

Covenant Response: During Belief

series: What Is the Gospel?

Romans 5:1-5

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We continue this morning in this series on responding to God's covenant faithfulness. In this portion of the series on the covenant this fall we've been looking at these last several weeks of what life looks like "Before Belief," as we looked at Nicodemus and his coming to Jesus and the various ways in which Nicodemus was using his achievements and abilities and knowledge and his approach as a way of resisting what it meant to bow the knee to Christ.

Last week we looked together at what it then looks like "After Belief"—how and in what ways even those who believe in the Lord Jesus still have ways in which we want to keep God at a distance, Christ at a distance. And the way in which, indeed, one of the things that we recognize and ought to receive is that there is an actual change that has taken place, and that changes that the Father sees us. He loves us through the work of Christ. Because of the work of Christ we are made new, and that gives us a radical freedom. And we looked at the various practices that form the Christian life.

But then this week we're looking at "During Belief," and that is when, in fact, faith meets the reality of life. So we'll look at Romans 5:1-5. Hear now God's word as we read Romans 5:1-5.

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we (now) stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Will you pray with me. Now Lord, we ask that you would open our eyes and our hearts to see wondrous things in your Word, how you call us to belief in response to your covenant love. And as we celebrate Christmas—the expression, the greatest expression, of your new covenant love is the giving of your Son, as a child, as an infant. Who would grow up before us as the Son of God and who would die on our behalf, who would be raised to life and who is now seated at your right hand. Lord, you instruct us on what it looks like, then, now while we wait for the return of Christ—what it means to live by faith. Help us, we pray. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

In these verses I want you to see, in verses 1-2, we'll look together at **Life Meets Faith**—how are we to respond, what is being stated about us here in the present because of what has happened in the past. Secondly in verses 3-4 we'll see **Faith Meets Suffering**. And then finally, verse 5, **Suffering Meets Hope. Life Meets Faith, Faith Meets Suffering, Suffering Meets Hope.**

So let's begin together in looking at these verses. You will see in verses 1-2 Paul declares great

truths, which are sermons in and of themselves. But they are in very quick form. He states what has happened because of the work of Christ in the past—because of God's purpose—what that means for us in the present. Looking together you'll see there are given to us in these grand words when he says in verse 1:

¹Therefore. . .

In other words, because this has happened, this is how we ought to live.

¹Therefore, since we have been justified by faith. . .

That is, we trust in the work of another, not in ourselves. This has happened to us. This has happened on our behalf. This is what Christ has accomplished. It's encased in this word 'justified.' It means we are made right with God. The fact that God was angry because of sin, the debt because of sin has been paid in full. It is no longer a debt which those who believe are obligated to pay. Indeed, no one has to pay this debt, because it's a debt that can never be paid. The question is: Where are you on the side of debt? Are you still in debt to God because you do not believe? But if you do believe, that debt is cancelled because of Christ. It has been paid in full.

Therefore, because Christ and His work have paid in full the debt incurred because of sin against the Holy God, this is the truth of what life happens when it meets faith. It tells us very clearly. It says first:

¹. . .we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Meaning because of Christ and the fact that he has paid the debt, we now have peace. But we must be clear in what Paul means by this peace. Here is perhaps a surprising thing. He does not mean that it is a peace which you subjectively turn on and off. It's not [?] a peace with God meaning a reconciled relationship, meaning there is no longer any enmity, there is no longer any distance, there's no dividing wall. It's not there because you feel it to not be there, nor does it reappear because you feel like it is. If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, the debt has been paid in full. Therefore objectively—not subjectively, but objectively you have peace. You have been reconciled to your Father.

This is important because if it is a peace that is dependent on our subjective understanding, our subjective experience, then it is merely like a switch that is turned on and off by our emotions or circumstances. Thanks be to God that is not the case. I want to state clearly this is not a matter of emotional understanding. By that I mean if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, no matter how you feel about it this morning, the truth is Christ has paid your debt. You are reconciled with your Father. Now.

Not only does he say that there is peace that has been obtained because of the work of Christ, it then says:

²Through him we have also obtained access. . .

Access meaning there a door has been opened that was once closed. The Scriptures speak about it in another way. There was once a veil between the people of God and the most holy place. Now because of Christ and his payment of the debt that most holy place where God is present—that veil has been removed. Therefore, we have access. As Paul would say, we can go boldly before the throne of grace. No matter how you feel about it, no matter what you think about it, no matter what your circumstances are, no matter where you've been—as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ the door is opened and will not be locked again. Do you know that you have this access? Do you know that it's not based on how you feel about it?

And here's something even greater. Do you know that not only has the access door been opened, the Lord is not sitting in the house waiting for you to walk through the front door? You know he's the one who's come out of the house, and he's come to you. I've shared this with you before, but I have a giant poster of Rembrandt's "The Prodigal Son" in my office. And there you see the culmination of the father running to the son and putting on the robe and preparing a feast. Not only has the access door been opened, the Lord has come through it And he comes to you this morning and he wants you to know that no matter how you feel or think, the access is there. Are you accessing it?

Thirdly, not only does it tell us that we have this access, it says that we have this access—
² . . . obtained access by faith into this grace which we now stand. . .

Again, this grace—God's countenance towards you, God's feeling towards you, God's position towards you—is not subjective. It is objectively, unconditionally grace-filled, grace-wrapped, grace-surrounded. His song over you is love. And this is a grace into which we now stand. It's important for us to remember the fact that we stand in this grace, because it is precisely what we need reminding of over and over again every day. Which is why we were talking about the habit-forming practices of the Christian last week.

I don't know about you, but I know my own feelings. I don't always feel as if I'm standing in the grace or that the access door is open or that there is peace. Which is why—remember we said—we need new practices so that we can un-learn old ruts, old habits. I don't know what your old ruts are. Are your old ruts trying to perform for God again? Are your old ruts trying to prove to God that if you are repentful enough he will forgive you again? What are your old ruts, the way in which you try to gain access again? I don't know what yours are; I know what mine are. And I need these new forming habits of being bathed in the Word of God, reminded that in prayer I can sit still and I can rest and know that he is God. And that regardless of my circumstances or in my emotions I sit in grace.

Not only does life meet faith in these things, finally it tells us in verse 2 that:

² . . . we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Rejoicing. This whole the idea of the fact that we now have peace, the fact that we have access, the fact that we now stand in grace—what could be the response, except to rejoice in singing?

One thing that came to my mind as I was thinking about this message this week is when it went down to seventeen degrees, oh, a day ago, and it's now sixty. But. . .Welcome the mid-Atlantic, right? So this is what I was reminded of. What does it look like to rejoice? It's hard for me to speak it; it's just to really tell you what rejoicing looks like in me. Do you know the first seventy degree day during spring—I don't know what you do, but my windows go down in my car and the music goes up. (Sometimes the speed goes up, but that's a different problem.) But you find yourself. . .I feel the warmth. And I just. . .I want to sing, I'm just a happier person. Now for some of you that's cold weather. Fine. Good for you. Wherever it is that you can find a picture of what it looks like to rejoice, that is what this is talking about. You are so full of thankfulness and experiencing joy, you're able to express that. This is what it looks like during belief when this peace, when this access, when this grace breaks in. We can't help but sing. Wonderous rejoicing.

But then we have this challenge, don't we. That while he states these things in regard to what it

looks like during belief, **faith** also has to **meet** with **suffering** and challenge and trial. He tells us in verses 3 and 4 when he says:

³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. . .

Paul is actually suggesting that because of the life of faith [that] brings about the things which we've just heard about, it actually means that when faith in the life of faith meets suffering the first thing that can happen is that there is singing out, even in the midst of suffering. And I want to be clear—Paul is not here celebrating suffering. That is not what he means. Nor is he prescribing it as if it should be something that we ought to seek out. But rather he is recognizing that when the peace, when the access, when the grace, when the rejoicing breaks in to the Christian's heart, that what actually is enabled is that singing can happen in the midst of suffering.

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and writer—his latest book is called *The Righteous Mind*—was thinking about this curious paradox that happens in a person who is a Christian who has faced great suffering. He wrote about a friend of his whose name is Greg. Greg had been through a severe season of suffering. And he visited Greg during the process as he was walking through this period of suffering. Early on it was clear to him as if Greg was experiencing the very deep ravages of a post-traumatic stress syndrome. And then as he was walking through with Greg, he visited him later in the year. And he said something so powerful happened that I choked up. Now as far as I know I have no idea whether Jonathan Haidt is a believer, but this is what he wrote:

“‘I have observed,’ my friend Greg said to me, ‘how in the middle of many operas there was a crucial aria, a sad, moving solo in which the main character turns sorrow into something beautiful.’ And Greg turned to me and he said, ‘This is my moment to sing the aria. I don't want to. I don't want to have this chance. But it's here now. And what I am going to do about it? Am I going to rise to the occasion?’”

Haidt responds and he says he listened and he knew that to have framed things in such a way showed that Greg was already in the process of rising. He recounts how he saw post-traumatic growth in his friend with the help of family, friends, and deep religious faith. He built his life. He finished a book. Two years later he found a better job. He now experiences more joy from each day with his children than he did before the crisis. He said for Greg it radically changed his perspective about what mattered in life.

And so Haidt said something interesting. Again, this is a social psychologist. He says three things happen with regard to suffering. He says that first people who endure and get through suffering become more resilient. Once they have learned to cope they know that they can do it again and live life with less anxiety. Number two. Second, it strengthens relationship, usually bonding the sufferer permanently into a set of deeper friendships or family ties that serve to nurture and strengthen for years. But the third benefit is perhaps the most significant. Suffering changes priorities and philosophies. What once used to be important no longer is. When you once thought you were in control, you now realize in the basement of suffering and difficulty that actually you are not in control, and that was just an illusion.

But what's interesting for Paul is he tells us something about the nature of grace and access and the presence of God in the life of the Christian. It actually enables us—not to celebrate at suffering, but rather be able to sing in the midst of it, to find a grace-empowered aria. It might be mournful, it might feel like a solo act, but the reality is grace enables us to sing. And to be

able to say surely the Lord was in this. But when suffering does happen, part of the singing is this: It actually brings about endurance, it says. Paul tells us that it does, because it fundamentally changes our ability to understand what is the meaning of life, what is important in life. This is the changing of the philosophy, the changing of the priorities.

The reality is, as a person who used to ride his bicycle a lot, I have now lost the fitness that I once had. But I know enough about fitness which scares me to get back on the bike again, because I realize something about gaining fitness. The only way to strengthen and to deepen your endurance is to suffer through longer and longer rides. The only way you get more fit is through suffering. The only way that the Christian, enabled and empowered by grace, deepens endurance in this life is when we go through seasons of suffering.

David Brooks, a writer in *The New York Times* who has written a book on character, has one of the most explicit declarations of the Gospel in this book on character. I do wonder whether he's converted to the Christian faith, because it is so clear. One of the things he says in *The New York Times* in 2014, he said: "Suffering gives people a more accurate sense of their own limitations—what they can control what they cannot control. When people are thrust down into these deeper zones they are forced to confront the fact that they can't determine what goes on there." He continues, "It's at this point that people in the midst of difficulty begin to feel a call. They are not masters of the situation, neither are they helpless. They can't determine the course of their pain, but they can participate in responding to it. Many people don't come out of suffering healed, but they do come out different. They crash into something which is illogical. Instead of recoiling from all sorts of loving commitments that always involve suffering, they somehow throw themselves more deeply into them. Even while experiencing the worst and most lacerating consequences, some people double down on vulnerability. They hurl themselves deeper and gratefully into their art, their loved ones, and commitments. The suffering involved in their tasks becomes a great and fearful gift, very different than that equal and other gift, which is happiness, as it's conventionally defined."

And he's contrasting something. He said, "In one period of three months in 2013, one thousand books had been written on trying to maximize happiness." But Brooks said something interesting about those around him, including himself, who experience seasons of suffering. That as they recount stories in their life, often it's not they go to the happy times—they tell about the ordeals and what they learned through it. Because something paradoxical happens in the midst of suffering, and for the Christian it is no less true—in fact, it is more true. Not only do we recognize that we have these great gifts of peace and access and grace and rejoicing, it's particularly during suffering where our endurance is deepened, and yet our experience of those same things become all the more sweeter, all the more real. And because our priorities and our philosophies have been turned upside down, we realize we're no longer in control. Our experience of the access of the grace, of the peace with God, not only takes on more real nature, we recognize how much more we need it. And oddly, not only does our experience of them grow deeper, so does our endurance.

But something else happens. Our character is formed in the process. What does Paul mean by character? I think he means what he talks about is the fruit of the Spirit as we looked at last week. Or what happens in the life of the believer is that when you experience suffering, somehow by God's grace and through his Spirit you become keenly aware of others who are experiencing suffering. It softens you. And you knew what it was like to receive love. You knew

what it was like to receive grace in the midst of trial and difficulty. And that becomes for you a calling card to be the same for others. Character is formed.

It's precisely what Brooks said when he said, "Instead of recoiling from the sorts of loving commitments that almost always involves suffering, people who have gone through suffering throw themselves more deeply into them. Even while experiencing the worst and most lacerating consequences, some people double down on vulnerability." And that's what grace, the Gospel, does in the heart of the believer as they endure the process of suffering. God forms character: a softer, loving, more vulnerable person. Because that which used to be your pride has been stripped away. You're no longer in control. Have you felt that? Have you felt what it's like to recognize when you're not in control, but you're in the Father's hands? What it looks like to actually rest and be at peace, to be more real with other people? It's a powerful thing, but it is a gift. It is a gift of faith that enables us to rejoice in our sufferings.

Finally, **Suffering Meets Hope**, when he says here in verse 5:

. . .⁵ and hope does not just put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

It means that for the believer ~~that~~ there is hope, because this suffering in this life is not the end of the story, but the resurrection is. And if the resurrection is the end of the story for Christ, that all those who belong to Christ, all those who believe by faith in Him, who have received these great gifts which we have spoken about—then the end of the story is not suffering or death, but resurrection and rejoicing.

It's important to know the end of the story, and then that gives hope in the midst of our challenges. I was thinking about this, yes, with a new Star Wars film, "Rogue 1." Now how is that possible? Because after reading several reviews I didn't want to go see it. In fact, I remember saying to our staff folks and others and the Shogers who I went with, I was saying to myself: Why am I going to see this film? I already know the end of the story. I said this to Pastor P.D. And he said to me yes, but you don't know how they got there. So true. That's totally my next point. Because here's the reality. I do know the end of the Star Wars film. OK, so it's been a . . . OK, the empire is destroyed. Right? The rebellion wins, right. But how did it happen?

The reality is this. We know the end of the story, but we don't know the journey through which we will walk to see the end of the story. We also don't know how and precisely what paths we're going to be taking. But there is hope because we know the end of the story, and no matter what suffering we face now, and no matter who ridicules us, no matter who asks us, "Where is your God?" we can simply open to the Scriptures and say: My God allows me to express questions and doubt and grief and mourning, but I can also rejoice that I am not a product of chance or time and circumstance. I am a product of a gift of love and life. That the end of the story is not my suffering and not my failure. Indeed, my failure only enables me to recognize how great he actually is and how not, 'I'm so great.' But rather he is. Therefore the hope that we have isn't the low hanging fruit of, oh, I can just be happy. No, it's the far deeper realities that in the midst of suffering I can declare: Lord, I do not like this. I do not want to be in this. But I can declare by faith in Jesus Christ through the access that has been given to, us standing in the grace—this is not the end.

But not only are we able to say that we can have hope in the midst of shame, we can say we can also hope in the midst of suffering because the love has been poured out. He tells us right here:

⁵ . . . God's love have been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

So therefore by the Spirit's presence, who right now is already testifying, because some of you've already said Amen, and those of you who haven't I trust that the Holy Spirit is working—is that the Holy Spirit takes these truths and enables you to recognize, to receive, and to rejoice that the great gift of hope in the midst of life is there. Because why? God's love has been poured out, and it's been poured out through the person of the Holy Spirit who is now residing in the life of the believer. Therefore we can declare that this divine gift—though it is a mystery—it is none the less the presence of God with His people and his love being poured out.

And so during belief we can declare that yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. He is with us, and his is the gift of salvation. His is the gift of love which has been poured out. And for the believer there is peace, there is access there is grace so that we can sing. May the Lord enable you to sing.

And as we sing, we do so around a table, a table which is a feast. And friends, don't think of a feast because of how big the pieces are or how big a cup is. That's not. . . It's the significance of what these points us too. And there are some weeks when we celebrate the Lord's Supper as those who are remembering what Christ has done for us, and we do that and we think that it is a time of solitude and silence and rather quiet. And there's an appropriate time and place to do that. But there's another time when we receive this Supper as a people who are rejoicing, because the psalmist says he has set a table before mine enemies, in the midst. This is the table of the Lord. This bread is his body; this cup is his blood. And when we eat of this bread and we drink of this cup we do so in the midst of life, in the midst of challenge and suffering. And as we take and eat and as we take and drink we can say that the end of the story is not what I'm presently experiencing, but what this Supper points me to, to the victorious Savior. And that this is one less meal we will eat between now and when Christ returns. And when we take of this bread and we take of this cup this morning may we remember that this is pointing us to the great feast when Christ returns. This is what we celebrate at Christmas: the giving of Christ, that we might respond to God's covenant promises, to be a people of rejoicing.

Let's pray. Father, we now pray that you would feed us. That you would give us by your Spirit an experience of your love this morning as we celebrate the Supper, that we can declare—not by our subjective experience, but because of your objective declaration—that something has actually changed. That we now have peace, we now have access, we now have grace, because we now can rejoice. Father, enable us to do this. We give you thanks and praise. In Jesus' name. And all God's people said: Amen.