

25th September 2016 Romans 5

Peace with God

At this Harvest thanksgiving we are surrounded by all the fruits of the physical, material Harvest, for which we give thanks to God, I want to spend a few minutes considering the fruits of the spiritual Harvest. Because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ what is the harvest for our souls. What good gifts do we receive because of who we are in Christ? This is what Paul details in chapter five of his letter to the Romans and which we look at this morning.

What is noticeable as we move into this chapter is how Paul's pronouns change to the first person plural 'we'. The characteristic pronouns in the first four chapters have been 'I' and 'they' as Paul has characterised a godless pagan world. But now he talks about those who have faith in God through Christ and the emphasis is now on our unity as God's people and the benefits of being God's people. This is the harvest we enjoy of spiritual graces because of what Christ has done which are all the results of justification – a technical word we looked at in recent weeks which means we have been judged innocent in the eyes of God.

Six things I want to highlight in the first eleven verses of this chapter.

1. We have peace with God.

The pursuit of peace is a universal human obsession, whether it is international, industrial, domestic or personal peace. The atrocities in Syria in the last week have made peace in that troubled country even more remote and accusations of war crimes as an humanitarian envoy was mercilessly bombed.

On a personal level I've conducted one too many funerals of individuals where one or two significant members of the deceased family have not been in attendance. Sometime in the past, often a long time in the past, there has been a falling out. They have gone separate ways, often never talking again nor meeting up. The reality is that both sides have nursed the grudge, or felt the pain of separation, but neither side has made a move of reconciliation. The telephone has sat by the side of the armchair but neither person has lifted the handset to make to first move. Won't speak, won't see' wont have anything to do with the other person. It's always a story of great tragedy.

But there is an even greater tragedy. A vast number of human beings live exactly like that in relation to God. Don't want to speak about God, seek God nor have anything to do with God. In this passage of Romans 5 Paul writes about the reconciliation to end all reconciliations;

Therefore, now that we have been justified through faith, we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The desire for peace with God does not seem to be a preoccupation of the modern person. Our

preoccupations seem to be more materialistic about careers, incomes, houses, pensions, relationships, but not about whether we have peace with God. The questions may still be there in many people's minds. It may still haunt them – what if there is a God? What is my relationship to this God? What happens when I die and I may have to face such a God? But by and large in our society we do a good job of pushing such questions out of view – turn up the television to drown out the noise of our hungry souls. But the question is still there: do we have a peace in our soul and a peace for the future?

Paul says those who turn to Christ have stopped the rebellion, stopped the rant against authority, laid down their arms and acknowledged that God is their creator and through Christ they can make peace with God.

2. We are standing in grace.

'We have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand' verse 2

Grace as I have said in previous weeks is normally god's free and unmerited favour, his undeserved, unsolicited and unconditional love. But here it is not so much his quality of graciousness as the privileged position of acceptance by him. We have gained access. A better translation than access (which implies that we have taken initiative to enter) would be 'introduction' (which acknowledges our unfitness to enter and our need for someone else to bring us in.

imagine being shown into the King's palace for an audience with royalty. It would be a memorable day in our lives – we all celebrated when Joan Kingham went to see the Queen to get her MBE for instance. But our relationship with God is not sporadic – the odd visit – but something continuous and secure. We do not fall in and out of grace like courtiers who may find themselves in and out of favour with their sovereign, or politicians with the public. No we stand in it, for that is the nature of grace. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, as Paul will emphasize again later in the letter.

3. We rejoice in our hope of the glory of God

We boast in the hope of the glory of God. Verse 2

Christian hope is not uncertain, like our ordinary everyday hopes about the weather, our football team, our health; it is a joyful and confident expectation which rests on the promises of God as we saw last week in the case about Abraham. And the object of our hope is the glory of God, namely his radiant splendour which will in the end be fully displayed. We have the splendour of creation at Harvest and the wonderful gifts the earth can bring forth. This is nothing compared to the glory that awaits us.

One day the curtain will be raised and the glory of God will be fully disclosed. The Lord Jesus Christ will return with great power and glory and we will not only see that glory but be changed into it: changed from glory into glory. Redeemed humanity who were created to be the image and glory of God but through sin have

fallen short of the glory of God will again in full measure share in God's glory. And all creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and be brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God as Paul will go on again later in his letter. What a hope – a hope of the whole of creation transformed into glory at the harvest of all time.

Three fruits of justification: past, present and future: we have peace with God as a result of our past forgiveness through Christa dying for our sins on the cross. We are standing in grace (our present privilege). We rejoice in hope of glory (our future inheritance). It all sounds idyllic – but then comes Paul's fourth affirmation:

4. We also rejoice in our sufferings.

We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. Verse 3

The sufferings Paul has in mind are tribulations, or trials, persecutions or oppositions, rather than aches and pains. Jesus warned his followers that in this world they would face trouble and Paul likewise warns his converts that they will go through hardships.

But put this in context: the context is future glory. Keep your eyes on the prize. If suffering leads to glory in the end, it leads to maturity and stronger faith and resolve meanwhile. I have known people for whom suffering has been destructive and has destroyed their faith or their hope in humanity. So one needs to use this verse with caution and not as a platitude. We do know that

suffering can also be productive, if we respond to it positively, and not with anger or bitterness. That has also been the experience of God's people in every generation. But that doesn't mean you have to be a masochist – finding pleasure in pain.

I once went climbing in the Alps and if you have been around the Mont Blanc Massif you will know what an inspiring landscape it is. We had been walking and climbing all day over ten thousand feet, more than twice the height of Scafell Pike, England's tallest mountain. My feet were shot. Blisters were forming I was in agony. I stopped to take off my boot and tend my sores. As I stopped I looked around at the great panorama, the majestic ice capped mountain peaks, the glistening glaciers and the green U shaped valleys. My breath was taken away, my mouth dropped. I gazed in wonder. For a moment I'd forgotten all about my aching feet. The backdrop was magnificent. It gave me courage to walk on and, even though I was in pain, my spirit was lifted high with the inspiring scene.

The backdrop to this letter of Romans is of God's unconditional love for us. Grasp that view and you find inspiration and hope to go on: to trek through life's pain with hope in your heart.

Paul encourages us to keep on going, knowing we have the hope of future glory. Ultimately God will never let us down. His love will never give us up.

How can we be sure of God's love? To be sure of the love of your parents is almost indispensable to the healthy emotional development of a child. To be sure of the love of spouse or friend is wonderful to human fulfillment. To be deprived of love in either situation is hugely damaging. To be sure of God's love brings even richer blessings even to the point of helping to make up for the deficiencies in human love. Paul sets out two major ways we come to be sure of God's love:

1. *God has poured his love into our hearts through his Holy Spirit.* The word for pour evokes the vivid metaphor you use for a cloudburst on a parched countryside, what the Holy Spirit does to make us deeply and refreshingly aware that God loves us. It is an assurance, deep within. Some experience this to differing degrees. Some are simply overcome by love and joy, some have very heightened even intense experiences of the love of God, and some just have a quiet confidence. . In many ways this is all subjective – personal experiences of knowing that God loves you. There is also an objective way in which we know that God loves us that Paul then mentions:
2. *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* Verses 6-8. If ever we doubt God loves us we can objectively point to Christ on the cross and say this is how I know God loves me.

500 years ago for a troubled monk, the question of our relationship to God was the burning issue. Martin Luther was trying to please God, trying to earn his salvation by being good. He was sat on the toilet when he had a eureka moment. His discovery was that God loved him as he was. Christ died for us whilst we were still sinners. This is proof of God's love for us. Faith is needed to open our eyes to that. To turn and accept that love. To make peace with God. Through Christ, God has already picked up the phone to call humanity back, peace is on the table. We need to answer the call. Pick up the phone and say thank you, I accept. Faith trusts that God does what is right and that God does love us.

Back to the spiritual harvest we have in Christ.

5. We shall be saved through Christ.

⁹Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Verses 9-10

I used to go to a church in Nottingham when I was at University there and the minister was a very serious and at times severe preacher who would often preach on the wrath of God. Preaching on the wrath of God has gone out of favour these days. Some think there is too much emphasis on the love of God to the neglect of the wrath of God. The Bible does hold these two concepts in tension. The wrath of God is usually

defined as God's holy hatred of sin. God hates the sin but loves the sinner was what St Augustine used to say.

I know God created us in His image but the reverse is also true: we often create God in our image. Some see God as either entirely loving and forgiving, so mellow and chilled that He's unwilling to find fault in anyone; or the other extreme that God is always angry, eternally wrathful against the tiniest offence and more than willing to punish in ever more vindictive ways. You can pull out verses from the Bible which will back up either views.

For Christians we try to see God in Christ and so look for Jesus to be our guide as to how God is towards humanity. Jesus was no pushover and opposed sin and injustice. He was greatly sad when people rejected his offer of grace. Yet neither did he condemn people but always sought to save them.

Humanity tries to have it both ways with God. We cry out for justice, and when some criminal gets away with it we pray for God to come in wrath and they will get their just deserts when they meet their maker. At the same time we hope that all will be saved and go to heaven when they die. Well freedom is surely freedom to reject even that offer when it comes to it. God's hatred is love that has been rejected. Sin that is unconfessed and unredeemed. Jesus is about turning enemies into friends and that is the desire of God through Christ. But some people will want to stay enemies. The church is a community of reconciliation. Let us remember that. We are saved through Christ.

Anyway back to this minister in Nottingham. He was Welsh and often preached on the wrath of God and whether we were saved. He would shake people's hand at the door of the church as they left and if he didn't know them he would say in his lilting Welsh accent 'are you saved?'

Being a smart allick theology student I replied to him 'Yes and No'. He actually liked that response because he too recognised that for the Christian we are saved through what Jesus did for us – we are right with God and no longer an enemy, our sins have been forgiven and we are not under judgement. But we will be saved finally at death from indwelling sin and be given new bodies in the new world to come.

Finally Paul spells out the final fruit of being justified in Christ:

6. We also boast in God

Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Verse 11.

Paul has earlier in chapter two condemned the Jews for boasting in God as if God were their exclusive property and they had a monopoly on him. Christian boasting starts with our recognition that we have no claim on God at all but while we were still sinners Christ died for us and ends with humble confidence that he will complete the work he has begun in us. So to boast in God is not to rejoice in our privileges but in God's

mercies, not in our possession of Him but in His possession of us. We boast of what God has done for us in Christ. It is clear from this remark and the content of this chapter that the mark of we the justified believers is joy, especially of joy in God. We should be the most positive people in the world for the new community of Jesus Christ is a community of worship and glory.

So on this Harvest Sunday when we give thanks to God for all good gifts around us let us also give thanks to God for all the good spiritual gifts He has given us. Peace, grace, hope, things to persevere us through suffering, save us and boast about.
So thank the Lord, O thank the Lord for all his love.