

# JUST IN TIME

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**ROMANS 5:1-8**  
**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**  
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Whenever I read a passage that I'm going to be preaching on, I'm always looking for a "way in" to the text. I'll often zero in on a phrase or a word or an image that jumps out or somehow sets itself apart in a unique or helpful or memorable way.

As I read Romans 5 this week, a few of my favourite words jumped out.

Faith. Peace. Grace. Hope Love.

Five words, just like last week.

I suspect I am not alone in being drawn to these words. Maybe they jumped out at you as you heard the Scripture read this morning.

Those who know me well know that I am a lover of words. Those who know me even better know that I sometimes exhibit an irritating tendency to demand precision in language.

Words matter. I think one of the most important questions we can ever ask, whether we're reading a text or talking about issues over coffee with friends is this:

*What do you mean by that?*

These five words loom large in the Christian faith, but it's very easy to just assume we know what they mean or import all kinds of our own meanings into them. And over time, these powerful, transformative, life-giving words become fuzzy, imprecise, and untethered from Christ and his kingdom.

So, today I am going to play a kind of word association game. I want us to look at these five words, the associations that might come to mind in our culture, and how the gospel of Christ redefines them.

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## **Faith**

In our culture, the word "faith" often refers to a rather benign belief that things will work out in the end (mostly for us).

*Just have faith.* Things will be ok. So we say.

Or it functions kind of like the word "spirituality." It's a word that we think sounds good and that we think conveys depth and moral character, but it doesn't have much concrete shape to it.

It's used to separate us from those who don't believe anything. There are "people of faith" and other people.

But the truth is that everyone exercises faith in something. Even the most hardened atheist is required to take some things on faith.

So the relevant question isn't, "Are you a person of (generic) faith?" but "What is the object of your faith?"

Or, "In whom do you place your faith?" And why?

For Paul, the word faith has a very specific object. It is faith *in Christ*. Faith in the incarnation, teaching, death, resurrection, ascension and reign of the son of God.

It is faith the one who lived and died in our place so that we too might die and therefore live.

It is faith in the one who did for us what we could not do for ourselves.

And it is not just faith *in* Christ but the faith or faithfulness *of* Christ that saves us.

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## **Peace**

The absence of conflict. Swords into plowshares. Lions and lambs. *Shalom*. We all want peace.

But in Romans 5, the word “peace” is followed by two more words: “with God.”

Paul is not talking about world peace or about nonviolence as a political strategy, important as these things are.

He’s talking about peace between God and *us*.

Which is a rather more personal and therefore uncomfortable topic. Because it implies that peace with God is something we need.

Sometimes, when I’m talking to someone who has little use for church or for creeds or doctrines or any of the formal aspects of Christianity, I hear people say a funny thing: “I’m good with God.”

That’s quite a thing to say, I often think. Is it true?

This isn’t what the Bible says. It isn’t even what basic observation of the world and of our lives bears out.

If we’re honest and paying attention, we quite quickly see that we are by nature turned inward.

Not all the time and not to the same extent. But we all miss the mark of what we were made to do and to be. We do what we ought not to do and we fail to do what we ought to do. All of us.

Which leads us to another uncomfortable word: sin.

“Sin” language is not terribly popular, inside or outside the church, I know.

It is thought best consigned to the dusty attics of our unenlightened ancestors who didn't know the first thing about brain chemistry or the social roots of human behaviour, who believed in all manner of magic and superstition, who wasted countless hours agonizing over and confessing moral failures that we now know to be either prudish or illusory, who searched the heavens in anguish when they ought to have been searching the pharmacy for the right pill. “Sin” is a word that makes us feel icky and guilty about ourselves and we've mercifully moved beyond all that by now.

In the event that we do behave in ways that we regret or that lead to destructive consequences, we often retreat into “victim” language. We were acted upon by all kinds of factors beyond our control. We couldn't help ourselves. It was the devil... or our genes... our bad socialization... or bad teaching from our church... or politicians... or big corporations... or \_\_\_\_\_.

There is often some truth in these explanations. Sometimes even a lot of truth.

But we are also sinners. At the root of who we are is a love of self that stubbornly and consistently overrules love of God and neighbour.

We are bent inward. Each one of us instinctively, like Adam, is prone to wander... prone to leave the God we love, we sing in the famous hymn, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.”

“Sin” is an ugly word, I know, but we need ugly words to explain ugly realities.

We are estranged from what we were made for. We are not naturally “good with God.” We need peace with God.

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## **Grace**

I have heard that there are some households out there where teenagers leave a mess. Food remnants, garbage, clothes on the floor, backpacks, shoes, sports equipment... all of this just sort of falls to the floor wherever it happens to have been used last, leaving a rather chaotic and depressing scene for any unfortunate soul who happens to wander through the door to witness it.

It sounds terrible. 😊

I have also heard that in *some* houses, parents actually clean up said mess because they get exhausted by the spectacle and of asking again and again and *again* for it to be dealt with. I have heard that *some* teenagers even come to *expect* this after a while.

(It's Father's Day, I'm allowed to do a bit of subtle parenting from the pulpit!) 😊

This is how we often view grace, isn't it? God is kind of like the parent who trudges around behind us, patting us on the head, assuring us that we're ok, cleaning up after us while we pretty much do whatever we want.

But if we've read our bibles at all, if we've paid attention to the story of Jesus, and certainly if we've encountered Paul's letters, we know that grace is not a generic, sloppy, divine good-naturedness toward human carelessness.

It is costly in every way. It cost God everything.

Our response to this grace ought not to be presumption but gratitude and devotion. It ought to be to receive it and extend it outward to others as a reflection of God's character and purposes.

And yet in the end, grace remains utterly scandalous. It is not a reward based on merit but the outrageous good news of the gospel that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

One of my favourite bands is U2. Right around the time that I became a father, in 2001, they released an album with a song called "Grace" on it. The song contains this line:

Grace  
It's a name for a girl  
It's also a thought that  
Changed the world

And it became the (second) name a girl. Our girl.

And it *is* a thought that changed the world, isn't it?

I forget where I heard the following helpful summary, and I've probably used it before, but the best things are worth hearing more than once.

Justice is getting what we deserve.

Mercy is not getting what we deserve.

Grace is getting what we don't deserve.

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## **Hope**

Hope is another word that can easily become rather vague and undemanding once we get our hands on it. Perhaps you're noticing this trend with all of these words by now.

But it's interesting to pay attention to how hope is produced, according to Paul.

It begins with boasting in suffering, of all things. In the first century, suffering would have been literal as they were a persecuted minority in the vast Roman Empire.

We may not all suffer persecution like this for our faith, but into each one of our lives some suffering will inevitably come. And this suffering can either make us bitter and angry, or it can drive us toward hope.

For Paul, hope comes at the end of an interesting sequence.

Suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character. And character produces hope.

And this hope does not disappoint us or "put us to shame" because....

... the love of God has been poured into our hearts.

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## **Love**

The last word is one that we probably misunderstand and misuse the most.

For us, love language often functions as something like an emotional thermometer—it's a way that we take the temperature of our affections.

Or it's used as a slogan to be plastered online in response to tragedy or injustice. *Love wins. Love is stronger than hate. Love will conquer it all...*

And it *is*... and it *will*, but...

The question is always, how? *How* does love win? And what *kind* of love wins?

In Romans 5, Paul makes it clear. How does God demonstrate his love?

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

When we were still bent inward, hostile toward and estranged from God, Christ died for us.

This is how God demonstrates love. By dying for his enemies, for those who wanted nothing to do with him, for those who had little interest in embracing the task of being human for the glory of God.

God demonstrates love by laying down his life for us. When we were at our worst, God was at his best.

Today is Father's Day. And when I think of the kind of uniquely Christian love that we are simultaneously drawn by and called to as followers of Jesus, I always think of the story of the Lost Son in Luke 15 (or, more precisely, the lost "sons," because both sons were lost in their own way).

This incredible story about a father whose love and longing persists for a son who was determined to do everything he could to insult, humiliate, and reject him. A son who wanted to live only for himself.

Francis Spufford, in talking about this parable, describes this love well:

[T]his is about something else, **a love that deliberately does not protect itself**, a love that is radically unprotected on purpose, and is never going to stop to ask whether the younger son, like many junkies briefly boomeranging back to the

nest, will tomorrow steal the silver spoons and the digital camera and be off again to the fun-bucket. **A love that does not come naturally** in a world of finite farms, and real inheritances, and exhaustible parents; a love which therefore can only be like a father running across the fields to kiss his ruined child.

But a love we might need anyway, if we're going to get beyond deserving. [Jesus] tells the story with the bad boy's viewpoint first, and then the brother's, so that those who hear it must become both of them. Which we do, if we're honest in the way [Jesus] recommends. In every life, we have times when we play both parts. We ruin and we build. We're chaotic and we're the anxious maintainers of a little bit of order in the face of chaos. We could only join the older brother in asking for fairness, nothing but fairness, if we didn't see ourselves at all in the lost boy.

Since we find ourselves in him as well, we too will need, at times, something far less cautious than justice. **We too will need sometimes to be met on the road by a love that never shudders at the state we're in**, never hesitates to check what it can bear, but only cries: this is my son, who was lost and is found.<sup>1</sup>

This is what we, as Christians, mean by the word "love."

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Maybe you're wondering about the title of today's sermon: "Just in Time."

I took it from another phrase that caught my eye from today's reading:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

*At just the right time.*

I think Paul is talking about the timing of Jesus' arrival in the big, cosmic story of God that stretches from creation to new creation.

But I think that Jesus arrives just in time in our own lives, too.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012).



When we would settle for **faith** as a vague expression of spirituality or belief in a generic higher power, Jesus arrives, just in time, and reminds that the object of saving faith is none other than himself.

When we are tempted to casually imagine ourselves as “good with God,” Jesus arrives just in time to remind us that while we are, indeed, special and dearly loved, we are also *sinners*, turned inward, bent away from God. Jesus reminds us the deepest problem in the world is not global geopolitics but human hearts, estranged from God, in need of **peace** and a peacemaker.

When we would make **grace** a cheap assumption that God will good-naturedly clean up all the messes that we leave behind, Jesus arrives, just in time, to show us that grace was costly for God. And, when we find ourselves tempted to despair, Jesus reminds us that what seems too good to be true—that we are loved as we are, that we can be forgiven and set free, that we can be healed and graced into new life—is actually true.

When we would be content with a non-specific **hope** drenched in platitudes, Jesus arrives, just in time, to show us how hope is forged. Suffering, endurance, character, hope. This is the road that Jesus took on our behalf and in order to show us the way. The Christian hope has always involved dying to self and rising to new life

When we would reduce **love** to the temperature of our emotional attachments when we would make it contingent upon moral performance and relational fidelity, Jesus arrives, just in time, to show us a love unlike anything the world has ever seen—a love that lays down its life for those who want nothing to do with it, a love that “never shudders at the state we’re in,” a love that stands with arms open at the gate, calling us home.

Jesus arrives just in time to rescue these words from the many ways in which we make them less than they ought to mean, less than we *need* them to mean.

Jesus arrives, just in time, to save us.

Thanks be to God.



