

2015_03_01 Passion 2
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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Access to a Hope that Will Not Disappoint

Romans 5:1-11

INI

Grace and peace to you from our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Romans 5:1–11

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

⁶ For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. ¹⁰ For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. ¹¹ And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

Let us pray, Lord, grant us such faith that our hope and strength would be found only in You through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In Jesus name, beloved of God,

Standing atop the holy stairs and looking upon all that had been done, all he could find was disappointment. Martin Luther had traveled all the way from Germany to Rome and there at the Scala Sancta – having climbed the the holy stairs – Luther found only disappointment. These were said to be the very stairs on which Christ had stood; supposedly brought to Rome from Jerusalem and Luther now had the chance to touch them. On hands and knees his lips kisses each step. “Pater Noster...” “Pater Noster...” With each step he repeats the Latin prayer: “Our Father who art in heaven...” He was taught that with each prayer and each kiss, he was climbing one step closer to the glory of God; each step closer to the hope of delivering a soul from purgatory. He continues,

“Pater Noster” ... “Pater Noster” ... until at last he reaches the top. His lips and prayers have touched each of the twenty-eight steps, but something is not right. His heart was left untouched. Disappointment. All the prayers, all the pilgrimages, how could he know it was enough? It was there at the Scala Sancta, having reached the top of the holy stairs where Luther’s disappointment with Rome would lead him to doubt and despair and ultimately discovery. Luther arose and said, “Who knows whether it is so?”

Who knows whether it is so? Disappointment. Its something we all experience. After all, what happens when we imagine to have reached the top? What do we see when we look back on what we’ve done; where we’ve been? Were those kisses were sincere or mere lip service? Did we spend enough time on each step in prayer? And what do we do in times of tribulation; when the pressure’s on? Perhaps we figure, we’d better go back and do it again; go to some other holy place; go to some other church; find some other way to fix things; some other person to blame. And then it happens again – one step forward, two steps back. And we are no better then we were last week; back to the old ways. Back to the old self. And we’re wondering, are we on the twenty-eighth step or the first? Who knows whether it is enough? Who knows whether I will be saved? Who knows whether it is so?

This is what happens when we think access to hope will be gained in the stuff we touch; the places we go; the experiences we share; the things we do; the visions we see in this world? But it leads inevitably only to a crumbling future filled with disappointment.

Who knows whether it is so? Well, God does. God knows what is so and He has proven it. He has given us access to something outside of ourselves, outside of this world. Today God grants us access to a hope that is not found in how many stairs we have climbed up or fallen down; or what we’ve touched, or said, or thought – today God grants us access to a hope that will not disappoint.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Therefore ... we have peace with God.” Paul has just spent four chapters; eighteen hundred and twenty-four Greek words; laying the ground work for this statement. “Therefore.” Eighteen hundred and twenty-four Greek words, proving God’s case, that there is none righteous, no not one. “Therefore.” Showing the difference between the law of works and the gospel of grace. “Therefore.” Demonstrating from Scripture and experience that “God does not justify the person who works; but the person who stops working and who believes.” “Therefore.” Stating with paradoxical power: “God

justifies the ungodly.” “Therefore” harkens back to all of 3:21-4:25 where Paul establishes the truth that we are not saved on account of the works of the law which reveals our sin debt, but on account of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus and the faith which apprehends this righteousness of the gospel; culminating in 4:24-25, namely, “righteousness shall be credited to us who believe in God who delivered Jesus our Lord to death because of our offenses and raised Him from the dead because of our justification.” Therefore! ... we have peace with God.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.³ And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;⁴ and perseverance, character, and character, hope.⁵ Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Peace with God means we are at His side and He is at ours. The Greek preposition means “side by side.” That is to say: “we have a place of peace at the side of God.” We have access. Access to the higher authority. Access to a greater hope. Access to the highest glory. What this means is, we reach the top, we reach God Himself, and all his glory – not because of what we do or think or touch – but because of what we believe. That is, by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, we access a hope that does not disappoint.

It does not disappoint because first of all it is objective. Objective means that it does not rely on the subject to exist. And in this case, we are the subjects. But grace is an object; an object that doesn’t rely on us. God doesn’t rely on us – on whether we believe or don’t believe: We have access by faith into this grace.

So the grace is unchanging. The justification that is ours through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the forgiveness; the life; the salvation – is secure, solid, and steadfast – leaving no room for disappointment; God has objectively saved you and given you access into the grace in which you now stand. And the way we gain access to all these objective blessings is simply by believing; by trusting that what God says about the redemption that is freely ours in Jesus Christ is true.

But in order for us to truly comprehend and believe what this means, we must know where our hope lies. We must be brought to nothing. Brought low. Disappointed in ourselves. Proven failures. So that when tribulation arises, we no longer hope in ourselves to persevere; to climb the stairs; to kiss the steps – instead we rely, not on us making to the top, but on Christ coming to the bottom.

This is the hope that does not disappoint. The hope which has seen that everything in us and in this world will lead to disappointment in the end and knowing that despite our sins and the many ways we've disappointed ourselves and God; we have a Savior and a God who has not come for the righteous nor the good, but who has come to the bottom. Which has come down the stairs of disappointment to give us access to God.

⁶For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.

That is to say, Christ was at the top, but chose the bottom. He was at the top, in all glory, the maker of heaven and earth, undeserving of being subject to the law, let alone death. But he came down.

He came down, step by step, lower and lower and along his way down he passed by a man bent down, and praying. A righteous man, a Christian, a Lutheran of the Lutherans, a man who knew the confessions of this church inside and out; dedicated and rigorous in his church attendance, contributions, work days, and meetings, he was zealous beyond them all. And he bent down and prayed, "I thank God I am not like other men." But Jesus with head hung low, just kept going.

He came down, step by step, lower and lower, and along his way he passed by another man, bent down and praying. He saw another man, a good guy. The kind of guy that would help you in a pinch, as long as you would help him in a pinch. He was quick to help; a good citizen; a good neighbor – that is as long as it didn't cost him anything. A good guy. But when times of trouble arose, when he saw a friend, a family member, a church brother, who had really messed up, who had gotten himself into big problems, when he saw how much it would cost him, well, it was watch out for number one. And he bent down and said, "I do not know the man." And Jesus, surrounded by guards and shackled by our sins gives him a look of utter disappointment and just keeps going downward.

He came down, step by step, lower and lower, until he reached the bottom. The bottom of the steps, where buried in the dust was the face of a man who could not bear to look up. His lips were covered in dirt from him kissing the ground. He was buried in his own sins, unable to lift himself up, unable to look up because it weighed him so. He had tried. Tried to do better, tried to make things straight with God, but kept falling back. One step forward, two back. And now he was at the bottom, face down, praying, "Lord, make atonement for me, a sinner." And Jesus looked at him. The ungodly one. And there he knelt down side by side with him, side by side with a sinner, and prayed "Pater Noster... Thy will be done."

There at the bottom, Jesus, the most righteous of them all, left himself for dead; there at the bottom, he found hell itself opened and laid himself bare, exposed to all of our sins; there we called him a sinner and we shed his own righteous blood, and there we buried him in our sins.

⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

There at the very bottom, he found you and together you arose. Together you found life. Together you arose from death itself and found hope. And he said, "Arise and have access to all that is mine. For if, when you were my enemy, I, the Son of God, was willing to die for you, then how much more certain can you be that you are saved when you see that I live! Not that you know my suffering and death was done in love for you, you who does not deserve it, how much more certain can you be that you now have peace with God. You have peace. You are reconciled because together, we have arisen. And by believing in Me, you have access to the top; to the glory; to the thing that Martin Luther was seeking and eventually found. Access to a hope that does not disappoint.

⁵ Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

And this is what gives us perseverance in tribulation. That the hope is not in us. Remember, even though by faith you are at the top, access to God, at his side and at peace with him, you still have a sinful nature. And that sinful nature is still at the bottom – a sinner who will always be a sinner. And there is nothing you can do about this other than looking up and keeping your focus on this hope which does not disappoint.

This is your test of character. For hope is nothing until it is tested against its expectations. And that is why we face tribulation. That is why God gives us tribulations. To produce perseverance. Literally, "a remaining under." A cross. The cross is your perseverance and from that your character is proven. The resurrection of Christ shapes you character; a character that lives and lives in Jesus so that you live not for the flesh which is at the bottom, but for the grace and love of God which has taken you to the top.

This is a hope that does not disappoint.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ

This is what saved Luther, who found in this book of Romans, the truly holy steps; the words of law and gospel which take us to the glories of heaven itself. These holy words which knock us to the bottom of hell itself in ourselves; and then rescue us in Christ and take us to the glories of heaven where we have peace at the side of God.

This is what saves you. Who knows whether these things are so? We do, for the love of God has been poured out in our hearts and we have a hope which does not disappoint. Amen.