

“Boasting In Our Hope”

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith,
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
through whom we have obtained access
to this grace in which we stand;
and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings,
knowing that suffering produces endurance,
and endurance produces character,
and character produces hope,
and hope does not disappoint us,
because God’s love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Boasting In Our Hope

Romans 5:1-11

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I.

I'm not sure what I was thinking selecting this passage from Romans now that the beautiful weather has finally arrived. I really don't know if I have it in me, or *want* to have it in me, to get all tangled up with the Apostle Paul today, or to delve into his notion of justification by faith through which we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand. Feels like an awful lot, doesn't it? I suppose it is the verse that follows which drew my curiosity and peaked my interest. Paul concludes this rather weighty and dense sentence by saying, "and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God."

II.

I remember back in seminary, one of my favorite classes was an upper level course in Christian Ethics taught by Nancy Duff. I liked Professor Duff. Like most of the faculty, she was a pretty smart cookie. More importantly, though, she was *my* kind of cookie. You might be surprised to know that, at least during my time there, the majority of the students at Princeton *Seminary* (as my son Tucker says) were interested in getting a Master's Of Divinity (M.Div.) only as a stepping stone to eventually go on and pursue a PhD. The next largest percentage of the student population were those who were there to become associate pastors at larger urban or suburban churches. Take away these two groups and you were left with only about 15% of the students who, like me, were interested in solo pastorates at small to medium sized churches. At churches like this one where the wheel hits the road.

III.

The Ethics, or the moral principles (or, in this case, spiritual principles) which govern a person's behavior or the conducting of an activity, is the place where one's beliefs get played out in real life. Hence, it was no surprise, that Duff's class in Christian Ethics was disproportionately filled with people like me who were going on to solo pastorates. It was refreshing, I must admit, to

be in a room filled with people who were not necessarily fixated on translating and parsing ancient Greek manuscripts, or tracing the lineage of ethereal concepts back through various theologians/philosophers. Not that I was not *able* to do the former, or wasn't quite good (actually) at the latter. It just bored the pants off me. Blah, blah, blah. No, what I wanted, along with the others in the Ethics class, was to put the wheel to the road. We wanted help driving the car of ministry down the road of life.

IV.

Now, some may say, that ministry is a difficult vocation because of all the stuff you have to do. Admittedly, it is the kind of job which requires one to be a Jack or Jane of all trades. What you quickly discover, though, is that while not necessarily *easy*, the nuts and bolts of ministry are, in fact, rather straightforward. The truly hard part, however, comes in deciding *why* you are going to do everything you have got to do. That is, what are the guiding principles you will use to conduct yourself, to govern one's ministry, and around which the congregation will coalesce? I don't know the actual statistics on this, but my guess is that when there are problems between ministers and their congregations the cause, inevitably, ends up being a difference in opinion, or conviction, about their shared guiding principles. Either these were not clearly spelled out at the onset, or there was confusion about them, or they have changed over time.

V.

Admittedly, such things might be hard for us to see; we are, after all, swimming in our own water. We tend to assume that a church is a church. That what our experience is of *this* church is the same kind of experience you would encounter at any *other* church. However, you would be wrong in this assumption. Whereas we kind of roll with the punches here, many other churches devote great energy toward controlling the process. Whereas we take a broad stroke approach, many other churches try to excruciatingly nail all down the details. Whereas we understand morality to be derivative of our faith, many other churches consider morality to be determinant of one's faith. And so on, and so on. I tell you all this today, because I think it is important for us, every once and a while, to go back to, and review the basics of our faith. For some reason, today seems a very appropriate occasion on which to do so.

VI.

To be honest, other than a kind of general fond remembrance I cannot recall all that much about my class in Christian Ethics. However, one detail I do remember, with great clarity, was a statement made one day by the professor, Nancy Duff. She said, the decision to have children is the greatest act of hope one can ever make. That stuck with me. It stuck with me then, because I could not imagine any other of the faculty at Princeton (primarily men at that point) ever saying such a thing. It stuck with me in my first marriage when I realized that together, as a couple, we apparently did not possess such a hope. It has stuck with me every day of my marriage to Linda as I realize just how hopeful one *has* to be. Not just to *have* children, but also to survive *raising* those children. It also sticks with me every Sunday when I come to church and realize just how much hope these kids give to me.

VII.

Certainly, lots of parents and grandparents, boast of their children. My Lord, when our kids were young it seemed like you could not have a conversation that did not devolve into whose kid was doing what. Now, its what college did they get into, what job they got, where they are traveling next. Blah, blah, blah.

This kind of thing, which is all too common, is more than mere boasting of accomplishment. It is boasting in the hope children bring which is a very different thing indeed. We all look at the world and must admit that this place we call home seems to be getting worse not better. A recent Wall Street Journal poll reports nearly 70% of U.S. adults believe the American Dream (the idea that hard work pays off) no longer holds true or never did.

VIII.

Nonetheless, people keep having children. Linda and I were remarking just the other day that the town seems filled with babies. Moreover, people keep *wanting* to have children. Behind such a desire is the hope that in spite of the lengthening odds such children will face, there is a goodness and joy to this life which makes the struggle and toil all worth it. This is an example of a moral principle governing behavior; an example of an ethic. Again, though, what we are talking about here is the *existence* of hope, or, even, of hope's survival; not boasting in hope. It is important we understand the distinction

because when we read the Apostle Paul talking about *boasting* in our hope of sharing the glory of God, we need to be clear that *this* degree of hope, the quantitative and qualitative measure of hope, is such to allow us to move from surviving to thriving, from just barely passing to flying colors, and from subsistence to abundance.

IX.

For the Apostle Paul, we aren't just *having* hope, we are *boasting* in our hope. Remember, Paul is quite the wordsmith. If he wanted to say less than this he would have. Instead, Paul paints a picture which demonstrates that, as people of faith, as Christians, we have both the privilege and responsibility to infuse our lives with a hope which over-flows the banks. Hope which is in *ridiculous* abundance. True, life is filled with suffering, there is no way to escape this. Yet, such sufferings produce endurance, and endurance produces character, and such character produces hope and, here is the take away, it produces a hope which does not *disappoint* us.

X.

Now, I've been talking a lot this morning about hope in broad strokes. Before we go, however, we should recognize that for the Apostle Paul, the kind of hope which does not disappoint the kind of hope which causes us to boast, is a very *specific* hope. Each day you and I live, move, and have our being while standing in the midst of God's grace. It is the water in which we swim. This grace is not earned, cannot be striven for, and, really, is not at all deserved. Nonetheless, through the cross of Christ this grace is poured out upon us with power to bring us a soul-soothing peace. Through such grace we are justified, made right with God and ourselves, and emboldened to go out and face the world. To live our lives, raise our families, do our work, and enjoy each and every day. It is the ethic, or guiding principle, by which we have chosen to live, and how we play out our life in real terms. Frankly, and just between us here today, I am not sure I could make it as a parent, as a husband, as a pastor, if I didn't have such a grace in which to put my faith. But we *do* have the gift of such a grace. So, let us boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God in each new day, for all days, and at the end of days. Amen.