



## Once an Enemy, Now Seated at His Table

### Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #32

Romans 5:5-11

David Sunday

February 21, 2016

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Father, thank You for the love that cleanses us and sets us free, and for the hope of being saved to sin no more. Open up the fountains of Your redeeming love through Your Word and by Your Spirit that we might bathe in the oceans of the deep, deep love of Jesus and of You, our Father, for us. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Turn to Romans 5—a passage read yesterday by Justice Clarence Thomas at the funeral for Justice Scalia. Dan Huff came into my office on Friday afternoon and asked me how sermon prep was going. I told him I felt like I'd been staring into the Grand Canyon, just gazing at the depths and hesitant even to lift my pencil to write anything, lest I do injustice to the wonder of these words.

This is the heart of the gospel. This is amazing grace. No matter how familiar we are with these words, may we never tire of hearing them and may the Spirit of God take us ever deeper into them. May we marvel at these truths, and may they become more precious to us today through the Holy Spirit. I'm going to read verses 1-11 of Romans 5, but we will focus today on the second part, beginning in verse five. Hear God's holy Word.

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

*<sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— <sup>8</sup> but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup> Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup> For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be*

*saved by his life. <sup>11</sup> More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

This is amazing grace, and thanks be to God for His gospel and the beauty and power of it. Amen.

How many of you are sure of where you'll be and what your life will be like one year from now? What about ten years from now? Or 25 years from now? At the end of this year, Kate and I have our 25th wedding anniversary, and we couldn't have begun to imagine, when we got married, what our life would be like in 25 years. We didn't know Rebecca Sunday, Nate Sunday or Ruth Sunday—or the church that has now become New Covenant Bible Church. None of this would have been imaginable to us. One thing we were sure of is we were not going to be living in Illinois for 25 years—and here we are...and happily so.

What about 50 years from now? If I'm still alive, I'll be 95 years old. I had a great-grandma that lived to be 103, so I could still be around. How many of you are sure of where you're going to be and what your life is going to be like 100 years from now? Now it's starting to get a little clearer, if you're a Christian, right? Isn't it interesting that the further out you go as a Christian, the clearer it gets, the more sure your hope becomes?

What about 1,000 years, a millennium from now? If you are in Christ, you are sure of what your future is going to be like. And don't we sing a song that says, "When we've been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we've first begun"? It's interesting, as believers, that as we go further out, the foundation becomes deeper and deeper and deeper, and we become more and more sure, more confident.

That's where we left off last week. Paul is speaking to us of living in the good of the gospel, telling us we now have peace with God. The war is over; we have access by faith into His presence. He not only justifies us as a Judge, but He opens His fatherly heart to us and welcomes us into the throne room of the King. He wants us to get close.

Then we talked about rejoicing in hope of the glory of God—a sure confidence of things not yet seen that bring joy to us even in the midst of our sufferings. It's a wonderful thing to contemplate the good of the gospel, how it enables us to have this confident future hope. But—as we sing in a song here at church—"Guilt and fear and sorrows rise and hide the promise from our eyes."

Sometimes we feel like we're walking on a rope bridge across a great chasm in the middle of a storm. We see a lot of broken planks. How many of you would want to be walking on that bridge? There's a real abyss underneath. We fear—because of the broken planks of our sin and the gaps along the way where we don't understand what's happening in the journey and the

sufferings we're going through—we fear that maybe we're going to fall into the abyss. And sometimes we wonder, “How can I be sure I'm going to get to the other side? How can I be sure that my hope is certain?” Some Christians feel very insecure at times. Paul says we stand in grace, but sometimes we feel like we're limping along—or not standing at all.

So someone might ask us, “How do you know you're going to be there 10,000 years from now in the presence of God's glory? How do you know this is not just wishful thinking?” The answer is this: this rope bridge that sometimes feels so insecure is unbreakably tied on either end. In the past, it's tied to God's justification of us in Christ—God declaring sinners righteous. On the other side, it's firmly tied to the hope of glory that God promises to believers. He's holding this bridge so it will not fail. If we ever fear we're going to fall through because of our sin, the Christ Who died for us is now alive. He is risen from the dead and He will uphold us. If we ever worry that the storms of suffering are going to cause the bridge to flip over—that we're going to be capsized—the risen Christ assures us that He will continue to save us from the wrath of God. He's holding us fast. We can know that our hope of glory is real, solid, secure and unshakeable. That's what Paul wants us to rest in and rejoice in today.

So the question we're asking is this: how can we be sure that our hope will not disappoint us? Paul gives two ways believers can be sure.

### **The Love of God is Experienced in the Heart**

The first way is in verse five: “...because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” The love of God is experienced in the heart. That's what Paul is talking about here. He's speaking of subjective experience—something you feel, something God wants you to know deeply within you. It's very personal.

It is the job of the Holy Spirit—among many things—to make believers know they are loved with an everlasting love, to cause us to feel the preciousness of what God has done for us in Christ so that we might bask in that love. That's why He's given us the Holy Spirit: so we can know His love. I love the way the King James Version puts verse five: “...because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts...”

God doesn't want us to think of His love as being just a little trickle. His love is being poured out abundantly, as the theologian John Murray describes it. This is indicating an abundant diffusion of His love. The hearts of believers are suffused with the love of God. It controls and captivates our hearts. God wants us to feel like we are bathing in the deep, deep ocean of Jesus' love.

Underneath me, all around me  
Is the current of His love.  
Leading onward, leading homeward  
To Thy glorious rest above.

[Oh, the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus by Samuel T. Francis]

All the way along this journey, the Holy Spirit's role is to assure you of God's love. It's good for you to know that this assurance of God's generous love doesn't depend on your background. You might have come from a family that was not very warm and loving. Because of that, you might feel, "I can never really experience God's love because I didn't taste it in my home." But experiencing God's love doesn't rely on your home. It relies on the Holy Spirit. He wants to make His love known to you.

Notice, too, it's not good preaching that produces this experience of God's love. God uses good preaching, but there's something here that goes beyond just learning the truths, that goes beyond getting your doctrine straight. There is a very real, personal ministry of the Spirit that God wants us to experience.

I love the way Charles Spurgeon puts it. "God's love is like sweet perfume in an alabaster box." The Holy Spirit breaks that box, pours the love of God into our souls, and the perfume fills our entire nature. It's like the fragrance penetrates and sweetens the whole nature of a Christian. Every believer has some of this experience, starting at conversion, when we taste the love God has for us.

But the verb here for God's love being "poured into" our hearts is in the perfect tense, indicating that this is an ongoing experience. As John Stott puts it, "The Holy Spirit has done this in such a way that the initial outpouring remains a permanent flood. He makes us deeply and refreshingly aware that God loves us." When I think of a flood, I think of turbulence, of activity, something flowing over everything. That's how our experience of the love of God should be—like a flood.

So what happens if you're a believer in Jesus, but your experience of God's love is feeble right now? Let me first just say that maybe there's someone here right now who does not feel the love of God at all—and this is the day that God, Who created you, is telling you, "I love you. I want you to know Me and experience My love." God wants you to know His love for you. God doesn't want anyone leaving this room today without entering into the experience of His love. He's done something beautiful to make that possible for you.

But if you're a believer and your experience of that love is feeble or faint, God is saying to you, "I want you to know more. I want you to experience more." Don't settle for a very minimal

experience. You can experience more of the love of God for you, and here's how it's going to happen.

### **The Love of God is Demonstrated in History**

The love of God that is experienced in the heart is, secondly, demonstrated in history. We see this in verses six through eight.

So when you're walking that rope bridge and you're coming to the broken planks—representing your sin—and it starts to swing in the turbulent storms. You're wondering, "How can I experience God's love when I've sinned, or when I'm suffering?" What does the Holy Spirit do to enable you to rest in the experience of God's love for you? He points you to the cross of Jesus.

We see this in verse six, which begins with the word, "For..." Paul is confirming here the love God has for us by bringing us back to what He has done for us in Christ on the cross. What I love about this passage is that it shows us both the subjective experience of Christianity and the objective, historical reality upon which Christianity is based. It's not just experience and no doctrine, nor is it just doctrine and no experience. It's both, hand in hand, through which we come to know the love God has for us.

What if experience was the only basis of our assurance? What would you be if you only had experience? You'd be a fanatic, or you might be merely sentimental, or you might think of spirituality like a hypnotic, ecstatic, head-emptying trance you go into. But that's not biblical spirituality.

Biblical spirituality takes us to content, to doctrine, to historical reality, to the cross, and says, "Gaze on this. Know this. Learn this." But it doesn't stop there. What if doctrine and facts were the only basis of our assurance? Well, then we could become cold and sterile and distant from God, as well as remote and prideful, puffed up with knowledge, but not sweetened or transformed by that knowledge. So it's both subjective experience and doctrinal facts.

As I was thinking about this, I kept thinking of a hymn that you've probably sung if you've been in the church for at least a couple decades. When I was in my 20s and 30s, I started to hate this hymn and banned it from our church. I didn't let us sing this hymn in our church because I thought it was just syrupy sentimentality. I'm repenting of that now. Okay? I still don't really want to sing the hymn, but I'm repenting of my attitude toward it. It's says:

I serve a risen Savior  
He's in the world today  
I know that He is living  
Whatever men may say

I feel His hand of mercy  
I hear His voice of cheer  
And just the time I need Him  
He's always near

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today  
He walks with me and talks with me  
Along life's narrow way  
He lives, He lives, salvation to impart  
*[This is the part I didn't like...]*  
You ask me how I know He lives  
He lives within my heart

(I Serve a Risen Savior by A. H. Ackley, 1933)

Here's the deal. Twenty-plus years ago I heard a theologian say, "That's a terrible song! It bases the resurrection of Christ on someone's personal experience. That's wrong. It's a historical fact. We shouldn't say, 'You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.'" But why, then, does Paul say in verse five, "*And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit*"?

It sounds like Paul is saying we know our hope is real because we experience the Holy Spirit's love within our hearts. That's where he starts, but he doesn't end there. When we are struggling with our experience, what we need to do is go back to the objective realities of what God has done for us in Christ on the cross.

When we read verses six through nine, we start to think, "Well, I know all that. Give me something deeper." But God says, "No, I'm never going to take you deeper than the fathomless depths that are in Christ and His cross." You need to get underneath the surface of your knowledge, and you need to meditate on these truths until the Holy Spirit makes them precious to you. If they're dry, cold, sterile and not transforming you, you need to gaze longer at them. Gaze upon the beauty and power of the cross of Jesus. Isn't that why our Lord gave us the Communion Table to observe often? It's very simple, but we never get beyond our need for the cross.

So here are five aspects of the beauty of the cross of Jesus that I invite you to meditate on as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table:

1. The perfect timing of the cross. Verse six, "*At the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*" That refers us back to history. Quoting an unknown source:

For 1400 years the Jews had the greatest law on earth, and things didn't get better, but worse. Four hundred years before Paul, the world had the greatest Greek philosophers, and things didn't get better through Greek philosophy. Two hundred years before Paul, the Roman Republic had the best government and culture mankind could produce—but it didn't make things better. Man has had every opportunity to save himself, and mankind cannot do that.

At just the right time, when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son into the world. And it was an ideal time for the message of the gospel to go forth, as all roads converged upon Rome, providing a system where the message of the gospel could be rapidly disseminated throughout the known world and the nations could come to faith. So Paul could say in Colossians 1:6 that this gospel was now known in all the world. It was an ideal time in history.

But "*at the right time Christ died for the ungodly*" isn't merely a historical statement. It's also a very personal statement. When do you most need to be rescued? You need it when you're in the direst of straits, when you're at wit's end, when you're utterly helpless. That's when God intervenes to save us—at just the right time. Today might be just the right time for someone in this room. God wants to turn your life around and turn your eternal destiny around. He wants to give you assurance of where you're going to be a hundred, a thousand, 10,000 years from now, through trusting in what He's done in Christ.

2. The great exchange of the cross. Verse six, "*...Christ died for the ungodly*" —in the place of the ungodly. We see it twice in verse eight: "*...God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" He stood in our place as the sacrifice of propitiation, bearing the wrath of God that we deserved, fully absorbing in Himself all the holy wrath that was due us, so now "No wrath remains for us to face. We're sheltered by His saving grace" [from "Why Now This Fear," by Augustus Toplady]. It's a great exchange that enables us to sing:

The mystery of the cross I cannot comprehend  
The agonies of Calvary  
You the perfect Holy One, crushed Your Son  
Who drank the bitter cup reserved for me

**CHORUS**

Your blood has washed away my sin  
Jesus, thank You  
The Father's wrath completely satisfied  
Jesus, thank You

Once Your enemy, now seated at Your table  
Jesus, thank You

(Jesus, Thank You by Pat Sczebel)

3. The cross came to the most unworthy recipients. Look at verse six, “...*while we were still weak...*” —or helpless, or powerless, under the dominion of sin, unable to do anything to save ourselves—that’s when Christ died for us. We also see that not only were we weak and powerless, we were ungodly. We were God-haters. We were not for God. We were ungodly. He says of Abraham in chapter 4, verse 5 – that when Abraham was worshipping idols in the land of Ur of the Chaldees (see Genesis 11 & 12, Joshua 24:2) – he was ungodly, yet believed, and was justified and his faith counted as righteousness. We too, like Abraham, were suppressing the truth by our ungodliness. “Ungodly” is not a flattering description, but it gets worse.

We see also in verse eight that “...*we were still sinners...*” We sin because we’re sinful. We sin because at the spring of our nature, the spring is polluted, tainted by sin. We are born with a sinful nature like Adam, that we got from Adam. We’ll hear more about that later in Romans 5. So we’re powerless, weak, helpless, ungodly sinners. And we see in verse ten, “...*we were enemies...*”—revolting against the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, treacherous in our hearts. Because of these things, God was very angry with us and had every right to be angry. And there was nothing we could do to rescue ourselves. But God made a way.

We see in verse seven the infinite magnitude of the cross of Christ. He talks about how we would “...*scarcely die for a righteous person...*” If you knew right now a very righteous person who was going to be put to death in Chicago, I doubt many of us would be running downtown to try to take his place. We’d say, “No, I’ve got kids to raise. I’ve got a job to do. I’ve got a life to live. I can’t die for a righteous person.”

But maybe, sometimes it happens, that someone will step in for a really good person, for a very kind person who has given much. Sometimes people will die in the place of a good person— but no one is going to step in to die for Jeffrey Dahmer. No one is going to step in to die for Adolf Hitler. That’s way beyond the range of human compassion.

“*But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (5:8). When we were at our very worst, He came and gave His very best. “What wondrous love is this, O my soul?” We see the absolute proof that the cross gives us. How does God show His love? How does He demonstrate His love? He demonstrates that love in the cross of Christ.

So we meditate on this wondrous gift. I love the way Spurgeon speaks of this:

God did the utmost for us when we were the least deserving of it!  
Oh, what love is this! Let it be shed abroad in our poor stony  
hearts and commended by us to others.

[Excerpt from The Wondrous Covenant]

When we were neither righteous nor good, when we were yet sinners, Christ did the most He ever could or ever can do for us. He died for us. This is the best gift for the worst of men, and it's the best gift given to us when we're at our worst state. That's what we're celebrating when we take this bread, drink this cup—the best gift given to the worst men, when we are in our worst state.

So how do we know the hope of glory is real? Well, Paul says if God did this for us while we were at our worst, now that we are no longer sinners who are ungodly and at enmity with God—now that we're His friends, now that we've been reconciled to God and we've received reconciliation—God says, "I'm no longer angry with you. You are now My children. You are now My friends." If God did all this for us when we were at our worst, can we not trust Him to bring us safely home to glory now that we are His blood-bought friends?

And if Jesus was able to save us from the wrath of God when His blood was being poured out on the cross, can we not now trust Him to carry us safely home and save us from God's judgment in the end? Can we not trust that He is risen from the dead, that He has been demonstrated by God to be the One Who paid in full for our sins, and that He's alive now? Can we not trust Him to save us by His very life? If He's done this for us, can't we trust Him for everything else we need?

4. The joy of the cross. Paul says when this message of the gospel gets hold of our hearts, it brings great joy. Verse 11: "*...we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*" We joy in our reconciliation. We joy in the One Who reconciled us. We study this gospel and speak of this gospel to others. We think of our past and all the guilt and stain of our sins in light of this glorious gospel. And instead of always thinking, "Oh, what a mess I've made of my life," we say, "Oh, what glorious grace God has showered upon me, that I should be called a child of God."

When we discover fresh sin in our lives, and when we see how much work still needs to be done in us, we don't despair. We don't doubt. Instead we draw nearer to God. The more we see of His holy love and the more we see of the depth of our sins, the more we see of the precious magnitude of His cross because it's the cross that fills that gap. The greater our sense of His love and holiness, and the deeper our sense of our sin and need, the bigger the cross expands in our view and the more precious it becomes to us.

May that be our experience today. Let's pray.

O God, we humble ourselves before You. We pray, Holy Spirit, that You would break open that flask of perfume, that fragrance of our Father's love for us in Christ, and let it be diffused throughout this room in all our hearts. As we take this bread and drink this cup, I pray that in these precious emblems we would taste and see that You are good, that our future hope of glory is secure, and that You have everything necessary to bring us safely home into Your presence, where for thousands and ten thousands of years we will sing, with all the redeemed saints and angels, "Worthy is the Lamb Who was slain."

Lord, we acknowledge that in ourselves every adjective used to describe us is absolutely true. We are helpless, ungodly, sinners and we are enemies left to ourselves. And whenever we see our sin and ungodliness, we pray You would help us not to defend it or excuse it or make light of it. Just like in the Old Testament when an ox would gore someone that ox had to be put to death, help us see that it was our sin that nailed Jesus to the tree, that gored Him, that put Him to death. Help us therefore put our sin to death—to hate it, to flee from it, fleeing to Jesus, our Savior and our refuge.

O Lord, I pray that You would make Your cross, Your saving work, Your Person more precious and more real to us. Holy Spirit, I pray You would take the things of Christ and impress them on our hearts in such a way that we would experience Your love. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

If you don't know the love of God in Christ, you've heard of it this morning. You can come to God now. If you haven't yet trusted in Jesus as your Savior, bow in this place and say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," and know for sure that He will be—because Christ died for you, and He will certainly save you right now if you call on His name.

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