

Ezekiel 36:22-23, 25-30 (New Revised Standard Version)

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations.

Romans 5:1-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

Amid all the struggle and suffering of the Babylonian exile,
God spoke a message of hope and promise through Ezekiel.

Even though Israel had been habitually unfaithful and disobedient,
the Lord didn't give up, but was promising to accomplish **for them**
what the people of Israel had been unable to do for themselves.

Thus says the Lord GOD:... **I will** sprinkle clean water upon you, **I will** cleanse you, A new heart **I will** give you, and a new spirit **I will** put within you; **I will** put my spirit within you, **I will** save you from all your uncleannesses ... and you shall be my people, and **I will** be your God.

Notice that in this passage, God repeatedly promises "**I will**",

and not even once insisted or commanded, "**this you must do.**"

It is all entirely the gracious work of God and not by human effort.

It's all grace, and since they hadn't been able to live faithfully,

God will cleanse them, **God** give them a pure heart and a new spirit.

That is a powerful message of mercy, reconciliation, promise & hope,

that also applies to us, it's about how **God never gives up on us**,
but provides a way to overcome our sin, weakness and failure.

The message is, since you cannot accomplish it for yourself,

I, your God who created you and loves you, **I will do it for you.**

One time a young woman was caught speeding through rural Georgia.

And since she didn't have enough money to pay the fine,
she had to appear before a judge at the courthouse.

In the courtroom, the judge said, "You were clocked by radar
doing 70 in a 55 mph zone, and by law the fine is \$100."

The woman said,

"I know I was speeding, but I can't pay it. I don't have \$100."

The judge said, "If you don't pay the ticket,
you'll have to serve time in jail this weekend."

"I can't pay the ticket, but I don't want to go to jail.
Can't you please have mercy on me?"

The judge replied, "I can't change the law. The law says that
you've got to pay \$100, or you have to spend the weekend in jail.

Those are the rules, and I can't change the rules."

Starting to tear up she spoke in a small voice,

"Isn't there something you can do? I just can't pay it,
but I don't want to get locked up. **Have mercy on me.**"

The judge looked at her, pushed his chair back from the bench,
stood up, pulled the zipper down on his robe and took it off.

Then went over to pick up his jacket and put it on,
as he walked over and he stood beside the young woman.

He reached into his wallet, and took out a hundred dollar bill,
and put the hundred dollar bill on the bench.

Then he took off his jacket and put his robe back on.

Zippering up his robe, he sat back behind the bench and said,

"You've been found guilty of going 70 in a 55 mph speed zone.

The law is the law. I can't change it.

The law says you must pay \$100 or spend the weekend in jail.

But I see that somebody else has already paid it for you."

The Lord God saw us speeding down the highway of sin and failure.

Jesus unzipped, set aside deity and put on the jacket of humanity.

He came down, suffered and died on the cross,
and paid the price that you and I could not pay.

He picked up the tab for all of us, rose from the dead,
zipped up his glorified body, and ascended up to heaven.

The good news of the gospel

is that a bill we could not pay has already been paid.

In Romans chapter 5, Paul very carefully explains the truth,
that by grace, we're given forgiveness and righteousness from God ...

... and that it is the gift of God's grace through Christ Jesus alone
that leads to faith, to a relationship **by God reaching down to us**,
which as Paul explains,
changes everything **as grace redefines everything about us.**

We're no longer the rebel sinners we once were, lost and without hope,
but now, reconciled, we're the beloved and blessed children of God,
which the Apostle Paul describes as being **justified by faith**,

which is to trust **that God has buried all our sins and failures under an avalanche of grace and mercy**, and so we have peace with God.

In the Romans passage that we read, Paul carefully describes three distinct blessings that we receive from God's gift of grace, vs. 1-2

Therefore, since we are **justified by faith**, ¹we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and ³we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Let's consider these 3 important promises and assurances 1 by 1:

^{1st} we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ
In Scripture, "peace"
means far more than just the absence of conflict.
When the word peace as it's used in the Bible,
refers to living within the purpose and will of God --
- a fruitful, meaningful and fulfilling life as God intends for us.

^{2nd} we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand
One of the ways that grace transforms, redirects & blesses us,
is the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian...
... which is a calm assurance, and a confident reason to trust
that God's gracious love and promises are real and sure,
as the Spirit guides us, comforts us, stands with us...
**... and that access to God strengthens us to endure and prevail,
even when life's storms come crashing down all around us.**

^{3rd} we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God
That's a phrase that may sound a bit strange or odd at first.
In Greek, the word boast does not mean to brag about something,
but describes having a bold confidence and trusting certainty
which is the opposite of a feeling of defeat, shame or fear.

Paul's not saying that we brag about our hope, but that we can trust,
by knowing with true certainty that our hope is sure and secure,
as we participate in the joy of God's will & purpose fulfilled...

**... and by allowing that grace to redefine who we are and how we live,
we can grow into living as the beloved and blessed children of God,**
which is **the power of God's gift of grace to change our lives.**
It's an invitation to be loved unconditionally for who we really are.

When Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome,
it was a challenging and uncertain time of persecution.

Recognizing the difficulties and troubles Christians were enduring,
he offers **pragmatic hope** amid their struggles & suffering. vs. 3-5
... but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Boast?, again, it's not that we brag about our suffering,
but confident in God's grace and promises, **we can rejoice**
for we know our struggles and God's love **are connected...**

... because by God's grace something beneficial and a blessing
can occur even amid the difficulties, losses & trials we endure.

**Yes, sometimes we struggle, suffer, lose and even fail badly,
but that's not the whole story & it's not how the story ends.**

Now this is also very important,
and I want to be very clear about what Paul is **NOT saying.**

It's not that good and faithful Christians shouldn't ever feel bad,
or just laugh and smile anyway, or try to ignore their pain away.

Maintaining a stiff upper lip when we really need to grieve
is not a faithful Christian response to loss and pain,
**and Paul is absolutely not saying that Christians
should deny their suffering, struggles, losses, grief or wounds.**

But when Paul wrote, "we also boast in our sufferings"
he means that even amid our struggles and defeats, we can
trust & know that God will accomplish victory in our lives.

It means that our suffering is never meaningless or pointless,
because of God's promise, because of God's healing purpose & power
to transform even the terrible & painful stuff of our lives,
and somehow use **even suffering** for our benefit & growth.

As Paul explains it, "knowing that suffering produces endurance",
is much like a committed athlete such as a marathon runner
who keeps on running hard despite breathlessness and pain.
The truth is, you can't produce endurance, without doing enduring.

Paul continues, "and endurance produces character"
In the Greek, the word "character"
means to be validated and approved through testing.
**Character comes from having endured, and prevailed,
and to prevail, that does come with a price.**

When I played football,
and was given the ball to break through the line for a first down,
my best shot was to run over the guy with the cleanest uniform.

That 'clean uniform' had likely been sitting on the bench,
because he was weaker or less skillful than others on the squad,
and hadn't been out on the field enough to earn a dirty uniform.

The stronger and more spiritually mature Christians I have known,
have all had **the dirt of costly endurance** on their uniforms,
and were marked by scars and wounds, hard lessons in life.

We develop confidence a more trusting & deeper faith and hope in God,
through our suffering, our losses, struggles and tribulation,
because God uses all of that – even our pain and disasters,
ultimately, for our good and growth and confidence,
to produce character, confidence, faith and hope.

Our Christian character is confirmed by enduring adversity,
for it is in passing through storm, trial and tribulation
that we learn and grow through all our personal experience,
the true depth and breadth of God's power and grace ...

... as we emerge from struggle with a tested and stronger faith,
more certain and deeper, with more developed hope and trust...

**... as we learn to fling ourselves with trusting abandon
into the waiting and loving arms of our Heavenly Father.**

Paul continues, "and character produces hope"
Biblical hope is not, "I hope I will be lucky",
but is a confident and proven hope for tomorrow
based on God's faithfulness yesterday and today.

It's not a self-confidence hope that I can if I try a little harder,
or that we can withstand by our own will, tenacity or strength,
**but is a confidence in God, in the faithfulness of God,
which over time, becomes our true courage & strength...**
... and like a nail, the harder we're hit, the deeper we're driven.

Over time and experience we gradually learn to trust and recognize the subtle signs of God's grace working in and through our lives, and so, our walk with God becomes more real and natural, as more and more we experience the peace that God intends.

Though we don't know exactly what lies ahead, **we do know God's love. Our hope is in believing God and in trusting God's love for us, because the promise is, God will finish what he started in us.**

And according to Paul, the stuff and the storms we endure, are about so much more than just this mortal passing life **but intended to serve a higher and a more significant purpose,** our preparation for God's eternal & gracious blessings & glory.

One time a man was watching for a while as stone mason was working some distance from the others working on building a cathedral.

The mason was off away by himself, and clearly in no rush as he spent hours carefully chipping away on just one stone. It was so slow, tedious and remeasuring for no apparent purpose, for it seemed to have nothing to do with building the cathedral.

The others working together were clearly accomplishing something, but that one single stone that he was working on seemed to have no connection with anything else going on.

Finally the man watching went over the stone mason and asked, "I've been watching you chipping away at that stone, but why, and what are you doing?"

The mason stopped and thought for a moment, and said, as he pointed to an open space up high near the top of the steeple, **"I'm working on it down here, because I'm shaping it so that it will fit up there."**

So too, that is the work of the Holy Spirit, as we are being slowly & carefully shaped down here in this life, so that we will fit, up there... .. in the Kingdom of God.

So during lent, **since God is up to something, I want to be in on it, in on the grace & growth project underway of God transforming me,** because I want to be prepared and eagerly ready for God's eternal and gracious blessings and glory.

Also, I want to explore whatever is limiting me or holding me back, and deal with whatever is standing between me and responding more fully & faithfully to God's will, purpose and intentions for me.

It's something like Michelangelo's famous sculpture of David, who said that he already saw the statue of David in the marble, and so, he just chipped away everything else that was not.

Our struggles, losses and trials can be something like that, **to trust and allow God's grace to bless, guide, love & transform us, to chip away all that is not good and pleasing to the Lord.**

As the prophet Jeremiah wrote, 29:11 & 13

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.