

## Boasting in Our Sufferings

Romans 5:1-5

*And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing 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 that has been given to us.*

In today's reading from the Letter to the Romans, Paul talks about faith and suffering. The church in Rome, like other early Christian communities, encountered resistance and, at times, intense persecution. So Paul is probably talking about the suffering that comes because of our commitment to following Jesus. We come up against what Paul calls the "principalities and powers" of this world. When you give your life fully to your relationship with God through following Christ, you don't belong any more to those systems and institutions. This can bring tensions and conflicts.

There are also inward struggles as we follow Christ, being transformed into our true selves, the persons God made us to be. This is the work of the inward journey of self-awareness, self-understanding, and awakening to our relationship with God. Paul talked about this as the dying of the old person so the new person can be born; he used the image of dying and rising with Christ. When we start paying attention to our inner life, we often face pains, anger, hurts, hostilities...things we would rather not deal with. Then we do the spiritual work of letting go all of that so we can live the freedom of love.

Paul wrote elsewhere about the suffering that is simply part of life—illness, aging, death, loss. Our culture is obsessed with pursuing the illusion of a suffering-free life and offers us all kinds of distractions from the pain that is part of life. We hardly know what to do with our suffering except try and run from it or anesthetize ourselves against it.

Paul offers a better way. We can embrace our suffering instead of running from it. We can learn to look deeply into our struggles and find there the presence of God's grace, the gift of God's love for us. Paul isn't speaking lightly of this. He knows about real suffering. He was rejected by his own religious community because he chose to follow Christ. He was beaten, thrown in jail, and even shipwrecked while on one of his missionary journeys. He had some sort of chronic personal suffering he named only as a "thorn in his flesh." Paul found in his own experience that our relationship with God through Christ reveals suffering as a channel of spiritual growth and strengthening.

What IS our relationship with God that enables us to take such a view of suffering? Paul writes that we are "justified by faith" and therefore we "have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Justified means being in a right and firm relationship with God. Faith means opening our minds and hearts to Christ and giving our lives to God through him. Our relationship with God is unshakable not because of anything we have done. We didn't have to be "good" or even "religious" in order to earn God's love. God's love is pure GIFT, which is the literal meaning of the word grace (*karis*). Now we have constant access to this peace that can never be taken from us. It is the peace Jesus talked about when he told his disciples in John's gospel that he was giving them his peace, a peace that the world cannot give, a peace that lets our hearts be untroubled and without fear.

This is where we find ourselves, says Paul, as we follow Christ. Paul uses the image of passing through the doorway into the holiest place in the temple. We have gained access to the very heart of God. That is where we STAND, he says, where our lives are now grounded and rooted. And because this is so, Paul can now say this outlandish thing: We BOAST in our relationship with God and we even BOAST in our sufferings!

Now, we don't like boasting. It sounds, well, too "unchristian"! A part of my otherwise very nurturing upbringing was an unspoken but clear message that we children were not to call attention to our own accomplishments. Bragging, boasting, taking pride in something was seen as a lack of humility. So when I read Paul saying that we boast in our relationship with God and boast in our struggles, our sufferings, I have this little tightening of the stomach. Besides, haven't we seen too much of a Christianity filled with arrogance about doctrinal rightness or numerical growth or financial standing or political clout or some other worldly sign of success? And haven't we all known that person who just seems to be stuck in his or her suffering so much that you want to say, When are you going to DO something about it? Paul is not talking about arrogance or self-pity or a victim mentality.

This word comes out of Paul's Jewish culture and upbringing. There can be bad boasting, which means puffing ourselves up. There can be good boasting, mainly rejoicing in and claiming our relationship with God. In the context of the suffering the Roman Christians and others are facing, the boasting Paul means is claiming their belonging to God through Christ. It is a source of freedom and strength. This kind of boasting means speaking on behalf of our own integrity and our right to exist. It is what women and African Americans and gay and lesbian people finally came to—proclaiming their humanity and dignity and rights as human beings in the face of those who want to define who they are and condemn or oppress them for it. That is the kind of boasting Paul is talking about—I am a child of God, and there is nothing you can do to me, there is no suffering I can experience that can take that away from me!

In the face of the powers and principalities, in the face of the struggles of your spirit or the sufferings of your body, or whatever it is that you are encountering that makes life painful for you—in the midst of that suffering, you can boast of your relationship with God, your being grounded in God’s love, and you can embrace your suffering as carrying within it, in a yet-unrevealed way, God’s grace and peace. Paul opposes the view that if we suffer it must be our own fault or something of which we should be ashamed. Struggles are part of the life of faith and life in general. We can rise above our struggles, our sufferings, not by denying them or pretending they don’t hurt but by acknowledging in the midst of everything that we are loved by God, that our lives are grounded in God. And this whether or not we “feel” it at the moment of our pain. It is an objective reality, in Paul’s view.

When we take this view we begin to get a sense of what Paul now talks about. Something starts to happen in us. We begin to change and deepen because we are no longer denying or avoiding but are embracing our suffering. Suffering produces endurance, or patience, in us. It is not about quick fixes or just getting to a less painful place. It is about accepting this painful experience as an important part of my life, that there is something in it that I am to learn, some way I am to be changed. That’s patience, endurance. Not just putting up with, but fully experiencing and learning from.

As we learn patience and endurance, our “character” is strengthened. The word Paul uses here is like precious metal that is refined by fire. We are tested by the fire of our struggles and suffering. That kind of testing means being made stronger. It is a strength that grows in us as we become more able to embrace struggle and suffering, looking more deeply into it to see God’s presence. Out of this strengthening of character, this refining of our spirits through our struggles, we find hope emerging. It is not the kind of hope that seeks escape by looking for some future time when there will be no suffering. It is hope for the future that is grounded in the present moment as we experience suffering and are not overcome by it.

This kind of hope cannot disappoint us, says Paul, because it is not based on our feelings but on what God has done for us. Paul uses one of the most beautifully graphic images in all his writings: God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. We have this direct infusion of God’s love, God’s very essence, right into the center of our being. Paul has brought it around full circle. We can face and embrace our sufferings and struggles because we stand firmly in the grace of God, God’s gift of love. We don’t need to be ashamed of our sufferings, our weaknesses, our struggles, or anything else. We come to see these things as our teachers, bringing something to us that if we are open to it will deepen and strengthen our lives. As we do this, we finally come to the kind of hope that is not wish-dreaming but grounded in what we

already experience in the midst of difficulties. This hope cannot disappoint us because it is connected to God’s love that has been poured into our hearts.

Paul is talking about finding out for ourselves, through our own experiences, the reality of God’s love in our struggles and sufferings as people of faith. It is important that we have a community in which to embrace our struggles. When we share our struggles with others, we are able to touch that strength in ourselves Paul is pointing to. We cannot and should not try to take away one another’s struggles or suffering, for that would rob each other of what Paul is saying we each can find in ourselves. But we can be a community that expresses in our life the peace, the “standing in God’s grace” that supports and upholds, that reminds each person of her or his belonging to God, and of the love God has poured into our hearts. We will be learning together what it means to boast in our relationship with God and in our sufferings.