

'Embracing the Future Now'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Scottish philosopher, writer and teacher, Thomas Carlyle, ended up marrying his secretary, whom he dearly loved. However, for most of his life Carlyle was thoughtless and absorbed in his own interests and activities, treating his wife as if she were still his employee. Stricken with cancer she was confined to bed for a long time before she finally died. After her funeral, Carlyle went back to his empty house. Miserable and grieving deeply, he wandered around aimlessly downstairs, engrossed in thinking about the woman he had loved. After a while he went upstairs to her room and sat down in the chair beside the bed on which she had been lying for many months. He realized with painful regret that he had not sat there very often during her long illness.

He noticed her diary. While she was alive, he would never have read it, but now that she was gone he felt free to pick it up and thumb through its pages. This entry caught his eye: *"Yesterday he spent an hour with me. And it was like being in heaven. I love him so much."* He turned a few more pages and read, *"I listened all day to hear his steps in the hallway. And now its late. I guess he won't come to see me today."* Carlyle read a few more entries and then threw the book on the floor and ran out into the rain and back to the cemetery. He fell on his wife's grave in the mud, sobbing, *"If only I had known ... if only I had known."*

I wonder how many of us will stand before our Heavenly Father someday, saying, *"If only I had known, if only I had known ... how much you loved me."* You see just like Carlyle, we can go through our whole lives so engrossed, so demonically captivated by our own agendas and schedules and feats for God, that we are strangers to His actual presence. I fear that. And just like Carlyle's wife God will not force us to love Him and draw near to Him, He is too meek and gracious for that. But in contrast to Carlyle's wife who apparently said little or nothing about her love, God on the other hand has made it abundantly clear how He feels about His relationship with us. The cross of Christ answers that question - once and for all. God has made it abundantly clear throughout the New Testament and especially in the book of Romans. There we learn that we were once justly condemned sinners, but we are now justified sinners through the blood of Christ. We were once enemies, but we are now we are friends. Once lost, but now we are found.

So let me ask you, are you like Carlyle, who day after day lived his life completely oblivious to the love and relationship that was his? Or, do you know how much your Heavenly Father loves you and the kind of relationship into which He has called you? Some small children were asked, *"What is true love?"* Without hesitation this little blond haired cutie spoke up, *"Love is when your mummy reads you a bedtime story. True love is when she doesn't skip any pages."* Friends, God has not skipped any pages in expressing His love for us and outlining the kind of relationship into which He has called us.

Let's look at Romans 5:1. Paul says *"Therefore, since we have been justified (i.e. legally declared righteous) by faith, we have peace with God."* Let me make a point right here. Justification, referred to here as an act of God at some specific point in the past, means to 'declare' righteous, not to 'make' righteous. It is this justification which ushers in a new era, prophesied in the Old Testament, a long hoped-for era where the peace of God would transform all our relationships with Him. As a Christian, you live in that era. Justification ushers in a present reality for the believer, that is, *peace with God*.

The idea of 'peace' here comes from the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) word for 'peace' which itself translates the well known Hebrew word, *shalom*. It refers to more than just the absence of hostility. Rather, it's more closely aligned with the Hebrew concept of 'peace' referring not so much to a purely inward peace, but a relationship characterized by God's peace toward the sinner, toward us. It is *God's* disposition toward us and the freedom we now have in our relationship with Him. There are no longer any obstacles in our relationship with God.

Amid the horrors of the first world war, there occurred a unique truce when, for a few hours, enemies behaved like brothers. It was Christmas Eve, 1914, and all was quiet on France's western front, from the English channel to the Swiss Alps. Trenches came within 50 miles of Paris. The war was only five months old and already over 800,000 men had been wounded or killed. Every soldier wondered whether Christmas Day would bring another round of fighting and killing, but something amazing happened: British soldiers raised Merry Christmas signs above the trenches and soon carols were heard from German and British trenches alike.

Christmas dawned with unarmed soldiers leaving their trenches as officers from both sides tried unsuccessfully to stop their troops from meeting the enemy in the middle of no-man's-land for songs and conversation. Exchanging small gifts - mostly sweets and cigars - they passed Christmas Day peacefully along miles of the western front. At one spot, the British played soccer with the Germans, who won 3-2. In some places, the spontaneous truce continued the next day with neither side willing to fire the first shot. Finally, the war resumed when fresh troops arrived, and the high command of both armies ordered that further "informal understandings" with the enemy would be punishable as treason.

Friends, with God every day is Christmas Day! Peace has flowed from heaven and it will never cease. God will never take up arms against you. You are not His enemy. You have been reconciled to God. There is peace in your relationship. But it is more than the peace which ensues as a result of a truce. It is a peace that is founded on justification which we receive when we trust Christ. This ushers us into a place of grace with God. We stand, confidently, in God's grace toward us - a grace He made available through Jesus Christ. For Paul, all of God's dealings with humanity and indeed with each of us as individuals, are through Christ. Again, all this comes by faith, as the example from Abraham in Romans 4:1-25 makes plain. We cannot and did not earn it. It was given to us freely!

God is completely at peace toward us. He has also given us *hope* for the future. In verse 2 Paul says that we *stand* in this amazing grace into which God has brought us (through Christ) and that "*we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.*" In other words, we hope that God is as great and awesome as He appears to be! Our hope is that "*no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him*" (1 Cor. 2:9-11).

But there's a problem: If I am truly standing in this amazing grace, why do I still struggle and suffer so much? That's the point of verses 3 and 4. And, how do I know that His grace won't just run out, that someday, like the proverbial "good time," it'll all just come to an end. I mean after all, I'm a sinner, and maybe, just maybe, God will someday utter those unthinkable words: "I've had enough of you...I knew this was a bad idea from the beginning!" This is the point of verse 5. Let's look at verses 3-5 in order to better understand our relationship with God.

Paul says in v. 3 that "*we rejoice in our sufferings.*" We do not conclude that God no longer loves us! Quite the paradox actually. We're destined for the glory of God, but in the meantime we're supposed to boast in our sufferings. To some of us it simply makes no sense to rejoice in the midst of trials. But - and it is a big but - there are good reasons why we rejoice in our sufferings, according to Paul.

We rejoice, *because we know* - that is, we have knowledge given only to the eye of faith - *we know*, that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character, hope. When we rejoice in our suffering we are responding to God's secret, a secret He let us in on: He has designed the suffering not to drive us from Him, but to draw us to Him. This is what we know! Though at times our trials threaten to undo us, there is always reason to rejoice. Rejoicing in suffering deepens our hope and creates a longing in us for its realization. It gives us a hunger and thirst for God. Suffering brings about death in us, so that God's life may be lived out through us. We rejoice because through suffering we come to know God more intimately and we long to be with Him more sincerely.

How does this happen? Well, first, suffering produces perseverance. Then, perseverance produces character. Character, for its part, produces hope. So all these qualities that are produced are for the purpose of deepening and maturing our hope, our deepest longings to be with Jesus.

We need to be careful, though. There is a real danger in suffering. The effects of suffering on Christians can be compared to placing objects in the sun. Ice melts and then warms up, clay hardens. It becomes like stone. We must allow, suffering to soften, not sterilize, our hearts. We need to let suffering fire up our souls, not freeze them. Paul is not talking about some kind of stoicism, the so-called stiff upper lip mentality. Suffering is not impersonal. God really cares - as Romans 8 reminds us. *We know* that in *all things*, not just *some*, God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose - and His purpose is to conform us to the image of His Son. In other words, suffering will transform us more into the image of Christ, if we let it.

So then, suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance may be defined as patient endurance, the ability to hold up under fire - and it's a rare commodity. In our instant-everything world, we have a tendency to bail out, to hit the eject button when we're going through the tough times. We often lack a persevering heart. Instead, we need to allow God to work patience and perseverance in us in the midst of our trials. Give Him praise and rejoice in His presence for the *work* of grace He's doing in our heart (Phil 1:6).

Remember what Paul told the Corinthians: *"By the grace of God I am what I am, but his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them .. I didn't quit ... yet not I, but the grace of God with me."* (1 Cor. 15:10).

Listen also to the words of James: *"Consider it all pure joy my brothers and sisters whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete not lacking anything."*

But it doesn't end here. Perseverance itself gives rise to another virtue, that is, the virtue of "character." The term for character, namely, *dokimhn*, means 'proven character.' Proven character is simply the result over time of the consistent exercise of perseverance. In the words of Plutarch, *"character is long-standing habit."* At the heart of this term is the idea of testing, and though Paul may have been the first to coin the term, the concept of God testing a man to reveal his character is found at important points in the Old and New Testament.

One needs only to think of Abraham and the testing he underwent regarding the original promise of a God. Therefore, we should demonstrate proven character by persevering through the circumstances which God permits in our lives. A lack of proven character, according to Paul, adorns the unbeliever more naturally, not the believer.

Our character is important to God and to the world in which we live:

I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely show the way.
The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear;
Fine counsel is confusing, but example's always clear.
And the best of all preachers are the men who live their creeds,
For to see the good in action is what everyone needs.

I can soon learn how to do it if you'll let me see it done;
I can watch your hands in action, but your tongue too fast may run.
And the lectures you deliver may be very wise and true;
But I'd rather get my lesson by observing what you do.
For I may misunderstand you and the high advice you give,
But there's no misunderstanding how you act and how you live.

(The Lookout)

Finally, Paul says that proven character gives rise to hope. But the hope of which Paul speaks is not the same thing as me saying that I hope NSW will win State of Origin. It's not the same thing because I have no assurance that NSW will beat Queensland! No, Paul has a certain conviction that Christians will indeed see the glory of God and their long awaited hope will be realized. The issue in this kind of hope does not concern a question about the certainty of the thing hoped for, but rather the struggles we go through which mitigate against the present experience of that hope.

Even in the bleakest of situations, there is always hope for the Christian. But in a fallen world, there are times when it *feels* like there just isn't any hope. Someone has once said, "*We can live for forty days without food, eight days without water, four minutes without air, but only a few seconds without hope.*" But the *truth* of the matter for the *Christian* is that there is hope because our God is the author of *continual* hope. He is the one who constantly, all throughout our lives, develops hope in us. This is Paul's point in verse 5. Paul says "*And hope does not disappoint because God has poured out his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit whom he has given us.*" He means that hope cannot in any way disappoint because we are currently experiencing a measure of the thing hoped for. We currently live in the new age of hope (i.e., the experience of the Spirit) which will be consummated at Christ's return. We are currently experiencing eternal life and will experience eternal life in all its fullness in eternity. If God has done this for us while we were sinners, surely our hope for our future glorification and relationship with God is certain.

So, what can we say about this relationship with God? It's a relationship which is characterized by God's peace toward us. You can get off the performance treadmill; He won't punish you. You can stop trying so hard to be somebody you're not and just rest in His presence. Remember, the larger truth is that *God* knows you! When you go through trials, know in your heart that God is working a deeper longing and hope in you. This shouldn't cause you to abandon your life here, but rather take it up with renewed vigour to embrace the grace and love of God so you too can love well and give freely. You are secure in Him. So persevere in those trials and draw closer to Him. Enjoy the love of God in your experience.

The Christian life is a life of being drawn, not pushed. For generations Christians have been told what they 'have to' do and be in order to please God. Jesus came and destroyed that yoke of religion and gave us the gospel and the revelation that, in Christ, we don't 'have to' ... we 'get to' do and be more than we ever dreamed or imagined ... only as we embrace the fullness of God's love and grace.

No wonder they call this the 'good news!'