

The first five verses of the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans about suffering is one of my favorite passages in all of the Bible. It's a Scriptural gem that I've had the occasion to turn to many times both in my pastoral ministry and in my own personal history. If you haven't ever read or memorized this passage you probably haven't lived long enough or suffered enough yet. Today, I hope you will go home, mark the page and commit it to memory, because sooner or later, you're going to need it.

In his letters, Paul assumes that we are all going to suffer, but nowhere does he tell us why we have to suffer.

With the exception of the Book of Job and Ecclesiastes and a few scattered verses in the Psalms, the Hebrew Bible or First Testament leaves us with the impression that we suffer because we sinned. The storyline goes that the Israelites were always screwing up and suffering the consequences for it.

Then we get to the New Testament where the authors of the Gospels and letters give us a new perspective on this old problem. They teach us that suffering is not always a punishment for doing something wrong. It can also be our reward for doing something right. Jesus said so in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

[Matthew 5:10]

Now this is a very different interpretation of suffering and one that gets taken up by the Apostles and the early Christians. Paul says that if we suffer with Christ, we will be glorified with Christ. [Romans 8:17] The author of I Peter says that if we do right and suffer for it, we have God's approval. [I Peter 2:20]

So we have two ways to look at suffering and both are true. Our life experience tells us that suffering is sometimes a punishment that we bring on ourselves by making bad choices. But we also see that suffering is sometimes a strange kind of

reward for making the good but hard choices to tell the truth, demand justice, and follow Jesus. Believe me, the more you tell the truth, demand justice, and love Jesus, the more you will suffer for it.

Nevertheless, sometimes suffering has nothing to do with doing right or wrong. There is something horribly random about a lot of human suffering. Disasters, diseases and disabilities come to mind. Sometimes suffering just is.

While Paul doesn't tell us where all suffering comes from, he can tell us where it is all going. In these short verses, Paul gives Christians a very important lesson about what to do with their suffering.

Basically, what Paul has to say is something that we don't want to hear: the only thing to do with suffering is to suffer it. But if you do, if you don't try to deny it or run and hide from it, in the end you will be blessed by it. In fact, suffering is the very thing that will get you started on a path of spiritual growth

that will take you from weakness to strength, from pain to promise, and from death to new life. There is no suffering so senseless that the God of Mercy can't make it meaningful, if not for us than for our loved ones, if not in this life than in the next one.

So, if we can't avoid it anyway, it is more helpful to think of suffering not as the hell we have been confined to but a spiritual boot camp we have been assigned to. There is no growth without pain; there is no progress without a price.

Think of it this way: if suffering weren't always stalking us, we wouldn't remember to pray; we wouldn't have so many reasons to give thanks; we wouldn't be pressed to find new paths; we wouldn't have to be strong; we wouldn't have to learn how to get along. If we didn't suffer, we wouldn't write any poems, paint any pictures or sing any songs.

If he hadn't suffered, Trevor Noah, the South African comedian and host of *The Daily Show*, wouldn't have written a

memoir. In his book, *Born A Crime*, he tells stories about his life in South Africa. His mom was African. His dad was Swiss German. In the waning days of apartheid, that made him "born a crime." His parents couldn't marry, of course, and life was hard. At times, he and his mom had barely enough to eat. Like other poor South Africans, they sucked the marrow out of bones. Sometimes they had nothing to eat but worms.

But they always went to church. His mother was very into Jesus. She took Trevor to a black Pentecostal church, a black Methodist Church and a white Anglican church every Sunday, just to cover all the bases. Even though Trevor would argue with his mom about God, he went to church anyway.

Eventually, his mom married an African man, a good man, when he wasn't drinking. But when he got drunk, he was very abusive. Trevor tells all kinds of stories about the terror he lived and the indignities he suffered, but nothing beats the story about the time when his stepfather shot his mother.

They had divorced, but his stepdad drove up one day and shot his mom in the leg. She managed to scramble into her car. Then he shot her in the back of the head.

When Trevor got to the hospital, he didn't know if his mom was going to make it. There he discovered that she had no medical insurance, and the hospital didn't want to treat her. When he convinced them that he could pay whatever was necessary, they finally agreed to take her to surgery. When it was over, the surgeon came out shaking his head in disbelief. The bullet had entered her head at the base of her skull. Somehow it missed her brain, ricocheted off her cheekbone and just missed her left eye. The bullet kept going and came out through her left nostril. All they had to do was stop the bleeding and stitch her up. She was going to be fine.

In the recovery room, she was fully alert and joking with her son. Then he took her to task for not having any insurance. She protested that she did. She had Jesus. Trevor said, "But

Jesus didn't pay your hospital bill." "No," she smiled, "But he gave me a son who did."

Trevor's mom suffered a lot in her life, but she showed him how her suffering produced endurance and her endurance produced character and her character produced hope and hope did not disappoint her because the love of God had been poured into her heart through the Holy Spirit that was given to her. We don't have to be "born a crime" to know that suffering can be a gift, but each and every one of us is going to have to unwrap it for ourselves.

By God's grace, our suffering can become a blessing, but we have to be patient. It's a long process. The first stage produces endurance. When suffering is no longer a crisis but a chronic condition, first we complain a lot, but we eventually adjust to it. We are forced to change our habits and our expectations. We learn to save our energy and spend it wisely. We set priorities and only do what is most important to us. We

hold onto what is life giving and realize that we can let the rest go.

When we have managed to do all these things, we are amazed to find that we can tolerate what at first seemed to be intolerable. Other people are amazed, too. And lo and behold, the suffering starts to lessen, not because the situation has changed but because we have. We've gotten stronger. That is endurance.

We can endure, but we'd rather not have to. If the suffering stops all of a sudden, we quickly revert back to our old self and our old ways of taking things for granted and forgetting what's important. But if the suffering doesn't stop, if the suffering goes on, so too will the blessing.

If we have to endure for a very long time then the changes we make in our lives will be more lasting. We arrive at the second stage of our journey when our change of habits become so ingrained that they change our fundamental



character. Like a piece of metal in a blacksmith's shop, if we get burned and hammered enough, God can bend us into a brand new shape.

Here's an example. I know people who suffered in the Great Recession. Some lost a job or a home, savings or retirement accounts. People had to tighten their belts and learn to count their blessings. But after a few years, the recession ended. Many folks found new jobs. They bought new houses and went back to living pretty much the way they were before the bubble burst.

It wasn't the same for folks who lived through the Great Depression. That suffering lasted much longer, long enough for suffering to produce endurance and for endurance to produce character.

Character is that steady quality that tells us who a person is in any given situation and who they are going to be even if that situation changes drastically. We all know people who

impress us with their ability to keep going, no matter what. We are humbled by them because we know that they have had a lot of practice suffering. Claudia Pierson was cracking jokes until the very end. Ruby Goodnight was telling us that she was feeling thankful even when her cancer got very painful.

After one hundred years of living and suffering, Ruby was thankful not because she was hurting but because she was hopeful. The character of a Christian is hope. Being hopeful means that we aren't disappointed even if the bullet does not miss, the cancer is not cured, the drought does not end, the war is not won. We have hope because we keep our eyes on the prize. We press on to the goal, keeping our focus on faith and our concentration on the cross. We look there and see how God took the utterly senseless suffering of Jesus and turned it into an unimaginable blessing. God promises to do the same for us, so all we can say is: thanks be to God who turns our suffering into rejoicing!