

Natalie Ford
July 11, 2010

Hope in Suffering?
Romans 5:1-5

What does it even mean to say we rejoice in our sufferings???

Does this mean we can find joy while six million Jews die in the Holocaust, or two hundred million are slaughtered under Stalin?

Do we find joy in the losses in Afghanistan and Iraq?

Or the genocide of Darfur? In epidemics or natural disasters?

We cannot see good in death or destruction.

And I don't believe we are called to do so.

But perhaps this verse is more about what ***God can do***,

Than what we are supposed to do.

Do you know Romans 8:28, "for we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose"

It doesn't say that all things are good, or we are supposed to find good in all things.

It says that God can bring good out of all things. Even the worst suffering.

Sounds like ***little consolation*** in the middle of the darkest night.

But God is not saying that the ***situation itself is good***.

Time and again we are reminded by Jesus and the early believers that all creation is groaning for redemption....

we live in a fallen and imperfect world full of suffering.

And God suffers with us, Christ suffered for us on the cross,

that eventually all suffering would end with eternal life in heaven.

God does not call suffering good.

I do not say to people in the midst of suffering—this must be God's will.

I cannot know that, I do not believe that is necessarily the case.

What I do know is that ***God weeps too***.

Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus.

And our God is a God of love, peace, and faith—not death or destruction.

So no, our God does not call suffering good.

Instead our God can take our horrific suffering, and somehow, some way, miraculously, bring something good out of it!
Even out of the worst situation.

I think about the flag line for **Andrew Looney** who died in Afghanistan fighting for his country, having gone back to war after losing a foot, all because of his strong convictions.

And I think of all the people whose hearts were touched by this young man's sacrifice. How rare it is for anyone to make such a sacrifice these days.

And his creates a ripple effect of **honor, and grace, and bravery** in the lives of others who are inspired by his life and his family.

I think about **Nancy Smith and Betty Lutz**, and their strength and bravery going through chemotherapy and countless appointments and treatments, and all the while keeping the faith, and a smile, and not letting it stop them from doing ministry here in the church!

And I think of the dozens of people who have told me that these women have inspired them to keep going and have a positive attitude in life—if they can do it, so can I! Out of their suffering God brings forth **inspiration and encouragement** for countless others.

Just like we see the **stars** on the darkest nights, it is possible to find some rejoicing coming out of suffering.... only because of God's amazing grace, and the power to bring forth goodness even out of the deepest darkness.

But why? Why focus on the **rejoicing in suffering**?

Paul says, "We **rejoice** in our sufferings because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope....."

Sounds kind of like one of those irritating **slogan posters** on the wall of a gym, No pain, no gain.

But this is **not a prescription** for living. Go and do likewise.

This is a **description** of life with Christ.

It's what happens when Christians suffer—God brings goodness from it.

God uses it to transform us, to give us more endurance, to deepen our character, to give us real, solid, hope.

Pastor...recalls a time when a friend warned during a rough time,
“Don’t waste the pain!” In other words, don’t spend all your time in the dark valleys avoiding, denying, or dwelling in the pain. Let God do something with it, and with you. If we can learn from pain it is not wasted, but a source of ‘life and health’. (Peter Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*, 2006, pg. 52)

But once again---it’s ***not something*** that we have to pull ourselves up and just do on our own, it’s something we ***allow God to do*** in our lives.
 We surrender ourselves to the power of God transform us and make us new,
 To get us beyond avoidance, denial, and self-pity,
 and through the storms of life.

I love the image of the ***strongest trees***.
 They are not found in the thick of the forest but out in the open,
 Where they grow stronger because of the storms.
 It is only through the fierce winds and wild storms that their roots go deep,
 and their branches strong, and their wood can be used
 for tools and handles because of their great strength.
 The storms are the very thing that make them stronger.

Annie Johnson Flint famously wrote,
Jesus Christ is not my security against the storms of life, but He is my perfect security in the storms, He has never promised me an easy passage, only a safe landing. (*Streams in the Desert*, ed. Cowman, pg. 136).

Pastor Linda Thomas puts it this way, *“When we face problems, we can rejoice and say “Bring them on!”...the suffering of life helps us grow stronger and build our character and patience.....Having these characteristics is what is required of us to live without complaint, but we can do this only if we have an abiding sense of the reality of God ...then a marvelous thing happens: we have the ability to hold our head high, no matter what comes our way. Even in a storm we know all is well, because we are convinced of the utter love of God.”* (Linda Thomas, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, pg. 42)

Some of life’s storms seem to be impossible.
 When we **lose loved ones**, it is devastating.
 Totally devastating. Days go by and you can’t imagine going on without them.
 And as we walk through those dark valleys,
 We will of course dwell on what has been lost,

But God always provides some light, some hope, to help us live.

After my **friend Linda** lost her only daughter in a drunk driving accident, she found a desire to carry on her daughter's strength and strong spirit
By sharing with other young people the dangers of drinking and driving.

When my **friend Sam** lost his only son, he discovered his son's journal, and was so inspired by the writings and the faith that he found there, that he started his own journey in ministry, writing, and preaching.

Linda and Sam's lives **were changed**, just as your own life
Has been shaped and changed by the trials and tragedies that you have survived. The suffering of your life, by the grace of God does bring endurance....that patience of Nancy and Betty, of all who deal with ongoing problems.....

it does shape your character like those who lose loved ones and keep going...

The **Greek word for character** means tried through affliction, or experience. It comes from an image of a refiners fire, like taking precious metal into a searing fire to remove any impurities.
I know I've mentioned this before, but when the refiner is refining the hot ore of silver, he knows it is completely refined when he can see his image shining in the hot metal's surface.

During times of trial and tribulation, our time is not wasted.

We are refined by **God's purifying fire**—
not to say, that God joyfully caused our pain,
but that God is making use of it in our lives.
And sometimes that process feels more like a fire
than anything else I can describe.

But 19th century preacher George MacDonald described this refining fire of God as a burning that "*begins to change to comfort*". (Creation in Christ, ed. Rolland Hein, 1976, pg. 86)

Pastor Michael Jenkins reminds us that God uses our suffering for good—
This means ***we aren't waiting til heaven*** to be transformed. He says, "*the life we live, with family friends and strangers, amid gossip, good news and bills to pay—is rich in eternal significance. God does not forgive us our sins as we sit*

among the clouds, but as we go about the business of ordinary life. God does not reserve our spiritual transformation to the afterworld, but delivers it with the morning paper to our front door. We are washed, cleansed, in water and fire, and we drip the holy stuff wherever we go. We track it into every room of our lives and out into the world.” (Michael Jenkins, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3, pg. 42).

Endurance, character, and in the words of Paul,
through suffering we find **hope**.

And hope does not disappoint us because the love of God is poured into our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

Who knew we could find **hope in suffering**?

But you know what?

That’s the **Good News** of our gospel today.

God **does bring hope**—right in the midst of suffering.

Look at that **cross** on the wall.

Have you ever heard of more **suffering** than crucifixion?

Have you ever seen more **hope** than him dying for you and I?

Hope is found in suffering, by the grace of our amazing God.

Sometimes you find the most hope and joy,

When you come to the end of all else,

And you realize God is all you’ve got.

I became convinced of this **utter love of God**

while watching my beloved Grandpa Bill die of bone cancer—

because he always had a smile on his face, and a lilt in his voice,

and Christian faith in his heart.

And because I believed what I memorized as a middle school kid on the wall of the hospital where we would so often visit him in Oklahoma City,

*The same **Everlasting Father** who cares for you today, will care for you tomorrow and every day. Either he will shield you from suffering, or give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace then, and put aside all anxious thoughts and worries. (Francis De Sales)*

By the grace of God, **there is hope in suffering**.

When we surrender our tired and weary hearts,

we do grow stronger through the storms of life,

our suffering produces endurance, which strengthens our character,

and brings us hope.

Hope in God—the Savior who suffered for us on the cross,
That we might be transformed in our suffering now,
And one day be relieved from all suffering for eternity. Amen.