

March 7 & 8, 2026 – Lent 3

Romans 5:1-8

Dear friends in Christ Jesus:

Lent is perhaps both the most rewarding and the most challenging season in the Christian church year. Rewarding because we get to witness once again our Savior's love in offering himself for us; challenging in that we must come to grips with the fact that it was our sins that made him suffer at the hands of wicked men and die nailed to a cross. Another challenge of Lent is the paradoxes. What's a paradox? A paradox is statement that seems contradictory but is nonetheless true. Jesus presented a paradox when he declared that **whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it (Mark 8:35)**. You must lose your life to save it? This would be nonsense coming from anyone but Christ who lost his life only to take it up again 3 days later. But perhaps the most difficult paradox Lent presents is the one before us. Today let's look at **The Paradox of Lent: Joy in Suffering**. This seems to be foolish and nonsensical, but, as Paul explains, nothing could be truer for Christ and for Christians.

In the years following the conclusion of WWI, H.G. Wells voiced the thought of many when he described it as "the war to end all wars". They imagined that future generations would learn from the death, depravity and violence and never repeat the same mistakes. How wrong that thought was when we look at all the wars and violence since then and around us today

But this lack of peace is only symptomatic of a deeper problem: the lack of peace between God and man. Sin separates us from God. It earns us his wrath. It makes us hostile to God and God hostile to us. And we were helpless to do anything about it. But Paul says that God did something about it: **therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

With the word "justified" Paul transports us into a courtroom, God's courtroom. This is a courtroom where we are the defendants. The charges against us fall into 10 categories, all first degree felonies worthy of an eternity in hell: failure to fear, love and trust in God above all things; failure to pray, praise and give thanks; failure to gladly hear and learn the Word of God; failure to honor and obey those in authority; failure to help and befriend those in need; failure to lead a pure and decent life; failure to help our neighbor keep what belongs to him; failure to take words and actions in the kindest possible way; failure to be content. We know, and God knows, that we are guilty as charged. But then something shocking happens. The judge slams down his gavel and declares that we are innocent of all charges, that we are free to go. How is this possible?

Paul's "therefore" points back to chapter 4 which tells us how this is possible: **[Jesus] was handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised to life because of our justification (Romans 4:25)**. Here's the greatest paradox of all: because Jesus endured the exact opposite of peace, a cruel death on a cross, we now have peace with God. It may seem contradictory, but it was the only way. And Paul tells us why a few verses later: **at the appointed time, while we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly. It is rare indeed that someone will die for a righteous person. Perhaps someone might actually go so far as to die for a person who has been good to him. But God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

What does this mean? Do you remember the name Aaron Feis? No? You might remember the name Nikolas Cruz. Cruz was the young man who killed 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida eight years ago. Aaron Feis was an assistant football coach and security guard at the same school and when Cruz came charging down the hall, Feis threw himself in front of a group of students, saving them from death but dying in the process. Feis made the ultimate sacrifice; he gave up his own life to save others. That kind of heroic, selfless sacrifice is rare in our world. But as heroic and selfless as Aaron Feis was, he didn't do what Jesus did. Feis sacrificed himself for innocent students. Jesus sacrificed himself for **ungodly** sinners. Jesus did the equivalent of taking a bullet, not for innocent students, but for Nikolas Cruz. Jesus didn't die for his friends, but his enemies.

And the result is that, through faith, we have peace with God. This is not the peace that our world talks about. This is not the end of school shootings; it's not the end of wars or racism or natural disasters; it's not a peace that can be achieved by getting rid of guns or urging love and tolerance. Standing justified before God does not mean that we will always feel "at peace" or have peace in our homes and families. This peace is better. This an

objective peace that exists outside of us. It means that regardless of what is happening in our lives, instead of being God's enemies, we are now his friends, his children.

And the devil simply cannot tolerate this. He works tirelessly to make us doubt that we are at peace with God. One of his more sinister methods is to make us wonder and worry about dying or having Jesus return in judgment at the very moment where we're doing something we shouldn't be doing. What happens if we don't have time to repent and be forgiven? Will we go to hell? The reality is that we may well be sinning when Jesus returns or we die. Sinful desires pass through our minds at the speed of thought. Sinful words, actions and attitudes are so much a part of our lives. But Paul grants us comfort and the assurance that peace with God isn't something we have and lose as often as we sin and repent. He says: **we also have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.** The wonderful reality is that peace with God is not something that we get this morning and lose tomorrow. The peace Christ died to win for us has changed our status before God forever. Wait, aren't we still sinners? Yes. This is another paradox of Christianity. Luther captured this paradox with the Latin phrase *simul justus et peccator* – a Christian is “simultaneously righteous and a sinner.” Yes, we sin and sin, but through faith Christ's righteousness always covers us. So, while Lent is certainly a time for serious self-examination and repentance, it is also a time to rejoice. Rejoice in Christ's suffering because through it he produced peace with God. Peace for sinners. Peace for you. Peace for me. Peace forever.

The second paradox Paul presents in our text is that of finding joy in the reality of *our* suffering. **We also rejoice confidently in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces patient endurance, and patient endurance produces tested character, and tested character produces hope. And hope will not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who was given to us.** Rejoicing in my suffering? What? When we are suffering is when we are most tempted to doubt God's love, most tempted to give up our hope in God and hope for heaven. How can suffering lead to joy and hope?

We suffer many things in life because, while Christ has already won our salvation, we are not in heaven yet. And yet, even in suffering, Paul says that we rejoice. Why? Because we know where the road of suffering starts and where it ends. It starts with hope, **hope for the glory of God.** In the life of a Christian, suffering leads to patient endurance. Patient endurance leads to tested character. And, when we have been put through the wringer and come out the other side, what is the result? Paul comes full circle: an even greater hope for heaven.

The Olympics just came to an end. Paul likens the life of the Christian to the life of those Olympic athletes. For years those athletes have trained, sweated, and sacrificed. They disciplined their bodies and their minds. Why? The hope of a gold medal. Hope is where their training began and where it ended. The Christian life begins with justification, the gift of God in Christ that guarantees our “not-guilty” status in his courtroom. And then, as we pass through the trials and troubles of life God strengthens us in that hope by showing us, in sometimes painful ways, that this world is not all it's cracked up to be by creating in us a longing for something better, by increasing our hope for the glory of heaven.

And this hope does not disappoint. The Apostle Paul says in the verses after our text: **Therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, it is even more certain that we will be saved from God's wrath through him. For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, it is even more certain that, since we have been reconciled, we will be saved by his life.** Jesus has already done the hardest thing, reconciling us to God. In Paul's eyes, then, nothing could be easier than bringing those who already stand before God not guilty through this life and through Judgment Day to the glory of heaven. That certain hope is why we can do the unthinkable: rejoice even in our sufferings. Amen.