

Hope from the Holy Spirit

A 1997 American Heart Association article, which was based on Susan Everson's research, shared the following, "That people who experience high levels of despair, had a 20% greater occurrence of hardening of the arteries than did optimistic people. In fact, this is the same magnitude of increased risk that one sees when they compare a pack a day smoker with a non-smoker. In other words despair can be as bad for you as smoking one pack of cigarettes a day." This is a very simple opening point for me. We need hope. We need hope in our lives. In fact, I believe God created us to be a people of hope. It says as much in the Scripture. And for us to walk in hope is to walk in healing, it's to walk in grace, it's to walk in faith, it's to walk in the power in the presence of God. For you and I to walk in despair, is to walk in fear. It's to walk in a constant struggle. It's to walk in anxiety. And so many people are walking in that despair on a constant basis today that it is literally killing them physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. The good news I have for you is that we have a hope that we can receive from the Holy Spirit. It is not an empty hope, but a hope that will not disappoint us. It is a hope that has stood the test of time.

In Romans 5:4, the apostle Paul shares the following: "We also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that sufferings produce perseverance. Perseverance, 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."

You'll notice in the Scripture today that Paul outlines a progression in the human life. And one of the realities for all of us as human beings is that suffering is part of the deal. Like you, I wish it weren't so. I hate suffering. I wish everything were just as smooth as glass. I wish I would wake up in the morning and go to bed at night with not a worry or a care or concern in my life.

But that is not the human experience, is it? God uses our sufferings. Paul says we rejoice in our sufferings. You gotta be kidding me! Rejoice in our sufferings? Is Paul a masochist? A sadist? Does he get off on suffering and pain? But, you see, you have to read the rest of the verse, because we know that suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance, character and character hope. Beloved, if you have been getting off of the train at the suffering stop, you have gotten off at the wrong place. Do you know that some people built a mansion in the condo group called "suffering"? That's the place where you live. That's your house. That's what you keep telling everybody about. But you need to read the rest of the story. Suffering is only the beginning of what God will hopefully use in your life to bring us to our knees before him. Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character and character, hope. A very special kind of hope from God. A hope that the world cannot give to you. It is a hope that will not disappoint you. It is a hope that has stood the test and found itself to be powerful and mighty to the pulling down of strongholds.

So who is this apostle Paul to be writing about suffering? I mean, why should you believe him anyways? 2 Corinthians 11:24 shares what Paul went through in his life. He writes these words, "Five times I received from the Jews, the 40 lashes minus 1." As you read the history about scourging's and floggings during the time of Paul it was not unusual for a person to go through that just one time and die before they reach the 39th lash. That's how horrific this flogging was. And Paul went through it five times. Incredible. "Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned." And if you read the story about this stoning, the crowd left him after they stoned him because they thought he was dead. "All right he's finished. He's done with. He doesn't seem to be breathing anymore; we can go home and have our dinner now."

You know, it is my personal belief, I don't know this for sure, but it's my belief that God's hand was on Paul in the midst of his sufferings. That Paul was at death's door many times but God said, "Not yet." I'm going to deliver you. I'm going to give you strength. I'm going to fill you with my grace and glory to be a testimony to me." I'm not done yet. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and day in the open sea. Being a Navy guy, I can't even imagine what that was like, and it was probably during a storm. In my frequent journeys, I've been in danger from rivers and bandits. From my countrymen in Gentiles. In danger in the city and country. In danger on the sea and among false brothers. In labor and toil and often without sleep. In hunger and thirst and often without food. In cold and exposure, I face the daily pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak and I'm not weak. Who was led into sin and I do not burn with grief. Beloved, I believe the apostle Paul has suffered like no other Christian. Look at his story. Look at what he went through in his own life. Look at the beatings that he went through and the suffering that he endured. He is one Christian that has suffered more than any other Christian. This is not to make light of your suffering or of any Christian because it is precious in the eyes of the Lord. But just know this; Paul is an authority on suffering. More than anybody else in this place. More than anybody alive in the world right now. And with authority, he writes in Romans, "Suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance, character and hope that does not disappoint us with the love of God being poured out into our lives." You know why Paul wrote those words? Not because he was trying to come up with a good ditty for a Hallmark card. Not because it kind-of rhymed and he put all the words together. He wrote this down because this was his personal experience. God was birthing in his life through the suffering. And that's why he rejoiced in it. Because he knew something precious, ultimately what God was going to do. That God was going to get the glory and God was going to bring Paul into an even deeper place in him.

Paul made it through his sufferings because he persevered. How many times in your life and mine have we simply wanted to give up? "God I've had enough. Just put me out of my misery, please. I'll do whatever you want if you just put me out of my misery." And the people that we know in the midst of great suffering have already given up in the depth of their heart. You know what it's like, as I do, to see someone who is hopeless. You see it in their eyes. You feel it in their presence. You sense it in their surroundings. There's just a sense of despair. And they have their reasons for that. But God can make a difference. You see suffering is part of our life but we need to

press into the next step, and that is to persevere. If you're not dead, God is not through with you yet. If you're still breathing, there's a reason. And what God wants you and I to do is to stop wallowing in our pity party of suffering and to get back on his glory train and begin to persevere. Begin to press into God. "Hear my cry, Oh Lord. Give me the strength to keep on going even though I don't want to."

You see Paul made it through his sufferings because God gave him the grace to persevere. I know for a fact, some of you should be dead. I visited your hospital beds. I came to give you last rites. And you're still here. God's calling you to persevere. To press into him and receive of his help. There's something special about a Christian on their knees crying out to God in the midst of their suffering and saying, "Help. I need your help to persevere. Without you, I'm not going to make it." God uses sufferings to finally break through our hard heads and the hard hearts to help us realize without him, we were doomed. As Paul persevered into God and said, "God your will be done in my life.", his character began to develop. He began to become a different person through each suffering he endured. His integrity was deepened. He was strengthened in the inner man by the spirit of God in a way like he never have before. That's what happens; suffering after suffering after suffering; produces a different Christian each step of the way that is stronger and mightier in the Lord God Almighty. You might crawl into glory but by God's grace, you're going to get there.

Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character, and character-hope. Paul had a faithful hope in God helping him. You see, he remembered all the other times God helped him. Do you have amnesia? I believe the people of God have amnesia, it's a spiritual amnesia. You know God could've delivered you 24 hours ago, and then you're in the midst of something else and you've forgotten what God did for you 24 hours ago. What's up with you? Instead of what's up with God, what's up with you? Why don't you remember what God has already done for you in your life? God is saying, "Hello. I'm with you now. I have not left and I'm going to get you through this one as well. I'm with you all the way to the end. All the way into glory." That's how long God is with you and me. He's with us to the end.

Paul had a hope that didn't disappoint him. God is not gonna let you down. He might leave you flapping in the wind for a while. God will not disappoint you. And that is the testimony of the apostle Paul. Because then God's love was poured abundantly into his heart through the power of the Holy Spirit comforting him, pouring a balm upon his heart. You see, God wanted to meet Paul in his sufferings as they deepen and increase and God wants to meet you in your sufferings as well. But he can only meet you as you keep going back to him. You have to keep going back to him, and back to him, and back to him. This is something beloved, you and I need to grasp, as you and I go through greater and greater sufferings, and we will, on this walk. The hugs, love, tenderness, mercy, anointing, and God's power just grow greater and greater!

I was reading this on a sign just the other day. "Perfume is the scent of a flower that has been crushed." As our flowers are crushed, a fragrant offering is lifted up before the Lord. It is pleasing to him. It invites his mercy. He just can't help but love and

hug you when that's happening. Get on your knees before God. If you stay on your knees, if you're face down on the ground, stay in the presence of God. There is safety in no other place. Love poured afresh. Paul shared, "I will rejoice in my weaknesses, from when I am weak then I am strong." Paul was writing what he experienced and he's inviting you and me into the same experience of embracing suffering. God is with us in the valley that he might bring us to the mountain.

In the innermost cell of the prison, two men were shackled after being severely beaten with rods; punishment for allegedly causing a riot. With the sounds of a murder's crowd still ringing in their ears, backs and chests bloodied by rods that they had been beaten with; pain still coursing through their bodies from head to toe, they persevered in prayer and sang hymns of praise to God. And as they did, hope and love began to well up in their hearts as the power of the Holy Spirit inhabited their worship in that prison. And it says in the Word of God in Acts 16, that there was a violent earthquake in the prison that shook the foundations of that place. And the prison cells were open and the shackles on the prisoners' hands were loosed. God showed up in that prison. God heard the praises of his people. And that day as He came in to that prison, He not only set the apostles free, He set everybody else free in that prison. It was a get out of jail free card that day, because God showed up in that moment. God wants to set you free. God is still showing up to the prisons where his people are kept today and setting them free. But he's waiting for something from you. He's waiting for the fragrant offering of your life. He's waiting for that step of faith from the depth of your heart that He'll know is true of continued prayer of worship and praise to Him in the depth of the prison, with a back that is bleeding, with a heart that is crushed; singing a hymn of praise and worship to Almighty God, believing that God is God of the prison, as well as the mountaintop. That Jesus is still Lord in the midst of my sufferings, as well is when things are going great. That He might come, pour himself upon you, bless you, and set you free!

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