

New Life: The Way Hope Works

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[0 : 00] Father, we thank you. We thank you that while weeping may last for a time, you bring joy in the morning.

We thank you that your anger lasts such a short time in comparison with the long endurance of your favor. And we ask that tonight you would, by your spirit, grant us such a clear vision of your love and of your mercy and of your grace, that we would be sustained by joy.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Hi, everybody.

Well done. Please open your Bibles, your pew Bibles, or keep them open to page 942, Romans chapter 5, the first 11 verses.

We'll be walking through that this evening. When you first come to Christianity, when you're new to the faith or when, maybe you've been a Christian for a long time, but when you come back to a passage of Scripture that has been, and you kind of look at it with fresh perspective, one of the things you realize is that Christianity is full of really strange things.

[1 : 41] Just very odd ideas. Just very odd ideas are found in the Bible and in Christianity generally. A whole bunch of ideas that you would not have come up with on your own, or at least I wouldn't have, and many of them are pretty counterintuitive.

And one of the odd concepts in Christianity is how Christians relate to suffering. You know, in the ancient world, take like ancient Greek religion, ancient Greek mythology, things like that.

If you suffer, it's usually because the gods are mad at you. It's usually either punishment or because the gods are, it's punishment for something you've done or it's because they're just vindictive up there.

If you've ever read Homer's Odyssey, the whole, almost the entire narrative is based on Odysseus killing Poseidon's son or injuring him.

I forgot which. But it really angers Poseidon, who is the god of the sea. And so for the rest of the story, Poseidon is, you know, making Odysseus' ship wreck and things like that and causing suffering for him.

[3 : 01] And the reason for it is the god is in a bad mood. And he's punishing and Odysseus is suffering because he's made the gods angry.

But all that changes when you get to Christianity. When Christianity shows up on the scene in world history, it presents just a completely different view of suffering.

In Christianity, for the first time ever, suffering actually becomes a means of blessing. Do you realize that? It's a very strange idea.

You realize that Christianity, the whole basis of Christianity is based on the premise that God's best blessing for the world came through the suffering of his son.

It's a very strange thing. It's a very strange idea. And after Jesus came, died, rose again, his disciples went out and they related to suffering in a completely strange manner.

[4 : 04] They were famous for rejoicing in the midst of suffering. The Roman persecutions, they would persecute Christians. And one of the reasons that it was so frustrating to persecute Christians is that the Christians rejoiced in the midst of it.

And you see that in our passage. Look at chapter 5, verse 3. Paul says a very strange thing. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings.

Knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Now my question is how in the world can Paul say that?

More than that, more than that, we rejoice in suffering. Now that's the question I want us to get to by the end of our time tonight.

But in order for us to understand how it is we can rejoice in the midst of suffering, we need to do something else first. We need to take care of some other business. We need to ask the question, what is God's agenda for our lives?

[5 : 09] What does God really want for you? What does God really want for me? And when we get clear on that topic, then we'll pick back up the suffering question, and we'll be able to look at it a little bit more clearly.

Okay, so first of all, the question is, what's God's agenda for our life? We'll start there, and then we'll pick up the suffering question in a little bit. According to Romans chapter 5, God wants us to enjoy Him through three gifts.

God's agenda for our life is that we would rejoice in God through three gifts that He gives us in this passage. The first thing He gives us is peace.

The second thing He gives us is love. And the third thing He gives us is glory. I want to look at all three of them real quickly. First of all, God grants us peace and reconciliation.

We've been walking through Romans here at St. John's for the last several months. And this theme of peace and reconciliation really has been the big theme that we've been covering again and again and again.

[6 : 14] You remember Romans chapter 1? Romans chapter 1 tells us that the deep problem facing humanity, the deep problem underneath all the rest of our problems, is that there's been a relational breach between us and God.

What we find out in Romans chapter 1 is that God designed us to find all our greatest fulfillment in knowing Him and enjoying Him. But all of us humans have rejected that, and instead we have a consistent tendency to live for ourselves.

And the problem with that is that our selfishness inevitably leads us to wickedness in one form or another. And because God is perfectly good, He cannot tolerate our ongoing selfishness, and so it creates a breach between us and God, and it causes us to be His enemies.

So we find that out in Romans chapter 1. Then we get to Romans chapter 2, and the thing gets worse. The whole problem gets worse. And the reason it gets worse is because we find out that all our best efforts at morality, all our best efforts at religion, can't solve the problem.

We are unable to fix our relationship with God. And so what we find out is that all our best attempts at religion, at behavior management, at religion, the best thing it does is it causes us to be hypocrites, which doesn't help the situation at all.

[7 : 45] And then halfway through Romans chapter 3, the good news breaks in, and it's a good news about peace. What we find out halfway through Romans chapter 3 is that we can't fix our relationship with God, but that God has stepped towards us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

And through the death of Jesus, God has purchased our pardon, purchased reconciliation, purchased peace. And so what we find out is that through the cross of Christ, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the conflict behind all the other conflict in this world, the deepest and most problematic conflict in the universe, the conflict between us and God, has been resolved.

And so we can now come before God and enjoy peace. And it's our peace with God that is the linchpin that opens up the possibility of peace in every other way in every other relationship.

Look at Romans chapter 5, verse 1. Paul kind of sums up the first bit of Romans by saying, therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

But that's not the whole story. Christianity, friends, is not just about forgiveness of sin. Christianity is not just about pardon.

[9 : 17] It's essential. Christianity cannot begin without justification, without pardon, without peace with God. But the gospel is also about enjoying and savoring the love of God.

Look at verse 5. Paul writes, and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

The word pour, you have to imagine a big pitcher that's too large and carries too much for the vessel. Like a big giant pitcher in a little tiny cup.

And the word pour is this generous pouring to the point of overflow. It just overflows. Pouring out love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Aaron mentioned that this week was Epiphany.

It was on Thursday. And Epiphany in the West celebrates the coming of the Magi to baby Jesus and to the revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles.

[10 : 27] In the Eastern Church, it emphasizes the baptism of Jesus. And do you remember the baptism of Jesus? Do you remember what happened there? Jesus goes to John the Baptist.

He's baptized by John in the Jordan River. He goes under the water. And then he comes up out of the water. And the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove and the Father speaks.

Do you remember what the Father says? This is my Son and I am delighted with Him. Romans teaches us that that same sort of thing happens to every believer.

When you become a Christian, when you place your faith in Jesus, Jesus gives us His status as God's Son. And one of the things that that implies is that we now get to receive the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit comes and descends upon us just like it did on Jesus. And as the Holy Spirit comes and fills us, the Holy Spirit pours out God's fatherly affection into our hearts just like He did into the heart of Jesus.

[11 : 45] A Christian is someone who lives who lives under that white hot intensity of God's fatherly affection.

Continually being renewed by the love of God. Continually being renewed by the affection of God the Father upon us because of what Jesus has done. You can see this gift it's something that should fill our hearts with joy.

And the reason we know, the reason we can be absolutely confident that God wants to pour out such generous love on you is verse 8. But God shows His love, demonstrates His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Friends, the cross of Jesus, this is one of the reasons Christians always put the cross front and center. The cross of Jesus is the historical, objective, verifiable, empirical proof that God loves us and that God wants us to be utterly confident in His love.

You know, when people like you and I love other people, when we love each other, usually we love another person because there's something attractive in that other person.

[13 : 09] we don't naturally love people that hate us. Right? We usually love other people because there's something sort of attractive in them.

There's something we love about them. Our love is always responsive love. We're responding to something we see in the other person. God's love is not like that. God's love is a lot more reliable than that.

The reason is, God loves when there's nothing lovable in us. God's love is preemptive.

Excuse me. God's love is preemptive. He preempts. He loves before there's anything lovable in us. Look at the text. Look at verse 6. We were weak and helpless and God loved us.

Verse 8, we were sinners and we were rebellious and God loved us. Verse 10, we were His enemies. And God loved us. That's precisely the moment.

[14 : 08] That was the right moment for God to show His love for us. And surely, friends, you need to know, surely this indicates to us that we can be utterly confident, utterly assured that God loves us and that God wants to pour out His love by the Holy Spirit into our hearts.

That's the second gift that God's agenda for our life is that we would rejoice in His peace and that we would rejoice in His love. And the third thing is that we would rejoice in the hope of glory.

Look at verse 2. Through Jesus, we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Now, look at that phrase, the glory of God.

In Scripture, usually the glory of God refers to God's presence. And the great hope of the Christian life, the great hope, the great confidence, the great expectation of the Christian life is that one day we will enjoy God's glory.

We will enjoy His presence. We'll be able to come into God's presence and enjoy Him without any mediation, without anything in between us, just immediate access to God.

[15 : 20] And the reason that's such a wonderful thing is that it means that the little taste of God's love that we enjoy now, just that little taste, will one day grow infinite.

When we fully experience the glory of God, we will enjoy God's infinite love with infinite intensity for infinite duration. Right now, we get just a little appetizer of God's glory when we experience His love.

One day, it will turn into an eternal feast. And all, there will be no joy more exquisite than the joy that we'll know in the glory of God.

And we get a little taste of that now when we sense His love. Okay, so what's God's agenda for our life? God's agenda for our life, for your life, for my life, is that we would enjoy God.

We would enjoy Him for His peace that He gives us through Jesus. We would enjoy Him for the love that He pours into our hearts by the Spirit. We would enjoy Him in hope of His glory. Okay, let's go to the second question.

[16 : 30] How does this help us understand how we rejoice in suffering? How can Paul possibly say that he rejoices in suffering? Let me say this.

The only way it makes sense to rejoice in suffering is if somehow God's able to use our suffering to push us forward in enjoying His peace and His love and His glory.

It seems to me that it's fairly intuitive, I think, I think, you can tell me if this is right. It's fairly intuitive to me that most of us understand that we need things like peace and love and reconciliation.

Most of us know that those are good things. That's the good stuff of life. Most of us know that we need those things. The thing that's not intuitive, though, the thing that's not intuitive is that those things come to us finally, truly, deeply, only because of Jesus.

And even if you're a Christian, even if you've been following Jesus for years and years and years, even if you theoretically know better, most of us spend most of our lives seeking after peace, seeking after love, seeking after reconciliation, running down a thousand different roads other than trusting in Jesus.

[17 : 55] And it's particularly easy when life is comfortable, when you've got a full belly, so to speak, it's really comfortable to be satisfied with joy other than the joy that comes through Jesus.

But all that changes when we suffer. Because what happens when we suffer is that suffering strips us of all the other alternatives to finding peace and love and reconciliation, joy.

When we suffer, all the other alternatives are stripped away from us until all we have left is Jesus. Jesus becomes the only alternative.

If you look at verse 3, it says that suffering leads to endurance. And that's an aspect of Christian endurance. When we're going through difficult times and all of a sudden we realize that all the things we've been hoping in and we've been trying, we've been hoping that will give us peace and joy and all those things, we realize that those things have failed us.

we feel the pain of the dead-endedness of all those different paths and we realize that Jesus is our only alternative. That's an aspect of Christian endurance because we come to hope in Him alone.

[19 : 22] But then as we hope in Him alone in those really difficult times, a second thing happens. Character begins to develop. And one of the aspects of true, tested Christian character is we come to realize that Jesus, not only is He our only alternative in the final analysis, He's also the best alternative.

He gives us the only joy that is really profoundly deep, even in the midst of our pain. Now I need to be clear about something. Paul is not saying here that suffering is a good thing.

It's very important. He's not, you know, and He's not trying to resolve the problem of evil and how could a good God allow suffering to happen in the world.

That's not what He's doing. Suffering is evil and one day God will abolish it. What He is saying is that God in His power and in His mercy, one of the ways He triumphs over suffering right now in our lives is that He uses it and He redeems our suffering by using it to drive us to His agenda for our life so that we enjoy Him alone, enjoy His peace and His love and the hope of glory.

I want to read you something. This is a letter written by an Orthodox priest, Eastern Orthodox priest who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. and He wrote this letter three years after his diagnosis.

[20 : 58] He was slowly deteriorating and at this point his short-term memory had begun to go but his long-term memory was still there so he knew what was happening and his intellect was still working very well as you'll tell when I read it.

And He wrote this letter to friends just to tell them how He was doing. I want to read it to you. It's quite alright for you to ask how I am. I'm very open about my illness and I do not hide anything or keep any secrets.

I have very little false pride about my limitations anymore. I've already been through that phase and I've been able to embrace my disease in the shadow of the cross. More than that I've begun the slow process of climbing up onto the cross with our Lord and sharing now in His passion.

This has been incredibly sanctifying. I don't know how else to describe it. And then He goes on and He talks about just His physical update and then He comes back to the spiritual life.

From a purely spiritual standpoint I want to share with you the insight I believe God gave me from the time of my diagnosis. My greatest and overriding sin indeed even my vice has been pride.

[22 : 18] pride of mind of knowing better judging others inappropriately sometimes thinking of them as being less than I am. This is a most grievous sin and one that many people don't even recognize in themselves.

It was the sin of Satan. It is the sin of Adam and Eve. I fully understand how I got this way. I have throughout my life been inordinately proud of my mind my intellect my ability to think clearly about difficult and complicated things to speak and to write well to understand process and explain difficult things.

And although I have tried to put these gifts to the service of Christ and the church as best I could the pride has still always been there. And now the Lord has offered me a chance to mortify and humble down that pride by accepting without complaint the slow crumbling of my mind.

I do accept this. With my whole heart I accept this even if with the occasional tear as a gift from Him for my salvation. sometimes it feels as though this dying of various parts of my mind is also a dying of self a dying of ego a dying of pride but isn't that the purpose of spiritual life after all anyway?

The Lord looked down and saw that I wasn't going to do it any other way and so because He loves me very much unworthy as I am and wants me to be with Him forever He offered me this incredible opportunity to die to self I see this as a great if sometimes painful blessing Well these are my few of my thoughts about it never hesitate to ask me how I'm doing I'll tell you honestly but never feel sorry for me never pity me I do not pity myself but rather rejoice for me that I am on a sure path to the kingdom of heaven I believe this with all of my heart it's a remarkable letter I wish you could read it in its entirety the thing that strikes me about it is that this man has a joy not a happy happy clappy joy not you know he has a broken hearted joy that's powerful enough that

[24 : 49] Alzheimer's can't even overcome it and you notice I hope you notice as I read through that how God had used this disease to bring him to a place of renewed reconciliation repentance and peace and then used it to reveal to him again how much he is loved by God and then used it again to increase his hope for glory God used it to advance God's agenda in this man's life and friends if God's agenda really is the best possible path for our life and if our suffering can be used by God to advance that agenda then it makes sense that we might rejoice in the midst of it knowing that God is powerful enough to use it for our eternal joy now I don't know how you're suffering some of you are suffering secretly silently some of you are suffering very publicly and the last thing you need is somebody to stand up in front of you and give you a bunch of trite answers about how you need to smile or something

Jesus doesn't offer you trite platitudes but he does offer you hope and he offers a hope that drives you to him I don't know what you're going through are you suffering from guilt you know Jesus Jesus died to pardon you come to him and you will find rest for your souls are your relationships falling apart you know if that's the case you need to know that when you come to Jesus he will give you the one love that will never fall apart even if all the other ones around you do his love for you will never fail and you will enjoy it for all eternity some of you are suffering terribly at work your profession is falling down all around you friend you need to know that God is the one person the one person who will love you in spite of your failures you do not have to perform to earn his love you may have to perform to earn anybody else's love but not

God's some of you are suffering physically pain some of you are facing death friends Jesus has gone there he has tasted physical pain he has tasted death and he has promised one day to give you a body that is fit for eternal glory and some of you some of us here are filled with a sorrow that we can't shake filled with depression filled to such an extent that we lack the ability to feel anything close to joy anything close to love anything close to pleasure friend I want to say look at the cross look at Jesus in Gethsemane look at him there in the midst of his suffering because even if you cannot feel God's love when you look at the cross when you look at Jesus and his suffering on your behalf his death and resurrection even if you cannot feel love you can look at love when you look at

Jesus when you look at Jesus upon the cross you are looking at love that is powerful enough to draw you all the way through your pain and into the glory of God's eternal presence I'm going to pray now and I'm going to ask God for three things for peace and for love and for hope because when he gives us these things nothing else can ever truly defeat us Paul writes in Romans 8 for I consider that the sufferings of this life are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us for I am sure that neither life nor death nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord

Father Father I pray that you would make these things a reality in our lives that you would come by your Holy Spirit and that you would minister peace even right now to the hearts of your people will you even now grant the gift of assurance to those who are struggling with guilt communicate your peace and your forgiveness Father I pray for your Holy Spirit to fill us and to fill us in such a way that your love is poured out into our hearts I pray for those here who have never experienced your love who know nothing of your love and will you pour it into their hearts will you break through and will you grant us to sense your love your fatherly affection and Father

[30 : 30] I pray for hope that you would give us such a joyful expectation of your eternal glory that we would look forward that we would look forward to seeing you in the brightness of your glory father only you can give these gifts only you can do this work so do it now in Jesus name amen bo here Probably if you saw a love or name introduce■■■■