek



Prayer

We open our eyes to see God's glory.
We open our ears to hear God's wisdom.
We open our hands to offer God gifts.
We open our mouths to sing God's praise.
We open our hearts to offer God our love. Amen.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

Scripture: Romans 5:1-5 (NIV)

¹Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— ²the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, ⁴and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. ⁵Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake.

Introduction

This is a letter from Paul to the church in Rome. The church in Rome probably consisted of several different house churches. Those who worshipped in these communities were made up of both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. This wasn't always an easy relationship. It would have been easy for each group to see the others as not-really-Christian or not-as-Christian-as-us. It seems likely that there would have also been both wealthy and poor Christians, with all the assumptions that can follow an imbalance of that kind.

Paul and His Intention in Writing

Paul has been preaching the Gospel for almost 20 years at this time. He probably felt that it was time for him to write an orderly description of what it means to be a Jesus-follower. The book of Romans became that description. Romans was probably written during the three months when Paul was at Achaia, as described in Acts 20:2 & 3. This probably occurred in early 56 or 57.

Romans is a beautifully written treatise on Christian faith. It's also demanding reading because it's so theologically dense.

SERMON – God's Extravagant Love

A. *[In chapter 4 Paul has been talking about Abraham and his faith. He argues that it was Abraham's faith, and not his works, that led to salvation. Paul further argues that Abraham is the spiritual father of both Jews and Gentiles and that all are saved, as Abraham was, through faith rather than works.]*

B. (v. 5:1–5) Therefore, since we have been justified through faith,

1. (v. 1b–2a) We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. *[Paul makes clear that the peace we have with God is because of what God has done, not because of anything we have done.]*

2. (v. 2b) And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. *[I grapple with this language. I'm someone who was reared to avoid boasting. For me, boasting is always saying, about one*

thing or another, "I'm better than you!" And I really don't like it. Some other translations translate the Greek word as "glory" rather than "boast." I think Paul's intention here is that we will be saying, "God is so great! God is so good! How blessed we are!" And I think that's different from boasting as we usually think about it.]

3. (v. 3–5) Not only so, but we also glory [*this is exactly the same Greek word, as you might have guessed, as the one we just looked at.*] in our sufferings, because we know that [*among those who are in relationship with God*]

a. (v. 3b) suffering produces perseverance;

b. (v. 4a) perseverance, character;

c. (v. 4b) and character, hope.

d. (v. 5) And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who [*not which*] has been given to us.

IV. What can we take away from this passage this morning?

I think that there are three huge truths contained in these few verses, and the first is this: **we are justified through faith.** So, what does that word "justified" mean?

To say that we are justified means that we are made right with God. Our sin, the sin of our past, the sin of our present, the sin of our future, all of which rebels against God, is forgiven. This sin which distances us from God has been wiped away. It no longer has anything to do with our relationship with God. This is justification, and it's huge! And it is all a gift from God. You know how often I say that God has loved you extravagantly, and this is a part of that.

Now, some of you may have experienced the blessing of having known God's grace and love all your lives. If so, you may be saying to yourselves, "Yes, John, God loves us. That's old news. Move on to something new."

But others of you may have been reared, as I was, in a Christian tradition where God is presented as a judge who watches your every move to see if you're going to be faithful or not, to see whether you're going to pass or fail. We were reared to believe that every day represents an opportunity to make the decision or take the action that will assure that you spend eternity in hell, and, if you do, it's your own fault and what you deserve. See, my friends, for people like me, the idea that our salvation is purely a gift, a manifestation of God's extravagant love, is like cool water on a hot day.

So, we are justified through faith. And as a consequence, **we have peace with God.** God's love for us is unconditional and trustworthy and reliable. Always. Forever. And, again, if you've always known that and have always known peace in your heart, good for you. I truly rejoice in that. But for people like me, for whom this was a revelation, we want to shout it everywhere and all the time.

The third thing we can take away is in many ways the hardest to understand and accept. And that is the idea that **we can glory in our sufferings**. I want to state very clearly to you these two, seemingly contradictory, facts. I believe in God's absolute sovereignty. I believe that God is all powerful, all knowing, all loving. I believe that there is nothing outside of God's power. Simultaneously, I don't believe that God causes tornadoes or hurricanes or floods. I don't believe that God causes pandemics. I don't believe that God causes school shootings or racism or genocide. I believe that these and all other tragedies are the result of a broken world, a world into which sin entered and has its impact.

What I do know to be true from my own life experience is that there is no disaster, no tragedy, no act of violence so awful that God will not bring something of beauty out of it. I know that some of you have experienced horrific things in your lives, and I don't say any of this to minimize your pain or your suffering.

I think that it is a part of God's nature to bring beauty and order out of chaos and ugliness. I think this is what was at work in the creation, however God chose to bring all there is into being. I think that this is what God does in big and small ways.

Jeanette Maré is a woman here in Tucson. I knew her somewhat because we had some mutual friends and because I had worked with her brother Michael on the Tucson Police Department. After her son Ben died in 2002, just before his third birthday, I saw her grief and her family's grief. As a way of trying to survive that grief, Jeanette and some friends and family members began designing wind chimes out of clay, which they fired in a kiln. She and her friends made four hundred of these wind chimes, called them Ben's Bells, and randomly distributed them throughout Tucson on the first anniversary of Ben's death. Since then, thousands of people have participated in making Ben's Bells and an incredible number of Ben's Bells have found their way around the world. I'm blessed to have one. The message of Ben's Bells is a simple one: Be Kind.

Nothing takes away the pain Jeanette, her husband, and her family experienced with the death of this little boy. In my view God has brought out of that tragedy something quite beautiful. And I think this is what Paul is articulating in his letter. We suffer, in big and small ways. And out of that suffering grow perseverance and character and hope. And God brings out of it something of beauty which in some way brings redemption to it.

So, what am I asking you to do this morning? As always, I'm asking you to recognize and rejoice in God's extravagant love, in which God has justified you.

I'm asking you to know with absolute certainty the peace you have with God. And I'm asking you, as you luxuriate in that peace, to ask yourself who it is that you can make peace with. Who is it who pops into your mind, and you immediately hope something bad happens to them? Who is it that you can't find a good thing to say about? How can you begin the work of making peace with that person?

I'm asking you to know that, regardless of the circumstances you find yourself in, God's love for you is absolute and profound. Will you seek to live into that truth?

May it be so. Amen

Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.®
Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.