

Something to Boast About?

Romans 5:1-11

By [Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson](#)

Now as we turn together to God's word this morning, let us bow together for a moment of prayer.

Our gracious Father and our God, we thank You that You are a speaking God, and that You are able to make us to be a hearing people. And we pray as we read Your word together, and as our hearts are opened by it and to it, that in our inner ear we may hear the voice: not of man, but of God; not of the one who preaches, but of Jesus Christ preaching His word directly into our hearts; that we may know that this is the voice of the Good Shepherd, and that He speaks to us not only as a fellowship of Your people, but as individuals whom He calls to Himself. So meet with us, Lord; grant us a sense of worship and hearing, and dialog with You as we listen to Your voice. We ask it for Jesus Christ our Savior's sake. Amen.

Our Scripture reading this morning is from Paul's letter to the Romans: Romans, chapter five. We're going to read verses 1 through 11, and you'll find this, if you're using the pew Bible, on page 1343.

And as we turn there, let me say more briefly than I would like to what a joy it is to be here at First Presbyterian Church in Jackson once again. There are members of this congregation I've known, I'm sure, for no less than twenty years, so it's a privilege not only to be with my friends on your pastoral staff, but also to see some of you whom I've known, obviously, since I was a little boy. And it is surprising to me that you're retired now.....!

Well, the word of God, Romans, chapter five:

Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance, and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will

hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

By any stretch of the imagination, one of the great books of the English language is John Bunyan's wonderful *Pilgrim's Progress*, which I know some of you in the congregation are even now studying. It is a marvelous book partly because it's so full of pictures—pictures of God's grace, pictures of the Christian life, pictures of the failures of Christians, pictures of the struggles that Christian believers from time to time experience.

And if you're a lover of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, then I suppose, like me, you have a favorite picture from it. My own favorite comes almost at the end of the second book, which describes the journey that the Pilgrim's wife, Christiana, takes from the City of Destruction to the Heavenly City. Towards the end, she sees a man standing with a muckrake in his hand, and he is raking about in the muck and in the mire—obviously looking for something, that he has lost, or he is looking for treasure that would enrich his life. And with his eyes fixed down, he does not see that there is somebody standing before him holding out to him a crown of gold. It is obviously a picture of Christ's holding out the blessings of the gospel, and a person oblivious to those blessings seeking treasure where it cannot be found: seeking in this world the treasures that only Jesus Christ can give.

But it's also, from another point of view, I rather suspect, a picture of many Christians and how we live the Christian life: conscious that there are treasures beyond our imagination offered to us through faith in Jesus Christ, but finding ourselves looking somewhere else, sometimes raking around in the muck and in the mire for the hidden treasure that is found exclusively in Jesus Christ.

That is not a twenty-first century phenomenon. That's something that obviously was true in the New Testament period as well, and I have little doubt that's one of the reasons the Apostle Paul, having expounded and explained in his great letter to the Romans the very heart of the gospel, goes on now in these amazing verses to describe some of the privileges of the gospel. Interestingly, earlier on in this letter he had spoken about the fact that we do not know the way of peace. But now he says in Jesus Christ (verse 1), having been justified by faith we have peace with God. We have the added privilege of access to God. Indeed, he says we are able to stand before God in His grace.

But he wants us to see that there is more to the gospel and more to grace than

this, and so he says not only are these things true of us in the gospel, but we learn also to exult in the gospel; or, if you're using a different translation, to "rejoice" in the gospel; even in some translations to "boast" in the gospel. It's a picture in a sense of someone who has been brought up to the summit of a great hill and sees a vast panorama of beauty before him, and wants, as it were, to stand on tiptoe and say, 'Yes! Yes! Yes! So rich are the privileges of gospel grace!'

The marvelous way in which Paul brings this out in these verses is by the use of a refrain, by the repetition of the same words. You'll see them first of all in verse 2 where he says "...we rejoice [or exult] in the hope of the glory of God"; again, in verse 3, more than that, "...we exult [or rejoice] in our sufferings"; and then finally in verse 11, more even than that, "...we rejoice [or exult] in God Himself through our Lord Jesus Christ."

He's actually using the vocabulary of boasting. We, whom he had said earlier on, have nothing to boast in: "Where then is your boasting?" he had said to sinners who were humbled under the judgment of God. "Where is your boasting? It is excluded." But now he says three times there are privileges in which the Christian can boast. There are reasons for the Christian whose mouth has been shut...there are reasons for that mouth to be opened in the praise of Jesus Christ.

I. The believer rejoices in the glory of God.

So what is it that we are able to boast in? Well, first of all he says in verse 2, we are able to boast, or exult, in our hope of the glory of God. Now, you know well enough from your study of the New Testament that when the Apostle Paul says "we hope" he does not mean "wishful thinking", the way some uncertain religious person would say if you asked them, "Are you sure that you will go to heaven?" They might say (eyes cast down), "Well, I hope so." Hope in the New Testament is a present certainty of something we have not yet fully experienced. And so he is saying because of Jesus Christ, because our sins have been forgiven, because we know Him, trust Him and love Him, we are also able to exult and to boast in our certainty about the glory of God.

Interestingly, that's the last thing that a "religious", but not really believing, person thinks about. He wants blessings in this life, and then to crown it all, the blessing of glory. But certainty of future glory, Paul says, is actually the first thing that we're able to boast in. You'll notice he goes on to say, "More than that..."--and then again, "...more than that." So here is the wonder and the privilege of the Christian gospel, that the very first thing we're able to boast about because we are justified by God's grace and made as righteous as Jesus Christ, because made righteous with His righteousness we're able to exult in the certainty of the future glory of God.

But how can this possibly be? Paul has spoken earlier on about the shame of our sin. And then he has gone on to explain to us how we may boast in the certainty of the glory of God, because the One who is the glory of God has come and taken our shame in order that we might receive His glory.

Do you remember how, in the Gospels, on the night of His betrayal the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane seems to be wrestling with God about this cup that His Father is pressing into His hands? And the reason He was wrestling about that, saying, "Father, if it is possible, find some other way," is because that cup had been described in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament Scriptures as a cup that would be filled with shame instead of glory. And as He hung upon the cross even nature itself seemed to express that what He was experiencing was shame, as instead of being exalted as the Lord of Glory, He hung between heaven and earth feeling that His Father's face had been turned away from Him, and asking the question, "Why? Why do I experience this shame?" And the reason of course is because He had exchanged our shame for His glory, that we might through faith in Him exchange our shame for His glory. And when we grasp the gospel and are grasped by its power, Paul is saying, we want to stand on tiptoe and say, 'Yes! It's marvelously true! I am able to rejoice in the certainty of the glory of God, and my Lord Jesus' prayer that I may see Him where He is in His glory will undoubtedly be fulfilled!'

But for Paul that is just the first thing. And in a way, it's understandable that somebody who has that certainty would exult in it, even your non-believing neighbor would understand that if you have that certainty which he or she may envy, and say 'I wish I had what you have.' They understand this is something to rejoice in and exult in.

But if that is understandable, what Paul then goes on to say is almost incomprehensible. We not only boast, or rejoice or exult, in our hope of the glory of God, but (verse 3), "...more than that..." And you understand why he says "more than that" when you see what he says. "More than that," he says, "we exult in our sufferings." Not because he takes pleasure in pain...remember how, in his second letter to the Corinthians he had himself agonized about some thorn in the flesh, and how obviously pleased he was that Luke the physician accompanied him around? He didn't take pleasure in pain, but he was able to rejoice and exult in what he saw God doing through his sufferings.

Look at what he says here in verse 3: 'More than that, we rejoice [or exult] in our sufferings because we know what God produces through it.' And this is a constant note in the New Testament: not that suffering is good for its own sake, but that God employs suffering in order to produce something in my life. Suffering is part of God's productivity design in my life, because through it He means to produce endurance, or stick-ability, and through that endurance He means to produce character, and through that character He means to produce hope.

Now, what hope is he speaking about here? It's the same hope he was speaking about in verse 2. It's the hope of glory. So you see, when you stand back from these verses, what he's done. He's said the believer rejoices in the certainty of the glory of God because he understands that he or she is justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

II. The believer rejoices in hope of glory.

But the believer also rejoices in hope of glory, because the believer begins to see that even through (and sometimes especially through) suffering, God actually now produces that glory in our lives. He's not now thinking about the glory that we shall see: he's thinking about the glory that has worked into our lives, as he says in II Corinthians 3, God in this way changes us, transforms us from one degree of glory to another, until ultimately, as he will say in chapter 8 here, ultimately He transforms us into the likeness of Jesus Christ Himself.

What's God's principle here? His principle is that friction in the Christian life, suffering in the Christian life...it is friction that creates beauty; it's friction that makes believers shine.

When I was a very small boy, one of my tasks before I was sent out of the house to school, was to go around the house with my mother on the day of every week—what disciplined people our mothers were, were they not?—and she would clean everything in the house that was made of brass. And it was particularly door knobs that were my task with her, and we would go around together with this little bottle of stuff that somebody brilliantly would call *Brasso*[™], and we would rub it on the brass doorknobs, and it would dry there and cover the door knobs over; and then, once we'd been round all the door knobs (and there were many of them), we would come back to the beginning, and then she would begin to polish—and having even at that age felt the power of her right arm in many places, I sympathized with those door knobs! And when she had finished, we did two things. I would put my hand on the doorknob and it was hot, as the result of the rubbing. And then she would bend down to my height and we would look into the doorknob, and of course when we could see our reflection there we knew that the job had been well done.

And that's what Paul is saying. It's through the sufferings of our lives, the afflictions that come to us in the providence of God, that we so often find that God is actually polishing those graces that He has given in the gift of His Holy Spirit. That's part of the privilege of belonging to a congregation where there are young saints and old saints, and the young saints can see how God, through times of trial and difficulty and suffering of all kinds, actually seems to have polished grace in the lives of those who become models to us of the way in which we learn to rejoice, not only in the hope of the glory of God, but learn to rejoice

also in suffering.

But you know, most hopes in life disappoint us, don't they? You get to middle years, and you look back and you have so many disappointed hopes. How do we know that this hope of glory will never disappoint us? How do we know it will never let us down? Well, Paul answers our question. He says, "This hope..." [verse 5] "...does not disappoint us, because God's love has already been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." What's his reason here? It's simply this: that we have this grand hope of future glory in our hearts, but God, as it were, has broken open the windows of that heavenly glory and poured out His love into us through the Holy Spirit, so that here and now we taste already the glory of God. That is what we look for, isn't it, in our worship together, as we leave church and from time to time say to one another, 'My, that was glorious today'? What have we experienced? This is what we've experienced individually, sometimes corporately...but the glory of God bursts down upon us from heaven and marvelously fills our souls.

I love those words of the author Izaak Walton, who (for those of you who are fishermen) wrote for the seventeenth century a work entitled *The Complete Angler*. He wrote a little poem about one of his contemporaries, a Christian minister called Richard Sibbs, and of him he said, "Of that blest man let this praise be given: that heaven was in him before he was in heaven." But that's every Christian, Paul is saying. We rejoice even in suffering because the love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.

III. The believer rejoices in God Himself.

So the first reason for exultation is utterly undeserved; the second reason for exultation is certainly unexpected; but if that's so, then the third reason for exultation is absolutely unparalleled. Here is something that, at the end of the day, nobody but a Christian believer can do. Look at what he says in verse 11: 'More than that,' he says, 'we also exult in God Himself.' God becomes our chief joy, as the psalmist says.

Now you'll notice a very interesting thing here. These verses 6-10 that I've just slid over actually provide us with an explanation of the love of God that he's described in verse 5. They're like a foundation stone explaining what he's said in verse 5, and they're also like a stepping stone that helps us to understand how it is as Christian believers we exult in God Himself for Himself. How do we do that? Answer: because we understand from these verses the kind of God our God is. We understand from these verses the kind of God our God is. And the sheer marvel of His love is brought out in the words that Paul uses to describe us as the objects of God's love: Verse 6 - it was when we were weak and ungodly; and verse 8 - when we were still sinners; in verse 10 - while we were enemies He loved us. And it's brought out by the amazing measure of that love.

I don't think it ever comes out as clearly as Paul put it in any of our English versions. Let me rearrange the word order in what Paul says. Look down at these verses, and let me arrange the word before you to capture an emphasis that lies in what Paul wrote. He says in verse 7, "For a righteous person one will scarcely die, though perhaps for a good person one dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, for us Christ died." Did you notice what he's saying? He is saying over and over and over again in these statements...the last word is always Christ died. That's how I know God loves me.

I cannot be sure God loves me by my ability to interpret the circumstances of my life. God's love for us is not always immediately plain in the circumstances of our life, and so if we're dependent upon our ability to believe in the love of God because good things happen to us, we will be in for a rude and perhaps disastrous awakening. But there is a place to go, Paul says, where you can be eternally sure of the love of God, and it is the place where Christ died.

How can that possibly assure you of God's love? For the simple reason that God gave His Son to die for us. As C.H. Spurgeon used to say, "Whenever we gaze at the cross, we ought to be constrained to say, 'Does He love me more than He loves *Him*? That He would give *Him* for *me*?' " Can you imagine the circumstances in which any of these fathers whose children were baptized here this morning...can you imagine the circumstances in which they would freely give that child up for anything in the world? Can you imagine they could conceivably love anything or anyone in the world more than they love these children? No, of course you can't! But, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." And when that is the kind of God we have come to know in Jesus Christ, then we surely want to stand on the top of the mountain, on top of Everest indeed, and say to Him, 'Yes! Yes! It's true for me!'

And that, of course, is the real issue. Is it true also for you? Or, are you like the man with the muckrake—this crown of gold, these amazing, life-transforming privileges, eternally transforming privileges held out before you, and you gaze down into the muck and mire of this world and look for treasure somewhere else?

Do you know what the Pilgrim's wife's response to the picture of the man with the muckrake was? Let it be ours: "O God, deliver me from this muckrake, and turn me to Jesus Christ."

Well, are these your privileges, my friend? Or are you ignoring the crown of gold? What a glorious summons to all of us to trust in Christ.

Our heavenly Father, we thank You for the riches of Your word and for the great riches that You make over to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we pray that

as we hear Your voice we may respond and learn to triumph in the gospel. For this we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.

We sing in closing hymn No. 505, *I'm Not Ashamed to Own My Lord*.

Now lift up your faces and receive the benediction of your God.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our heavenly Father, the communion of the Holy Spirit, strengthener and comforter, be with you all this day and forevermore. Amen.

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