

Faith Faces Life

by Ray C. Stedman

This is graduation time, as is evidenced by the many young people who are home from school now – just out of high school and college. It is a very appropriate time to come to the fifth chapter of Romans, because Romans 5 is a graduation exercise. It takes us from the elementary grades of Christian life into high school. Up to this point in the book of Romans, we have been dealing with birth truths – the elementary, introductory truths of the Christian faith. But at this point in the book we learn of the existence of growth truths – the way to maturity and power, and the way to be effective in Christian service. This will occupy our attention through Chapters 5, 6, 7, & 8 of this great letter. Now, wherever the Christian church is weak (and it is weak in many places), and wherever Christians are weak individually, it's because they have never graduated into the High School of the Holy Spirit – they are still “babes in Christ” {1 Cor 3:1}, no matter how long they have been Christians. Sometimes you can find “babes in Christ” who have been Christians 15, 20, or even 40 years, and it is because they have never come into this high school truth of the Holy Spirit: They keep learning over and over again the same old truths about salvation in Christ that are presented in these early chapters (wonderful as they are), and never go on – never graduate.

The sixth chapter of Hebrews in the Amplified Version begins with a much-needed exhortation:

Therefore let us go on and get past the elementary stage in the teachings and doctrine of Christ, the Messiah, advancing steadily toward the completeness and perfection that belongs to spiritual maturity. Let us not again be laying the foundation of repentance and abandonment of dead works [dead formalism], and of the faith [by which you turned] to God. {Heb 6:1 Amplified New Testament}

That is an exhortation that is tremendously needed in these days.

The first eleven verses of Chapter 5 of Romans clearly show us two areas of Christian blessing, and two great reasons for Christian victory.

Let me bring the first before you – **the two areas of blessing** – in Verses 1-5:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. {Rom 5:1-5 RSV}

Now, Verses 1-2 sum up all that we have learned in Romans so far – justification by faith. This is the first experience, and the results are three fold: Peace with God, access to God, and the certain hope of sharing the glory of God (in heaven). All this we have the moment we become a Christian. The moment we believe in Jesus Christ all these things are true for us. And they never become any more true – a person who has been a Christian for 50 years is no more justified than the man who just this moment has committed his life to Jesus Christ. All Christians enjoy these same blessings immediately, permanently, and continuously. Now, that is cause for rejoicing! And we do rejoice in this. We have been converted – the direction of our life has been changed as we have come to realize that God has a gift of righteousness to give us – something that we can never earn ourselves – a gift that Christ has given us, and we are

born again by receiving that gift and by the Holy Spirit working in our hearts:

- The question of our going to hell has been forever settled,
- The certainty of heaven is forever established.
- And this is cause for rejoicing.

And we ought to rejoice. Just as Paul points out here, there is a sense of peace that possesses us. You remember it well, don't you? How, that day when you came to Christ, you became aware that you were God's child – you were now in the family of God – and what a sense of peace came into your heart!

Then, there is a new sense of God's presence to delight us – we have access to God. When we talk to him, we feel that he is listening: He hears us. We have the right and the privilege of coming to him at any time any place – we have access to him.

Also, the certain hope of heaven sustains us. That is why we sing, "When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there!" And certainly this is cause for rejoicing! But that is not all there is to the Christian life (though, unfortunately, this is all the Christian life that many people know; for them salvation begins and ends with these facts – though they have been rather weary and barren years, I am afraid). We look on to heaven, and we sigh after it, and say, "Thank God that someday we are going to get through of all the struggles and trials down here, and will be up there with him, and what rejoicing that will be!" Certainly it is proper that Christians rejoice in this fact. We are ready for heaven, you see, but the trouble is that we are not ready for earth. This is why you often meet Christians who are ready for heaven but are no use on earth at all – they are very heavenly minded, but they are of no earthly use. The reason for this is that they have never graduated from elementary school and go on into the truths that we find in Romans 5, 6, 7, & 8.

Now look at Verse 3. It begins with these words: "More than that." The idea here is – beyond this, in addition to these facts about heaven, about peace with God, about access to God – more than that, we rejoice in our sufferings.

Now, do you do that? Have you learned to live on this level yet? Do you rejoice in sufferings?

Now, this is being ready for life. You see, Paul takes the very worst thing about life, life at its worst, our periods of suffering (not all of life is suffering, thank God, it never will be that), but Paul takes the very *worst* things about life – the periods of heartache and sorrow and disappointment, the tears, the crying, the heartbreaks of life – the suffering, and he says *it makes us rejoice*: We rejoice in our sufferings.

Now, I believe it is time that we Christians take these words very seriously, because this is no special standard, reserved for just a few wonderful saints who, by virtue of great faith, are able to live on this high level – this is the normal expectation of every Christian.

Oh, I wish I could shout that, sing it, paint it – I don't care how – just so I could get across that message!

This is what God expects of every Christian, and he not only expects it, but provides for it. Anything less than this is simply sub-Christian living.

Have you learned to live on this level? Have you learned to rejoice in suffering? Or, do you still gripe and complain and grumble and murmur about all the circumstances that come?

Do you remember the story of Sophie, the scrub woman, who lived in New York City, and made her living scrubbing floors in the skyscrapers of New York? By that means, she earned thousands of dollars to send out missionaries. That one woman supported some twenty or thirty missionaries, alone. Sophie had a wonderful character of glory about her all the time – so much so that she used to cause people to stop her and ask what her secret was. On several occasions, while she was working, some office worker would come to work late and would say to her, "Sophie, I wish I had your faith – I wish I knew God like you know him." And she would say, "Well, if you would read your New Testament right, you could know him." This person would say, "Well, I read my Bible." In fact, she said this one time to a minister. He said, "I read the Bible – I read the Bible in Greek and Hebrew." And she said, "Well, you don't read it right!" And he said, "What do you mean?" "Well," she said, "when it says g-l-o-r-y in tribulations, you read it g-r-o-w-l, growl. That is the

trouble with you, that is why you don't have joy in your heart, you growl in tribulation."

That is exactly what Paul is getting at here, you see. Someone has said that the definition of a Christian is a one who is:

- Completely fearless,
- Continually cheerful, and
- Constantly in trouble!

That's true! Do you know the secret to that kind of Christianity?

Let's face it – most of us feel, really, that being a Christian should excuse us somewhat from trials and sufferings. I know that, if we are asked, we would say that we realize that sufferings may come, but that we don't think of them as really necessary. We think that sufferings are sort of signs that something is wrong, that, if we keep in fellowship with Christ, things ought to go well. And, if we have difficulty, we feel it is a sign that we are out of fellowship, or that Christianity doesn't really work after all.

Now that shows how wrong we are, for when Paul speaks of fellowship with Christ, he speaks of the fellowship with his sufferings (Philippians 3:10). And Peter, in First Peter 5:6-10, says that the matter of suffering is for *all* Christians everywhere. Let me read it to you:

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you. Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you. {1 Pet 5:6-10 RSV}

You see, suffering, trials, difficulties, hardships, disappointment are all an indispensable part of the process by which God makes us into what we long to be. He loves us too well to deliver us from this.

As we read here, there is a process at work in which suffering produces endurance (or patience);

and, oh, how we need patience! I do! Don't you, these days?

Suffering produces patience. You can't get it any other way. Don't ever pray for patience, for God will never give it to you – he can't give it to you. Patience is something that must be learned, and, if you pray for patience, God will bring you suffering, because suffering produces patience. There is no other way to get it. If you want another word for it, it is *fortitude* – suffering produces fortitude – strength.

And fortitude (or endurance, or patience) produces character. All of the most beautiful characters come out of suffering. You can't have a beautiful character without some degree of suffering. Suffering produces character.

Character (gradually growing into true manhood and womanhood) makes us hope, for we see that the job is being done, and we know that God is at work and that we need not stand at last ashamed and disappointed before Jesus Christ when he comes.

All this, Paul says, is because God loves us – so, when suffering comes, it is not a mark of God's anger; it is a mark of his love. That is what Hebrews 12 says, doesn't it? Every son whom God receives, he chastens because he loves him – not because he hates him – but because he loves him {cf, Heb 12:6}.

Therefore, there is no necessity to cry out, and say, "Oh, what have I done? What have I done, that God should treat me like this?"

We think that God is interested in getting a certain amount of work done in this world, and we think that the work is the important thing to God, but it is not so. God doesn't need us to do the work that he wants done in the world. He can do that with a rock, or a stone, or a child, or a tree – it makes no difference. Did not Jesus say, when the Pharisees rebuked the crowds for praising him as he rode into the city of Jerusalem on the triumphal entry – did not he say to them, "Look, if these should hold their peace, the very stones would cry out," {cf, Luke 19:40}. That is, God can use anything to do his work. This isn't what he is interested in. He is interested in our lives – it is what the work does to us, it is what life is doing to us. It is our character that God is after, and this is why (in love) he introduces suffering, tribulation, trials, disappointments, and anguish into our lives. These are an indispensable part of the process.

Oh, I wish we could see that! These things come because he loves us, and because he has given the Holy Spirit to us to do this very work in our lives.

Let me share with you a brief word from Amy Carmichael; some of you know of her great work out in India. She was a woman who suffered greatly through her life, but accomplished tremendous things for God in southern India. She writes this under the title, *The Shadowed Way*:

He said, "I will forget the dying faces;
The empty places –
They shall be filled again.
O voices mourning deep within me, cease."
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in forgetting lieth peace.

He said, "I will crowd action upon action,
The strife of faction
Shall stir me and sustain;
Oh, tears that drown the fire of manhood, cease."
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in endeavor lieth peace.

He said, "I will withdraw me and be quiet,
Why meddle in life's riot?
Shut be my door to pain.
Desire, thou doest befool me, thou shalt cease."
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in aloofness lieth peace.

He said, "I will submit; I am defeated,
God hath depleted
My life of its rich gain.
Oh futile murmurings, why will ye not cease?"
But vain the word; vain, vain:
Not in submission lieth peace.

He said, "I will accept the breaking sorrow
Which God tomorrow
Will to his son explain."
Then did the turmoil deep with him cease.
Not vain the word, not vain,
For in acceptance lieth peace.

Do you know what that means?

It means that the mark of a Christian who has grown to maturity, the mark of a spiritual Christian, is that he accepts everything that happens to him, without exception, as coming from the hand of the Lord into his life, and rejoices in what it is doing to him. Paul says:

In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. {1 Th 5:18 KJV}

So, if you are a Christian, no circumstance of your life happens to you except that it comes by the choice of God. Now, it is true that he may use Satan, and Satan does attack us, but never without the permission of Christ. Once Peter came to the Lord, trying, in his blindness, to defend Christ, and Christ said to him, "Fear not, Peter. Satan has desired to have thee that he may test thee, that he may sift thee as wheat. But fear not, I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not," {cf, Luke 22:31-32 KJV}.

This is what God brings *us* to. This is the *mark* of the spiritual Christian.

"Well," you say, "I know that I can't do it. I have tried this. I can endure, but I can't rejoice. And, I get awfully upset by these pious Christians who go around with a smile screwed on their faces and pretend like they are enjoying suffering."

I don't blame you! I get upset at this too. But this isn't any pretense. When Paul speaks about rejoicing in suffering, he is speaking about genuinely rejoicing in suffering. You see, the problem is that perhaps you don't see, yet, what is behind this – what will make it possible – and this is what we need to see.

This answer is briefly stated for us in these next verses as **the two sources of our hope**: Listen to Verses 6-11:

While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man – though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation. {Rom 5:6-11 RSV}

You have probably heard a great many sermons based on Verses 6-8, and that is as far as

they go. But that is only half of Paul's argument. These verses wonderfully show us the love that God has for us while we were yet sinners – so preachers dwell upon this, and point out how wonderful it is that God gives us a hope of heaven even though we are sinners, because of *the death of Christ*. But, if this is where you stop, then you miss the whole point of Paul's argument because that is just the first part of it. He goes on to build upon that foundation of the death of Christ and to show us that, if we have learned to rejoice in the hope of heaven because of the death of Christ, it will be much more certain that we can rejoice in suffering because of *the risen life of Christ* at work within us. In other words, his death makes us fit for heaven, his life makes us fit for earth. Because of the death of Christ, we can rejoice in the future; because of the risen life of Christ given to us, we can rejoice in the present. That is the difference. His death saves us from the *judgment of God*, but his life saves us from the *wrath of God*.

Now, the wrath of God here is not hell, nor is it the great tribulation. The wrath of God is the silent destruction of the soul and body that inevitably occurs when men disobey God, and it goes on all through life. Men are experiencing the wrath of God today – that is what we read in the opening part of this book, didn't we? Notice Romans 1:18:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. {Rom 1:18 RSV}

And then he went on to show us how God has given men over to their bodily passions, their lusts, the foulness of their mind, the pride of their hearts, and how these things are constantly taking their deadly toll out of human life so that life is coming apart at the seams. Men are coming unglued, and destruction is gradually taking over in their heart and life and soul. That is the wrath of God – being experienced right now.

Look at Ephesians 5:3. Paul says,

But immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving. Be sure of this, that no immoral or impure man, or one who is

covetous (that is, an idolator) [who has another god besides God], has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. {Eph 5:3-5 RSV}

Now listen:

Let no one deceive you [you Christians] with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. {Eph 5:6 RSV}

Are these Christians? Yes, they are – Christians who are doing things that the non-Christians live in continually. When Christians do them, the wrath of God comes upon them as well as upon the unsaved: They begin to come apart; they begin to come unglued; life begins to fall apart for them, as well; and Christ has come to save us from this, you see.

Now, these words simply mean that Jesus Christ will not stop with justifying you – and getting you ready to enjoy heaven someday. That is part of it, but it also means that he has made full provision to save you

- from your meanness,
- from your stubbornness,
- from your selfishness,
- from your nasty, mean tongue,
- from your bitter rebellious spirit,
- from your dirty thought life,
- from your filthy habits, and
- from your ungracious way.

I include myself in this, of course. He has come for this, and he does it, not by hounding me and beating me with the Law, not by taking the Ten Commandments and using them as a whip to bring me into submission, but by the impartation of his life – his life lived again through me!

You see, when I believed in the death of Jesus Christ, I was “in Christ,” but when I began to appropriate his life, then it is “Christ in me.” Jesus summed up the whole of the Christian life in these words: “ye in me, and I in you.” {John 14:20 KJV}. That is the Christian life.

Now, this is what we are going to learn about more fully in Chapters 6, 7, & 8. And I tell you that my heart's cry is that all of us will lay hold of this great delivering truth, that we may learn how

to live through life taking it all at its very worst and rejoicing in those sufferings that come – because this is the mark of having appropriated the fullness of the life of Jesus Christ. And, when this day comes, as Paul points out in Verse 11, we will not only rejoice in the hope of the glory of God – we will not only go around singing, “When the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there,” but we will learn to rejoice in God himself – God will be the important one to us. We will learn:

- That he is more than any circumstance,
- That he is greater than all his gifts,
- That he is fully adequate for every situation in our life,
- That he is El Shaddai, the God who is sufficient.

Years ago I read a sermon by Dr. Arthur John Gossip, called *When Life Tumbles In, What Then?* He preached it the day after his beloved wife had suddenly died. He closed with these words:

I don’t think you need to be afraid of life. Our hearts are very frail, and there are places where the road is very steep and very lonely, but we have a wonderful God. And, as Paul puts it, “What can separate us from his love? Not death,” he writes immediately. No, not death, for standing in the roaring of the Jordan, cold with its dreadful chill and very conscious of its terror, of its rushing, I, too, like Hopeful in Pilgrim’s Progress, can call back to you who one day in your turn will have to cross it, “Be of good cheer, my brother, for I feel the bottom and it is sound.”

Jesus has come, you see, to *prepare us to live* – to take life as it is at its worst, at its hardest, and to find in him those hidden streams that make it possible to rejoice in

- all the difficulties,
- all the hardships,
- all the trials,
- all the defeats,
- all the adverse circumstances,
- all the crushing disappointments,
- all the heartaches,

because they are producing in us the very thing God is after, and making us what we want to be!

Some through the water, some through the flood,
Some through great sorrow, but God gives us song,
In the night season, and all the day long.

Prayer:

Our Father, we want to learn this truth. We pray that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened to lay hold of it and understand it – that you have provided a way by which the One who walked in the hills of Galilee 1900 years ago can live that same wonderful life again through us and make it possible for us to be victor over every circumstance, over every heartache. Lord, we thank you for this. Help us to understand this. Help us to lay hold of it as we go on into these chapters, that we may begin to live it, and experience the real glory and beauty of Christian living. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.

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