

The best is yet to come Mark Stephens

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[0 : 00] Just over three months ago, it was New Year's Eve. And on that night, you, because you're cool, would probably be doing all sorts of things.

If you're anything like me, you might have been asleep. Because that's what I like to do on New Year's Eve, because my kids get up at 6.30 no matter what day of the year it is. And so I need my beauty sleep.

But assuming your life isn't as tragically boring as mine, you might have been at something exciting like a New Year's party. And at a New Year's party, it's an interesting kind of thing, because you start those parties by finishing off the year.

And you finish off those parties by starting the year. And it's kind of like, what is the New Year's party about? Is it actually about the year that's gone past? Or is it about the year that's coming? And I guess that kind of depends on the year you've had or the year you're looking forward to. But most of the time, it's a transitional moment in your life. You kind of go from one to the other and you're kind of like, hey, it started 2015 and now it's 2016.

[1 : 02] And the text we're looking at today is a transition point in the book of Romans. Romans chapter 5. And it's a chapter that both looks back and looks forward.

And it looks back because it nicely rounds off a bunch of themes that have been going on in Romans throughout chapters 1 to 4. In those chapters, Paul has been outlining for us how God brings sinners back to himself.

But Romans also looks forward in chapter 5 because it prepares us for what happens in chapters 6 to 8. And in chapters 6 to 8, it's all about how to live life once you've come to Christ.

Because here's the beautiful thing about Jesus. Jesus didn't just come to fix up your mess and wipe your slate clean. He came to do that and to give you new life in order to live for him.

And so my sermon today is going to try and do both of those things. It's going to try and show you the glory of Jesus by demonstrating how he deals with your past, how he secures your future, but also how he transforms your present.

[2 : 12] So let's start with our past by looking backwards. Take a look with me at verse 1 of chapter 5. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith. Now, what does Paul mean by this word justified here?

In the simplest terms possible, it means that God has declared us to be not guilty before him. See, the wonder of justification is that the future verdict you might fear has already been given in the present.

If you are in Christ, there is now no longer any condemnation, both now and into the future. You have been justified.

It is a settled fact in Christ. And that verdict will not change because Christ will not change. And what he's done on the cross and through the resurrection will not change.

If you are in Christ, the verdict on your acceptance has already been given. No matter what you've done, no matter what you've become, Christ can make you right with God.

[3 : 21] And everything that Paul will say from this point onwards about the Christian life assumes you already know that fact. It assumes you know that you're already justified.

Because if you don't start there and you start thinking about how to live the Christian life, but you're unsure that you are a Christian, you're going to end up in all sorts of wrong places.

And friends, I need to ask you before we kind of embark on the journey, do you live with that assumption? Do you live with the assumption? It's easy enough to say or sing the words, I have been forgiven.

Christ loves me. I've been justified. But our actions and our attitudes so often tell a different story. Do the anxieties of your spiritual life, and I get it, we've all got anxieties in our spiritual life, but do your anxieties say that you're worried what God's verdict will be in the future? Are you a hard worker in this church? And every church has them. People who basically make the place run. Are you a hard worker partly because you're not actually sure whether God has really accepted you?

[4 : 35] And you're trying to work your way back. The text says, since we've been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. But note also that Paul uses other metaphors to describe salvation.

To describe what Christ has accomplished for us. So in verses 10 and 11, Paul talks about being reconciled to God. So justification is, if you like, a metaphor from the law court.

It's, whereas reconciliation is a relational metaphor. Now one of the dangers for the metaphors we use to describe salvation is if you just focus on one, you can actually end up distorting the gospel. You can reduce it. So if you only ever talk about justification, that means you tend to see God only as your judge, whose job is either to declare us guilty or not guilty.

Which is true enough, but a judge is not necessarily someone you have a relationship with. I don't know how many times you've been to court. But like, when you go to court and the judge kind of goes, not guilty.

[5 : 45] It's not like after that you sit there and great, we should have coffee sometime. Like you don't, you don't hang out with your judge. His job is just to basically say you're either in or you're out. And that's why we need metaphors like reconciliation.

Because God is not merely our judge, he's our father. And he wants you as his child. You are estranged from God by your sin, but he has brought you back.

And as Tim Keller says, God doesn't want to be a concept, he wants to be a friend. And so we need all the metaphors of the good news that we can find, because without all the metaphors, you don't see the full richness of the gospel.

I remember once being in Rome. I've only ever been to Rome once. That makes it sound like I go all the time. I remember the one time I was in Rome. And all you do in Rome, as far as I'm concerned, is you go and see old monuments and eat gelato.

That's basically all you need to do in Rome. That's enough. And I went to a gelato store, and I'll never forget it. It was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life, because I went into a gelato store that had 130 flavours of gelato.

[6 : 52] It had 11 different types of chocolate. I wanted to die and live there forever. And I tried to eat as many different types of gelato from that store, but I couldn't manage to get around to all 130 flavours.

But I left thinking I've not experienced the full glory of this store, until I've had 100. 129 won't do. In a little way, that's kind of like what it is to hold all the metaphors of Scripture about salvation.

Because Jesus doesn't just bring justification. He brings reconciliation. At other points, it talks about that he brings liberation. All of those things are true, and we need to hear all of them.

So the foundation stone of Romans 5 is that your past has been forgiven, and you are at peace with God. Whether you feel like that right now, it is objectively true that in Christ you have peace with God.

And so having dealt with our past, towards the end of verse 2, Paul starts looking forward. He says, Through Christ, we now rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

[8 : 06] It's one of those phrases, I don't know if you've ever heard it, but I don't know if you ever do this in Bible study group. It's one of those phrases that people used to say to me, and it was a nod and smile moment, which is where you don't have any idea what people are saying, but you know you're meant to know, and say, oh yes, amen.

We rejoice in the hope of the glory. That's fantastic. I have no idea what you're saying. And let's be honest, we sometimes do that in the Christian church.

I didn't actually know what that meant. Because it's got all the right terms to be a Christian quote, doesn't it? It's got God, glory, hope, rejoicing. Who doesn't want that for a poster? Facebook status, ready to go.

But what does it actually mean? Well, on the one hand, many people would interpret it, and they'd be fair enough in doing so, as being the hope that we have for seeing God's glory at the end of time.

The hope that we have of being in his presence for eternity. And that is a perfectly reasonable idea, and perhaps is what is going on here. But I think something else might be going on here, because a little earlier in Romans, Paul referred to the glory of God, and he made this point in chapter 3. [9 : 18] He said, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. That's his statement about human beings in Romans chapter 3.

Now, what's he meaning there? Well, in Psalm 8 verse 5, it says that human beings have been crowned with glory and honour. And we're crowned with glory because we're made in the image of God, made to know him and to show him, made to be his representatives as we cultivate his creation.

And so we're called to this glorious task of imaging God and reflecting his goodness to the world. And the fundamental fact about human beings is that we've all failed at that task. We've all failed to live up to be the people that we were created to be.

We've all failed to live up to the glory for which we were intended. And so what I think Romans 5, 2 might well be saying is that through Christ, God is going to restore us to the glory for which we were designed.

Not as our own achievement, but as Christ's achievement. On that final day, you will not only be forgiven, you will be everything that God intended you to be from the very beginning.

[10 : 29] Because what Paul is saying in verse 2 is that we rejoice in the hope that we will be fully conformed to the image we were meant to have from the start. A little later in Romans 8, 18, Paul says, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

But note carefully, this glory is something that I don't have yet. It's a hope. It's a sure and certain hope, but we don't yet have at least not in full measure.

And that highlights for us a persistent tension that underlies so much of the New Testament, which is that throughout the New Testament, you have this constant tension between we are already experiencing salvation now, and yet we're still awaiting the completion of salvation at the end of time.

We live between the two comings of Christ. The first coming of Christ achieves and secures our salvation, but it's only at the second coming that you get the full benefit of the blessings.

And so the Christian always has to look at their life as a mixture of the two, of the now and the not yet. So now we are already justified.

[11 : 47] Now we are already reconciled. But at the same time, there are things we are waiting for. And the tension between the now and the not yet helps explain what might look initially weird to us in verses 9 and 10.

I don't know if you saw that language in verses 9 and 10. It says in verse 9, having been justified, how much more will we be saved? Verse 10, having been reconciled, how much more will we be saved?

And when you first read that, you're probably thinking, aren't they the same thing? Like if I'm justified, aren't I already saved? If I'm reconciled, aren't I already saved?

Was I lying before when I said that God's final verdict has been given already in the present? Was that just a kind of, you know, a fake move to get on your side to begin with? No, Paul is not getting you to question your salvation.

What Paul is trying to tell you is there is a sense in which you have not yet been saved. Because this morning when I checked, I still didn't have a resurrection body.

[12 : 52] To be quite honest, when I looked in the mirror, it looked more like a body of death. There's a lagging indicator. It's called my body. And last time I asked my wife, she confirmed to me, Mark, your life still falls short of the glory of God.

She's good at letting me know that my life falls short of the glory of God. It always, as in my body, my holiness, there's so much of my life that doesn't yet have the touch of God's salvation on it. It will be touched one day. I will be raised with a body like his. I will eventually be perfected in Christ. But there are some things that are not yet.

And this is why the New Testament refers to salvation sometimes as a future possession. Not to get you to question whether you're saved or not, but to get you to understand you don't yet have it all. You are an heir of salvation, but you haven't yet received all the inheritance. And so far from trying to make us discouraged, Paul is actually trying to encourage us here, because what he is saying in

Romans 5, 1 to 11 is that God who began a good work in you is going to carry it to completion.

[14:06] The God who has started with you is going to finish with you. If you have been justified, you will be saved. God is going to get you home because the problem is we can get discouraged living between the first and second coming of Christ because what if something happens?

What if something happens between when I profess faith in Christ and the day of the Lord? One of the things that really shakes us up is suffering.

We really get ruined sometimes by suffering and Paul zeroes in on suffering for us in verses 3 to 5 and teaches us to see our suffering in a different perspective.

He says, not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope. And hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us.

Now for most of us who are Christians for any length of time, the experience of suffering, big, intense, chaotic, absurd suffering, is going to mess with us.

[15:24] In fact, it's going to sometimes make you feel like you're never going to make the finish line. You started the Christian life so well, things were so happy and then it hit.

And it can make you feel uncertain about the future. Will I make it? And part of, let's be honest, what fuels the despair is sometimes the thought lodges in your brain.

This isn't meant to be happening to me. I'm God's child. I'm his justified, forgiven sinner. We're done with that, aren't we, God?

Why am I still suffering? It must be that there's something wrong with me. And Paul's answer is, no, it doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you. This is where understanding that salvation is both now and not yet is so helpful because Paul actually assumes that suffering of all sorts is going to hit Christians if they live long enough.

And that's because we live this side of the second coming and the end of suffering is not yet. And so if you understand that we live between the now and the not yet, you can use your suffering to galvanise your hope.

[16:41] So to rejoice in our sufferings doesn't mean we do what some people have tried to explain to me sometimes, as if we can reimagine that our pain isn't painful or our hurt isn't hurting or persecution is somehow fun.

No, no, no. To rejoice in our sufferings is to rejoice in the fact that this moment of suffering is not the last word. The better day is coming and not only that, that God can even use my suffering to deepen my hope and to form my character.

But it's hope that brings the joy, not the suffering. We rejoice because Jesus defeated death and that I know this suffering will not be the final chapter.

And so friend, do not let suffering take away your assurance. God is going to carry you all the way home. And just at the end of those verses you have that beautiful line and hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us.

So Paul is saying there that part of our assurance derives from the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Now we Anglicans are good at speaking about the objective facts of faith.

[18:04] Christ died, Christ is risen, therefore we can have hope and that is true but there is also a subjective dimension to the experience.

When you come to Christ he fills you with his Spirit and the Spirit it is said pours out the love of God into our hearts. In other passages Paul talks about the Spirit cries Abba Father within the forgiven sinner.

it is what John Wesley called his heart being strangely warmed by the gospel of Christ as the Spirit touched him and there is a part of me cold rational Mark philosopher historian white Australian male wants to run a thousand miles from her feelings and yet God actually sometimes wants to use those feelings to remind me of his love that I will even feel his love for me and he will stir up strong affections within me and that experience of the Spirit we have is part of our assurance it's not the only part of course but it's part of our assurance that our hopes are not in vain Paul talks at later points about that the Spirit of God is like the down payment of heaven in Ephesians 1 he talks about he's a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance it's like you get just a little foretaste of heaven by the gift of the Spirit within and he's reminding you you are loved you are justified and the best is yet to come don't give up so Romans 5 says your past has been forgiven it says your future has been secured and so we rejoice in the hope of glory but what about my present what about my present if

my future life is to be new in

Christ restored to the glory I was made for what should I expect right now in the present we already know that it can't be perfection that is something which hasn't come yet and won't come till his second coming but ever since Adam our focus has actually probably been more on failure have you ever noticed how our language talks about failure and humanity quite easily to err is human when you make a mistake and screw up people go you're only human because humans by definition are the people who constantly screw up at things and that is also the testimony of scripture that no matter how good you are you're really actually not that good that actually we all have gone astray but what Paul wants to say to us in Romans 5 and then he goes on to keep on saying it in Romans is that Christ not only deals with your past he not only secures your future he transforms your present life and in

Romans 5 the way Paul illustrates this is to show that Jesus is our new Adam that's why I got the passage to continue to be read Jesus is our new Adam and he gives us power right now to live a different kind of life so Paul in this passage and verse 12 starts with the bad news in Romans 5 12 Paul says that what Adam did in the Garden of Eden affected every human being however that process of transmission happens and that's something you can go to theological college to discuss however it happens that Adam's act influences us the foundation stone for Paul's argument is that when Adam sinned then death came to all people because we all sinned and so we are all in Adam we all suffer from the brokenness that he gave to humanity and if you sorry every person shares in the beauty and brokenness of

[22 : 07] Adam if you like for every human being we all have a family history that negatively affects us now I know that some of you almost certainly will have a family history that's much more local that affects you you might have an experience in your family of grandparents parents and that what they did in the past negatively affects you right now and for the people who I've known who've had that experience it crushes them it colors everything they see they sit there and the lens of the past is the lens through which they view the world and if you like every human being has family history we have family history going all the way back to Adam we've all got a past and it conditions us to thinking we'll never break free so when you hear the Bible storyline ends with you being perfected in Christ perhaps your response is well

God at the end of time is just going to have to do a demolition job because there is nothing going on in me I don't know if you've ever seen those real estate ads where they kind of put out a thing and say renovate or detonate okay well I think sometimes we feel like with our life it's just detonate there's nothing here to renovate God but Paul thinks something different is happening to us in the present and in 5:17 he says for if by the trespass of the one man death reigned through that one man how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ so in Christ God not only provides us a sacrifice for our sins he provides us a new Adam who can enable us to reign in life and so where Adam failed Christ triumphed where Adam gave in the temptation Christ did not and because of his perfect life

Christ not only becomes our means of forgiveness he also becomes the fountain head the source of a whole new way of being human and Jesus represents everything a human being is meant to be and by his resurrection power and by the gift of his spirit he does the most remarkable thing he starts transforming us now to be like himself and so the whole comparison between Adam and Christ raises an identity issue for us as Christians how do you see yourself as a Christian do you see yourself as primarily still in Adam that you are forgiven yes but basically doomed to failure or do you see yourself in Christ not perfect forgiven yes but on your way to be to be like him because in Romans 5 12 to 21 Paul wants to use this Adam Christ comparison to proclaim that you are no longer in Adam you are in Christ and therefore when you come to Christ you aren't just wiped clean you are made a new creation because of Jesus there's a whole new way of being human to reign in life as it states in verse 17 is to actually start to be transformed in Christ even now and so as the book of Romans moves forward into chapter 6 it assumes you can be transformed it assumes you can really change friends because of Jesus you are no longer defined by your past so many of us perhaps all of us define our life in terms of our past our identity is based on our past if I ask you who you are you'll tell me what happened to you in the past and sometimes our Christian life is defined by our past I just can't be holy

I just cannot change Mark you don't know my story I'm a screw up that's what I do I'm just like Adam yeah you are but because of Jesus your story no longer has to be just about your past because with him a different story has begun where your sins have been forgiven and you are on the journey towards Christ likeness and in Christ we find a new beginning which means you are not what you were you are in Christ now and your hope and destiny is to be like him now please do not hear me saying anything that might smack of triumphalism as if your life from now on is going to be one long victory march not a victory march no no no you are not in some victory march that is the life to come but we are in our way this is who you really are who you really are is not your past it's not even your present it's your future who you really are is what you will become in

[27 : 30] Christ on that final day your future in Christ is what defines you I love the phrase Tom Wright uses he says we are but shadows of our future selves because that is who I am what I'm becoming in Christ that's what the Holy Spirit does to us he brings the life of the future into our life in the present as we are transformed into the image of Christ sometimes when I summarise for people what should you really expect from a Christian because there are so many people out there who expect that Christians will be perfect and they're thoroughly disappointed when they're not and then I meet other people who expect that there will be no change at all in the Christian life that we're all going to be horrible until the day of the second coming and when somebody does actually have holiness break into their life it's kind of like wow that's weird and so how do we capture this tension between the now and the not yet

I sometimes like to say that all Christians should have a little tag on them saying work in progress you know when you go past a building site and it says work in progress when you see that sign you know that what you see isn't the finished work but you also know that something has been begun because you know that if somebody puts up a work in progress sign but nothing has been begun you're kind of like sitting there going I'm not sure you should put the sign up there's a little saying that I have to try and describe all this at every point we should be able to say this about our Christian life I'm not what I was I'm not yet what I will be I'm not what I was I'm not yet what I will be I thought I was so awesome when I coined that quote I thought that's a zinger people are going to put that up on Facebook for years people are going to copyright I'm going to make a lot of money out of this that's a bang on quote and then I realised about 200-300 years ago John

Newton had said something and said it even better and so I'll quote you John Newton he said I am not what I ought to be I'm not what I want to be I'm not what I hope to be in another world but still I am not what I once used to be and by the grace of God I am what I am let's pray Heavenly Father you are so good to us because when you send your son you don't just send an atonement for sin you send someone who can enable us to become the people you always intended us to be that you take away our guilt that you justify us completely and then you actually set us free to be more like your son Heavenly Father if we are struggling with our past tonight help us to see that the future you have given us in

Christ is what defines us now that we are not to be enslaved with what we've done or even what we're failing to do in the present but that we are to look forward with great anticipation straining towards what is ahead because of what Christ Jesus has won for us we thank you for your rich and overwhelming gift of salvation salvation in Jesus name we pray amen