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Jesus Came for the Least of the Lost

At a well in Samaria, Jesus reached out to a lost soul whom his countrymen never would have approached: a woman, an adulteress, and a Samaritan. Jesus saw none of her social liabilities; he only saw her spiritual flaws: she had little happiness and less hope. Jesus recognized she was thirsting for more than what she could draw from a well so he offered her living water that gave her life with God. When Jesus seeks the lost, he is not concerned about social conventions or expectations. He came to save all people including the woman at the well and including us.

Sermon Romans 5:1-8

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And 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.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Bulletproof armor is older than you might think. Long before the invention of Kevlar, but shortly after the invention of gunpowder, armorers would sell steel plate suits of armor that they claimed were bullet proof. Some of these old suits still exist in perfect condition, except for one dent made by a bullet on the left side of the breastplate. These marks were either the only misfortune suffered by a handful of knights on a battlefield or were deliberately put there by an armorer who wanted to prove that his armor was truly bulletproof by shooting it in the place where it mattered most. That seems like an effective sales tactic to me! I'm not in the bulletproof vest market, but if I were, I might consider shooting my vests so that my customers could see where the bullet was deflected and know for sure that the vest they're buying is indeed bulletproof. In the physical world, enemy soldiers target the heart. Armorers work to protect the heart. In the spiritual world, sin and the devil target our hearts. God works to protect our hearts by pouring out his love into them. In these verses from Romans 5, God describes your heart, the heart that his people have. **A Heart Full of God's Love** is personified by peace and proved in suffering.

Personified by Peace

Our God is a God who brings peace. He uses his almighty power to bring peace to the powerless. He sends his unending love to bring peace to the ungodly. God displayed his almighty power in the nation of Israel.

He gave a son to 100-year-old Abraham and 90-year-old Sarah. He raised their family into a great nation. He completely devastated the land of Egypt with plagues so that Israel might be freed. He split the Red Sea to give his people safe passage and then turned it loose to destroy the Egyptian army. We would be hard pressed to find a people who have witnessed greater displays of God's almighty power than those Israelites who lived through all these things, whose story we heard in the First Reading. After those Israelites got out of Egypt, they got thirsty. God commanded them to camp in a place where there wasn't any water. The people's thirst turned to anger as their dry mouths cried out desperate grumblings and threats against Moses, "Give us water to drink!" Without water, the people realized how frail, helpless, and powerless they were. And God, through his servant Moses, used his almighty power to miraculously give water from a rock to his people.

Thousands of years later, God displayed his power again as the virgin Mary conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit and gave birth to God's Son, Jesus. Thousands witnessed the almighty power of God demonstrated in Jesus' miracles. As Jesus was going about his work, he got thirsty. He had to go through Samaria, near Jacob's well. Jesus' thirst turned into compassion as he took an opportunity to share the gospel with a Samaritan woman. Their conversation was fascinating. "Will you give me a drink?" Jesus said. "You're joking, right?" replied the Samaritan woman. Jesus was a Jew, and the woman was a Samaritan. There was bad blood between their people. "How can you ask me for a drink?" she said. "If you knew who I was," Jesus replied, "You'd ask me for water, and I'd give you water that wells up to eternal life." A bit confused, but intrigued nonetheless, the woman asked for this water. This is where the conversation got a bit awkward. "Go get your husband," Jesus said. "I don't have one," the woman replied. "I know. You've had five, going on six." If people might look down on this woman for her behavior today, back then it would have been much worse. That sort of thing was just downright shameful and ungodly. Because of her behavior, she was an outcast. And to this woman, Jesus said, "The Messiah that in whom you hope, for whom you wait, I am he."

In these two accounts from the Bible God showed himself to be a God who brings peace to the powerless and the ungodly, and in these two accounts, in a way we see a reflection of ourselves. The people of Israel were suffering. God commanded them to go to a place with no water. Without water, our bodies quickly begin to shut down and our condition rapidly becomes desperate. When the situation seemed impossible and they realized how helpless they were out in the desert, they got angry. "God, why would you do this? How could you put me through this?" The woman was shamed by those around her for what she had done. She would go out to the well in the heat of the day rather than the cool of the morning so she wouldn't have to endure the stares and snide comments from others. She felt her shame when Jesus came to the well. "Man, why would you talk to me?"

We can see ourselves in these stories because we're cut from the same cloth as the people of Israel and the woman at the well. When we're suffering and helpless, our hearts fill with anger that leads to questioning, blaming, and resenting God, just like the Israelites. Just like the Samaritan woman, there isn't a single one of us that doesn't have a skeleton in the closet, a haunting memory that fills our heart with shame. We're cut from the same cloth. Powerless, ungodly, sinners.

But, **"you see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."** Jesus Christ, our Savior, died to drain our hearts of anger and shame, and to fill them with his love. On the cross Christ gathered every one of our sinful stains into one spot and cleansed them with his holy, precious blood. Our anger and our shame, though they be like scarlet, through Jesus are white as snow. **"God demonstrates his great love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** How great is God's love for us that he would send his Son to die the death we deserved! We hear of heroes who lay down their own lives to save others, soldiers in the line of duty, brave citizens in dire situations. Paul wrote, **"Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die."** Self-sacrifice is an extreme act of love that we don't hear about often, but usually when we do, someone gives their life to save someone they love, or someone important. What does the fact that Jesus gave his life to save you say about his love for you and how

much he values you? How important you are to him! How great is the love God has for us, that he would lay down his life for us! How great is the love that God has for us, that he would give us his Spirit and his promise that we are forgiven!

Christ Jesus has created new hearts within us. They're not personified by anger or shame, but by the peace that comes from knowing we are forgiven. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." There's not an ounce of anger or a speck of shame between us and God. Our hearts are full of God's love and personified by the peace that comes from knowing that we are forgiven.

Proved in Suffering

What Christ did for us causes us to rejoice in the hope and the glory of God. Paul took it a step further. "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings." With this verse, Paul said that Christians do something that they ought not do. Hearts full of God's love do rejoice in something they ought not rejoice in. We rejoice in suffering. Doesn't that seem backwards? No one likes to suffer. Often times when we are suffering, we don't see any reason to rejoice. Who could rejoice while suffering the pain of losing a loved one? Who could rejoice while their bodies suffer illness? Who could rejoice while suffering extreme stress or deep depression? Who could possibly rejoice in suffering? We can. Why? Because we know. We know who God is and how much he loves us. We know God has promised that he works all things for our good. Not only do we know that God uses suffering for our good, but we know exactly *how* God uses suffering for our good. "We rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Our sufferings produce perseverance within us. Our perseverance produces character within us. Our character trusts God and clings to the hope he has established for us. "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." Your heart of faith, a heart that is full of God's love, is a gift from the Holy Spirit. God proves your heart through suffering. Just as a hot furnace proves that pure gold is indeed pure gold, just as a test proves that a student does indeed know the course material, just as a scrape left by a bullet proves that a bulletproof vest is indeed bulletproof, so also our faith is proved by suffering. By giving you suffering, God gives you evidence of his love and evidence of your faith. As we recall the traumas and sufferings of our past, we can recall the faithfulness and love of God who brought us through to the other side. As we ponder the trauma and suffering that we currently experience, we can certainly trust that God will continue to nourish us with his grace in which we now stand. God has proved himself faithful, and through suffering he proves to you that your heart is exactly where it needs to be. Full of God's love, personified by peace, and proved in suffering.

We know we'll have more aches and illnesses to endure. We know we'll have more tears to cry. We know suffering lies ahead of us. God knows too. Because of his great love for us, we know he will give us precisely what we need to persevere while suffering. He pours out his love into our hearts. He sends us his Spirit. Through words printed on the pages of your Bible and through words echoing off the walls of your church, God assures you of his love and encourages you by his Spirit. Of this you can be sure.

Every trauma, every pain, every suffering that we've endured is like another dent in the armor, another deflected bullet. We can remember how God delivered us from each one and how God's grace and our hope have remained through it all and have proved genuine. We have every reason to rejoice. We have every reason to persevere. We stand in God's grace. We will always stand in God's grace. Through every hurt and every tear we will always stand in God's grace until we see Christ face to face where there will be no more mourning, no more crying, no more tears. Of this you can be sure. Amen.

This sermon was preached by Vicar Bon Beaver.

