

Gospel-centered suffering

Pastor Wyley Jenkins

Robert was the chief accountant for one of the largest hospitals in the U.S. and he was also a devout Christian man. He was coming to the end of his first year at this position and he had a problem. He had lost 60 million dollars. Not exactly lost, but Robert could not explain why the books he had did not match the amount of money in the bank accounts. He literally did not sleep for 2 days. He prayed and begged God to help him, but nothing changed immediately. He went through account after account. Finally, Robert called his boss and admitted he could not account for the 60 million dollars. He knew he would lose his job and go to jail. They called him to the top floor of one of the many buildings the hospital owns. He had not slept in days and was angry. He was angry at God. Robert told me that as he was walking through the entrance into the hospital he was questioning God. Why me? What did I do? Why do you hate me? Who will feed my children while I am in jail? As he entered the ground floor his questions were interrupted by the sound of a child crying. He could not see the child because it was around a corner. But then he saw her. She was maybe 8 or 9 years old and had a bald head. She was crying, "it hurts mommy, it hurts." Robert told me that, at that very moment, he felt like God answered him deep in his heart, "You are asking me questions, now I have a question for you. Do you want to switch places with her mom?" He said it was as if, instantly, all the pain he had felt, left. He then walked into the elevator, and, as the elevator rose, so did his faith. He began to thank and even praise God, and when he got off the elevator he was a changed man. By the way, in the end, God helped Robert find the lost money and he was a hero. He told me he cannot really explain what happened to him that day. "In an instant, I came into the presence of God and my perspective totally changed," he told me. "I wanted to worship, not curse. I felt so small before him."

Robert's story is not unique. In God's Word, we have story after story of pain and suffering. We have sickness, death, pain, famine, disease, hatred, rape, deceit, persecution and war. But, we also have story after story of people who find hope in the darkest times. God parts the red sea. He makes water spring up in the desert. He brings down bread from heaven. He heals the sick, comforts the brokenhearted, and walks with his people through the valley of the shadow of death. But the pain is very real. They were still hungry and thirsty, and scared and sick. Not everyone is healed. Not everyone is better. One of the greatest ironies for me was reading story after story of people

worshipping in the middle of pain. Job lost 10 children and everything he owned, and still worshipped God. In Job 1:21, he says:

“Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

In the same way, King David lost a child and worshipped. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown in jail and sang praises while chained to the wall of the jail. Why did suffering lead these men of God to praise instead of curse? Why did the pain lead to worship? The answer is not found in their pain, but in their relationship with God. The answer is that suffering brings out of you and me what is in us. And worship is what happens when God's true children are brought into close communion with Him through their suffering. In other words, suffering has a way of making the real physical world fade away, and the reality of Almighty God come to the front and center of our lives. In the end, we encounter God's presence in a more real way in a hospital gown than in a wedding dress. One author puts it this way: *“We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”*

Today, I do not pretend to have easy answers for you. I don't have the formula to fix your pain and suffering. But what I do want to do is point you to a person. I want you to know that through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in the midst of your pain, your struggles, and your tribulation, you have an everlasting relationship with the Triune God, whose grace, mercy, and steadfast love endures forever.

In Romans 5, the Apostle Paul connects the Gospel to suffering. Paul has spent the first four chapters of his letter to the Romans explaining the Gospel. Then, in verse 3, he seems to jump to another subject. He shifts from the Gospel to rejoicing in suffering. But what do four chapters on the Gospel have to do with our pain and suffering here and now? Are they related? I wholeheartedly believe God wants us to connect the dots. He wants us to understand that the Gospel creates a new pair of lenses through which we must see everything, even suffering.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

For us who believe, all our sins, past sins, present sins, and future sins are wiped clean by the blood of Jesus on the cross. They are forgotten and erased. This miracle of getting Jesus' good works and spotless record through faith in him is called justification. Justification means when God sees us, he sees Jesus righteousness. He declares us righteous and innocent. We are justified. This justification may feel like a high theological truth that has no impact on your life, but that is not true. In Romans 5:1-5, Paul tells us about four very practical Gospel implications for suffering. Today, I am going to explain those four.

1. Because of the Gospel, we suffer as sons, not criminals

Paul says, *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* He does not say we have the peace of God, but rather peace with God. The Bible teaches both ideas, but here Paul focuses on the fact that we are no longer criminals and enemies. The war is over when we trust in the Gospel. God makes us sons. We are not on the other side of the battle being shot at by God; we are sons. Have you ever had something bad happen to you and you thought, “Why is God punishing me?” or “What did I do to deserve this?” or “How long are you going to have me suffer like this?” First of all, let me say that even if the questions are wrong, the conversation with God is right. What about questioning God? Is it OK to question him? The answer might surprise you. Did you know that 60-70% of the Psalms are laments? Laments are songs in which the Psalmist expresses suffering, trials, tribulation and pain, but, ultimately, hope in God. These are God-inspired, Holy Spirit-breathed songs and they are at times crying out in pain. They even question God. This questioning is never in arrogance or judgment, but as a child questions his mother and father. In the end, though, they always trust in God. The Psalmists suffer as sons, and not enemies. The Gospel teaches that God has declared you his son or daughter. He does not punish us as he will punish those who reject him. We do, however, receive discipline and training as sons. Do you understand the difference between disciplining children and punishing criminals? Because of the Gospel, we are children, and even when we suffer it is to teach us and to mold us as children. Run to God in your sufferings, because he is your Father.

2. Because of the Gospel, we have God’s grace for every need

Paul then reminds them that, *“Through [Christ] we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.”* Because of Christ’s righteousness, we have the right to stand before God. The most glorious part is that we do not just have access to the one true God and his grace; we stand in his grace. If you have ever been in a swimming pool, you understand what it means to stand in something. *Whatever* direction you turn in a pool, there is water. And, because of the amazing work of Christ on the cross, whatever direction we turn, there is his grace. We breathe it and live in it. This series of sermons we have been preaching is called the Gospel-centered series. What we keep saying is that the Gospel is the source of our power as Christians. We are not just talking about religion. Many religions have good rules and foster good behavior. But the question is: where is their power? When they suffer, where is their strength? You are children of God and have access to the very throne of the King of the universe. You have everything you need in him. Do you need wisdom? Ask. Do you need healing? Ask. Do you need grace to endure suffering because he won’t heal you? Then ask. Do you need people to walk alongside you? We are here. God has given you grace and power. Even when the storm rages and beats upon the ship of life, the anchor of God’s grace holds us firm. The Apostle Paul says it this way: *“Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this (a messenger of Satan that was causing him to suffer), that it should leave me.⁹ But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”* 2 Corinthians 12:8-9a. Run to God in everything you do. His grace is sufficient.

3. Because of the Gospel, we suffer with an eternal perspective

Paul then says that *“we rejoice in hope of the glory of God”*. I want to rejoice as well, but what is the “hope of the glory of God”? All throughout Paul’s letters, he refers to the resurrection as glorification.¹ Originally, we were made to reflect God and to be his image. But we lost our original glory, our God-like-ness, because of sin. And, though we may have to endure many hardships on earth, nothing can take the hope of our having this glory returned to us. The Gospel assures us that because Jesus rose from the dead, so too we will rise. Because he lives forever, so will we. And, if God glorified him, we too shall be glorified with him. In a very real sense, then, it is as if God wants us to look back from eternity onto our present suffering and see how small and light they are compared to an eternity with Him. As Paul himself sees it through Gospel eyes, *“... this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”* (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Let me stop here and address a common but dangerous misunderstanding that has become popular in the Christian world today. God makes many promises in his Word, but if you do not understand and apply the promises correctly, you can easily hurt yourself and others. Let me give you an example. Isaiah, and then Peter, when they speak of Jesus’ crucifixion both say, *“by his wounds we are healed”*. Let me affirm that is 100% true. Because of what Jesus did, our spiritual, physical and emotional healing is guaranteed. So I won’t debate that Jesus died to heal us. But the mistake is to assume that the promised healing is guaranteed now on this earth and if you are not healed now you are somehow the problem. Our hope is not that God will always heal on earth, but rather that one day *“He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things [will] have passed away”* Revelation 21:4. But now, Paul says he cannot cure his own thorn in the flesh, and God actually refused to fix it. Then, in 2 Timothy 4:20, we see Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus. Why would the Apostle leave his dear brother sick in Miletus? The answer is simple. The power to heal is in God’s will and timing, not in Paul’s. Sometimes, God says, “I will heal you. But just not now.” Even Paul had to wait. But why would God make us wait? That is the final idea today.

4. Because of the Gospel, we suffer for God’s good purposes

I grew up on a farm. So my brothers and I learned to keep and take care of animals. I will never forget one day when my father told me to change the water for some animals. I told him it was only a little dirty and did not need to be changed. He then took a stick and began to stir the water trough. In an instant, dirt and slime clouded the water and you could tell it was not good water. Our hearts are similar. We think we are clean and good people. But, just as soon as the pain or pressure comes, the dirt in our hearts muddies everything. God has many good purposes in mind when he stirs the waters of our hearts. Let me share just a few purposes, which the Word of God gives for our sufferings:

- 2 Corinthians 1:3-6: Our suffering prepares us to comfort others.
- 2 Corinthians 12:7-9: Our suffering humbles us.

¹ See Romans 3:23, 8:17, 18, 21 and 30 for examples of how he uses it in the same letter.

- James 1:2-4: Our suffering builds character in us.
- 1 Peter 1:3-7: Our suffering refines our faith.
- John 9:1-3: Our suffering reveals God's glory.
- Romans 8:28-29: Our suffering makes us more like Jesus.
- Job 1-2,40-42: Our suffering makes us trust in God even when we don't understand why we are suffering.

Our passage today speaks about how God is producing hope through suffering:

³Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Imagine the process of growth as stairs or rungs on a ladder that cannot be skipped. Each stair leads to the next, and the last stair leads to an abiding hope in God. Christian "suffering," therefore, is purposeful. Because our suffering produces endurance, and that endurance produces character, and that character produces hope. And God wants us to be the kind of people who have hope in the darkest of moments. But to have that kind of hope you must have character. And to have that kind of character you must also have endurance. But endurance of that kind only comes through sufferings. So God is not punishing us, he is forming us into the image of his Son. All suffering has a purpose, even if it is sometimes hard to tell what that purpose is. So, let us suffer then, knowing full well that God knows best and will one day deliver us from the body of this death and replace our momentary suffering with everlasting joy!

Questions to meditate upon:

1. In the introduction, did Robert's circumstances change or did his perspective change? How does the way we see our suffering affect us? How does encountering God change our perspective?
2. Why do you think 60-70% of the Psalms talk about trials and suffering?
3. How would you explain the difference between the punishment of a criminal and the discipline of your child? Which perspective does God want us to have of our sufferings?
4. The Gospel is the key that grants access to God's grace and power. How does God's grace and power transform our suffering? (See 2 Corinthians 12:7-9.)
5. Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. Why does Paul call his terrible sufferings light and momentary? (See 2 Corinthians 11:23-27 and 1 Corinthians 4:9-13 for a partial list of Paul's sufferings.)
6. If you are a Christian, how does the Gospel impact the way you see your suffering? How does God want you to see your suffering?
7. What advice and words of comfort might you give to a Christian who is suffering?