Romans 5:1-5

What does it meant to be at peace? I think that much of the time we can more easily answer the opposite question, what does it mean to be at war? We all know what it looks like to see a broken relationship, to see people torn apart by grief or conflict. Peace we tend to define as simply the opposite of war, but I don’t think that’s what Paul has in mind here. I think it might be more accurate to think of things in the opposite direction. War is the absence of peace. War is the catastrophic tearing apart of the proper relationship that should exist between people. War is something negative, it is the negation of peace. When Paul talks about peace, he is talking about the fulness of a proper relationship with God. It is the world as it ought to be working. Peace with God is not just to no longer be at war with God, it is to be brought back into God’s plan for how creation should be. But how can this be? How can sinful people be at peace with a God of holiness, a God who is a consuming fire and in whom there is no darkness? In answer to this, Paul spends the majority of the preceding chapters in Romans arguing that we are justified before God by faith as a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here in chapter five, his focus shifts and becomes more celebratory as he declares what has now resulted from this work of Christ. Paul is not arguing a point, he is not urging you to believe more strongly so that the promise can be yours also. He is inviting you to celebrate with him. The victory has been won! We have access to God through Jesus Christ. We are standing on a grace too wild and wonderful for human minds to comprehend, unexpected, undeserved and yet, nevertheless here before us in Christ and poured out in love through the Holy Spirit. This is what peace with God means. It is not an injunction, but a fact of God’s work for us, through us and in us. This is a reality which exists for us in the present moment. Those that are in Christ have peace with God, and so in the midst of this world divided and enslaved by sin the great glory of God is manifest to us and through Christ we are at peace with God, we have a relationship with God because in Christ God has reached out to us.

And yet God’s glory has not yet been fully manifested to us. We still live in this world of suffering, in this Vale of Tears. We are at peace with God in that we have been given access to the grace of God and been justified before Him, yet we still await the fullness of what it means to be adopted as sons and daughters of God. Not only that, but we wait in a world of evil, in a world in which we suffer, in a world which crucified Christ. As clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson says, “That’s what life is like, it’s suffering…its not an accident that the axiomatic western individual is someone who was unfairly nailed to a cross and tortured.” In spite of this, Paul declares, we have hope from God. This is not a desperate hope that grasps at straws in an attempt to cope with tribulations, nor is it an opiate doled out to alleviate the anxious grumblings of workers dissatisfied with their economic conditions. This is a hope given by God, grounded on the basis of the peace we have with God through what Christ has done. We can hope for the fulfillment of God’s work in us because we have already become a part of the present work now and because God has promised to complete this work in us. This hope for the glory of God that Paul mentions is a glory that is here in our lives and yet also not yet here, at least not fully. A hope for a restored world in which sin is gone, the heavens and the earth are made new, and the dead in Christ are raised to everlasting life with the Lord. It is because we now have access to God in Christ Jesus that we know that this access will be completed and we will one day see the Lord and be with Him forever. As C.S. Lewis said in his sermon The Weight of Glory, “our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation…We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so.” So we hope, we hope for a reality that is here now and is also not yet. The mind stretches and collapses at the weight of such an idea, that we shall see the Lord, that He will redeem us body and soul in the last day when He returns. And not us only, but that God will redeem and glorify the entire cosmos, now damaged by sin. God will complete His work and creation will finally rejoice, dancing and radiating with divine energy as it glorifies its creator while sin and evil are forgotten. In thinking of this hope the image that often springs to my mind is that of the final scene in the film The Tree of Life by Terrance Malik. The movie follows the life of Jack O’Brian through childhood, adolescence and adulthood as he struggles to find internal resolution between what Malik calls the way of nature, the hard, inflexible and violent aspect of creation, and the way of grace, creation’s beautiful, gentle and forgiving side. Following the death of his brother, Jack has become depressed, isolated and alienated from God amidst the harsh modernist skyscrapers he himself designed as a successful architect. In his depression he contemplates the meaninglessness of suffering against the backdrop of the universe’s indifference. However, in the final scene of the film as Jack boards an elevator he receives a vision of the end of time and the resurrection of the dead. In this vision all the people who populate Jack’s memories gather on a shore together. He meets his father and in an instant all his father’s shortcomings are forgiven as he embraces both his parents, his brother, now a boy again, is restored to his parents, even the different versions of himself from different times of his life are there. All meet on that shore and all are reconciled to one another. The wounds of damaged family relationships healed, the grief of suffering erased, lost loved ones alive, and the things that we could not fully express to one another now wordlessly said. Finally, Jack returns to himself, once again able to have faith. Malik’s message in the film is similar to that of Paul’s in this passage. There is a final, theological hope for the glory of God, for a restored heaven and earth when faith will be rewarded, where what seemed on this side of glory to be the meaningless suffering of humans in an indifferent universe will finally meet the way of grace, and in this act of grace brokenness will be healed and God’s plan will reach completion, which leads us to Paul’s next assertion. The startling, even obscene claim that we should rejoice in suffering.

The first thing to be noted regarding this teaching is Paul’s rejection of the self-righteous moralism common both then and, perhaps even now, that suffering is simply the result of divine punishment. That those who suffer have incurred the ire of a wrathful God on account of their sin. Instead, those suffering are the same ones who Paul says have God’s love “poured into their hearts” and who have hope for “the glory of God.” Paul himself was no stranger to suffering, as can be seen in 2 Corinthians where Paul describes some of the abuses he endured on his missionary journeys, as he says “Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea…in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” In fact, there is a strong possibility that Paul is basing this idea of rejoicing in suffering on his own experience of suffering. As Paul explains in Philippians, it was as a result of his sufferings that he learned that he could “do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” For those of us who have received the Christian hope for the final healing of all things, we are sometimes able to learn a greater trust in God and find a deeper hope in suffering, and in that there can be rejoicing. However, nothing about Paul’s assertion that we should rejoice in suffering is coherent without the knowledge of Christian hope. It seems to me that the central reason why Paul wants us to rejoice in suffering is because of the hope we have. If we could truly grasp the inexpressible majesty and joy that awaits when the Lord returns then we would rejoice, yes, even in our suffering not because the suffering is something to be valued but because our hope is so great that even in our suffering we should rejoice. Paul argues this exact point in 2 Corinthians when he says that “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” Such words are a mystery, and how it is that the flow of history in which we exist prepares for the weight of glory promised we do not know. Nevertheless, Paul exhorts us that if we, like Jack O’Brian could see the eternal weight of glory that waits for us with Jesus, then the shock and joyful exaltation of it would be such that even in our suffering we would rejoice. I am reminded of a parable recounted in the novel the Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in which an atheist philosophy professor who disbelieved in the afterlife dies. Upon dying he naturally learns that there is an afterlife. However, instead of admitting he was wrong he exclaims “No! I will not accept it! It is contrary to my principles.” So God sentences him to walk a quadrillion mile before he will be allowed to enter into heaven. The professor, however, refuses saying “No! It is contrary to my principles!” So for billions of years the professor sits in a heap on the ground refusing to move. Eventually, however, he came to be bored with this and got up and proceeded, over countless ages, to walk the quadrillion miles required of him. Finally he reached the gates of heaven, which now stood open to him and as he took a step in, upon seeing the heavenly reward in store for him the professor exclaimed that these two seconds of heaven were worth walking not just a quadrillion miles but a quadrillion times quadrillion raised to the quadrillionth power. It is noteworthy that the parable does not explain why the professor should have to walk a quadrillion miles or in what way it was beneficial, if at all. All that it explains is that the greatness of what God has in store was such that even walking a quadrillion miles appeared to the professor to be a “light momentary affliction” and in that, there can be rejoicing.

So we are left in a strange now and not yet. We have peace with God, the fullness of justification before Him, what’s more we also have been granted hope for a new heaven and a new earth, and yet we still remain in a world where this hope is not yet fully manifest. We are still the professor walking his quadrillion miles, we are still the grieving Jack O’Brian in his modernist steel skyscraper awaiting the resurrection of the dead, we still live in the stinking tomb waiting for the cry of “Lazarus come forth!” And yet we see the future to come, we have this hope for future glory which has been granted us by God. We know what God has done and we know God is here with us promising us a greater harvest of thirty, sixty and a hundred-fold. We see in part what we will one day see in full. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” Amen.