

Prayers

To God

*Sit quietly and think about when you first knew God
What did you feel about God? Was He difficult or easy to understand?
Reflect on whether your picture of God has changed over the years
Praise God for His revelation to you over many years: Hallelujah!*

For Self

*Pray for your hands
Think of what your hands do
Reflect on the good and the bad things they have done
Submit the bad to the Lord your God and wait on Him for His sure forgiveness
Resolve to use your hands for good in whatever way is possible in the coming days.*

For others

Lord God of love and compassion, Your mercy reaches out to all who are hurting today. In power, come amongst us to strengthen those who are struggling with personal difficulties, to comfort those who mourn the loss of someone close, and to bless all who reach out to you in the midst of their struggles or despair. May Your servants always seek to minister to people in their time of need, in Your glorious name we pray: AMEN

Meditation

Lord God, You are the Master of the Miraculous!
Perform miracles of grace, and open up people's hearts
To find the truth of Your Word within the Bible.
Perform miracles of hope, and demonstrate to the world
That true love comes from You and never ends.
Perform miracles of healing, and mend broken bodies
To show the world that You care for all people.
Perform miracles of wholeness, and cure hurting souls
And in 're-creation', breathe Your Spirit into tired lives.
Perform miracles of passion, and bring genuine happiness
To married men and women who truly love each other.
Perform miracles of faith, and repeat them in our churches
Again and again, until revival comes among us in power!
Lord God, Your miracles revitalise our life!

Bible Passage

Romans 5:1-5

¹ Therefore, since we are put right with God by faith, we now have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access (by faith) to this grace in which we now stand, and we rejoice in our hope of the glory of God.

³ Not only that, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that

- suffering produces perseverance,
- ⁴ perseverance produces proven character,
- proven character produces hope;

⁵ Moreover, this hope does not disappoint us, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Bible study Review

This, indeed, is a treasure store within God's Word, and it sets out some of the most basic truths of our faith. It begins with the famous words; '*since we are put right with God by faith, we now have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*' (5:1), and comes to a climax by glorying in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the believer whose hope is in Christ alone (5:5). This is a surprising and fresh way of describing Christian faith, and in addition, the verses in between these two identify key features of Christian discipleship (5:2-4). Every part of this passage merits our lively attention because it is directly applicable, and the closer we examine it, the more it will challenge us as we travel on our own Christian journey.

So far in Paul's letter, we have read his analysis of the human condition (1:18-3:20), and the answer to this provided by the work of Jesus Christ (3:21-26). This allows sinful people to be put right with God, or 'justified', and Paul defends this central Christian truth against those of his own day who wanted to qualify this Gospel by retaining Jewish religious practices (4:1-25). Now, at last, Paul has unburdened himself of the task of explain and defending the Gospel, and these words have the feel of pure liberation. With the first phrase, '*therefore, since we are put right with God by faith ...*', we can almost hear Paul's spirit lift, and he goes on to proclaim the result of God's gracious work through Jesus; '*we now have peace with God!*' He now begins to talk about how the Gospel works in the life of the believer in a powerfully new way.

In the first verse, we find the inspiring phrase '*peace with God*' which is found nowhere else in Scripture. By using the word 'peace', Paul evokes the great Hebrew word 'Shalom', which speaks of peace in its most expansive sense, meaning 'wholeness', 'security', 'welfare' or 'contentment'. Such a peace is denied to those who are trapped in sin because of the way it cuts people off from God, and it is extraordinary to think that this can be overcome by our faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus is our route to the throne of God's grace, where the spiritually healed heart can then rejoice in the eternal hope of God's love (5:2). These verses encourage all God's people to glory in what Christ has done for us and look forward to all that God has for us in days to come, even in eternity.

This is wonderful, but we can almost hear those who would say, 'that's all very well, but life is not that simple!' Paul continues as if to answer such an objection immediately, and the following verses describe real Christian faith by combining some of the realities of life and the hope of glory. He describes each disciple of Christ as standing in two places, firstly in the knowledge of God's great gift (5:2) and secondly in the midst of 'sufferings' (5:3). This sounds difficult, but the Christian can stand firm in the face of suffering knowing that Christ has overcome it and secured a glorious future for those who believe in Him, so suffering is the first step on the journey of faith.

Then, in a remarkable sequence, Paul continues in verses 3 and 4 to explain that Christian discipleship is like a pathway in which Jesus leads us through the perils of life to greater things. Suffering with Christ's help leads to perseverance (5:3), and this perseverance builds up our character, and finally, this growth in proven character yields hope (5:4). In addition, our hope is more than certain and guaranteed, because God has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit (5:5)! The message is complete, the love of God in Christ Jesus is a love that 'does not disappoint us' (5:5)!

Within this rich passage, each phrase invites us to explore further. Now that Paul has completed his detailed description of the Gospel and defended it, he is now free to speak openly about what it means to be a Christian, and we are the richer for what he has written!

Going Deeper

'Peace with God'

This is the beginning of Paul's explanation of the Gospel, as he makes clear by saying; 'Therefore, since we are made right with God by faith' (5:1). It is very important to remember this throughout our examination of this text, for it is all written from the standpoint of someone who knows that they have been 'saved by grace and by faith in Christ Jesus'. This text is not one that will easily explain the Gospel to a sinner (for which the arguments in chapters 2 and 3 are relevant); it explains the consequences of faith to one who has already been saved.

The first consequence of our salvation is that 'we have peace with God'. In a fascinating twist to this letter, some of the most ancient copies we possess (no-one has the 'original', we only have copies) have something slightly different 'let us have peace with God'! Even more puzzling, the most ancient and reliable copy of the whole New Testament in existence has this version 'let us have peace with God', however, in the margin, someone has corrected the copy and written 'we have peace with God'! Of course, one phrase is a statement of fact, and the other is an appeal, and although the difference is very slight in Greek, theologically, it is very different. Did Paul mean that we have the peace of God as a gift ('we have ...'), or did he mean that we must strive for it ('let us have ...')? Clearly, people have been uncertain about what Paul meant from the earliest of times, and this is one instance in which we really would love to have the original letter Paul wrote! Together with most translators, I am of the opinion that throughout Paul's writings, he describes peace with God as a pure gift, and so I have translated it in this way (agreeing with the person who 'corrected' the ancient manuscript!).

Peace with God is therefore a gift of God, but it is not merely the feeling of peace, such as we might sense the absence of conflict. Paul used the word 'peace' with the famous Hebrew word 'Shalom' in mind, which describes peace as something that is active and not passive. God's peace is about health and well-being, as well as prosperity in the widest sense, and also good

order and organisation, such as being at peace when you know that everything has been properly sorted out or arranged. Paul says that our relationship with God is this kind of active peace, and it is something that continues throughout life. God is the healer of our whole beings, body, soul, mind and spirit, and He heals within our real and everyday lives so that we may be assured of His promises of eternal glory.

'The hope of glory'!

The wonderful thing about this new relationship we have with God is that because of our faith in Jesus Christ, God treats us with his grace, which means his undeserved favour, and Paul describes it like this; 'we also rejoice in our hope of the glory of God'. Each word in this phrase has something to teach us; firstly, we will look at the 'glory of God', which is what Paul describes as the end result of our faith and our reconciliation with God. 'Glory' is often misunderstood, but here it means the full majesty and splendour of the presence of Almighty God. This, of course, is something we will only experience at the end time when God remakes all things. However, in our passage, it means that the reconciliation with God we now have through Jesus Christ points us to the day when we will have the full experience of the presence of God, beyond death, remade into a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:44f.) and with our Lord in the 'new heaven and new earth' (Rev 21:1). This is our 'hope', and again, this does not mean some form of chance for the future, but a secure hope based in the fact that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, and He has already shown us the way to this incredible future!

Finally, the word for rejoice is a word which is normally used for referring to boasting, and some translations of the Bible have 'we boast of our hope of the glory of God'. The Greek word used here has a meaning for which there is no simple English word; but it means something like the happy and excited sharing of some good news. This explanation tells us all we need to know, for the fact of our salvation and the path it reveals to our future in the full 'glory of God' is an amazing tale, worthy of being shouted out and shared with excitement amongst all who will hear. Yes, some will call it boasting, but most of us can tell when people are genuinely happy and excited, rather than 'blowing their own trumpet' over something. Faith is about the former, not the latter!

Connecting real life with the 'hope'

Using the same word for 'boasting' or 'rejoicing' (in my own translation, I much prefer the latter), Paul now does something that is typical of his writing in general, although we do not always spot this because we are so used to reading his letters according to our own agendas. In verses 3 and 4, Paul talks about rejoicing in a sequence of things, moving from 'suffering' to 'perseverance' to 'proven character' to 'hope'. This is not a description of a spiritual journey, or some measuring stick against which we can assess spiritual growth, as some preachers suggest. Paul is still speaking in the present, and all of us, including Paul, have lives that contain grief and sorrow and all the features of earthly life. So the question is this; how, in the midst of our troubles, how can our minds and our spirits be lifted to connect with the reality of the future hope we know we have through Christ?

With this in mind, we can see how this passage works. All of us experience suffering, as Jesus told His disciples they would, and yet with faith, our sufferings produce perseverance. Again, some translations use the word 'endurance', but in English, this implies 'keeping going through gritted teeth against the odds', but Paul envisages that because of our faith, we can look beyond our sufferings and endure them with a more patient endurance, knowing that however long our sufferings last, God will bring us finally to His rest. Not everyone who suffers will

persevere; some will give up, but genuine faith gives us the reason to keep going whatever, and do so with joy.

Beyond 'perseverance', Paul perceives that our patience produces what I have called 'proven character'. The Greek word is 'dokime', which means 'something proven', or 'tried and tested'. As before, when faith is at work in us, patient endurance can work to 'prove' and 'test' our character so that we mature in our spirits, and this is what he says produces the 'hope' he has described (5:4,5). The whole sequence then, describes how our experience of life is connected with our hope in the 'glory of God' (5:2), and it is not something like a stairway of spiritual excellence which we have to climb, this is Paul's description of how any believer connects real life with their destiny in Christ. If we have problems with any of what Paul says here, then we do not have a problem with our 'spirituality', we have a problem with faith, and this must be clearly understood.

The work of the Holy Spirit

The last verse is also amazing; and it both confirms what Paul has said and points forward to what he will say later in his letter. If we have real faith, the 'hope of the glory of God' (5:2) is not something that disappoints us because 'the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (5:5). In other words, Paul assumes that the Christian knows the presence of the Holy Spirit, for it is the Holy Spirit who confirms our faith (through the giving of spiritual gifts) and enables all this to make sense.

This text does not explain the power and work of the Holy Spirit, and Paul waits several chapters before talking about the Holy Spirit in more detail (see chapters 8 and 12). But along with 'faith', it is clear that Paul expects Christian readers to know full well what he means by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, as being a small 'sample' of the great 'glory of God' we await in the future. The Holy Spirit is not an addendum to the experience of a Christian, He is central to the life of all God's people.

Application

Discipleship issues

Accepting the Lordship of Christ

There are many things that it is possible to pick up on from this great passage of Scripture, and you will probably find that you are led to a number of them by yourselves. I must draw out two points, however. This passage only has meaning for the believer because of what Jesus has done on the Cross, and it only has meaning because we have faith that what He did has saved our souls for eternity. I am sad to say, but I have been in too many situations where Christian people have attempted to discuss this passage, but they have not yet wholeheartedly accepted the Lordship of Christ and not yet believe that they are indeed saved for all eternity. Without this assurance, Paul's great passage is a mere concoction of words and ideas about faith, and the connections between them make little sense. The logic of this passage is spiritual logic. Too often, those who attend church and search for faith find themselves facing a passage of Scripture such as this, and what is said lies quite beyond them, even if they have attended church for many years. We desperately need to make sure that those who are seeking God's love really do know that Christ has done all things for their salvation.

The importance of the Holy Spirit

Secondly, I cannot emphasise enough that unless we assume that all Christians know the work of the Holy Spirit personally, including what we mean by the gifts of the Spirit (Romans 12:7f.), then the introduction of the Holy Spirit at this point in Paul's letter is strange and means little. A number of commentaries I have read are written by people who have no personal knowledge of this, and a fair number of them comment in effect that they find the reference to the Holy Spirit 'adds nothing to Paul's argument'! In reality, it adds everything. For the authentic Christian experience (as Paul makes clear in his ministry, see Acts 19:1f.) is that upon baptism, the believer knowingly receives the Holy Spirit and may expect to experience spiritual gifts. It is God's presence by His Spirit that enables the Christian to stand in the midst of suffering, and recognise the pathway to 'the hope of glory' spoken of by Paul within this passage. In every generation, Satan has attempted to blind the church to the truth about the Holy Spirit, and rob it of its power, and we should surely be wise to this! Still, where people pray and read the Bible, the truth of God's work in the life of a believer will become known and the power of the Holy Spirit will be evident!

Ideas for what to do

- Read through the sequence within verses 3 to 5, and check out how this relates to your own personal life, if at all. If possible, do this exercise with someone else, perhaps someone you trust, and help your friend as much as you seek to gain help from him or her.
- Pray for all God's people to accept the principle that they can grow through suffering. If we all cease to fear suffering in this world, then we are liberated into doing God's will.

Questions for groups

1. *Discuss in your group which part of this great text of Scripture means most to you as an individual, and why.*
2. *Is there any part of this text that you have previously misunderstood? Why?*
3. *How does the presence of the Holy Spirit help you live your life in a way that is similar to that described by Paul in this passage?*

Final Prayer

Almighty God; pour out Your Holy Spirit upon us as we open our hearts to You in faith. May we have every confidence in what You do with us and what You give us, and may we never to fear the call you have placed on our lives, knowing that You love us and want the best for us. Almighty God, we praise You for the gift of the holy Spirit; AMEN