

The Fruits of Justification

Last week, *again*, I bragged to guests of how wonderful the view is from the top of Mount Thompson but, alas, also *again*, I was far too occupied down here in the valley to get up there and enjoy the view. But if *you* do get the chance to take the road up Mt. Thompson, you will come to a place about half way up where you can look back down through a break in the trees and see where you've come so far: you see the road way down there . . .

Romans 5:1-5 is one of those stop off points in Paul's letter to the Romans. He has *come so far* in the first chapters explaining salvation through faith, by grace alone in Jesus Christ. But now, before he goes on to describe how we should *behave* in the light of the Gospel, in 5:1-5, he *looks back* on where we've come *so far*. (And I would encourage you, if you're looking for really a life-altering inspirational project to read the whole of Romans over and over maybe for a month as your devotions and get into the whole flow of this letter. It takes a lot of contemplation to take it all in but it's well worth it.

But beginning in 5:1, Paul says, "Therefore since we *are* justified by faith, there are *therefore* certain *benefits* we enjoy, certain realities that are present to us because we are in Christ. And I have made it work this week that they all begin with the *same letter*. So if you're a fan of the letter "S," you're in for a *real treat!* But before we get to *those fruits or benefits of justification* that come from being people in Christ we must put 5:1-5 this into context. We need to understand the **situation** at Rome. . .

Romans has long been used as a sort of "Gospel handbook." Many of us were led down the "Roman's Road," – that series of verses throughout the letter that helped us grasp the basics of Christian faith: why we need to be saved, how to become a Christian, how to grow and live holy lives. But if we let Romans become nothing more than handy evangelistic pamphlet, we'll miss the grandest depths of the apostle's thought. This theme of "*justification by faith*" is not an abstract philosophical idea but one that was painfully pounded out on the anvil of Paul's own life. The oppressive chains of his religion as Pharisee were shattered on the Damascus road when he met Jesus. From that point on, slowly, Paul began to realize that God had saved this people Israel, not just for the sake of having just one people Israel, but so that *through* Israel he could save the world.

The church at Rome was evidence that God's plan was working for this church was home to *both Jews and Gentiles*, but not in equal proportions. We know from Rom 15:25-29 that Paul is writing to Rome from Corinth, where he is being hosted by Gaius (See 1 Cor 1:14). So from other events in his life around this time, especially his collection for the poor in Jerusalem, we can deduce that it is around the year 55 A. D.

Therefore we know that a few years prior to this, all the Jews had been expelled from Rome by the emperor due to rioting between groups of Jews, possibly because of tensions arising from the birth of the *Christian* movement within the Jewish community. But, now, by the time Paul is writing Romans, tens of thousands of Jews are now flooding back into the city. The synagogues are all full again.

But, meanwhile in the intervening years, a predominately *Gentile* Christian church had developed. So Romans is written to push this church into the new and uncomfortable territory of seeking a unity that *crosses racial barriers*. Imagine this predominately *Gentile* church feeling threatened by this flood of Jews back into the city and *some into Jews are making their way into the church*, but the church at Rome must not erect a racial barrier.

Curiously, Paul is facing the mirror-image of the dilemma he faced in Palestine where the majority of believers were *Jews* who demanded that *Gentiles who became believers* be circumcised and adopt the Jewish lifestyle. Well, in *Rome*, the opposite is the case: in a church where *Gentiles* held the majority, *they* were attempting to write off the ethnic Jews as second-class, second rate throw-backs to a defunct era, a people whose faith was no longer irrelevant and whose covenant with God had been *superceded*. But no, says Paul. He argues in Romans for the total equality of Jew and Gentile in Jesus Christ. For the essence of the church is rooted in the “*righteousness of God*,” and that is something never given to *anybody* on the basis of ethnic bloodline, but to those who have the *faith of Abraham*. “Abraham *believed* God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. God in his faithfulness and love and justice, made promises *to Abraham* fulfilled through *Jesus*, the descendant of Abraham. For God’s ultimate plan was the salvation of all humankind. *Therefore, we no come to the first fruit of justification* which is . . .

Shalom

“we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. . .”

The *Hebrew* word for peace is *shalom*. But the important thing about Shalom is not that it begins with the letter “S”, but that it is the *blessing* that comes as the result of being *justified* by God. So what does justification mean? Sometimes, especially with young people, life really starts to happen. Life gets so exciting! They get so pumped and live in one continual adrenaline rush and they say, this must be peace with God! But then some challenges come along – their heart gets broken, bills need paying, hormones change . . . and they can begin to think they’ve done something really terrible that has caused them to lose peace with God. But no. Because “*justification*” is not actually something that happens within *us*, nor does it have anything to do with our personal, moral state. It is the language of the courtroom. Justification is the pronouncement of a judge that a one is *free from the penalty of the law*. Justification is not some improvement *within* us, it is something God pronounces *over* us and really has nothing to do with what is in our hearts, or with what we have done or not done. O yes, we do need the inner witness of the Spirit, and *yes, O, yes*, we do need to live in a manner worthy of the Gospel, and Paul will get to that in a moment, but right now we need to define the basis of our *peace with God*. What is it?

It is the *shalom*. It is the state of blessing that comes from being *in covenant with*

God. Which takes us back to Father Abraham in Gen 12. When God made his covenant with Abraham, he blessed him with these words:

*“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; **and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**”*

Before Abraham had *done* anything or *said* anything, God *pronounced* a blessing on him: a blessing of protection from enemies, the promise to make him a great nation, but *most of all* that through him all families of the earth would come to know peace with God through Jesus Christ, for *“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

First God pronounces his shalom, second fruit of justification is . . .

Security

“through [him, Jesus] we have obtained *access* to this *grace* in which we stand . . . “

The other day in Paris, all a thief had to do was cut a paddle-lock, break a window in order to have *access* to a gallery where he walked off with some of the world’s greatest art treasures including Rembrandts and Picassos, a haul worth a total of some \$13 million. How could it have been so easy? I’m sure there’s a few Paris security guards who are feeling their skin right now, and I’m sure there will be an major upgrade to the art gallery security system.

But you know, our personal identities are really, really vulnerable treasures that are hung out before the public every day. When we’re young, we struggle to figure out who we are, and when we finally think we know, we don’t like others coming along and messing it up. You think you finally know who you are, but then you get *married*, and you realize you’re not the person you thought you were. But *now* you *really* know who you are – that is until you start raising a *teenager*. But unless we become callous, unfeeling, nasty people, it seems far too easy for others to break in, steal our treasures, really mess us up.

My hunch is that the Gentile Roman church had finally got a grip on things. They felt they finally knew what it meant to be the people of God, but now they are acutely vulnerable as thousands of Jews flood back into their city. They wonder, are we secure anymore? Are we *really* the people of God, the new humanity? Perhaps they were afraid these Jews with their much longer and deeper knowledge of the Scripture would come in to the church and really mess things up. Perhaps some of them had even experienced firsthand the riots and the tensions years before that caused the Jews to be expelled from Rome. They feared could easily happen again. So perhaps the best thing the church could do was is just keep these Jews out. Keep them at arms length.

But Paul will not allow them set up this kind of *false security system*. This will *not* ultimately secure the Christian identity for the church. In fact this exclusionary idea will be the very thing that will destroy their identity as the New Testament people of God. For through the mediation of Christ they *all* have been instated in grace before God. We *all* get there the same way: our drawing near to God is always dependent on Christ and Christ

alone. Doesn't matter who we are: Jew, Gentile, slave free, male, female: we all look forward to the future with the same hope.

Here in Romans 5, Paul is summarizing in advance what he is going to elaborate on in chapters 6-8: the privileges God gave to his people Israel – namely the right to be called the children of God – all those privileges have now been transferred to Jesus Christ, and through him to the church. Ironically, the *security* of the Christian community always comes not from keeping certain others OUT but by inviting them IN. For the essence of the Christian identity is not exclusion but . . .

Sharing

Now, *boasting* is generally a negative concept in English but not in the way Paul uses the Greek language here for he says “we *boast* in our hope of *sharing the glory of God*.” What is this glory? It is what God first gave to Adam and Eve in the beginning. We humans were created in God's image to reflect his character in the world. To represent God in the world and be his stewards over the earth and it's resources. But it's something that was lost when we began to worship the creation rather than the Creator. But now a human sits on the throne of the universe. In Jesus Christ we become part of the new creation and thereby we now share in the beginnings of the all things being made new.

As I was running in Calgary early on a sunny spring Saturday morning and I came to a little community playground: swings and a slide and monkey bars. I notice that the park is really well maintained. It was obvious that the people in that little neighbourhood really cared about their playground. There was no trash on the ground. Nothing appeared to be broken or vandalized. That's something quite remarkable these days. But I think I know why this playground is kept up so well: at the centre was a commemorative monument. It's a rectangular pillar on the sides of which are ceramic tiles. There's a plaque on top that gives thanks for all the donors that contributed to building the playground. And it appears that instead of inscribing the names of the various donors, each ceramic tile was a unique work of art. All different colours, many appeared to be the work of children, little handprints and flowers of folded clay, perhaps carefully created with the help of parents or teachers, then glazed and fired and shiny and cemented onto the monument by the hand of a master craftsperson.

See how this works? Who in the neighbourhood would vandalize the playground? because everyone had put their work into it. It's easy for us to neglect something put there by a nameless faceless government. But many, many hands had put their mark on that playground. AND if someone did vandalize it, someone would come forward if they knew who did it.

Our collective ministry requires of us to grace the church with something of our own work. But let's face it, creation now bleeds. The Gulf of Mexico bleeds oil today. For meanwhile, we also share in a *bitter fruit* for we share the glory of God, but we also share in creation's . . .

Sufferings

But Paul says, “not only that, but we also *boast* in our sufferings. . .”

Paul never let’s future glory diminish the glory we experience in the present despite the pressures of this life. He doesn’t elaborate on what specific pressures he and his companions were under, but nor does he just submit passively to them. In fact he finds in them a reason to boast for they are proof that we are in the process of being redeemed.

We often find ourselves in the state of hardship or misfortune. It can be small things like losing you pocket knife or failing a test at school. It can be, huge – like losing a loved one or coming home to find that your house destroyed by a flood. But every problem in life can be interpreted as the *frustration* in the *creation* in the process of being made new. That’s how Paul describes it in Romans 8. It’s all in how we *look* at the obstacles we face, and Paul says we should *boast* in them. If we have the ability to interpret our adversity as an opportunity to build God’s kingdom on earth instead of becoming depressed every time something goes wrong, the smaller problems in life won’t be a problem at all and the larger problems will be easier to deal with because we will see them as just one part of a . . .

Sequence

There’s a train that’s leaving the station here, and we need to jump on board. Paul says, suffering produces endurance and *endurance* produces *character* and character produces *hope* and hope does not disappoint us . . .”

All our trials and tribulations, all our stresses, pressures can only develop character and lead us to *hope* through patient endurance. Each of these things is not an independent rail car, they must be hooked onto and pulled along in a train. For *these* sufferings are not just any sufferings. They are specifically sufferings endured *for Christ’s sake*. As the train rolls along the track and we encounter the obstacles: washouts, dark tunnels, rocks on the tracks, we must never lose sight of their relationship to our ultimate destination: HOPE. For, as Paul says in 1 Cor 15:19 “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ”

We don’t just go through life with a stiff upper lip, stoically enduring anything and everything that comes our way until we get to go to heaven. No. We are in the process of growing more and more in hope. But this sequence only works the way it’s supposed to when we see that, as new creatures in Christ, we are able in our daily lives to truly do God’s kingdom work on earth. That’s why we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” For to be *justified by faith* means we are people in a living covenant with God which can only mean that we *are able* to keep God’s Torah. And what is the essence of keeping Torah? Someone asked Jesus that question. He said it was to keep the most important commandment in all. Keep this one, and you fulfill all the others. It is what Jews call the . . .

Shema

“Hear, O Israel the Lord. The Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength . . . [and Jesus adds] and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

And so Paul says in verse 5 “the *love of God* has been poured into our hearts . . .” That’s Shema language. God’s love for us never changes. He loved us when we were yet sinners. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. But that love has to be *experienced* by us if it is to become the source of our confidence and the basis of our hope. So we must express our love for God with everything that is in us. But one of the greatest benefits knowing we are justified by faith in Jesus is that our love for God is being poured out in our hearts. Picture your heart as a brimming tea pot out of which you are pouring, for God, the perfect cup of tea. Brewed just long enough, poured not too soon lest it be too weak, nor delayed too long, lest be bitter. But the perfect cup brewed from the finest leaves. And while you’re pouring into God’s cup, you also pouring out the same tea from the same pot into the cups of your neighbours – whoever they may be.

It’s the *brewing* in our hearts of the knowledge that God has pronounced me justified in his sight. Me, a sinner saved by grace! That reality has brewed in my heart long enough to allow those tea leaves of hope to release their flavour and fill my heart with the reality of a loving God who rules the universe and is loving the world *through me*.

The Christian life is not a complex set of ethical rules. It is as simple as St. Augustine expressed in the 4th century A. D. : “ Love God then do whatever you like.”

But this brings us the last “S” word. For we do none of this in our own power. The one thing that is so crucial to realize if any of this is to make sense is that God does this in us through his

Spirit

The love of God is poured out in our hearts by the Spirit that has been given to us. The world will read our tea leaves. Whatever we pour out from our hearts, those around us will drink in. And in the end, when there’s nothing left, what will be left at the bottom of our cup? What residue will remain? What will linger on the palate of those we interacted with on a dialy basis? When the world reads our tea leaves, will it be the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

For these are the fruits. These are the qualities that come to us as we live consciously in covenant. They are the fruits of justification.