



Temple Baptist Church
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Dr. Mark E. Gaskins, *Senior Pastor*
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Suffering and the Saints: “The Miracle of Endurance”
Romans 5:1-11

It was one of those statements that grabs your attention and burns itself deeply into your heart. Dr. John Eddins, my seminary theology professor made it as he was talking about miracles one day. It had been only a year since his beloved wife had died after a long, courageous battle with cancer. In the midst of his comments about the reality, nature, and purpose of miracles, he said something like this:

“You know, we hear so much today about miracles of healing. And when someone recovers from a serious illness, we rightly say that it was a miracle. But what about those who don't recover? *What about the miracle of endurance?*”

“*The miracle of endurance*”! I had never thought about it like that!

Usually, when we think of miracles, we think of healings, mighty works, or signs and wonders. We think of miracles as God's intervening in difficult, even impossible circumstances to deliver us from hardships and suffering.

But could it be that the strength to endure when God does *not* choose to relieve our hard circumstances is also a miracle?

How long, O LORD?

Now no one is immune from trials and hard times. They come in many different forms—illness, tragedy, family problems, or a host of other difficulties and distresses. For ancient Christians, and for Christians in many parts of our world today, trials may come in the form of persecution.

Sometimes it seems like we face one hardship after another, a crisis at every turn. I don't know about you, but there have been plenty of times in my life when I could really identify with the psalmists who penned the psalms of lament, prayer-songs that were written to help the people of God pour out their complaints and longings for deliverance to God—sort of an ancient form of the blues. Maybe you remember the one we looked at in the first sermon in this series, Psalm 13:¹

**How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?**

**Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.**

**But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.**

“How long, O Lord? How much? When will you deliver?” Have you ever felt this way?

As I’ve told you earlier in this series, for many years, I was hesitant to express it. But through psalms such as this one, God graciously taught me that when we do feel this way, we can freely express these feelings to him in complete honesty. He’s not threatened by our questions or complaints. He lovingly hears our cries.

But as I’ve also said earlier, sooner or later we have to get beyond the questions and complaints. If we wallow in them, it will only make us sink deeper into the mire of our suffering and depression, and will lead to bitterness. We have to move beyond our consternation and find strength and hope from God if we’re to endure trials successfully.

Moving beyond lament

But how can we do that? Maybe the Apostle Paul can offer us some help and insight here in our text.

As Paul has been laying out his understanding of the human condition and what God has done about it in the first four chapters of Romans, he has stressed two things. First, all people, Jews as well as Gentiles, are sinners and in need of salvation. Second, God has done for us what we couldn’t do for ourselves, since no one can be saved by the works of the law.

Now in our text, as he summarizes his argument to this point, Paul says that because of God’s saving activity in his Son Jesus Christ, we who have placed our faith in Jesus now have peace with God through him. Through Christ we have been justified—set right with God, delivered from sin and freed from our guilt. We have access to God’s grace, and so we boast in the hope of sharing the glory of God. So far, so good. Being set right with God, that’s something to boast about! We’re not boasting about something we’ve done, but about what God has done.

But then Paul takes what seems to us like a strange turn when he goes on to say, **“And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings . . .”** (5:3).

Now wait a minute, Paul! What do you mean we *boast in our sufferings* (literally, **“our tribulations”**)? Personally, I take no pleasure in pain! How can suffering be something we can boast or have joy about?

He doesn’t leave us hanging. Look at what he says— we boast in our sufferings because we know 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 who has been given to us” (5:3-5).

This hope is not only assured by our experience of God’s love poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit; God demonstrated it beyond question by Jesus’ death and resurrection

for us. If he died for us while we were his enemies, now that he has reconciled us to God, he'll certainly save us and bring us to final glory!

So on top of all this, we not only boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God and in our sufferings; we boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation!

Could it really be that Paul is saying to us here that enduring suffering is actually *a key component* of the Christian life? To hear some preachers talk, once we trust Christ everything is supposed to go our way; if we really have faith in him, we'll prosper and always be healthy and blessed.

But that didn't seem to be Paul's experience, did it? It certainly hasn't been the experience of those who have given their lives for their faith as martyrs—in both ancient and modern times. And quite frankly, it probably hasn't been the experience of most of us here today.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, among Jews, Christians, and even pagans, suffering was often seen as a means of divine training. In some cases, it was viewed as God's disciplining his children to turn them back to his ways, as a parent disciplines his or her child. Sometimes it was seen as being like athletic training, as an opportunity for developing skill and endurance.²

Gary was one of my former colleagues at Wingate University. He's been a dear friend since our days together in seminary. He used to coach high school basketball. So when Jo Ann coached middle school basketball at her first teaching assignment, he would occasionally come and help her with practice.

One of the key tenets of Gary's coaching philosophy was to make the players run in practice, run some more, and then run still more, even when they felt like they were going to die! They'd be tired and sore and would complain, but as they endured that running, they developed real stamina. Gary's teams often defeated teams that were more talented, better teams, especially if they could stay close and force the game into overtime. Enduring all that running had developed such a strength and stamina that when the other teams were worn out, Gary's guys were still good to go! Their *pain* produced *endurance*!

That seems to be what Paul is talking about here. We boast in our suffering because it produces endurance, and that endurance produces character. That character is proven like metal that's been tempered, or gold or silver that's been refined, or pottery that's been successfully fired in the kiln. It's this character that's been proven that then produces hope that's grounded both in what God has done in Christ and in our own experience of the Holy Spirit, God's presence dwelling in us.

So instead of being *foreign* to the Christian life, in Paul's view here, suffering plays *an integral role*. God has a purpose in allowing it. It's not without meaning in our Christian experience. As Walter Wessel has said, "A Christian can rejoice in suffering because he knows that it is not meaningless."

Eugene Peterson has stated it well:

Suffering is not evidence of God's absence, but of God's presence, and it is in our experience of being broken that God does his surest and most characteristic salvation work.

There is a way to accept, embrace, and deal with suffering that results in a better life, not a worse one, and more of the experience of God, not less.

God is working out his salvation in our lives the way he has

always worked it out—at the place of brokenness, at the cross of Jesus, and at the very place where we take up our cross.³

That doesn't mean it's easy. It wouldn't be endurance if it were. Philip Yancey tells of a letter he received from a friend whose daughter, Peggie, was terminally ill. The mother wrote:

The weekend before she went into the hospital for the last time, Peggie came home all excited about a quotation from William Barclay that her minister had used. She was so taken with it that she had copied it down on a 3 x 5 card for me: "Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory."

She said her minister must have had a hard week, because after he read it he banged the pulpit and then turned his back to them and cried.⁴

God's ways

When it's all said and done, doesn't it come down to this? Sometimes, God intervenes in miraculous ways to accomplish his will in and for us. Sometimes there are mighty deliverances and wonderful demonstrations of his power. When that's the case, we rejoice and praise him for his marvelous grace and power. But often, maybe most often, *rather than preventing or removing our sufferings, God chooses to grant us "the miracle of endurance."*

It's in our endurance that our hope becomes real to us. And when it does, we can then say with Paul in Romans 8:18, 28-39 . . .

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all day long;

we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And for that I say, “Thanks be to God!” Amen!

†MEG

¹ Scripture quotations are from The New Revised Standard Version Bible.

² C. H. Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, Ga: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 134ff.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, adapted from Foreword of Alan E. Nelson, *Embracing Brokenness: How God Refines Us Through Life's Disappointments* (NavPress, 2002).

⁴ Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Zondervan, 1997), 157.