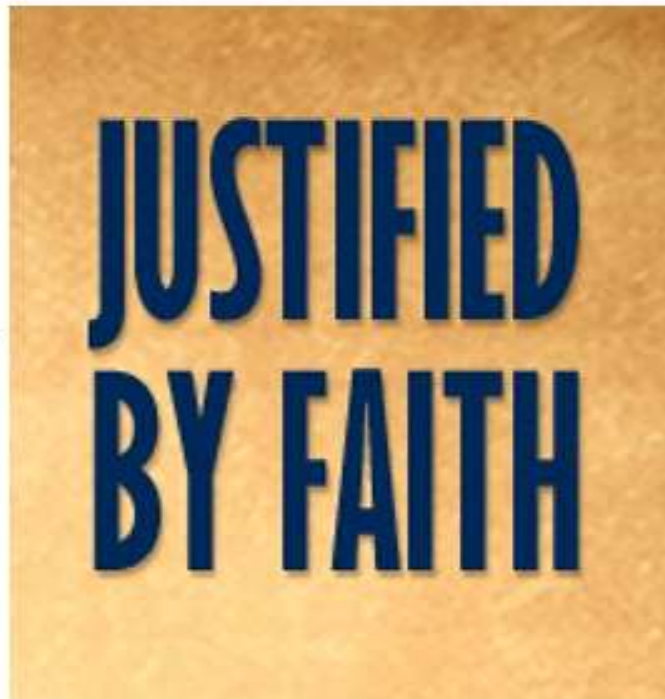


Paul's Letter to the Romans

5:1-11

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Based on a New York Times best-selling novel, the movie The Shack, takes us on a father's personal journey in the wake of a horrific family tragedy. With news of his daughter's abduction and death, Mack Phillips (played by the Aussie actor, Sam Worthington) spirals into a deep depression. Mack questions his innermost beliefs. And here he faces a crisis of faith.

In the midst of this deep crisis Mack receives a mysterious letter that urges him to go to an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness. Despite his doubts, Mack journeys to the shack and here he meets God. Important truths are discovered and Mack's life is transformed. Mack's life is changed forever.

The Shack has been showing in local cinemas here in Sydney during the month of May and while some of its theology is a little ragged, the movie makes a mark in terms of addressing that perennial question: where is God in the midst of suffering and grief?

The shocking death of Mack's daughter is, in many ways, the unforgivable sin. Moreover, such an incident casts God in a very negative light. How could such a thing ever happen? Why do such horrifying things occur? Where is God in all of this? Such tragedies seem to defy explanation.

But the amazing thing about the The Shack is that it offers us a God who really cares.

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Here in this movie God is encountered as one who loves unconditionally. Here we meet a God who has compassion. We encounter a God who wants to make things right and heal the woundedness of his people.

And the overwhelming message in this movie is simply this: *“Trust me”*. *“Trust me to do what’s right. Trust me to know what’s best.”*

Here we encounter echoes from the Old Testament book of Job and when Mack learns to trust and accept God’s bidding, his life changes. When Mack is able to let go and embrace God’s loving, his burden is lifted. Mack is able to move on.

Now, before you question this as being rather simplistic or even naïve, I wish to take you into the scriptures and to Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Romans is a profound piece of work. It warmed the heart of the great St Augustine and it impacted the reformer, Martin Luther. Moreover, Romans inspired John Wesley in his call to renew the life of the church and promote a movement that touched the lives of many.

Indeed, I believe Paul’s words in this epistle are simply mind-blowing as Paul speaks of a God who yearns to reach out and touch the lives of his troubled people with grace, mercy and love.

Romans 5 is no exception. Here Paul speaks of the way God reaches out to us in all our vulnerability and fear. Life is hard. We suffer. We are plagued with sickness, tragedy and death. We fail. We muck things up. We are anxious and tired with an inability to control our destinies in the wake of what appears to be a to be a random, somewhat uncaring, cruel universe.

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But Romans 5 offers us hope. Paul's letter turns this scenario around. Here God throws us a life-line as Paul writes: *"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."*

This lifeline is the death of Jesus as God builds bridges. This deliverance lies in the cross of Calvary as God makes peace and as God offers us a way to look beyond ourselves, our concerns, our vulnerabilities and our failures. For here we are gifted with a new way of seeing things. Here we receive a new way of experiencing life as we focus on God and on what God desires for us.

Paul summarizes this up beautifully with the words: *"since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God."*

For you see, in our pain and hurt, in our anxiety and fear, in our experience of failure and in our feeling of not being in control, God says, *"it's okay, it's alright. You are a messy, confused lot, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that I love you, I accept you and I want to make things right with you!"*

God does this by "justifying" us. Here God declares we are set free from everything that prevents us from being anything less than what God intends us to be. We are rescued. We are released. We are pardoned. We are given new opportunities and we are made whole. And God does this through the death of Jesus on the cross.

Now, you may ask, why does God need to do this? Why does Jesus die on the cross?

And the response is this: the greatest act of care, mercy and compassion is manifested when one lays down their life for another.



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The most profound display of unconditional love is demonstrated when one gives everything of themselves for the sake of others. And this is precisely what God does for us on the cross!

For you see, in the death of Jesus God's true nature is revealed. God's authentic character is made known. God's real purpose is confirmed as God gives everything of God-self in order that we may have life and have it in all its fullness.

Friends, this is the kind of God Mack Phillips meets in The Shack. And here Mack is transformed. Mack is transformed because God says Mack no longer needs to carry his burden of despair, anger and hurt.

For, all these things have been taken up by Christ and they have been crucified with him on the cross. And in the place of this despair, in the void of Mack's heart which was filled with distress, anger and hurt comes the incredible, life-sustaining, enriching unconditional love of God. And this love heals Mack of his wounds.

So, what about you? Know this - Christ died for you, too! This means you are invited to place your burdens, your hurts, your failings, your anxieties and your fears upon him.

And what we need to do here is to trust. For, to have faith is to simply "trust" - to trust in the God who truly loves you. It's not about knowing. It's not about being certain. It's simply - and wholly - about trust!

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Friends, these are amazing, life-giving words. Hold on to them, treasure them – and let them be for you the foundation of your living now and always.

Amen.

