

Sermon Notes, May 22, 2014

A Proven and Tested Character, Genesis 6b-21, Romans 5:1-5

We're begin with words Paul wrote to the church at Rome during extraordinarily difficult times. We're in this series because no matter who we are we'll either face a crisis or something very difficult to deal with will come our way. It's just life. Paul writes, *"We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance produces character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us."*

There are three postures that human beings can adopt as we look at the future, because the future is a big deal to all of us.

1. One is this posture that Paul is talking about and that is "I have hope." This hope is the belief that my future holds good prospects.

There are two parts to this business of hoping.

- 1) The first is desire. I have to actually legitimately, genuinely want what the future holds.
- 2) The other part of hope is that I have to believe. I have to really reckon that this is true. When I do that then I live with a sense of anticipation. And hope is contagious. If I hunger and thirst for it from my soul but I think it's not going to take place...
2. My posture towards the future is despair and it just hurts. I ache, thinking it's not going to happen. We cannot live well or long in despair. It is toxic to the soul.
3. A lot of times people will manage despair by what may be called resignation. In resignation, I dampen down my hope by ratcheting down my desire for whatever it is that I wanted by telling myself it's not really that big of a deal. Resignation is kind of a halfway house between despair on the one hand and hope on the other hand.

Ultimate hope is the hope that I'm banking my life on, and we all have these. What do you want, really want more than you want anything? You see when the Bible talks about rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God, this is what it's getting to. It's getting to... What do you really, really want? Would we want every sword to be beaten into plowshares? And for peace to break out, for the defeat of death and the triumph of joy, and over all of this for there to be a God watching over it every second and this God is so gloriously good that everybody knows Him, and everybody enjoys Him, and everybody loves Him best of all. If you want that then you want what it is that Jesus talked about. Then you want Jesus, because He said when you pray, pray like this, *"Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Your name. You are so gloriously good. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."*

He believed. Jesus life was rooted in hope. You do not, you cannot, understand Jesus if you don't know this about Him. Jesus' life was grounded in a secure hope. Those who knew Him came to hope in Him, and those who knew Him best came to hope the strongest.

If there is no God, if there is no story, if there is no design, if this universe is simply an accident, the best we can do is resignation. Jesus, however, did not go down the road of resignation. Jesus says, "Don't despair." Jesus says, *"Don't grieve as those who have no hope."* Jesus says, *"There is good reason for hope. Trust in God. Trust also in Me."* Then people, who follow Him, like the Apostle Paul, go through enormous suffering, but he never resigns himself to it. Paul says, *"May the God of all hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Spirit, by God's presence with you."* In a sense Paul is saying, *"We're hoping for all joy, for all peace. For God's kingdom to come, His will to be done down here, and if you want it, and if you believe that it is possible enough to commit yourself to it, then what you do is you rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Then you're a hoper."*

Then something extraordinary is possible. *It is possible for suffering to produce perseverance, and perseverance to produce character, and character to produce... not resignation, but hope.*

Over the last decade a lot of research has been done in the area of how is it that some people don't just get through suffering, but they actually get stronger. It's very interesting. For quite some time, there has been a lot of talk about post-traumatic stress syndrome. More recently researchers have begun to talk about a thing they're calling post-traumatic growth. People go through suffering, they go through hardship, and they don't just make it through to the other side, they come out different. But it doesn't happen automatically. Adversity—suffering—crises can cripple people. They often do.

And here is Joseph. If you were here last week, we talked about Joseph. Young guy, 17 years old, had the world by the tail, and then all of a sudden his world collapses, as it will for everybody. His brothers betray him and he is sold into slavery. Then there is this remarkable response to slavery. He thrives in slavery. He does some of his best work ever in slavery and he lives a most exemplary life in slavery. This remarkable thing happens. We're told that the Lord is with Joseph in slavery.

I want to pause here to note something that can happen in suffering. Suffering is not a good thing, but good things sometimes come out of it. When you suffer, sometimes you find yourself rising to a challenge that reveals abilities hidden in you that otherwise would have never made it to the surface, and you grow.

Joseph finds out that somehow God is with him in a way that he never expected. Then it's like, you know what? Whatever life throws at me from this day forward. The Apostle Paul put it like this, *"I have learned what it is to be in need. I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content, of being alive, of being vital in any situation up or down. I can do anything through Him who strengthens me. I have hope."*

Joseph did not have that, see, until he was thrown into a situation he never wanted to be in. His trials are not over. Suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance produces character. He ends up getting falsely accused. He doesn't get rewarded for these noble choices; he ends up in prison. The text says, *"But while Joseph was there in prison, the Lord was with him."* This is a remarkable statement. I wonder what that was like. God showed him kindness, granted him favor in all he did.

A really interesting little detail in the story. There are two men put under his watch that worked for Pharaoh...the baker and cupbearer. Here's what's interesting, you might not have noticed this: When Joseph was at home and his life was going great, his own brothers lived in huge pain because he was the favorite. He never noticed.

Now, in prison, where you might think he would just be consumed, you know, "I have my own problems, have my own difficulties to deal with." Now he sees. Now he cares. Now he asks. Suffering and trials can do that to a heart, and because they do, it's going to lead to amazing things for him. One of the things about suffering is it has the power...it doesn't automatically do it... it has the power to deepen relationships in profound ways.

Joseph is a different person in his relationships in prison than he was at home when everything was going great. The cupbearer gets released just as Joseph said. You can just imagine how Joseph is waiting to get out of prison, waiting for the cupbearer to remember. But the cupbearer forgets when he goes back to normal life.

Tomorrow...Joseph is stuck in prison. The next day...stuck in prison. Two full years, the text says, then, finally Pharaoh has a dream. Finally, Joseph in this strange, strange, strange, strange life gets out of prison and begins a new life. It's kind of that way in the kingdom for those who hope. For your life is hidden with Christ in God. One day Pharaoh has a dream, calls Joseph. Joseph does great with Pharaoh. He gets exalted to the highest place in Egypt, and it turns out that all of his suffering is his glory... Just as Jesus' cross was His glory...strangest thing.

Here's one of the things that can happen in suffering: It's kind of like in normal life, we get on this treadmill and we're just running after money, success, education, comfort, security, power, pleasure, happiness, something...I don't know, just running after it. Then when suffering comes, it just knocks you off the treadmill, and all of a sudden you have to ask, *"What in the world am I doing here? Is there any meaning to this life?"*

Again, suffering is a bad thing, but it can give this kind of gift of changing. It doesn't happen automatically. In Romans 5 Paul tells us that suffering can lead to perseverance, and it can lead to character. It can lead to hope. Suffering brings about perseverance, or patient endurance. Now, Paul isn't saying this is universally true. For many, suffering unleashes hatred and bitterness and resentment and anger. But this is not the ongoing effect in those who have the Spirit of Christ. For them the effect is patient endurance, because the fruit of the Spirit is patience.

Here's something else Paul is wanting us to understand. The point here is that until hardship comes into our lives, especially hardship for the sake of Christ and His righteousness, we do not experience the extent and depth of our devotion to Christ. Until times get hard, we do not taste and really know if we are fair-weather Christians.

What Paul is saying is that one great effect of suffering is that it brings about patient endurance and perseverance in God's people, so that they can see the faithfulness of God in their lives and know that they are truly His. Proven character. *"And [this] perseverance [brings about] proven character."* Literally the word there in the Greek is *dokimen*, which means *"a tested character, the experience of being tested and approved."* This is not hard to grasp. If, when suffering comes, you persevere in devotion to Christ and don't turn against Him, then you'll come out of that experience with a stronger sense that you're real, you're authentic, you're proven, you're not a hypocrite.

The people who know God best are the people who suffer with Christ. The people who are most unwavering in their hope are those who have been tested most deeply. Hope is just the best. Hope is just the best. Hope is it.

Jesus said (and this is just through everything He said), *"You will have trouble now."* And, *"Blessed are you when you're persecuted because of righteousness for yours is the kingdom of heaven."* Through your suffering and pain you will yet taste the glory of God. Paul understands this. In Romans he says, *"The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are God's children, then we are heirs—heirs with God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."*

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done. And then a terrible thing happened. They put Him in a trial. They hung Him on a cross. They laid Him in a tomb. Then the strangest thing happened. The Lord was with Him in the tomb. He does great in the tomb. He is raised from the dead. He gets exalted to the highest place. It turns out so strange. All His suffering becomes His glory. That's the way it is in the Kingdom of God.

Now there is a promise and one day there will be a union, and between that day and this day, there is hope.