

# The Order of Salvation

## *Romans 8:22-30; James 4:7-12*

Because there were three James among Jesus' apostles, the early church gave James the little brother of Jesus the title of James the Just. And I noted to you last Sunday when we ended last week's passage with James teaching us to "*Be wretched and weep and mourn...*" that modern readers might be more inclined to think of Jesus' little brother as, not James the Just, but James the Grouch.

But I also reminded you that, in this kind of teaching, James was not very different than Jesus, who in the Beatitudes said, "*Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh!*" And then Jesus even went on to become a little grouchy himself and say, "*Woe to you who laugh, for you shall mourn and weep!*" In this week's Call to Worship, we read Paul continuing in the same vein.

So what happens when we believe in Christ and the Spirit comes to live in our hearts? We tend to think that we become whole and happy and healed and live happily ever after. But Paul says "No!" He says we "*groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as children, the redemption of our bodies.*" And Paul goes on to teach that God the Holy Spirit shares in our unhappiness, he says, "*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we don't know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes with us with groaning too deep for words.*"

It's extraordinary stuff to read because it's such a far cry from what people often promise us if we give our lives to Christ. The implied promise often is that, with Christ, our lives will get better, we'll be better adjusted, more functional, more successful. Our marriages will improve, our kids will come around, our neighbors and friends will see and understand and admire us for the turn our lives have taken.

Never mind that it didn't break that way for Job or Moses or Samuel or David or Solomon, or Hannah, Esther, Elizabeth, Mary. If you really read their stories, you'll see twists and turns, heartbreak and tears. Paul goes on to explain, "*And we know that God works all things together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose.*" But the good God has promised us, and the groaning he tells us we'll have to work through, only make sense in light of a larger project God is working, a project for which our happiness is not the first goal.

In our own Calvinist, Puritan tradition, the project God is working is called the Order of Salvation. And the premise underlying the project is that God created a universe, and set a story in motion, out of love, to share the goodness and beauty that existed within his heart and that was

always there between the three persons of the Trinity, to share that with a vast number of creatures who would learn his beauty, see his glory, and love him for letting us in on it all.

So Paul writes about us, *“those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son...”*. Those two words, foreknew and predestined, mean that before the beginning of time, eons before any of us ever existed, God knew us and willed to save us from Sin and Fall and the Curse that follows, so we would belong to him, our Maker and Father, that his own Son, Christ, would win us our place in the love that was always there between Father, Son and Spirit. So to belong to Christ is to be welcome as family in heaven where God lives.

But...there's always a but!...to foreknow us as his children, to predestine to save us from Sin and Fall and Curse, God had to both know and sovereignly allow there to be a Fall with all the horrors that followed in its trail. It is a logical necessity that no one can explain away...and much to your relief I won't try to explain today, except to say that Sin and Fall and Curse is what makes mourning and tears, weeping and gloom, a necessary part of untangling from what we used to be and engaging with what God has both promised and commanded that we become in Christ.

We said last week that, whatever happened in the heart and mind of the Almighty in all eternity past, our experience with God began at the moment he called us. Paul wrote, *“those whom he predestined, he also called...”*. Jesus told Nicodemus, late one night in John's gospel, that *“...unless one is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God...unless one is born of water and Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God...The wind blows where it will...but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”*

So we are called, God comes calling in that moment when the wind blows and the Spirit lights on you or me or him or her and makes us alive to, gives us birth in the things that belong to God that he wants to share with us. Only after the Spirit has made us alive can we, as Jesus put it, *“see the kingdom of God”*, or believe the gospel we hear or read. The technical word for God come calling is regeneration, God makes us alive and we believe the gospel and give our lives to Christ.

So Paul goes on, *“those whom God called, he also justified...”*. Now justification is a legal thing. God bestows upon us the verdict Christ earned by the life he lived. Does the Father love Christ? He said so twice, once at the Baptism, once at the Transfiguration. The Father said about Jesus, *“He is my beloved.”* So justification means that when we throw in with Christ, we become beloved by the Father. And the trick here, the reason that tears and mourning and gloom are all still in play is that justification has no immediate effect on what we're like in our hearts or how we act in our lives.

Paul wrote in Romans 4, that God “*justifies the ungodly*”, not the good guys, not people who are sincere, not people who are really trying, but the ungodly people who never got close and they know it. So they weep! Jesus used this verb, justify, in Luke 18 about a tax collector who hadn't done a thing right and that's what he told God when he went to worship, “*I'm a sinner!*” he said, but Jesus said he went home “*justified*”. The point being that at the moment we're justified, our hearts are still sinful, our lives are still wrong.

Justification is about what happens when the Father's heart changes toward us, because we've thrown in with Christ. Our hearts, our lives begin to change only after we're justified because the faith God gives us gets us to a place where the Father can begin to work with us. We don't instantly become better people when we're justified, but that is the moment when God begins to sanctify us.

He begins to sets us apart from what we used to be, slowly but surely. He indwells us by his Spirit and begins to teach our hearts and minds who it is we've taken up with and what it means to know and love and follow him. Short small lessons at first that gain traction as we give God time and place in our lives. Which brings us to where James left off with us last week. James the Just tells us: “*Submit to God! Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he'll draw near to you.*”

Lesson one about God: He requires moral choices. He has set an order to life that he expects us to follow. Lesson two: There is opposition to this new life of faith, this new walk with God. Before the Spirit brought me alive to God, I had always ever lived by Serpent rules. Who's cool, whose not. What's fun, what's not. What works, what stinks. Life was always ever about my being happy, my getting ahead, my suiting myself. And all of a sudden I'm reading words from God in my Bible that show me a whole different way to live. Listen to my Dad? I hate my Dad! Tell my parents the truth? Well, that's not going to work!

People have these pictures of Satan appearing out of smoke and haze, endangering life and limb and sanity. Well... sometimes. But usually, nothing like that is necessary. It's the friends we already have and don't want to lose, the habits we've already formed and don't think we can live without, the lies we already believe, the Serpent whispering in the back of our minds that bowing to God and going to church is going to be dreary and lonely and dull and sad. That desperate fear we all have of looking strange and being laughed at and left alone.

The thing that grabbed me when I was sixteen and has held onto me through the decades since is this certainty in my chest that when I open my Bible and open my heart and read what it says as something real and true, God really is in the room with me. Not that the words always relate, not that the solution is always at hand, not that I often know how to pray but that God is there at the breakfast table and he will bear me through whatever waits for me that day. That certainty, that

God is near, and I am his is what makes Satan's lies sound weak and lame and false. He can only flee once we let God into the room.

My own experience is that the value of Bible reading is cumulative. That sense of who God is, who we are, where we stand in the world, what life is about and for, that sense gains traction as we read the different books through, a song, a poem, a story at a time. I can remember what it was to take to heart what a test it was for Moses in the desert when the Israelites staged a food riot on the day his sister Miriam died. "Yeah Moses, it's all very interesting about your sister, but when am I going to get something to eat!" He lost his temper and I would have lost mine. He lost his ticket to the Promised Land and I would have lost mine with him.

So I took the story to heart. I thought long and hard about how tough God was on Moses. It makes it a little easier for me to take James when he tells me, "*Cleanse your hands, you sinners! And purify your hearts, you double minded! Be wretched and mourn and weep! Let your laughter turn to tears, your joy to gloom.*" Here we are, back in the Crying Room. Why would a person who's justified, born again, got the Holy Spirit, been promised eternal life, how could a person like that be reduced to tears and grief and gloom, and why would that ever be a good thing?

Paul told us our Call to Worship, he said, "*...the whole creation groans together in the pains of childbirth till now.*" Once Jesus walked the landscape, once we come alive to God and let him in the room, a deep powerful change sweeps through our lives. We see the Fall for what is, we see our sins for what they are. We long to change, we need to grow, but the commandments are so foreign, the holiness God calls us to is so hard and strange. Paul said, "*...we ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as children, the redemption of our bodies.*"

If we've given our lives to Christ, something wonderful is in motion inside us. God's Spirit is on the move rearranging our thoughts and feelings so that life makes sense and God comes close. But this doesn't happen in a vacuum. In the swirl around us, relationships bend and break, and people get hurt sometimes for their sins and sometimes for ours and either way our hearts will need to break.

We do become whole and healed and balanced over time but mourning our losses and repenting our sins is part of the process. Jesus wept for his friends at Lazarus' funeral and for his enemies at the Jerusalem city gate. The person who fails to weep for sin and folly and tragedy and absurdity isn't aware of themselves, isn't awake to God and isn't awake to life. So James exhorts us, scolds us to pay attention. "*Cleanse your hands, you sinners! Purify your hearts, you double-minded!*"

What he's concerned about is that propensity in all of us when we gain a degree of success to imagine we did it all, and that God isn't really as necessary and central as he was when we were in trouble. Paul wrote in Romans 7 about the passions in his heart making him a "*wretched man*", he wrote in Romans 8 about the Spirit in his heart causing him to groan for the goodness he hadn't gained, the holiness he hadn't reached. Because Paul knew that there was no such thing as grace from God that doesn't lead to repentance, love for God that doesn't lead to obedience.

And that reality should open our hearts to weep for ourselves, to turn from our sins and show mercy to each other in what we say and how we act. There are no heroes and no villains in church. Only sinners bound for glory, depending on God's grace to get us there.