

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Romans 5:1-11 **“New Life, Real Pain, Bright Future”**

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

ROMANS 5:1-11 "NEW LIFE, REAL PAIN, GREAT FUTURE"

Transition Passage: Already (Present), Not Yet (Future)
 What Is The New Situation In Which Believers Find Themselves?

1) vv.1-2, 3-5 Benefits Of A New Relationship With God Through Christ: Peace/Hope. 1st Plural

Trinitarian Dynamic: God/Lord Jesus Christ/Holy Spirit Work As One, //8:12-39

1a a1 **Therefore**, having been **justified** by faith, we have peace with GOD 1:7, Aorist, Is. 32:17, Objective New Status!

b 2 **through our LORD JESUS CHRIST**. Mediator, Double *dia* (4:13, 25), Justification → Peace (Ps. 72:7)

2a 2' Through him we have obtained *access* to this grace in which we *stand*, *eschekamen/hestekamen*, Eph. 2:18, 3:12

b 1' and **we rejoice (boast)** in our **hope** of sharing the glory of God. 6:14,8:18,21, Col. 1:27, Resurrection Kingdom *Then Boast/Exult*: 1) Hope, 2) In Sufferings, Not For Them, Link Word *rejoice*, Jer. 9:23 *ou monon de, alla* (v.3//v.11), Don't Waste Your Pain! 1QS 10:16-17

3a b1 **More than that**, we rejoice (boast) in our tribulations, 8:18, Distress/Pressure/Pain, Life = An Honest Curriculum
 2 Schools: 1) Suffering As Chastisement (1 Cor. 11:32), 2) Training In Virtue (Rom. 5:3-5)

b 2 knowing that suffering produces endurance (patience), *Sorites/Climax/Graditio*, Climax = *Hope/Love*, Rely On God!

4a and endurance (proven) character, *Endurance* = Sticking Power, *Character* = Approved After Test

b and character **hope**, 5:2, 4:18, Cor. 4:17, *Hope* = Extra Step, Confidence In God's New Future
 //2 Pt. 1:5-7. Ethical Ladder, "Sow a thought... reap a destiny"

5a 3 and **hope** does not disappoint (shame) us, Not Let Us Down, Hope Is Grounded In God's Gift Of Love In Us
 b because God's love has been (and is) poured in our hearts 8:39, Foretaste! Evidence From Experience
 through the HOLY SPIRIT which has been given to us. *dia*, p.v., 15:30, Spirit As Mediator Of Love

H.S. = Source Of Boasting In The Future, Love: Not If Or Because Of But In Spite Of

2) vv.6-8 The Cost Christ Paid Shows Our Great Need, Great Worth. *die* (4x, vv.6-8)

Crescendo :*Weak (Fragile), Ungodly (Immoral), Sinners (God's Law), Enemies (Hostile)*

6 a1 While we were still **weak** (helpless) (*asthenon*) Step 1: AA, Fragile, Unable To Help Ourselves
 2 at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. (*asebon*) 1:18, 4:5, Gal. 4:4, "time had fully come..."

7 b *For (gar)*, one will hardly die/ *Amplification, Appeal To Common Experience, Chasm God Crossed*

c for a righteous man-/ 4 Macc. 17:22, Chiasm/Ring: 1. die/ 2. righteous // 2' good/ 1' die

c' though perhaps for a good man (or thing)/ *Benefactor, Ethics 9.9.1169a*

b' one will dare even to die. In Some Situations, Persons Are Willingly Die For Another

8 a'1 But God shows his love for us in that while we were still **sinners** Not For The Reformed, 1 Jn. 4:10, Jn. 3:16

2 Christ died for us. For Our Benefit, On Behalf Of Us, Our Basis Of Confidence
 vv.9-10, Light To Heavy Argument = *How Much More!* (2x)

1') vv.9-10, 11 The Cost Christ Paid Shows Us Our Great Future, Much more! Benefits!

Confidence! Future Hope By Another Name, Already/ Not Yet

9a a1 **Since, therefore**, we are now **justified** (right-wised) by his blood, p.v. 3:25, Metonymy For *Death, Blood As Life*(v.10b)

b 2 much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath (of God). 1:18, 2:5, 8, 3:5, 4:15, 1 Thess. 1:10, Last Judgment!
 2 Images, 1 Reality Of Salvation! Paul's Own Biography

10a 1' *For (gar)* if while we were **enemies** we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, p.v. Open Warfare! 2 Cor. 5:19

b 2' much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Fullness Still Future, Christ Is Alive!

Descriptors: *weak, ungodly* (2 adjectives), *sinners*, now *enemies* (2 nouns), Ascending Form

11a b1 **Not only so**, *ou monon de, alla* (v.3//v.11) = *not only, but also...*

b 2 but **we also rejoice (boast)** in GOD Joy In God! *Justification/Reconciliation* = 2 Metaphors For Salvation

c 3a **through our LORD JESUS CHRIST**, //5:1, 2a, Double *dia*, 3:27 No Human Boasting, 2 Titles

d b through whom we have now received our reconciliation. //v.10b, 2 Cor. 5:18-20, Comprehensive Act

5:12 Shifts To 3rd Person, We Live In A Healed Relationship, Therapeutic Model

Boasting: 2:17, 23 (Jews On Law), 3:27 (No Room Before God), 4:1-2 (Abraham Before God), 5:2 (Hope), 3 (Affliction), 11 (God)

Victorious Passage, Top Of The Mountain View!

John Chrysostom, "If God gave a great gift to enemies, will he give anything less to friends?"

<u>Salvation Past</u>	<u>Salvation Present</u>	<u>Salvation Future</u>
Christ came, died for ungodly, rose	Peace with God	Share God's glory
We are set right with God in trust	Full access to grace now	Resurrection bodies
Hope is restored	Suffering transformed into virtue	No suffering
Holy Spirit dwells within	Love poured into our hearts	Love unending
Saved by his death	Reconciled with God	Saved by his life
Jesus as mediator (<i>through</i>)	Jesus as mediator (<i>through</i>)	Dwell with the Holy Trinity
Justification (realigned)	Sanctification (renewed/remade)	Glorification (enjoyment)

A Brief Treatment Of Romans 5:1-11

Rhetorically, 5:1-11 is a *transitio*, a paragraph that sums up what came before and previews what's ahead, a bridge of sorts. The structure is a 3:1 chiasm (1. vv.1-5, 2. vv.6-8, 1' vv.9-11) with multiple inclusions in the frames (1//1'): *Therefore, justified, God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, we rejoice, more than that/not only so* (Gk. *ou monon de, alla*). This sets off the center as the focus with its claim about Christ's death, i.e. that it is not for the righteous or good but for *the weak, the ungodly* (v.6), *sinners* (v.8), and even *enemies* (v.10a): a crescendo of escalating diagnostic terms! Additional rhetorical techniques are: inclusions (vv.1-5//vv.9-11), the use of double *dia/through* (vv.1b-2a, vv.9-10, vv.11c-d), word play in v.2a (*access/echekamen, we stand/kestekamen*) and in v.6 (*weak/asthenon* and *ungodly/asebon*), *hope* as a link word (vv.2b, 4b, 5a), a word chain (*sorites/gradatio*) leading to a climax (vv.3-4), an appeal to common wisdom (v.7), arguments *from lesser to greater* (vv.9-10, implied in vv.6-8), the cultural theme of *boasting* (vv.1-3a, v.11b), alternating past and future tenses to set us amidst a dynamic process. Theologically, the invocation of God (v.1a), the Lord Jesus Christ (v.1b), and the Holy Spirit (v.5b) is proto-Trinitarian.

The framing subunits (1. vv.1-5 //1' vv.9-11) each have two parts (a-b). First an assertion introduced by *Therefore* (v.1a//v.9a), followed by an elaboration that heightens the claim beginning with *More than that* (v.3a)//*Not only so* (v.11a). The claim of vv.1-2 is that we have been reset in a right relationship with God through grace-enabled trust and so hostilities have ceased: *we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*. A second benefit (v.2a) is access to divine favor, a third that we now *rejoice* in our glorious future with God (v.2b). The form is a 4:2 ring (1-2//2'-1') with *God* as an inclusion (v.1a//v.2b) and a double *dia/through* at the center (v.1b//v.2a). An extraordinary claim is taken to an even higher register with the phrase *More than that* (v.3a). We not only find confidence in our future but in present struggles where God is turning pain into a capacity to endure; such fortitude builds the convictions of tested character that produces hope. Such hope will not end in the shame of disappointment because even now love is poured into our hearts through the indwelling Spirit. Future hope has a grounding in the love that keeps flowing our way (v.5). The form of b. vv.3-5 is a three part progression: 1) an assertion (v.3a), 2) a claim to knowledge and growth in virtue (vv.3b-4c), 3) an outcome or telos (v.5).

The form of the central sub-unit (2. vv.6-8) is a 6:2 ring (a-b-c//c'-b'-a') with a contrast between *righteous* and *good* at the center (c//c'), the parallel phrases *will hardly die // dare even to die* in b//b', and a statement of Christ's death for the *weak/ungodly* (a. v.6) and *sinners* (a' v.8) in the outer frames. It is conceivable that someone might die for a *righteous person* or *cause*, and a bit more likely if the person or cause is *good* (a benefactor). But God's *agape* love is shown by Christ's death *for us* when we had nothing to commend ourselves, when we remained *helpless ungodly sinners*. We do not deserve such, but have it anyway based on the lavish nature of the divine lover. In the Messiah, also *the Son* (v.10a), God acts. This is what the language of mediation, *through our Lord Jesus Christ* (v.1b), means. It costs God everything to come in the person of his filial agent and absorb in love the worst we had to give. Jesus does not change the divine character but fully reveals it as suffering love and forgiveness.

The final subunit (1' vv.9-11) parallels the first, as noted above. The first part (a. vv.9-10) uses two parallel *how much more* (Gk. *pollo mallon*) arguments to contrast the lesser present event (*justified, v.9a // reconciled, v.10a*) with the greater future event of full salvation (*saved by him from wrath, v.9b // saved by his life, v.10b*). The double images of *justified* and *reconciled*, from the judicial and diplomatic realms, remind us that the mystery of salvation requires multiple complementary metaphors to show its fullness. The second part (b. v.11) again raises the level with its *Not only so*. Our privilege is to brag on the God who showed up at ground level in Jesus with the offer and gift of a reconciled relationship.

NEW LIFE, REAL PAIN, GREAT FUTURE

“... at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”

What it took God to change our reality.

R O M A N S 5 : 6 b

It was her sixteenth birthday, August 14, 1945. Her date, son of a prosperous planter in lower Florence County, had his father’s Buick for the evening. Rationing was in effect with gas in short supply, but not tonight! All dressed up, a meal and movie, perhaps *Anchors Aweigh* with Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra— one of the year’s big films.¹ It was one of the markers of life for a young woman from a small tobacco farm, and every night round a kitchen table lit by a single bulb, prayers went up for her brother Glenn, then an F6F Hellcat pilot somewhere on a carrier in the Western Pacific.

The Buick turned off the Old Georgetown Highway and onto the dirt lane that led to the house with the chinaberry tree in the bare, sandy yard. “Mr. Turner, I’m here to pick up Betty Jean, and I’ll have her home on time.”

“Now Joe, take good care of my youngest,” he said as they shook hands. The seventeen mile drive from Coward to the big city was full of conversation: a couple they planned to meet, news from the war, her recent graduation at fifteen from a school named after Joe’s grandfather, *J.C. Lynch High School*, and planning their next secret flight.

Yes, I did say secret flight. Joe, a year older at seventeen, was a novice who rented a bi-plane. What an adventure! Sneak off with some excuse, roll the plane out of the tin-roofed hanger at the Florence airport, check oil and gas, spin the prop till the rotary engine fired, then climb in wearing leather caps with ear flaps just like Snoopy, he at the controls, she in the back seat. Clip the

¹ “1945 in Film,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1945_in_film.

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harness that keeps you from tumbling out, bump down the grass runway and pull back on the stick, climb for altitude, and head for the Pee Dee River.

The first time I heard this tale it took my breath away. My mother doing crazy stuff, hiding the truth from us till I was married! My mother was once young and foolish, trusting her life to a seat-of-the-pants barnstormer! A low gas gauge or moment of pilot error, and I might not be here!

Then came the big lazy turn to align with the river. Lower and lower till just twenty feet off the water, banking left and right at the bends. A rakish daredevil impressing the girl with auburn hair. It worked until she met the handsome young intern who broke the spell of Joe's multiple proposals and the diamond ring she returned to him several times! But when they arrived in Florence that sweltering Wednesday evening, the town was in an uproar, everyone out in the streets shouting and making noise with whatever was at hand, including metal trash can lids. Fire engines and police cars riding up and down the streets, sirens blaring. It was chaos. What was going on?

Mr. Turner had been in the fields that day with the share croppers. The radio was off in the house and later in the car; they'd all missed the news. Japan had surrendered. VJ day, Victory over Japan, my mother's 16th birthday. So what did the young folk do? Why, they got out of the Buick and joined the party. To this day she cannot remember whether they ate anything or made it to the movies! The official end of hostilities. Peace had come home again. Yes, there was much left to do to enter the peace, eventually turning Axis powers into allies, but a new state was now in force, and the name for that official new status was *Peace*. And when she got home, it was, "Dad, did you hear? You won't believe what happened in Florence! Glenn's coming home!" On the way to a birthday, Joe and Betty stumbled into peace.

When people used the word *peace* in the first century, there were two versions, one Roman, one Jewish. There was the fabled *Pax Romana*, the peace Caesar forced at the point of a spear.² Peace through strength, peace through

² See John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2008).

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war and occupation and – where necessary– through the raw brutality of crucifixion.³ Jesus was strung up for sedition, for the pretension of being a Jewish king; it’s why the sign over his bloody brow read *Jesus Nazarenius, Rex Judaeorm*, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews;”⁴ in other words, this is what Rome does with the competition. Jesus had one vision of peace, Rome another, and it looked to all on that Friday that Jesus and his version lost. Had not Easter been God’s trump card, all Jesus would have been was a small footnote to a long list of failed Jewish reformers. Without Easter, no Gospels!

A second vision of peace was distinctively Jewish, and the Hebrew is *Shalom*, still used as a greeting in Israel. And it means, not just the absence of hostilities, a peace enforced with violence, but a state of wholeness when all ones relationships are rightly ordered along four axes: with yourself– what we call *peace of mind*; with others– what we call *the beloved community*; with the natural world– what we now call *ecology*, and vertically with God as his children– what we call *grace and faith, the family of God*.⁵

All is well, life now flourishing in every dimension. This is the *shalom* style of peace Jesus inherited and enacted. He came with an offer of peace and demonstrated the results in village after another. When he showed up, *shalom* showed up, the power of love in his words and touch. Now they still lived in the same old world of sin and evil, of demons and disease and death and domination by Rome because the kingdom of God was not yet here in fullness, only in preview, but what happened through him was real, which is why we have all these conversion and exorcism and healing stories in the four gospels. It was the greatest concentration of miracles in the ancient world. It was as if God overcome all barriers and come near enough to make a difference, and he had!

The largest version of the Christian story is that God the Father sent God

³ For the historical evidence, see Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2007).

⁴ Mark 15:26.

⁵ Charles Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 131-132.

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the Son as Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to make this revelation and do the heavy lifting to give all people a way to come back into peace with One who made them.⁶ And this is the new status Paul the Diplomat announces in verse 1, “Therefore, having been set right with God by trust, we now have *peace with God*.” And how is this accomplished? *Through our Lord Jesus Christ*, who because of his resurrection now carries the title *Lord*– the Old Testament name for God, and the title *Christ*, which is not his new last name but the Greek for *Messiah*, the good king the Jews longed for. So we read from Isaiah in Advent:

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called
‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, *Prince of Peace, Prince Shalom*.’”⁷

The man Jesus is revealed in history as God the Son, thus full deity or *Lord*, and as the one who fulfills the long history of Jewish longing for a perfect king, thus *Messiah* or *Christ*. So when the kindness and invitation of God come to a person, as they do to us all, and when we rely on Jesus to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, what then transpires under many names– be it *born again, justified, reconciled, adopted, or saved*– is that we are set in a new right relationship with God, and one of the chief benefits is *peace with God*.

Then, with life’s central issue settled, we begin the long, uneven process of letting *peace* work its way out through other relationships. The fancy name for this is *sanctification*, meaning us becoming evermore *whole* and *happy* and *holy* and *wholly* devoted to loving God and his kids in the midst of the mess of a broken, contrary world.⁸ God sets us into a new relationship of acceptance,

⁶ This is the core narrative of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds.

⁷ 9:6.

⁸ Classic U.M. Teaching is found in our Confession of Faith, Article XI: Sanctification and Christian Perfection, “We believe sanctification is the work of God's grace through the Word and the Spirit, by which those who have been born

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and then in the safety of that goes to work on us from the inside out by teaching us just who he is as displayed in Jesus. We literally *taste and see* that the Lord is good,⁹ and a hope is born about just how good it may become when we cross into God’s visible glory, which is what Paul offers in the second half of verse 2, “... and we rejoice in our hope of sharing God’s glory.”

When God comes to us– to use a homey analogy– we are burned out light bulbs, or to use Paul’s increasingly serious list of non-compliments: we are *weak and insipid, ungodly and perverse, sinners who delight in what God forbids, and enemies at war with God*. But God fixes the filament, plugs us in, and restores a little spark of light, a little glow within. Over time, and as we are able to bear it and grow in our capacity for more of God, the juice is turned up, and we become even more luminous light-bearers; and if you could see where it’s all headed, it would blind you. We will share God’s luminosity; we will shine with love and wisdom in new industrial strength resurrection bodies just like that of Jesus, now fit for life and work in the kingdom of God, which is the entire

again are cleansed from sin in their thoughts, words and acts, and are enabled to live in accordance with God's will, and to strive for holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Entire sanctification is a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one's neighbor as one's self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God.

We believe this experience does not deliver us from the infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes common to man, nor from the possibilities of further sin. The Christian must continue on guard against spiritual pride and seek to gain victory over every temptation to sin. He must respond wholly to the will of God so that sin will lose its power over him; and the world, the flesh, and the devil are put under his feet. Thus he rules over these enemies with watchfulness through the power of the Holy Spirit” (*The Book of Discipline* 2012: 73).

⁹ Psalm 34:8.

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universe healed and restored as our forever stage and cosmic playground.¹⁰ Sometimes you catch a glimpse of the glory in someone’s face when joy bubbles up, and then– in a flash– the shine is gone again, but one day it will never fade.

In his book *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis uses sanctified imagination to describe what those new bodies might be like. This is what he sees:

“I saw people coming to meet us. Because they were bright I saw them while they were still very distant, and at first I did not know that they were people at all The earth shook under their tread as their strong feet sank into the wet turf. A tiny haze and a sweet smell went up where they crushed the grass and scattered the dew. Some were naked, some robed. But the naked ones did not seem less adorned, and the robes did not disguise in those who wore them the massive grandeur of muscle and the radiant smoothness of flesh. Some were bearded but no one in that company struck me as being of any particular age. One gets glimpses, even in our country, of that which is ageless– heavy thought in the face of an infant, and a frolicking childhood in that of a very old man. Here it was all like that.”¹¹

Now that we’re back in the family, guess what? We can come into God’s presence with anything and everything that concerns us, as Paul highlights in verse 2, “Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we already stand.” You don’t have to make an appointment, go through a secretary, a pastor or priest. The God of the Universe, your Father through Jesus, is as near as a thought. Tim Keller wrote, “The only person who dares wake up a king at 3:00AM for a glass of water is a child. We have that kind of access.”¹²

¹⁰ Romans 8:18-25.

¹¹ “C.S. Lewis On The Wonder Of Our Resurrection Bodies,” PreachingToday.com search under Romans 5:1-11.

¹² Michael Bird, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 168.

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The war is now over. We quit fighting God because Jesus took the big hit for us all. He came towards us bearing a white flag, and we shot him dead and then went out to scavenge his clothes. But now that he has a deathless frame instead of mortal one, he just keeps coming towards us with God’s offer of peace. “I am not your enemy,” he says, “I am your friend, so let me help.” And if he wins our trust by his love and actions, we lay down our arms in surrender and trust we will not be harmed. We find ourselves embraced and reclothed, our rags traded in for custom fitted robes, as if someone was planning for us to eventually come home. At home and at peace with God, a new two-way relationship, Jesus as our Public Defender and Big Brother, immediate access to divine presence, something new is happening that gives us hope for the future. The lights are on, and when he look into our hearts, we see a little glow!

We have been changed. But the world around us, our comprehensive culture, has not changed. The devil and his helpers, the culture and its pressures have only increased their clever assaults, because we now stand in opposition to their agenda rather than in cooperation.¹³ We once went with the flow, but now swim against the currents of our former habits, and it’s very, very difficult. Following Jesus will both simplify and complicate your life!

I remember pulling a seine with my Father against an incoming tide in a Pawley’s Island creek when I was thirteen. It was a *guy thing*. I had to strain, but the buoyancy of the water helped. When we trudged up the boat ramp with our proud catch of shrimp, my legs cramped. The next day they still felt rubbery, all because I was working against the tide. Little did I know....

And that is precisely why, after his glorious rendering of the benefits we receive through Christ— peace and access and hope— Paul turns in verses 3 through 5 to the pressing issues of distress and suffering summarized in the term *tribulations*, a word for what it means to walk towards God in a world that’s marching in the other direction.¹⁴ You have now changed loyalties, and both the

¹³ The is the clear intent of the first two U.M. baptismal vows (*Hymnal*: 34).

¹⁴ On the Greek word *thlipsis*, see Arland Hultgren, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 2006), 207.

old you and the old associations don't like it one bit and set about making life difficult in ways you never imagined.

So what's our response? Well, says Paul, in a counter-cultural insight, "More than that, we brag on God in the midst of our troubles." Not *for them*; we are not masochists who delight in hurt, but we rejoice *in them* because of God's ability to use them. It's an educational, training model, like a regular hard workout in the gym. Over time you improve and can lift more weight, jump higher and run faster, spiritually speaking.¹⁵ The old slogan, "If life gives you lemons, make lemonade" is a simplified version of the same insight. There's no situation that puts you out of reach of God's resources because the risen Jesus is near and the Holy Spirit lives within. Pain is real; it's expected, but God is never far away. When troubles come, as they will because you are frail and life is hard and the kingdom is not yet arrived, you will either get better, or you will get bitter. You will take your pain to Jesus and let him work with you, or you can go it alone. Every week I deal with folk who are mad at God and missing out on growth. They think God owes them an easy time.

Many things that happen are outside your control; still they effect you, and you will make some sort of response. If you moan and complain and whine and evade and postpone engaging them, you miss out, because with God's help suffering and stress can increase your capacity to endure, and when you can do right in the face of opposition, the result is proven character. You develop deep convictions about God, and that is— in turn— the source of a hope that will not disappoint because its object is the God whose love you already know and that wells up within whenever the Holy Spirit turns on the tap. In the midst of the things that try your soul, you find God pouring fresh love into your heart, an artesian well bubbling up in a dry place. I did not say *relief*, because that is what we all crave— for life to be easy and pain short. Instead, I said *love*, and when love fills you again at just the right time, you have empirical knowledge that God remains in control of your world and its details. I frankly could not survive or continue without such gifts.

¹⁵ On ancient models of virtue through suffering, see Talbert, *Romans*, 134-137.

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Thus far, in just five verses, Paul announces some of the benefits that are ours when we surrender to Jesus Christ:

- 1) we are set in a new, right relationship with God as a gift;
- 2) it's characterized by peace;
- 3) we have continual access to our Father;
- 4) a guaranteed glorious future is ours;
- 5) God works in us for good as we face the tough realities of life in the world as it now is, and
- 6) God sends us fresh reserves of love along the way.

Now because he was trained in the art of ancient rhetoric, in oral speaking and persuasion, the focus of our passage is on the central paragraph, what I call the *pivot point*. The two outside paragraphs reflect one another in form and vocabulary; they act as a frame around the center, verses 6 through 8, which is carefully constructed with a contrast between a *righteous man or cause* and a *good man or cause*.

Paul then makes the general observation that it's rare— though not impossible— for one man to voluntarily die for another man out of respect for his righteousness, his keeping of God's laws. But it's more likely if the man has been good to you as a benefactor.

Soldiers die in battle for their buddies; we call them heroes and give medals to their family. But what God enacts is so far beyond the highest of human nobility as to blind the mind. It was while we were *weak and helpless* because of the crippling myasthenia of sin, while we remained *ungodly* and involved in all sorts of wickedness, while we were still *sinner*s who delighted in spurning God and his law that Christ, the very best, came and died for the likes of us. He didn't wait for us to engage in projects of moral improvement or abandon our low habits. When we deserved nothing but judgment, he came and lived and loved and reasoned and took the worst we could give in order to be rid of him and his crazy ideas once and for all. He now comes to us with open wounds in his risen body, looks through our eyes into our hearts and asks, "Will you trust me? Will you let me save you?"

It was in 1742, four years into the Methodist revival in England, that our poet Charles Wesley wrote the hymn *Sinners Turn: Why Will You Die*, and in the second stanza he turns to the appeal of Jesus:

“Sinners, turn: why will you die?
God, your Savior, asks you why.
God, who did your souls retrieve,
Died Himself, that you might live.
Will you let Him die in vain?
Crucify your Lord again?
Why, you ransomed sinners, why,
Will you slight His grace and die?”¹⁶

No one voluntarily dies for a unrepentant, ungrateful, morally disgusting, hate-filled scum bags. Think traitor to one’s nation; think child molester; think of one who waters down antibiotics to stretch profits; think policeman who tips drug dealers about coming raids; think ISIS assassin; think Imam who inspires children to wear exploding vests to honor Allah and earn a ticket to heaven, think serial adulterer who brings infections home; think abusive husband; think pastor who corrupts the faith for career and popularity; think bishop who no longer believes the faith she’s pledged to defend; think lawyer who bribes jurors; think gossip; think pornographer and human trafficker; think hedge fund manager who robs retirement funds for foolish derivatives. No one voluntarily dies for despicables. No one but Jesus, and that free sacrifice gives him unique authority in honkey-tonks and red-light establishments, in political back rooms and in corrupt board rooms with low and high class sinners. To every man and woman it can be said, “Jesus, God the Son, voluntarily died for you because you have value to him, and what are you going to do with that gift?”

Now while the main idea of the central paragraph highlights human nobility and then goes far beyond it in the voluntary death of Jesus the Son for the likes of us, there is a subsidiary point that needs clarification, and it is the little phrase *at the right time*. Not any ole time, but *at the right time Christ died*

¹⁶ *U.M. Hymnal*, No. 346.

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for the ungodly. Why not earlier? Why not last week? Why was Passover AD33 *the right time?* *Because God chose it* is one possible answer and true enough, but I find the reasoning of Dr. William Lane Craig more interesting than a bald assertion of sovereignty.

In a debate with the legendary– and now deceased– atheist Christopher Hitchens, who typically asked why– if Christ was indeed God’s revelation– he did not come earlier if the goal was love for all, Craig noted how Christ's arrival occurred at the perfect time in the unfolding of history:

“Human beings,” he said, “have existed for thousands of years on this planet before Christ's coming. But what's really crucial here is not the time involved; rather, it's the population of the world. The Population Reference Bureau estimates that the number of people who’ve ever lived is about 105 billion. Only two percent of them were born prior to the advent of Christ. God's timing couldn't have been more perfect. Christ showed up just before the exponential explosion in the world's population.”¹⁷

That was where Craig ended his riposte, but Dr. Erik Kreps of the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, took it a step further:

‘The Bible,’ he notes, ‘says in the fullness of time God sent forth his Son,’ and when Christ came, the nation of Israel had been prepared. Roman peace dominated the Mediterranean world; it was an age of literacy and learning, (of roads and protected sea lanes and one dominant language). The stage was set for the advent of God's Son.... And I think in God's providential plan... we see the wisdom of God in orchestrating the development of human life and then in bringing Christ into the world in the fullness of time.”¹⁸

¹⁷ The debate may be found at www.reasonablefaith.org.

¹⁸ Quoted in Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity?* (Colorado Springs, CO: Tyndale, 2007), 64, bracketed materials added.

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To use an avian analogy: when the nest was prepared, the egg was laid. Jesus hatched, and then one day left the safe, family nest of Nazareth. So beautiful was his flight across the landscape, so wide the span of his wings, so beautiful his song that— after a time of great public admiration— some evil men in government and religion shot him down with a single blast of cruelty. He crumpled after a final screech and fell to the ground in a feathery heap. But like the legend of the Phoenix, and this is its mythic fulfillment in history, Jesus rose from the ashes of death and disgrace to fly again and forever. Who was Jesus? A bird? No, that’s just a figure. He was the right person at the right time to come into a wrong world to show God’s living and dying and rising love for every wretched human being, taking their first breath and breathing their last, born amidst sweat and blood, headed for death. All of us across the whole of history can come home to God, be at peace and have a future beyond imagining through simple trust in Jesus Christ, “I yield my life to you.” He does the work; our call is to quit fighting him and surrender. Just stop fending him off!

Saturday night in the 1950s and 60s at the Chesterfield County Memorial Hospital was what my father labeled *hard liquor and hand gun night*. There were no ER specialists; the family docs and general surgeons did it all: babies, wrecks, ortho, whatever. Drunk men with razors and 38 Specials do real damage, and when they come to the ER at midnight holding a wound shut with a dirty kitchen towel, most were still drunk and some belligerent.

One man, I remember being told, had his forehead laid open by the heavy end of a pool cue so the skull was clearly exposed for about six inches from his hair line down to his right brow at a forty-five degree angle. It was then that the country doc learned a new medical skill: mirror plus lecture, in Latin *reflectum ad interrogatum!* “George,” he said, “take a look in the mirror while I hold it in front of your face. You see that big white stretch,” as he tapped it with his gloved finger. “That’s your skull, and if you don’t calm down, I’m not going to clean it out and sew it shut till you sober up, and by then it might just be infected and you headed towards an ugly death.”

George got still and quiet all of a sudden. He winced as Dr. Jim circled his forehead with needle sticks to numb the entire area. He then went to work folding flesh back together with careful rows of sutures for minimum scarring.

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One day years later he admitted to me, “I like to have the plastic men in Florence and Charlotte admire the work I do on wreck victims and good ole boys! Nothing better, Son, than the praise of your betters!”

Folks, it’s not till we see how bad things are that we realize what a good deal Jesus is. Quit fighting him. Let him do his work and save your sorry soul. It’s what he loves to do and does best. It’s why he came. And if he sets you right with the Father by his blood, can he not also take you through the final judgment without fear? Of course he can. And if you were set right with the Father by his death, how much more can he do now that he’s alive again!

The peace and reconciliation issue is not on God’s side but ours. He wants you to quit fighting him. Let him in. Exercise your trust muscles. And if, to get your attention, he lets you catch a glimpse of how bad it is and how worse it’s going to get, he’s just trying to get your attention with a mirror and a lecture. And- oh by the way– *reflectum ad interrogatum* is not Latin! I just made it up because it sounded impressive and added to the story!

CONCLUSION

I was saved; I’m am being saved; at death heaven is my stop-over, but I’m not gonna be fully saved till I get a resurrection body and the fullness of Jesus’ great work is completed in me.

Life is good and rich and hard and full of pain and loss, but somehow God’s using it all to give me a bigger heart and a larger capacity to stand with him for Christ and against the world’s illusions, still I get wobbly legs and weak knees. I have no other hope; I have no other plan and nothing else to offer. Just the Son and the Father and the Holy Spirit and the four Gospels and Paul’s letters and God’s pilgrim people at worship and prayer on Sunday mornings. There is no other, no easier, no better way. How Paul could put so much in eleven verses amazes me. Maybe he understood what God’s up to!

