

STRUGGLES ON THE JESUS WAY

Suffering

Romans 5:1-5

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AUDIO: <http://fbcjc.buzzsprout.com/7678/159894>

I'd like to begin this morning with a few questions to frame our conversation about suffering. 1) When I am suffering, could the energy I spend on bitterness and self-pity be used for better purposes? 2) Do I see any positive growth emerging from previous trials? 3) How do the suffering of Christ and his ultimate victory impact the way I respond to suffering?

I have to confess to you that my difficulty with this sermon is twofold: First, my heart breaks for you, my congregation, and the suffering you endure. Second, I don't want to be trite and simplistic in the way we deal with this tough subject. So you pray for me, OK? Flannery O'Connor once compared chronic illness with visiting a foreign country. It's like no place you've ever been before, maps won't help you and postcards don't do it justice. When I asked on Facebook for sharing about your struggles, both a youth and an adult reported to me being bullied, one at school and one at work. Others told of domestic violence and going to bed hungry. Still others reported issues raising children, or physical illness or mental illness.

Someone once said that suffering stings the faithful twice. First, it just hurts, and then comes the question of why God allows it. And that temptation to bitterness, to whining, is very real. I have to confess to you something I'm not proud of. My life has a whine cellar. Not a wine cellar. A whine cellar. A dark, secret place where I brood over life's seeming unfairness. Do you have such a place? It might surprise us--even startle us--to read that Paul declares the same boasting about present trials that he practices for future glory (read vv. 2b-3a). It's one thing to endure suffering. But to boast and exult in it?

He says that suffering produces patience, or endurance (v. 3). The word means to "stay put under." But we don't, do we? We want to cut and run during times of trouble. Or we self-medicate with alcohol or other chemicals, or self-medicate through spending money. Or maybe we don't do those things. If we're trying to be spiritual, we go looking for Jesus somewhere else more exotic than this nasty place of suffering. Bonhoeffer says our first response is to get out from under our suffering. but if we will stay under the load, lo and behold, that's where we will find Jesus [*A Testament of Freedom*, p. 291]. Hebrews 2:10ff says, "It makes sense that God...now completes the work by making the Salvation Pioneer perfect [complete] through suffering...That's why he had to enter every detail of human life....he would have already experienced it all himself--all the pain, all the testing" [*The Message*]. Jesus is there with us!

I once heard about a Boy Scout obstacle course that was built in the woods. The designer explained that the course is designed for failure, because the goal is to create trust and to grow character. Character, interestingly, is Paul's next word--endurance produces character (v. 4).

When you hear this word, think of metal that passes through the fire. All the impurities are burned out of it. Does that describe you?

There is really no way around suffering, but there is a way through. And the reason we are taking this passage of scripture verse by verse is because it is vitally important to know where you stand spiritually, to know the riches at your disposal, the assets available to you. Read vv. 1-2 again. Do these truths take away life's pain? No. But do they offer a perspective on life's pain? Yes! They offer energy, hope and a way through. After your very positive response to my sermon on suicide back in January, I promised myself that mental illness would be a subject which we would continue to talk about in this church. In her book, Kathryn Greene-McCreight talks about how important it is that the mentally ill stay exposed to the objective truths of scripture, those things that are true 24/7, no matter what we are feeling or experiencing [*Darkness Is My Only Companion*, p. 163].

But there's something else about the way through our suffering. That little pronoun "we" (vv. 1-3). We boast in our suffering...This assumes others are participating. In times of pain, we must discover all over again the power of fellowship, small groups, support groups, prayer partners and a healthy church community. We need each other! We can't do this alone!

Have you ever wondered why suffering is such an emotional and important subject? Suffering is important because it reveals what we really think of God. Is God cruel and vindictive? Is God absent? No, scripture says, God is loving and suffering. Remember the cry of Jesus hanging on the Cross? He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Maybe when God was silent in those moments, God was doing more than at any other time in the history of humankind. Paul's version of that is v. 5. God's love is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. "God's love has flooded our hearts" [*The New English Version*].

So, here are those very same framing questions I asked at the beginning. 1) When I am suffering, could the energy I spend on bitterness and self-pity be used for better purposes? 2) Do I see any positive growth emerging from previous trials? 3) How do the suffering of Christ and his ultimate victory impact the way I respond to suffering?