

Third Sunday in Lent, Epistle, Year A

STRONG IN CHRIST

Romans 5:1-11

Third Sunday in Lent

Analysis by Lori Cornell

1Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5and 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.

6For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. 9Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. 10For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. 11But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

DIAGNOSIS: Strong Is Weak

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Choose Weakness?

The world the Apostle Paul paints for us is a topsy-turvy,

unpredictable world. If you thought physical strength, political power, and achievement were where it's at, Paul says, then you've missed the point. In Christ everything is changed. But who in the world buys that upside-down idea? Everyone knows there's a lot to be said for being able to defend yourself, rise above your enemies, and gain notoriety. Why would anyone choose weakness over such strength?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): No Way

Why choose weakness over strength? Well, because in an odd and mysterious way, Paul says, Jesus shows us that real strength doesn't come in having the upper hand, or making a name for ourselves, or getting to the top. Instead, strength is experienced in being spiritually resilient (hopeful) in the face of defeat, humiliation, and suffering. But, again, wouldn't it be better to just avoid such weakness? To this question the Apostle gives us a definitive No. If we love being loved by the one who gave away his very life for us, and if we want to follow that same Christ, then we are bound to experience suffering. This raises an ugly specter: perhaps being loved by such a God, and following God is more costly than we are willing to afford.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): No Way = No God

But avoiding the suffering of faith is intricately entwined with faith itself. And without faith we have no God of mercy to rely on. That just sounds like hell: godlessly trusting in our own strength, success, and prowess, coming up short or becoming ever-more dependent on making good things happen for ourselves. The demand, the failure, the loneliness, the god-forsakenness of it all. Now that is wrath.

PROGNOSIS: Weak Is Strong

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Way of Suffering

Contrast that lonely life with the life of Christ, who stretched out his arms to the world, committed his spirit into the Father's care, and forgave and prayed for those who would deride and kill him. Oh, it's true, he cried out in his very real experience of abandonment, but he faced that so that we wouldn't have to anymore. No more God-forsakenness because of Christ's forsakenness. In the very place where he appeared weakest, he demonstrated the strength of God's love and mercy for us. And as a byproduct of his suffering, and endurance, he embodies for us the character of God and our hope in God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Following Christ's Way

So should we seek out suffering as Christ's followers—in order to be people of hope? Not at all. Instead, as people who trust in Christ, we know that we hardly have to go looking for suffering in this life; instead it will find us. But Christ's own suffering and hope-filled resurrection assures us that, when suffering comes, Christ has already been there before us and makes a way through that suffering for us. So, as we endure this world's suffering, we build character, and emboldened by Christ's promises, we live in hope.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Showing Others the Way

And who says character and hope don't count? Our Christ-like character surely benefits our neighbor; and so does our hope. When we no longer feel the need to put our trust in our own human strength and effort, we lean on Jesus for mercy and love. As people of faith, we become people of character and hope, carrying Christ's love and mercy to others.