

“The Bridge of Hope” (Romans 5:1–11)(12.13.20)

Romans 5:1–11 (NIV84) *Peace and Joy*

5 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.

The word of God for the people of God.

Title: **“The Bridge of Hope”**

LET US PRAY.

INTRODUCTION:

This week, The Babylon Bee published the satirical story titled “Movie Studio Accidentally Releases Uplifting, Inspirational Movie:”

LOS ANGELES, CA—According to sources, Hollywood has accidentally released an uplifting, inspirational film. Sources reported that studio execs are in full damage control mode after a movie with incorrect messaging was inadvertently released to audiences nationwide.

“We are deeply sorry for this inexcusable mistake,” said a representative for the guilty studio. “This accidentally-released film really clashes with our usual offering of nihilistic violence and gratuitous sex designed to make you **lose all hope in humanity** and shred the last vestiges of your faith in God to pieces. Starting today, we commit to being better.”

Embarrassingly, the film in question features transcendent themes of love, sacrifice, and virtue in the face of evil. Audiences are hailing it as a film that **reconnected them with the divine and gave them hope for a better tomorrow**. Professional critics dismissed it as “not sufficiently gross and horrific.”

The film will be available on streaming platforms but will have an “inspirational content warning” from the studio.

BODY:

It took me four days to come up with the title for this message because the Holy Spirit was teaching me in my preparation. And, there is so much here, I soon figured out it had to be a sermon series. {write on slide} This bridge of hope starts with our new birth, with being a new creation, with our life in Christ. We travel across this bridge in our bodies of flesh. It ends with our eternal life.

You can see that the bridge is built upon reconciliation, rejoicing, grace, faith, glory, peace, and justification. The superstructure of the bridge, what holds it together, is the love of God. The surface, the roadway of the bridge, is where we experience the suffering of life. And Paul tells us something that is difficult to receive: We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

What is Paul’s basis for making such a bold claim? What does he know about suffering? What does he know about perseverance or endurance? What does the Apostle Paul know about character? What does he know about hope?

The answer is in 2 Corinthians 11:21–29 (NIV84):

²¹ ...What anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

I can hear your thoughts. You are rationalizing that this is the great Apostle. We are only regular Christians. Certainly, the expectation of suffering does not apply to us. Yes it does. Most of us have experienced trials in our lives. Not to the degree of Paul for sure. Overall, because of the affluence of our society and excellent medical care available to us, we are somewhat insulated from long term suffering.

You may have noticed that although I mention the Corona Virus during the Pastoral Prayer, I have said very little about it, and our responses to it, in my preaching. The reason is because the airwaves have been saturated with COVID, COVID, COVID. I wonder about the mental health aspects and ramifications. In the last couple days, the news from Asia is that things are getting worse. This second wave of the virus has changed. Right now, relief seems to be several months out on the horizon; meaning we will have coped with it for over a year. I am hearing more reports of infection, closer to home, your homes, as it seems to be circling ever closer and closer.

That is part of my motivation for preaching on hope. Of course, Advent is a season of hope and expectations. That is why I preached “The God of Hope” last week and why I have posted a video on social media that was put out by Chosen People Ministries called “The Hope of Messiah’s Arrival.”

Today’s scripture is critical for us to rightfully understand hope. We need to be asking God and ourselves, what am I to be learning in this pandemic? How should I be growing in my relationship with Jesus in this pandemic? We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

We should lean forward in our Christian walk, picking up others on our way, and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Is God being glorified as we face our suffering? We are not to just be existing, but rather persevering: not being passive, but active. Is our character being enhanced? Imagine yourself as a block of marble. When that great Sculptor creates our statue, we must bear the beautiful wounds of the hammer and chisel.

Will it end happily ever after? By now you know, life is not a fairy tale. Sometimes it will be hard, very hard; and, you may wonder if you will really make it through. A dear loved one may get seriously sick or even die. Sometimes the relationship is dried and shriveled up...and the other person does not want to join you in the rebuilding. Jobs are lost and cars are repossessed. Someone we love is struggling with addiction and they relapse.

And still we hope. We hope in a sovereign God. The Reverend Dr. Charles Stanley wrote a book titled, *The Reason for My Hope*. At the end of each chapter, he summarized with a reason for his hope:

I have hope because I know God loves me.

I have hope because God has a master plan for good for all His creation and I am a part of it, now and every day to come.

I have hope because God has a blueprint for my life—a personalized plan that is still unfolding.

I have hope because God is at work in me, and the work that He is doing is a good work with eternal benefit!

I have hope because God still has more that He desires to say to me!

I have hope because I have people who need me to love them and give to them.

I have hope because God is the One who is in charge of fulfilling the potential He has given me.

I have hope because all of God's promises are intended for me, and He still has blessings to give to me.

I have hope because God is with me always!

Most of you know that we collect the pop-tops from cans for the Ronald McDonald House. They offer many programs, but are mostly known for providing hospitality to families who's loved ones need medical care. The headline on their website says, "Providing hope to families around the world."

Last week I introduced you to Katie Davis Majors. She wrote the book *Daring to Hope* (Finding God's Goodness in the Broken and the Beautiful). Because she lives near a hospital in Uganda, and like Ronald McDonald House, she provides hospitality and medical care as one of her many ministries. There is a guest cottage behind her house. It is often full, where a whole family might share one room. Remember that she has 13 adopted children of her own.

A woman named Katherine and her grown daughter and another five children under the age of ten was one of those families. Katie Majors shares her story: "Katherine had been fighting tuberculosis, a complication from HIV, for a while, but recently it had gotten bad enough that she was rapidly losing weight and had very little energy. Katherine didn't need much, just some good food and a little extra care; I figured it would be a month, maybe two, before she was strong and healthy enough to move out and care for her children on her own again.

Friends turned into family as we adjusted to life with six more people (the adult daughter was not living there). It is a bit of a mess, this business of love. As more and more people enter our lives, we are left with no choice but to enter theirs as well. Even more so, over time their pains become our pain and their joys become our joy and this sharing of the Gospel becomes a sharing of life. This, at first glance, seems so burdensome, so overwhelming, but somehow I have found it not to be any longer. Something about shouldering the burdens of another brings a lightness to our own affliction. We are in it together, and Christ is in it with us.

The world would like to tell us otherwise; the world would teach us that pain is what ruins us. We are trained and conditioned to run from pain at all costs. Some would even argue that doing so is primal instinct. Only the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit can override this fear of pain with a love that is greater. The world would teach us that once we are broken, we cannot be used, we cannot be strong, we cannot be happy. But this NOT TRUE. In the very greatest miracle of all time, Our Father God resurrects His Son Jesus. Out of the darkness of Jesus' tomb, new Life emerges and a new Light shines forth. The Lamb, the Lamb. God uses all things, even pain, for His glory.

The months passed and Katherine wasn't getting better. Everyone agreed that her disease had progressed too far for her body to fight much longer. I sat on the side of her bed, like I did every morning, to ensure that she was swallowing down the drugs meant to make her better but that also made her feel nauseous. The most recent doctor's report said that the drugs meant to save her life were tearing her stomach apart and that eighty pounds was just too small for a woman of nearly six feet. It was possible that something might shift and her body might start responding. This was rare, but it was possible.

Intellectually, I knew that the chances of her improving significantly were not great. But in my heart, I knew the God of the impossible. I knew the Life Giver. I couldn't help but hope, and I asked it, begged it, over and over again, Oh, Lord, might she live? I remembered the expectancy that He had been teaching me for years, to look at the broken places and expect that He would bring beauty, to look at bleak situations and expect that He would meet us there.

I resolved to choose life. I would choose it for her and for her children. I would choose it for me. I was determined that even when the temptation to despair was overwhelming, I would choose hope, expectantly waiting on God to save not only Katherine's soul but also her life. I would choose to believe for the victory found in Christ Jesus. I knew the God who could heal her, I desperately wanted Him to heal her, and I believed that He would.

Because Katherine was growing weaker, we moved her from the small house in our backyard into our living room, where I could provide more immediate assistance. Katherine slept on the couch while her children piled on mattresses on the floor. It was Christmas morning. Katherine's chest heaved and a small moan escaped her lips, and I worried.

I watched Katherine and her children sleep and heard my precious ones begin to stir in their bedrooms, and I wondered if I could do it all again today. Could I find the strength and grace to yet again care for the children and the sick and the broken and those who would come for dinner and just all these lives with all their needs? The house was all aglow with candles lit and the light from the tree. I reminded myself of all God's promises fulfilled in a baby, and I breathed it deep: grace.

I looked around and I knew, again, that this is what Jesus came for. The heartaches and the doubt and the wounds that our sin carves deep, that is why He is here. And all this life that was hanging in the balance in the dark of that morning, that is why we wait, why we celebrate. We light the candles and the tree and the house, and we cry with longing in our voices and our hearts, "Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel. Come, Lord Jesus." And His hope surged up in me again, for her, for her life. We waited.

On New Year's Day, Katherine was noticeably worse. The doctor at the hospital did a scan and gave us more news we didn't want to hear. Her digestive tract had completely stopped moving, causing an obstruction, which was the source of her severe pain. Katherine spent six long agonizing nights in the hospital. I look back and marvel at how many people stepped in and loved us so that I could just keep loving her. Whether she was healed or not, we would make sure that in this time she was well loved. "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water." She was thirsty, her lips parched and cracking, and I was thirsty to see God here. We cried out to Him. But my desperate pleading and earnest seeking wouldn't yield the outcome I was looking for, not this time. On the evening of our sixth day at the hospital, with a loud cry of agony, Katherine died.

What do you do when you believe for life and ask for it with all your heart, yet your friend still ends up dead and sealed up in a coffin? What do you do when God doesn't show up in the way that you asked Him to? What was all that hoping for if this was to be the end? As naïve as it seems, I couldn't believe that it had ended this way after all our prayers, after all our hopes and dreams.

I asked God repeatedly why He allowed me to believe so strongly that Katherine would live when she wasn't actually going to. Slowly He began to show me that He gave me the grace to believe that should live so that in her final days she would feel hope and high spirits all around her, so that she would feel that she was fought for and that she was worth the fight.

God's answers came to me like this, unfolding slowly, gently. He was growing me and shaping me in my hope because my eager anticipation for Him had drawn me to His feet. In my hope and waiting, regardless of the outcome, I had known Him. And I would continue to know Him in this place. Night after night as I sought Him in the quiet after Katherine's death, I began to realize that my great hoping, my great expectancy, had grown in me both a hunger for God and an understanding of His love for us that I had not realized before.

My belief that He would heal her had grown more room in my heart for Him. And now, in this emptiness, He was all that would fill it. When I had nowhere to turn, he was the only place I could come home to."

CONCLUSION:

A little known preacher concluded his sermon: "This subject of tribulation and its fruit might fittingly be closed with some lines written by a young lady in Nova Scotia, who was an invalid for many years-" (I tried to find out this woman's name but could not.)

"My life is a wearisome journey;
I am sick of the dust and the heat
The rays of the sun beat upon me;
The briars are wounding my feet;
But the city to which I am going
Will more than my trials repay;
All the toils of the road will seem nothing
When I get to the end of the way.
"There are so many hills to climb upward,
I often am longing for rest;
But he who appoints me my pathway
Knows just what is needful and best.
I know in his Word he has promised
That my strength shall be as my day;
And the toils of the road will seem nothing
When I get to the end of the way.
"He loves me too well to forsake me,
Or give me one trial too much:
All his people have dearly been purchased,
And Satan can never claim such.
By-and-by I shall see him and praise him
In the city of unending day;
And the toils of the road will seem nothing
When I get to the end of the way.
"Though now I am footsore and weary,
I shall rest when I'm safely at home;
I know I'll receive a glad welcome,
For the Saviour himself has said, 'Come:
So when I am weary in body,
And sinking in spirit, I say,
All the toils of the road will seem nothing
When I get to the end of the way.
"Cooling fountains are there for the thirsty;
There are cordials for those who are faint;
There are robes that are whiter and purer
Than any that fancy can paint.
Then I'll try **to press hopefully onward**,
Thinking often through each weary day,
The toils of the road will seem nothing
When I get to the end of the way."

"We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope." Amen and amen. Let us pray.