

Introduction

A couple of weeks ago, there was a terrible accident on the farm of my wife's aunt and uncle. He had just finished chores about an hour ago and they were both getting ready for bed when they had a knock on their door. A good Samaritan had stopped to let them know that there was smoke coming from their barn. They called the fire station, and her uncle went to the barn to see if he could save the animals inside, but only ended up with burns for his effort. The firefighters arrived and fought the flames through the night. When the morning came, however, the barn was no longer standing. The firefighters brought in an excavator to pick through the ruins, making sure there were no more embers that could start another fire. The farmers had lost many of their animals. They some expensive machinery. It was a total loss.

However, when they called the family to tell them their news, I was very surprised with their attitude. As painful as it was for them to tell us what had happened, their news was filled with echoes of, "thank God." Thank God that stranger stopped and knocked on their door. Thank God that the firefighters were able to save the animals outside. Thank God the fire didn't reach their house too. Thank God no one lost their life. Even though it was a night of loss and suffering, they were able to count their blessings as well. **Their faith led them to praise God for what they still had rather than despairing over what they had lost.**

Transition

We have all suffered in our lives. Some of us have gone through trials like that one. Others of us haven't, and I pray, God-willing, that you will never have to. The fact is, we live in a fallen, sinful world. And as long as we live in this world, we will have all kinds of troubles **that will leave us asking, "Why?"** But God assures us that we do not suffer needlessly. In our lesson for today, the apostle Paul tells us of God's great love for us **and the hope that it brings us**, even during times of suffering.

Part 1: God's Love and Our Hope

Paul begins writing this portion of his letter, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is a very important truth, and it all centers around that word: justified. What does it mean that we have been justified? Let me put it into a picture for you. You are the culprit in a big court case. **You have been convicted of serious crimes**, and the evidence is stacked against you. The jury has decided, and you know the verdict is coming: "guilty." But before the judge makes the call, a man runs through the doors. He cries out, "Stop! It was me! I'll

take the blame!” And, although you can’t believe it, the judge lets it fly. The man is put in your place, and the judge declares you, “not guilty.” Okay, I know that’s not how court works, and so that case would be very unrealistic. But the meaning of justification is tied up in that illustration.

God demands perfection, but our sin makes us imperfect. It is clearly written in the Scriptures that sinners deserve death. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, we are guilty. But, because God loves us, he wanted to save us. So, he sent his son to take the eternal punishment that we deserved. In doing this, we were justified; declared “not guilty!” This gift itself is so much more than we deserve!

But our good news doesn’t end there. Because we have been justified by God, we obtain many other gifts through that justification. As Paul already mentioned, we have peace with God. While we were sinners, we were enemies of God. Hostile toward him, in fact. And that makes God’s grace, **his undeserved love for us**, even more amazing. Later in our text, Paul tells us, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” Who does that? Personally, the list of people that I would die for is very limited. Sure, I would give up my life if it meant saving my wife, because I love her, and she is that important to me. But Jesus had no obligation to us to save us. After all, we are just dirty sinners. **We were so lost in our sinful ways that there was nothing we could do to save ourselves. We were truly powerless.**

Even so, Christ gave up his life for us! Even the apostle Paul admits that this makes no sense to our human reason. “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.” Even on rare occasions, if someone had the opportunity to give their life for another, even if they were a morally upright and good person, they might not take that chance. We value our lives so highly. Paul continues, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Again, this makes no sense to us. **But this was God’s will for us.** If someone continually rebelled against you, sinning against you time after time and never apologizing, would you be able to say that you loved them? I don’t think I could. **But that is just how God deals with us.** His love is so amazing, all surpassing, that he gave his perfect Son to be our substitute! And through faith in Jesus’ sacrifice, we have peace with God **where we had once deserved only his wrath.** In fact, Paul says, “we boast in the hope of the glory of God.” When Jesus returns, we will not receive the punishment we deserve for our sins. We have confidence that God will take us to be with him. What amazing grace and hope that we have!

Part 2: Hope From Our Sufferings

The apostle follows up with this, however: “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings.” This statement may give us some pause. We boast in our sufferings? We have all experienced suffering in our lives. It is painful, it is unpleasant, and it doesn’t seem like it would be much good for our body or our soul. How, then could we boast in our sufferings? **When we suffer, we don’t thank God for it.** Suffering takes away our earthly possessions. Suffering brings illness that takes away the lives of those that we love. Suffering brings pain to our very souls. In the moment of suffering, it can be easy to shake our fist at God instead. “Why, God? How could you let this happen? If you love me, how could you do this to me?”

There are also cases where suffering is the result of our Christian faith. We are blessed here in the United States with freedom of religion. But for the Romans to whom Paul wrote, these words would soon ring true. When they received this letter from Paul, the emperor, Nero, was mostly indifferent toward Christians. But in a couple of years, he would change his mind. Christians would be persecuted across the Roman empire. They would be hunted down, forced to meet in secret places. The ones who were caught were killed, often part of the gruesome display in the coliseum. Nero would even sign off on Paul’s execution. Persecution of this sort is not common here, but across the world Christians are tortured and killed for their faith every day. We may be tempted to hide our faith, to blend in with the world, when we are threatened with suffering for our faith. After all, we would rather avoid our suffering.

But Jesus didn’t shy away from his suffering. In our gospel lesson for today, Satan, through Peter, tried to tempt Jesus to take the easy way out, the way that would not involve his passion on Good Friday. But Jesus rebuked him, and said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” He lived and died on those words too. He stayed on the path God set for him until he literally bore his cross, and he showed his love by suffering on that cross for unrighteous sinners like you and me. And in doing this, he gave us an example of bearing our crosses.

Yes, our lives will be filled with suffering. But Paul doesn’t leave us there. He continues, “we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance produces character; and character produces hope.” How can suffering be good for us? When I was in high school, I ran cross country. I had never run long distances such as that before, and so it was quite a tough adjustment for me. The coach started me off easy: He had me run a mile or two, and I could take breaks to walk when I needed. Starting out, that was still very hard, and I was sore for the next day’s practice. Slowly but surely, the distance would

increase, and the walking time would decrease, until I no longer needed a break to walk. Every day I could take myself a little further for a little longer, until I was able to run 5, 6, 7 miles with no break!

This is like our crosses. The more we suffer, the more we learn to endure it, to persevere through it. The more we persevere, the more our Christian character is built up as we seek to live a life pleasing to God. And the stronger our Christian character, the stronger our hope, our sure confidence that we are saved by grace through faith. Paul finishes this section: “and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” Yes, the life of the Christian is complicated. We have God’s love, hope, and peace, but our suffering may very well continue. But we see that the love, hope, and peace that we have give us more hope even in the midst of suffering.

Conclusion

What does this all mean? I’ll tell you that it does not mean we should go out looking for trouble, into every dark alley or dangerous place, always seeking to suffer to increase our hope. God gives us moments of quiet in our lives as well, and we can take comfort in those. But that quiet cannot last forever, and suffering will enter our lives once again. But remember that we never suffer needlessly. We will lose things that are valuable to us in this life. We will even have people that we love taken away from us. But when we suffer, we can turn to God, taking hold of the hope he has given us through his Son Jesus Christ. Our suffering will not last forever. When our lives draw to a close, or when Jesus returns to judge the earth, we can take comfort in the fact that we have been justified through our faith in Christ. And through that we have the ultimate hope that God will deliver us to be with him in heaven for eternity, where we will never suffer again. May God grant that we cling to that hope throughout our lives, during both the good times and the bad. Amen.