

R. I. P.

Romans 5:1–11



Dear Friends in Christ!

The symbol R. I. P. as you know stands for Rest in Peace. It comes from the Latin phrase: “requiescat in pace”, “rest in peace”—words written and spoken on the dead.

We usually say that phrase when somebody has died and of course we do wish for that person to rest in peace.

The phrase will be said when you die, as you probably have said it before of others, “may you rest in peace!”

But what if you don’t have to wait until you die to be told “may you rest in peace!”? That sounds like a morbid statement, doesn’t it?

Yet as Christians, we really rest in peace. That’s what God does for us through His Son Jesus Christ to bring us rest and rest in peace. But what does it mean to rest in peace, after all this life doesn’t seem to offer us peace, does it?

In exactly six months from tomorrow, it will be the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II (1945). It is one of the greatest days in human history—certainly the greatest day of the last century for it meant peace. Of course, that peace left millions, perhaps sixty million people or more, dead, including over 45,000 Canadians, many of whom are buried in Europe or the Pacific in cemeteries marked by rows and rows of white crosses. And yes many of such grave markers still bear the initials “R.I.P.”

But is that really peace? Can there be peace when someone lies in the grave—whether death has come violently in war or “peacefully” in one’s own bed? And, what about while we live? Since the world never lives in peace, can we? Can we rest in peace even as we live? Well yes and no! But that kind of answer doesn’t help us does it.

Let’s start with the no. No we can’t rest in peace in life, and even in death because of our sins. In the epistle reading for today the Apostle Paul’s words follow on the previous chapters, where he explains that we were among the dead—dead in our trespasses and our sins. Twice, Paul says that apart from Jesus, we have no hope and can expect only eternal death, therefore no “resting in peace” for you and me. In chapter 2, Paul announces: “For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law” (2:12).

Law or no law, knowing what sin is or not, without Christ we all are dead Paul says. And again, Paul teaches us that “there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:22–23). The result of both is death, and death equals no peace, so no “resting in peace,” no R.I.P.

This no peace condition, Paul describes as “weak” “we were still weak” (v 6) he says.

Do you feel weak today? Tired? Those are signs that there is no peace, no resting in peace. Even we Christians, yes, at times we do feel weak and tired, don’t we.

Imagine that, if we Christians feel weak, imagine those who have no Christ! The reality is that there is never a good time to be weak, weak in sin, weak in moral courage and weak in faith. That pretty much describes you and me. Yes, Paul goes on to say, "We were still sinners" (v 8). We know that's true, isn't it? Still true! We still sin. Yes, we know we're still weak, still sinners. And many are still dead in their sins and trespasses as Paul says. They are away from God living in a miserable condition where there is absolutely no peace, and what they think is peace is no more than a bandage over the wound that is so deep and will never heal unless Christ comes and deal with that wound.

But there is something worse than wounds. Paul says we weren't just weak; we weren't just sinners; we were enemies of God: "we . . . were . . . enemies." (v. 10) Enemies of God!

Enemies? But God is so nice. He's the "Big Guy Upstairs," the loving uncle who gives you daily treats of bread and breath. It's hard to imagine being an outright, screaming-in-your-face enemy of God. But then look at the crowd in front of Pontius Pilate who goes to cry: "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" (Mt 27:22–23).

But we never do that, do we? Enemies of God? No way! Yet it is a world war! The whole world has been at war with God ever since Adam and Eve. Enemies! Not like friends or siblings who occasionally step on one another's toes. Not allies who occasionally disagree about foreign policy. Not neutral nations who may not totally be on board but are generally sympathetic to the cause. No! But enemies! Every one of our sins puts us at war with God..... "Enemies!" or "At war!" By this point, you realize there was a real problem between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of your flesh, deeds, and doings! Our sins mean war! Our indifference isn't neutrality; it's opposition. Jesus says, "Whoever is not with me is against me" (Mt 12:30). Enemies of God! Therefore no resting in peace for us, and for those who are without Christ. That's what we do, that's who we are, and that's what the world does and is.

But God is not so. Listen to what Paul says: "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (v 6). Despite our weakness Jesus sought our peace. And for that He, the Almighty, had to become like one of us, and more, had to sweat blood and stumble down the street with a cross on His torn back and then His hands and feet were nailed to the cross, and by doing so at the exact, right time, Jesus snatched from the devil the keys of death, and now Jesus holds them in His strong, resurrected hand. Jesus died for each one of us. Yes at times we Christians might feel weak and tired, but once again and every time we come to the foot of the cross, our sins are washed in the peace-giving blood of Jesus, and with His victory over sin and satan, give us peace.

And for those who don't know Christ yet, the invitation is also for them so that they would come and taste the peace Jesus brings to them as well.

And as if He couldn't preach enough good news, Paul continues, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (v 8). For you! While you were weak, the death of Jesus became your death and that certainly happened in your Baptism. While you were still a sinner, Jesus made you, a lost and condemned person, a saved and acquitted child of God through your Baptism. You did nothing, have done nothing, to be saved. That point is clear: weak and a sinner. Jesus takes what is crooked and wrong and not strong in you and makes you strong and redeemed, makes you right. Is that not a peaceful message, one that can give you rest even in the worst of times?

And we weren't just weak; we weren't just sinners. We were enemies of God! At world war with God! Yet, out of His great love for you and me, Jesus died for you, His enemy, and defeated your enemies—your enemies of the devil and sin and death.

Now, "R.I.P." is right, not only when you die, you know, somebody saying those words over your resting place, and not because you were an enemy of God and someone is now hoping, when it's too late, that you might yet find peace. Rather, because when you died you were at peace with God and God with you, so now yes you will rest in peace. But not only then, but even now, even now that peace is yours. Because your sins no longer stand between you and God, because you are reconciled by Jesus, you now have "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [which] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:7).

So, can we rest in peace even as we live? Well yes and no! No because of our sins, but yes because of Christ.

Hear once again what Paul says: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v 1). Being justified by Jesus means the Law has been completely fulfilled by Him for you. It means God declares you right! Just! Good! Peace with God means the Lord Jesus Christ has taken away the discord of your sin, silencing the disruption of your disobedience. Now you can R.I.P. Rest in peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And this we do even as we live. And even when the hour of your death, physical death comes! When looking on the cross of Jesus and considering your own death, you can say that dying in Jesus is "character building"—the character of Jesus. In your Baptism, you have already died in Jesus (6:1–6). Jesus has made His death your death. Life will include suffering, but even when you suffer, such suffering produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope (vs 3b–4)—and what we all need in this dying world is hope, hope in the Savior Jesus.

The season of Lent takes on toward the cross of Jesus, where we see His most unrestful, unpeaceful death take place. But there God's is reconciled with the world, with you and me, now we are declared justified, now we rejoice even in the midst of suffering, but because we rest in peace there is endurance, character, and hope. Through Jesus' rest in a borrowed grave, you can find comfort in knowing that Jesus knows what it's like to "rest in peace"—completely, perfectly, quietly rest in peace—for you, and with you!

And wherever you may be buried, in a military cemetery, the city cemetery, the Emmaus cemetery, or any other one, and whatever may mark your grave—polished marble or weathered wood—if your life has been marked with the cross, you will most surely rest in peace.

As we said at the beginning, in about six months it will be the 70 anniversary of the end of WWII that brought peace as we know it. Yet there is no peace, but here in our epistle reading Paul celebrates the end of the world war, not among nations but with God and the world, now there is peace, now we Rest in Peace because Jesus ended the world war. "R.I.P." Rejoice in the peace of Jesus, dear people of God. Fear not, and rest in His peace. Amen.