

Hope for Tomorrow Today

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on August 29, 2021.

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 (Romans 5:1–5).¹

There is a topic which runs throughout Scripture that if denied, ignored, or forgotten render the gospel personally irrelevant. It is a topic that involves every man, woman, and child, as well as God. It had a beginning, is an ever-present reality, and will have an end. It reveals much about our condition and more about God, yet it is rarely discussed. The topic is the wrath of God.

Of course, we are all readily capable of unleashing our own sinful wrath on others, but this does little to help us understand God's. God's wrath is neither fickle nor fitful but holy and righteous. Therefore, his wrath is a righteous response to sin which is always right, as sin is an offense to the holiness of God.

As we are often hypercritical of the sins of others against us yet dismissive of our own, between the two God's holiness is rarely considered. But whether denied, ignored, or forgotten, the wrath of God remains on all apart from Christ (John 3:36), of which they are oblivious. As Jonathan Edwards famously preached to his Northampton congregation,

natural Men are held in the Hand of God over the Pit of Hell; they have deserved the fiery Pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his Anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the Executions of the fierceness of his Wrath in Hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that Anger, neither is God in the least bound by any Promise to hold 'em up one moment; the Devil is waiting for them, Hell is gaping for them, the Flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the Fire pent up in their own Hearts is struggling to break out; and they have no Interest in any Mediator, there are no Means within Reach that can be any Security to them. In short, they have no Refuge, nothing to take hold of, all that preserves them every Moment is the meer arbitrary Will, and uncovenanted unobliged Forbearance of an incensed God."²

If what Edwards describes sounds like a war in which all hope is lost, you are getting but a glimpse of what James describes as "enmity with God" (Jas. 4:4). And when you get but a glimpse of this, it makes the gospel all the more glorious.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Digital Commons, accessed August 26, 2021, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=etas>.

Although “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18), all who have believed the truth of the gospel “have been justified by faith [and] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” We who were at war with God, deserving his judgment and under his wrath, are now at peace with him, not by merited treaty but by grace through faith. In fact, we are not only justified as righteous before God, he has also adopted us as his own. We are legally-legitimate, eternally-favored children of God.

When you consider what we were yesterday compared to what we are today, we really do have “Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”³ Consider the hope we have in knowing who we are: children of God; how we live: by God’s grace through the Spirit of Christ; what we do: live all of life to the glory of God; where we are going: the eternal kingdom of God. We are certain of all of this, not based on feeling but faith. Hope believes.

Hope Believes

Christian hope is not wishful thinking but *believes* objective truth: “since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The Christian’s peace with God is not based on his or her works but on Christ’s, his perfectly obedient life, his sacrificially atoning death, his victoriously conquering resurrection. What Christ has done for us is based on the objective truth of his life, death, and resurrection. And, it is to him alone that we look for salvation from the wrath of God: “because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Rom. 10:9-10). We are justified as righteous before God by faith alone in Christ alone, through which we are saved from the wrath of God.

Therefore, Christian hope is neither natural nor circumstantial. Given that our faith is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8-9) and given that it comes through the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit, Christian hope is supernatural. Given that we are saved not by our works but, God’s sovereign grace, and given that “those whom [God] predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30), Christian hope transcends the circumstances of life. When we consider what God has done for us in Christ, saving us from his wrath, securing our redemption, adopting us as his own, and giving us an eternal inheritance, we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Heb. 13:6).

And yet, we often do fear what man can do to us, or think about us, or say about us. Today, worldly fear has become the “respectable sin” for many Christians. It is often justified, even defended, and certainly debilitating. But this fear is misplaced and contrary to the victorious Christian life. Did Jesus not say, “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28)? Misplaced fear

³ “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” in *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 32.

breeds a sense of hopelessness because it focuses, even obsesses over, what man can, might, or will do to you.

Instead, the Christian's focus is to be on the peace we have with God, the one who can destroy both "soul and body in hell" but instead has redeemed us as his own in Christ, giving us access, standing, and hope. And these God gives through faith. For, we were once at enmity with God but now are clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ before God. It is, as Matthew Henry calls it, the "saints' happy state."⁴

And it is in this "happy state" that we persevere, rejoicing "in hope of the glory of God," our sanctification's purpose: our glorification. What greater truth destroys our fear and gives us hope than the promise that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6)? This truth we believe which give us hope and in hope we rejoice.

Hope Rejoices

Christian hope does not despair over circumstances but rejoices in God's purpose. Therefore, "we rejoice in hope of the glory of God," and "we rejoice in our sufferings." We may read this as two unrelated points, but actually they are closely connected. God is, by the ministry of his Holy Spirit, preparing us for eternal glory. This preparation we refer to as our sanctification. And what is one of the ways he prepares us? What is one of the ways he completes the good work begun? God uses suffering in our sanctification, and in this we rejoice.

How contrary this is to our way of thinking, isn't it? Isn't suffering something to be avoided? Of course, we are never encouraged to pursue suffering, but we are taught to understand it, not for its own sake but as evidence of God's work in us. And it is the evidence of God's work in us that gives us hope, and in this we rejoice.

Often within the modern Evangelical mind, suffering is often imagined akin to torture, even martyrdom. This leads some to assume that Christian suffering is something that happens to others, typically missionaries in third-world countries. Indeed, Christians have been, are, and will be persecuted for their faith and witness, but every Christian suffers in their own unique and divinely-ordained way.

In this life, we are either going into, immediately in, or coming out of troubles, trials, or tribulations. If not, you're dead. These troubles, trials, and tribulations are not mistakes but are divinely-orchestrated furnaces of affliction (Isa. 48:10) intended to refine us by fire (1 Pet. 1:7), not in wrathful judgment but in loving purpose. Yes, God uses things like world-wide pandemics, and sickness even, to refine us, which Satan despises. His desire is that we obsess over headlines and hunches, conspiracies and conflict, chips and choices. What Satan doesn't want is for you to love your neighbor (Matt. 12:31), to consider others more important than yourself (Phil. 2:3), to be at peace with everyone (Rom. 12:18), and to humble yourself under the mighty hand of God (1 Pet. 5:6). But God does, and there is loving purpose in it all.

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible: Genesis to Revelation*, ed. Leslie F. Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), 1764.

What is God's purpose in our suffering? First, it produces "endurance" or "perseverance" (NIV). James uses the same word to describe the one who "remains steadfast under trial" (Jas. 1:12). The Christian perseveres through suffering, steadfast under trial, embracing not masochism but maturity.

Enduring suffering, then, is not an end in itself, as it is working toward, or producing, "character," a "quality of provedness," as one commentator describes it, "which is possessed by faith when it has stood up to testing, like the precious metal which is left when the base metals have been refined away."⁵ Character is evidenced in Christ-likeness, a confirmation that God is at work. And this evidence gives us hope. Easier said than experienced, right? Yet, this is why our perspective is so important and why the gospel must be at the center of our thoughts. When we consider worldly fear in light of our peace with God, our fear is replaced with hope. When we consider our suffering this side of glory in light of God's work in us, we rejoice with hope. And so, in a very practical sense, hope not only believes and rejoices but hope remembers.

Hope Remembers

Christian hope is not ashamed to trust the Lord but remembers God's love. We remember that in love God "gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). We remember that "In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons [and daughters] through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:4-5). And we remember that in love "we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us his Spirit" (1 John 4:13).

Let us remember that through the Holy Spirit we were brought from spiritual death to life. Let us remember that through the Holy Spirit, "we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" bearing witness that we are children of God and heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:15-16). Let us remember that through the Holy Spirit we will not be brought to shame but rejoice in the Lord always.

Christian hope reorients our focus. We focus not on who we were but who we are in Christ. We focus not on trying to merit God's favor but rest in his grace, desiring to please him in love. We focus not on temporal circumstances or our momentary afflictions but on God's glory revealed through us as we are conformed more and more to the image of his Son. We focus not on what the world loves but on God's love poured into our hearts. And so, we do not fear tomorrow but have hope for today.

⁵ C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: T&T Clark, 1975), 1:261.