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GOOD MOON RISING

Romans 5:1-5

You may be surprised to learn that I have something in common with Fernando Tatis, Jr., the Padres’ dynamic all star shortstop. No, obviously it has nothing whatsoever to do with ability to play the game of baseball. If you follow the Padres at all you know that he has a problem with his left shoulder. It keeps popping out of joint. The medical people have told him he needs surgery to repair his shoulder, but he has chosen to try to rest it and strengthen it in the off season because he wants to avoid surgery. I have mentioned that several years ago I thought I had a persistent case of tennis elbow. I tried every treatment I could find for it, but nothing helped. Finally, my doctor sent me to an orthopedic surgeon who ordered an MRI on my arm. It showed I had a torn tendon in that arm. The surgeon said I needed surgery. I was reluctant to take that step. He said there might be another option, though he thought it unlikely, but he said I could try it. He sent me to another doctor in his group. This doctor wasn’t a surgeon. He was excited about what he specialized in. He said that the new treatment that he offered was going to revolutionize the field of orthopedics, that it had the potential to replace many of the surgeries they did. The treatment involved a platelet rich plasma injection. When you have an injury, your body rushes platelets to the injury site, and the platelets start the healing process. So they take some of your own blood, spin it in a centrifuge to separate out the platelets, then collect them, put them in a serum and inject the concentrated platelets directly into the injury site. The doctor told me I was good candidate for this treatment, that in cases like mine it heals the injury 93% of the time without surgery.

There was one catch. This is a new treatment and health insurance doesn’t cover it, so you have to shell out hundreds of dollars in cash for it. Laurie and I talked it over and we agreed to spend the money because like Fernando Tatis, I seriously did not want to have surgery. So, I had the PRP treatment, and as they warned me, that evening my arm became very swollen and painful. They gave me some pain medication, which turned out to be as helpful as taking M and M’s. Nevertheless, it was worth the pain to heal that arm. I had a follow up with the doctor after a week and was disappointed to report that there was zero improvement in my condition. The doctor said sometimes they saw improvement that quickly, but it usually took longer. We needed to wait. That’s why they call the people who see doctors “patients.” I patiently waited and in the following months had a couple of more follow ups with the doctor. By the last one I knew the bad news before I saw him. This was a couple of months after the surgery and my arm felt zero percent better than it did before the treatment. This revolutionary new treatment had accomplished exactly nothing. The doctor admitted it had not worked, and he told me the only option left was to go back to the surgeon and have him do his thing. I’m going to go out on a limb and make a prophecy. I prophesy that Fernando Tatis is going to have this in common with me. He’s going to have surgery on that shoulder, and my guess is he is going to end up having it some time in 2022.

I tell you that story because I want you to think about having a treatment that doesn’t accomplish anything. In Romans 1 and 2 Paul laid bare the truth about human beings. He pointed out that we are characterized by a lot of conflict, violence, malice, deceit, broken relationships, lack of peace. This condition stubbornly resists all efforts to resolve. Paul said in Jesus Christ God has accomplished a radical treatment for this condition. At the heart of the condition is separation from God, and in Christ, by grace through faith, God has made it possible for that to be healed. But frankly, at times it looks like this treatment hasn’t been any more effective than my PRP injection was. Many of the same problems Paul identified in human beings still exist in people who have received God’s supposed treatment. And a lot of those people, Christians, would attest to the fact that they expected some more impressive change than they have experienced. The question I wonder about is, what should this spiritual treatment that Paul has described in chapters 3 and 4 produce in us? Paul claims it is the solution for the human condition. If that is true, should we not expect it will make significant difference in us? We will get a glimpse of some aspects of the answer to that question in Romans 5:1-5.

IT GIVES US PEACE WITH GOD

The treatment Paul described is being justified, declared righteous and approved by God, by faith in Christ. In verse 1 Paul says, “therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The word “therefore” tells us he is drawing a conclusion based on what he has said in chapters 1-4. One important result of being justified by faith is we have peace with God. This presumes that prior to that we did not have peace with God. This is a point he had made in the previous chapters. In 3:11 he said none of us seek God, and in 3:18 he said there is no fear of God before our eyes. All of this is consistent with what the Bible has been saying since Genesis 3. We are estranged from God. All of us. Romans 8:7 says, “The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God.” A mind governed by the flesh means the natural state of human beings, and Paul says it is hostile to God. That is how we all start out in life. In Romans 5:10 Paul will say we were reconciled to God through Christ. You only have to be reconciled if there has been estrangement. What is the effect of not being at peace with God?

I’ve mentioned many times the first argument Laurie and I had as a married couple. It happened on our honeymoon. In the initial stages of the argument I made a strong case that she was the one who caused the problem, and she finally had to admit that I was right. Yay, I won the argument. And lost the war. As we were driving back to our hotel after my “victory” there was stony silence in the car. There was distance between Laurie and me even in that little Toyota rental car that had nothing to do with the physical space between us. That distance had thickness to it that you could cut with a knife. It was obvious that there was a separation in our relationship and it felt bad. You all know that I adore Laurie. I have adored her since before we were married. It felt terrible that there was separation between me and this woman I love like I have never loved anyone else. I couldn’t stand it. I asked her what was wrong, and she told me. I had trampled all over her heart. Maybe I “won” the argument, but I hurt her in the process. That estrangement felt so bad I was eager to admit my wrong and ask her if she could find it in her heart to forgive me.

It’s a safe bet that all of you can relate to that because you have had a conflict with your spouse, or with someone you love with all your heart. You know how the resulting estrangement weighs on you, how it nags at you and feels terrible until you can get that relationship fixed. Though we don’t all know it, the person we need most in life is God. That separation from him, that estrangement, weighs on us. It causes an underlying unsettled feeling, an uneasiness that is there all the time. It may feel like background noise you’re not always aware of, but it never goes away. It won’t go away until we are reconciled to him.

Because we are separated from God, we won’t have that which we need so badly, to be declared righteous by him. The result of that is we will continually be trying to prove that we are righteous. Usually we think what we are trying to do is establish our worth by impressing other people, gaining their approval. But it is never enough. That’s because it is not the approval our souls need most.

In my junior year of high school I did what I mostly did in my baseball career, spent a lot of time sitting on the bench. I almost never played in games. Toward the end of the season due to an injury to another guy on our team the coach had little choice but to play me. In those last couple of games I played very well. When the season ended the coach had a final meeting with the team. I was surprised when during that meeting he turned to me and said in front of the whole team, “Myatt, I have to apologize to you. I think I had my best hitter sitting on the bench all season. I’m sorry.” I wasn’t the best hitter on that team and I knew it. Still, that felt great. My senior year I had a different coach. And I was back on the bench. I only got in a couple of games, but in that tiny sample I actually did even better than I had the year before. One day as we were suiting up for a game in the locker room the previous coach walked through. He said to me, “Myatt, what’s the guy playing ahead of you hitting?” I said, “I’m not sure, Coach. I think around .240 or so.” Then he said, “What are you hitting?” I said, “Well, I’ve hardly played.” He said, “I know, but what are you hitting?” I said, “Well, I’m batting 1.000 coach.” He said, “Why aren’t you playing, Myatt?” I said, “Uh, that’s not my call to make, Coach.” I had won his approval. But I hadn’t impressed the only one who mattered, my coach that year. After that encounter I got in zero games. I didn’t play a single inning. Our problem is a bit like that. We keep trying to impress others with our intelligence, ability, wit, charm, good looks, achievement, being right, our good deeds, and so on, but it’s never enough. That’s because we haven’t impressed the only one who matters. We will never be at peace with ourselves until we are at peace with God, who gives the stamp of approval we need most.

When we are not at peace with God we will try to force the world around us, including other people, to be what we want and do what we want. And all that does is cause conflict with other people, because they’re trying to get the world and people to do what they want, and because all of that is not within our control it causes great frustration. Ultimately without that connection to God we are left with a world that is chaotic, dangerous, and ultimately senseless. Our lives in the end will feel insecure, scary, pointless, meaningless and frustrating. Not being at peace with God is the source of all kinds of negative stuff.

When we first moved into our home the neighborhood we live in was only half completed. For the next year plus they built the rest of the homes. We used to take walks at the end of the day and see what progress had been made on the homes being constructed. They always started by digging trenches that outlined the footprint of the house. Then they poured concrete into those trenches. That formed the foundation. Without being anchored into a solid foundation like that the house would not be stable. Our lives are like that. We need a concrete, rock solid foundation upon which to build a life. The foundation we need is peace with God. Lacking that, whatever we have will be akin to a house of cards.

What will being at peace with God produce? It will be the opposite of all the things I just mentioned. It will begin with that reconnection to God, which brings with it the peace and joy of being in a love relationship with him. That nagging sense of unease is gone because we know God loves us. It will include an ability to accept ourselves as we are and know that we have worth because God values us more than we can comprehend. This means we can have peace with other people, for we don’t need to compete with them to establish our own worth, prove that we are right or valuable, nor tear them down to make us feel better about ourselves. It will mean that while life will always be chaotic and we won’t understand all that happens, our lives will be full of meaning, for God has a plan for us. It means that we will be able to stop trying to control other people and circumstances and just focus on being what he wants us to be and do. It means we can accept what happens, because we know God has a plan for us and for all of it and his plan is good. It means that rather than God being a threat, we are now his beloved children so that we can enjoy him, love him and worship him.

Sometimes followers of Christ don’t seem to experience that peace with God and as a result lack all those positive consequences of it. How can that be? Our relationship with God has two sides. Think about those two sides. God says if you are justified, declared righteous by him, by faith in Jesus Christ, then you are at peace with him. In other words, from God’s side of the relationship all walls are down, all obstacles removed, there is no estrangement, he is at peace with you. Therefore, if you don’t feel at peace with God, where is that lack of peace coming from? It is coming from your side, not his. From his side, there is only peace. The lack of peace is 100% from you.

I am bemused by how many people in our society are afraid of things that are no threat to them at all. I can imagine someone claiming that electricity is making us sick and even killing us. Suppose you fall prey to their spurious claims. One evening you want badly to watch TV, but to do that you’d have to plug it in and let the electricity flow. But because of your needless fear you choose not to do that. Where is the problem? It is not with the power supply in the house. The power is there fully supplied to you. The problem is totally with you. You are not accessing what is completely available you you. If you believe in Jesus but lack peace with God, you are not believing what he says is true of you in Christ. So the solution to not feeling at peace with God is the same as it is before you come to Christ. You must believe what God says. We must live by faith in God’s promise. He says you are accepted, loved, he has nothing for you but peace. Will you believe it? In other words, we have to live by faith in the gospel of grace.

IT GIVES US HOPE OF GLORY

Hope makes a huge difference. Our daughter, Carissa, is now at 30 weeks in her pregnancy. She still feels terrible. It looks like she’s going to feel sick for the entire pregnancy. The reward for that is to go through the painful experience of giving birth to a child. How do women endure that? Why are they willing to become pregnant and go through all that does to them? It is because they have hope, the hope of having a child whom they will love with all their heart. That hope is what enables them to endure. In Christ we have several kinds of hope that are important. Verse 2 highlights one of them.

Verse 2 says we “boast in the hope of the glory of God.” Let’s think about the word “boast” first. We don’t like bragging. I recall one time when Laurie and I were on vacation and one evening we went to enjoy the jacuzzi at the hotel where we were staying. There were a couple of people we didn’t know there. We said hello to them. One of them, a man began talking about himself. He proceeded to tell of his great partying and of his amazing feats of impressing the ladies and of his great success in business endeavors. After we left Laurie and I compared notes. This guy made us both feel like gagging. It was pathetic. His boasting was not appealing, it was kind of sickening. So why would Paul think it a good idea to “boast” in anything?

Notice in that in verse 3 Paul says, “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings.” The word “also” gives you a clue. He hadn’t mentioned glorying in anything, so how could he “also” glory in sufferings? The word translated “glory” in that verse is the same word translated “boast” in verse 2. So do we boast or do we glory? Probably the New American Standard translation which says we exult in the hope of the glory of God and also exult in our sufferings is best. All right, we exult in the hope of the glory of God, or rejoice in it. But what is the hope of the glory of God?

Psalm 19:1 gives us the idea of God’s glory when it says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” When you look at the night sky, someplace other than coastal San Diego County where what you will usually see is the marine layer, it is awesome, impressive, humbling. It is massive and beautiful. That tells us about God’s glory. It says he is impressive, spectacular, powerful, awesome. It is what causes us to stand in awe and say, “Oh, wow,” and really have words fail us. Psalm 8:1 says, “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.” God is majestic. His power, his goodness, his wisdom, his love, his justice, are all overwhelming, spectacular, glorious

All right, that explains something about God’s glory. What is the hope of that, and why would we rejoice or exult in it? We were created in God’s image. We were created to be like him, to also be glorious, to share in the awesome glory of God. This means we were created to also be beautiful, majestic, awesome creatures. Not divine, not as glorious as he is, but to reflect his glory.

One night recently I woke up in the middle of the night. I was struggling with some sinus issues, so I went downstairs to the kitchen to take some sinus medicine. I was struck by how bright it was outside at 3 AM. There was a full moon, and the light on our patio was surprisingly bright, casting shadows that were clearly defined. I looked at the moon, and it was spectacular. Is it as bright as the sun? No, not even close. At its brightest the moon only reflects about 12% of the sun’s light. But in doing so it is beautiful and spectacular.

You and I were created by God to be a little be like that. We were intended to reflect the glory of God. Perhaps only a small percentage of his glory. But in so doing we would be awesome, majestic, spectacular beings. Sadly, that image of God has been badly damaged in us and we don’t reflect much of his glory. But according to Paul in this verse, we have the hope of his glory, meaning we have the hope of being restored to that glory he designed us to have.

There are times when Laurie and I have seen the full moon just rising over the hills, and it looks impossibly large. It is awesome, glorious. We say, “Look at that. It is so beautiful.” We have seen the full moon out over the ocean with its light reflecting on the water, and it is so gorgeous we can’t even come up with words to describe how magnificent it is. In fact, I can think of times when it touched something deep inside me and it almost brought tears to my eyes. God has created us to have that kind of glory, to be beings so impossibly beautiful that others would see us and be stunned to the point where they can’t even express how awesome they think we are. All they can do is praise God for creating us.

We all sense that we were made to have that glory. But we don’t have it now. We live with a little sense of disappointment. We are disappointed because we want that glory, and we haven’t been given glory in life. In fact, for most of us, life has been a little disappointing because it hasn’t lived up to our dreams of glory. Even deeper, we are a little disappointed in ourselves, because we’d love to be that majestic, have that kind of splendor, but we know that we don’t. At some point in life most of us think, “I should have been better.”

I feel like I’m just not as great at anything as I wanted to be and should have been. That’s true of my role as a husband, a father, a grandparent. I wish I were better at all of those things. It certainly was true of my desire to be a glorious athlete, an endeavor that was laughable. It is true of my efforts to be a pastor. It surely was true of my attempts to be a writer. In short, as a person I feel like I’ve fallen far short of the glory of God. In all those endeavors and more, what I was seeking was to share in God’s glory. That is why these words are so powerful. In Christ, we rejoice, we exult, we celebrate in the hope of the glory of God. Paul means that we are finally going to experience the fulfillment of what we have always longed for. We will be those beings that others will look at and be stunned by our glory, majesty, and beauty. They will be forced to give praise to God because he made us and we are truly awesome.

Oh, so this is that “pie in the sky when you die” thing? When Jesus comes back we have the hope that we will finally have the glory that we were intended for? Yes, that’s true. But that hope actually has some effect on our lives right now. God is right now in the process of changing us so that we begin more and more to reflect his glory. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with every increasing glory.” Even now as we live in the truth of the gospel of grace we are being transformed and becoming the glorious beings God wants us to be.

One of my favorite old bands was Creedance Clearwater Revival. One of their hit songs was *Bad Moon Rising*. It was a song about perceiving bad times and gloom ahead. If you wrote a song about the hope of God’s glory it could be called *Good Moon Rising*, because it means we have the hope of actually being glorious, reflecting God’s glory in ways that are majestic and spectacular.

IT CHANGES HOW WE DEAL WITH SUFFERING

Our attitude about what is happening in our lives is often more important than the events themselves. Becky Barnes teaches at an elementary school in Arizona. The school had a problem because kids were picking up rocks and throwing them during recess, and it was clear it was only a matter of time before someone got hurt. So the principal made an announcement over the school PA system. He said anyone caught throwing a rock would be taken home by him personally in his car, a clear, intimidating threat. That afternoon a teacher caught a boy in the kindergarten class throwing a rock. She said, “Didn’t you hear what the principal said today about what would happen if you throw a rock?” With a huge grin on his face the boy said, “Yeah, I get to have a ride home in the principal’s car!” He thought it was a reward. His attitude about it changed the whole situation.

That reality has significant implications for how we deal with the sometimes difficult experiences we have in this world. Verse 3 says “we also glory in our sufferings.” Um, no we don’t. We suffer in our sufferings. We complain in our sufferings. We get grumpy in our sufferings. We mope and feel sorry for ourselves in our sufferings. We doubt God in our sufferings. I recently went through a bout where I got a virus. Dr. Toby diagnosed it as an adenovirus. Oh no! Is that potentially fatal? No, it’s a form of a cold. Along with it I got a canker sore in my throat. That was fun. Everyone should experience that at least once in life so they can know what misery is. Then the infection got into my eye and I got conjunctivitis. Then it turned into a sinus infection that just wouldn’t go away. Let me sum it up. I was a mess. I can assure you that I wasn’t glorying in anything, especially not my suffering.

Yet Paul says we can glory in our sufferings. He doesn’t mean we enjoy them and would choose them every day of the week and twice on Sunday. He says there is a reason we can even rejoice or exult in our sufferings. It’s not because they’re fun and enjoyable. He’s also not saying we should pretend to be happy and enjoy them. “Oh, great, it’s been a long time since I had the flu! I’m so glad I finally got it.” No, that’s not what he means. He says we glory in something else that comes with our suffering.

Paul says suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance is not something you develop in easy, pleasant circumstances. Last year for a vacation Laurie and I went to Maui. Every day of our stay it was sunny and 82 degrees. We had to stay out there and relax, reading while lying in the shade, and occasionally swimming. It was grueling. I didn’t know if we could make it, but we endured. We kept at it and made it through an entire week. Um, no. It wasn’t grueling. We didn’t have to endure. It was easy and it was a delight. You only learn perseverance when you have to do something hard and you want to stop, but you keep going anyway.

Fine, but why does perseverance matter? Why not just go with the flow, row your boat gently down the stream? I’ll let you in on a little secret. Actually it’s not a secret and you already know it. Anything worth doing in life, including becoming glorious, is going to be hard at some point, and if we can’t persevere, we won’t be able to do it.

We’ve been watching our 4 grandchildren grow up. Growing up is hard. Little Wesley is learning how to talk. He understands pretty much everything you say and has quite a few words of his own. It is hard work figuring out what words mean and how to form them. A lot of it comes through mimicking first. A while back one evening Michael and Carissa were talking as Wesley was eating his dinner. They were discussing an incident in Michael’s home town in Georgia where a guy burned down his very nice home in a beautiful neighborhood because of explosives in his house. Michael, kidding, said that kind of thing sometimes happens with white trash. Wesley quickly bellowed out “white trash!” Michael and Carissa couldn’t help themselves. They burst out laughing. Wesley saw that what he had just said elicited laughter from his parents, so he shouted out again, “white trash!” and began laughing uproariously. This produced more laughter, so he kept repeating it and laughing. His parents learned they need to be careful what they say. My point is, Wesley is involved in a long process of learning to speak. It takes perseverance. But wouldn’t it be terrible if he didn’t persevere and never learned to verbally communicate?

Perseverance is critical to proven character. Character is not character if it crumbles when something gets hard. It’s more a function of convenience. In the end perseverance and character produce hope. They remind us that even in the hard times something good is happening. That means there is hope even as we suffer. That hope does not disappoint because it reminds us that God loves us and uses even hard things to bring about something good for us. He is changing us from glory to glory.

In the end we can rejoice in our suffering because we know that God does pour his love into our hearts at every moment of our lives. We can see that in the fact that he even uses suffering for a good purpose. Everyone is going to suffer. That’s a fundamental reality of living in a fallen world where evil is still running loose. The presence of evil means there is going to be plenty of hurt for all of us. But in Christ we can know it is not random and pointless. God uses even suffering for his good and loving purposes in us.

There are a million ways to suffer in this world. At times I see people I know and love suffering and it breaks my heart. I cry out for God to somehow save them from it. But then I think back in my own life. There have been many difficult things that have ranged from irritating, to extremely difficult, to soul crushing. The interesting thing is that the worst of them have been the things that God has used most profoundly in my life. I would never want to live through them again, but I see how much wiser, deeper, more compassionate, better I am because of those experiences. The great news is, the hopeful news is, yes, we will all suffer, but because of what God has done for us in Christ our suffering is never pointless. It is powerful. It is changing us from glory to glory.

CONCLUSION

After the failed PRP treatment for my arm I was left with only one option. The only hope was surgery. I talked to the surgeon and he assured me that surgery could alleviate the pain and restore my arm to full function. I believed him. But my belief was of no value until I acted on that belief. If I said, “Yes, I believe surgery will fix my arm, but I don’t like the idea of someone cutting part of my body open so I’m not going to do it,” would my belief have solved my problem? No, it would have been of no help at all. My belief only became effective when I scheduled a date for the surgery, showed up at the appointed time, and allowed the anesthesiologist to put me to sleep and the orthopedist to cut open my arm and repair the damage. It only became effective when I accepted the reality that after the surgery my arm was going to hurt for a while, quite a lot. But I committed to all of it, and as a result today I can turn doorknobs with no pain. The surgery was indeed effective.

My point is that it is one thing to say we believe in God’s remedy for the human condition, but it won’t actually make a difference in our lives until we act on that belief. We need to actually submit to it, to trust in what God promises. That means we need to live each day knowing that regardless of what we might feel, what we might sometimes think, we have been declared righteous by God, are loved by him more than we can comprehend, and are completely at peace with him. It means knowing that we have hope, that God is making us glorious and some day when he completes that process it will be joyously astounding, the thing we’ve always wanted. And it means that we can know even in the hard times, the times of suffering we can revel in the fact that God is using the hard things to make us the glorious beings he wants us to be.

If we will do this, if we will actually put our belief into practice, we will become a new kind of human being. We will be people living in bright contrast to the human condition, because we will be at peace with God, with ourselves, with other people and even with the often confounding events of our lives. We will have hope, and hope sustains us, makes us able to persevere. We will be confident in the amazing truth that whether we are going through good times or bad times God is using our circumstances to change us from glory to glory, to make us the glorious people we want to be, people that will provoke wonder and joy in all who see us.