

Fifth Sunday in Lent – Epistle

SUFFERING THROUGH

Hebrews 5:5-10

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

5Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

*“You are my Son, today I have begotten you”;
6as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”*

7In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; 9and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, 10having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

DIAGNOSIS: WANTING OUT OF SUFFERING

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – No Pain

We live in a culture that has little tolerance for pain. We believe that suffering is intrinsically bad, something to be avoid at all costs. Pills, drugs, self-medicating with alcohol promise us freedom from depression and unwanted pain. With “loud cries and tears” we plead to be saved from the pain of dying

(and living, too), accepting death just to avoid the suffering. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer has reminded us, when speaking of suicide, ending the pain doesn't necessarily end it. And so, the pain remains.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – No Sweat

Struggling through is not considered an option. Even the prayers many people offer most often are pleas for escape rather than for endurance. We dismiss the value of struggling. We avoid the agony of faithful prayer, we refuse to ask God for what we need; instead, we bargain with God to get out of trouble. Our need for easy solutions reveals our inability to trust God through whatever comes. And, the pain deepens.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – No Out

The priesthood of Dr. Death offers us the prospect of ending the pain, at the same time it deprives us of an opportunity to find our way to God through the pain. Having already ruled out that God can be found in the midst of our pain, we have left ourselves with no way out. By imagining that we can actually escape suffering, we discover to our everlasting regret that we cannot escape God. In the end, no ordinary priests can save us from God.

PROGNOSIS: WILLING TO GO THROUGH SUFFERING

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Reverent Submission

Oh, but there is One extraordinary priest who can! “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (v. 7). All of our “loud cries and tears” were offered up in his prayer, and in him they become faithful prayers. Jesus does what we are unable to do. Our Lord, who deserved no pain, cries out, suffering what we deserve, and then because he was faithful “in

what he suffered" (v. 8), offers us a way through; it's something we do not deserve. Jesus does this by his own willing when he cried out, "My Father, if this (cup of suffering) cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done" (Matt. 26:42). He goes to the cross, and in that "reverent submission" (v. 7) our Lord perfects "our eternal salvation" (v. 9). Only a priest of the order of Melchizedek could save us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Learning Obedience

No earthly intermediary, no human ritual or sacrifice, no "grin-and-bear-it" suffering on our part could get us through. God would have to be that Priest, represented by "the order of Melchizedek" (v. 6, 10), without lineage or family, without beginning or end (Heb. 7; Ps. 110:4), yes, Jesus, "appointed" (v. 5) by the Father, who is the embodiment of the eternal covenant. Incredibly, Abraham believed the promise and he made it through. Our trusting in Jesus' own suffering through, our "obeying" (v. 9) him, becomes our getting through. Faith is sweating through, because faith clings to the One who has already made it through. That is how we learn obedience.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Valuing Suffering

Obedient to the one who has already gotten through and has become "the source of (our) eternal salvation" (v. 4), we discover that our living and even our suffering in the here-and-now takes on a new quality. For one thing, whenever we suffer, whether we bring suffering upon ourselves, whether it is inflicted upon us by others, or whether God sends it, suffering for God's daughters and sons is no longer something meaningless or monstrous. Since our Lord Jesus Christ has endured suffering of every kind, our suffering now unites us with him; our suffering-through is a witness to his victory. This is not masochism; it is reverent submission. The other thing is that pain unites us with the neighbor and with one another. Since

suffering is no longer to be avoided for its own sake, it is endured with and for others as a sign of our compassion, as a sign of bearing “one another’s burdens” for the purpose of helping others “carry their own load” (Gal, 6:2, 5). In that way our suffering now is something to be valued.