

The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 27th February 2005
by Mark Ashton

10p

Romans 5: 1-11

The Biggest Issue

Introduction:

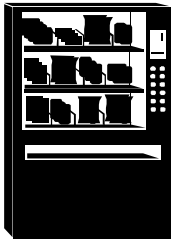
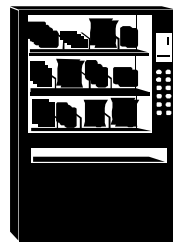


Figure 1

With the start of Chapter 5 we reach a significant point in Paul's letter to the Romans. For four chapters Paul has argued that we cannot treat God as if He were a vending machine—something which you and I approach when we choose, into which we insert our money, and from which we receive our soft drink or chocolate bar [Figure 1]. If there is a God at all, He is not at our disposal like that. We can't come to Him when we want to, choose what we want from Him, pay the price and expect to receive it. And it is a big disappointment to us that God is not like that. Think how frustrated we get when a vending machine does not work! —in one office there was a notice on the vending machine which said [Figure 2]:

Figure 2



If you have a problem with this machine,
please speak to the caretaker.

Please do NOT bang on the machine:
the caretaker does not live inside.

And you and I can get quite cross when we discover that God is not a vending machine god—where we can present the coins of our prayers or our good deeds, and expect to receive the chocolate bar of a relationship with Him. Surely it would be only just, if life worked like that? But NO! —this is not actually a universe with me at the centre of it. It is a creation with a Creator, whom I have ignored and disobeyed and sinned against; and I am powerless to restore my relationship with Him. Only He can bring me back to Himself. Have you realised that? If you are going to have a relationship with God, God has got to choose to give it to you.

So Paul has taken four chapters to show that we are sinners, but that God Himself has dealt with our sin and restored the relationship, and the only way we can enter that relationship is by trusting what God has done for us—what Paul calls faith (5:1: justified—made right with God).

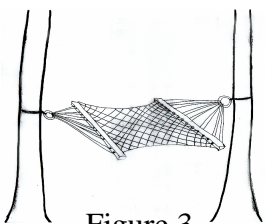
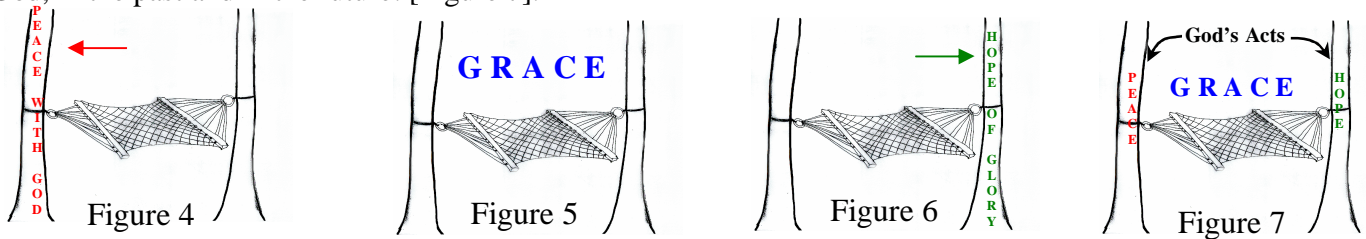


Figure 3

In the first half of chapter 5 Paul then explains our position once we have trusted God to do for us what we could never do for ourselves—bring us back into relationship with Himself *“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God”*. (5:1-2). The life of the Christian believer is like a hammock slung between two mighty trees [Figure 3].

Paul says the Christian can look back to the fact that he/she has peace with God, because we have been justified in the past **“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** (5:1) [Figure 4]; that we now stand in the present in grace (5:1a) [Figure 5]; and that we look forward to the hope of glory (5:2b) [Figure 6]. So the Christian life is, as it were, suspended between great acts of God, in the past and in the future: [Figure 7].

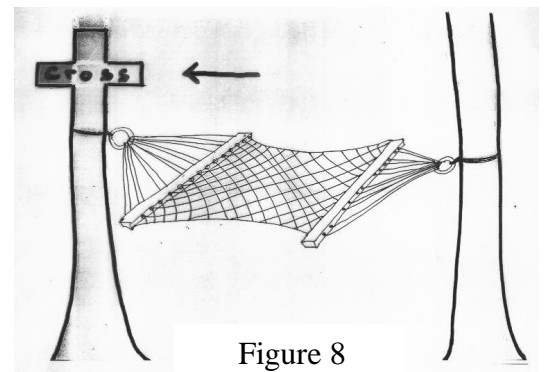


So, we are going to consider what Paul says about each of those 3 tenses of the Christian life (the past, the present, and the future) in these 11 verses to understand the grace as Christians.

1) An Anchor-point in Past: Peace with God, because Christ died for us (vv 1, 6-8)

“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (v 6). There was a moment in human history, when God stepped in to act. Christian faith is based in history. That is why, in the recent rash of anti-Christian novel writing, Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* is a more serious assault on Christian faith than Philip Pulman’s *Dark Materials* trilogy—both soon to be films, I gather; because the *Da Vinci Code* attempts to undermine the historical record of Jesus Christ—not very plausibly, I might add: only those who are desperate to be convinced by it will be. But it does at least address the issue of the historical Jesus—who does not feature in Pulman’s work.

“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (v 6). But it was not just at God’s moment in history that He acted to deal with our sin. It was also at just the right time theologically **“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (5:6-8). From a spiritual perspective, it was not just at an unexpected—but we might even say at an inappropriate—moment. You see, God should have acted to save us when we had given some indication that we deserved saving, some sign that we would try harder to be good, to live better lives, and to take Him more seriously, and to repent of our sins. But He acted to save us when we had done none of those things and there was no sign that we ever would. **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (v 8). Do you realize that? Perhaps someone here this evening is thinking, “I am not ready to relate to God”. But, you know, that is not the issue—whether I am prepared to meet God—it is whether God is prepared to meet me. And the cross of Christ tells me that He is. **“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (vv 6,8). The foundational fact of Christianity is the historical death of God’s own Son in our place and for our sins we look back to the cross. [Figure 8] But what the cross achieved conditions our present.



2) The Present: the grace in which we now stand

“through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (vv 5:2-5). The grace in which we stand is to have the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy

Spirit, whom God has given to us. When we are put right with God through the death of Jesus, that new relationship is brought to life and sealed by the presence of God's Spirit in our hearts. The Spirit tells us as believers that we are God's children, that He loves us. The knowledge that I am loved is one of the most motivating forces in human experience. It releases energy. Think of the energy that young lovers display—up all hours of the day and night, traveling across the country to see each other, writing long letters—no, perhaps that's going too far—endless phone calls etc...; even our most dozy lethargic friends take on a new lease of life when they are first in love.

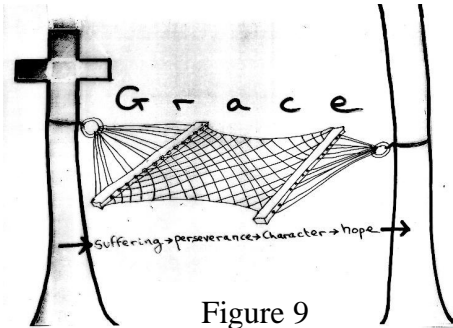


Figure 9

But notice what this grace and this love are for: ***“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope”*** (vv 3-4). They are to take us through suffering, perseverance, character, and hope, with rejoicing [Figure 9]. A hammock is a pretty limited illustration, I fear. You and I live in time, an ever-moving stream. As Christians we look back to a mighty act of God in the past, and forward to a mighty vision of His glory in the future; wake and thank God for Jesus' death. Think, “perhaps today I will see Your glory!” Here in the present we are in the middle of one of His mighty acts—the act of

getting us to heaven. And that has got to be mighty indeed, if Mark Ashton is one day to stand in the presence of an utterly holy God. A huge work has to be completed, a painful work, a work stretched out in time, so that as day follows day in my life, and month follows month, and year follows year, I wonder if anything is happening, and whether I will ever get there. “Has there been any progress? Is there any sign of glory?” I ask. And God's Spirit replies “God loves you, Mark. God loves you. You have trusted Him to justify you (to put you right with Himself); so trust Him to save you (to bring you into His glory).” It is all grace, and none of it achievement. It is His glory, not ours, we are heading for.

And that takes us to our last point—

3) An anchor point in the Future: The hope of the glory of God: saved through Jesus' life (vv 2, 9-10)

Paul was focused on the future when he wrote this letter. The verb ‘save’ comes 8 times in Romans, and 7 of those times it is in the future tense. ***“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him”*** (v 9). Remember that familiar saying of Magnus Magnusson in Master Mind—“I've started, so I'll finish.” God has started a work in the believer and so He will finish it, but not this side of death. If you read to the end of the Bible, you will find we win! God is not still trying to

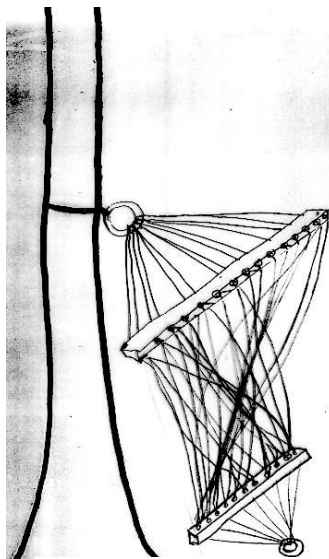


Figure 10

decide what is going to happen in the last chapter. He has already written it. We may be inside time, but He is not. What He did when Jesus died on the cross was not an incomplete, speculative action. He raised Jesus from the dead and that risen life is our assurance: ***“For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”*** (v 10). Paul wrote to the Corinthians, ***“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.”*** You see the Christian life without this future hope is like a hammock with only one anchor point [Figure 10] and what a pathetic sight that is! But we look back to the cross and we are grateful that Jesus died for our sins.

Do we also look forward to heaven with the confidence that the grace that forgave us our sins will also be the grace that takes us into God's presence and glory forever? ***“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through***

his life!” (v 9-10). There is a salvation yet to be experienced, but it is just as sure as what the Christian believers here today have already experienced of Christ's life. (I know this will make little sense to the non-

believer present). And so we have an entirely different attitude to death from our contemporaries. In an age that cannot face death, or speak about it, and that is actually terrified of it, Christians must be counter-cultural. It is why Paul tells that we rejoice. And notice he keeps doing that—“***And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings***” (vv 2b-3a). To rejoice in our sufferings is not to say, “Wow, this experience is really hurting me. What fun! Isn’t God good?” No, It is to look on, right through all the days of my life, to my death, and beyond it to glory. And to say, “That is where I am heading. The way may be tough, but the end is glorious” In another of his letters, Paul put it like this. “***Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation***” (2 Corinthians 5:17-18).

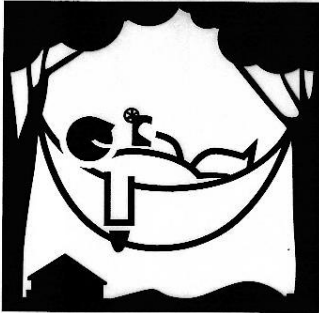
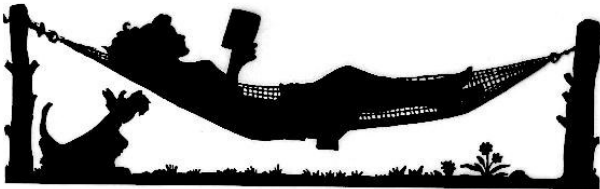


Figure 11

Christian rejoicing is all about seeing past death, knowing where we are going. Do you know the expression ‘demob happy’? You might say it of someone who is about to change jobs and whose mind is clearly on the new job before he’s left the old. Or think of that day before you leave for holiday long vac when your mind keeps drifting off what you are meant to be doing on to the thought that, “This time tomorrow I’ll be in Honolulu, wearing a grass skirt!” or whatever. Well, the Christian is to be demot happy. Our thoughts need to keep wandering off on to our future; and, whatever our present circumstances may be, that will bring joy to our hearts if not an actual smile to our lips. You see a hammock [Figure 11] is a place of joy (one for the lads and one for the lasses). Well, I am not sure how helpful a picture of the Christian life that is.



But I am sure how Paul ends our passage: “***Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation***” (v 11). We rejoice because of what God has done and because of what God will do. Our lives hang suspended between those two great acts of God. ***Encourage each other with these words*** (1 Thess 4:18). Grace is to live between mighty acts of God.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)