

Standing in Grace

Our New Testament Scripture reading is from Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 5, beginning with the first verse. The apostle has been expounding the teaching of how we as sinners are made right with God through the death of Christ. By our faith in what God has done for us in Christ, we are made right with God. Our sins are forgiven and we're given a right standing with God and the gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus. Now in chapter five, Paul gives one of his "therefore" transitions, listing the results of our being made right with God. (As someone has said, "Whenever we see a 'therefore' in Scripture, we need to understand what it's there for!").

Follow as I read Romans 5:1-5: *Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

The verb "to stand" means more than to be physically erect, or to literally be on one's feet in a physical posture. The older I get, the more I understand how difficult it will become for me to stand, at least without some assistance. But "to stand" has a meaning that's only illustrated by the literal definition. It means also to take a position, to be firm against opposition, to endure with perseverance, or to be in a fixed position, etc. We realize what we mean when we sing, for example, "Stand up for Jesus, you soldiers of the cross," or "I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus, the Nazarene." One old song I recall singing is "Standing on the Promises of Christ the Lord."

Paul uses this concept, in the Greek language, of course, to say we who are followers of Christ and have mercifully been made right with God, are standing in grace. This grace he describes for us in the first chapters of his letter to the Romans. Like us, these people had been entrapped by the prevalent cultures of paganism and also religion that had served to separate them from God's love. The good news of God's love is that he, by giving his Son to die for us, provided the means of our forgiveness and being made right with him. Grace is a big concept that means, among other definitions, the work of God that we desperately need but could never deserve.

No one better described it for us than John Newton, who as a radically converted former slave trader and moral degenerate, wrote the well-known words,

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see.

Paul says that we who identify ourselves as Christians have received God's grace, and now, in fact, stand in that grace. We're firmly positioned in God's amazing grace. The picture is of a temple or perhaps a throne room called "Grace," and God has invited us in. In fact, he's escorted us into this treasure room called Grace. One scholar (John Stott) says the picture here is of our having been escorted into God's presence, like a subject being escorted into the throne room of the king, or a worshiper being escorted into the temple's most holy place. And now that we've been escorted into the throne room and are given an audience with the king and great high priest, we stand there and remain there permanently. There's no time limit to our audience with King Jesus.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews pictures this invitation, reminding us to enter boldly God's presence and come before his throne of grace to receive his mercy and to find his help in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). God invites us into his grace and wants us to stand there, to take up a firm position with him, and to never fear we'll ever be outside of his love and grace. As our high priest, he's also the Christ who sacrificed himself with us, showing us on the cross how much he loves us.

We stand on our privileges. And this isn't to exclude anyone, because his grace is available to all who will come to him. But, as an American Express commercial some years ago put it, "Membership has its privileges." What a privilege it is to have this permanent access to God's grace, which means we're promised everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

Paul reminds us that we're given peace with God. The barrier that was erected by our sin and failure to live up to the call of holiness has been torn down, and God has crossed over into our lives and made us his friends, as well as his remade, everlasting children. Like a loving parent who watches over their sleeping children, so God watches over us. I love the imagery of God's peace watching over us as guarding us like a soldier, a sentry. We have the peace of God because the God of peace is with us, even inside us, watching over our hearts and minds (Philippians 4:7-9).

When my son, Kyle, was a young boy, he had a fixation about monsters, especially at night. When I would tuck him into bed, say his prayers with him, the last thing I'd do is open his bedroom closet door and "shoo" all the imagine monsters into his closet, close the door, and say, "Now they can't get out and you can go to sleep!" It probably wasn't the best therapy for a young boy, but it seemed to get the job done. He would go to sleep with confidence in my command of the monsters. And so, Almighty God, who has all authority and power over all forces of evil, including our imagined "monsters and

persistent fears, will command these to leave us and will give us the peace we need to rest in his love and care.

Paul rejoices in the hope for sharing in the glory of God, which means he had an eternal Kingdom-of-God perspective on life, that there was an amazing, everlasting future awaiting the children of God that made all of the trials and sorrows of this present life fall into their proper perspective. But Paul also says, in addition to our future glory, there are present benefits to our trials, difficulty and suffering.

God is at work in all our circumstances for our eternal good (3-4). Romans 8:28 is often used incorrectly to say that all of life's problems and tragedies will work themselves out for a good and well-rewarded life in the present. But Scriptures speak instead of the eternal good that results from our earthly trials. God doesn't make things work out always for improved present circumstances, but rather works in us during our trials and suffering to produce a more Christ-like character.

These characteristics of endurance and strengthened character are reflective of Christ himself, and of Christ living and leading within us, to reflect his presence in our world where we live. Throughout his letters, Paul uses athletic imagery to convey the idea that we're always in spiritual training, and need, like an athlete, to condition ourselves by daily exercise and discipline. I know that in my past history as an athlete, I never enjoyed conditioning very much, especially during the hot late summer months of football practice. But when game days began, I was thankful for the good training, hard work and discipline behind a victory in the gridiron.

These admonitions to rejoice in suffering can come across as a bit unrealistic when we lift them out of their total context, which includes the *good results* when bad things happen to us. To illustrate, when your car breaks down on you or you have a flat tire, it's a bit unrealistic to expect to say "Praise the Lord, my car broke down!" You're not happy about that immediate problem. But then you discover that as a result of your delay you avoided a mass collision up ahead, or you may have been introduced to a wonderful friendship with the person who helped repair your car. So, we can rejoice in the results of our trials, realizing nothing is wasted on us.

When I was a young pastor, I visited a lady in the congregation who was facing a difficult surgery and long prospect for recovery. As I drew my hospital visit with her to a conclusion, I read some Scripture and then asked her what I should ask the Lord to give her through my prayer. She said, without hesitation, "Pray that none of this experience will be wasted on me." She understood the idea in our text, that God will produce a good result from our trials if we respond to them in faith. And that's what Paul says is the reason we can rejoice in our trials—it won't be wasted on us because God will work in us his conditioning, to strengthen us in endurance and in a godly character.

The response of faith is essential if we're to benefit from our trials. Without faith, we can easily become bitter. With faith and trust we should become better. I've seen this exemplified in people I have sought to shepherd in times of trial—people becoming bitter against God and those who are strengthened in their hope of the glory of God. And, it's been true in my personal experience as well. I've responded to my trials with immediate bitterness and anger towards God until I regained my spiritual legs, and was able to see the hand of God and sense his grace working things out for my eternal good. So, what I'm saying is, sometimes the joy lags a bit behind the trials, but it surely will come as you begin to see the hand of God.

As we respond to trials with persevering trust that results in character building, we are given new and profound hope of sharing God's glory. If we only knew the glory that awaits us in the eternal kingdom, our present trials would appear small by comparison (Rom.8:18). But we don't have to wait for the consummated kingdom, the new heaven and earth. God's glory is given in part to us now. Recently, as I have mutual comfort and God's grace with a dear friend, we have both of us received almost an overwhelming awareness of the goodness and glory of God. The sense of his presence has been so real at times we at times have almost asked God to "let up" on his blessings and the blessed assurance of his love.

I want to encourage you to let God turn your trials, suffering and disappointments into occasions for his blessing, for a new awareness of his amazing goodness and love. You may be in the midst of some difficulties that seem overwhelming or that seem intractable, that you'll never be able to overcome. But now is the time to seek the Lord and be reminded of his love, love that was shown us through his suffering and death on the cross for us.

We aren't able to love God until first we realize just something of his incredible love for us. Sometimes we find it difficult to love God because we have an image of him that's been distorted and obscured by the way our parents or others treated us, perhaps denying us the love, affection, attention and affirmation we craved in our childhood. Those who suffered through abusive relationships will need counseling and therapy to gain the right understanding of a loving God. You may be a long way from gaining a right understanding of his love, which he wants to pour into your heart, giving you the peace, joy and assurance you crave. Let me, as your pastor, speak with you and be given the opportunity to help you recover or even discover the awareness of God's love, which will be poured into your heart by the Holy Spirit (5).

Whatever your circumstances, God can enable you to stand in his grace, to stand against the Enemy, Satan himself, who wants to deprive you of joy and peace, to deceive you into thinking that you'll always live with a spirit of discouragement and

defeat. To stand in grace is to be able to have an indomitable spirit, whatever your difficult circumstances.

Years ago, I attended a meeting of the Baptist World Alliance that was meeting in Toronto, Canada. This was during a particularly difficult time, with the lingering war in Vietnam and a general spirit of pessimism. We spend time in group prayer and intercession for fellow believers who were undergoing persecution for their faith. The closing sermon of that conference was given by an African American preacher, who had some inspiring and encouraging words for us and for those at the conference who would return to their homes and ministries in lands of persecution.

The young preacher told about visiting a toy store with his son, who had become preoccupied with a particular toy, an inflated clown punching bag, which was kept upright because of sand in the bottom. When the clown was knocked down by a punch, it immediately popped back up to an upright position. The preacher's boy excitedly called to his daddy to come and see the clown get knocked down, only to come back upright. "Look, Daddy," he exclaimed. "He's knocked down on the outside, but standing up on the inside!"

And that's the way it is for us. We can get knocked down on the outside with suffering and trials, but by the grace of God, we can always stand up on the inside. I pray we'll, whatever we suffer, always stand up on the inside. This is what grace is all about, i.e. standing in grace.