

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
October 15 & 16, 2011
John Crosby
Enduring Hope
Romans 5:3-5**

I'd ask you to take out your Bibles if you brought them with you, or you could reach in the pew in front of you, and there should be a big, black Bible there. We would love to have everybody grab one. If you want to share with somebody, that's fine. Turn to Paul's Letter to the Romans toward the end, Romans, chapter 5:1-5. If you were in the same class that I was, you might look on page 1,678. The apostle Paul is talking about faith and hope and love.

This weekend we had about 80 kids receive their Bibles, but they will not believe it if they don't see us living our lives out of the same Book. That means we need to read this Book and teach them not only what we *hear* but how to do it *together*. Paul speaks to the church in Rome, not to one person but to the whole church in Rome, so I'd like us to do this together. We are going to read the first five verses. I deliberately had you open your Bible, and I want you to keep it open, please, but we are going to read this off the screen so that we can go back and forth. I'll start and you respond with the next verse, and so forth. We'll do the first five verses. The Apostle Paul says,

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

(All:) ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

(All:) ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.

⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

(All:) ⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Now I said our passage was verses 1 through 5, and that was verse 6. I did it that way deliberately because I was at a friend's church, an African-American church, and as so often happens, they read together. When they finished reading, one of the women went on reading before she realized nobody else was reading. Rather than make her feel uncomfortable, Al looked out and said, "Oh, that's okay. It tastes so good, you just want one more bite, don't you?" That is the way this is supposed to be. There is one more bite. That bite, verse 6, is a bite

for another day, but if it is not already underlined in your Bible, please underline it now, Romans 5, verse 6, because I knew a theologian who said, if you just have one verse in the Bible to understand the story of God, Romans 5:6 is it.

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

That is the good news, all of it summed up in that one verse so it is an important verse. But now we want to look at the first five verses that the apostle Paul wrote because they are about hope, especially hope in suffering. Somehow followers of Jesus are called to be holders of hope and sharers of hope, and we want to do that together. But before you do that, Paul said, "There are a lot of false pictures of hope," so we have to sort out what hope really is.

Hope can too often be promised by charlatans. They raise your hope, saying, "If you just buy this..." "If you just go here..." "If you just believe that..." "If you just have faith..." And the charlatan abuses your hope. In the same way, we are, especially Americans, optimistic people. We are the-sun-will-come-out-tomorrow, we are that group, but we should not confuse hope with optimism. Hope needs to be there whether the sun comes out tomorrow or not. It needs to strengthen itself in hard times.

I have a spiritual mentor. I see him 2-3-4 times a year now. His name is Leighton Ford, and he is in his eighties now. He was asked to write an article on hope. I love the definition of hope he gave so much, I am trying to memorize it. After 80 years, Leighton says,

What is hope? Hope is a strong and confident trust, given by the Holy Spirit and nurtured in life, that God who has promised good to us and all creation, makes good on His promises through Jesus' coming and coming again.

I don't know if I got it all right, but I'm getting closer. Let's go through that one bit at a time and see if we can remember what hope is like from somebody who has lived a long life. *Hope is a strong and confident trust.* In others words, it is not an emotion. Hope is not a feeling. It is an act of the will. It is a choice that we make to trust. Hope is a strong and confident trust, *given by the Spirit, not something we create ourselves, not something we go and get. It is a gift from God and nurtured in life.* In other words, when we receive hope, we can either help it grow or we can help it die. Hope is a strong and confident trust *that God who has promised good to us and all creation, makes good on His promises.* What are the promises of God? We have to know what they are before we know whether He is making good on them or not. He says, the promises of God *through Jesus' coming and His coming again.*

Paul connects hope to the future, to hard times, especially in difficult times, the idea that suffering should not be wasted. He says in this passage, "We also find glory in our sufferings." That means we find glory, we find the presence of God, even in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces endurance. We learn to hang on. And endurance produces character, and our changed lives, our new character, brings us hope. The last thing I would like you to underline is that next verse, "And hope does not disappoint us..." or in your translation, put us to shame,

⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Would you underline that? “Hope does not put us to shame....” so that the next person who reads Romans 5 will see that you know something about hope, that it is not an emotion. It is a trust, but it is there for the hard times, and it does not put us to shame. Hope is a gift from God that connects our faith in God to an uncertain future. Hope is a bridge to the future, especially in hard times. The only way we get faithfully to the future is by hope, and sometimes the bridge is swaying in the storm, so hope isn’t something you believe so much as something you experience in the storm. Hope is a bridge to the future but it works only if it is not put up in the wrong place. If hope is a bridge to the future and you end up in the wrong spot, it was a false hope.

Several years ago a friend of mine talked about a bridge in Honduras, Choluteca Bridge. It is in a part of the country that is ravaged by storms. Let me show you what the bridge used to look like (*slide shown*). See it there? One of the many times the bridge washed out or was destroyed because the incompetent and corrupt government could not protect the people and the bridge from the storms, so the Japanese government finally gave them a new bridge. Built this beautiful bridge that was strong enough to withstand any storm and people crossed it over and over, but then came Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Devastation. Huge loss of life. The bridge stood in its place, but there was just one problem. The bridge stood, but the river moved (*slide shown*).

Our hope must be rooted in the right place or we end up in the river. It is not American optimism. It is not just try a little harder. It’s not even hang on. Our hope must be placed in the idea that the God who makes promises to you, makes good on His promises through Jesus’ coming and through Jesus’ coming again. The only hope there that it will last is the reality of God coming for you, God coming for all of us. We talk about the sacrificial love of Jesus as a means to show that God shows up and He comes for you. The experience of the Body of Christ, the church in this world, is tinged with hope. It points to the world to come. The apostle Paul says, “Do not kid yourself. If Christ has not risen from the dead, you are fools, and your hope is in vain.” You have placed your hope in the wrong spot, and you will fall into the river. That is why at the end of the day, it is imperative to know in what your hope lies. I’m with the writer of the old hymn,

My hope is built on nothing less,
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' Name.

Hope is a gift of God. Don’t accept any substitutes, any promises. It is a gift of God. Then Leighton said that it is not just a gift of God, it is something that is nurtured in life or something that you receive but then dies because you don’t know how to deal with it. We are going to talk about this for six weeks, so I don’t want to take too long on it this time. I just wanted to say **two things about hope. The first is that the way that we receive the gift of hope from God is to mine for it and bring it to the surface of God’s Word.** The reason we gave these Bibles to the second graders is because we believe they are filled with hope, but they do absolutely nothing if they stay closed. Your children will not receive hope if they don’t see you mining the Word for hope. God’s Word speaks to us of hope, and it is mined in the good times so that it is there in the hard times.

I have a pastor friend who has become a grandfather. The good news is that he is a grandfather, but the bad news is that his son is not in the picture so he is helping to raise this

child, his grandson, without his son. I said, "How is it going?" He goes, "I had no idea how much sleep I would lose again." He said, "I hold him, and I put him to bed, but as soon as I get to sleep, I hear the wailing start up again, and I go into the room." He said, "But do you know what I hold onto? For me it is Psalm 33:18. You know it, right?" I'm a pastor, so I have to fake it. I mean, I have to say, "33:18, what does your translation say?" When somebody asks if you know a verse, you say, "What does it say in your translation?" He said, "Well, the baby is squealing in the middle of the night, and I look down, and I pick him up and say to him Psalm 33:18.

¹⁸ 'But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love.'

And I say to the baby again 'on those whose hope is in His unfailing love.' And if he is still screaming, I say 'on His unfailing love,' and if that doesn't work, and He is still awake, I say 'the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear Him, on those whose hope is in His unfailing love.' And I say it again and again and again until one of us falls asleep." He has mined for God's Word. I would urge you to do the same, not just to read a passage in it but take tiny bits, not big chunks, tiny bits of it and let it be God's Word of hope to you.

I stink at this. My wife is laughing now because when we were growing up with the girls, we would have little contests around the dinner table. We would have a card that would have the verse you were supposed to read, and it would be like Katy would go, "Uh, for the wages of sin is death," and Maggie would go, "But the free gift of God is," and they would turn to me, and I would go, "Uh, Jesus?" It is hard for me to memorize. They would do it easily, and it would sink in. Laura would help them mine the depths. I don't have as much as I should, but I have a couple of quotes. Sometimes when I go to the hospital or I visit a friend who is dying, I put my hand in theirs and say that I don't know much but I have become absolutely convinced of this, absolutely convinced, that nothing in all creation,

³⁸ ... nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

³⁹ Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is Romans 8:38-39. I have become absolutely convinced that nothing will separate us from the love of God, and I don't need to remember it on Sunday morning when the sun is shining. I need to remember it in the middle of the storm. So mine the Bible for hope in times of need, and **the second, I guess I would say is that hope has power because it is God's gift of love poured into our hearts.** It says that hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. God poured His love into our hearts to give us hope, but God's hope, God's love, is a lot like manna.

Remember manna from the Old Testament? It was the miraculous bread that God used to feed the Israelites out in the desert. Every day they would wake up and there would be manna all over. They would pick it up and eat it. Manna literally means *what is this stuff?* They would pick it up and eat it, and each day they would have just enough for that day. God said, "Don't save this stuff. I'll give you more tomorrow," but sometimes people would say, "Well, what if God doesn't show up?" And they would take extra manna and put it in their bag and put the bag in the tent, but they would wake up to find the bag in their tent filled with maggots because saved manna rots.

I have got to tell you, I feel like God's love is the same way. I feel like hope is the same way. If you bring it in, and bring it in, and bring it in, and don't let it get out, it goes bad. It turns into laws. It turns into self-righteousness, into arrogant people, who know too much and do too little. Hope is either shared or it goes bad. So I just want to leave you with one or two thoughts about **how you share hope**, very practical stuff. Here we share it in Al-Anon, in AA, and in other groups dealing with pornography and pain and divorce. It is important that we gather together. So **the first thing hope does is, it just shows up**. You can't share hope if you don't show up. The first thing is, if you see someone who needs hope, show up and then, shut up. The problem is that Americans want to show up and give advice. They want to show up and solve the problem, but instead we need to show up and let God speak through our presence and not through our advice.

Then, the second way I think you can bring hope to people when you show up is, instead of giving advice **give service**. Find a way to serve somebody, some tangible sign of lightening their burden just a little bit, and if hope shows up and shuts up and serves instead of giving advice, hope makes sure that instead of answers, it provides humility. The thing that gives hope to people is not your faithfulness nor your arrogance. It is your humility.

I am a little embarrassed because so many of you are so good at bringing hope, better than I am. Laura and I were in another church preaching through the Beatitudes, and one day it was my turn to preach and I said, "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted." Little old Ruth met me at the door. Ruth was a widow, and she said, "I miss Bill. I miss him so much. I hope you are right," and she went off. Then through the week I'm driving somewhere, and I remembered Ruth. I am close by, so I just stopped at her house and knocked on the door. I said, "Hey, Ruth. Just wanted to give you a hug. Remember 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.' That was Bill. Bill sees God." That was all I could say. I hugged her and I left. Toward the end of the week we got word that Ruth had fallen down the stairs, slipped into a coma, and died. Went to see Jesus. Went to be with Bill. We had the pleasure of doing the memorial service, and afterwards Laura and I saw this card that Ruth had written after my visit, that I didn't read until after her death. Just a real quick note like my real quick visit. It said, "Blessed are the debonair since they stopped by for five minutes." That was it. We are called to be hope-givers because you never know what will happen next.

Some of you today are in the middle of a storm. You are just barely hanging on. You desperately need to believe in this hope stuff. Others of you are in a season that is good, and you are hope-FULL. You need to open your eyes to people around you who desperately need a call or a card or a bag of groceries, who believe that God's people bring God's hope to a hurting world. Who are you today? You need hope or you need to share it. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I thank You for my friends here, who now are going to run out into a crazy fall afternoon and maybe will remember very little of what they saw or sang or heard here today. My prayer is that when they come again to suffering, they will find the glory of God in their suffering because it will produce endurance. They will get through it, and as they endure, they will be changed into a different character that is more like Yours, and that character will produce hope, not for their circumstances but hope for their soul, and they will be bringers of Your hope to a world of desperate needs. So to those who ache, we bless you with a hope that will never let you go. To those who walk out with hope, we

pray that God will open the eyes of your heart that you might see those around you who need hope so that all the children of God may bless all the needy of God and glory will go to the only God. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.