

Romans 5

[ACME SLIDE]

If Romans is the acme of the bible, then perhaps Chapter 8 is the acme of Romans.

And you can't get from base camp to the summit without the path getting steeper.

In chapters 1-4 of Romans we learnt about God's wrath against the ways of mankind, the coming of his righteous judgement, the law given to Jews to convict mankind of sin, the reality that no-one is righteous.

Things improved as Paul explained that the answer to all this is found in Jesus. That Jesus offers us a righteousness from God. A righteousness achieved by faith, from first to last.

Last week, Ville reminded us of Abraham. To whom God promised more descendants than the stars in the sky. And even though he was a hundred and his wife barren Abraham trusted God. And even when the son God had promised finally came and God asked him to kill his son, Abraham trusted God. Abraham believed God despite the circumstances and God credited it to him as righteousness. The wonderful message of chapters 1-4 is that we are made righteous through faith. Though we are wicked, by faith we are justified in God's sight and escape the penalty of death.

These are some of the elementary, introductory truths of the Christian faith. Many people hear these truths, many believe them, but few progress beyond them. But there is so much more to Christianity than these elementary truths.

In Chapter 5 we move on from the base camp, that is chapters 1-4, and begin to seek for the summit, the acme.

Acme means "highest point". But it has a second meaning which is just as relevant to the book of Romans. Acme also means "the period of full growth, or the full bloom of life" (OED).

[SLIDE 2]

In Chapter 5 Paul teaches us some "growth truths", truths which open the path to the "full bloom of life". We will continue to expand these "growth truths" through Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 of this amazing letter.

My question today is, are we ready? Are we ready to grow? Are we ready to move on from the elementary truths. Are you ready to leave the base camp and start out for the acme, the highest point, the full-bloom of life?

Let us pray

[SLIDE 3]

If you have taken any kind of interest in the Bible, you will know it is full of amazing promises that God makes to each of us.

Let me remind you of one of my favourites. Jesus said to his disciples: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full". THEY is you and me. Everyone who receives Jesus. Jesus declared "I am The Life". Jesus was there in the beginning, he is now and will be forever more. Jesus is eternal life.

If you ask Fred Bloggs whether he has life, if he does not nut you, he may well say: "What? Of course I do!". But no, Fred does not have life. For life is found in Jesus alone. Jesus came to earth that everyone might share the life in him. The life in Jesus is eternal, but it is not just eternal, it is also full. A fullness of life, experiencing everything, in every way, to the full. Jesus came, that we may have life, and have it to the full!

[SLIDE 4]

More than that, in Jesus we may enjoy untold spiritual riches. Despite a lifetime of searching, we cannot hope to understand the greatness of the riches that can be found in Christ. -- *So, I won't try to explain them now.* -- Let me just remind you of Paul's words of praise: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." Every spiritual blessing in Christ. Praise God!

If you ask Fred Bloggs what he thinks of Christians, will he say, oh wow, aren't they so blessed, they seem to be weighed down with blessings, they are so full of life? Perhaps Fred would say, oh yes, they are a people of perfect unity, overcoming strength and freedom from the vices and corruptions of this World. Perhaps Fred would say, oh yes, they are a people complete in every way, a people so rich and free I find their presence and outlook quite contagious.

Well, Fred should. And more than this, for **we** have "all the riches of Christ", life, and the fullness of it.

Now some Christians are known for their peace, their joy, maybe even the light in them. Have you seen The Convent? I caught the end of it on Thursday. I thought it was great. One of the participants, a non-believer, reflected on an inexplicable kind of light she saw in all the nuns. Isn't that great?! **For it is from God, it is God, and it testifies to him.** There is so much of the Life we miss out on. And there is so much the World misses of God for it is not revealed in his people.

In Chapter 5, Paul begins to explain why we may not be enjoying the "fullness of life" we are promised. Paul gives explains how we grow. He lays down truth, which points the way to maturity, completeness and great joy, the full-bloom of life.

[SLIDE 5]

If we are not enjoying the full-bloom of life, if we stagger along in weakness, then we have not learnt the lessons of Chapters 5 to 8. We are "babes in Christ". As Paul puts it, we are still drinking milk not solid food. We are suckling on the elementary truths of Christianity, not prepared to move on to solid food and so grow to maturity.

"Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³You are still worldly." Are you ready?

You can be a babe in Christ however long you have been a Christian. If you need to keep re-learning the truths about salvation and justification in Christ, that are presented in chapters 1-4, you will remain an infant. As wonderful as these truths are, we are called to move on, to grow.

[SLIDE 6]

The writer of Hebrews picks up the same analogy. He says he has much more to teach than he put in his letter but he could not put the more difficult stuff because the people were so slow to learn. He said: "In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

See how the solid food the mature eat is described as: "the teaching on righteousness". If you continue to live on the elementary truths you are an infant in the faith. Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. Milk is not enough for maturity.

So, let us move on, let us get acquainted with the teaching on righteousness. The writer of Hebrews continues with a much-needed exhortation:

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"Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. **And God permitting, we will do so.**" Amen. Let us move on, together.

[SLIDE 8]

Verses 1-5:

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. 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.”

Verses 1 and 2 sum up what we have learned in Romans so far – that our justification, is by faith. This is the elementary experience, the base camp, the experience is threefold: (i) peace with God; (ii) access to God; and (iii) hope of sharing the glory of God (in heaven).

Now, even the elementary experience is difficult for some. Perhaps we are all short of peace and question our access to God, at times. But that might be because we think peace and access to God is all there is. Remember the principle Jesus gave us: that those who have will be given more but to those who do not have even what they have will be taken away. If you stick with the basics only, you will struggle to keep even the basics. If you move on to maturity, even more will be given you.

The moment we believe in Jesus Christ we have peace with God and direct access to Him. We will never have more peace and access. A person who has been a Christian for 50 years is no more justified than the man who just committed his life to Jesus. All Christians enjoy the same blessings immediately, permanently, and continuously. Amen? This is cause for rejoicing! And we do rejoice in this. We are converted to a new course of life and celebrate God's gift of righteousness. As psalmist says, we find a new song planted in our hearts.

The certainty of our avoiding hell for heaven is forever established. This is cause for rejoicing! As Paul observes, through faith, we enter a sense of peace and reassurance of our destiny. Perhaps you remember the day you first came to Christ - and the peace and acceptance that came into your heart! Then, we experience our access to God, a new awareness of God's wonderful presence. A sense that, when we talk to him, he is listening. A belief that we can approach him at any time, in any place. And a hope of heaven sustains us. So, we rejoice in the coming glory of heaven.

But this is not the full-bloom of life in Christ! It is right to rejoice in our salvation but lets not stop there. A Christian life that starts and ends in salvation is a weary and barren one. We look to heaven, and sigh. We say: "Thank God that someday my struggles will be over and I will be up there with him, what rejoicing that will be!" It is true, but there is so much more. There is being ready for earth, not just heaven. Lets get ready for earth, not just heaven.

Look at Verse 3, it begins with these words: "Not only so", in the NIV, the Revised Standard Version renders them "more than that". Not only so, more than that.

Beyond this... in addition to these facts about heaven, and peace with and access to God... more than that, **we rejoice in our sufferings!** We don't just rejoice in the elementary experience, we also rejoice in our sufferings!

**Are you living like Paul and the early brothers?
Do you rejoice in suffering?**

This is being ready for life, on earth. Not all of life is suffering, thank God, life can be very pleasant. I imagine Portugal found last night very pleasant. When the sun shines and we are relaxing in the park, life is good. But Paul takes the worst thing about life: our periods of suffering, our periods of heartache, sorrow and disappointment, our tears and says he rejoices in these times. Not only when the sun shines he says, more than this: "We rejoice in our sufferings".

[SLIDE 9]

This may be hard to accept. We rejoice in our sufferings? It may even seem inappropriate. Could we say to the boys they should rejoice? Could we say it to someone who is bereaved? It did feel a bit like bereavement. I think we need a new slide, I don't want to depress you.

[SLIDE 10]

It may be hard to accept. But it is time Christians took these words seriously, because this is not a special standard, reserved for a few wonderful saints who, by greater faith, lived on a higher plane. Rejoicing in suffering is God's expectation of every Christian. This is our first "growth truth". Yes, it is steeper than the base camp but remember it leads to the zenith, to the full-bloom of life.

And what God expects of every Christian he also equips every Christian to achieve. Each of us will suffer but, in God, each of us can rejoice in suffering. Anything less than rejoicing in suffering is sub-Christian living. Have you learnt to rejoice in suffering?

Let's face it -- most of us feel that being a Christian should excuse us from most of the trials and sufferings. We might say we understand suffering may come, but don't really think it is necessary.

Perhaps we see suffering as a sign that something is wrong. Sometimes we think that if we just keep in fellowship with Christ, things will go well. If we have some difficulty, we think we must be out of fellowship with God, or perhaps Christianity doesn't work after all!

How wrong we are. When Paul speaks of fellowship with Christ, he speaks of fellowship with Christ's sufferings.

[SLIDE 11]

Suffering was the place Paul most had fellowship with God.

And Peter, in First Peter 5:6-10, observes that every Christian everywhere is suffering. Let me read it:

[SLIDE 12]

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you. Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you. (1 Peter 5:6-10 RSV)

We all know about suffering. About illness, financial calamity, bereavement, the failure of friends, controlling desires, failures at work, relationship difficulties, etc. The first step to spiritual maturity is realising that our suffering, trials, difficulties, hardships and disappointment are an indispensable part of the process God uses to make us into the people we long to be.

God loves us too well to deliver us from our suffering before it has done its work. He will deliver us, but not before the work is done in us. See, Peter points out the purpose of suffering too: "After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you." As we read in verse 3, there is a process at work in suffering which produces perseverance/endurance.

Suffering produces patience. You can't get it any other way. Patience must be learned. If you pray for patience, God will bring you suffering, because suffering produces patience. Another word for endurance is fortitude – strength.

[SLIDE 13]

The bible declares that those who persevere are blessed. Remember Job, who persevered despite every kind of suffering, and what God finally brought about. If you persevere under trial you are blessed. For when you have stood the test, you will receive the crown of life.

[SLIDE 14]

In verse 4 of today's passage, Paul explains how, in time, fortitude (or endurance, or patience) produces character. All of the most beautiful characters have been borne in suffering. Mandela, Theresa, Gandhi, Jesus. You can't have a beautiful character without some degree of suffering. Perseverance in suffering produces character.

And, as Paul observes, the growth of character gives us hope that we will receive the crown of life. For we see a work is being done in us. If we know God is at work in us, we know we will be unashamed when Christ returns.

Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

And this hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Paul wants to make clear that our suffering is a direct consequence of God's loves for us. Suffering is not a mark of God's anger; **it is a mark of his love.**

[SLIDE 15]

Remember the passage in Hebrews I mentioned when I spoke on Romans 2. "The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son". So, we are wrong to exclaim "Oh God, what have I done? What have I done, that you should treat me like this?"

It is our character that God wants, and this is why (in love) he introduces suffering, tribulation, trials, disappointments, and anguish into our lives. These are an indispensable part of the process. These things come because God loves us enough to want to see us grow. So the mark of a Christian who has grown to maturity, is that he accepts everything that happens to him, without exception, as coming from the hand of the Lord, and rejoices in what it is doing to him.

[SLIDE 16]

Paul says: "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." (1 Thessalonians 5:18 KJV)

"Well," you say, "I know that I can't do it. I have tried this. I can endure, but I can't rejoice. And, I get awfully upset by these pious Christians who go around with a smile screwed on their faces and pretend like they are enjoying suffering."

[SLIDE 17]

I don't blame you! But it isn't a pretence. When Paul and James say they rejoice in suffering, they genuinely mean they rejoice in suffering.

Perhaps the problem is we don't see what is behind God's work in us. What makes the work possible. This is briefly stated for us in verses 6-11:

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“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

You have probably heard many sermons based on Verse 8. But that is only half of Paul's argument. It is amazing that God loved us while we were sinners. But this is not the whole point of Paul's argument.

Paul observes that, if we have learned to rejoice in the hope of heaven because of the death of Christ, how much more certainly should we can rejoice in suffering because of the life of the risen Christ at work within us. Because of the death of Christ, we can rejoice in the future; because of the risen life of Christ in us, we can rejoice in the present. His death saves us from the judgment of God, but his life saves us from the wrath of God.

The wrath of God mentioned in this passage is not hell it is the silent destruction of the soul and body that inevitably occurs when men disobey God. Men are experiencing this wrath today. Remember the opening chapter of Romans verse 18: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth.”

Remembered how Paul explained that as men refuse God, God leaves them to their bodily passions, their lusts, the foulness of their mind, the pride of their hearts. And these things are taking a deadly toll on mankind. People are coming unglued, their hearts and lives being destroyed. That is the wrath of God -- being experienced right now.

To the Ephesians, Paul said: “Be sure of this, no immoral or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolator) [one who has another god besides God], has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive [you Christians] with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”

Paul is talking about Christians. Christians doing things that the non-Christians live in continually. When Christians do them, the wrath of God comes upon them as well: life begins to fall apart for them as well.

But Christ has come to save us from this. Jesus Christ will not stop justifying you and getting you ready to enjoy heaven. But, more than that, he has made full provision to save you from your meanness, your stubbornness, your selfishness, your bitterness, from all your faults. He does not do it by hounding us with the Law, not by using the Ten Commandments as a whip - but by the impartation of his life -- **his life lived again through us!** [MY JOURNEY]

When we believe in the death of Jesus Christ we are "in Christ," but when we begin to appropriate his life, then it is "Christ in me." Jesus summed up the whole of the Christian life in these words: "ye in me, and I in you." (John 14:20 KJV). That is the Christian life.

I pray that all of us will lay hold of this delivering truth, that we may learn how to live life at its very worst and rejoice in the sufferings that come -- because this is the mark of having appropriated the fullness of the life of Jesus Christ.

And, when this day comes, as Paul points out in Verse 11, we will not only rejoice in the hope of the glory of God - we will rejoice in God himself -- God will be the important thing. We will know him as he is. More important than any circumstance, greater than all his gifts and fully adequate for every situation in our life. El Shaddai, the God who is sufficient.

[Dr. Arthur John Gossip, preached a sermon called When Life Tumbles In, What Then? the day after his beloved wife had suddenly died. He closed with these words: "I don't think you need to be afraid of life. Our hearts are very frail, and there are places where the road is very steep and very lonely, but we have a wonderful God. And, as Paul puts it, "What can separate us from his love? Not death," he writes immediately. No, not death, for standing in the roaring of the Jordan, cold with its dreadful chill and very conscious of its terror, of its rushing, I, too, like Hopeful in the Pilgrim's Progress, can call back to you who one day in your turn will have to cross it, "Be of good cheer, my brother, for I feel the bottom and it is sound." It may be that we will have to feel the bottom too. But let's be of good cheer, for it is sound.]

[SLIDE 19]

Jesus has come, to prepare us to live life at its worst, at its hardest, and to find in Him in a way that makes us rejoice in our difficulties, hardships, trials, defeats, adversities and disappointments. To rejoice in suffering, knowing that God is working in us to make us what we want to be! To lead us to the full-bloom of life.

Let us pray

LATE DELETES

We think that God is interested in getting a certain amount of work done in this world, and we think that the work is the important thing to God, but it is not so. God doesn't need us to do the work that he wants done in the world. He can do that with a rock, or a stone, or a child, or a tree -- it makes no difference. Did not Jesus say, when the Pharisees rebuked the crowds for praising him as he rode into the city of Jerusalem on the triumphal entry -- did not he say to them, **"Look, if these should hold their peace, the very stones would cry out," (Luke 19:40).** That is, God can use anything to do his work. This isn't what he is interested in.

So, if you are a Christian, no circumstance of your life happens to you except that it comes by the choice of God. Now, it is true that he may use Satan, and Satan does attack us, but never without the permission of Christ. Once Peter came to the Lord, trying, in his blindness, to defend Christ, and Christ said to him, "Fear not, Peter. Satan has desired to have thee that he ay test thee, that he may sift thee as wheat. But fear not, I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not," (Luke 22:31-32 KJV). This is what God brings us to. This is the mark of the spiritual Christian. And JC lives to intercede for us.