

LET HIM WHO BOASTS BOAST IN THE LORD

by Steve Zeisler

On a beautiful sunny afternoon on a recent Sunday I had the privilege of attending a baptism service at the fountain in White Plaza at Stanford University. More than twenty Stanford students stood and proclaimed in clear tones that they were followers of Jesus Christ and that in their community they wanted to stand publicly for the Lord. I was on the edge of the crowd, and as I strained to hear some of the more soft-spoken individuals speak of their faith in Christ, I could also hear the passersby. Some ridiculed the baptism that was taking place. Others continued in their conversations and ignored what was going on. Still others seemed attracted by what they heard. It struck me that the voices I could hear were multiplied thousands of times around the university in dormitories and classrooms and libraries and computer centers. The university is a place of intense conversation, self-declaration and intellectual argument. It is a place of exaltation of the human spirit if you will, even arrogance. But in the very center of the campus men and women stood saying, "Jesus Christ is my Lord, and I will live the rest of my life in his service," and then they made public proclamation of their faith by being baptized.

The reason I describe this scene is that it reminds me of the argument of the book of Romans. Let's review the first four chapters briefly. These chapters, too, are filled with human voices arguing their case and calling attention to themselves. The self-proclaimed sinners knowingly and openly rail against God and everything he stands for. The finger-pointing moralists deflect attention from their own sin by judging the flaws and failures of others. The very religious and outspoken teachers of the law, who often speak of the things of God and name his name, also by what they say deflect God's statement about their need. As the argument progresses these voices grow louder and louder and make their assertions more frequently.

There is a Greek word used several times in these chapters that I would like you to consider with me, because it's going to come up again in the passage we will look at today. It is the word *kauchaomai*. It can be translated two different ways depending on whether the context is negative or positive. When it is used negatively it means to boast, brag, or vaunt yourself. When it is used positively it means to rejoice or to exult in, to be thrilled with, things that are worthy of your feelings for them. In chapter 2 verse 23 Paul castigates those who boast in the law and dishonor the God who gave the law by breaking it. In chapter 4 verse 2 Paul says that if Abraham had been justified by what he did, he might have boasted or bragged before God; but he couldn't because his works weren't sufficient. In chapter 3 verse 27 Paul summarizes the negative use of this term *kauchaomai* by saying, "Where, then, is boasting? It is [entirely] excluded."

An important phrase that draws a conclusion to Paul's argument in the first three chapters of the book is found in chapter 3 verse 19. It says, "...that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." In exposing all the false speech, the apostle is driving toward this point: Everybody should be quiet-no more promotion of sin, no more casting of blame, no more judging of others, no more clever denials, no more extenuating circumstances. The voice of God speaks through the Scriptures as Paul quotes the damning indictment over and over in these Old Testament phrases:

"There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God."
"...ruin and misery mark their ways...."
"There is no fear of God before their eyes."

The entire world should stand speechless as the word of God speaks the indictment. Our desperate condition is declared and there is nothing anyone can say.

But then, glory of glories, the heavenly Father offers a gift to silenced sinners, not because they deserve it but because he loves them: You can be made right with God because of what Jesus Christ has done. And if you accept the gift, everything changes. Where once there was unrighteousness, now there is righteousness; where once distance, now acceptance.

Having illustrated this point in chapter 4 by speaking of Abraham and David, Paul is finally going to pick up the logic of his argument again in chapter 5. The question is now, if everything has changed, how should we understand the new life that is ours?

I remember several years ago reading about what happened to some Japanese soldiers after World War II. The Japanese had conquered most of the islands in the Pacific, some of which were extremely remote and unpopulated. The war ended, the Japanese surrendered, peace was established, and the world got on with its business. But there were Japanese soldiers stranded on these remote islands, some of them living in caves. They had no contact with the outside world, and some of them went for as long as twenty years thinking they were still fighting the war. They were finally discovered subsisting in these caves by those who had once been their enemies, who invited them into the modern world, offered food, clothing, and medical help. These soldiers found out that Japan had lost the war, and now peace reigned between the former enemies.

WE REJOICE

That picture is something like what Paul is describing. In chapter 5 we're going to start learning about what it means to live this Christian life we have been given. Verses 1-2:

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.

We have been given access into the presence of God, and we stand in a circle of grace approved of completely, instead of living in a cave and hiding from God from whom we were once estranged. We now have a friendship where once there was enmity. So now that the problems are over, now that the gift has been given, what shall take place? Wonderfully, these opening verses of chapter 5 speak three times of the word *kauchaomai*; of exultation and rejoicing. Where once we were silenced by the reading of the indictment against us, now three times we will read here that we are to rejoice or exult. We are to speak up, because we have songs to sing and a name to name. We can hold our head high and boast in the best sense of the word of what the Lord has done for us. In verse 2 it says, "...we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." In verse 3, "...we rejoice in our sufferings." And in verse 11, "...we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Let's talk for a moment about this business of exulting or rejoicing. At the heart of the word it just means to declare yourself, to speak of something that matters to you, to take a stand, to speak up, to announce who you are and what you stand for openly and clearly and loudly. It is to rejoice because the object of which we speak inspires joy.

For example, if you wear a Giants' hat into Dodger Stadium, you are exulting in or being a fan of the Giants. You are taking a stand, saying who you are regardless of whether the people around you want to hear it or not. Another example is a wonderful experience I had just this morning. I came in about 7:30, and the choir was up on the platform practicing. Kathy Hansen was standing on the end of the riser. Glenn Pickett, our minister of music, noticed that she had a ring on. He stopped everything and said, "Kathy, are you engaged?" She blushed and said, "Yes, I'm engaged! Look at my ring!" And as choir members began kidding her she said, "I'm going to get married!" and started jumping around on the risers. Her exultation was infectious-joy spread to everyone in the room.

Now let's look at the three things Paul tells us we rejoice in. We rejoice first of all in the hope of the glory of God. Hope is a very important word in the Bible and a critically important concept in the world we live in. I believe our world is more hopeless than it has been in ages. Western culture had Christian foundations once, but it has lost them, and there is a growing darkness and hopelessness that surround us everywhere. Human

beings cannot survive without hope. This is one of the reasons that the urban underclass, as sociologists describe it, is in such desperate shape now. No matter what the government or individuals do to try to change the horrible circumstances of our cities, most of the people who live there don't believe it's going to do any good. There is absolutely no reason to hope that tomorrow is going to be any better than today. So why go to school? Why get a job? Why try to make a marriage? It's not going to work. Many in that situation have no reason to think that any good thing is going to come of their lives.

Children are sometimes helped by just being given hope that their parents believe in them. Tell your child, "You don't have to give in to the sins that your peers give in to, because there is something great that is going to happen to you some day. Your body was meant for something better than drugs. Your sexuality is a gift that doesn't need to be spent on something that is unworthy of it. You are a remarkable person, and I can see a great future for you."

Even commercials have raised the same issues. Michael Jordan sells shoes and Pepsi and so forth, and one of the tag-lines of his commercials is, "I want to be like Mike." So children put up posters of Michael Jordan in their rooms. And sometimes even that might give them enough to not give up: "I want to be like that; I don't want to settle for anything less. So I'll stay in school and work hard." It's interesting that even the advertising world has captured the truth that if you can somehow pass hope on to somebody, you have done them a great service.

The very first thing that Paul says of us who have come out of the caves and are now standing before the throne of God in the circle of grace is that we exult in the hope of the glory of God. Now, he isn't saying that we are rejoicing because God is glorious. That is true, but what he is saying is that we rejoice because we have the hope that we are going to partake in God's glory. We will one day be like him; we will reflect his glory to the universe. We will be near him in his glory. We are destined to be like our Lord with no distance, no waiting between us. We will be filled with the glory of God and will be offering back to him praise because he is glorious. That is what the future holds for us. It is as if, having walked into this circle of grace that we didn't belong in before, we can look off into the distance and see ourselves as we will be some day, when God has completed his work in us, when all the things we hate about ourselves are over with, all of the deterioration has ended, and everything has been made new. And because we're destined for that we rejoice or exult in the hope of the glory of God.

THE RESULT OF SUFFERING

Verse 3 then raises the second reason for rejoicing or exulting:

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.

If the first word of exultation is to look to the future and see what we are destined for, the second word of exultation has everything to do with the present. It is hard-headed honesty about the real world. In this life we will have troubles. Things break down, relationships fail, people disappoint us, and we do things we're ashamed of. We seemed gripped by problems that we can't get out of. We have illness, loss of jobs, angry relationships, everything you can think of in the way of suffering. Yet the apostle says we rejoice in our sufferings. He is not saying that we like pain as if we were masochists. He is saying that we recognize as Christians that the God who is sovereign over our lives would use our suffering for a purpose. It is not random or without its reasons, although God is not required to explain the reasons to us.

Many of you know that I had knee surgery in December. I spent six weeks on crutches with my leg immobilized. The combination of surgery and then immobilization produced a weakened and constricted joint. Then I was supposed to rehabilitate it, and that meant inflicting pain on myself. The whole point was to make the knee bend and break adhesions within it, but it didn't want to do that. It suffered and protested. I put more weight on it, demanding that it lift heavier amounts all the time because I was trying to strengthen muscles that

had atrophied. The pain was required in order to gain mobility again. Suffering led to strength and opportunity. Once I could walk and go where I hoped to go, there was the possibility for relationships, service, learning, joy, and so on.

That is the kind of progress that Paul is pointing to here. Suffering makes us stronger than we ever believed we could be. To have to trust God with something that is very hard and to see him give us the strength to survive make us different people than we were before. And once we grow stronger we realize that our character is changing. We do not merely experience isolated incidents of faith. We have become people of faith. Suffering leads to perseverance, which leads to character, and finally that leads to hope. Now we are back where we started—the hope of the glory of God. The whole process of facing this world as it really is and trusting God in the midst of real life, drawing on his strength, and becoming a different person leads us again to look forward to that which has not yet happened. We can see the invisible more clearly than ever.

Now in his wisdom Paul, this great teacher of the gospel, raises a question: Is it possible that this is somehow just wishful thinking? May it not be that the hope at which we arrive will disappoint us if we lean on it too heavily? What about suffering that doesn't look like it has any useful purpose at all? It is one thing to say that you are rehabilitating your leg and making it strong, or to say that you have some horrible habits that have led to misery in your life, and you are going to start disciplining yourself—stop doing drugs, being angry with your kids, and doing all the things you shouldn't do—and become a better person as a result. That suffering leads to a useful end. But what about all the suffering that is absolutely without explanation, that doesn't lead to any good thing that you can see? What about the suffering of children who are innocent? What about the tragedy of the rape and pillage and desecration going on in regions of the world that lead to no good thing and to misery upon misery? Can we say that this suffering is leading to hope? Will hope disappoint us?

The apostle takes up the challenge. In verse 5 he says, "And hope does not disappoint us...." The reason it does not disappoint us, he contends, is because of the nature of the love of God. We are deeply loved by God, and that is the great, inexplicable, remarkable power that makes our hope reasonable and secure. We don't receive just a little bit of love; it is poured out into our hearts. We are treated to an avalanche of God's love! The love of God is described to us here as both something we can think of logically and rationally, and something that is beyond reason.

The first point that he makes is that the love of God is poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us. As we walk with the Lord, you and I will have times of intense awareness of intimacy with God that cannot be explained. The only way to describe the experience is to say that we are overwhelmed by the power of the Spirit resident in our hearts.

As some of you know, my wife's mother died the day before Easter. Leslie was with her sister and father at her parents' home. Her mother was in bed, and she and her dad described a deep sense of the presence of the Spirit of God as Betty died. They could say that there was a peacefulness about her breathing when it ended. But beyond anything they could articulate, they said that the Spirit of God was in their midst, embracing them. As they lost their beloved, he was there. There are elements of the love of God that we can't do anything but experience, although we occasionally attempt poetry to speak of it. That is the best we can do.

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S LOVE

Then Paul goes on to speak of the reasonableness of the love of God. It is also true that we can be sure that God loves us for reasons that will make sense to us if we think about them. Verses 6-10:

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.

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!

There are three phrases here that speak in turn of increasingly awful aspects of our prior existence. Verse 6: "when we were still powerless." Verse 8: "while we were still sinners." Verse 10: "when we were God's enemies." We were powerless before the gift of righteousness was given us; we couldn't fix things. We would strut around and imagine ourselves to be important, but we could accomplish nothing that was really worth accomplishing. We were sinners; that is, we were shamed and defiled. And finally, we were God's enemies.

Now here is the logic of Paul's argument: If God would send his Son to die for us in that condition, if he could look clearly at us and see nothing but rebellion and unrighteousness and love us anyway, if the Father gave the life of his Son for us, if the cross had real blood on it and the tomb was really empty because the Lord became human and suffered on our behalf-if all that is true, then isn't he going to love us more now? Can't we be more sure that he is our friend now that we have peace with God, now that we can love him in return? Shouldn't we be more certain now, on the Godward side of the gift of righteousness, that he will care about us, even though our suffering seems absolutely beyond any explanation we can think of? We can be sure God loves us because he loved us when we didn't deserve it.

The argument says that if the greater is true, the lesser must also be true. That kind of argument is a helpful way to think. As parents you might have had a rocky time with teenage children in which you experienced anger, rebellion, yelling, distance, hardship, heartache, and hurting of one another-all the awful things that can happen during rebellious teenage years. But afterward you would say to your children, "If I stuck with you through all that, you know I want to be there to dance at your wedding! I want to be there for you even more now that things have turned around."

That is the argument that Paul is making. Because God gave his Son for us, we can be sure that he will love us now that we are friends, now that we have peace with him. So we have the super-rational explanation-the Holy Spirit's embrace of our hearts-and the rational explanation, the death of Christ for us when we didn't deserve it. All of that serves to underline the certainty of God's love, and it is for that reason that hope will not disappoint us.

The last use of the word rejoice or exult is in verse 11:

Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

In this third use of the term, Paul is not speaking any longer about our participation in the things of God. In the last phrase here he says we rejoice simply in God himself through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have a sense of appreciation for God that is not attached to any benefit to us, but that is just because he is.

In the book of 1 John there is a wonderful description of the stages of maturity. John says that when you are little children, you are grateful that your sins are forgiven and that you have a Father who will listen to you. When you are young and vital, like young men, you are delighted with God because you are fighting his battles for him and overcoming the evil one. And when you are adults in the faith, the simple statement is that you have known him who is from the beginning. He says that twice. The most mature men and women are those who are finally able to rejoice in the person of God as he is. The things of this world make less and less of an impact. We find our thoughts more and more drawn to him, our hours more filled with him, our joy in his company and in his reality deeper. That is the third word of exultation here in verse 11. We rejoice in God himself.

It's thrilling to me that on the Godward side of the gift of righteousness, the awful silence is over. There is a great deal to rejoice about. We have a lot to say. We can sing songs of praise because we have hope in the glory of God; we will be participants in his glory. We look squarely at our suffering and are certain of the love of God that gives purpose to our lives, even if it is very hard and very painful, because the love of God will not disappoint us.

Lastly, as he gives us the grace to grow, we find ourselves rejoicing in him for who he is. That too deserves a song to be sung and a word of praise given.

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