

Romans 5:1-8  
Exhibit A: Endurance  
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There is seemingly no shortage of elements in our culture today that divide us, segment us, turn us upon one another, and subvert our hope. Even the glimmer of hope of reconciliation to the age-old feud between Actor Matt Damon and Oscar Host Jimmy Kimmel was thwarted by one misplaced envelope.

You don't need me to remind you of the tensions we face and the potential erosion of our hope in the world today. It can feel, sometimes, as though the good gifts of God are always under threat of unraveling. Which is why, during these forty days of preparation, I want to invite you to engage with me in the spiritual discipline of reclaiming hope. Together we will look to Scripture to make the case for the hope available in Jesus Christ.

As Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15 to **always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.** During Lent, we will look at the evidence the Apostle Paul lays out in what some scholars call the fifth gospel, his letter to the Romans, for evidence that undergirds our hope.

Saint Paul throughout his career faced countless instances where hope was challenged. Whether it was his regular stints in prison; tenuous lectures before hostile crowds; a riot in Ephesus; a shipwreck on Malta; even the mysterious *death by preaching* of the young Eutychus in Jerusalem—Paul was no stranger to hope called into question.

But like a defendant testifying before a grand jury, Paul, time and again, systematically makes his case for hope in Jesus Christ—the same foundation for our hope.

As we begin this journey together, would you join me in prayer? *Let this good news come now, Father, not only in word, but also in power and with great assurance...*

**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.**

Chapter five begins with a bold claim. The Apostle writes, **“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith.”** By way of introduction, Paul spent the first four chapters laying out the history of God's work in the world. Our predecessors in the faith, the heroes of the Old Testament, lived under the law, the old covenant: keep my commands, worship me alone, and it will go well with you. But inevitably, they were completely incapable of living righteously according to the law. Romans 2

sets up the straw man scenario, **saying if you choose to live by the law you will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who are justified.** In other words, if you rely on the law, you'll be held to its full weight.

Then in chapter 3, we get the honest admonition that **all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.**

For the Jews, the Law was given as an instructor, a keeper, but it was never meant to be a redeemer. That is, until one came who was able to perfectly keep the law, Jesus of Nazareth, the holy one. So, does that mean he then became merely our model human being? No, Romans 3 says that Jesus became, for us, a propitiation, a substitution, an acceptable offering, for the sins of the world. Through him we gain access to the depths of God's manifold grace and mercy. So that now when God looks at us, he doesn't see the filthy rags of our own righteousness. Instead, what he sees is our substitute, our covering, our advocate, our new creation: the pure, spotless, life of Jesus.

This truth, that we are justified by faith, is the very point on which our faith will either stand or fall. The one through which the verdict of our lives is rendered innocent. Martin Luther, when he finally understood this concept of justification, cried out "simul justus et peccator" which means simultaneously sinner and simultaneously completely justified. When you believe in Jesus Christ and put your full weight down on his merciful grace, you are simultaneously a sinner and yet entirely righteous, just, redeemed in God's sight. That's the heart of the Gospel.

And so, as Paul begins chapter 5, he uses one of these beautiful little prepositions, **Therefore**, (some of the most important words in all of Scripture are simple prepositions) **since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God.**

Peace with God. This word peace is the quintessential Hebrew word for salvation, shalom, peace. When you as a child of God grasp how great a debt you owe to God, and at the same time how great a gift Jesus offered on your behalf to bring that grace to us, our first response is awe-struck humility. But the more important response, the response God wants for your life is this: shalom. Peace. God wants you to have peace from the rat race, God wants you to have peace from the insecurity, God wants you to have peace from the comparisons, the measuring up, the balancing of the accounts, peace from the endless self-justifications. In Jesus Christ, you are justified by faith, and the gift of that is peace.

The other night, Amy and I watched a documentary called *The Minimalists*. It's the story of two guys in their early thirties who decided to get off the corporate hamster wheel and pare down their copious and unnecessary stuff in order to live present and simple lives. And what they found was that as they chose to resist the temptation to define their lives by the things they acquired, and chose instead to be defined by their experiences and relationships and live a simple life, their happiness skyrocketed. Their ability to appreciate things was so much clearer and more acute.

In our spiritual lives, God is inviting you pare down the acquisition of spiritual accolades, pare down the constant urge to justify yourself, pare down the temptation to define your life by how it measures up to others, or how good you are trying to become. But that's not far enough. Jesus doesn't just call us to scale back, he calls us to nothing less than the complete death to self, by allowing him to skillfully and precisely eradicate these things from your lives. And then look only to Jesus the author of the minimalist life.

You see, it's only when we die to our desire for self-definition, that we can live in the fullness of not who we are, but who he is. His life becomes ours. The life defined not by the degrees on the wall, or the car in the drive, or the amount in the account. These things, good though they are—I'm not denigrating degrees, I'm not condemning cars, I'm not assessing the account—I am warning that they in themselves can never bring peace. The only thing in this world that can bring true shalom is that quiet, confident, rooted faith in Jesus the Messiah—the hero of our hope. Jesus who justifies and gives our lives meaning.

As we minimalize the distractions in our lives, Paul says something interesting. Jesus maximizes our capacity for, what he calls, **rejoicing in our suffering**. This doesn't mean that we say yippee, life is terrible. What it does mean is that when things don't go our way, when we find ourselves at the butt end of a criticism or cruel joke, when a venture fails and we lose out, we don't say things like, "this isn't fair, this isn't supposed to happen to me, my life is meaningless." If when things go bad, when you suffer, or there is some injustice in your life, you are shattered, it proves that your view of life is built upon a false reality, because it can't handle reality and life as it actually is.

Therefore, Paul says that we as Christians have a unique ability to rejoice in our sufferings. Not that we look for suffering (mascicism), or that we mindlessly endure it (stoicism), but we have the honesty to recognize that when suffering comes, growth is not far behind. Again, a setback is just a setup for a comeback. Paul says in verse 3, **"suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character; and character hope. And hope does not disappoint us."**

As you face the obstacles that seek to pull you under, the more you lean into the hope of your justification in Jesus Christ, the more the Holy Spirit will deepen your capacity to endure. Suffering, when we acknowledge that it is a part of every person's experience, and that Jesus Christ has redeemed all our sufferings through his own suffering, deepens our endurance and our ability to stare it down and face it with resolute hope that Jesus ultimately has the last word.

Our faith muscles are in many ways like our physical muscles. They're strengthened when they are strained. I want to tell you about a time when I endured suffering like this. In 2004, I undertook a training regimen and signed up to run the Twin Cities Marathon. As weeks ticked by, I would get in my short midweek runs, then on Saturday mornings I'd get out early for 8, 10, 16, and ultimately a 20 mile training run. They were often lonely, and sometimes agonizing. But with every mile, I was increasing my body's ability to endure.

But nothing compared to the day of the race. The first 15 miles breezed by and I hardly noticed them. Then I realized, maybe I started out too hot, I'd better pace myself so I've got gas in the tank for the home stretch. 17, 18, 19 ok, this is starting to not feel so good. At 22 miles, there was an inflatable wall arching over the road, and it was almost exactly there that I hit the proverbial wall. Calves, quadriceps, hamstrings, as if on cue, all seized up at the same time...both legs. Lying on the side of the road, I thought, "Well this is it, looks like this is my final resting place." But then a woman about my mom's age walked over to me and said the most angelic words these ears have ever heard: "I'm a physical therapist, do you mind if I massage your legs?"

After a few bottles of water and those glorious hands working out the knots, I got back up. I plotted along for the next 4 miles, running a bit, walking mostly, every step agony. I had the endurance, but even those who have trained for the race face suffering. Paul says that suffering produces character.

For the next few miles as I painfully hobbled along, I found myself thinking, “I wonder if I’ll ever do something like this again?” But then, as I reached the crest of Summit Ave overlooking the capital and finish line, the hope of all my suffering, in that moment, joy flooded in. Would I do it again? You bet... I haven’t yet, but I would.

Now I realize that in the grand view, this is a petty example of suffering that produces endurance. But it begins to speak to the way in which justification enables a Christian person to endure suffering and have their hope actually increase because of it. In Ezekiel 36, God says, **And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.** The character Paul talks about that comes from suffering is the ability to remain tender in the face of despair, and not become cynical, jaded, hard hearted.

I heard a story about the famous Poet WH Auden who in the 1930s went to the movies in New York City. He was in a German neighborhood, and the theater was showing a Nazi propaganda film. Throughout the film, there was all sorts of cruelty being depicted by the Germans toward the Slovaks and Jews, in the name of great triumph. Auden, the secular humanist, believed that there was no God and that people were basically good and just needed a little more education to eradicate evil. As he sat there with the Jews on the screen, the people in the audience shouted out, “Get rid of them!”

When it ended, he sat there, unable to stand. He was in the middle of having his worldview changed. He sat there and wept because he realized that his worldview would not let him accept the reality of how evil human beings could be. He realized that no amount of education, good politics, or culture could heal the hard-heartedness, because there was no doctrine of sin. Without the ability to define and label the root of our problems (sin) and the justice of God, there was no ultimate hope that there was a God who would ultimately put all evil down, hope that there is a God who came down to partake in the sufferings of this life, hope in a new kingdom. Without this hope, his heart would continue in a state of hardness.

Suffering produces character. When God carves out that heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh, he gives us the capacity to see things the way they really are, to weep over the sufferings of others, to have empathy and compassion for those who struggle in this life. You have to have hope in a greater good, in order to share in the sufferings of others.

Where do we find that hope to endure the struggles of the world? At this table. The memorial of Jesus’ ultimate act of entering into our sufferings in order to offer his transcendent hope. The Lord’s Supper is the great banquet feast in which people from every tribe and nation, regardless of the stuff they bring with them that needs to be shed or the suffering they’ve endured just getting to the table, all who hunger and thirst for righteousness are invited to this feast.

Today, if you are weary from the weight of the struggles you face, or if you are weary from trying to keep up the appearance that everything is ok, Jesus invites you to hope in his word of justification over your life. Brothers and sisters, fellow sinners, come to the table where suffering is transformed into the hope of the glory of God.