

## *From Faith to Peace*

First Sunday of Advent

December 1, 2002

Background Study

*Scripture Passage – Romans 5:1-5 (NRSV)*

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. <sup>3</sup>And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>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.

*High Anxiety*

We live in anxious times and in an anxious world. Terrorists, the prospect of war, crashing stock markets, countless lay-offs – all these threaten our security and our hope. Yet, today is the First Sunday of Advent, a time when we begin to prepare for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a time when our hearts and minds ought to be seeking peace and good will. Today's text is about our hope in Christ, even in the midst of suffering. But what is this hope really about and how can we obtain it and how confident can we really be?

The overall theme of Paul's letter to the Romans is pretty easy to grasp (Romans 1:16-18). First, God's gospel, the Good News, is salvation for everyone who has faith. Second, the gospel reveals for us God's faithfulness to his promises. Today's scripture passage begins the second section of Paul's letter. In the opening section of his letter, Paul shows his readers how God is the great covenant-maker and covenant-keeper. How beginning with Abraham nearly 2000 years before Jesus, God had chosen and formed a people through whom God would restore all of creation. He had saved them from slavery in Egypt and had made a covenant with them, in which he would be their God and they would be his people. Under this covenant, the responsibilities of the people of God can be summed up as loving God and neighbor. Tragically, much of the Old Testament is the story of God's relentless pursuit of his people, despite their unwillingness to listen to God or to do what he asked.

Paul explains to the Christians in Rome that despite the seeming inability of God's people to live under the covenant, God's own faithfulness to the promises he had made was demonstrated by the willingness of Jesus to do for God's people what they had been unwilling or unable to do for themselves, even to the point of being nailed to a Roman cross.

### The Letter to the Romans

Romans, written in 55-56AD, is a letter from the apostle Paul to the house churches in Rome. All Jews, including those Jews who had become Christians, had been expelled from Rome about five years before. Jewish Christians were now returning to Rome, only to find out that the Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians were running the show! In this letter, Paul urges harmony and unity, reminding those Christians who had been Gentiles that the Jews were the root of the Christian tree and reminding the Jews who were now Christians that God's salvation is for all people. There is one people of God and one faith.

You see, it is God's faithfulness to his promises that is the ground of our hope and the basis for true security. What God begins, he completes (Philippians 1:6). Paul's point is that if God loved us enough to allow his own son to die on a cross, then surely God will complete what was begun long before. So, in verse 1 of today's scripture, Paul writes that we, who have been reconciled to God through our faith in Jesus Christ, "have peace with God" now, and "boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God." When Paul says "boast," he doesn't mean some sort of self-promotion. He simply means that our own faith in Jesus Christ and God's faithfulness to his promises give us sure ground for confidence that we are forever reconciled and at peace with God.

### *Peace, Patience, and Hope*

Many ethicists today see all human ethics as being about the minimizing of suffering. Thus, it seems odd to us that Paul would talk about "boasting" in suffering. In the NIV, the translators even use the word "rejoice." How could we possibly rejoice in suffering?! Yet, Paul sees that suffering produces endurance (perseverance or patience) and endurance produces character and character produces hope – and that our hope will not disappoint us! (v. 3-4) Why can we be so sure that our hope is not in vain? Because God keeps the promises he makes and he has promised a day when "he will wipe every tear . . . death will be no more . . . mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (Revelation 21:4). This is the divine logic of the Bible. This is why we persevere, in hope and peace, through all the troubles and misery that can plague our lives. We do this because the Holy Spirit has poured into our hearts the love of God (verse 5).

In reflecting on Paul's comments on suffering, N.T. Wright<sup>1</sup> notes that when suffering, rather than separation from God, is seen by our culture as the worst of evils, we should not be surprised that we live in

**"Justification"**

*Justification* is one of those Christian vocabulary words we find in the Bible, but aren't really sure what it means. To be *justified* means to be part of the covenant people of God, and, therefore, declared righteous (in the right!) or vindicated in the metaphorical law courts of God. The justified are those who are reconciled with God. After all, that is the whole point of the covenant.

So . . . How are we justified? How do we enter the covenant people of God? We are justified by our faith in Jesus Christ (v. 1 in today's passage); nothing more, nothing less. The people of God are those who place their full trust and faith in Jesus Christ and are thereby vindicated by God and reconciled to him.

a society so often without hope, so shriven with anxieties and worries. He writes, "Those who believe in Jesus the Messiah are called to model communities, families, and personal lives in which the sequence of faith, peace, suffering, patience, character and hope<sup>2</sup> is lived out, sustained by the Holy Spirit's work of enabling us to know God's love and to love God in return."

Suffering will pass . . . even the grave is not the end of the story . . . for "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). This glorious and thrilling statement of our assurance in God's love closes the section of Paul's letter to the Romans

begun with today's scripture. The peace and hope, even during suffering, enjoyed by God's justified people is the love of God embodied in the death of Jesus Christ and the life-giving leading of God's Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From N.T. Wright, *Commentary on The Letter to the Romans* from the *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1992, Abingdon Press

<sup>2</sup> Note that the sequence here is taken directly from the sequence in today's passage.

<sup>3</sup> Also from Wright's commentary

## Daily Bible Readings

This week's readings are all taken from Paul's letter to the Romans. Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1 Romans 2:1-16 We are all accountable to God for the way we live our lives.</b></p>	<p><b>Day 2 Romans 3:21-31 God's faithfulness is revealed by Jesus' faithful obedience. There is one people and one faith.</b></p>
<p><b>Day 3 Romans 8:1-11 God gives life through the Son and the Spirit</b></p>	<p><b>Day 4 Romans 12:1-13 Worshipping in body and mind; unity, love, and the community</b></p>
<p><b>Day 5 Romans 15:1-13 All, Jew and Gentile, are welcome in the people of God.</b></p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How booked up is your calendar this Christmas season? Given our incredible busyness at Christmas time, how do we really go about finding peace in the Christmas season? What will you do in your home this year to seek the Christmas spirit of peace and good will?
  
2. In his letter to the Romans, Paul wants his readers to understand that God is the great maker and keeper of covenants. What does the word “covenant” mean to you? What sort of covenant have you made with God? What are your responsibilities under your covenant with God? What are God’s responsibilities? Which of God’s promises are most meaningful and important to you? Which are most real? Which promises make the most difference in how you live your life?
  
3. It can be pretty easy to be a Christian when things are going well in our lives. But anxiety and suffering and tragedy can make us question everything about our faith. The mystery in the story of Job is whether or not he will surrender his faith in God after suffering countless, and inexplicable, personal tragedies. How might we help bring comfort and peace to a suffering friend? How can we find such peace for ourselves?