

I

When I was working on my Master's degree, I had a work study arrangement that helped defray my seminary expenses. I was assigned to the Media Services department of the library, which most of the time meant I helped professors with their instructional technology and audio-visual needs.

The professors were supposed to reserve AV equipment in advance through the library, but sometimes, they'd forget, but they knew that I had a key to the storage closet and could get them access to what they needed even at the last minute.

That little key, I'm convinced, was worth at least a half a grade-point on my final transcript, as more than one final exam or paper came back with a note of thanks for all the access to equipment I provided.

II

In our modern world, we place a premium on access, don't we? Some folks will pay a premium to stay at a hotel inside the amusement park rather than at a property a few miles away because of the access it provides. Some folks who travel frequently sign up for certain credit cards because it gives them access to airport lounges. We like to know about shortcuts and backroads and side entrances to places. As a general rule, most of us like having access.

And the flip side is true - we don't like being denied access. How many of us have typed our password incorrectly so many times that access is denied, and now

we'll need to submit our childhood pet's mother's maiden name before we can make a new password that is between 17 and 19 letters long that uses at least one capital letter and one symbol and one number, but no more and no less.

The problem of access is a major feature of this modern life of ours.

But what about access to God?

Is there a password? An exclusive credit card? A secret handshake or TikTok dance? How do we access the divine? Those kinds of questions are before us today in our reading from the Book of Romans.

III

Romans isn't a book at all, but rather a long letter, the longest one in the bible, in point of fact.

This letter was written by a man named Paul, who, although he wasn't one of the original twelve disciples, was the most important preacher, missionary, and church planter of the first century. Of the 27 books that make up the New Testament, about half of them are letters that were either written by or attributed to Paul.

The letter was written to a small group of people who lived in the city of Rome, probably sometime between the years 50 and 70. Paul had never met most of these women and men, in the letter he speaks of his plans to travel to Rome and meet them in person at a later date. Paul's purpose in writing this letter, then, is to address some of the tensions that were developing in the early Roman

church between those who had been born and raised as first-century Jews and those who had come to faith in Jesus as Gentiles, that is, those raised outside of first-century Judaism, most likely worshipping the Greek and Roman gods of antiquity.

Romans is the longest letter in the New Testament, and most scholars believe that Paul composed it late in his life, reflecting over two decades of teaching, preaching, and writing letters to churches he had founded. It's dense reading in places to be sure, but Paul's letter to the Romans has been preserved and passed down to us from generation to generation as Holy Scripture, and so although you and I live two millennia later and half a world away, it's also a letter to us.

So listen now for a Word from God from Romans 1 5:1-11.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to

die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For 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. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

How do we gain access to God? That is not just a Christian question – that is a human question, one that has been pondered and addressed by human civilizations throughout human history.

And so, too, for the recipients of Paul's letter, the fledgling Christian community living in the capital city of the Roman empire in the first century.

Those who had been raised as first-century Jews may have asked, "Do we gain access to God through careful observance of all the commandments, through attending to the disciplines of prayer and piety? Do we access God through our worship?"

And those who had been raised as first-century Gentiles, that is, non-Jews, may have asked, "Do we gain access God through acts of mercy and justice and righteousness toward our neighbors? Do we access God through our works?"

And here in his letter, Paul says, the question isn't about how we access

God. The good news of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ, God has accessed us.

We have peace with God, Paul says, not because we said the right prayers or sang the right songs or had the right devotional life. He says, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.

We have peace with God, Paul says, not because of our acts of mercy and righteousness and justice. Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.

In other words, Paul reminds the Romans of one of the miraculous, even scandalous claims of the gospel. Throughout human history, there have been all kinds of faith and philosophy systems teach their adherents how to become more God-like, how to obtain access to the divine. But the gospel of Jesus Christ turns the whole thing upside down. The gospel of says that through Jesus Christ, God has obtained access to us.

IV

And so you have peace with God, my friend, but it's not because you said the right prayer at the right time. You have peace with God, but it's not because you have received the sacraments of the church. You have peace with God, but it's not because of how much you give to charity or how many volunteer hours you put in or because of the ways in which you

show solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.

You have peace with God because you have been justified by Jesus Christ.

You, my friend, have been justified, that is, you have been set in right relationship with God and neighbor through Jesus Christ. You have been reconciled, that is, you have been brought into balance with God and neighbor through Jesus Christ. There's nothing you did to earn it. It's a gift, given to you by a generous and loving God who would rather die for you than live without you.

Paul is not arguing that acts of devotion and prayer are unimportant or unnecessary, anymore than he is arguing that acts of mercy and righteousness and justice are unimportant. He's arguing that this whole question about how we access God has been rendered moot by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for in Jesus, God has gained access to us.

So the question is, then, what will you do with this gift of grace? What would it look like if you stopped trying to pray or work your way to God, or if you stopped feeling guilty or giving up when your commitment to prayer and acts of mercy comes up short of your intentions. What would it look like if you took the gospel seriously and lived your life not with fear of punishment, but with joy and thanksgiving?

Might your prayers be a little deeper? Might your acts of mercy and righteousness and justice be a little more consistent? Might you live more devoutly before God and more lovingly before your

neighbor? Might you worry a little less about getting everything step of this dance of faith just right, and instead just dance with joy before the throne of God?

V

And what about us, as a community of faith?

Paul speaks to the Romans, and by extension, to us, of suffering.

Lord knows there's plenty of suffering in our world, in our community, in our own families, in our own hearts. Being followers of Jesus Christ does not exempt us from suffering. In fact, as Paul himself experienced many times, being a follower of Jesus Christ sometimes leads directly to more suffering.

Paul knew first-hand about suffering, as do so many of us. But Paul says that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And then he makes a bold claim. He says that hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

And that is a bold claim. For everyone suffers, but I'm not sure that everyone finds their way from suffering to hope.

Paul here is making a distinctive theological claim about the nature of the church, the nature of the gathered body of Christ, of those who follow Jesus. Paul reminds the Romans, and he reminds us, that faith in Jesus Christ is not an individual, private exercise. Faith in Jesus Christ is a group project.

Most days, I feel pretty confident in my faith. I feel like my connection to God and my connection to my neighbors is strong.

But not every day.

And some days, I feel like I'm just lost, like I'm praying and praying and praying and there's just nothing on the other end of the line.

And those are the days that I'm thankful for the gift of the church, for the saints who gather together who keep telling this old, old story, this odd story about how instead of God demanding that we become gods, God instead became just like us in every way, except was without sin.

I'm thankful for the gift of the church, that reminds me that suffering happens to us all, but for those of us who have been justified by faith through Jesus Christ our Lord, we don't suffer alone. Together, we are the body of Christ. And when one member rejoices, all rejoice together with it, and when one member suffers, all suffer together with it.

But for we who have faith in Jesus Christ, for we who have read the last page of the book, we trust that suffering leads to endurance, and endurance leads to character, and character leads to hope, and hope does not disappoint *us*, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to *us*!

Thanks be to God! Amen.