

## Peace Through Christ

### Romans 5:1-11

You and I sometimes wonder why certain people move through suffering with some measure of triumph and others do not. Last week on the Detroit NBC station there was an interview with Richard Bernstein who was hit by a bicyclist while he was running in Central Park. Richard was badly injured and spent several weeks in a New York hospital. He decided to turn his pain and suffering into something positive and helpful to others. In our scripture, Paul reveals a clue as to how Richard was able to come out of his suffering with peace and maturity. At the beginning of chapter 5, Paul moves from addressing the gift of our salvation to addressing the wonder of our growing into mature Christians.

We are saved by faith, not works; and this salvation results in our being at peace with God. Being at peace with God is not a motionless condition, but that God is engaged in our life, not only watching us but also working with us. This has two immediate effects on our lives. First, we have standing in God's care. Our lives are in God's active custody. Second, we have hope. Our hope is such a great hope that we are inspired to boast not about ourselves but about the power of God at work in us.

Paul then explains that suffering produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope. Paul is clearly talking from personal experience, but he also knows that everyone does not choose the path he took. Rather than letting suffering produce endurance, character, hope and peace, some people choose the abandonment of faith. It can be a shock to realize our faith does not protect us. There is in some of us an unexamined assumption that if we do our best to be faithful to God, God will take care of

us, meaning God will protect us. People new to the faith or people who have not been tested by some deep lingering struggle may be prone to question their faith when the going gets tough. As I read this I remembered my friend Carolyn Huff who told me when I joined the church that testing would follow, but that I must hold on.

The impetus to abandon faith can also be a result of the discovery that it is precisely our effort to live a faithful life that gets us into trouble. Suffering can come to us as we engage in witnessing or in the struggle for justice. Since suffering will come we need to remember that suffering can create a deep challenge to the very possibility of our faith. But this does not mean that such an experience is wrong, bad, or somehow disqualifies us from God's love and care. We are not the first to question faith in times of trial and difficulty. In fact I heard a former Pentecostal preacher in an interview talk about his loss of faith.

Some other people become angry during times of suffering. Even people who retain their faith in the midst of struggle can be angry about it. We may be angry that distress of varying degrees and types happens. We may be angry that some people we believe we can count on will not be available to us. We may be angry at the sheer effort of the struggle. We may certainly be angry at God. But anger can be one stage along the way as we progress from suffering to hope in response to challenging experiences. Years ago, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross discerned a similar sequence to Paul's through which many people who were dying might move: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

So anger is a natural emotion when things are out of our control. I can't tell you that all will be well tomorrow or that if you hurry through the steps of loss and suffering you will become a mature Christian with hope and

peace immediately, but we do know this can be a messy, unpredictable, difficult, and daunting experience as we suffer. We know the journey from suffering to hope is not straight line and that suffering, endurance, and character are not like bus stops that always come in the same order or follow automatically. Each stage is a challenge in which we can remember that God has promised God's presence, even in God's apparent absence.

Part of verse 5 helps us dwell in each stage of this journey with grace: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." This generosity of God is worth holding onto and affirming. God's love is "poured into our hearts." We need to have it poured. We need to drink it in, freely, eagerly, over and over again in order for our lives to move, with God's help, toward the hope that does not disappoint. It is God's power at work in us that makes the progression to hope and peace possible. The passage reminds us that the Christian life is not a do-it-yourself project but a do-it-together project.

This scripture sets us on the pilgrimage of hope and peace, where God feeds us and leads us through it. Hope and peace also comes because before us is the cross, a sign both of the suffering of Christ and of the triumph over death that God made possible for him and for us. It is the cross before us, like the north star, that calls us forward through this journey from suffering into endurance and character on our way to hope and peace. **Laird J.**

**Stuart**

Paul's knowledge of salvation by faith is about relationships; probably from his own experience. Paul developed this understanding that the law is unable to bring us into a joyful, empowering, free, and full relationship with God. No matter how sincerely we try, we always fall short of fulfilling the

requirements of the law. There are always things we have done we should not have done and things we have not done we should have done.

In fact, the very effort to seek perfection leaves us isolated, focused on self, and often torn with feelings of guilt. So we need another way, a way that does not depend on our efforts. Through Christ, God reveals the nature of the divine love—a self-giving love that suffered death on the cross for us, even though we do not deserve this love. Through faith we understand perfection is not necessary for us to be loved by God. We do not need to justify ourselves. We are loved, and that is all the justification we need. We are in relationship with God, not because of our efforts, but because of God's loving action. Through faith we enter into that relationship and discover peace, hope, and perseverance, even in suffering.

Paul's focus is on our relationship with God, but it is important for us to understand that all interpersonal relationships are created and sustained through grace. Just as we are unable to earn God's love, so we cannot earn another's love. Who we are attracted to is very complicated, but the emotional and motivational commitment of love—the willingness to set aside our own needs to respond to the needs of the other—is always a gift. While hurtful actions such as the betrayal of trust, physical violence, emotional neglect, or isolation—can destroy a relationship, what creates the relationship is acceptance of the other with his or her character defects as well as with those aspects of their personality that are attractive and represent strengths.

A spirit of judgment or requirement is destructive to the life-giving relationship of love. Paul affirms this nature of human social relationships in his teaching that the church is the body of Christ with diversity of members and gifts, together with his affirmation that we must bear one another's

burdens. All love is a free gift—unearned, undeserved. Therefore to receive love, the beloved can only accept it gratefully.

If we are loved unconditionally, what is the motivation for doing what is right? If the good is our relationship with God and if works are unnecessary for establishing that relationship, then what is the motivation and importance for right action? Paul addresses this concern later in Romans and elsewhere in his writings. To oversimplify and briefly summarize his teaching, he affirms the importance of works as an outcome of the loving relationship, rather than as a means for that relationship.

We must understand God's relationship as gift. Each stage of life from adolescence to retirement presents us with questions regarding purpose and meaning for our life. Rather than seeking to affirm personal worth through works—making money, finding security, being honored and admired, or accomplishing important goals—which usually results in isolation, failure, shame, and even despair; we discover our identity based on a loving God—that whatever happens, we are beloved by the very Heart of the universe, knowing that nothing can separate us from God, and that nothing is more valuable than being a child of God—then we do not judge personal worth by comparing ourselves with others. We realize that failure and shame are symptoms of misplaced values—idols to be set aside. Motivation becomes directed toward the real needs of others and society instead of our quest to establish our personal worth.

When we understand our relationship with God personal ego is less important, we become free to take risks, to be bold, to dream of God's healed creation and work toward it. We recognize that our fundamental identity rests in the value of our humanity; this also means recognizing the worth of every other human being as well. Openness to others becomes easier,

empathy toward others becomes a natural response, and willingness to know and be known binds us together in the love of God. Having discovered through faith the love that God has for each of us, we have peace and we have hope. We are able to accept ourselves as we are because we experience being accepted. We have hope in the certainty that God's love is unfailing. Even though in the present we may face persecution and hardship, knowing God's love is present, we rejoice in that relationship and look forward to enjoying being in God's presence even beyond death. **Ward B. Ewing**

What of Christ's peace, which is unlike any of the world's promises? While the world offers peace as an escape from disputes or disorders, Christ's peace assures a stability and serenity, not apart from, but in the midst of "the thousand natural shocks of life" In spite of all the pain that life visits upon us, the Spirit transforms our suffering from endurance into character, and from character into certain hope (vv. 3-5). Remember the incredible power of God's love that, in the face of all our foibles, trumps God's own wrath with a reconciling compassion embodied in the crucified and risen Christ (vv. 6-11).**Don Wardlaw**

By the way, remember I mentioned Richard Bernstein? He is now a lawyer in Detroit working at his family law firm and he is spending his energy to make New York and other places enforce the Americans with Disabilities Act so that persons with disabilities have equal access to public spaces and activities. Did I tell you that Richard is blind? I believe he has hope, peace and life through Christ.

Grace, not works, is what brings us life. One of the great insights contained in this understanding is the recognition that external conditions are of secondary importance. We may experience being loved and loving in the hospital, in unemployment, with a disability, and even in emotional pain.

This should not reduce the desire to end suffering in this world, especially suffering caused by human action, but it does mean even in hardship we can know the life of grace and peace. That is good news! **Ward B. Ewing**

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