

OPENING SENTENCE:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

PRAYER OF ADORATION:

You are the Peace of all things calm; you are the place to hide from harm. You are the light that shines in dark, you are the hearts eternal spark. You are the door that's open wide, you are the guest who waits inside. You are the stranger at the door, you are the calling of the poor. You are my Lord and with me still, you are my love, keep me from ill. You are the light, the truth, the way, you are my Savior this very day. AMEN.

Sermon: Final Proof of Love

Scripture: Romans 5:1-8

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast 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 that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Paul begins with the premise that we are justified by faith. He has argued that point and now moves forward to what that means for us. The result is that we have Peace with God. This justification by faith opens the way to God's salvation, the new relationship with God. Those who believe have been brought into a right relationship with God, have fellowship with, and are in unity and harmony with the God of all creation. Now there is no more hostility toward God in one's spirit or in one's actions. Having peace with God is something Paul and the other New Testament writers emphasize. Paul seeks it for his readers and hearers in his letter greetings ("Grace and Peace to you") and in what he desires and prays for his hearers. For example, "May the God of Hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). Peace in God opens up the possibility of rest in the God of our salvation.

Here is one of Paul's great lyrical passages in which he almost sings the intimate joy of his confidence in God. Trusting faith has done, what the labor to produce the works of the law could never do: it has given us peace with God. Before Jesus came, no one could ever be really close to God. Some, indeed, have seen him not as the supreme good but as the supreme evil. Some have seen him as a complete stranger, the utterly untouchable. In one H.G. Wells' book, there is the story of a businessman whose mind was so tense and strained that he was in serious danger of a complete nervous and mental breakdown. His doctor told him that the only thing that could save him was to find the peace that fellowship with God can give. "What!" he said, to think of that, up there, having a fellowship with me! I would as soon think of cooling my throat with the Milky Way or shaking hands with the stars!" God to him, was the completely unfindable.

It is only when we realize that God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ that there comes into life that closeness to him, that new relationship, which Paul calls "Justification".

Through Jesus, says Paul, we have an introduction to this grace in which we stand. The word he uses for introduction is *prosagoge*. It is a word which conjures up two great images. It is normally used for introducing or ushering someone into the presence of royalty; and it is a word for the approach of a worshipper to God. It is as if Paul was saying, “Jesus ushers us into the very presence of God. He opens the door for us to the presence of the King of Kings; and when that door opened what we found was grace; not condemnation, not judgement, not vengeance, but sheer, undeserved, incredible kindness of God. In late Greek, it is a word for the place where ships come in, a harbor or a haven. If we take it in that sense, it means that as long as we tried to depend on our own efforts we were tempest-tossed, like sailors striving with a sea which threatened to overwhelm them completely, but, now that we have heard the word of Christ, we have reached at last the haven of God’s grace, and we know the calm of depending not on what we can do for ourselves but on what God has done for us. Because of Jesus, we have entry to the presence of the King of Kings and entry to the haven of God’s grace.

No sooner has Paul said this than the other side of the matter strikes him. All this is true, and it is glory, but the fact remains that, in this life, Christians are up against it. It is hard to be a Christian in Rome. Remembering that, Paul produces a great climax. “Trouble”, he said, “produces fortitude”. The word he uses here for Trouble is *thlipsis*, which literally means pressure. All kinds of things may press in upon a Christian – want and difficult circumstances, sorrow, persecution, unpopularity and loneliness. All that pressure, says Paul, produces fortitude. The word he uses here for fortitude is *hupomone*, which means more than endurance. It means the spirit which can overcome the world, it means the spirit that does not passively endure but which actively overcomes the trials and tribulations of life.

When Beethoven was threatened with deafness, that most terrible of troubles for a musician, he said: “I will take my life by the throat.” That is *hupomone*. When Sir Walter Scott was involved in ruin because of the bankruptcy of his publishers, he said: “No man will say Poor Fellow! To me, my own right hand will pay the debt.” That is *hupomone*. When the poet W.E. Henley was lying in Edinburgh Infirmary with one leg amputated, and the prospect that he would lose the other leg as well, he wrote the poem “Invictus”: Out of the night that covers me, Black as the Pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever God may be, for my unconquerable soul. That is *hupomone*. *Hupomone* is not the spirit which lies down and lets the floods go over it; it is the spirit which meets things head on and overcomes them.

Fortitude, Paul goes on, produces character. The word used here is *Dokime*. *Dokime* is used of metal which has been passed through the fire so that everything base or bad, has been purged out of it. It is used of coinage as we use the word sterling. When afflictions is met with fortitude, out of the battle we emerge stronger, purer, better and nearer to God.

“Character”, Paul goes on, produces hope. “Two people can meet the same situation. It can drive one of them to despair, and it can spur the other to triumphant action. To the one, it can be the end of hope; to the other, it can be a challenge to greatness. I do not like crises, but I like the opportunities which they supply. The difference corresponds to the difference between individuals.

If we let ourselves become weak and flabby, if we allow circumstances to beat us, if we allow ourselves to whine and grovel under affliction, we make ourselves the kind of people who, when the challenge of the crisis comes, cannot do anything but despair. If, on the other hand, we have insisted on meeting life with our heads held high, if we have always faced and, by facing, conquer things; then, when the challenge comes, we meet it with eyes alight with hope. The character that has endured the test always emerges in hope.

Then Paul makes one last great statement; “The Christian hope never proves an illusion, for it is founded on the love of God. When our hope is in God, it cannot turn to dust and ashes. When our hope is in God, it cannot be disappointed. When our hope is in love of God, it can never be an illusion, for God loves us with an everlasting love backed by an everlasting power.

The fact that Jesus Christ died for us is the final proof of God's love. It would be difficult enough to get someone to die for a just person; it might be possible to persuade someone to die for some great and good principle; any one of us might have a greater love that would make us lay down our life for a friend. But the wonder of Jesus Christ is that he died for us when we are sinners and in a state of hostility to God. Love can go no further than that.

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY:

Rita Snowden relates an incident from the life of T.E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia. In 1915, he was journeying across the desert with some Arabs. Things were desperate. Food was almost gone, and water was at its last drop. Their hoods were over their heads to shelter them from the wind, which was like a flame and full of the stinging sand of the sandstorm. Suddenly, someone said: "Where is Jasmin? Another said: Who is Jasmin? A third answered: "That yellow- faced man from Maan. He killed a Turkish tax-collector and fled to the desert. The first said, look, Jasmin's camel has no rider. His rifle is strapped to the saddle, but Jasmin is not there.

A second said: "Someone has shot him on the march. A third said "He is not strong in the head, perhaps he is lost in a mirage; he is not strong in the body, perhaps he has fainted and fallen off his camel. Then the first said: "What does it matter? Jasmin was not worth anything." And the Arabs hunched themselves up on their camels and rode on. But Lawrence turned and rode back the way he had come. Alone, in blazing heat, at the risk of his life, he went back. After an hour and a half ride, he saw something against the sand. It was Jasmin, blind and mad with heat and thirst, being murdered by the desert. Lawrence lifted him up on his camel, gave him some of the last drops of precious water, and slowly plodded back to his company. When he came up to them, the Arabs looked in amazement. Here is Jasmin, they said, Jasmin, not worth anything, saved at his own risk by Lawrence, our Lord. That is a parable. It was not good people Christ died to save but sinners, not God's friends, but those who were hostile to him.

Then Paul goes further. Through Jesus, our status with God was changed. Sinners though we were, we were put into a right relationship with God. But that is not enough.

Not only our status must be changed but also our state. The saved sinner can not go on being a sinner but must become good. Christ death changed our status; his risen life changes our state. He is not dead but alive; he is with us always to help us and guide us, to fill us with his strengthen order to overcome temptation, to clothe our lives with something of his radiance. Jesus begins by putting sinners into a right relationship with God even when they are still sinners; he goes on, by his grace, to enable them to quit their sin and become good. There are technical names for these things. The change of our status is justification; that is where the whole saving process begins. The change of our state is sanctification; that is where the saving process goes on, and never ends, until we see him face to face and are like him.

There is one thing to note here of quite extraordinary importance. Paul is quite clear that the whole saving process, the coming of Christ and the death of Christ, is the "Proof" of God's love. Sometimes it is stated as if on the one side there was a gentle and loving Christ, and on the other side an angry and vengeful God.

And as if Christ had done something which changed God's attitude to men and women. Nothing could be further from the truth. The whole matter springs from the love of God. Jesus did not come to change God's attitude; he came to show what it is and always was. He came to prove beyond question that God is love.

CLOSING PRAYER: O God, your son, Jesus, prayed for his disciples, which is us, and sent them into the world to proclaim the coming of your kingdom. By your Holy Spirit, hold the church in unity, and keep it faithful to your word, so that, breaking bread together, we may be one with Christ in faith and love and service, now and forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

This peace, this new relationship with God, has been brought through Jesus Christ, who is understood to be our Lord. Jesus gives us access, through our faith, to this grace, this unearned, unmerited gift of God, in which we now stand, in which we now have our solid footing and confidence. GO IN PEACE!