

**TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
MINOCQUA, WI
SERMON FOR FEBRUARY 25/26, 2024**

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we also have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand. And we rejoice confidently on the basis of our hope for the glory of God.

³ Not only this, but we also rejoice confidently in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces patient endurance, ⁴ and patient endurance produces tested character, and tested character produces hope. ⁵ And hope will not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who was given to us.

⁶ For at the appointed time, while we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ It is rare indeed that someone will die for a righteous person. Perhaps someone might actually go so far as to die for a person who has been good to him. ⁸ But God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹ Therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, it is even more certain that we will be saved from God's wrath through him. ¹⁰ For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, it is even more certain that, since we have been reconciled, we will be saved by his life. ¹¹ And not only is this so, but we also go on rejoicing confidently in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received this reconciliation. (Romans 5:1-11 EHV)

You oversleep...or you can't get back to sleep. You spill your coffee and wreck a shirt. You lose your keys. You get a flat tire...or you end up in the ditch. Your list of to-dos is a mile long. You're tired, frustrated, and a little bit hangry. You feel like you're knee deep in well, sewage, and it's only 9 a.m. How are you going to get through the rest of the day/week?

Oh, circumstances. They can stink. And if we get too wrapped up in them, they can sink us. And then there's the reality of a sinful nature – yours, mine – that just won't quit; aiming to exceed and excel in thoughts, words, and actions that go against God's Word and will. Feels like we might be hip deep, even chest deep in sewage, the excrement of life.

Appreciate with me God's timing: ***"At the appointed time, while we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly...God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*** (vv. 6,8) When we were still powerless, while we were still sinners, when we were dead in our sins, Christ died for us. Before you and I were even born, knowing all the terrible things we would do, God showed his love for us anyway, sending his Son to die for us. That doesn't make sense – ***"It is rare indeed that someone will die for a righteous person."*** (v. 7a) – and yet God sent his Son to die for the likes of you and me and all the other carnal catastrophes on the face of this earth. But that's why it's called grace, God's undeserved love in action on our behalf.

The timing of God's redemptive act emphasizes his pure grace. When the time had fully come, when God himself decided enough was enough, despite the fact that not one person deserved the forgiveness of sins, despite the fact that not one person wanted forgiveness and life, God implemented the plan he'd put in place long before creation. He sent his Son, the victory's won. It's done. And we had nothing to do with it. This makes salvation all the more certain because entrance into heaven rests not on what we do or don't do, but on what God has done, and he has done it all. **WE NOW STAND IN GRACE.**

Actually, one more thing had to happen. After the plan, after Christ came, after the execution of both God's plan and of Christ, after the resurrection...somehow forgiveness has to become personal, really and truly yours and mine. Listen for the key word: ***"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we also have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand."*** (vv. 1,2a) Repentance, turning away from sin and back to God, is the Holy Spirit's working through his

Word. Faith, which is also God's doing, is the faucet through which the blessings of forgiveness and life freely flow. Faith clings to Christ, who ushers us into the presence of God the Father, who then assures us that because of Jesus' shed blood, we are at peace with him. We now stand in grace.

We have been justified, declared righteous by God. Past tense. Done. We have peace with God. Present tense, right now. We stand in grace. Right now, present tense. ***"We rejoice confidently on the basis of our hope for the glory of God."*** (v. 2b) Present tense. Joy right now over what will be ours in the future – the full enjoyment of glory of God in heaven. This would be a great place to say, "Amen." *Now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

But we can't say Amen. We're not done with this text. And, honestly, God's not done with us. While we now stand in grace, we also stand in, well, how can we characterize the mess and mire and sewage and sludge and chaos and confusion and disorder in which we also stand as we live and breathe in this world. I hoped you wiped off your feet when you walked in the door. Seriously, life beats us up and wears us down. We stand in grace, but we are also surrounded by and even immersed in suffering. At times, hope seems more like hype and seems so far away. And yet Paul says, ***"We also rejoice confidently in our sufferings."*** (v. 3a)

Rejoice in suffering? Be happy when pay is cut and jobs are lost and homes foreclosed on? Smile when vehicles break down and bodies succumb to illness? Pass out candy hearts and smiley face stickers when relationships fracture and love dies? Respond to adversity and setbacks by throwing a party?

Christians don't rejoice in suffering per se, but we rejoice because we can read the whole sentence. ***"We also rejoice confidently in our sufferings, because we know (WE KNOW!!) that suffering produces patient endurance, and patient endurance produces tested character, and tested character produces hope."*** (vv. 3,4) When we rejoice in our sufferings, we are responding to the fact that God uses challenges not to drive us away from him, but to draw us closer to him. He is not the author of evil or of terrible circumstances, but he can work amazing good and blessing for us out of the absolute worst situations. And he does. Faith gets this. Faith knows this. And faith rejoices.

On a balmy October afternoon in 1982, Camp Randall stadium in Madison, Wisconsin, was packed. More than 60,000 die-hard University of Wisconsin Badgers' fans were watching their football team take on the Michigan State Spartans. MSU had the better team. What seemed odd, however, as the score became lopsided, were the bursts of applause and shouts of joy from the Wisconsin fans. How could they cheer when their team was losing?

It turned out that seventy miles away the Milwaukee Brewers were beating the St. Louis Cardinals in game three of the World Series. Many of the fans in the stands were listening to portable radios—and responding to something other than their immediate circumstances. So it is with us. When we rejoice in our suffering, we are simply responding to another frequency—a frequency recognizable only to the eye of faith. We respond to the fact that regardless of circumstances, we now stand in grace.

And we are able to remain in grace because of the faith-strengthening that Spirit offers through suffering. ***"Suffering produces patient endurance, and patient endurance produces tested character, and tested character produces hope. And hope will not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who was given to us."*** (vv.3b-5)

Stressful and painful situations can actually help us grow. Imagine you're handed a script of your newborn child's entire life. Better yet, you're given an eraser and five minutes to edit out whatever you want. You read that she will have a learning disability in grade school. Reading, which comes easily for some kids, will be tough for her. In high school, she will make a great circle of friends, then one of them will die of cancer. After high school, she will get into her preferred college, but while there, she will lose a leg in a car accident. Following that, she will go through a difficult depression. A few years later she'll get a great job, then lose that job in an economic downturn. She'll get married, but then go through the grief of separation.

With this script of your child's life and five minutes to edit it, what would you erase? Wouldn't you want to take out all the stuff that would cause them pain? If you could erase every failure, disappointment, and period of suffering, would that be a good idea? Would that cause them to grow into the best version of themselves? Is it possible that we actually need adversity and setbacks—maybe even crises and trauma—to reach the fullest potential of development and growth, to reach who we are in Christ Jesus?

God doesn't always erase all our stress and pain. Instead, God can use the failures, disappointments, and periods of suffering to help us grow. God isn't at work producing the circumstances I want. God is at work in bad circumstances to produce the me he wants. (Source of illustration: *John Ortberg, "Don't Waste a Crisis," Leadership Journal (Winter, 2011)*)

What would you erase from the script of your life? Should you erase those things? Would you have the gifts you have, the perspective you enjoy, the faith anchored in the Rock of Christ and his almighty Word? Would you now stand in grace without testing and trials and continued reliance on the Savior who sees you through it all? Bottom line: Who do we trust to determine what's best for us? You/me/us or God?

You know that common question we ask one another, "How are you doing?" Often, we don't really want an answer, we don't really have the time, but it's the polite thing to do. "How are you doing? How are things?" And the answer comes back or the answer we give sounds like this, "I'm doing OK...under the circumstances." And the nodding begins – "Yep, me too. Hanging in there. Under the circumstances."

Jesus comes at us and says, "What are you doing there...under the circumstances? You're not meant to live under the circumstances. You live under grace." Different perspective, isn't it? Makes all the difference!

We now stand in grace. That means that all the things that happen to us, both good and bad, are not random acts of an out-of-control vindictive Deity, but gracious acts of faith-strengthening from the God who knows best how to keep us looking heavenward, who has in fact already written your name in his Book of Life. The writer to the Hebrews wrote, **"Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons...No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it"** (12:7,11). It also produces perseverance, character, and hope – hope that does not disappoint us.

We now stand in grace. Today. Tomorrow. Forever. **"Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm (in this grace). Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor (and life) in the Lord (are) not in vain"** (1 Corinthians 15:58).

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Stephen Luchterhand". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial "S".

Pastor Stephen Luchterhand
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