

If you haven't caught it by now, today is all about suffering. Today is all about how we Christians should respond to suffering. Is suffering to be viewed as a bad thing – a consequence of sin that should be avoided?

Or, is suffering a good thing that should be embraced?

Paradoxically, the Christian/Biblical answer to that is... yes. Suffering is both a bad thing to be avoided and a good thing to be embraced.

I've said it before and I'll say it again as long as my own heart and mind struggle to understand this paradox: We (the human race) spend an incredible amount of time, money, and energy trying to avoid and lessen the suffering inherent in a fallen world. From little things like tag-less shirts that don't itch to big things like cancer research we humans serve and love ourselves and our neighbors by using God's gifts of time, money, wisdom, and energy to avoid and lessen suffering in this fallen world.

God's word makes clear that is not only an ok thing to do, that is a God-pleasing thing to do – we are called to love our neighbors by tangibly serving them and meeting their needs, helping them avoid and lessen suffering.

Just because we Christians often talk about suffering as a good thing doesn't mean we have a masochistic view of life. We aren't asked by God to prove how much we love him by never avoiding or lessening suffering. God has not asked us to live like the Amish and avoid all the blessings of modernity. God is not impressed if you sell your home and start living in a tent, sleeping on the hard ground.

So, on the one hand, the Christian's view of suffering is, when possible, to lessen and avoid pain and suffering, and especially to love your neighbor by doing the same for them.

And that part of this paradox isn't a problem for my heart and head. I don't have any problem avoiding suffering. I'm very good at taking care of myself. I sure do need reminders to selflessly take care of my family and neighbors in their suffering, but the general notion of avoiding suffering, my heart and my head have no problem with that.

It's the other half of the paradox that is less natural, less feel-good, less logical to me – the part where in the Bible suffering is not only at times accepted, but embraced and celebrated.

Today is all about understanding that second half of the Christian response to suffering. Yes, suffering, as a consequence of sin, is to be avoided and lessened when possible (but avoiding and lessening suffering will not always be possible for a number of reasons), but suffering is paradoxically also to be embraced and celebrated. In Jesus' words we are to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow him – embrace the cross, embrace suffering! In Paul's words from Romans 5, we are to glory in our sufferings – to not just embrace our sufferings but celebrate them!

That doesn't come naturally. It doesn't feel good. It doesn't always seem logical. How do we do this? How do we not just accept, but celebrate and embrace when suffering cannot be avoided or lessened?

Well, Paul in Romans is going to help us do that today.

The bottom line is this: I can glory in my sufferings because I have the sure hope that God is not done with me yet.

I can give you one verse, from another letter that Paul wrote to the Philippians that sums up Paul's logical argument here in the first part of Romans 5.

In Philippians chapter 1 Paul wrote: **[I am] convinced of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

A simple and beautiful truth, right? The God who started the work of saving you is going to finish the job. Until you see Jesus Christ with your own eyes in heaven, God is not done with his mission to save your soul.

God is not done with you yet.

That beautiful truth is in a nutshell in Philippians 1:6. That truth is unpacked in Romans 5:1-11.

So let's dig in to this beautiful truth – that the same God who started a mission to save you will finish that mission. God is not done with you yet.

Paul gives us three main objectives in God's plan of salvation. Two of those objectives are in the past – God already did them. And the fact that those two objectives have been met give us comfort and confidence that he will complete the third objective.

Objective 1 (the first paragraph in Romans 5): **Justify you through faith.**

Talk about a loaded and beautiful objective!

To Justify: I hope most of you know what that word means. If you don't, don't feel bad, but listen up, this is an incredibly important Biblical term – I would put it in the top three most important Christian/Biblical terms for you to understand.

Justify, justification, is an official courtroom term that refers to the moment (in a modern courtroom) when a judge reads the verdict of "not guilty" and the gavel echoes through the chamber – ending the trial and setting the accused free.

God's first objective is to declare you not guilty.

Let that sink in. You know better than anyone else in this room how little you deserve a not guilty verdict. You have consciences. You do things that make you feel your guilt all the time! And you know that not only has God has seen every single one of those, God also has seen all the other things you did wrong that but your consciences were either too ignorant or too hardened to even feel guilty about them.

And yet it has been God's mission, from the minute that sin drove a wedge between Creator and created, to declare us not guilty of the very things we are guilty of. What a God of love we have. Even when we have wronged him countless times, he has made it his mission to set us free from the guilty verdict we deserve.

And how will God justify us? Through faith – trust in our God’s love and promise to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And let’s be clear here friends, even this faith, this trust is not our doing but God’s – this is *his* rescue mission and it doesn’t rely on *our* faithfulness. Paul makes that clear by reminding us that this faith in justification, this love of God has been **poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.**

Paul says it in verse 1: Objective complete! Check it off the list: **We have been justified through faith.** And don’t forget to let the blessing of this completed objective sink in: Because **we have been justified through faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.**

That faith in your heart that loves God and trusts that we have been declared not guilty is proof that the Spirit has been poured into your heart and objective one is complete.

Objective 2: Die for us.

What do we have faith in? How can a just and holy God declare guilty people not guilty? Take a look at the second paragraph.

At the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Talk about another beautiful and loaded objective. Let that one sink in.

While we were still powerless, while we were still sinners – without you having done anything to earn it, while you were incapable of doing anything to earn it, Jesus died for you. Jesus paid the debt you owed. Jesus took the guilty verdict on your behalf.

And just like the first objective, Paul says it in verse 9: Objective complete! Check it off the list: **We have now been justified by his blood.** And don’t forget to let the blessings of this completed objective sink in: since we have been justified by his blood, we have been saved from God’s wrath. We have been reconciled to God through the death of his Son. Things between you and the God of heaven and earth are good. The wedge between creator and created has been removed.

Finally, in those last verses comes the big future objective: Since this is true, Paul says, since we have now been justified by his blood, since we have been reconciled with God *we shall be saved.*

Objective 3: Saving you from the wrath of God, the wages of sin, this world of suffering.

In other words: **He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to completion.**

God is not done with you yet. The same God who in love poured faith in your heart by the Holy Spirit, the same God who in love sent his Son to die for you while you were powerless and sinful, the same God who has justified you by faith in Jesus’ blood, will finish the job. He will save you.

Friends, this is a worldview altering truth. God is not done with you yet. The same God who has already proven that he will do whatever it takes to save you (even dying on a cross) will finish the mission he started. He will save you. He will do whatever it takes so that you will be in heaven with him.

In view of this truth can your heart and head begin to feel and understand how Paul would say, **“We boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only that, we even glory in our suffering.”?**

It may not be a natural response to suffering, but not only accepting, but rejoicing in suffering is a heart of faith speaking this truth: God is not done with me yet. I know that no matter what I go through, no matter what I suffer, the God who has already died for my sins and given me faith will use that suffering as a part of his mission to save me.

And when my heart wrestles with this (with accepting suffering that I can’t avoid or lessen, and not just accepting but glorying in, rejoicing in it) – when my heart wrestles with that (and it does, you better believe my heart wrestles with that, and yours will too), Paul reminds us to look at what God has already done for us.

God’s not going to sacrifice his own Son for you and then fail to bring you home to heaven.

God’s not going to pour out his Spirit into your heart and then fail to finish the mission and save you.

Friends, this is the hope we have.

When we suffer, and we will, we will not always know why God is allowing it. We will not always be able to figure out how he is using it for our good. BUT, there is no doubt that he loves us – my faith, Jesus’ cross make that hope very real.

This friends, is how we Christians respond to suffering. We avoid and lessen suffering when we can, but when we can’t, we welcome it with open arms because we know that our God is not done with us yet and he will use everything in life (even our sufferings) to finish his mission, to save you.

When the crosses, the sufferings of life cease to be an object of torture, and begin to be viewed as a tool God will use to save you, that is when even suffering becomes glorious.

God is not done with you yet.

Amen.