

## Good News About Forgiveness (Romans 5:1-11)

### Have I Got Good News For You! (Colin Hughes)

Sunday Morning 10:45am 16 November 2008

1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

3 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

4 perseverance, character; and character, hope.

5 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.

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.

8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

10 For if, when 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!

11 Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Romans 5:1-11

Christians talk about being saved, but saved from what?

It may surprise many of you to hear that we are being saved from the wrath of God. This becomes more puzzling when we read in scripture that it is God that saves us. In other words, we are saved from God by God. But how can this be?

We read in verse 9, "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" Paul's letter to the Romans, from where this passage has been taken, is perhaps one of the greatest expositions of the Gospel message. Throughout his letter Paul pulls no punches and only presents the Good News after he has first painted a picture of how wretched our state is. In chapter 2 he writes, "But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed." (Romans 2:5) When we read verses like this we tend to react in one of three ways: We think it applies to someone else, we say that we don't care, or we ask the question, "Then what must I do?"

It is only by responding in the third way that we will appreciate the Good News, but getting to that point is far from our minds until God intervenes. Until that happens we will find ourselves responding in one of the first two ways.

The first response of thinking it applies to someone else is rooted in arrogance and pride: thinking ourselves better than we are. The second response of saying that we don't care is rooted in ignorance: again, not seeing ourselves as we truly are. Anticipating our responses Paul quotes from one of the Psalms in the next chapter: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Romans 3:11-12) Christian or not we often struggle with this assertion. We all know people who often seem to put

Christians to shame when it comes to being a "good person". Augustine, along with many other brilliant theologians from Church history, wrote about this problem of, what is called, civic virtue. Let me give you a modern day example.

Last year major roadworks were being undertaken on the section of motorway just before my exit and consequently the traffic queues were horrendous. During this period I found an alternative route by leaving the motorway an exit early and using some back roads through the countryside. Although this route would have ordinarily been longer, with the delays on the motorway I was cutting ten to fifteen minutes from my journey time.

Part of this route involved a two mile straight road section that ran parallel to the motorway with a speed limit of 60 miles per hour. I saw this section, where I could "put my foot down", as a small indulgence and a consolation for whole inconvenience.

One morning I rounded the bend onto the straight section and I was about to open up my speed when I found myself behind a car travelling a rather casual and steady 45 mph. To begin with I became quite frustrated. It was about 6.45am, the road was practically empty, there were no awkward bends to contend with, and this clown was robbing me of my little treat. Although the road was quiet at that time, the occasional car travelling in the opposite direction made it difficult to overtake safely. However, as I continued I felt a prick of conscience. God was challenging me and little by little my attitude was transformed. Eventually I saw this person in front as someone to be admired. I realised that just because the speed limit is 60 mph it doesn't mean that I must travel at that speed. In fact I began to wonder were the police were at times like this. Instead of only stopping motorists for offences, why didn't they ever pull over drivers such as this and present them with some type of award for safe driving?

Finally it was time to make a left turn off this road and when the car in front also put on his left indicator I no longer felt anger or frustration, but instead I felt a genuine sense of privilege to be following him. How good God can be!

As we turned from the main road the new road is narrower and has a few bends so the speed limit becomes 40 mph. As we both accelerated I wondered how fast he would go now? I was a little surprised, and somewhat disappointed, to see him increase his speed to 45 mph. Admittedly, that was how fast I normally drove along that section, but I almost expected more from him.

We continued our journey for a mile or two before the area became residential and the speed limit drops to 30 mph. Guess what? He continued at 45 mph. At this point I reduced my speed as I felt it was simply not safe to drive at that speed along that section and I watched him disappear into the distance.

If he had continued along that straight road and not turned left with me I would have been left with a memory of someone to be admired. It was only by seeing him in a different context that his true nature was exposed. He wasn't driving at 45 mph because he wanted to be a safe driver. He drove at that speed because that made him happy and he wanted to. In the same way, we observe the outward virtues of people and believe that they are rooted in a good heart, but only God sees their true nature. He knows the depth of their "goodness", and He knows how long it would last if circumstances in life should turn bad. This is not to say that people do not do good things, it is simply that any goodness we perform does not come out of our love for God or wishing to please Him. In fact being told that it is only in seeking the glory of God that it can be called truly good makes the natural man quite angry.

In the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul writes, "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to

God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God." (Romans 8:6-8)

But why is this?

In Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesus we read, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath." (Ephesians 2:1-3)

Scripture teaches us that we are born dead in our sins. What this means is that we seek to live our lives as if we do not need God and consider His interference in our lives to be an infringement of our right to do as we please. The worst part is that our condition is hopeless in that we can do nothing to change it. We cannot bring ourselves back to life.

So here it is... Regardless of any outward appearances the natural man does not seek after God, and as a consequence we are under the wrath of God.

From the air we breathe to everything we possess, we have received it all from God. Yet we do not seek Him, nor have we ever shown gratitude in any proportion to the gifts received; we cannot! We have literally committed cosmic treason against our Maker and we deserve death. So we are born dead in our sins. We are both unwilling and incapable of seeking God.

Now if that is not bad news I don't know what is. It is when we reach this realisation that we properly appreciate the Good News. The passage in Ephesians we just read continues, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved." (Ephesians 2:4-5)

In the eleventh chapter of Saint John's Gospel we read that a message was sent to Jesus about a friend of Mary and Martha called Lazarus who was seriously ill. They wanted Jesus to come urgently to heal him. When Jesus eventually arrived Lazarus had already been dead for four days and his body had been placed in a stone tomb. But Jesus ordered that the stone be rolled away from the entrance to the cave and He commanded, "Lazarus, come out!" Immediately Lazarus came to life and walked out.

Jesus could have rushed to Bethany before Lazarus died and healed him, but He wanted us to learn some valuable lessons. The first, and perhaps most obvious, lesson is that Jesus is the Lord of Life and He has authority even over death. In fact, commentators have said that such is the power of the Jesus' words that if He had not spoken the name of Lazarus in His command then every dead person around Him would have come back to life! However, the second lesson we learn is about our natural state. Like Lazarus we are dead in our sins. Our situation is utterly hopeless. Neither we nor any other person is able to do anything about it. Yet when Jesus calls our name we are brought back to life and He draws us to Him. Having being brought back to life do you think that Lazarus would remain in the dark tomb? Certainly not! He heard the voice of Jesus calling him and walked into the light. In the same way when we hear the voice of Jesus calling us we will respond and come to Him. Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-28) What a wonderful truth!

But have no doubt: if we are saved then it was by the grace of God. A couple of verses later in the same passage in Ephesians, Paul continues, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

But how are we saved? If God is not to compromise His holiness and be forever just then He cannot allow sin to go unpunished; He cannot simply ignore it. So His plan of salvation was this: He chose to take on the form of a man, coming to earth born as a baby. To live that perfect, sinless life which we should have lived, and then finally offer Himself as a living sacrifice in our place. In doing so He took on all of our sins and paid the price we should have paid. This is why upon seeing Jesus approach, John the Baptist declared, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). And in Paul's second letter to the Church in Corinth he wrote, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

This is truly Good News: God offers His forgiveness to those who neither deserve it nor are capable of earning it and in doing so we are born into new life. Even more remarkable is that we become as righteous and pure as Christ in God's sight. In our passage this morning Paul wrote, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

Once we are made alive, God's Holy Spirit will then continue working in us to make us into the image of Christ; this process is called sanctification. However, this work will not be complete during our lifetime, and we will only be fully sanctified when we enter into Heaven. In the meantime we will stumble and we will sin. So it is important to realise that we are weak and as much as we needed God to bring us back to life in the first place, we depend on the continued work of God's Spirit in our lives.

In other words, seeking forgiveness reflects an attitude of heart, and a willingness to continue seeking forgiveness stands as testimony to our dependence on God. Confession is one of the most important corporate acts we do in Church. To deny the need for confession is to declare yourself as the finished article before God. If nothing else that is certainly grounds to confess!

In a moment I would like to move into a time of confession. Perhaps there is no greater place to look than Psalm 51. I would commend this Psalm to you and suggest that you make this passage a regular part of your prayers.

But before that I would like to mention one other lesson from the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus could have miraculously commanded the stone to roll away, but instead He chose to involve us; He asked those with Him to roll the stone away. So it is with us in the Church. He chooses to involve us in bringing His word to the world through everything we do. Although it is the power of God that saves, it is our words and our lives which are to be a witness of the transforming power of God's grace.

This whole message may be new to you, or it may be something you've heard many times before. But perhaps this morning you are being challenged by a feeling in your heart that things in your life aren't quite right? We must remember that we do not naturally seek God, so if this describes your experiences then God has begun His good work in you. And like Lazarus who was raised from the dead and found himself in that dark tomb, the Good News will be as attractive as the light; you will be drawn to it, into the loving arms of Jesus who has brought you from death to life. To encourage you further, Paul wrote to the Philippians, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6a)

As a church it is our mission to nurture and support those called to a new life in Christ; each and every one of us. As individuals it is our responsibility to be a part of that church so that we can contribute and continue to grow in order to reflect the glory of God, sharing the Good News of God's forgiveness to a desperate world.

God's plan for mankind has never changed. Psalm 51, was written several hundred years before Jesus was born, yet it was written as if for every generation. Whilst it is being read, and if you feel moved to do so, please make this your own prayer of confession.

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is always before me.
- 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are proved right when you speak  
and justified when you judge.
- 5 Surely I was sinful at birth,  
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
- 6 Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;  
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.
- 7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins  
and blot out all my iniquity.
- 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will turn back to you.
- 14 Save me from bloodguilt, O God,  
the God who saves me,  
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
- 15 O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;  
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
- 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart,  
O God, you will not despise.

Psalm 51:1-17

So it is that God promises, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1: 9) Amen.