

Romans 5:1-6 - The Beautiful Ordinary Christian Life

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Good morning. Pleasure to be here in Huntsville at Southwood Church. Todd mentioned I am the National Coordinator for Reform University Fellowship, but prior to that, I spent several years as a senior pastor of Red Mountain Church down in Birmingham.

I'm very, very happy to be here. I'll be reading from Romans chapter 5, verses 1 to 6. And it's possible that the translation I'm reading may be slightly different, but that's okay.

They're close enough. This is Romans 5, verses 1 to 6, where the Apostle Paul, having explained the glorious content and the data, the what is of the gospel, in chapters 4 and following here, laying out the implications of that. Romans 5, verses 1 to 6. Let's hear now the Word of God.

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.

[1 : 15] 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, endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, which has been given to us. While we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.

This is the Word of God written. Amen. My wife and I love each other. We'll be married 30 years in December. But like most marriages, we have our differences. And one of the differences, small difference, is the way in which my wife loves those Facebook personality tests. You know those?

Which 80s sitcom are you? Right? Which state should you live in? And those things always leave me kind of cold. In fact, I'm just not a huge fan of personality tests. I know people, my wife's one of them, they love the Myers-Briggs test. Maybe you're familiar with that, where you take a series of questions, and then you, four letters, I think, pop out, and that describes the way that you see the world, the way that you react. I'm just not a fan. To me, it just is taking something that is really, really complicated, and sometimes giving us the illusion that we understand something because we've taken some, we've answered some questions, and we're given some letters. Well, this is the way that I am, and I just, I don't know, I could be wrong. I'm just not a huge fan. But I understand why there is such a need for us to understand why we're different because we're just so different, aren't we? Parents, sometimes we look at our kids, and we see they're radically different personalities, and we wonder if they came from the same parents. We see that people will respond consistently in certain circumstances. There's certain kind of hardwired characteristics we each had. I get that.

I just want to oversimplify it. I'm 57 years old, and I've lived long enough where I, well, I don't like those tests. I do know that there are certain things which kind of leap off the page on particular personalities, and there's one word that I can tell you maybe encapsulates a major part of my personality, and that word is grumpy. I was born grumpy, and I'm not bragging about this because let me tell you, on balance, being grumpy has not served me well. Being grumpy, I have said things, I have done things as a real grumpy person. Oh, I shouldn't have said that.

I shouldn't have done that. But every now and then, being grumpy has come in handy. I became a Christian at the University of South Carolina as a first-year freshman student there, and as a new Christian, I was a part of a small Presbyterian church, but I also know, I knew that I needed to be involved in a campus fellowship. So in my dorm room, I saw a sign for a gathering of a particular campus fellowship, not a national one. You've never heard of this one.

[4 : 43] It was based at a local church in Columbia, South Carolina. And I thought, hey, well, here's a group of Christians. I'm going to go to this group. So I met on a Tuesday night. I went to the meeting. It was a large gathering at a local church, and it began with singing. And then after the singing, they had testimony. This was 1976, and we've got a testimony. And so a young woman got up to give testimony about how God was working in her life. And she stood up, and she said, y'all, I want to tell you about a miracle in my life today. And I'm thinking, this is going to be good.

Y'all, I had a miracle today. I drove to campus, and I couldn't find a parking space. So I prayed really hard, and God gave me a parking space. That's my miracle.

I'm sitting in the back of the room. Now, remember, grump, grumpy. I'm sitting in the back of the room. I've been a Christian for a matter of weeks. I didn't know anything about, much about the Bible or anything about doctrine or theology. But I heard her say that, and I just intuitively, that incredulity kicked in. I met a crunched eyebrows.

And I went, you know, I don't think that's a miracle. Not only that, I remember thinking, not only that, I'm thinking that that probably cheapens the idea of what a miracle is. So after that meeting, I resolved I needed to find a group as grumpy as I was. Next week, I found RUF, and here I am.

All worked out. I raised this because we come to this passage in Romans 5, 1-6, where if we read this and we don't say to ourselves, oh, I'm not sure that's true. If this passage does not invite you to a certain degree of incredulity, you're not paying attention. This passage invites you to go, um, is that true? Does suffering, does resistance really produce endurance and character and hope? Is that really true? Or is that as flippant as some freshman declaring a parking spot being a miracle? Because functionally, the way that you and I respond to suffering, to resistance, to heartbreak, to failure, to vocational setback, to family disappointment, the way that we respond to that sometimes says that this doesn't make any sense to us. It also speaks to what I'm going to call the beautiful, ordinary Christian life, and I think this is a key. You see, one reason why we have a problem with this passage is, is that we have an idea of the ordinary Christian life that makes this passage incomprehensible. For one thing, this is point one, for one thing, you and I have a very, very funny idea about the idea of happiness. The idea of happiness, I used to say happiness is overrated. I don't mean that. What I'm saying is this. The one reason why we struggle with the idea that suffering produces all these wonderful things is that you and I have an idea of happiness happiness that's pretty out of focus. In fact, most of us, we speak of happiness in a language that's mostly a post-Western construct. In other words, the way we talk about language is language that's been used, it's a philosophical movement that happened after the Industrial Revolution.

[8 : 45] Think about this. This is not hard. Way a long time ago, way, way a long time ago, you woke up in the morning, and if you made it through the day without getting eaten by an animal or being killed by disease, it was a great day. I mean, you woke up in the morning a long time ago, and you had to eke out an existence from the soil. Your life never existed more than a couple square miles from where you were born. Life was brutish and short, and there was not much spare time. Now, the Industrial Revolution comes through when we have a prospering middle class, and we have this thing called spare time. And we're not worried about getting eaten by animals or the constant threat of early death by disease. When we have time to sit and reflect, we start wondering, hmm, why am I here? What is my purpose in life? Am I happy with things? The British philosopher John Stuart Mill famously said this, ask yourself whether you are happy, and you immediately cease to be happy.

That is the idea being that we're just reflecting, I mean, I just don't know. There's always this constant emotional splinter. What's going on here? And when we do that, and we start measuring happiness by, well, you know what, I wish my marriage was better, and this town I'm in is kind of boring, and the job I have, oh, you know, I wish I'd be doing something better than this, and boy, my kids are driving me nuts. Well, then suffering, resistance, becomes an obstacle to what you think is happiness. Resistance in life is no longer something which the Bible tells us produces this harvest of really, really good things. When we sort of construct happiness into being, well, I wish I had a better this. I wish I was married to this person, not this person.

Then, all of a sudden, we have a very different idea of what happiness is. And then, the idea of resistance and the idea of the ordinary Christian life becomes one of constant lack of satisfaction, constant restlessness. There's always something better. My kids ought to be better. I'd have a better job. I should live in a better place. And the idea of the Christian life being in long stretches, being very ordinary, kind of boring, kind of prosaic, is just not a category you think about.

But the reality is this, is that the active, the faithful Christian life, long stretches of it, are actually pretty ordinary, kind of boring, kind of prosaic, changing the diapers, taking out the trash, paying the bills, dealing with your kids. But that's not very exciting. That's not making me happy. Then there is the idea of us always living in the future tense. Some psychologists call this the satisfaction treadmill. Ever heard of that? Satisfaction treadmill? That's the predictable and frustrating way where any new source of pleasure, whether it is something major, like a new house or a job, or something like a new phone, it gives us an immediate visceral kind of pleasure. But then, when it starts to fade, it ceases to deliver the same kind of joy. The endorphin rush we get, from getting a new iPhone, or a new job, or the newest operating system, or a new car. That's always just so exciting, but that always fades. And physiologically, they've measured this.

You just don't get that rush anymore. And it seems kind of boring. And I want something newer and more exciting. So, let's circle back to Romans 5. We know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance character, and character hope. And when we get frustrated when our internet is too slow, how could this make any sense? We get frustrated because our phone is too slow, or is too old.

[13 : 26] And when we look at the families God has given us, or the jobs that we have, and all we can think of is how frustrating and unsatisfactory it is, we want something more, something in the future tense that will make it better. Then there's our nostalgia. David Bentley Hart wrote this, The past is always, to some extent, a fiction of the present. Let me say that again. The way you perceive the past is always, to some degree, a fiction of the present. Let me spell this out.

Think of your life right now, and rate your level of happiness in your own head and satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10. All right? Now, remember that. Now, 10, 15, 20 years from now, you will remember this time as you being happier and more satisfied than you are right now. Do you get that? That's the way it works. We look back on life, and we always have a soft focus. We always winnow out the stuff we don't want to remember. Our childhood has become very pure and pristine and simpler and better times.

Our college days, oh my gosh, the football games and the fraternity parties, oh, that was amazing. But if you were to transport yourself back there, you will discover that some of the very, very same things, maybe even worse, that frustrate you and anger you, we're still there. We just don't remember them, and so we become a victim of looking at the past and longing for something like that in the future.

Okay, so how can this be true? How can suffering, how can bad, big disappointments in life, how can the idea that the life is resisting produce all these amazing things? Jesus has to mean something when he says, do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy, where thieves break in and steal. But instead, what? There's your treasure in heaven. Or the apostle Paul who says, we are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed. So hold on to this one. We crunch our eyebrows at this passage because the way we think about happiness prevents us, often prevents us from fully embracing the blessing of suffering and resistance. The other thing is this. Not only do we have an idea about happiness that it's kind of funny, the second thing is we have an idea of achievement that is really funny. Like, achievement. If we get a little wonky when it comes to happiness and suffering, we are really tangled when it says here suffering produces endurance. Like, that's a good thing. Really?

Just endurance? I want more than endurance. I want more than just hanging on. I was a campus minister at New York University from 1997 to 2001. And during that time, I was part of what a lot of campus ministers are. I was part of an organization of all the campus ministries on campus, all the heads of them. We would meet on a regular basis to pray for each other.

[16 : 53] Loved doing it. Well, at the beginning of my third year, we gathered before the school year started, and there was about 12 of us, and we were sitting in a circle. And the person who led the meeting said this, what we're going to do today is this. We're going to go around the room, and we're going to ask all of you who head up ministries at NYU, you're going to answer the question, what is it you want to produce in your students? What do you want to achieve with the students you work with? And the start of the person next to me, and it went in the other direction, so I had a lot of time to think about it. And the person next to me, they said, I want our students to be really concerned and involved in evangelism and discipleship. I said to myself, amen. Beautiful, of course. The next person said, I want our students to have a real heart for the widow and the poor and the orphan and the marginalized. I thought, amen. Next person said, I want our students to really know their Bibles, to be able to know the content, to memorize it, and to dwell upon it. I thought it's a great thing.

So I went around the room talking about basically the things which their ministry focused on. By the time it got to me, okay, people were kind of tired. I thought, well, I better keep this short.

So I said this. I hope with my students that in 25 or 30 years that they're still Christians.

And there was this pause, really awkward pause. And I could tell they were expecting me to say something else. Well, that's it. What do I hope? Another pause. And I could tell the entire room was feeling sorry for me. Oh, poor Tom. He's so old and jaded. Okay. He's so, he is so like, what's this, everything okay? Like you've lowered the bar so much. And no, that's not the case.

I can tell you right now that my happiest moments in ministry are when I run into people who were in a Bible study that I led in 1982, and they are still working out the implications of the gospel.

[19 : 22] They're still struggling with their own sin. They're still in the fight. Now, they're all over the landscape, these ex-students. I run into people whose marriages have been really, really hard and high maintenance. But they're still in it. They're hanging on. That is the happiest I get.

Because trust me, on a college campus, it's not hard to work up a lot of people getting excited about things. Go to a pep rally, a fraternity party, political rally. That's not that hard. But the idea of instilling in students the idea that the Christian life is a marathon. It's a long race.

And staying in the fight is the thing. The whole last book of the Bible, even with all our attempts in American Christianity to make that completely incomprehensible, the book of Revelation, you know it's about one thing. Hang on. Hang on. Really, to him who overcomes, to him who overcomes, the idea that's going to get really, really kind of toey here in the future, but you need to hang on. That's the whole idea of it. And so achievement in the ministry, achievement in the Christian life, when it's all said and done, is are you hanging on? Really?

That's, I, again, here's my sort of grumpiness. I go, really? Can I be true? Seriously? Seriously. But we have a different idea of that. In our mind, the best Christians are the busiest Christians. Now, I got us done wonderful, amazing things through individual Christians and even churches, but I mean, what is the normal Christian life like? The New Testament contains extraordinary stories of how normal men and women have turned the world upside down. That happens.

But in the main, the normal Christian life, the normal church life is one of faith and perseverance in the midst of suffering. Go like this. Yeah, endurance. And parents. I've grown children right now.

[21 : 29] And I'm going to tell you that when I look, I look at these toys here, and I almost got misty-eyed because, you know, I've got a lot of those toys for my kids. And I look back at raising my kids, and I think of a lot of mistakes, a whole lot of mistakes. One of those mistakes was this, was that I really should have said to myself more and more than I did, that it doesn't matter to me if my kids are a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker, whether or not they're most socially skilled kids in the world, whether they're particularly smart, no matter what they do, but if they love Jesus and they're hanging on, I can't hope for anything more than that. But I didn't do so good on that one.

You know, they disappointed me in ways that I shouldn't have been disappointed in. They let me down in ways that I should not have been let down by. The standard I had was not what God wants, but the environment, the culture I was in. So parents, what is our great achievement?

It's not that your kids are the best or the brightest or the cutest or the best athlete, but instead, do they still love Jesus? So suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

What does this mean? Well, you could go a long way with this, but I'm just going to suggest a few things here. One is, is that the key of the Christian life, if you take notes, you can write this down, is to just show up.

You all feel sorry for me now, yeah? You go, poor Tom, he's so old and jaded. I think Wardy Allen said that. 80% of life is just showing up.

[23 : 20] Now, let me qualify that. In the ministry, I'm always telling our campus ministers and interns, there are many mornings you wake up and you're discouraged, you're depressed, you want to call out a fetal position. I know what you're called to do. But there are many mornings in the Christian life where you just get up and go. You go, you do. I mean, in spite of the of your fears and anxieties, in that sense, you just show up. You show up in faith.

You show up in spite of the overwhelming sense, perhaps, of despair at times, of frustration. You show up, you go there, and you step in there, and that's what happens.

I have, I can't call myself middle-aged anymore because I don't know anyone who's 114 years old.

I'm 57, right? I'm not middle-aged. All right? So when I got to my midlife crisis some time ago, here's how I decided to deal with that.

You know, I'm not going to buy a Jaguar. I'm not going to, I can't afford that. And I play golf, man. Golf is the spawn of Satan. I hate golf. Can't stand golf. It's so frustrating. What am I going to do? I know what I'm going to do. It was back in Savannah. I'm going to start a band with my friends. See, I played the bass guitar when I was a teenager. I said, I'm going to start a band.

[24 : 51] So a bunch of guys in my church, about my age, same age in the stage, hey, we're going to start a band. Our kids were mortified. Just mortified. Our wives rolled their eyes, and we went out to the guitar center and got stuff. Like, we had, we bought our stuff. We literally went to a garage, a guy had, and we started playing. And we are so bad. We were awful.

Very first song that we practiced, we rehearsed, was a song called Louie Louie. You know who Louie Louie is? Okay. Three chords. A, D, and E. You know? And a bass, you got the one note, A, D, and E.

You got one note. And we're playing this, and it is such an awful racket. And even though it's just A, D, and E, A, D, and E over and over again, I'm just completely messing it up. And I'm getting all frustrated. I can't do this. And a guy across, the guy is Frankie. He was actually a pretty decent guitar player. He saw me getting frustrated, and he screamed over the din. Tom, it's just three chords.

Just keep going. Don't stop. Keep going. It's all right. So, I kept going. And after a few minutes, it was slightly less awful. After a couple days, after practicing for like two or three weeks at a time, this, we actually had moments, these transcendent moments of almost competence when we played. Oh, it does make a difference. There's a certain simple harmonic cadence to a song like Louie Louie. It's A, D, and E. The gospel has a kind of harmonic cadence that way. When we face suffering, okay, the whole to translate that to character and endurance and hope, is that, you know, you just keep going. It doesn't eliminate the other issues involved. But we realize that the more we do this, how does the book of Hebrews put it? Who, through constant practice, how learned to discern good from evil? And that's how we move forward. The other finally thing, and I will close with this, is that we also have a very, very...if we overstate the idea of happiness and achievement, we also, of course, tragically underrate the love of God in Christ. Verse 6, while we were still weak at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. And in fact, that's the cadence right there. Those are the three chords. It's not A, D, and E. It is at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. Now, you can call it what you want. In our circles, we are constantly producing slogans and waving flags. It's okay. We're gospel-centered. We're missional. We preach the gospel to ourselves.

I believe in all those things. I fear that when we put too many labels on that, when we separate ourselves into thinking that we believe it more than other people. I'm not saying you do that, but I've seen that happen. No matter what you call it, just do it. At just the right time, Christ died for me. He died for the ungodly. And so, in that way, we get up and go.

[28 : 15] The artist Chuck Close said this, inspiration is for amateurs, the rest of us to show up and get to work. So, let me encourage you at Southwood that inspiration does come. There are moments when you are filled with a desire to serve Jesus. The love of God has been shed abroad in your heart through the Holy Spirit. There are moments when you get tremendous satisfaction and a great visceral form of joy and happiness from the Christian life. But what it doesn't, we go back to the harmonic cadence, the gospel. At just the right time, Christ died for the ungodly, and we get up and we go to work. Amen. Let's pray together.

Lord, we give thanks for the way in which that you, through your gospel, have given us hope and encouragement. And pray that in every way that we would see the Christian life as being both a mix of wonderful moments of joy and happiness. And there's moments when we just get up and we show up.

Always reminding ourselves of the harmonic cadence of Jesus dying for the ungodly at just the right time. This we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

For more information, visit us online at southwood.org. Thank you.