

This Week at the Creek

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Here's the text from the pastor's Sunday message:

Rescue the Perishing

Romans 5:1-8
January 20, 2008

There was a man in England who put his Rolls Royce on a ship and went across to the continent to go on vacation. But while driving around Europe, something happened to the engine of his car. He cabled the Rolls Royce people back in England to tell them, "I'm having trouble with my car; what do you suggest I do?" Immediately Rolls Royce dispatched a mechanic who flew over and repaired the car, then flew back to England and left the man to continue his vacation.

As you can imagine, the Englishman was wondering, *How much is this going to cost me?* So when he got back home, he wrote the Rolls Royce people another letter and asked how much he owed them. Within a few days he received a letter from the Rolls Royce offices that read: "Dear Sir: There is no record anywhere in our files that anything ever went wrong with a Rolls Royce."

Of course God knows all about our sin! But when it comes right down to it, God, in the end, looks at you and me and sees one of two things: He sees either a sinner **rejecting** Him or a saint **embracing** Him. For with the saints who accept Him, God sees nothing wrong at all! With those who've truly embraced His grace, He looks at them through Jesus-colored glasses – and what He sees are

pure and righteous human beings because all He can see is His only begotten Son!

And because that's how God sees His saints, those saints are granted peace with God – peace in the rich biblical sense of the word. We're not talking merely about peaceful feelings such as calmness and tranquility. This peace is the objective state of harmony with God that believers who have been justified enjoy. This peace means that we have been reconciled with God. There's no more hostility between us, no more sin blocking our relationship with Him. And that peace is possible only because Jesus paid the price for our sins through His death on the cross.

The apostle Paul made it clear in his letter to the church at Rome that justification by faith is the key to our redeemed relationship with God. Being justified, in the simplest terms, means that it is just as if we had never sinned. And because it is just as if we'd never sinned, God invites us to draw ever closer to Him – to move ever deeper into His presence. For when we respond to the Gospel in faith, God declares us innocent – and our relationship with Him begins. And from this new experience of close proximity to God, we can even share in the glory of God, that is, to experience the divine radiance or brightness of God in our own lives.

What we see next in this passage is Paul's master plan for the particulars of a virtuous Christian life. Such grace, he wrote, should be visibly demonstrated in the believer's life. No, we're not justified by our works. But our justification should bring about growing attitudes and actions, better habits and habitats. What we sometimes forget is that grace stands over the entire Christian experience. We not only get into a relationship with God by grace; we live out that relationship day-by-day by grace. The daily provision I enjoy comes not from my hard work but from God, who has chosen in His grace to bless me. Whatever good I accomplish comes because God graciously works through me. To stand in grace, as Paul put it, means that I live out my life in all its dimensions within the sphere of blessing that Christ has won for me.

Oh yes! There are plenty of ups and downs! And Paul talked about that too. As growing believers, it's so important to keep in mind the two-sided reality of the Christian life. On the one hand, we must realize that we are complete in Christ – that our acceptance with Him is secure. But on the other hand, we must also realize that we are growing in Christ – that we are becoming more and more like Him. On the one hand, we've been given the status of kings – as the children of God. But on the other hand, we've also come on board with the duties of slaves. On the one hand, we feel the presence of Christ. But on the other hand, we feel the pressure of sin. On the one hand, we enjoy the peace that comes from being made right with God. But on the other hand, we still face daily problems that often help us grow.

That's exactly what Paul was getting at when he reminded us of how our troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how patience in turn forges

the tempered steel of virtue, which keeps us alert for whatever God will do next. This is why it's so important to remember these two sides of the Christian life: So that we won't grow discouraged as we face temptations and problems; and so that we'll learn to depend on the power of Christ, who lives in us by the Holy Spirit.

And all of this is possible because we've been rescued by our loving and caring God! He didn't wait for us to get ready. Jesus Christ presented Himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too **weak** and **rebellious** to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn't been so weak, we wouldn't have known what to do anyway. For unlike the death of a heroic individual on behalf of another righteous person, Jesus' death occurred at an unexpected time, on behalf of ungodly people like us who don't deserve it. And that's why this passage of Scripture begins and ends with boasting: boasting in our hope of sharing the glory of God, and then boasting in God – because He has rescued us and reconciled us through Jesus Christ.

While visiting her friend Howard Doane in Cincinnati, the blind hymn writer Fanny Crosby was asked to speak to a group of blue-collar workers. Near the end of her address, she had an overwhelming sense that some mother's boy before her must be rescued that night or not at all. She mentioned this to the crowd, pleading, "If there is a dear boy here tonight who has perchance wandered away from his mother's home and his mother's teaching, would he please come to me at the close of the service?" Afterward a young man of eighteen approached her. "Did you mean me?" he asked. "I promised my mother to meet her in heaven, but the way I've been living, I don't think it's possible now." Fanny had the joy of leading him to Christ.

Returning to her room that night, all she could think about was the theme "rescue the perishing," and by the time she retired that night she had written the complete hymn: "Tho' they are slighting Him, still He is waiting, waiting the penitent child to receive; Plead with them earnestly, plead with them gently, He will **forgive**, if they only **believe**. Rescue the perishing, care for the dying; Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save." The next day, Howard Doane put the words to music.

Many years later, Fanny was speaking at the YMCA in Lynn, Massachusetts, and she recounted the story behind "Rescue the Perishing." After the service, a man approached her, his voice quivering. "Miss Crosby," he said, "I was that boy who told you more than 35 years ago that I had wandered from my mother's God. That evening you spoke, I sought and found peace, and I have tried to live a consistent Christian life ever since. If we never meet again on earth, we will meet up yonder." He turned and left, unable to say another word. But Fanny later described it as one of the most gratifying experiences of her life.

The clear message of Scripture – from Genesis to Revelation – is that while God goes to extreme measures seeking the lost, our neglect of His gift of grace hardens our hearts and places us at the furthest point from God's attempt to

rescue us. It's not that God doesn't want to; it's just that we too much hate to admit that we're lost. So we ignore the offer of rescue. Or perhaps we feel that there's always plenty of time before we need to call on God to get us out of the fix we're in. Whatever our excuse and however far away we are, God is still eager to rescue us.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the father who runs down the road to greet his returning son is doing something rather humiliating for a wealthy Middle Easterner; a rich patriarch just didn't go sprinting down the sidewalk when someone was on the horizon. Yet for his son, this father did just that, not considering in the least what the neighbors might think. And for His sons and daughters – for His children far removed from His circle – God, in the person of Jesus Christ – dashed into this world and moved deliberately and carefully toward a date with death to rescue us from the eternal consequences of our sins. The only time God is in a **hurry** is when we are in need of **rescue**.

Consider the progression: "At just the right time," meaning that at both the right point in human history and the right time in God's provision – and at the right time for us to take advantage of it – at just that moment things happen. And those things happened "when we were still powerless." Paul was speaking to people who were empowered by their new birth in Jesus Christ. But before that time, they were lacking the power of God to live a good life. "I can do all things," Paul wrote to the Philippians, "through Him who strengthens me." But he doesn't say he could have done all things before Christ strengthened him!

And just who are these powerless people – the ungodly – for whom Christ died? They're you, they're me, the high-and-mighty and the downtrodden, the oppressors and the oppressed, the overcomers and the underachievers. God is on a rescue mission. He's searching for the **body** that's bruised, the **mind** that's crushed, the **heart** that's heavy, and the **soul** that's lost. He wants to find you and comfort you and strengthen you and save you – but you must be willing to receive what He has to offer. This salvation is no mirage, no joke, no temporary effort. It's real and it's lasting and it's wonderful. Don't take His rescue mission for granted.

Let us pray: How amazing, O Lord, is Your grace! How far-reaching is Your love! How thorough is Your rescue of our souls! Thank You for coming to us in our helpless state to save us for Yourself. Grant that we, as Your children, would grow day-by-day to be more and more like our Savior and Lord, in whose name we pray.

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