

REJOICING IN HOPE

by Ray C. Stedman

Paul's letter to the Romans is a description of the power of God let loose among the ruin of men. It is about the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ. God has found a way, through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, to justify the ungodly. Now, that includes us all, because we are all ungodly. Romans teaches us that as God sees and understands our hearts, he understands all that is there. As a result, no one is able to stand upon his own righteousness in the presence of God. As Paul has told us, "There is none righteous, no, not one," {Rom 3:10b KJV}. There is no sweet little old lady, or strong virile man, or boy, or girl, who has lived a clean, moral life and who is able to stand in the presence of the demands of the Law and the love of God. Therefore, we are ungodly to start with.

If you understand that you are ungodly to start with, then you can be justified -- because we have a God who has found a way to justify the ungodly. As we have seen, to be justified means to be given the gift of righteousness, the gift of loving acceptance before God. That is where our lives start. If we are ungodly, we qualify. As long as we remain self-righteous, we don't have a chance. I hope we are facing facts as they really are in our lives.

In Chapter 5 of Romans, the Apostle Paul is tracing the results of having been justified by faith. We can see this from the opening word of the chapter: "Therefore ..." Obviously, as a result of what he already has said, Paul is coming to certain conclusions:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into his grace in which we stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. {Rom 5:1-2 NIV}

That little word "rejoice" is the key to this whole fifth chapter. You will find it again in the very next verse. In these first two verses Paul says there are three results when we have really believed in Jesus Christ for our justification, and we rejoice in these results. In Verse 3 he says, "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, ..." Have you gotten that far yet? That is a higher stage of Christian growth and development. Then, in Verse 11, we find that the apostle, with his very logical mind, says, "Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God ..." This is the third level of Christian growth.

There is the outline of the whole chapter: learning to rejoice at these various stages.

As a Christian, if you really understand your theology, you will be rejoicing, even in the midst of suffering. As I look around at Christians, sometimes I wonder if they ever will grasp this idea. Some of them look like they have been marinated in embalming fluid. They never seem to rejoice. But Christian teaching and doctrine is designed to produce a spirit that can't help but rejoice. It is not something artificial -- screwing on a smile and pretending that you are happy when you are not. When you really understand Christianity, it will produce a rejoicing spirit. (If you're a glum-bum, just study the fifth chapter of Romans and it will turn you into a glad-lad!)

In subsequent studies, we will look at this three-fold division of Chapter 5:

1. First, we learn to rejoice in our spiritual position;
2. Then, to rejoice in our present troubles; and
3. Finally, we come to the place where we rejoice in God himself, our powerful Friend.

This morning we will look at these first two verses only.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through

our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. {Rom 5:1-2 NIV}

When you find a word in Scripture that is repeated three or four times, it is reasonable to conclude that it represents what the passage is all about. The first thing that you learn as a Christian is that you are justified by faith. To help us understand what that actually means, the apostle brought in the example of Abraham. Way back before the Law was given, before the ritual of circumcision, or before anything that we usually associate with religion came into operation, Abraham was justified by faith. Those two terms, "justified" and "faith," are explained to us and demonstrated for us in the person of Abraham. "He was justified" means that he was declared to be the friend of God. He was acceptable to God, he was loved by God. He was God's friend. What we need to understand is that Abraham didn't earn that. He was given that right at the beginning of his relationship with God, when he believed God. And that is what faith means. When Abraham believed that God could and would do what he had promised, Abraham was declared the friend of God and he entered into that close relationship with God that characterized his life. Now that is what it means to be justified by faith, to be given as a gift, this closeness, this nearness, this dearness to God. You receive this with no merit on your part, but by faith alone -- by believing the promise of God, according to the work of his Son. That is justification.

Then, Paul says, there are three ways by which you can test whether you really do believe that and have been justified by faith:

Since we have been justified by faith, the first result is that we have peace with God. As you think about your life and your relationship with God, if you really have believed that God justifies the ungodly, you will have peace with God. You are a Christian. That means you are in the family, you belong to the family of God. The war is over. All the conflict between you; and God is ended; you are at peace with him.

I was in Honolulu when World War II ended. We had gone through the excitement and joy of VE Day some months before, when the war had ended in Europe, but that was a long way from the South Pacific. Though we were glad that the fighting in Europe had ended, we still had a war to fight. Out in the South Pacific there were many bloody battles yet to come. But I will never forget the day it was announced that peace with Japan had been signed in Tokyo Bay. All over the world, World War II was at an end. Some of you here remember that. In Honolulu the people simply poured out into the streets. All over the city, lights that hadn't burned in years went on. There was dancing and shouting and music and laughter, with thousands of people jamming the beaches and streets of the city, rejoicing because they were at peace.

That is something of what happens in the heart when we understand that we have been justified by faith. The war is over, we are at peace with God. All conflict has ceased. I think there are at least four things that are true immediately when you are at peace with God:

The first one is, you lose your fear of God. I think there is something in all of us that instinctively fears God. I remember how awesome the person of God seemed to me as a boy. My guilty conscience troubled me when I thought of God. I thought God as a heavenly policeman, always watching me, a stern and forbidding judge, ready to correct me and straighten me out. I will never forget the joy that came into my heart when I realized at God was no longer my judge -- he was my Father. When you have been justified by faith, you no longer fear God as a Judge because, according to this book and the promises of Scripture, it is no longer necessary that God function as a judge in relationship to you. He is now a loving, tenderhearted, compassionate father. Now, as a father, he disciplines. That is what love does. But God is no longer a judge. That beautiful picture our Lord gave us in the story of the prodigal son -- is the picture of God as we learn to see him. Having been justified by faith, we immediately lose our fear of God.

Second, we lose our fear of death. If we have been justified by faith, we no longer are afraid to die. As a boy, I lived for a while in the Red River Valley of North Dakota in a little Scottish settlement named after Ayr, Scotland: Ayr, North Dakota. It was a Presbyterian settlement and held to the old custom of ringing the bell of the church when someone died. I can remember yet, lying in my bed, listening to the tolling of the bell, knowing that someone had died, and feeling the cold clutch of fear on my own heart as I faced the possibility of my own death. Someday I would die. It could even happen while I was a boy. I knew it could, because a friend of mine had died. I knew it could happen to me, and I felt the fear of death.

Last week Hal Lindsey shared with us that certain psychologists and psychiatrists are now admitting that the basic fear behind all other human fears is the fear of death. The conflict with which we constantly live is this shadow of the end that hangs over us all, this awareness that someday this life is going to come to a close for us. Hebrews 2:15 speaks of that. It says, Jesus came "... that he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage," {cf, Heb 2:14b-15 KJV}. So when you come to understand that you've been justified, you've been given a righteous acceptance by a loving father, you immediately lose that fear of death. You are not afraid of what lies beyond. You know it is not judgment, but glory.

Third, when you have peace with God, you have the answer to the attacks of doubt and fear that the devil is able to bring into your life. I think this is one of the things that troubles many young Christians. They start out their Christian life with a sense of rejoicing and an experience of peace. But after a while, there will come a time when all that they have been believing and resting on and rejoicing in seems to turn dull and cold and unbelievable. They don't know what has happened. They think they have just been kidding themselves about Christianity, and now they have awakened to the cold reality of life. They do not understand that the Scriptures tell us that this is the power of the devil. Through his angels, he has access to us through our thoughts. He can insert these troubling doubts and fears into our minds without our being aware of it -- even against our will, at times.

I know there are some who think that after you've been a Christian awhile you should reach a point when you never again have any doubts. But you never do. I know some people think that pastors never have any doubts about their salvation or their relationship with God. I can tell you, that's not true.

When I first came here to Palo Alto, there was a dear old Presbyterian pastor associated with the work of this church when we met in the Community Center. Some of you here will remember him. His name was Dr. Francis Russell. He was 96 years old when he died, but he was a dear, alert, godly man, who was a tremendous help to me as a young pastor here. Just a couple of years before Dr. Russell died, I got a call from him, asking me to come see him. I found him in deep distress over his personal salvation. He told me, "I just feel like God is angry with me. If I were summoned into his presence now, there is nothing I could offer to him." I had to help that dear, godly old man, and remind him again that he had been justified by faith in the work of Christ. I reminded him that his salvation had nothing to do with what he was like, but with Jesus, and what he had done. This is how you can deal with these doubts and fears if you have believed you have been justified by faith.

If you do not have that sense of peace, the way to get it back is not by working on your feelings but by reviewing your justification. Go over the facts again, remind yourself of what God has declared, and what kind of a God he is -- Abraham's God, who can raise the dead to life and call into existence things that do not exist. He is able to perform what he has promised. Then your faith is restored and you can handle these doubts and fears.

Fourth, if you have peace with God, you have an answer to the accusation of your own conscience when you sin. I know that many young Christians, in that glory and first flush of love in their relationship with the Lord, really think that they are not going to sin again. Sin seems to them an impossible thing. Their hearts are so caught up with the love that God has shown to them that they cannot imagine themselves going back and doing some of the things they once did. But sooner or later they will be back doing some of those things. Old habits will reassert themselves, old ways of thinking will return. Perhaps they will not go back to all that they did formerly, but they will go back to some. They will sin again. Or it may be that after years of Christian life and service, they will fall into some terrible thing they thought they never would or could do again.

What do you say to your accusing conscience that says to you then, "Are you a Christian? Could you possibly be a Christian and act like this?" That is where justification by faith comes in. You remind yourself at that time: "My standing and my acceptance by God does not depend upon me. Even my sin doesn't cancel it out. The whole essence of this truth is that God has found a way to put aside my sin, by faith in the work of his beloved Son on my behalf." That is why you read, at the close of Chapter 4, "He was delivered over to death for our sin, and was raised to life for our justification," {Rom 4:25 NIV}.

These are the ways you can test whether you really have believed it:

- Do you have peace with God?
- Are you freed from the fear of God and the fear of death? And
- Do you have an answer to the doubts and fears and attacks that come from the enemy, those "fiery darts of the wicked one" {cf, Eph 6:16 KJV} that Paul speaks of in Ephesians 6?
- Do you have an answer to the accusations of your own guilty conscience when you fall, or sin?

Here is where the answer lies: You have been justified by faith.

Notice that Paul is careful to remind us again that our justification is through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is never through ourselves. We have no merit before God ourselves. We never deserve this, we never earn this, and no matter how long we have served God as a Christian, and have lived a clean and moral life, we can only stand on the ground of the work of the Lord Jesus on our behalf. That is why Paul insists on saying this again and again. He knows our prideful flesh. He knows that after we have cleaned up some of the bad areas of our life we will begin to take credit for it and think that we have deserved something from God. So he faithfully reminds us that we are not deserving in this matter at all. The first mark of our justification by faith, then, is that we have peace with God.

The second mark is found in verse 2:

... through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand. {Rom 5:2a NIV}

We have access to continued grace, to enable us to stand in the midst of pressures and problems and trials and difficulties. This is a constant supply, because we have instant access to God himself, the God of all grace. That is the second way you know you are justified by faith -- you see that you have this instant access to the grace of God -- to the throne of grace, as the writer of Hebrews puts it.

There is a beautiful picture in the book of Esther that illustrates this. Remember Esther, that lovely Jewish maiden, a captive in the land of Persia? The king, seeking a bride, found her and made her his queen. After Esther ascended to the throne as queen, a plot was hatched against the Jews. The king, unwittingly, signed a decree that meant death for all Jews in the land of Persia. Esther's godly uncle, Mordecai, said it would be necessary for her to go to the king and tell him what he had unwittingly done. Esther knew that was a dangerous thing, because it was the law of the Medes and Persians that no one could come before the king without first being summoned by him. It meant death for anyone to dare come before the king in that manner. There were no exceptions -- even for a queen -- for this was the law of the Medes and the Persians and could not be changed. Unless the king extended his golden scepter to that person, he must die. Yet Esther knew that she had to dare to take her life in her hands and go before the king.

The story tells us that she fasted for three days and three nights before she went. I am sure that was to prepare her heart and her courage. It doesn't say what else she did during that time, when she was getting ready to come before the king. With a wife, four daughters, and a mother-in-law in my home, I've observed women getting themselves ready for some years now. I'm sure that what Esther was doing was fixing her hair. It probably took three days and three nights to get ready! Then we are told that she dressed herself in robes of beauty and glory. When she was all ready, she stepped into the audience hall of the king, appearing all alone before him. The king was so smitten with her beauty that his heart went out to her. He stretched forth his scepter and accepted her. She had access to the king.

This is a picture of what Paul is telling us. Who would dare stand before the God of all the earth, the God of majesty and power and greatness and glory, unless he has been given access to the King. The wonder of this promise is that, by being justified by faith, we have been given access into his presence. Esther received from the king's hand all that she needed to handle this problem which was a threat to her life. That is what this portrays for us. Dressed in robes of beauty and glory that do not belong to us -- for they are the garments of Jesus -- we have access to the King, to receive from him all that we need to handle any threat that has come

into our lives. We have continual acceptance before him.

One phenomenon of our day that has always astonished me is the persistent popularity of the program "Hogan's Heroes." My daughter is a fan of "Hogan's Heroes," and every night I can hear the story of these Americans in a concentration camp in Germany during World War II and how they always confound the German commandant by the schemes they come up with. To the continual dismay of Colonel Klink, they keep coming up with all kinds of unique weapons and various other things. They have an unseen, undiscovered link with Allied Headquarters, and the Underground supplies them with things they could never get otherwise. I am sure the popularity of that program is due to the fact that we all love to think that there are hidden resources supplying the underdogs and keeping them going in the face of all kinds of difficulties. Surely that is exactly what Paul is talking about here.

We do not get our strength from our circumstances; we get it from our continual access to the power and presence of God in our lives in the midst of danger or difficulty, trouble or pressure. Hebrews 10:19, 22 puts it this way:

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, {Heb 10:19, 10:22a NIV}

That means we have a supply, a resource, given to us in the hour of need or danger.

Now look at the third thing that comes as a result of being justified by faith:

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. {Rom 5:2b NIV}

That means that as we look at life ahead, even though life comes to an end (and it will) that is not the end of the story. There is a confident anticipation that something is beyond. We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

Hope is not a word that means a mere possibility, a good chance. Hope, as it is used in the Scriptures in this way, is speaking of a ringing certainty, based upon the words of Jesus himself. "Because I live, you shall live also" {cf, John 14:19}. "If I go to my Father, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, you may be also," {cf, John 14:3}. That is the certain hope of everyone who has been justified by faith. If you really have been justified by faith, you know that you have the promise of God that he will do this, and that he is able to do what he has promised.

That promise is given to us regardless of what our conditions here on earth may be. It may be tough here. For some people it is very tough. There are some Christians today who have nothing of the freedom and the joy of relationships that you and I experience together. They are under persecution, they are in danger, they wake up every morning with the dreary expectation that they are going to have to live under the watchful eye of some hostile person. Life may be cold and hard, it may be filled with pain and sorrow, but the minimum promise to all who are justified by faith is that there is a glory beyond death that is absolutely certain.

I have a friend who lives in the Midwest. He told me one day of an experience he had. He lives in the country, and one stormy morning, in the dead of winter, he looked out his window and saw the mailman drive up and leave something in his mailbox. Wanting to see what it was, he dressed warmly and went out into the bitter cold, with the snow swirling about him, and walked about a quarter of a mile down the lane to where the mailboxes were located. He opened the mailbox and, to his disappointment, all that was there was a seed catalog. But he opened it up and began to thumb through it. You know, there is nothing like a seed catalog to capture the beauty and brilliance of the flowers and vegetables. As he stood there in the snow, suddenly he felt as though spring had come. He could taste the crunch of a cucumber and smell the fragrance of those red roses and feel the juice of a red-ripe tomato running down his chin. It seemed as though winter faded away for the moment and he was caught up into the beauty of spring and summer.

I think that is something of the experience that we get at times when we read the Scriptures. Here, in the midst of "the winter of our discontent," something of the glory that is waiting beyond, the hope of the glory of God,

breaks through.

I will never forget reading, as a young Christian, the words of Samuel Rutherford, that dear old seventeenth century Scottish Covenanter. At a time when the English Church was persecuting the believers in Scotland, he was a dear and godly man who had come to know and love the Lord Jesus and to understand these great truths in the Scriptures about the inner strengthening that can come through faith. As he was lying on his deathbed, he received a summons from the king of England to come to London and appear on trial for his life. He knew he was dying. Samuel Rutherford sent back by the messenger of the king this word: "Go and tell your master I have a summons from a Higher Court; and ere this message reaches him, I'll be where few kings and great folks ever come." That was the spirit of the man. He wrote many letters that reflect the glory of his faith and expectations. Anne Cousin has gathered them up for us. Some of them are arranged as hymns. One, which was D. L. Moody's favorite hymn, and mine also, is one we have sung many times.

The sands of time are sinking,
The dawn of heaven breaks,
The summer morn I've sighed for,
The fair sweet morn awakes.
Dark, dark hath been the midnight,
But dayspring is at hand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Emmanuel's land.

O! Christ He is the Fountain,
The deep, sweet well of love!
The streams on earth I've tasted,
More deep I'll drink above;
There to an ocean fullness
His mercy doth expand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Emmanuel's land.

With mercy and with judgment,
My web of time He wove,
And eye the dews of sorrow,
Were lustered by His love.
I'll bless the hand that guided,
I'll bless the heart that planned,
When throned where glory dwelleth,
In Emmanuel's land.

The bride eyes not her garment,
But her dear Bridegroom's face:
I will not gaze at glory,
But on my King of grace;
Not at the crown he giveth,
But on His pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory
Of Emmanuel's land.

That is the first stage of the Christian life -- just the beginning. That is what you get, without fail, when you believe that you are justified by faith; but it is just the start. Then we go on to handle life and its suffering, and, finally, we end up rejoicing in God. But everyone who has put faith in what Jesus Christ has done on his behalf -- not in what he himself has done -- has come to a place of complete assurance, continual acceptance, and confident anticipation. When you have those, you know you have been justified by faith.

Prayer

We thank you, Father, for these riches that are given to us so freely in Jesus. We don't deserve them -- we never can, and never will, Lord, but we have them because we have

believed your great and mighty promise. How we thank you for it. What courage and strength this imparts to our feeble and faltering hearts, as we face the problems of our life with these great certainties underlying us. We have peace with God, we have been reconciled. We have acceptance in your presence and continual access to your help. We have been propitiated, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. How we thank you for that anticipation. We pray that we will be able to walk in these terms and rest upon them all through this day and through this week, and in every relationship that confronts us. In the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

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