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Certain Hope Amidst Serious Suffering

Romans 5:1-11

My guess is that it would have been pretty easy to have a long, heart-to-heart conversation with Job. He could relate to just about anybody. How? He was very experienced in one area. One area that the whole world is very familiar with. Suffering. And serious suffering at that: disaster, destruction, disease, death. Can you relate? Of course you can. You might be thinking, "It's a nice Sunday morning, can't we talk about anything else? I hear enough suffering every other day of the week." You're right, because there is some serious suffering out there, and after a while it can really get to you. But this morning as we are gathered as fellow believers is the perfect time to talk about it, because we have ***certain hope amidst serious suffering.***

I'm going to go out on a limb and say that it's not pessimistic to say that the world is suffering. Any day of the year, any moment. No matter how World News shades it for that day, no matter what the voice broadcasting through your living room at night says. There's no denying it. We look at the world and we see a panorama of suffering sprawled out before us. It's not pessimistic, it's realistic.

It's one thing to hear about suffering, it's another thing to be in it. To suffer can feel like being in a dark tunnel. Disorientated, dizzy, desiring more than anything for that little beam of light. But how many times in the past several months have you felt like the dark tunnel just kept going? "Everything will be better in 2021." "Everything will be better after I get a new job." "Everything will be better after.. [fill in the blank.]" The list goes on and on... how long are we going to be looking for that light at the end of the tunnel?

I look at the verses before us this morning about suffering and see, "we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." At first glance this may seem like a motivational poster you might find at the gym. Unfortunately, suffering-perseverance-character-hope is not a four-rung ladder that we climb. It's not a four-step fix to getting your life back on track. No, it's a whole lot better than that. These words go hand in hand with the words from verse 1! **"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith."** In other words: we are now in a good relationship with God! See how that affects our understanding of suffering-perseverance-character-hope.

Suffering: we are driven to our knees. We abandon any hope we might have in ourselves.

Perseverance: amidst serious suffering we are taught to cling to the cross of Christ.

Character: day in and day out, we are being renewed by the Holy Spirit to live a new life.

And finally, hope. To understand hope, ***see where you stand.*** Paul says, **"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."** Peace with God is real peace. But peace can seem like an abstract term. If someone told you to draw a picture of peace, how would you illustrate it? Paul gives us two beautiful pictures of peace.

Imagine a circle. And not the peace symbol of a circle with three lines. A circle with the word grace written on the inside. Paul tells us that **"through [Christ] we have gained access by faith into this grace."** That is to say, previously we did not have access. Let me tell you that this was one place that we did not deserve to be. Anywhere with God's name on it should be an "Off Limits" "Restricted" "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted" kind of place for us. And that sinful nature we were born with still rears its ugly head. When we find ourselves in that dark tunnel of suffering, how easy is it to lash out at others? To push other people away who are trying to help? We retreat inwardly. We only see ourselves and doubt whether anyone or anything can help.

But we have gained access *by faith* into this grace. By faith in Christ, your Lord, your Redeemer, you have gained access into the grace of God. By faith in your perfect substitute, the one who endured unthinkable suffering

and yet never doubted his Father's plan. That's how you've gained access. And this isn't access to some counselor with limited office hours. This is 24/7 access to your heavenly Father. This access is a small child running to mom and dad's bedroom at night during a thunderstorm. See how this might play into our understanding of hope amidst suffering?

It only gets better. **See where you stand.** Picture 1: a circle of grace and we have access. Picture 2: circle of grace and we're already standing inside it. **"...we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand."** The same grace we have access to is the same grace in which we are standing. Paul didn't misspeak here, he wants to make sure we understand this. He assures us, "Look down! See where you stand, really!" This is a double assurance: we are in the room of grace and always have an open door to it! As surely and concretely as you are sitting in church right now or in the living room watching from home, you are located in God's grace. When *anything* happens to you, good or bad, look down and see where you are standing. You are standing in God's grace, day and night, as a baptized and redeemed child of God. Whenever hardships come, know that you are standing in God's love that made you his own. Seeing where you stand, hope in your eternal home!

I've been reading several productivity/self-help books recently and I promise you that not once have I run into the advice: hope in what's invisible. Hope in what is unseen. I mean, right? That doesn't make logical sense. The world tells us to make realistic goals. The world tells us, "Don't count your chickens before they hatch." Is this hope really the answer for suffering in our lives? Is the hope that God gives us in the middle of suffering really just hope in something we can't see, something invisible and almost abstract? Paul answers that for us: **...hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.** This hope doesn't put us to shame, it doesn't disappoint. Take a look and **see what is certain.**

We have already taken a look at Paul's beautiful picture of the peace we have with God. Painting in general is incredibly difficult. I have absolutely no idea how people can use paint to create a real-life image. However, I do know one thing that really makes a great artist. Great artists often use light and darkness in dramatic ways. For example, a great painter might use bright light against an incredibly dark background to draw our eyes to the subject.

We see in God's Word today that God paints the most beautiful picture of his love for us. Christ crucified. In this particular gospel image, God frames the gospel in dramatic fashion to draw our eyes to the subject. **"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** The dark background: while we were still sinners. The bright light: Christ died for us. Do you see the contrast! God draws our eyes to focus on this: his love for us sinners.

This type of imagery, this contrast, this is unheard of. Paul says in verse, **"Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die."** Maybe you can think of some special scenarios in which someone might give up their life for someone else. Maaaybe. And chances are, there is at least some sort of logical explanation for it. Dying for a family member or friend. This is not what we have here. While we were sinners!

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." That was just the right time because it shows us we certainly had no part in earning our salvation. When we could do absolutely nothing by ourselves, when we were dead in sin, incapable of doing anything... that's when Christ died for us. What a clear and certain demonstration of God's love for us!

See what is certain. If God saved us while we were sinners, he will certainly deliver us as saints. **For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!**" Paul lays it out before our eyes clearly: If Jesus lived a perfect life for me while I was standing outside of the circle of grace, what will he do for me now that I am standing inside the circle of grace? If Jesus shed his blood for me while I did not have access to his grace, what will he do for me now that I have access to his grace? *Certainly* he will continue to be with me! *Certainly* he will take me home to be with him!

As we stand in grace, with ready access into that grace, suffering will inevitably come. Disaster, destruction, disease, death. All of these are knocking at your door. Fear not, for you have been justified and have peace with God.

Perseverance: Christ is battling by your side day by day. Even though you can't see him, know that he won't let you fail.

Character: Look around and see the Christian character in the pews all around you. These are Christians who have endured real suffering and yet have clung to the promises of Christ through it all. See their character and remember that they are fellow-soldiers in this battle.

Hope: With God on your side, the victory has already been won. This means that the battle itself is the victory: Your salvation is certain.

I still think that it would be pretty easy to get into a long, heart-to-heart conversation with Job. Why? He could relate to us. Job saw what we see. He saw where he was standing: surrounded by suffering and yet standing in God's grace. He saw what was certain: God's love and his eternal life. Like Job, we have certain hope amidst serious suffering.

I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!