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What have you come to believe? God reveals His glorious plan for our salvation through His Son Jesus Christ. God loves you. Jesus died for you. Life is restored for you. Come to believe in Jesus Christ.

I'VE COME TO BELIEVE • Romans 5:1–11 • Tim McConnell • June 7, 2020

We have seen what hate can do. Our stomachs turn to see how awful and perverse we can be in our relations to one another. We have seen a man, George Floyd, lose his life under the knee of a uniformed officer who was meant to serve and protect. There are things that cannot be. Now our cities are on fire. We have seen what hate can do. But what about love? Martin Luther King Jr. said in his book "Strength to Love," that "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." What about love. What can love do? What fires can love ignite? What about the love of God?

An old gospel song says, "I love to tell the story, 'Twill be my theme in glory, To tell the old, old story, of Jesus and His love." The world needs to hear the story of Jesus and His love. We are the tellers of that story. Right now hearts are open to the good news of Jesus. The answers people had to the questions are not holding up. We all have questions, and we need better answers, and they are found in Jesus. We are starting a new series called ***I've Come to Believe.*** If you are a follower of Jesus, we want to practice telling the old, old story. Tell it again and tell it new. If you are a seeker, looking into this Jesus business for yourself, well, the next five weeks are a perfect opportunity to understand what Christians believe. This is the greatest story, the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ and how He saves your soul.

Your story with Jesus is your greatest story, and it is the best tool you have to share about Jesus. Are you ready to tell your story? I spent a summer selling knives. I practiced my pitch knowing people only had so much patience. Billy Graham spent a summer out of high school as a salesman for the Fuller Brush Company. He outsold every salesman in North Carolina! The best salespeople believe in their product. Well, I'm not saying we are out to sell Jesus to anyone, but we do need to be prepared to represent the greatest story ever told. We are the story tellers. If it gets told, it's because we told it. In John 6, the things Jesus had just said made many disciples walk away, so Jesus asked His closest friends, "What about you guys? Are you out?" Peter said no, they would stay. They had nowhere else

good to go. Besides, he said, "We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:69). What have you come to believe? What is your story? We sent journals out to all of you. If you don't have one, let us know, and we'll get it to you. This journal is your tool for the next five weeks. Learn afresh to tell your story. What have you come to believe? Your story with Jesus is your greatest story.

It starts with love. The Gospel story, the story of salvation, has four movements. Very quickly, it is this: (1) God loves you. You might not believe that, but it's true. (2) Your sin separates you from God. You might not like that, but I think you know it. (3) Jesus died for your sins. You might find it humbling, but you need and you have a Savior. (4) God has a plan for your life. Believing in Jesus Christ and asking forgiveness is only the beginning of a life knowing God. The Bible calls it eternal life. Following Jesus. Finding your purpose and resting in the peace of knowing you belong to God forever. You are His; He is yours. That's the story we will walk through these next few weeks. It begins with love. God loves you. I have come to believe it.

Romans 5 defines the character of the love of God. See, love is funny. Love seems simple right up until you get into it. It's simple right up until it's not. You can love someone and never express it. Someone can love you and you never feel it. One person can try to love another, but their love languages don't match and everything they try goes wrong. You may have been hurt by someone you loved. Love is a many-splendored thing, but it's also complicated. God defines His love for us very clearly. God loves you. God loves you. There's only one point to this message this morning. If you forget everything else, please take this away: God loves you. Romans 5 shows us what that means.

Paul is talking about the benefits we gain, the benefits that have been won for us and that we receive by faith in Jesus Christ. We are justified by faith. That means, as you look at verses 1–2, that when you put your faith in Jesus Christ, what He did for you becomes your story and you have peace with God, you have access to God the Father through Jesus, have grace, you have hope and a future. All of this

was won for you by Jesus, and when you put your faith in Jesus, it becomes yours. Why? Because God loves you. He loves you. The rest of the passage defines the character of that love: (1) God's love is faithful in hard times. "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3–4). Who is able to glory in sufferings? The secular person cannot. If there is no God and life is just a meaningless series of events, suffering is just a bad turn. Many eastern religions see suffering as punishment for past deeds, their own or those of their former lives. Karma. The Muslim sees suffering as divine anger and disappointment. Who can glory in sufferings? Only those who know they have a God who loves them, a God who walks with them through sufferings, a God who feels suffering with them, a God who is both all-powerful and all-loving. A person with that God can look through suffering to what that moment of pain might produce. Perseverance. Character. Hope. Hope for eternal glory. God is with us in hard times. God's love is faithful even when we are suffering.

(2) God's love is giving. Sometimes we say we love someone, but we are really taking from them, not giving ourselves to them. Love gives itself away. God's love is defined most clearly in the giving away of His Son Jesus, and in Jesus giving away His own life on the cross to save us from our own mess. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6–8). Do you forget that God loves you? Do you go to sleep to it, no emotional power to this love? Do you doubt that God loves a woman like you, a man, a kid like you? Look at the cross. You didn't deserve it, but Jesus gave it. He gave His whole life. God loves you.

(3) God loves His enemies. Jesus taught this. Love your enemies. If you love people who love you, if you love people who are easy to love, what is that? But if you love your enemies... That's world changing. That's war ending, people uniting, nation saving, heart melting, racial healing, Kingdom of God stuff

right there. Love your enemies. God did. God does. "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Romans 5:9–10). That's the kind of love God has for you. Even when you declared yourself His enemy, He loved you through and through. That kind of love can change the world.

(4) God's love makes whole. Reconciliation. That's a big word. Not just the syllables. I'm talking about all that represents. Coming back together. Finding peace. Disintegration turning around and becoming integration. The broken pieces picked up and made whole. "Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (Romans 5:11). We can boast in Jesus Christ! He gives us a relationship with God. You know, usually when you know someone famous it's a little uncool to boast about it. Jesus doesn't mind. In fact, He wants you to boast. I know Jesus. Jesus loves me. Jesus brings me back into a full, whole, joyful relationship with God. Jesus, and the love of God, it's the most powerful force for unity the world has ever known. God's love makes us whole. God loves me. I've come to believe it.

How do you feel God's love? In your journal, I want you to write down when you first sensed God's presence and when you first felt God's love. Jonathan Edwards, the leader of a revival called the Great Awakening, used to take long walks in the woods in western Massachusetts. He soaked in the beauty of nature. Big things and little things. Mountains and flowers, spiders' webs and birds' nests, grasses and trees. He opened himself up to feel the presence of God who made it all. He allowed himself to feel it, to feel God's love pouring into him, a sense of the presence of God, a divine and supernatural light, until, he would say, he was bathed in the ecstasy of a heavenly air. Do you let yourself feel God like that? I remember feeling God's love at camp as a kid. Young Life camps. I've felt awash in God's love in large worship gatherings, conferences, like Promise Keepers, times I've been able to worship with thousands of voices around me. I feel God's love in church. In the gather-

ing of the people. Maybe you have gathered with a few others this week. Where do you feel God's love? He is pouring it out. Pouring it out. Into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit. Allow yourself to experience it. Take it in. God loves you.

God's love puts things back together. It pulls things together in order. C. S. Lewis said, "To love you as I should, I must worship God as Creator. When I have learned to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now... When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased." The people we love are not shaded or diminished when we love God. We actually love the people around us better when we love God first. His love puts things in order. You say, "I think I love money more than God. I think I love pleasure more." Oh. You should feel horrible. Go sit in a corner and feel bad. Is that how God works? No. God says, "Let me pour out more love. Let me pour out more love." "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). The Holy Spirit is inside of you, in your inner core, pouring the love of God into your inner being, more and more, until all your loves come into order. The love of God puts things in order.

God loves you. That's how the story begins. That's how your greatest story begins. When did you first know, understand? When did you first feel God's love? Your story with Jesus is your greatest story. Billy Graham said, "Today when a cynic asks me 'How does giving your life to God pay off?' or 'If I change, what will God do for me?' I can answer by telling him what He has done for me. He forgave my sins; He gave me peace of mind; He took away my fear of death. He stirred up creative powers within me that I never realized existed. But more important than what I received from God are the efforts I have been able to make for Him." That's what God did for Billy Graham. I'd say the same. That's what God can do for you. God loves you. God sent His Son Jesus to save you. God has a purpose for you. The love of God will change your life. It will bring things together. I have come to believe.

STUDY GUIDE

I'VE COME TO BELIEVE • "God Loves Me"

Romans 5:1-11

UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word

Friends, we thought COVID-19 was going to be the major affliction of 2020, but events of the past week have added another layer of suffering to our communities and nation. Not only have we been stressed by physical distancing, we have been rocked by racial injustice and violent responses to that injustice. Both of these crises call for responses from Christ's people out of love for neighbor. This is where we can truly be the church, as we act in love for the well-being and dignity of neighbors.

Now is the time to become the greatest artist you have ever been. Create ways to stay relationally and spiritually tethered to your core circle. We need each other. We are gifts to one another! Make phone calls; text photographs; set up video gatherings. Consider ways in which each of us and all of us together can contribute to reconciliation. Together, we are the hands and feet of Christ to one another and this city!

Begin your study in prayer. Read and reflect on Romans 5:1-11.

- 1) Three times Paul uses the phrase "when/while we were..." (verses 6, 8, 10) What are the three conditions he describes? How would you describe your experiences with those conditions?
- 2) When we were those things, what did Jesus do for us and what does that tell us about God's love for us?
- 3) Pastor Tim, at the beginning of his sermon describes how Jonathan Edwards, the great colonial preacher, saw God's love in everything he saw. As you look around your life—your surroundings, the people around you, your circumstances—how do you experience God's love?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

- 4) As Pastor Tim noted at the beginning of his sermon, we have seen hatred and conflict all across our nation this past week. With the stresses of dealing with COVID-19, this social rupturing has driven many to the point of hopelessness and despair. Yet in Romans 5:1-11 we read of God's great reconciling love which gives us peace with Him. We also learn that the Holy Spirit pours out His love into our hearts... overflowing love. If we have been so loved and so filled with love, what can our response be in this wrenching conflict? How might what God has done for us be a model for reconciling with enemies?

IN: Connect with Each Other

COVID-19: Spend time connecting with your core circle on how you are doing. **Racial Unrest:** Look for ways to open up a discussion about responses to racial division.