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Finding Hope
Romans 5:1-8

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^[a] have **peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access^[b] to this grace in which we stand, and we^[c] **boast in our hope** of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also **boast in our suffering**, knowing that **suffering produces endurance**, ⁴ and **endurance produces character**, and **character produces hope**, ⁵ and **hope does not disappoint**, because **God's love** has been poured into our hearts through the **Holy Spirit** that has been given to us.*

*⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while **we still were sinners Christ died for us.***

On December 31st, 1862, enslaved and free African Americans gathered in ***churches for the first ever “Watch Night”***.

It was known as “***Freedom's Eve***,” because the Emancipation Proclamation would take effect the next day on January 1, 1863.

At the stroke of midnight, ***prayers were answered*** as all enslaved people in Confederate States were declared legally free.

Union soldiers, many of whom were black, marched onto plantations and across cities in the south ***reading small copies*** of the Emancipation Proclamation to spread the news of freedom in the Confederate States.

But not everyone in Confederate territory got the news, specifically those in the westernmost state of Texas.

And not every state freed their slaves until the 13th Amendment was passed on February 1, 1865.

On June 19, 1865, over 2,000 Union troops came to Galveston Bay, Texas.

And that army announced that the more than 250,000 enslaved people in that state were now free.

This day came to be known as ***Juneteenth, or Freedom Day***.

It is a ***second Independence*** day in the United States, declaring freedom for all. The historical legacy of Juneteenth shows the value of ***never giving up hope***.

After Juneteenth, the post-emancipation period known as Reconstruction (1865-1877) marked an ***era of hope, uncertainty, and struggle for the entire country***. Formerly enslaved people started to reunite their families, establish schools and businesses, run for political office, and write legislation.

African Americans were inspired and empowered to transform their lives and their country. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/historical-legacy-juneteenth>

So tomorrow--***Juneteenth, is a celebration of HOPE***.

It's an example of finding hope, and an inspiration to us as people of faith,

Because many enslaved people found their hope in Jesus,

And the promise of being with God eternally one day.

Many of the black spirituals that we sing still today, have hope for the lyrics:

*Nobody knows the trouble I see,
nobody knows but Jesus,
Nobody knows the trouble I see,
Glory Hallelujah!*

As one pastor wrote, their hope was ***not an anesthesia or opiate*** to make them passively avoid pain. It was real hope.

Hope in the present power of God

And the future glory that awaited them.

Diane Givens Moffet writes: *what Christians know about the **future** inspires us to act appropriately in the **present**. The **love of God** is so powerful that it sustains us through suffering and empowers us to act according to our faith.*

Diane Givens Moffett, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, Pg. 138

HOPE is a powerful thing, isn't it?

It's the thing that helps us ***keep going*** when there seems to be no way forward.

It's the last ***string holding us together*** when life is falling apart.

Last year I spoke about Hope and the ***famous painting*** of that title, where a woman is playing a harp, and there is only one string left.

We all need hope, don't we?

Think about the hardship in your life.

Where do you need hope right now?

And think about the ***effects of suffering in your life.***

What does pain and suffering do?

What happens when we hurt?

What happens when you are down or in despair?

Sometimes suffering can ***blind us, right?***

It can get us ***STUCK in the moment***, unable to see ahead?

We start to focus only on what's right in front of us,
our pain, our sorrow, our sadness.

And sometimes, we even feel like ***we are the only person***
going through this particular pain at this particular time.

When we are hurting, it's all too easy to ***focus inward***
and feel very ***isolated and alone***, right?

But, as people of faith, ***we have another OPTION when we face hard times.***

The ***Psalms*** especially give us a roadmap through suffering.

The truth is, when we hurt, ***we can call out to God.***

We can ***pray*** to God, we can ***yell*** at God, we can ***complain*** to God,
we can simply ***cry out.***

Just like ***Psalm 116***, when it says:

*I love the Lord because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.....*

³*The **snares of death** encompassed me;*

*the **pangs of hell** laid hold on me;*

I suffered distress and anguish.

⁴*Then I called on the name of the Lord,*

"O Lord, I pray, save my life!"

You know what happens when we reach out to God?

You know what it does for us?

The same thing a ***beautiful spiritual*** did for enslaved people.

It helps us ***ENDURE.***

It gives us the ability to ***keep on going, right through the suffering.***

It actually opens our hearts and minds beyond ourselves —

to *who God is, what God is doing, and what God has done.*

Think about that for a moment.

If we can endure the suffering in our lives,
especially when we are suffering for what is right, and what is good,
then we can start to *imagine a new day.*

We can start to imagine *what God CAN do,*
And we can start to *see what God IS doing.*

Just like we heard in **Psalm 100** today:

³ *Know that the Lord is God.*

It is he who made us, and we are his;^[a]

we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

Give thanks to him; bless his name.

⁵ *For the Lord is good;*

his steadfast love endures forever

and his faithfulness to all generations.

Here in Romans, Paul says that suffering **DOES something for the believer:**

*Suffering produces endurance,
and endurance produces character,
and character produces hope....*

I would add the word ‘**CAN**’. ***Suffering CAN produce endurance.***

It doesn’t always do that, even for people of faith.

We all know people for whom suffering has led only to bitterness,
despair or giving up hope all together.

But as people of faith, suffering **CAN** produce endurance,
especially if we are willing to cry out to God,
just like the Psalmist.

When was the last time YOU cried out to God?

Did you complain? Did you question? Did you doubt?

Did you simply cry?

All of that is good, my friends.

It’s definitely not a sin to yell at God, or be angry,

To even wish for bad things to happen to those who hurt us.

It’s not a sin to **FEEL anger, despair, doubt, or sorrow,**
and to tell God all about it.

That's what happens over and over again in the Psalms.
That's why they are known as our *prayerbook*, right in the middle of God's Word.

Do you have a favorite Psalm?

Do you have some committed to memory?

I know I have many hidden in my heart, that come to mind in hard times.

Like Psalm 42:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul **longs** for you, O God.*

²*My soul **thirsts** for God,
for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold
the face of God?*

³***My tears have been my food**
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”*

These are words that have sustained me for years in hard times.

Paul says that suffering produces endurance---

And we can find that **endurance IN GOD**.

We can find it in the **Word** of God.

And we can find it in our **relationship** with Jesus Christ—

the one who suffered by giving up his own life—for us, to forgive us of our sins.

Talk about helping us endure.

Jesus has already endured the ultimate pain—death on a cross,

Even though he was totally innocent.

His endurance can inspire the strength we need to endure.

But that's not the end of our journey.

Paul says that suffering produces endurance,

And **endurance produces CHARACTER**.

Now the interesting thing here in Romans 5

is that the **Greek word** for character

is a word that refers to being **marked with a stamp or insignia**.

Isn't that an great image?

Suffering does that to us, doesn't it?

Doesn't it leave some kind of impression, or mark on us?

I know that the hardest days of my life have made me who I am—
the wife, mother, daughter and pastor that I am today.

I am marked by my suffering, and you are too.

All of that makes up my character.

My suffering has made a difference in my daily life,
and it has even given me ***gifts*** I dare say,
just like it does for so many people.

Does this mean that suffering is GOOD?

No—it's not.

We don't believe in a God who zaps people with pain.

God does not wish suffering upon us.

But we live in a ***fallen, broken world, full of fallen, broken people and systems,***
and so we suffer—this side of heaven.

And for reasons unknown, some suffer in some ways,
and some suffer in other ways.

And for reasons unknown,

God can and does use our suffering to bring good,

kind of like weaving a ***tapestry*** together—

and we see only the underside that looks like a mess.

But God sees the ***front*** of the tapestry,

where it all somehow in the end is woven together, ***and it is beautiful.***

Our suffering in the meantime is definitely a ***MYSTERY***—

I often joke that I will be standing in the ***heavenly FAQ*** (frequently asked questions) line to ask why this happened.

Until then, ***I just hold onto God's hand.***

I have faith in the loving God who has saved my life,

And enriched my life,

And made me who I am,

So I have faith that somehow all of this mess works out in the end.

Think about *people you know who have suffered*—
Aren't they marked by that suffering?
Doesn't it make them who they are today?

In fact, we sometimes find *a wisdom, a patience,*
An inspiration from those who have endured suffering—
especially our brothers and sisters who have endured suffering by doing what is
right, or those who suffer for no reason at all.

I believe we can find *a special wisdom* from our friends who have been
marginalized by our society—like people of color,
or those in the LGBTQ+ community.
Why? Because they have suffered, just for who they are,
what they look like, who they love.
And often their endurance has led to character.

In what way *have you been inspired by those who have suffered and endured?*
We can certainly find lots of examples of this the *Bible*.
Not just Jesus, who suffered on the cross,
But so many of his followers as well.
Most of the disciples suffered because they shared the good news of the gospel.

We know that *Paul himself* was tortured, shipwrecked, flogged, imprisoned,
accused, and had a disability that left him begging God for healing.

And yet, it is Paul who says that *suffering produces endurance,*
Endurance produces character,
And character produces HOPE.

So, what is HOPE?

Hope for us, is not wishful thinking.
In fact, hope for the Christian is certainty.
Certainty.
A strong and certain belief—in what?
In the promises of God.

People can fail us.
But God does not.

The truth is, we can stand upon the promises of God's Word,
And on the person of Jesus Christ.

Our hope is grounded in our *relationship* with God in Christ.

And Paul says here in Romans that *Jesus loved us so much* that he died to give us grace and forgiveness.

We, who were sinners, have been made right with God, we have peace with God, by the life and death of Jesus.

In fact, we can even *boast in our suffering*—because we will share God’s glory one day in heaven.

Paul says:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . and we^[c] boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.³ And not only that, but we^[d] also boast in our suffering,

Now why would we boast in our suffering?

We boast because *suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,*

and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

We can be *people of hope, because our faith is founded on hope.*

Not a wishful thinking, the way the world thinks of hope.

But a *certainty*.

We’re not saying we have hope in suffering,

The same way we hope it will rain today,

or we hope we get to have pizza for dinner.

We can have hope, even in suffering,

because God’s *Word is true*, God’s *promises are sure*,

and *Jesus is with us*—no matter what we face in life.

So go ahead and cry out to God—say whatever is on your heart and mind.

Use a Psalm to help you find the words.

Go ahead and have your doubts, and anger, and frustration,

Because God can handle it all.

And God is the one *working behind the scenes* in all of our messy lives.

So that our suffering can produce endurance,

And endurance can create our character,

And character can bring us hope— which never disappoints,
Because it is from *God's love poured* into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Hear the Good News:

We all have pain, we all have suffering,

But we can also have endurance, character, and hope.

May we seek God, and find the hope.

Now let all God's people say together, Amen.