

Suffering Produces Endurance?
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Our scripture this morning is from Paul's letter to the believers in Rome. Romans is one of the most significant letters in Christianity, it's the longest of Paul's letters and serves as the bridge between stories about Paul in the Acts of the Apostles and the rest of Paul's letters in the New Testament. Martin Luther's right hand man, Phillip Melanchthon, believed that Romans is the handbook of the entire Christian religion!

Like many Pauline letters, it was written to believers who were meeting in various house churches. Paul wrote before he had ever visited the Roman community, knowing that there were tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers. Paul teaches that when one becomes a follower of Christ, one enters a new multicultural Spirit-led community. The Letter to the Romans is early Systematic Theology, outlining some of the major tenets of the faith: salvation, justification by faith, God's justice, freedom from sin and death, dying and rising with Christ, resurrection, and unity in Christ.[1] It's heavy-lifting.

Today we hear Paul's take on suffering when he writes, "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that 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." [2] Not even getting into justification by faith and salvation, I get hung up on boasting in our suffering and suffering producing endurance and character and hope. It just seems too neat and tidy—like too quick a progression from suffering to hope and God's love pouring into our hearts.

Paul is speaking from personal experience though. Paul was thrown into jail and beaten constantly when he traveled and preached the Gospel. In Second Corinthians, Paul recounts that on five separate occasions he was lashed 39 times, beaten with rods three times, stoned once, and shipwrecked three times.[3] Paul speaks of his own suffering often, go figure, and outlines one of the paths open to us when we suffer. Suffering producing endurance and endurance producing character and character producing hope.

Paul is telling the believers in Rome that suffering is necessary for producing hope! But can we have all these important spiritual disciplines and just forget the suffering? Probably not. So how do we understand suffering? And is this linear progression normative—suffering producing endurance, character, and ultimately hope?

In modern terms, we can compare this to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief. When we are faced with a loss or a death, we enter a cycle of grief. The stages Kubler-Ross outlined are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The stages are cyclical though and not everyone goes through every stage when facing grief. You hope that someone finally reaches the place of acceptance, but unfortunately people can remain angry, depressed, bargaining, or in denial for a good long, time.

In a similar way, Paul writes that the end of suffering is hope, and hope won't disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts. But let's face it, suffering can also lead to becoming bitter, angry, sad or abandoning our faith—especially if our faith is causing us to suffer in the first place! This was a harsh reality for the earliest Christians who dealt with persecution. It can be difficult to realize that not only does our faith not totally protect us, that God can't stop every bad thing from happening to us no matter how faithful we are, but our faith may even get us into trouble sometimes. When people stand up for the lost and the least

because their faith compels them to take a moral stand, it's not always a popular position in society.[4]

Suffering is one of the most difficult aspects of our lives. When you speak to folks who are not religious, one of the things that may keep them away is the existence of suffering. If God is all-powerful, then God could seem like a bully who causes people to suffer and war and natural disasters and the like. Just last week, Comedian and TV host Bill Maher mocked the new film Noah and called God a psychotic mass murderer, a tyrant, and other names I can't even say in church. We can pass this off as Maher being rude, and he kind-of is since he does insult comedy and makes fun of people. But even Paul writes that we are justified by the blood of Christ so we can be saved from the wrath of God.[5] And that verse is no joke.

There are verses in scripture that Progressive Christians really struggle with because they point to disturbing images of the Divine. But instead of always explaining problematic verses away, it's sometimes best to admit that difficult verses are here in scripture and that we just don't see God that way. Methodist Minister Roger Wolsey affirms that all Christians pick and choose which portions of the Bible we take literally. Progressive Christians just admit that we do it and share how we discern what verses help us to be faithful Christians.[6]

Can God seem like a bully who causes suffering in some Biblical texts? Sure. But God is also depicted as a Good Shepherd who seeks out and saves lost sheep. Jesus, when lamenting over Jerusalem said, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." [7] He's comparing himself to a Mother Hen gathering her chicks together, that's a pretty tender image! Or the story of the Prodigal Son and God understood as the father who runs out to greet his wayward son who finally comes home. Images of God in scripture are complicated. Yet God seems to consistently comfort those in pain and seek out those who are lost much more so than God shows divine wrath in the Old and New Testaments.

Some folks assume that God, if God even exists at all, is all-powerful and just mean. God requires the blood of God's own Son to save us from God's wrath. Others may connect with more loving images of God like the Good Shepherd or the Mother Hen. But may still wonder that if God is loving, but not all-powerful (which means that bad things happen to good people and God can't prevent them) then why waste your time on God?

Rabbi Harold Kushner who wrote the classic book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* told a story of parents who lost a daughter when she was in college. She died from a blood vessel that burst in her brain. Rabbi Kushner went to the home of the parents to sit with them in their grief, not knowing what he could possibly say to ease their pain. But the first words they said to him were, "You know, Rabbi, we didn't fast last Yom Kippur." [8] This comment sent him reeling, wondering how they could believe in a God who would strike down their only daughter out of nowhere for punishment for their ritual infraction? What kind of God do we believe in? What kind of God are the religions of the world teaching people to believe in?

Today Paul talks about not just suffering producing endurance and character and hope. Paul presents some drastically different images of God—God saving us from God's wrath through the blood of Christ and God's love being poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit and God granting grace even if we don't deserve that grace. Depending on our images of God, we may have hope that our faith can save us from suffering. What we all must realize though is that God can't prevent suffering even if God wants to. And I believe in my heart of hearts that God does seek to prevent our suffering. The question then become how do we handle suffering? What lessons can we learn? How do we rely on God when we suffer and somehow be at peace knowing that God can't prevent these difficult moments?

For this, I turn to my theological buddy William Sloane Coffin. Coffin's son Alex died when he was only twenty-four in a car accident and he gave the eulogy at his son's funeral. He spoke of his disappointment in some peoples' reactions, of a woman who dropped off quiche and remarked that she just doesn't understand the will of God.

Coffin questioned that woman's theology, that it was the will of God that his son should die. He said in the eulogy, "God doesn't go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels . . . My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break . . . Like God herself, Scripture is not around for anyone's protection, just for everyone's unending support . . . You gave me what God gives all of us — minimum protection, maximum support." [9]

Minimum protection and maximum support, this is what God provides to all of us—if we are open to accept that freely-given and unmerited grace. When we face suffering, whether our suffering will end with hope or if it just feels like we are enduring and enduring and enduring some more, our God is not the one with his finger on the trigger. Our God is the Good Shepherd searching high and low for that one lost sheep. Our God is the Father running down the road to meet that wayward son. Our God is the Mother Hen gathering her little ones together. Thanks be to God, Amen.

[1] "Romans: Introduction," in The Common English Bible.

[2] Romans 5:3-5, NRSV.

[3] 2 Corinthians 11:23-25, NRSV.

[4] Laird J. Stuard, Romans 5:1-11 Pastoral Perspective, in Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2.

[5] Romans 5:9, NRSV.

[6] Roger Wolsey, "16 Ways Progressive Christians Interpret the Bible," January 21, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogerwolsey/2014/01/16-ways-progressive-chr...>

[7] Matthew 23:37, NRSV.

[8] Harold Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, 12.

[9] William Sloane Coffin, "Eulogy for Alex," http://www.pbs.org/now/printable/transcript_eulogy_print.html