

Suffering—something to rejoice about?

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Romans 5:1-5

1Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we^[b] rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. 3Not only so, but we^[c] also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Let's imagine you have been in a car accident. You have been flown to UVA Hospital from the site of the wreck. It is predicted that you will stay there for the next two or three months. MONTHS. You are going to be ok, but you've got a lot of healing to do. Almost all of you is wrapped up in bandages, your head, your arms, your legs. There's this little triangle of face showing, and a couple of fingers. That's all that can be seen of the real you. You are extremely uncomfortable. Besides being bruised all over, and hot and sweaty inside your several casts, your legs and one arm are suspended in some sort of pulley rope thing. There's an IV in your one unsuspected arm, and you've got a tube up your nose. You can't even wipe your mouth or blow your nose.

Your family is in a panic. They call me to come visit you and offer some pithy words of hope that will get you through this thing. Hope. That's what you need. In I walk with my Bible cradled in one arm. After a few minutes walking around your bed and surveying the broken and battered you, I open my Bible to Romans 5, since it's about hope and suffering. I read, "We rejoice in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us."

Now those are not the words you want to hear. You already know what suffering is about—and it's not rejoicing!. Your own take is: "Suffering produces impatience; impatience produces bitterness and bitterness leads to despair." Right now you are experiencing bitterness and despair is not far behind. Paul was screwy in the head.

I could have read you a Psalm. A Psalm would have been nice. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me." It would have been

reassuring to hear that God is with you in the mess you are in. Or maybe the beatitudes would have put you in a better mood, something like, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” You are poor in spirit and you are mourning the state of your wrecked body. It is good to know when you are laid up in bed that God will bless and comfort you. But you do not need to hear from Paul. “We rejoice in our suffering!”

Think about it. If Paul is right, and we are to truly rejoice in our sufferings, do we have our celebrations and concerns reversed? On Sunday mornings maybe we should celebrate our sicknesses and pray over our celebrations. “Lord, we thank you for all the sickness and tragedies you have visited upon this congregation and our loved ones this past week. Thank you for teaching us perseverance. We are grateful for our misfortunes because they build character. And, Lord, be with those today who are having birthday parties or who have just graduated from high school or college. Pile on the misery, shower them with adversity so that they, too, may have reason to rejoice in their suffering.” What would visitors think?

Paul is an ok theologian. He had some great ideas about justification and he was a missionary par excellence, but a pastoral care giver he is not.

Paul had a lot of experience with suffering; maybe even as much or more experience than either you or I. As far as we know Romans was the last letter Paul wrote and he wrote it late in his missionary career. He wrote it from prison. By the time he wrote Romans he had been stoned in Lystra, beaten with rods in Philippi and twice more in Corinth; He had survived a shipwreck and imprisonment in at least three other prisons besides the one in Rome: the prisons of Philippi, Ephesus, and Jerusalem. On top of all of that he had what he refers to as a thorn in his side, which scholars have guessed to be either partial blindness, malaria, or migraine headaches. My vote is for partial blindness.

Paul knows suffering. If Paul says that suffering builds character, perhaps he is on to something.

It is true, I think, that suffering CAN build character, if by character we mean ‘the inherent complex of attributes that determine a person’s moral and ethical actions and reactions.’ That’s a dictionary definition. I would change that to read, “The inherent complex of attributes in part, gained from experience, that determine a person’s moral and ethical actions.” For instance, until you have ever suffered the death of a loved one, you don’t really know what it is like to grieve. Once you have experienced grieving you may be more empathetic to others who are in the grieving process. You know, if you

have endured the loss of a loved one, for example, to steer clear of platitudes like: “He’s in a better place,” or “It is God’s will,” “It’s for the best” or “God gives us only what we can bear.” Because you have suffered such a loss yourself, you know that those platitudes are at best, a backward glance at loss. They are not helpful and in fact, they can be hurtful to one in the grieving process. Far better, you know, since you have known grief, to simply offer a hug, squeeze a hand, take a dinner, send a heart felt note of concern, or just listen and be present to the one who is grieving. You have learned and can now practice empathy, which has a lot to do with the nature of character.

That is all very true, but I don’t think that is what Paul is talking about here. We have to go to the very end of our scripture passage for today to find out what he really means. Paul says, “Character produces 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.**”

Paul is not talking about just any kind of suffering, like the suffering you endure in your hospital bed, with your several casts and your suspended appendages and a tube up your nose. That’s suffering as a result of an unfortunate accident. Paul is talking about suffering love. That is suffering you experience as a result of your love, for a person, a community, an ideal, or God, for example. Suffering love is pain suffered willingly because the love is bigger and more important to you than that pain. That is the kind of suffering that also builds character and that is rooted in hope—a hope that in any contest between pain and love, love wins.

In Romans, Paul is writing to the Christian community in Rome. He is addressing the persecution that Roman Christians are enduring and will continue to endure out of love for Christ, for God and for each other. He says that this suffering love, will mold them into a stronger community—one that is able to embrace the hope we have in Jesus Christ and the coming Kingdom of God.

I have witnessed that kind of “suffering love in community.” I have witnessed it here—in our prayers for those who are experiencing the death of a loved one; and in the casseroles we bring to members who are ill. I also witnessed suffering love in a big and **novel** way in the church in which I served as Associate Pastor. I would like to end this sermon today, with a true story about suffering love as it was lived out in my previous congregation.

My previous church, as you probably know, was in McLean, Virginia. McLean is an upscale community. Think large homes and manicured lawns. Its residents, for the

most part, work in Washington, DC. Our congregation was comprised of government officials, lawyers, CIA officials, State Department folks, you get the idea. As you probably also already know, in Washington, DC, connection means everything to your career. It's who you know and who you choose to associate with, maybe as much or even more than your talents and your work ethic that can lead to either your success or demise in your chosen profession.

A member of our church was a nationally known State Department Official. He was also an active church member. Besides attending services on a weekly basis and being involved on our mission committee, he attended the Men's Study group at our church which met at 7 a.m. on Wednesday mornings. The men's study group was comprised of the kind of high-powered DC professionals I mentioned earlier.

Not too many people in the congregation knew this, but the church member aka State Department Official was having family difficulties. His teenage daughter had been involved with drugs and alcohol. She had run away from home several times. Life was difficult.

One evening this church member/aka State Department Official was at a Blockbuster Video Store in McLean. He was returning a tape. The manager of the store told him that he owed a fine. The man did not believe that he owed the fine. Now you or I would probably just say something like, "How is that?" Or, if we were in an anxious or angry state we might say something like, "I can't believe that!" But this man, remember, was feeling extremely burdened. Instead of speaking or even screaming his anger, he took the video tape he was trying to return and whacked the store manager over the head— not once but over and over again. That may sound funny, but believe me it was not. The violence escalated. A scuffle ensued, which ended when our church member pushed the manager through the store's plate glass window and the police came and arrested him.

The next morning this church member/aka State Department Official made headline news in the McLean paper, and second or third page news in the Washington Post. It took one millisecond for the State Department to put him on administrative leave and perhaps a week to actually give him his pink slip. Meanwhile, our church member, who was no longer a State Department Official, had to appear in court. As he told me later, and I am paraphrasing here. "I was in such despair. I had just ruined my career and embarrassed my family. But as I walked into the court room, I scanned the crowd, and there was Roger." Roger, was a very tall man in our congregation, at least 6'5". His license plate read Jlyngnt (Jolly Green Giant). Roger was a participant in the Wednesday morning Men's Group. The church member/aka no longer State Department

Official said, “I saw Roger’s head above the crowd and then I saw that he was surrounded by people from the church, the men from our Wednesday morning Bible Study, and I wept.”

That is the kind of suffering love that is worth rejoicing about! Amen