

The Spirit Given

As I grew in faith over the years, the people who were my mentors and encouragers shared two critical qualifications: faith in God and experience with challenges and hardships. Their experiences and professional credentials varied, but God used them, as well as the Bible, to shape my life. Paul was certainly an educated scholar and a strong personality, but he also knew about disappointment and danger. Paul knew what it meant to be thrown into jail, threatened by religious and government authorities, run out of town, shipwrecked and on trial for his life. In Philippians 1:20, Paul stated his desire that “with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.”



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Romans is Paul’s deep theological treatise, but it is also marked by practical living ideas as expressed in the text we study today. He reminds us that we are “justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 1) ... we “stand” by grace (v. 2). But then he writes something that sounds contradictory to faith in God: “we also boast in our sufferings” (v. 3). No, this is not a boast that we have special privileges, or are exempt from real life, or are guaranteed health and wealth. Our “boast” is that God’s love in Jesus Christ is the grace gift that no one and nothing can take from us.

Then follows a beautifully crafted unfolding progression of how suffering leads to a deeper faith. “Suffering produces endurance” (v. 3). Sometimes we can’t find immediate or clear answers for disappointment or danger. We have to hang on or suffer through as we remember God’s promise to be with us in all things. In Philippians 4:13 Paul declares: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Sometimes winning the battles of life is simply deciding by faith not to give up.

Paul continues: “endurance produces character” (v. 4). We know the well-worn truism, “the strong get stronger.”

Paul is suggesting something deeper. Life’s challenges toughen us, drive us closer to God, remind us the struggle may seem too much, but Christ endured the cross to give us life and hope that even the forces of hell cannot take away. Every time we are tested we grow stronger as our faith deepens.

“Character produces hope” (v. 4). Growing from childhood to maturity is a process of hard lessons. Growing up spiritually involves insecurity, fear, ignorance, mistakes and finally the understanding that God is really with you and you can face it all in the strength of his indwelling Spirit. Hope is not immunity from life or guaranteed success in every endeavor, but the certainty that God is with you in each moment.

At this point Paul forcefully declares “hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (v. 5). The Holy Spirit is the source of our spiritual life, the powerful presence of God within us that guides, empowers, strengthens and guides us in all the challenges we face. To love someone is to care for them, understand them and be there for them. That is love and that is the nature of God’s Holy Spirit.

When you accept God’s love in Christ and love him back, life is just beginning, but you will never be alone or forgotten because “God’s love has been poured into your heart!” Paul lays down a brief theological explanation of God’s love for you. “For while we were still weak ... Christ died for the ungodly” (v. 6). Does that sound harsh? Examine the history of the human race until this very day. We are “ungodly,” unlike God, lacking in grace and love, and focused on our own comfort and desires. But through faith in Christ we discover a different way to live and relate to one another. Paul writes, “We have been justified by his (Jesus’) blood” (v. 9). From the first page of Genesis to the last word in Revelation, God has pursued us in our selfishness and rebellion. The cross of Christ is the final attention getter, the solution we can never accomplish. Nothing “in all creation will be able to

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Scripture: Romans 5:1-10

separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39).

Paul describes our current situation: “We are reconciled to God through the death of his Son” (5:10). Through Christ God has wiped away our guilt and chosen to make us his own dear children. God chooses to not see us as beyond hope or help, but, instead welcomes us. “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Paul declares the goal of God’s love for us, that “much more surely, having been reconciled, (we) will be saved by his life” (v. 10). Our ultimate goal of maturity of faith is called “sanctification,” or becoming more like our Savior. No, this does not mean we will become lesser gods in an eternal pantheon. It means we will live and love after the example of Jesus. Christ arose, so shall we. Heaven is not just a reward of luxury and wealth, but a life of meaning and joy as God has always intended for us. We cannot begin to describe heaven except to say we will never be separated from God’s presence where evil has no standing.

Humankind has always known there is more to life than this physical world. But most of our religious inventions are little more than the clever sayings found inside the wrappers of my favorite chocolates. Faith for many people is doing good deeds, reciting happy slogans, looking for the best in people, seeing God in nature and so on. The gospel of God’s grace confronts reality, rages against evil, loves beyond human reason, and welcomes anyone who will believe. Jesus has shown us “the way” through his words and his treatment of all people, including those who killed him. The cross is the hinge point of history where God has stepped into our reality and said that authentic life is found in his love alone. Only through the help of God’s Holy Spirit can we discover and experience the grace of God in Jesus Christ.