

# *Suffering, Endurance, Character, Hope*

## *Romans 5:1-11*

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One of my favorite singer-songwriters has a song called “My Mamma Said It’s True.” It’s a peppy bluesy number that consists of a string of clichés and witticisms that parents tell their kids: “Bread crust can curl your hair / it’s not polite to point or stare / if everyone else was jumping off a cliff too, you can be sure that I wouldn’t let you!” You get the idea. You can probably suggest an additional line or two. In fact, the artist, Carrie Newcomer, has recently added a verse to the song based on feedback from her audiences!<sup>1</sup>

One of the mom-isms I grew up with came out whenever I was having a really hard day. Tragedy had hit my adolescent world, and life wasn’t going my way for whatever reason. My mother would listen patiently to my tale of woe, sigh, and say, “Well, what a wonderful opportunity to grow.” Boy, I hated that! I did not want to hear that, even if part of me knew it was true. “Opportunity to grow?” No thank you, I’ll stay immature and stunted if it means I won’t have to go through *this*.

Now, to her credit, I don’t think my mother ever once said it with any condescension in her voice or face. This was not some dismissal with a pat on the head. No, she always chuckled a little when she said it—not at me, never at me—but simply at how inadequate she knew that response was.

“What a wonderful opportunity to grow.”

“Great. Life stinks, but at least I’ll grow!” How little consolation it seemed while in the middle of a crisis. And she knew it, and so she chuckled and shrugged as she said it, every time.

Now, we don’t know terribly much about what the church in Rome was going through at the time of Paul’s letter. More to the point, Paul himself had at best secondhand knowledge; he was writing to a church he did not establish, to people whom he himself had never met. But perhaps we can grant that they were afflicted with at least an average level of first-century church hardship: persecution, death, economic burdens, temptations to stray from the Way, divisions, and the like. And in the midst of all of that, Paul writes this:

We boast in our sufferings, because suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...

Did Paul laugh and shrug as he wrote these words, realizing how inadequate they were to speak authentically to the reality of suffering? Because personally, I want to type up this passage and put it in my own Anthology of Unhelpfulness, right between “A wonderful opportunity to grow,” and “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” Certainly Paul knew firsthand about suffering, which gives him some credibility, but is this supposed to be consoling? Is it even relevant? Does it help people get through tough times to know that there will be these helpful by-products along the way?

Maybe that helps you but it doesn’t help me. Not while I’m in it. Maybe it helps

*after* the fact, when I can look back and appreciate the virtue of endurance and character and hope. But Paul's using the present tense here, which means he's talking about immediate suffering, about fresh wounds and new grief. And his response to these sufferings is that they're all part of a process of endurance and character-building? I have to be honest with you—I simply don't have it in me to respond to suffering in that way.

The problem is, I don't think it's possible for Paul or anyone else to talk about suffering in the abstract. Maybe we can hear words like love, grace, even sin, and think about them in general terms. But suffering? When I say the word "suffering," things get really graphic, really quick. Each of us has a specific image in our heads, I'll bet. Yours may be global in scope, or it may be intimately close. And with these images, these icons of suffering cradled in our hands we come to this passage, to this tightly-drawn circle that Paul has constructed:

boast in hope...  
also boast in suffering...  
suffering produces endurance...  
endurance produces character...

and character produces hope, and we're back to hope again! The circle is complete.

And we want to place these icons into the circle somewhere, and maybe yours fits. And maybe it's a comfort to be able to orient ourselves somewhere that seems safe and manageable, and that's how this text has often been used in the church. Suffering exists in the world, we know it to be true, but thank goodness, we hardworking, bootstrap Protestants can look forward to cultivating endurance, character, and hope: good and sturdy products we can put to fine use.

But I must admit, I'm suspicious of it. I'm suspicious of it because it's too easy. I'm suspicious because the icons of suffering that I cradle in my hands don't always fit in the circle.

I'm suspicious of it because this circle represents our best effort to make sense of a sovereign God and a suffering world, but the result seems to me heartbreakingly unsatisfying.

Yes, heartbreaking, because the frontlines of this struggle are in the hospital, the oncologist's office, the hospice, the funeral service. The tragedy is bad enough, but the relentless search for a reason why, for an explanation that makes sense, is what rips one's heart out. As a hospital chaplain, I met a man who had struggled with terrible chronic pain for thirty years. After spending the morning with him I walked back into the pastoral care office and shared my experience with a colleague, a woman who comes from a different Christian tradition than my own, who listened soberly and responded, "Maybe he is here to teach you something." That's a hefty price to pay for my personal edification.

We hear such sentiments from time to time: "God had a purpose in this, and so who am I to question it? I guess God needed those people up in heaven. I don't know why, but how can I know better than God what's right? Perhaps it was just God's plan." Now, I dare not judge these folks if in their heart of hearts, this perspective is truly a deeply cherished belief and it brings them comfort. But I am worried. I'm worried because it bears the imprint of Paul's circle, of "suffering, endurance, character, hope,"

and is that real? I'm worried that this is what people say in times of suffering, because what have they been given as an alternative? Is this the best the church can do in the midst of the reality of great pain?

I remember watching a *Frontline* program on PBS a couple years back called "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero." The interviews included people who had lost loved ones on 9/11, and people who had barely survived, and "God had a plan" was a popular sentiment from both groups. It was ironic, perhaps, that the person I resonated with most on the program was an orthodox rabbi. He talked about how people come to him with questions about the meaning of suffering. He said, "I think my job as a rabbi is to help people live with those questions. If God's ways are mysterious, then we have no choice but to live in the mystery. It's upsetting, it's scary, it's painful, it's deep, and it's interesting. But no plan. That's what mystery is. You want a plan? Talk to me about plan, but if you're going to tell me how the plan saved you, you'd better be able to tell me how the plan killed them."<sup>2</sup>

So talk to me about plan, Paul. Talk to me about "suffering *producing* endurance *producing* character *producing* hope," but you'd better be able to tell me about people who don't ever make it past suffering. Tell me about people who somehow find the ability to endure but the experience has left them utterly broken in spirit. Tell me about folks who scoff at hope because hope *has* disappointed them, again and again, and they cry out, "How long?" They are out there—these aren't abstract categories. These are people whose stories we cradle in our hands.

Maybe I should give Paul a break. He's certainly not the only one who seems to fall prey to convenient categories and paradigms. I am reminded of the psychologist named Lois who attended a seminar on Jungian dream interpretation many years ago. Carl Jung's own grandson was one of the panelists. Members of the audience had submitted dreams for the panel to interpret, and at the end of the evening the panelists read the cards aloud and discussed them. Lois listened with interest to one, a horrific dream during which the dreamer was subjected to all types of torture and atrocities at the hands of Nazi tormentors.

When it was over, Jung's grandson said, "Would you all please rise? ...We will stand together in a moment of silence in response to this dream." Meanwhile Lois eagerly awaited the interpretation that was sure to follow, but...no. The group sat, and the panel went on to the next question. When she talked about it later with a friend, her friend nodded and said, "There is in life a suffering so unspeakable, a vulnerability so extreme that it goes far beyond words, beyond explanations and even beyond healing. In the face of such suffering all we can do is bear witness so no one need suffer alone."<sup>3</sup>

A suffering so unspeakable...A vulnerability so extreme...It does not fit the circle. Unless. Unless we take this circle of virtue production that Paul seems to be constructing, and blow it apart. Unless we take that "suffering makes you strong" mentality and say NO.

After all, look where Paul lodges all this—right in the middle of his arguments on justification. Justification! Not of people who are strong, and character-filled, and hopeful, but justification of people who are weak, and broken, and in despair. That's who Jesus died for. Jesus died for people who strive for endurance, who try to be independent and strong, but who cannot be. Jesus died for people who try to have good character in the midst of bad circumstances, but who fall short again and again. Jesus

died for people who try to concoct some easy hope for themselves, hope which *does* disappoint every time.

So no, maybe the answer isn't to ride the circle in some painstaking attempt to give our suffering some structure and meaning. Maybe the answer is to step off, to fling ourselves into the waiting arms of God, to be embraced by the Jesus who says, "I am all the endurance and character and hope you will ever need." When we insist that suffering have some meaning, that it produce something or mean something, we no longer need God. We've got the answers. And when we travel round and round that circle, we bog ourselves down with all the baggage that gets in the way of God doing God's work!

I try to endure the suffering but I can't.  
I try to pass the test of character but I can't.  
I try to have hope but I can't.

All this seeking after virtue leaves us empty. Empty...so that God's love can be poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit— so that we can be filled by *that*. God's love cannot be poured into us when we're already full of virtues and plans and answers. We must be empty. As empty as the man of faith who says, "No plan. Just God." As empty as a moment of silence in the wake of unspeakable pain.

As empty as two outstretched hands.

#### Notes

1. Carrie Newcomer, "My Mamma Said It's True," *An Angel at My Shoulder*, Philo Records compact disc, 1994.
2. "Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero," *Frontline*. PBS. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/faith/etc/script.html>>.
3. Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001).