



REJOICE IN SUFFERING?

Romans 5:1-5

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Dr. Thomas E. Evans

"Peace! Peace! There is no peace- the war has already begun!" These famous words spoken by Patrick Henry were meant to spur the colonies into action, but even though they are more than two centuries old they fit most perfectly for our times. Peace is something that weighs deep on the hearts of men and women.

It seems that almost everyone is at war: at war with addiction, at war with financial distress, at war with work, at war with a meaningless life, at war with their spouse, at war with family. Maybe it's a cold war, but a war nonetheless. Being estranged from a son or daughter who you don't speak to for years on end leaves a gaping hole in your heart. I have spoken with many of you, and I can see even allowing yourself to think about it for even a fleeting moment brings up deep wells of sorrow, heartache, and pain.

But Paul opens this section of Romans with an astounding statement: There is one place we have peace... one place that truly matters. We have peace with God.

God suffered that same hole in His heart. He felt the pain of rejection and it cut Him to the heart. And it opened a vast gulf between us... one we could not cross. We proved time and again to be unwilling or unable. But Christ crossed the divide and because of him we are no longer strangers. In Jesus we have been reconciled to God and so we have peace.

This peace we have with God is the foundation from which we can build a life of hope and of love. Though this peace is sheer gift and

though it is beginning and end, the beginning of our new life and the destination to which our life leads, there is a whole lot in the middle that Paul speaks of in Romans which requires everything of us: suffering, endurance, and character.

At various times in life, I have taken on running as a means to stay in shape, but I have never been good at it and I never have liked it. The only thing worse than going outdoors for a run is hopping on a treadmill and literally going nowhere! Running is misery, especially the first few times I go out, because I am not sure if I am going to stick with it. And If I don't stay with it for at least a few months, then the pain of the run will have served no purpose whatsoever- just 45 minutes of misery. And many times I have done this.

But after running regularly for a few weeks, I begin to look forward to it. Because I have conquered the pain, because I have begun to reap its benefits, and at that point I know every run will build greater strength and endurance. In this way, it not only builds physical endurance but mental fortitude as well. Thus the suffering of running produces endurance, which builds my will and sense of purpose. It builds a confident hope.

In a very real way, God has built into the human condition the need succeed and persevere through challenges in order to fully become who God meant us to be. This is sadly why the lives of the children of the fabulously wealthy are prone to become train wrecks, filled with addictions and self-destructive behavior. Our inclination as parents is to

protect our children from hardship, to give them everything they could possibly need and to afford them every opportunity. But this is not how we have been created, and the need to strive is a lesson that carries into all aspects of life.

The crucible of hardship not only hones endurance and character for things like running, but also when we suffer brokenness and loss. In running the challenge is not only to keep putting one foot forward, but to keep good form. Without proper form the run can do more damage than good—destroying bones, ligaments and cartilage.

As Christians, when we endure suffering without allowing it to compromise the core of who we are, we build character. We keep good form through suffering by remaining true to our values as Jesus did.

Jesus suffered the scorn of his people, the judgment of the religious authorities and the pain of crucifixion. But it did not change him. He did not stoop to their level. He did not compromise the truth. He did not become bitter and hateful. He always remained a person of mercy and compassion, and as a result he has inspired the world. Even those who don't believe in Jesus as Lord have a profound respect for his character.

In this life we can encounter two types of suffering: meaningless and redemptive suffering. Meaningless suffering degrades, defiles and erodes our soul. This is akin to those runs I went on that never became a habit. Meaningless suffering can destroy us. Psychology has even coined the term “Existential concussion,” which describes the result of long term and severe meaningless suffering characterized by *“profound disorientation in the world such that a person does not know who she is, where she belongs, or how she fits in the world.”* Even Nietzsche, the famous nihilist, talked of finding

meaning when he said, *“to live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.”*

The difference between meaningless and meaningful suffering resides within the individual. Some people left the holocaust as hollow shells of human beings, destroyed by the evil, others found meaning or purpose. It could have been something as simple as appreciating the beauty of a butterfly, or as selfless as sharing your soup with those who were weaker than yourself.

Our character emerges from enduring suffering through a series of choices made each step of the way.

The choice to be truthful...

The choice to be merciful...

The choice to seek peace...

The choice to continue to love...

These are all hard choices. Sometimes impossibly difficult to make.

In the middle of a run there is something called “The Wall.” After running for a few miles it feels impossibly difficult to take one more step. You just want to stop. Every fiber in your body screams give up! To make it past “The Wall”, you have to change your focus. You no longer think about the run but what brings you joy. I might think about a delicious smoked brisket, the music from Pentecost, or a 30 foot, side hill putt that snuck in the corner of the hole! And if you focus hard enough, soon you have made it and can easily go several more miles.

To endure the hardest parts of suffering and temptation, we look to the joy of faith. As Paul said “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Knowing that we have peace with God, Peace! despite whatever wars are raging, it can even become a moment of bliss.

As you make it past The Wall of Temptation in

suffering, God does something amazing and profound. Rather than suffering breaking you down, it begins to sharpen and hone your sense of what is beautiful and of value in the world. Something like a long, hot day in the sun makes a cold sip of water taste *fantastic*. And yet, even that sip of water overtime loses its power.

There is one final Wall we must pass. It is the Wall of Self. If you only ever run for yourself, your destination becomes meaningless.

Now in this life there is more than enough suffering for everyone. In the immortal words of William Goldman author of *The Princess Bride*, “*Life is pain, highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something.*” So to invite more suffering in would be crazy. But as Christians it is our calling. To follow Jesus is to be willing to take on another’s pain, for it is the suffering of love. In some amazing way, our willingness to suffer for another helps them get past The Wall of Meaningless Suffering.

Redemptive suffering was Christ’s willingness to take on the pain of the world. It was this love that brought us ultimate healing and peace. When we shed tears of sorrow for another, they can bring healing. When those who have lost know others feel their pain, it transforms their own grief into hope through suffering.

Think about the hundreds of people that came last Thursday evening to this church to not only pray for those in the car accident and their families, but to shed tears of sorrow and pain. They did not have to come. We are all busy. But you not only came, you came to open your heart, to open your soul. And I know it means so tremendously much to those families, because I too have experienced another’s tears on my behalf. For to see someone else shed tears on your behalf is to feel as if God is suffering with you.

We are not all doctors. We are not all counselors. But we can all pray. We can all offer the sacred gift of our tears that they might wash away a little bit of grief, cleanse a bit of pain for another. And in willing to fracture our own heart, it opens it up to the Lord.

When Paul talks about suffering producing endurance, producing hope which does not disappoint, it is because the suffering forced him to look to God because he could not make it through on his own. And a heart that is turned to God is a heart that is turned home, and that is why he rejoices in suffering. Amen.