Romans 5: 1-8 *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.*

“We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God and we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint.” Yes, that’s what Paul says in today’s second reading. Doesn’t that remind you of the much dreaded “what doesn't kill you makes you stronger” or “what a wonderful growth opportunity!” I sincerely dislike those phrases, especially when I am in the midst of a significant life challenge.

It does not help me to hear that whatever current bit of misery or anxiety or heartbreak I am experiencing now is going to look very different in the rear view mirror. That may be true but it’s not helping me right then. And at first reading this passage sounds like Paul wants us to brag about our suffering, like it’s something noble to do for God and aren’t we lucky to have this character building experience? But I don’t believe that is what Paul is saying here.

First of all, when Paul uses the word “boast” it is in the context of boasting in what God has done. Other Bible translations interpret the same Greek word as “rejoice” or “glory in” instead of “boast.” When I make that word substitution, this scripture feels more relevant, and helpful. Then Paul’s message is that we are able to rejoice in the *midst* of suffering because through Christ we have been justified. “Justified,” there’s another word that seems odd. Here it means we are in right relationship with God. Then Paul goes on to say that because we are in right relationship with God, we stand in grace. It makes great theological sense. To understand how it makes sense in real life we can look back at what was going on when Paul wrote this letter to the Church in Rome.

At the time of this writing the fledgling church was trying to survive while living right under the nose of the Roman Emperor. Christians were growing in number and becoming more visible and more of a disruptive force in society. This did not go over well with the Roman officials and Christians were being persecuted. Paul himself spent the last two years of his life under house arrest in Rome. In this hostile environment the early Christians were striving to hold on to their confession of faith in the midst of their fear. So of course they needed encouragement. Paul is reminding them of what they have been promised through faith in Christ Jesus. Paul wants them to recall it, to replay Christ’s message so that it will become a sustaining force in their lives. This was important because what Christ offers is a personal relationship, available to all, with a loving, forgiving, faithful God. Paul wanted God’s love to become something Christians never lost sight of because that is what would get them through the suffering that life inevitably presents.

Christ never promised that God would take away, or prevent, or impose suffering. Christ promised us a constant, loving, and consoling companion through our suffering. That promise, that love, that companionship is grace. And we are always in the midst of it.

Now I often toss out that term “grace” when something good happens that I cannot take credit for. But I had to really stop and think about what that term means in the context of suffering. First, what is grace, how do we come by it and what are we supposed to do with it?

Most of you know I am attending seminary in the South now, Tennessee to be exact. I haven’t eaten out a lot in the little town of Sewanee where I live, but I have learned one thing about restaurant breakfasts in the South. There is something that always shows up on your plate. It’s grits. Grace is like a serving of grits. It is something very mysterious if you’ve never encountered it before, you don’t ask for it, you don’t have to pay extra for it, you just get it. Grace and grits, they just somehow, show up!

And Paul says we stand in grace. It is ours, always, in all situations, even when God’s presence is obscured to us because of the difficulty of a situation. Even when our eyes cannot see as the disciples on the road to Damascus could not recognize the risen Lord, we stand in grace. And through that grace we can be at peace in the knowledge and love of God.

Oh, if it were only so easy! What about those times when things are so tough, so painful and chaotic that we can’t find God’s peace? Those are very real times, at least for me. That’s when I long to step back into grace, into that peaceful and restful place I know exists, but I can’t find it. Not only can I not find it, I forget where to look.

You often hear Fr. Richard Rohr quoted from this pulpit because of his deep spiritual insights, intentionally cultivated and artfully shared. Last year Fr. Richard was diagnosed with prostate cancer and he wrote about what he learned while recuperating from the process of diagnosis and treatment. He said that his best spiritual knowing often comes *after* the fact, in the remembering. And he says it was the same for Moses, God told Moses “I shall place you in the cleft of the rock and shield you with my hand.”[[1]](#footnote-2) Moses could only look upon God after the fact.

Fr. Richard also recalls the “ability of the Jewish people to look at their entire salvation history and *then trust that this pattern would never—could never— change!”* [[2]](#footnote-3) The Jewish faith was actually formed *after* the stories we read in the first part of the Old Testament. Those stories where then transmuted into hope for the future. Fr. Richard came through this experience with cancer realizing the value of holding on to the whole story of God’s work in his life. And that’s an important concept to sit with.

You may not be able to see God’s hand in your life when crisis descends. Or you may immediately turn to God and find refuge. I think that what makes the difference between these two scenarios is what we have done to preserve our memories of God’s grace throughout our lives.

In my chaplaincy training I had the marvelous experience of working with a woman whose life had been filled with what most people would experience as faith shattering tragedies. Her husband had died a few years earlier of a debilitating genetic disease and both of her adult children had inherited the disease. One was dying in the hospital and the second was not expected to live another year. The love and attentiveness she was showing to her dying daughter was inspirational. She could interpret every grimace, body movement and vocalization for us. She talked to me about all the things she and her profoundly handicapped children enjoyed doing, her love for them filled the room. She was not in despair and not in denial, she knew how this was going to end. So I asked her one day how it was that she managed to handle this incredibly tragic situation and life story with such grace and acceptance. I will never forget her words to me. “God has blessed me so much in my life, I have no room for anything but faith in his goodness.” And then she proceeded to tell me about how she had experienced those blessings, going all the way back to her early infancy when she had been spared exposure to a contagious disease which would likely have taken her life. She used those memories of her blessings, she stored them up, recalled them, rehearsed them. And through that remembering she was able to do exactly what Paul is suggesting is possible. She was able to rejoice in the midst of suffering.

When I started the discernment process for ordination, one of the things I had to do was write a spiritual autobiography, the story of my journey in faith. I know that document was meant for the benefit of others, but what it did for me was much more important. That exercise revealed to me all the ways God had been working in my life, forgiving, accepting, sustaining and inspiring me. And like the stories of salvation for the Hebrew people, I could transmute my story into trust and joy for the future. Now, you might ask, “How’s that working for you?” It’s a good question, and the truth is it does work, once I remember to stop my obsessing with the current crisis, and remember. That’s when I’m able to let God in to do the work of salvation. But if I keep filling my head with all the details of the problem, there’s no room for anything else. My motto needs to be, stop, remember (pray), relax.

So my challenge to you is to recall your story of faith. Write it down, share it with someone if you can. Notice how God’s grace has always surrounded you, even when you couldn’t see it in the moment. But don’t stop there. Be alert for the “God moments” in your life now, don’t let them slip away. And do not confuse standing in grace with standing outside of suffering. That’s not part of the deal. We can ease suffering, but we cannot avoid it.

So use all of your story, past and present, to build that storehouse of trust in God’s constant and faithful presence. God’s grace is like grits, it just shows up. Do not let someone clear your plate until you have taken advantage of all that is in front of you!

1. Exodus 33:22 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. “Things I learned While Recuperating,” *The Mendicant,* Winter 2016, Vol. 6, No. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)