

Psalm 29 (opening)

- 1** *Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
 ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*
- 2** *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
 worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.*
- 3** *The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
 the God of glory thunders,
 the LORD, over many waters.*
- 4** *The voice of the LORD is powerful;
 the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.*
- 5** *The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
 the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.*
- 6** *He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,
 and Sirion like a young wild ox.*
- 7** *The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.*
- 8** *The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
 the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.*
- 9** *The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth
 and strips the forests bare,
 and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"*
- 10** *The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
 the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.*
- 11** *May the LORD give strength to his people!
 May the LORD bless his people with peace!*

Introduction

There's nothing better than a nice, peaceful place to sit and read. Or just look up at the sky. Or maybe take a nap.

Of course, the biggest problem with a nice peaceful summer day is that peace is usually ruined by some sort of small buzzing insect; usually one that bites.

But think of the perfect place to relax. Maybe it's by a lake. Maybe you're fishing. Maybe it's on top of a mountain. Maybe it's in the middle of the woods.

Sometimes peacefulness can be a state of mind. There have been times that I felt peaceful in the middle of a city, sitting on a bench, just watching people go by. Or wandering around a city I've never been in, just looking at the buildings.

Peace is a great thing. It gives us the chance to relax and regenerate a little. There's nothing like a nice nap on a peaceful Sunday afternoon; a great way to unwind.

Have you ever noticed that some people just never seem like they're at peace? It's like the entire world is their enemy, and they can't trust anything or anyone, so they can't let their guard down at all. They're always on the defensive, ready for anything to happen, usually something bad.

I guess society has programmed us to think this way. But that's not how God wants us to live. He wants us to be at peace.

You don't have to climb some mountain in Tibet and talk to some sage to find peace. I can tell you all about it, and where you can get it. And I'm not that old, so, not sage jokes. And lately I think mountains are a bit beyond my ability; at least for now.

You see, God has promised us His peace. Peace was such a big deal in Jewish culture that it was and still is their standard greeting and

farewell. It's kind of like aloha in Hawaiian. In Hebrew, you wish each other peace, or Shalom. A more formal version of this would be the phrase "Shalom Aleichem" which means "May peace be upon you."

The idea of shalom in Jewish culture is a big thing. It's more than just peace, it's prosperity; it's good living; it's the combination and culmination of everything positive, all wrapped up in one word, and it also expresses the thought of completeness. It's the ultimate positive thing.

Paul takes this concept of peace and tries to explain to the Christians in Rome that no matter what things are like here, if you obey God and accept Jesus as the sacrifice for your sins, then the peace of God will be upon you.

Let's turn to Romans, chapter five, the first 11 verses.

Romans 5:1-11

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² 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. ³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ 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.

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Grace and Peace

Paul says we have peace with God.

Think about that for a second. What would the opposite of that be like? What is the opposite of peace?

Distress; turmoil; strife; agitation; conflict; war; all these are the opposite of peace.

Before we were justified by our faith in Christ, we did not have peace with God; we were against God, and because of our sins God was against us. Not that He didn't want good for us; exactly the opposite, actually. But His wrath was directed at us because we were not obeying Him.

God loves us all, but before we become Christians, we are on the outside looking in, if we're willing to look. We basically do whatever we want to do and disregard God completely. We follow our rules, if we have any; and we do what we think is best. That puts us on the opposite side of God; if we don't obey God, we disobey God, by definition. There is no in-between; it's one or the other.

But Paul tells the Christians in Rome that because we are justified, because we've accepted the covenant, we have peace with God. Now we're on the same side. If we decide to obey, Paul says we have received God's grace. What is God's grace? Grace is God giving us something we don't deserve, and can't earn in any possible way. That gift that God gives us, His grace, includes His peace.

If you think about how powerful God is, it's kind of foolish to want to be at war with God. Nothing is more powerful than God. Talk about being between a rock and a hard place. God is not going to move. Our best

choice is to submit to His will; give up, commit to obey Him, and stop fighting this losing battle.

Growth Process of Hope

Paul says that being in this peace agreement with God should make us happy. He says “we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.” Once we’re Christians, we’re on the right side, and even if life is hard, we know that things will be good in the end.

When Paul wrote his last letter to his son in the faith, Timothy, he warns him that life will not always be good. In 2 Timothy 3:12-13 Paul says

2 Timothy 3:12-13

¹² Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

Life is going to be hard sometimes, Paul says, and you’ll see people who you think deserve punishment getting away with lots of bad things. And it will probably get worse before it gets better.

But here in Romans, Paul encourages his readers by saying that whatever we suffer, good things will come of it. Paul says that there is a growth process that we go through. Paul experienced this process himself.

Paul says that suffering produces endurance; some translations say perseverance, long-suffering, or patience. Patience or perseverance doesn’t come along on its own; it comes from experience, and usually bad experiences. We learn to be patient because we’ve been in situations where we weren’t patient, but we should have been.

You could also look at it like physical fitness. I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase “no pain, no gain.” This is true, to an extent. Not all pain is gain, but as you exercise, you actually have to break down muscle tissue for

it to get stronger. You can't start out running a 5K. You have to start small and build up to the distance you want to be able to run. And over your training, it hurts. I remember days when it hurt so bad just to get out of bed and walk around because I'd been running so much over the past week or so. But over time, the more you deal with the suffering of physical conditioning; you get more endurance because you're physically stronger.

In verse 4, Paul says that the endurance we get from suffering produces character; some translations say experience, or proof.

Every experience we've lived through has made us who we are today, individually and collectively. The good days, the bad days, they all blend together in our past experiences to make us the way we are. We make decisions based on our past experiences. They define us, and show other who we really are. They make up our character.

Your character shows through in your daily actions. How you react in situations shows how much you've grown through your experiences. The character of a Christian should shine like a light to everyone who comes in contact with them. Sometimes we don't do so well, at least I don't. But that's just another part of the growth process. Our character keeps being formed and transformed by our constant exposure to trials and also our constant exposure to Godly principles we find in the Bible.

Because of our growth of our character, we learn to hope in God. What is this hope? The best definition of Christian hope is a confident expectation of good. Not just "Boy, I hope this works" when you flick the light switch the first time you install a light. It's more like knowing that you've done it correctly, and barring any unforeseen circumstances, everything is going to work; you know that you've done your best.

Paul's not the only person who wrote about dealing with problems. James, in his letter, also wrote about problems, and how they help us grow.

James 1:2-4

² *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,*
³ *for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*
⁴ *And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

The words James uses here, testing and steadfastness, are the same Greek words that Paul uses that are translated as character and endurance. There's something about endurance that makes us more mature, complete, perfect.

Jesus talked about how hard it was going to be to follow Him during the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:11-12 He says

Matthew 5:11-12

¹¹ *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Pain for the sake of Jesus is a good thing, and it causes us to mature, to become more Christ-like.

Undeserving Enemies

But it's obvious that we don't start out Christ-like. Compared to Jesus, we're all a mess, and before we become Christians, we're even worse than that. We were weak, we were ungodly, living as far from God as we possibly could.

Paul points out in verses 6 through 11 that we were the enemy of God. We were on the wrong side. But Jesus died as a sacrifice for our sins.

We didn't deserve it; that's where that grace that I was talking about earlier comes in. Part of the gift we didn't deserve is the fact that there was a sacrifice for everything we've done wrong. That sacrifice was God's son, Jesus.

Because of this sacrifice, we've been saved from the wrath of God; now we have peace, not wrath.

Listen to how Paul explains it to the Christians in Ephesus, in chapter 2 of his letter.

Ephesians 2:1-10

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

No matter how bad we were, Jesus died for our sins. You see, there is only one punishment for not obeying God; death. I know it may seem harsh, but that's the way God set it up. Either you completely obey Him, or you are subject to the death penalty. But the good news is that Jesus died in our place, so we can live. **That** is a gift. We didn't deserve

that kind of gift, or any kind of gift. We couldn't do anything to earn it. If you earn it it's not a gift.

When Jesus was talking to Nicodemus, one of the Sanhedrin, the equivalent of the Jewish Supreme Court, He explained it like this.

John 3:16-21

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

Most people quit reading at the end of verse 16, but it's important to get the complete context of what Jesus is saying here.

God didn't send Jesus to condemn the world. We condemn ourselves by what we do (and what we don't do). Disobeying God gives us a death sentence. But if we believe that Jesus was sacrificed for our sins, and start obeying God, no matter how foolish it may seem to us at first, then we have peace with God! And if we don't obey, well, then we're condemning ourselves. That's our choice.

God wants us to have peace, to have shalom, that word that means all the good things of life all wrapped up in one little word. But He will only give it to us if we obey.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (closing)

¹⁶ *From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

¹⁸ *All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*