

Holy Suffering?

A sermon on Romans 5:1-8
for Sunday June 18, 2017

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

A couple weeks ago when I was down at school for a summer class on the gospel of Mark. It was a small class, just three of us, which made for an informal enough setting that we got to go off on some very interesting tangents. One of these tangents was regarding the letters of Paul. As it turns out, no one in that class likes Paul very much - the professor included. And it is passages like the one I just read that have cemented that opinion.

Although, when I approached this text, I already had it in my mind that I wasn't going to like it, and like a self-fulfilling prophesy, I found it rather easy to well, tear it apart.

Allow me a brief reenactment of my first read through today's passage:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith - **ugh! Not that again. We are justified by GRACE.**

Let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ - **blah, blah blah...**

we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God - **Sorry, but boasting is just obnoxious, and claiming to share the glory of God is a bit egotistical. Whatever happened to humility?**

And not only that, but we also boast in our suffering - **And now you sound like a masochist. A masochist whose arguments get used to justify slavery!**

knowing that suffering produces endurance - **yeah right. Sometimes what doesn't kill doesn't make you stronger, sometimes it just leads to infirmity and despair.**

I'm going to stop, because I think you get the idea.

Go in with a chip on your shoulder and you'll succeed in finding a fight.

Still, I really get why one of my classmates the other week said that he couldn't figure out why Paul is considered canon, or authoritative, and therefore included in our Bibles.



The thing that gives me pause, however, is that **it is canon**. And it is canon **because** the early Christians were reading this same letter that we are, and they were sharing it with other Christian communities, and they were upset when some Christian groups decided that only the gospel of Luke should be canon, because they saw such value in Paul's letters that they wanted to



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include not only the other three gospels, but all of these letters, from Paul and others.

Because of this, and because of my general love for the ancient church, not to mention the fact that I was expected to preach on this thing today, I figured it was worth a second read, this time with an open mind, and with the guidance of one very talented preacher of the fourth century to show me a different way of interpreting Paul's words.

So, let's try this again.

We are justified, and because of this, we have peace with God. And Paul is inviting us to *stay* in this right relationship with God that we are in because of Christ.

“For if He reconciled us when we were in open war with Him, it is reasonable that we should abide in a state of reconciliation, and give unto Him this reward for that He may not seem to have reconciled untoward and unfeeling creatures to the Father.”

If Christ gave us this second chance at being in right relationship with God, we might as well take advantage of it and prove our gratitude.

Often we think of “standing in grace” as Paul puts it, simply as having our sins forgiven. That fourth century preacher man I mentioned earlier corrects us here:

The purpose of Christ bringing us close to God was not simply that we might have the remission of sins but that we might receive these gifts of grace, namely the knowledge of God, ...coming to knowledge of the Truth, and unutterable blessings that pass understanding and language. And included in this is sharing or perhaps better put, participating in the glory of God. That kind of language can seem blasphemous but has been affirmed by Christians throughout the ages, albeit in various understandings. Our own Presbyterian Church best expresses this in our confessions, the first point in the Westminster shorter catechism I believe it is...: What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

As for the boasting bit - I'm ashamed to say that was just a misreading of the Greek. While **καυχόμεθα** is often translated as “we boast” it is better translated “we glory” or “we rejoice.” There is a different Greek phrase **μεγαλα ἄνχεω** used to indicate “the haughty speech which stirs up strife or provokes others” that we normally associate with “boasting.”



If, as Paul tells us, we are to participate in divine glory, I can see that as a reason for rejoicing. A strong enough reason even to warrant the next line, that we also rejoice in our suffering, or tribulations, literally a crushing pressure.

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This line can and has been used, misused in my opinion, to keep the oppressed “in their place.” It has also been interpreted to mean that it is good to suffer and that suffering should be sought out and even self-inflicted. I don’t think that is what it means.



Paul himself specifies that these crushing pressures are to be welcomed and rejoiced in because they produce endurance, or patience. This really narrows down what he means by rejoicing in our suffering. I think it is easiest to understand this through examples of discomfort that we know is part of self-improvement.

The marines have a saying that pain is weakness leaving the body.

In the same way, recovering addicts take comfort in the maxim that urges and cravings are the addiction leaving the body. A lot of people just aren’t comfortable with the discomfort, certainly don’t rejoice in it, and so face the choice of being miserable through the discomfort, or avoid it by giving in to the craving, which depending on what it is, leads to longer lasting misery.

there is also however, something to be said for meeting the other stresses of life with rejoicing as though they too will strengthen you. And met with that attitude, those stresses also actually can make you stronger.

One of the best ways I have seen this explained was in a post on an online forum that has a lot of people posting their experiences in developing discipline and motivation for life. This is from a post entitled “Your Triggers are not your Enemy”

Yesterday during yoga class a wasp landed on my leg. My initial reaction was to swat it away. In the moment, however, I paused. That day I had been wrestling with some personal demons. Demons I’d been aiming to kill for some time. No matter how high I climb, they always seem to drag me back down. The ghosts of old karma, haunting me from day to day.

As I strived for presence in my practice, I thought to myself, "If I move too quickly, this wasp will sting me. To avoid getting stung, I must be still." Then it dawned on me - the wasp didn't have to be a distraction. On the contrary, the wasp offered valuable assistance as a tool to stay even *more* conscious. At the risk of being stung by this outside challenger, my motivation greatly increased to be even more presently engaged.



For the entire duration of the class the wasp slowly crept along my leg and foot.

"Warrior II? No problem. Child's pose? Trying not to sit on you, buddy.." A full hour and

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a half. It's safe to say it became one of the most consciously engaging classes I've ever participated in.

I often find when everything is just perfect, the sun is shining & there's not a worry on the mind, that it's easy to slide back into complacency. Like the wasp during my practice, our enemies have either the potential to be nuisances or allies. Inconveniences in our lives never ever fully go away for good. As long as we are alive, demons will be present. If we fight against them they can sting the living the shit out of us. However, if we see them as a way to grow stronger, they become incredibly valuable allies in making us strive harder than we ever before thought possible.

Our individual wasps enable us to engage in ways that aren't always possible without them. I now recognize that their threat of the sting fuels the drive to succeed. Sometimes they're there, sometimes they're not. Sometimes they fly away, but they can always come back again. Often when least expected. I no longer seek to rid myself of my wasps. Despite the fact that there will be times they aggravate me. Times when I get stung. Times when there are just too many to deal with, I will always strive for my wasps and me to work side by side.

If this is what Paul had in mind when he wrote that we ought to be rejoicing in our stress, then just maybe he actually is worth listening to.

He says that just as our crushing pressure produces endurance, the endurance in turn produces what is often translated as “experience” or “character.” If one is familiar with the Greek education system of the first century, and earlier too, that would be recognized immediately as the word used to describe a young man who has proven himself to be no longer a boy but a man. It means, having been tested, and having passed that test. That also makes a great deal of sense. If you are working on developing that patience and endurance, you're more likely to have increasing success at passing the various tests or challenges you run into throughout your day.



Now Paul brings us back from practical psychology into spirituality and theology. Because that character that is developed in having proven yourself he links to hope. And not just the hope that you will continue to persevere against your demons, but that **same hope** that he referred to before that he says we rejoice in

- the hope of participating in God's glory. **Of enjoying God forever**, as we'd be more likely to express it.

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Chrysostom, that fourth century preacher whose sermon I am pretty much plagiarizing, makes this connection all the clearer in speaking about what a wondrous thing a clean conscience is. A few weeks back I was talking to the kids in the children's sermon about how I was the good kid, and when we were called to the principal's office, my classmates could breathe easy knowing that if the good kid was called they probably weren't in trouble. The same thing is operating here. There is great freedom in not expecting troubling consequences or punishments that you might have coming your way. It is just easier to be hopeful if you have a clean conscience. Why else do you think we start our worship by confessing our shortcomings and being reassured that God forgives us? It is because that reminder relieves the anxiety and shame that might be there in presenting ourselves before God and opens us to being present to Him, and for having that **hope** that we can glorify God and enjoy him forever.



The more we live like that, the more we believe it is possible, and the more we trust in the hope that it will be forever. Which might be what Paul means in saying that our 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. The more we practice doing everything we do out of this love, the easier and more habitual it becomes, and the more we trust in this Holy Spirit.

And for those who still aren't sure about all this, Paul insists that we can have hope because of what God has already done. Not only in providing us with the Holy Spirit but in what Christ did for us.

He did not do it because we were so righteous that we deserved it, for as Paul points out to us, it is rare that anyone will offer to die for the sake of just anyone, even if they are good and righteous and would live if the world were but fair. The fact that Christ died for our sakes when we did not deserve it proves that God must really care about us. It proves that God is a loving God who is always ready to forgive and help us move on and into a deeper relationship with him.

This brings us right back to the beginning of today's reading. We've been justified, God has given us yet another chance. So let us have peace with God.

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*