

Selected Sermons #11

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

ROMANS 5:1-5 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Dear fellow members of God's family in Christ Jesus our Savior –

Through the stifling darkness of the jungle a Christian walks forward with confident step. It is impossible to see the path unless you know it well. Across it lie the trunks of fallen trees; creepers and vines reach out from either side to snare the unwary foot, but this person never hesitates. With swinging gait, smoothly and strongly this person strides along where others would have fallen, following unerringly the course where others would have become hopelessly lost.

And if you ask me why this Christian is so unconcerned in this steaming wilderness, why does this person seem so sure, I will tell you that it is because this person knows where they are and where they are going; knows the path, and knows how to find the way home in that jungle. It is a safe home in a clearing by a river, where one can see the sky and know that if you follow the river, then you can get to the world outside - therefore the jungle has no terror for this person. The darkness and the vines and the wild beasts are all against this Christian, but this person faces these without fear. This person has a safe place to live and knows where it is; in a few moments this Christian will arrive home.

Such a jungle is this world, and such a person is the Christian. A great many people are in this jungle, and most of them are crashing about helplessly in the underbrush. They are lost; they are full of panic. The Christian alone lives without concern because this person has a home in this jungle and knows where it is, and that it is safe. It is wonderful to know where you stand, wonderful to be able to live with such confidence. The darkest path means nothing as long as there is under the open sky and along the river of death our blessed home of hope.

Our blessed home of hope and where it is

This is the joyful theme of our Epistle today, this home of ours here which is like the entrance hall to heaven itself. Let us hear:

I. How we come to live there

II. How we daily find our way there

I. Our house of hope was built of the wood from the tree of the Cross, and **how we came to live there** is the most wonderful story in the world. God led us into a clearing in this jungle where we could look up at the stars, and there we saw a heaven in which peace had been declared. Until that time we too were lost, as are all people to whom heaven is dark and angry, from whom God hides his face.

Only picture to yourself the person to whom heaven is the place where one's enemy lives. All about this person, his or her sins stand like tall trees. These sins send out roots and vines that trip and bruise as one stumbles along thorough life, and the crowns of these sins have grown together like a roof over this person's head. This person is out of touch with God, except when the storms of God's wrath come and lightening flashes warn of danger. This jungle of sin is this person's home and he or she is never safe – in constant trouble because God's wrath alone

abides. Wherever this person turns, there is no place to go. Wherever this person goes, he or she knows not where to stand or in what moment the terror of judgment will befall.

Oh, if sinners would but come to the place where we poor sinners have been brought, led by God along the path of faith until we came to where the Cross stands and there learned the truth that beyond the darkness of the trees of our sins – right in the sky above – lives God who has justified the sinner through the Lord Jesus Christ! At the Cross the sky is open, and God looks down with the smile of love. **At the Cross we have *peace with God*.**

That peace has been there for a long time and is still there for all humankind. There are those who are still at war with God, not he with them. They wander about in the darkness of their sins, thinking that God is still their enemy – but he has long since made peace with them on his part. He has cast their sins on his Son, made of him the sacrifice, and justified all sinners through his merit. If only they would come to the Cross, they would see!

We have seen. At the Cross we have heard God read to us the proclamation that he longs to cry to every sinner, *“You are justified; this is your pardon; your sins are forgiven; there is nothing against you.”* We came like the prodigal son and suddenly found ourselves enfolded in the

arms of the Father who we thought was bitterly angry with us. *Peace with God!!* No more stumbling through the jungle with no place to go. Here is the place to be – at the Cross of Christ.

And there God built us a house to live in. He took the cross and put up a house, with an open door giving access into the grace of God wherein we stand, a beautiful home of hope. God's grace is his mercy; it surrounds us on all sides like walls, shielding us from threatening dangers, hiding us always against the fear of the unknown. The Christian knows where he or she stands.

There are indeed many things that one does not understand, and there are many things against the Christian. One has no control over the world which surrounds like a jungle; it is too vast, too powerful – and if the Christian were to say, *“I have hopes that somehow I will get along safely,”* he would be speaking empty, meaningless words, because hope is an unknown, impossible idea in a world where eternal death walks abroad and Satan goes about as a roaring lion. But **now we have access;** we have a door in the wilderness *leading into this grace in which we stand.* Within this door uncertainty ends. Whatever happens and whatever threatens, we are inside the mercy of God, and thus we live in the house of hope.

Usually, when human beings speak of hope, they mean a sort of wishful thinking. They hope the weather will be warmer soon and they hope the war will end soon. Such hoping is pleasant and comforting, but it is only a child of the imagination and has no reality – because the thing hoped for does not exist, and we have no power to bring it about. But when the Christian *rejoices in hope of the glory of God, he lives in a house* from which he can see the glory of God.

The little child stands in the dining room on Christmas Eve and rejoices in the hope of a Christmas tree because he or she can already see the colored light twinkling through the curtain. I live in a clearing in the forest where I can see the sky and the river which will positively lead me home whenever I am ready to go. I am not in heaven, but I am in heaven's antechamber, waiting for the hour to strike. Thus many the Christian rejoice! Let this be your certainty also, that you not only have a home awaiting you in heaven but a secure house even in this world, this vale of tears.

II. There is no purpose in pretending that the world has ceased to be a dangerous, unhappy place merely because the Christian lives in a house of hope. **The Christian must operate daily in the jungle of tribulation**, as all of us are only too well aware. Living in the house of hope does not mean that we are spared the toil of hardships or

the hours of suffering that lie in wait for us on this sin-cursed Earth.

No matter how fine and how secure the home of the person in the forest, does one not have to **go forth to one's duties and labor** in the black shadows where the serpents coil and the beasts prowl? One owns a rubber plantation or a coconut grove, and one's responsibilities are great – but one faces the hardships connected therewith, happily knowing that at any time and at the end of each day's work one can find one's way home. In much the same manner we, though our trials are many and our hearts often weighed down, may meet them confidently and carry the burdens lightly **because we always know the way home**. Each day as we set forth, we are already on the path that will lead us back to the house of hope.

And not only that, but we also gory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint. Consider once more the person hastening along the jungle trail; how easy it seems for one to pick one's way along. Does this person not feel the strain? Does one not hear the insects buzzing about one's head? Does one not see the green eyes watching this person? Oh, indeed, one feels and hears and sees all these. One's travel is not as much without effort or

discomfort as it may seem, yet **one finds home** and get there - and knows that he will get there **because the Christian knows how.**

For one thing, one faces the difficulties of the path with patience; one does not rush blindly or kick at obstacles in one's way but carefully considers each hardship. This person gradually gets experience and learns how to turn every obstacle to one's advantage; learns to cross every fallen tree at its easiest point, and thus finally one reaches home and safety.

It is much the same way with the Christian. So many are the miseries of this world that one cannot count them. You know how far it often seems to our house of hope - but if we will only **follow the route**, we may *glory in tribulations*, for by the proper use of them we are on the path that leads us home. In the child of God, *tribulation* hardens the muscles of faith and teaches the first rule of life - patience. One learns not to set oneself against hardships but like one's Savior to bear them patiently.

Out of this comes *character*. We learn how all things work together for our good; we see how our God turns them to our advantage because he wants us safe and unharmed to appear before his throne; in this gracious purpose we cannot fail. Once that is clear to us, nothing

whatever matters – not all the poisons of Earth or all its claws. **We arrive in the house of hope**, which will not fail us nor ever make us ashamed that we trusted in its protection.

If ever you are lost in the jungle and cannot find your way back home, it is because you have followed some false lights flickering in your own mind. You have sought escape from trials instead of bearing them patiently; you have cast aside in unbelief the experience that God is leading you through cross to crown.

You may have been a wanderer gone astray from the path that leads you home, and you have seen others who have lost their way. We admit that we are happy to see one another here today as we direct our steps again out of the jungle that surrounds us. Ahead of us and bright before our footsteps stretches God's pathway of tribulation and experience and hope, and we are not ashamed to be on that pathway, for we step forward to the clearing that holds our blessed home. Lord, be with us on our journey, as always! Amen!

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