

## February 25, 2018 God accomplishes the unexpected! Romans 5:1-11

About 40 years ago, one of the greatest moments in the history of American sports took place in Lake Placid, New York. It was the 1980 Winter Olympics. The US men's hockey team, which was made up of inexperienced college students, surprised everyone by making it all the way to the championship round. There they would meet the feared Soviet Union team which had won 5 of the previous 6 Olympic gold medals. This was perhaps the ultimate David vs. Goliath story. The Soviets were the overwhelming favorites. The question was not whether or not the Soviets would win, but how much they would win by. Yet shockingly, the Americans defeated the Soviets 4-3. It's hard to put into words how surprising this was. Suffice to say, it is one of the greatest upsets in sports history. The result was completely the opposite of what everyone expected.

Today in our Lesson we hear about something that is even more shocking than the Miracle on Ice. **Today we will see that God accomplishes the unexpected.**

First, we see that **God accomplished the unexpected through the life of Jesus.** This section of Scripture paints a bleak outlook of our spiritual lives before Christ intervened. We hear that by nature we are powerless to do anything to earn God's favor. We hear that we are by nature sinners who disobey God's laws. Because of this, we were enemies of God.

We often hear opinions that contradict those truths. The prevailing thought in the world today is that humans are basically good. Sometimes we make mistakes, but for the most part we are okay. Our sinful nature also wants us to believe that we are not so bad. We like to think of ourselves as the righteous and good person in verse 7 of our Lesson. But that is not what the Bible says. God tells us here that by nature we are sinful enemies of God, and we are powerless on our own to change that. We are not the kind of person that someone would want to give their life for.

Yet God accomplished the unexpected. Jesus was innocent, perfectly blameless before God. He was completely holy. Yet he gave up his own life for us. This is the exact opposite of what we would expect to happen. Who would have seen this coming? The perfect God-man gave up his life for lowly sinners, wicked, helpless people who had made themselves God's enemies.

Another unexpected thing about what God did is that he was willing to give up his own Son for sinners. There are few things that are more heartbreaking than a parent who has a child die. That God was willing to intentionally let his Son be born so that he could die in the place of his enemies is mind blowing. And Jesus was willing to die for us. When Paul says that even for a good person someone might die, he adds the word "dare." Even if someone died for a good person, it would be a bold move. But Jesus, the only righteous person, gave his life for sinners. This shows us even more how unexpected it is that Jesus would die for us.

As God accomplished the unexpected in sending Jesus to die for us, the way that Jesus paid for our sins was also unexpected. God chose to accomplish our salvation through the suffering of Jesus. Anyone who saw Jesus' suffering would have thought that no good would come of it. Jesus was beaten and bloodied, he was mocked and humiliated, he was nailed to a cross and killed. Jesus suffered an excruciating and shameful death.

In our Gospel lesson, Peter showed that he did not understand why this had to happen. When Jesus told him that he was going to suffer and die, Peter took Jesus aside and told him that he should not go through with it. Peter had the same thought that all of us would have had in that situation: How could anything good come from Jesus being tortured and killed? No one expects good to come from suffering.

Yet God accomplishes the unexpected. God let his own Son suffer the punishment that our sins deserve. God aimed all his wrath at Jesus. And when Jesus emerged from the grave on Easter morning, he opened for us an entrance into God's throne of grace. Jesus reconciled us to God. He transformed us from enemies of God into members of his own dear family. What an unexpected turn of events! God accomplished the unexpected in the life and death of Jesus, and he continues to accomplish the unexpected in our lives.

**We Christians are now joined inseparably with Christ.** The next chapter of Romans talks about how we are united with Christ in his death and also in his resurrection. Our old way of life, the fact that we were enemies of God, was nailed to the cross with Christ. But Jesus was given new life, and we are partakers in that new life.

Since we are united with Christ, we also will suffer with Christ. In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus said that anyone who would follow him must take up his cross daily. Following Jesus is not easy. The life of a Christian is full of suffering. We daily face sickness, hardship, and persecution. Jesus' life was not without suffering, and ours is the same.

And just as God accomplished the unexpected through the suffering of Jesus, he does the same for us. Suffering does not negate the hope that we have in eternal life. Suffering actually leads to a firmer hope. For this reason, we actually boast in and are happy about our suffering.

Paul here lays out the steps that God brings us through in order to bring hope out of suffering. First, suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance has the idea of endurance, the ability to hold out under suffering for longer periods of time. Once we have that ability, then character begins to develop. The Greek word for character has the idea of something that has undergone testing and passed the test. A person with character does not react negatively to each and every piece of suffering in their lives. They are able to keep an even keel and to respond with a calm maturity. Such a person is then able to develop a true sense of hope. Paul is not giving us self-help advice. This is not some click-bait article about how you can follow these 3 steps in order to have hope. No, Paul is seeking to show us that God accomplishes the unexpected through suffering in our lives. God gives us hope even through our suffering.

And this hope is different from earthly hope. When we hear hope, we often assume that the hope is not certain. For example, fans of the American hockey team had hope that the US would defeat the Soviet Union. Yet most of them did not expect it to happen. Their hope was not a sure hope. But when the Bible talks about hope, there is no degree of uncertainty. Christian hope is a certain thing. Our hope will not disappoint us.

Our hope comes through faith given by the Holy Spirit. Our lesson says that the Holy Spirit has been given to us and that God's love is poured out into our hearts through him. As we heard earlier, before we believed in God we were God's enemies. We were powerless to make a move towards God. We were completely helpless. But the Holy Spirit created faith in our hearts. He worked through God's Word, and for many of us that was in our baptism. He gave us faith and hope. And now he lives in us and dwells in our hearts. He continues to work through the Word to strengthen that faith. He works through the Lord's Supper to make us more sure of the hope that he has given us. And he has created a New Person in us that loves God and wants to obey his laws.

The reason that our hope will not disappoint us is that it is rooted in God's promises, and God will keep his promises. We know what God has done for us. As we just saw, God sent his only Son Jesus to suffer for us. God worked through the horrible suffering and death of Jesus to forgive our sins and put us in a good standing before God. And shockingly, he did this while we were his enemies, while we were people that no one would want to die for. Jesus suffered and died for us, but that is not all. After three days Jesus rose from the dead in victory over death.

Now Paul uses an argument from the greater to the lesser to show why we have hope. If God has done something difficult, we can expect that he will do something easier. God has done the completely unexpected and seemingly most difficult thing of sending his Son to suffer for us while we were his enemies, so we can trust him to do the easier thing of bringing us to heaven. God sent his Son to save us while we were his enemies, and now we are no longer his enemies, but part of his beloved family. God worked through Jesus' suffering and death to take away our sins, so how will he now not also work even more through Jesus' life? Jesus is alive and sitting at the right hand of God praying for us daily. In horrible circumstances, God accomplished the unexpected and took away our sin. Now, we know that he will work in good circumstances to save us. On the Last Day, we do not have to be afraid. We have the sure hope that our sins are paid for and

that God will save us. We no longer have to fear death, since we are God's family and he has promised to raise us from the dead and give us eternal life.

This is what gives us hope. A person who knows that there is eternal life waiting after this life of suffering has a positive attitude despite the trouble they're experiencing. They know that there is light at the end of the tunnel. And so already in this life there is a firm hopefulness – a positive joy – that surrounds them always. This is not the kind of attitude that we would expect to see in a person who has gone through intense suffering. But that is the amazing, unexpected thing that God does in the life of the believer. It is totally unexpected that our suffering would be a good thing, but God uses it for good. God has shown that he accomplishes the unexpected, that he will work great things out of horrible situations. We have seen God bring good things out of the beating and murder of an innocent man. What are the horrible things in your life? Cancer? Unemployment? Family problems? Those sufferings do not negate the hope that we have. Instead, trust that God can and will do the unexpected and use it to give us hope. When God delivers us from suffering and hardship, our trust in him is strengthened.

We know that part of the Christian life is bearing crosses. We embrace the suffering Savior and do not run away from our own suffering. Both are gifts of God's grace to sinners who have become saints because of Christ's suffering and through faith in what he has done for us.