

Look At Me!

Sermon for Reminiszere

Romans 5:1-11

¹Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." ⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. ¹¹More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

"Look at me! Look at me!" Six-year-old Rita had just swum an entire lap on her own for the first time. With eyes sparkling, she jumped out of the water and wanted to know again, "Mommy, did you see that? I did it! Did you see me?" At that moment, Rita didn't need ice cream, toys, or a new bike. She only needed one thing: for someone to look at her, to acknowledge her, and to say, "Yes, I saw you! You're wonderful." It's not just children who have this need. We all carry it within us. We want to be loved. We want to be recognized. We want to hear, "Well done! You're great!" When this recognition is lacking, we humans can become unbearable. One could say that the entire history of humanity is marked by this cry, "Look at me—I'm worth it!" Those who don't get this recognition become hypocritical and sometimes even cruel. People will do anything to get attention: justify themselves, look for a scapegoat, or indulge in narcissistic self-praise.

In the 5th chapter of Romans, this cry for recognition suddenly falls silent. In the preceding chapters, Paul had clearly exposed the futility of human self-justification. He showed that all people, without exception, stand before God without merit and without glory. No one is saved by their own efforts. Only grace can save. In this chapter, peace enters in. Paul's letter to the Romans reminds me of Bach's Cantata No. 21 on Psalm 94:19: "I had much grief." The first half of the cantata is marked by pain, lamentation, and inner turmoil. Then comes a turning point, a break. It is as if peace has suddenly returned and the choir sings, "Be at peace again, my soul." That is precisely the message of the 5th chapter. Paul wants to encourage us: since we are now justified through Jesus Christ, we may dwell in the peace of God.

In a world where people increasingly feel unloved, unappreciated, and despised, the cries are getting louder: "Look at me!" Whoever shouts the loudest (or has the strongest

weapons) seems to win. The result is a terrible chaos that sounds like people incessantly banging on tin cans and scratching their fingernails across a chalkboard.

God wants peace—not just the absence of war, but a peace that reaches deeper than any human longing. He wants us to find this peace in Him again and again. During Lent, we want to reflect on this peace: peace with God, which stands above all the noise, indestructible and everlasting. In the end, only Jesus on the cross at Golgotha will matter. That is what this season is all about. Jesus is our peace.

Paul emphasizes in Romans 5 that “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This sentence realigns our focus. Most of the time, we are looking in the wrong direction. We start from ourselves, from our own lives, and what we see there is not very encouraging: mistakes, failures, and sin. These things are easy to hide from other people, but not from God. He sees in our hearts and knows exactly what we think in secret. He knows that our actions often do not match our words. He knows that we struggle daily with evil thoughts and feelings, and sometimes we cannot forgive our neighbors. One person tries to fight against it and does a few good things. He may behave a little better than some others and hopes that his good deeds will outweigh his evil ones. Another person gives up and sees no hope. Both are missing the same thing: Jesus.

“No,” says Paul, “this is not the way.” If God is gracious towards us, it is for one reason only: He sees Jesus Christ in us, because we are baptized into His name.

When Israel fled Egypt, every family had to smear the blood of a lamb on their doorposts. When the angel of death saw this blood, he moved on. He did not ask who lived in that house or what good deeds its inhabitants had done. He only looked for the blood on the door. In the same way today, God asks only one question: where is Jesus? That is the crucial question, and Paul goes even further. God not only declares us righteous because of Jesus—He *makes* us righteous *through* Jesus. All the righteousness that is with Christ in heaven comes upon us and dwells in us. There is no greater peace than this.

Here we stand, amid the loud clamor of this world, and we learn that through Jesus we are righteous. A part of eternity is with us here on earth, and a part of us is already with the Father in heaven. Yet we remain here in our bodies, in our families, in our cities and countries where there is still strife. Sometimes this strife penetrates deep into us, especially when bad things happen to us. Even Christians experience suffering, illness, and death. These things affect us just as much as they affect anyone else. After the death of her child, one woman said, “It was as if everything had turned black overnight. I couldn’t enjoy the beautiful weather, music, or good food. When I saw cheerful people laughing and happy families, I felt shut out. My life was literally joyless.” Such sadness can block our view of heaven so that we can no longer perceive God and His promises. This is exactly what Paul is speaking against. He does not say that Christians are spared suffering, nor does he say that Christians do not struggle with doubt and lack of faith. Instead, he states that the peace of God works amid suffering. He comes to the astonishing conclusion that we can even boast in such times as this.

Boasting—like little Rita. Only, we do not boast in ourselves, but in Christ who dwells in us. Amid all of this, God is at work and gives us a special spiritual gift: hope.

“...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame” (Romans 5:3-5)

How can anyone say that suffering is good because it brings hope? That sounds heartless. However, here Paul is not talking about just any hope. He is talking about a hope that has a firm foundation in heaven. Where the Holy Spirit is poured out in us, this foundation is unshakeable. You cannot and must not simply say to such a person, “Just be happy!” What the Holy Spirit does in each individual is different and incomparable. One thing I know: the Holy Spirit is exactly in the center of your life, here and now. He puts a pause, a silence, in the midst of suffering. This silence connects us to heaven. The Holy Spirit prays silently with us when we go through difficult times. The bad times don’t just go away, and yet He brings peace into our lives. And so, in the midst of affliction, eternal hope arises.

It is as if the Holy Spirit takes the terrible noise and transforms it into new music. He opens our eyes to Jesus, who is standing right next to us. Suddenly, out of the same life, out of the same suffering that previously overwhelmed us, a beautiful symphony emerges. The Holy Spirit sets the rhythm. He writes and conducts the music—and from the very same instruments, the very same people who could only complain before, something wonderful flows forth.

Paul gives us clear proof that all of this is true: “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) Paul makes this unmistakably clear. There is nothing we need to do to make Jesus and the Holy Spirit come to us. God always acts first. He makes us what we are meant to be. Then (and only then) does peace come.

Several decades ago in South Africa, there was a violent confrontation between two rival groups. Both sides faced each other armed. It was loud and tense. Everything pointed to a terrible bloodbath. Some of those involved even came from the same church. Then the pastor of this church drove up in his car and parked—calmly—right between the opposing groups. He opened his trunk, took out his communion kit, and set up the elements on the hood of his car. He then climbed onto the roof of his car and called out to the crowd, “What is better: to shed your own blood, or to receive the true body and blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins?” On that day, there was peace. No blood was shed.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7)

Amen.