

Prov. 8:1–4, 22–31

Ps. 8

Rom. 5:1–5

John 16:12–15

Hope in Hard Times

Goal for the Session

Based on Paul’s witness in Romans 5, adults will express their reliance on God for hope in times of suffering.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Romans 5:1–5

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Margaret P. Aymer

Through Jesus Christ, the Roman church has peace with God and access into the grace of God. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, it also has had the love of God poured into the hearts of its members. All of this underscores that the affliction or oppression of the Roman church is not the result of divine displeasure and should not, therefore, cause the Roman church shame. Rather, all evidence to the contrary, the church is awash in the gifts of God and, despite its affliction or oppression, is filled with divine favor and love.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Linda E. Thomas

Paul tells the believers in Rome that because they believe that Jesus is the Son of God, God brings them to a place of highest privilege and they stand there presently. So whatever their place or station in life, in whatever circumstance they find themselves, they can rest assured that God gives them special honor and freedom now. Because of this, they can boldly and merrily anticipate developing into the complete person God always intends for them and for us to be. Following Paul’s message to the Romans means that becoming all God intends for us to be begins *now*. This too is part of the real peace we have with God.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Michael Jenkins

Paul does not say that whenever the world breaks us, we will inevitably heal back stronger. It is simply not true. Some who suffer are broken for good, and they do not get well again. Paul is no magician, nor does he advocate a simpleminded optimism. What Paul does promise is that our suffering need never be wasted. Because we belong to God in Christ, because God has poured his love into our hearts, that which we suffer can produce patient endurance. This endurance can form the character of the God who gives God’s self away for us all, and this character produces hope, hope that will never disappoint because God is more faithful than we can ever imagine.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Richard L. Sheffield

Hope is not just the result of “being hopeful,” or “wishful thinking,” or how much we hurt. Hope happens because—as Paul wrote, again about suffering—“we know that all things work together for good for those who love God” (Rom. 8:28), even bad things like suffering and pain. Hope is not something we “work out” but something we take in. “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” (5:5). Our faith (endurance and character) and God’s love, freely given, are the substance of hope.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Romans 5:1–5

Focus on Your Teaching

For many adults, times of suffering can raise doubts about God’s love or presence. We may wonder why a good God allows agonizing things to happen to us or those we love. We may rationalize that the cause of our suffering resides in something we have done. The first option opens the door for bitterness toward a vindictive God. The second option leaves us immersed in guilt or shame. Today’s passage offers a third option for grappling with hard times. Be sensitive to adults who may be enduring significant suffering or brokenness. Do not minimize their experience by confusing hope with simplistic optimism.

Gracious God, help me rely on you in my preparations and leading of this session. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- board or newsprint
- markers
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2
- option 3: Resource Sheet 1

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome the participants. Introduce any visitors or newcomers.

Have people stand at one end of the room. Explain that you will be engaging in a continuum exercise in which you will make several broad statements. If adults totally agree with a statement, stand on a designated side of the room. To register total disagreement, stand on the other side of the room. To indicate some agreement or disagreement, or absolute neutrality, stand closer to one side or another or right in the middle. After you read each statement and allow time for adults to position themselves, ask for brief comments about why folks stand where they do. The statements are:

- ✿ Peanut butter is my favorite food.
- ✿ I am basically a hopeful person.
- ✿ Bad things happen to good people.
- ✿ God causes suffering.

Affirm that today’s session will explore interactions among suffering, reliance on God, and the possibility of hope.

Offer this or a similar prayer:

God, whose ways are both mysterious and wise, guide us in our time together. Amen.

EXPLORING

Ask participants what they know of or associate with the book of Romans. Briefly relate the information in the sidebar.

Paul's letter to the church at Rome is stylistically his most theologically developed epistle. The church(es) he addresses there had not been founded or as yet visited by Paul (see Acts 28:14ff for his final time there before martyrdom).

Have adults silently read Romans 5:1–5. Invite them to offer comments about the passage as a whole or questions it raises. Briefly discuss these.

Form groups of three or four. Explain that you will read the passage aloud. Ask adults to listen to the spoken word with these particular questions in mind:

- ✧ What does this passage reveal about God?
- ✧ What does this passage reveal about human existence?
- ✧ What significance might these revelations have had for Paul's original audience?

After the reading, have the groups discuss their responses to the three questions. During the discussion, draw a vertical line down the middle of a board or newsprint. Title one column *Romans 5:1–5 and God* and the other column *Romans 5:1–5 and Human Existence*.

Gather the groups together. Draw attention to the board or newsprint. Ask each group, one at a time, to call out what they saw the passage revealing about God and about human existence. Write these down.

Invite groups to focus on verses 3–5, noting the “cycle” Paul describes there (suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope). Engage adults in a critical discussion of each element in that cycle. Some questions to lead into such a discussion could include:

- ✧ What in Paul's earlier affirmations in the passage might lead suffering to produce endurance as opposed? For example, what might one expect in terms of suffering leading to despair or bitterness or hopelessness?
- ✧ What in this passage might prevent endurance from simply being understood as “survival by any means necessary?” What do you hear Paul meaning by “endurance?”
- ✧ What meaning do you hear Paul giving to “character” in this passage, and how? Keep in mind, character can be a word with mixed messages. *He is a real character* may connote ridicule more than respect.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Romans 5:1–5) and read the “So What?” excerpt. Discuss its affirmations about suffering and hope in light of both Romans 5:1–5 and the participants' experiences.

Look again at the notes on the board or newsprint about what Romans 5:1–5 reveals about God and human existence. Recall that the third question also considered what significance these revelations might have had for Paul's original audience. Have the adults now consider the significance of these revelations in their own lives by silently reflecting on these two questions:

- ✧ What significance do these assertions about God and human existence have for your life and in your experiences of suffering?
- ✧ How might they foster your reliance on God?

EASY
PREP

Your church library may have resources that shed light on these individuals. Bring those resources to class if available. Online biographies are another source to access.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Grounding Hope in Deepened Relationship with God** Reliance on God for hope in hard times depends on the vitality of our relationship with God. Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Renewing Relationship with God). Review the instructions in the opening two paragraphs, then have the adults carry out the activity. Urge adults to carry through this week on the commitments they make.
- 2. Standing on the Shoulders** The church's history is filled with examples of individuals who relied on God in stressful circumstances. Reread Romans 5:3–5. Have adults call out names of persons whose lives bear witness to Paul's linkage of suffering, endurance, character, and hope. Examples might include Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or Mother Teresa. Discuss how their lives embodied reliance on God in difficult conditions. Have each adult choose one such example. Encourage participants to deepen their knowledge of this person in the coming week, reflecting on how that life might inspire their own reliance on God.
- 3. What Hope Is—and Is Not** It is important to understand what is meant by "hope" if we seek to faithfully acknowledge how reliance on God generates it. Read the "Now What" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Romans 5:1). Discuss its assertions of what hope is and what it is not. In each case, relate those assertions to what hope does and does not bring to times of suffering. Call on adults to carry these assertions of hope into situations they confront this week that test what hope means for us.

CLOSING

Invite adults to gather in a circle. Encourage adults willing to do so to briefly identify what this session has affirmed to them about hope and reliance on God, especially in times of suffering. Respect the silence of those who may choose not to speak.

Explain the following commissioning exercise that will close the session. Beginning with you, and then proceeding around the circle, turn to the person on your right, and say: "(Name), may you rely on God, whose peace and hope are yours." Have the group practice the commissioning words several times so folks will be comfortable doing so on their own.

Carry out the commissioning until all have received its word of blessing.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet before the next session.

Focus on Romans 5:1–5

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Renewing Relationship with God

In her commentary on Romans 5:1–5, Linda E. Thomas lifts up some specific actions in which we might ground our lives in peace and hope by strengthening our relationship with God. In her words: *“Each person has to construct how she or he will build, maintain, and sustain her or his relationship with God.”*¹

Pick one or two actions from this listing she provides. Perhaps they are actions for which you have great passion. Perhaps they are actions for which you have great need. Perhaps they are both. Use the space between lines to describe what you will commit yourself to doing in the coming days.

“For some people, it may be intentionally taking some part of the day to pray (e.g., talk to God and meditate or listen to God).”

“For others, it may mean taking a walk in the city and noticing God’s active presence in the hustle and bustle of life.”

“For yet others, it may be giving service in a soup kitchen and seeing God’s face in those coming to get food.”

“For those who are partners or parents, it may mean building a culture of peace between family members where anger or frustration or apathy have permeated relationships.”

“For young adults in high school or college, it may mean noticing that peers from other cultural backgrounds are being treated differently and that their learning community could intentionally build practices of welcome, inclusion, and acceptance.”

“For those in church leadership, it may entail attempting to negotiate peace between warring parishioners over the direction of the congregation’s mission. Such courageous leaders within Christian communities may help to resolve genuine fears and distrust that has been festering between parishioners over generations.”

1. Linda E. Thomas, *“Theological Perspective,”* *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 40.