

KNEC 23rd March 2014

Psalm 42

Romans 5 : 1 – 11

– 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.....we also rejoice in our sufferings

This grace in which we now stand – we stand in the love of the God – grace is God’s love poured out for us even although we do not deserve it. It is our salvation. We stand in the love of God – how amazing is that!

We are so aware of that grace at times – when we look at a newborn baby, when we get that job we have longed for, when we pass an exam or driving test, when we get the all-clear from the doctor, when a son or daughter comes back from fighting in a war zone, when someone gives us hug just when we need it

We are full of thanksgiving to God, we rejoice in the glory of God –

Like Mary when the angel told her she would mother to the Son of God – My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour

Like the lame man who was healed by Jesus and he went off leaping and singing and praising God

Take a moment to think of a time when your heart was filled with thanksgiving, when you were so aware of God’s love and grace.

Romans 5 verses 1 and 2 are easy – **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**

Verse 3 is not so easy – It says, **Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings....**

That is more of a challenge, isn’t it.

It says in Thessalonians 5 : 18 – **Give thanks in all circumstances ; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**

How can we rejoice in our sufferings and give thanks in all circumstances?

The Bible has many examples of people rejoicing in the midst of their sufferings and praising God –

David would be an obvious example – the psalms abound with David crying out to God in his anguish and despair and depression – followed by words of praise and rejoicing. I read once that the psalms wrap nouns and verbs around our pain better than any other book.

Psalm 13 – How long O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? Every day I have sorrow in my heartBut I trust in your unfailing love, my heart rejoices in your salvation, I will sing to the Lord

Psalm 57 - Have mercy on me God, I am in the midst of lions, I lie amongst ravenous beasts.....be exalted O God, above the heavens, let your glory be over all the earth.....I will sing and make music

Psalm 42 - Why are you so downcast O my soul, why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God for I will yet praise him my Saviour and my God

Anguish and praise, sorrow and rejoicing, crying out and singing out!

And what about Daniel – we watched part of the The Bible series at housegroup last week showing the horror of the sacking of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the slaughter of many, the people of Israel were the slaves of Babylon for hundreds of years – many turned away from God to worship the pagan Gods – but Daniel and his friends remained faithful to God in the foreign land – they continued to pray to God and to worship him alone- even in the midst of slavery and persecution and oppression.

And in the New Testament too. 2 Cor 7 – 10 – Reading from The Message, the bible in contemporary language, hear how Paul reacts to his disability, his thorn in the flesh –Paul said **So I wouldn't get big in the head I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees.....At first I didn't think of it as a gift and begged God to remove it.**

Three times I did that and then he told me – My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness. Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. Now I take limitations in stride and good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size – abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over. And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

When I thought of a contemporary person who has triumphed over pain and despair, a modern day David or Daniel or Paul, the person who came to mind was Joni Eareckson Tada.

Joni was a vibrant 17 year old girl around 1966, full of life and vitality with a heart to reach out to others – one day at the beach with friends she dived into water that was not as deep as she thought and she hit the bottom and broke her back. She would never walk again. In the film made of her life you see her immobile in a metal frame holding her body together for weeks followed by a long period of depression and despair – until God lifted her up. Until she was able to raise her arms and shout “This is the prison where God set me free!” What she meant was that the pain and limitation and frustration brought on by her disability threw her back on God in such a way that she discovered what true freedom in life is all about – and it is not about arms and legs and skiing and jogging and diving . **“It’s about forgiveness and hope and love and meaning and eternal life. It’s about knowing that God is for you and not against you in suffering. That’s how grace becomes visible.”**

She went on to have an amazing ministry worldwide, giving hope to millions who suffered their own disability, their own thorn in the flesh, people carrying their own grief and despair and burdens, by demonstrating how God’s grace can heal and restore and bless.

She has written numerous books and there are so many amazing quotes that uplift and encourage.

For example, she wrote “Heartache forces us to embrace God out of desperate urgent need. God is never closer than when your heart is aching”

Joni Earickson wrote “He chose not to heal me but to hold me. The more intense the pain, the closer his embrace”

She wrote “There is nothing that moves a loving father’s soul quite like his child’s cry.”

I like that image. Doesn’t the parent run when he or she hears a child’s cry? The mother who can tell by the sound of the cry how urgent is the need, how fast she needs to run to be by her child’s side. The father who bends down and picks up the hurt child and holds him close and reassures that he is safe and all will be well.

The psalmist knew God as such a father – Psalm 40 **I waited patiently for the Lord, he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me up out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire, he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God**

You see, God is not asking us to be thankful for our difficulties, our pain, our suffering, but he is asking us to continue to give thanks and that is different. He is asking us, in Romans 5, to rejoice in our sufferings because rejoicing brings hope, a hope that does not disappoint us because God poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us.

Jesus went without comfort so that we could have it. He postponed joy so that we might share in it. His eyes were fixed on the future joy, the joy to come. He chose isolation so that we might never be alone in our hurt and sorrow. These things alone are enough to cause us to be filled with gratitude, to give thanks to the Lord.

As a church, as Christians, we need to show the world that we have a powerful joy in Jesus in the midst of suffering and sorrow. The world will only be drawn to a church of happy Christians. Now I don’t mean “happy clappy” Christians, Christians who present a cheesy, cheery, superficial, false picture of happiness.

I have been to Christian gatherings where the worship is bouncy and upbeat and people are dancing and the preacher is a great comedian and an entertainer, playing for laughs and the whole thing is lighthearted and meaningless. But I look at the people out there, sometimes thousands of them, and I think that there are people here who have serious illnesses, whose

marriage is a living hell, whose children have broken their hearts, who are struggling financially, who have just lost their job, who are lonely and frightened and depressed – and the leaders are trying to create an atmosphere that is bouncy and playful and unreal.

I think that atmosphere can lead to people feeling even worse about their circumstances, more downcast and isolated and hopeless. They look around and think everyone else is in a much better place than they are but they're not actually. They think they are surrounded by happy fulfilled Christians who have got it all, who are so holy and together – but they aren't really.

There is of course a place for singing O Happy Day – but Christian joy is in the midst of suffering and sorrow. Christians know a deep and pervasive sorrow, a sorrow that we reflect on during the season of Lent as we journey with Christ towards the Garden of Gethsemane and the cross. As Christians we know a great joy when we reflect on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God which was poured out for us on Calvary.

Sometimes we feel like singing and even clapping and sometimes we don't, and that is fine.

Sometimes we go around with a smile on our face and sometimes we find it hard and that is fine.

Sometimes when we are asked how we are feeling, we might want to say actually I'm not feeling fine today, and that is okay.

We need to be real with ourselves and with each other and especially with God.

In our own strength we cannot rejoice in our sufferings, we cannot give thanks in every circumstance. But in the strength of God through his holy spirit we can try. We will not always succeed but we can try and try until we do succeed, because we will, there will be breakthrough into every pain and sorrow and anxiety, nothing is impossible for our almighty God who is a God of grace and love and forgiveness and salvation.

The Christian faith is full of paradoxes –

Joy found at the foot of a cross

Peace found in the slaughter of the lamb

Forgiveness found in the one who was unjustly condemned

Wholeness found in the body broken for us

A new covenant with God found in the blood of the Saviour

I will finish with the words of a hymn by Mary Peters –

Through the love of God our Saviour all will be well

Free and changeless is his favour, all, all is well

Precious is the blood that heals us, perfect is the grace that seals us

Strong the hand stretched out to shield us

All must be well

AMEN