

Suffering, Endurance, Character and Hope.

This text is well known and oft-quoted. Christians have drawn a lot of reassurance and strength from it over the centuries. It has that very memorable unfolding chain of effects or consequences: Paul talks about a process that is going on in the hearts and minds of believers – how love and spiritual maturity gradually grow in a Christian's life as they trust in God's grace. One thing leads to another; it starts with suffering, and that produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, but leads us to God.

And what's the cause behind all this, driving this spiritual maturity and health? The second half of verse 5 tells us: the Holy Spirit has poured God's love into our hearts. Perhaps you have known a Christian in whom you have seen this beautiful process gently unfolding. I am privileged to teach young Christian men and women theology; and I see this often, and it's one of the wonderful things that gives me hope for the future, I must say: God is at work in peoples' souls. Faith in Christ is established and grows and deepens and then, the world being as it is, it meets suffering. Things go wrong. And yes, the Christian experiences is pain and frustration and sorrow, but by God's grace they endure it, they bear it, and their faith comes out of it stronger, harder. Because they know something they didn't before, not like they do now anyway – that God can be trusted in a crisis, that he is faithful and stays with you and helps you. And this deepening awareness goes with them. As they build on that conviction, their lives take on a deeper pattern, a solid framework is established. When they meet adversity, they turn to God and trust in his grace and mercy, and find him faithful again, and so they are established more firmly again in what Paul calls *character* – this is a very interesting word he uses here, it comes from the world of metal working and minting coins, where metal is purified or hardened in the fire. You find exactly the same word and image in 1 Peter 1, where Peter talks about how our faith which is more precious than gold, is tested by fire and proved genuine. And this *character* (produced by endurance) is tested and strengthened as life throws up greater challenges.

An important qualification here: Paul is not talking here in Romans about what we might call the Hollywood version of character – where the hero's superior self-belief and fortitude wins out over all adversity. That is a false idol. Christian character is developed when believer discovers they can rely on God, and is based alone on God's grace in Christ.

When this character is built, which relies upon and proves God's love and mercy again and again, then the outcome, Paul says, is hope – we know our life and our future is in God's loving hands; we cannot control everything that will happen and we don't know what might be waiting for us in the future – but we know God's mercy, both here and eternally and we can have hope and security in God's love. This hope is not uncertain or provisional because it is based on truth of which the believer has over time become more deeply confident, as the Holy Spirit has formed their character: God's mercy and its eternal faithfulness and reliability.

So, to give an example, I am hopeful about my marriage to my wife, Coralie – I have a strong hope that we will continue in love and that our bond will grow stronger in the future and that she will continue to love me. Why? Because I am sure of her love for me; it's strong (it has to be) and genuine – she has proved it many many many times, every day in fact. We will celebrate our 30th anniversary this year, so I have good reason for my hope here.

Our marriage with God is even more certain and secure – we can hope in him confidently because we know *his* character: his love, his faithfulness, his forgiveness, his generosity, his mercy, his patience, his eternal patience. When the Holy Spirit builds endurance and character in us, we grow also in hope, hope for our future here in this world – no matter what it throws at us, we can rely on

the words Jesus tells his disciples in John 16: 'I have overcome the world'. And we have hope for eternity because we know what Jesus has promised us, and that he who has promised is faithful. St Paul was a seasoned Christian sufferer. In 2 Timothy, where he reflects on all that he has had to go through, he says: *For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.*

All this is very pertinent to our lives here at the moment. We are in the midst of a trial at the moment that is quite a tough one, tougher than most of us have ever known. It is not severe perhaps, not for most of us, but it has that quality that really testing and difficult experiences have – it is long lasting. Psychologists know that we humans can cope with difficulty, even quite severe suffering, for a short period quite well, and more often than not we can bounce back. But when things grind on for a long time, then it gets much more difficult. Our normal routines that sustain us are suspended. Our mental health comes under threat as things drag on, with no end yet in sight - anxiety and depression. We have to hang on and persevere. We have been in this pandemic situation some weeks now, and it will be some time before we can come out of it. But there is real comfort and strength for us all here in God's word. God is doing his work, equipping his people to meet this time of suffering, teaching us endurance, testing, hardening and strengthening us as we learn that we can rely on him day by day, forming character in us, and giving us hope.

That is the unfolding chain of spiritual maturity that takes shape as the Spirit pours God's love into us, as we live by grace and find that grace proved again and again.

But sometimes there is a different process at work. I see this process happening in people often, and I see it in myself. It is a bit like the process Paul talks about here, but it goes in a different direction, in the opposite direction in fact. It goes like this: Suffering produces complaining, complaining produces misery and cynicism. Misery and cynicism produce rage and despair, and rage and despair destroy us, because our hearts are utterly empty and loveless and there is no point in going on. Perhaps you know *this* process too.

This is the unfolding process of the human life in which there is suffering, but from which God is closed out. And we should not too piously say well that is what happens to unbelievers, non-Christians who don't know Christ's love. Because this horrible chain of effects can and does happen among us sometimes too. It usually happens a bit like this: we become self-reliant and proud and entitled and self-important. When we encounter suffering and problems, we think 'What is going on here? We don't deserve this. It is not fair. It is not right. But what can you expect? This world is a mess; it is full of idiots who don't know what they are doing, unlike me! To hell with it all. It is hopeless. I can't be bothered with it anymore'.

This process produces its own character too, marked by anger, bitterness, selfishness, loneliness and isolation. It does not produce hope as its fruit, but despair, the place where life feels too empty to go on.

Both these pathways have suffering, but they have different outcomes. The difference is not that those who know Christ's love have happier lives, in which things go right more of the time. Not at all.

When Paul refers here to suffering and problems in life, he knows what he is talking about. His life is full of suffering. More suffering than most of us have ever or will have to bear. And yet just read his letters – he is filled with overflowing joy and hope.

Not long ago, an old friend I had not heard from for a long time made contact again. We know one another quite well, but we had not talked for a long time. She was having a tough time in life with

her physical and mental health. She said to me: You seem much more joyful and at peace than I could ever be. I know you are far from perfect, and I know life isn't always easy for you. What is it?

What is it? The best answer to this question is right back at the beginning of this text in Romans 5, in verses 1-2, which introduce this section we have been studying. Paul says: 'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God'. This is where the chain of effects, the unfolding process Paul describes in verses 3-5 all begins. This is the source of it all. It starts in our free salvation, in the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Through him we have access to the treasure house of divine grace, unlimited access to the Father, who gives us everything in Christ, who sends his Spirit, to produce endurance and character and hope – even in the worst times of our lives.

Jesus Christ who suffered for us, whose compassion for us and understanding of our struggles in life is beyond any other person's, is the one who has opened this access to the mercy of God the Father. It is all from him, and is all freely available to you.