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“It’s hard to believe, isn’t it?” Romans 5:1-11

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Do you know what the main message of the Bible is? The message that helps to make sense of everything in God’s revelation. It is the message about God’s love, the message about God’s unbelievable grace and forgiveness. The message that tells that the Triune God, indeed, loves you and cares for you and has prepared a place for you so that you could live in His presence forever. Yes, all of that for you!

This message is so, so good... and do you know what our problem is? Our problem is that we struggle, we really struggle to believe that this message could be true. It just sounds too good. Too incredible. Can all of that really be true and for me?

The few verses which we just heard from Paul’s letter to Romans are of great help and they bring us great comfort and encouragement as Paul the apostle assures us that, yes! you can trust this message, it is true, and it is for you.

How is the Holy Spirit comforting us through Paul? **“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”**

Just listen to what He says: you are justified by faith, you have peace with God, you have access to God’s grace, you can rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. All of this is said about you, as one of God’s chosen people.

See, Paul speaks about all these wonderful gifts of God as about our present reality, not as some kind of uncertain promises sometimes is the future. This is what you have already now, all of this has been given to you already now! Let’s look at it once again!

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First, Paul says, you are justified by faith. What is that about? All human beings know that we are accountable. Our conscience tells it every day. It testifies about the Last Day when we all will have to give an account for what we have done with the lives given to us. Have you loved your God more than anything else and trusted Him above everything else? This coming future encounter is scary; on our own we have so much to answer for and so much to fear from.

But now, Jesus Christ has taken your place, your sins, He has received what you deserve, and in exchange He offers and gives you His righteousness. He says to you: "You are not guilty, you are forgiven, come into God's presence!" Without fear, with joy. And that is true already. You just need to receive this gift by faith, trusting Jesus.

Also, you have peace with God. What is that about? Since the Fall there has always been enmity between rebellious human creatures and their benevolent Creator. We want to be like gods; we don't want the Triune God to be our God.

We ignore Him, we resist, we reject Him. But now He has come and done something that we would never be able to. He has restored our relationships. He has done it. How? He has sent His Spirit into our hearts, to bind us together with Him with the bond of peace and trust once again. It is done. Already. You have peace with God.

Moreover, you have access to God's grace. You have access to God's presence. This is what our congregational gatherings, what the Divine Service is about. Your loving Father, and your Saviour Jesus calls you out of the world into His presence.

Why does He do that? Because He wants to be with you. He wants to bless you. He wants to converse with you. Since the Fall human creatures have been separated from their Creator, for nothing sinful can come in God's presence and remain alive.

But now, you can come in the presence of the holy God, you can receive His gifts of forgiveness and good conscience, of wisdom and protections, you can be united with Jesus Christ in His Holy Meal. You can! All these gifts are yours already.

And there is more – you have the hope of the glory of God. This is our ultimate hope; when our time here in this age is over, we will see our God, we will see Him face to face as He is, and we will reign with Him forever. Unbelievably great gifts!

This is the Triune God speaking to you. His message is true, but we just struggle to embrace it and to believe it. Partly it is because we still experience all the tribulations and challenges of this life. We can only ponder, yes, this sounds wonderful, but...

... My relationships are still broken, the closest people in my life still hurt me, I still have to carry on the losing fight for my health, I am still in distress daily, my mental health is on the edge, I don't know how I will meet my financial obligations, and bills and needs just keep coming, I worry about my loved ones who still reject the Triune god, and I struggle with anger because people keep letting me down, and I am in despair, for I feel I am losing control, and so on... That's our life.

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We all, wounded and bruised by this life, still live in this broken world and it succeeds to hurt us daily, from inside and from outside. And in the middle of these mundane experiences and daily struggles from time to time we are blessed to hear about those wonderful things that Jesus Christ, the Son of God has done for you, and about your home in His New Creation that He has prepared for you.

Amazing, magnificent! But... our daily challenges and tribulations drag us down, darkness around us is too thick and this wonderful message just doesn't really sink in. It's hard to believe it. Does some of this sound familiar? It certainly does to me.

But know this, Paul wasn't a dreamer. Paul had experienced as much hardship in this life as all of us together. And this is how Paul continues: **"But we rejoice [not only in all these wonderful things, but also] in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."**

Yes, we still live in this sin-ridden world where we are bruised and disappointed every day. But God has given us something that changes everything. **He has given us His Holy Spirit**, who now is with you all the time. The same Spirit in whose power Jesus rose from the dead. What does it mean or what does it do for us?

He changes everything. You are not alone in this beautiful but too often hostile world. Sure, trials and sufferings come and they will as long as we are here. But what can they do? For many they produce despair and hopelessness.

But for God's beloved as Paul says, **they produce endurance**. How? For you know that your God would never ever abandon you. Yes, He doesn't pull us out of this world, true, instead, He comes and dwells with you wherever you are. We endure together.

Endurance, with the help of the Holy Spirit, then **produces character**; not a bitter or pessimistic, but joyful, trustful, and peaceful character. For you know that Jesus not only is together with you, but that He understands you better than you do. He has suffered whatever you may need to suffer. He can relate to you, and He will lead you through whatever comes. And He continually shapes you to be more like Him.

This character then **produces hope**. The same hope which we already spoke about. The hope of eternal life with Jesus in Paradise, seeing Him face to face and being made like Him. This hope is much more powerful than any suffering of this time. For we know what awaits us: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined... God has prepared for those who love Him." [1 Cor 2:9]

You see, it is such a privilege to be a Christian. That doesn't free us from the trials and tribulations of this world, I wish it did, but we have the Son of God, who took the sufferings of the whole world upon Himself, walking with us, right next to us.

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Embracing and sheltering you by the power of His Spirit so that we could rejoice even in the midst of our struggles, for you are not alone, your God and Saviour is closer to you than you can possibly imagine. That is true.

But still... the old Adam in us just wouldn't stop doubting: "How can you know that all of that really applies to you? Are you really worthy of something that great? You, of all people?! You?! Think twice! Aren't these just your dreams and wishful thinking?"

The Spirit knows our doubts and so He continues to speak through Paul. He makes a very simple argument. This kind of argument is called from greater to smaller: if God did this, then He will surely do that. Listen carefully how Paul puts it!

We all were enemies of God. We all were hostile to Him. We all sinned against Him and deserved His wrath. That's us. Me and you. In that situation, God the Father sent His only begotten Son to take mine and your sins and guilt and shame upon Himself.

Jesus Christ came to us, His enemies, to take our place in God's judgment, to receive what we deserve, God's anger in full measure. Full cup. He has done it. It is finished. Over! Jesus, the Son of God justified you, He reconciled you with God the Father, He brought you in His presence, He gave you His Spirit. When did He do this? When you were still His enemy.

That's right! What now? If God did all of that – that greater thing – when we were still His enemies, He will most certainly do the smaller thing – He will bring you to be with Him now, when you have been made His beloved child through Jesus.

Jesus is risen and lives. And because you are united with Him by means of His Spirit, you will live too. I know, I know, this message is too beautiful, too magnificent, too much out of this world and too far beyond our comprehension.

I know that we doubt it, we can't exactly hold it in our hands, we struggle to believe that such great divine realities could be true for us. How could we be worthy of something like that? Sure, you are right, we are not worthy of such wonderful divine gifts.

But our God is an incredible God. He prays for those who persecute Him, He comes to those who reject Him, He dies for His enemies, He chooses the lowly and unworthy and He transforms them to be His children and His heirs. He does all of this for you too.

I pray that the Holy Spirit who dwells with you and in you, would help you to believe with your whole heart that you are loved by the Triune God, forgiven, that He is with you regardless of what happens in your life and that eventually He will bring you to be with Him in the world to come, in His New Heavens and New Earth. That you can trust Him.

May God Himself give you His joy, may He give you His peace and His hope. Have them abundantly, let them warm your heart and fill your lives. Rejoice in these incredible blessings, and whenever possible, tell everyone how good this God is.

And the peace of God which surpasses all our understanding keeps your minds and hearts in Jesus Christ.

Amen.