

RECONCILED TO GOD

12

BACKGROUND
SCRIPTURE

Romans 5:1–11

A VERSE TO
REMEMBER

[S]ince we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:1)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	May 13	Isa. 26:1–11	Trusting in God Brings Perfect Peace
T	May 14	Isa. 40:1–11	The Penalty Has Been Paid
W	May 15	Acts 2:1–4, 14, 16–24, 36	God’s Spirit Poured upon All Flesh
Th	May 16	Acts 2:37–47	The Firstfruits of Reconciliation
F	May 17	Gen. 33:1–15	Brothers, at Long Last Reconciled
Sa	May 18	Ps. 29	May God Bless Us with Peace

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

A quick glance at the news reveals plenty of suffering in the world. Hunger, war, violence, greed all make headlines regularly. We know suffering close to home as well. Illness, tragedy, broken relationships; these are familiar to us and those we love. We think we’ve seen it all, then suffering takes on a different hue. The World Health Organization reported a 25 percent increase in anxiety and depression across the globe during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ At the time of this writing, over 6.6 million people worldwide have died from the virus. Even as the specifics surprise and shift, suffering is a constant. How do we navigate a world where such things happen? More importantly, how does our faith affect the way we do so?

Think about how you and your faith community have changed during the past several years. Patterns of worship have evolved. Ministries have transformed—some ending and others beginning. Relationships have changed. Babies have been born. Saints have died. Some churches closed their doors for good. Others learned new ways to keep them open. Your way of living out your faith is not the same as it was before COVID or before other events in your life that mark time as *before* and *after*.

1. “COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide,” *World Health Organization*, March 2, 2022, bit.ly/TPWPandemicTriggers.

Yet here you are, reading a church curriculum titled *The Present Word*. Something in you knows that God’s Word has something to say to you in the present, today. Words written and compiled centuries past, about the people of God thousands of years ago, say something to you now. Faith brings you to these words, faith in the one who offers peace and hope despite whatever suffering is present. Today’s text is exactly what we need in times of suffering, global or personal. The apostle Paul describes faith for all who are justified by God’s grace as a gift that sustains us today and into the future.

God of grace, your Holy Spirit is with us in suffering. Open our eyes to your peace and hope for us, and for your world. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Romans 5:1–11

5:1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely, therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

JUSTIFIED PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Having made his case in the first four chapters of Romans that all are justified—made right with God—solely by grace, Paul

turns now to what that means for the Christian life. He says “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). This peace is more than the absence of conflict with God. It carries the sense of entering a state of wholeness and security, as in the Hebrew word *shalom*. It’s a bold statement to share with Christians living under the authority of the Roman Empire in the mid-50s CE. The whole of the empire existed during the time known as the *Pax [Peace] Romana*, a period of imperialism, expansion, and relative peace. This peace and power were attributed to the Roman emperor, who held the status and bore the titles of a deity and Lord. To say that peace comes through the Lord Jesus, rather than Rome, is to step into a new realm.

Paul says that, through Christ, we have been given *access* to a new place of grace. For first-century Jewish Christians, the word-*ing* evoked a temple image. One entered the great temple in Jerusalem through a series of courtyards and gates. It took special status to go further in, and only the high priest could approach the holy of holies, where God dwelled. Even then, the high priest entered only once a year. Now Paul says we have all been given full access to God through Jesus. We could boast about having this special access to God, but Paul says it’s not because of anything we’ve done (see Rom. 3:27; Eph. 2:8–9). Instead, we boast in our hope, which is pinned on God, even in our suffering. Suffering isn’t a mark of God’s absence for Paul. It’s an opportunity to grow in hope, recognizing that the present day is not all there is.

In this passage, Paul joins the present with the past and the future into one connected experience of grace. We celebrate what God has done in the *past*: in Christ, but also further back as Creator, life-giver, covenant-maker. Because of Christ’s death for us, which happened when we had done nothing to merit it, our *future* is sure; we are saved from judgment and are joined in a reconciled relationship with God. So we have peace and hope in the *present*: justified as we are, even in present suffering. As he connects past-present-future, Paul also hints at a trinitarian understanding of God, long before such a theological concept had a name. In these few verses, we meet God as Creator, as Christ the Redeemer, and as the Holy Spirit and Sustainer.



Which verses and ideas in this rich passage stand out for you, and why?

HOPE IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING

Justification in Paul's understanding is not like ticking a box, then moving on to other concerns. It's more like opening a door or crossing a threshold. Being made right with God through grace shifts us into a new hope-filled reality where a distinctly new life is possible. Within this new reality, our relationship with God is secure, which gives us peace and hope. Later in Romans, Paul will tell us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ (8:31–39). No kind of hardship or distress, nothing in the past, present, or days to come can change our life in and with God. Thus, we can persevere in hope.

In lesson 4, we met Stephen and found in him a model of perseverance under suffering. We wondered if Paul—known as Saul before his conversion—marveled at Stephen's faith, even while he held the coats of those stoning the young follower. Saul watched in real time the progression of affliction to endurance to character to hope. After he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus, he himself stepped over a threshold into a new reality where affliction required endurance. Paul's hardships on account of his faith included personal and physical attacks, his undefined "thorn in the flesh," snakebite, shipwreck, imprisonment, and more. Read his own partial tally in 2 Corinthians 11:23–28, and more recounted in the book of Acts. Yet by God's grace, he can confidently write these and other soaring verses of hope (see 2 Cor. 4:8–12, 16–18).

The book of Hebrews describes hope as a confident future expectation of something not yet seen (Heb. 11:1–2). Paul claims hope's benefits are also at work in the present, even in our suffering. Whatever our current affliction, suffering does not have the last word, not for the crucified Christ, and not for us.

The writer and preacher Frederick Buechner wrote that hope is the "outermost edge of faith. Hope stands up to its knees in the past and keeps its eyes on the future. There has never been a time past when God wasn't with us as the strength beyond our strength, the wisdom beyond our wisdom, as whatever it is in our hearts—whether we believe in God or not—that keeps us human enough at least to get by despite everything in our lives that tends to wither the heart and make us less than human. To remember the past is to see that we are here today by grace, that we have survived as a gift."²

2. Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 63.



How can hope, seen through the lens of past-present-future, help you navigate present suffering?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

We live differently when we confidently claim our peace and hope through Christ. We know we are seen for exactly who we are, in all our weakness, and yet God has redeemed us anyway. God's actions in Christ have thrown open the doors of welcome, and this allows us to claim the peace of belonging in relationship with God.

Belonging to God doesn't mean an absence of suffering. If we think that, we misunderstand our own justification. We haven't worked our way into the relationship with God; it's been given as a gift. Yet for now we still live in a world where suffering happens. Those who seek to follow Jesus retell again and again the story of Christ's suffering and new life afterward. At the same time, we are charged to live out the gospel's hope in the world as we help alleviate the suffering of others. The peace and hope we have through Christ Jesus urges us into the world as the body of Christ to offer material and spiritual hope to all God's children.

Just as we have been welcomed into God's new reality, the doors are open to all. This changes the way we view every other person. They are all beloved by God. Like us, their ultimate worth is not assessed by worldly standards. They are created by the same God, justified by the same act of grace in Christ Jesus, and sustained by the same breath of God's Holy Spirit.

On this Day of Pentecost, we recall the gift of the Holy Spirit, who came to a scared group of disciples. They had not earned the gift. It was shared in a burst of flame and wind, and reoriented them into a new relationship with God and the world. In the same way, the Spirit has been "poured into our hearts" (Rom. 5:5) as a gift. It's how we can stand firm in faith during any suffering we experience. The Holy Spirit also nudges us outward as a visible sign of God's peace and hope in the world, sustaining us as we respond to the suffering of others. As you celebrate the gift of God's Spirit today, breathe in the peace of your own reconciled relationship with God. Breathe in the hope that nothing can separate you from the grace of God in Christ. Then breathe out the same gift of the Spirit for all. Let the Spirit's gift lift and strengthen you in your call to love in the name of Christ.



How does the gift of the Holy Spirit sustain you in suffering? How is the Holy Spirit calling you to respond to the suffering of others?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Reciprocation and gratitude were significant elements of the first-century Mediterranean social fabric, and a gift within that social web (often called a *grace* in the first century) brought with it the question of how to appropriately express these. For Paul, there is no question of “returning the favor” with salvation; rather, the appropriate response is to please and accurately represent the Giver.
2. While Hebrews describes hope as a confident expectation of something not yet seen (Heb. 11:1–2), Paul adds another dimension in that God is never completely absent in our waiting. While we wait for the outward manifestation of our hope, God is working internally on heart and character, transforming us into God’s image (Rom. 5:3–5; see also 2 Cor. 3:18).
3. The word in Romans 5:5, translated as *disappoint* in the NRSV, has been changed to “put us to shame” in the NRSVue, which is closer to the Greek meaning of *shamed*. Paul is reminding the church that our unseen hope will not leave us shamed for believing in the ridiculous but, while we wait for hope to be realized, God gives us the Holy Spirit to confirm the validity of our hope (see also Eph. 1:13–14).
4. In Roman culture, the highest ideal of friendship was the willingness to die for a friend. Paul shows how God transcends the highest ideals of the culture in God’s radical love for God’s enemies (5:6–10), and offers a subtle call to the suffering church to love those who persecute them (see Matt. 5:11, 39–42).