

February 25, 2024

Romans 5:1-11

THE JOURNEY TO LIFE ...

“Love Beyond Comprehension!”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It's not easy being a Christian when you take the Bible seriously. Take, for example, these words of Jesus: "I do not give to you [peace] as the world gives." Oh, he gives us peace, but it isn't the type of peace that you expect. It's the peace that Paul writes about in our epistle lesson for this morning: "... since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The peace that we receive by faith is to be forgiven for our sins - justified. We have been declared righteous because Jesus lived a perfect life for us and spilled his righteous blood on the cross to pay for each and everyone of our unrighteous sins. But this faith we have in Jesus has not yet given us peace from the mess down here. Luther remarks in a sermon from 1523:

The world calls it peace when suffering is ended and leaves a person. For example, when a man is poor he thinks that he has much bitterness because of poverty, and he ponders how to get rid of poverty, thinking that if he can get rid of that, his person will be able to live in peace and wealth. Again, if someone is about to die, she thinks, "If I could but throw off death, I should live and have peace." But that is not the peace that Christ gives. Rather he allows the evil that is laid on us to lie upon us still and to continue oppressing us, and he does not take it away, but he uses another device: *he changes us and removes us from the evil, and not the evil from us*. This is how it is done: You are held in the grip of suffering. He turns you away from it and gives you such courage that you would think you were sitting in a rose garden. Thus there is life in the midst of dying, and peace and joy in the midst of adversity, and that is why it is a peace that ... surpasses all understanding.

And this is further explained by Paul in our epistle lesson. Through the person and work of Jesus we have entered into the undeserved kindness of God. In that grace we stand and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Hope means to excitedly anticipate something. In this case, we excitedly anticipate the moment when we are in the shining face of God - knowing him as we are fully known. We look forward to the relief that comes when faith and hope are fulfilled in that wonderful day when there is only pure and uninterrupted love. So, what are we left with until then? Paul tells us ... we are left to rejoice in our sufferings.

What?! Our lot in life is to rejoice in sufferings?! And this is supposed to be a good thing?! What we really want is a Christianity that is more than simply anticipating that which is to come. If we are suffering, we want relief now. If we are in poverty, we want to be rich now. If we are sick, we want to be healed now. If we are sad, we want to be happy now. If life is rough, we want it to become smooth now. If we are about to die, we want more time now. And on and on it goes. Luther is right. This is the peace of the world. But Christ does not bring us that kind of peace. It really is the case that Jesus removes us from evil by the cross and empty tomb, but he doesn't immediately remove the evil from us. So, why? It's because we still have sin in our flesh that would destroy faith and remove our salvation.

Paul goes on to write: "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not

put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." If God were to remove the evil from us in this life, we would not endure to the end. Our new identity in baptism - our character in Christ - would collapse. If everything in this mess of a world became peaceful in our lives, as the unbelieving world desires peace, then hope in what is coming would be erased by worldly contentment. Yes. Because we are simultaneously saints and sinners, God must work with us in such a way that we remain sick of the down here so that we are sick for his glorious presence. I hope you don't mind another quote from Luther, this time from a sermon in 1527:

When God wants to strengthen our faith, he first weakens it by feigning [pretending] to break faith with us. God thrusts us into many tribulations and makes us so weary that we are driven to despair, and yet God gives us strength to be still and persevere. Such quietness is endurance, and endurance produces character, so that when God returns to us and lets his sun rise and shine again, and when the storm is over, we open our eyes in amazement and say, "The Lord be praised that I have been delivered from evil. God dwells here. I did not think that all would end so well."

Like I said, "It's not easy being a Christian when you take the Bible seriously." But this is our *journey to life*. We all have a journey that is especially made for us so that, when all is said and done, we will be with the Lord Jesus forever. Thus, *the journey to life* really does take us to **Love Beyond Comprehension!** Yes. These things we have been talking about so far are designed to magnify the cross and empty tomb of Jesus Christ our Lord. First, we see that he is loving us by removing us from evil. Second, he loves us when he does not remove the evil from us, but allows it to be a thorn in our flesh. So, in both Jesus removing us from evil and not removing the evil from us, we are brought to the next thought of the apostle in our epistle lesson:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die - but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been 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. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

There is much to be said in these words. Overall, we are once again brought to **Love Beyond Comprehension!** God works in our lives in ways that are mysterious and strange because of the strangeness of our situation. We are simultaneously saints and sinners. But the first point is this: we are continually driven to the good news of our salvation in Jesus Christ as we *journey* to everlasting life. Paul would have us to see this in every stage of our journey.

Before we were even Christian, we were ungodly and hostile. Yet, while we were still sinners, God so loved us and sent his Son into the flesh to die for us. **Love Beyond Comprehension!** Having been

declared righteous by the shedding of his righteous blood, we are being saved from the wrath of God that is being revealed. What is amazing is that for us who have come to faith, this wrath of God must even become a servant to our *journey* to everlasting life! Even the wrath of God becomes a driving to the gift of Jesus. This truth is especially seen in the words of Paul that I hope you don't mind me repeating: "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."

So, what's the point? Well, if we were reconciled to God when we were ungodly and hostile, then even now, all the more, even when we are suffering while living in this reconciliation, our life will be saved. In other words, this **Love Beyond Comprehension** will see us through the *journey* and to the destination of our *journey* - the salvation of our souls and to see the face of Jesus! One more time, the words of Luther, his sermon from 1527:

Within a day or two, within a week or a year, or even within the next hour, sin brings another cross to us: the loss of honor or possessions, bodily injury, or some mishap that brings such trouble. Then it all begins again and the storm breaks out once more. But now we glory in our afflictions because we remember that on the former occasion God was gracious to us, and we know that it is God's good will to chastise us that we may have reason to run to him and to cry, "He who has helped me so often will help me now." That very longing in your heart (which makes you cry, "Oh, that I were free! Oh, that God would come! Oh, that I might receive help!") is hope, which does not put to shame, for God must help such a person. In this way God hides under death, heaven under hell, wisdom under folly, and grace under sin.

It really is amazing when you think about *The Journey to Life ... Love Beyond Comprehension!* May God not only help us to understand it the best we can, but to embrace it with rejoicing!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott