

INTRODUCTION

I felt the tugging of the Holy Spirit this week telling me to go back and look at verses 3 and 4 of Romans 5 because I know some of you are going through some very difficult times right now, struggling with suffering and pain and tribulation. I hope the Holy Spirit will use this message to encourage your heart today.

There are all kinds of pain out there. There is physical pain, of course, which is sometimes the easiest to deal with. In addition, there is emotional pain, mental pain and relational pain. Dr. Karl Menninger, a clinical psychiatrist in Wichita, Kansas, has listed some of the things we experience in life which causes us the most mental anguish:

- 1) The death of a spouse
- 2) The death of a child
- 3) The death of a parent
- 4) Divorce, which is the death of a marriage
- 5) Receiving a bad health report
- 6) Losing a job
- 7) Being placed under arrest, or having someone in your family arrested
- 8) Death of a sibling
- 9) Death of a grandparent
- 10) An estranged family member (meaning a family member that you can no longer even talk to)

I have had people tell me they are going through a tough time because as adults they have to look at putting their parents in a long-term facility to care for them. I have others tell me they’re heartbroken because of the divorce of a grown child. They no longer have access to a grandchild who is so precious to them. The sufferings, the pains and tribulations of this life come in all shapes and sizes. None of us are immune to them. Rather than just trying to talk about where they come from, instead, I want us to look at what the Bible says we should do in the midst of suffering. It’s right here in Romans 5:3-4. “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our suffering, because we know that suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance produces character, and character produces hope.”

A number of years ago, I read a book by Paul Billheimer, entitled “Don’t Waste Your Sorrows.” In other words, if you don’t learn something from the pain and disappointment of life, you basically wasted that experience. Instead, the Bible says, “There is something we ought to be learning from it.

I think there is probably somebody in this room, who has either already gone through all ten of those things I just read a while ago or you are going through them now. It is amazing to me to realize that Sunday after Sunday, there are people seated in these pews, who at that very moment are going through the most desperate crisis of their entire lives. I don’t know who it is, and you may not know who it is, but there are people who come in Sunday after Sunday who are saying, “I am struggling, and I don’t know how I am going to make it.”

I. WHY DOES GOD ALLOW SUFFERING?

Well, God has a word for you today about how to rejoice in your suffering. I want to ask you three simple questions about suffering. Number one, why does God allow suffering? Why, suffering? And, why is not as important as what can I learn from suffering? But let’s look at the answers. Why does God allow suffering? Let me give you at least three answers. There are many others.

1. Suffering forces us to depend on God

Suffering forces us to depend on God. When you are not going through any kind of struggle, you are just clipping along, and you are happy and free, and everything is okay, you find yourself not depending on God. On the other hand, whenever you are going through a tough, desperate experience, that’s when you realize you have to depend upon God.

One of these days I’m going to write a book, and the title of the book is going to be, “Things the Bible *Doesn’t* Say.” There is a lot of misunderstanding out there about things people think the Bible says. For instance, have you ever heard anyone say, “The Bible says, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” Mothers like to quote that verse. But you that’s not in the Bible. You won’t find it anywhere in the Bible. Another quote people are sure is in the Bible is, “Well you know the Bible says, ‘God helps those who help themselves.’” Friend, that is not in the Bible. Not only is that not in the Bible, that is contrary to the truth. God does *not* help those who help themselves. God helps the helpless.

Here’s another thing that’s not in the Bible but people say, “You know what the Bible says, ‘God won’t put more on you than you can bear.’” That sounds good, and we wish it were true, but I challenge anybody in this room to go through the pages of scripture and find where it says God will never put more on you than you can bear! There *is* a promise about temptation in 1 Corinthians 10:13, “There is no temptation that you face that is such that you cannot endure it.” What that means is God doesn’t cheat. He doesn’t give you a temptation that is so strong you cannot resist it. But, we are not talking about temptation here; we are talking about adversity, trouble, or problems. Where does it ever say you won’t have more on you than you can bear? The truth is sometimes we have so much on us, we cannot bear it alone, and it drives us to God. You say, “Well, is there a scripture about that?” Well, it’s right there in front of you. 2 Corinthians 1:8-9. Here’s the apostle Paul, who is an expert on suffering. He says, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships that we have suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure far beyond our ability to endure.” The truth is God will put more on you than you can withstand *by yourself*. Keep reading, “So that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the symptoms of death.” Why did this happen? “but, this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.”

God wants every one of us to depend totally and completely on him. Sometimes when things are going great with no problems, no suffering, we don’t even think about God. We just think about how good we’ve got it! God wants us to depend on Him. Watchman Nee was a great Christian from China. This is what Watchman Nee wrote, “God’s great purpose is to reduce us. This is

because any confidence in one’s own flesh is fatal to confidence and faith in God” Listen to this “God must bring a person to the end of himself before he can release his mighty power.”

2. Shows us the value of God's grace

You know what? As long as we are cruising along, we have everything under control and we can handle it. We are not depending on God. So, one reason God allows it, so we will depend on him. I didn’t say God *causes* suffering, but he allows it. Here’s another reason he allows suffering, because suffering shows us the value of God’s grace. Sometimes, we think grace was just something way back yonder when we got saved. It was grace that brought about the forgiveness of our sins, but we forget that God’s grace is active right now, present tense.

I want to read another quote from Paul, that expert on suffering. He had this thing called “a thorn in the flesh.” Have you ever heard about “a thorn in the flesh?” There has been all kinds of speculation and suppositions about what that was. I’m glad we don’t know what it was, because the fact we don’t know what it was makes it apply to whatever problem you are going through. Think about a “thorn in the flesh.” Think about a “splinter under your fingernail.” Think about something that is causing you constant pain you are thinking about all the time. Some agonizing experience that when you go to bed at night, that’s what you are thinking about. When you wake up in the middle of the night, that’s what captivates your thoughts. And, when you get up the next morning, that’s the one thing that you say, “It’s there. I’m going to have to do something about it.” That’s a “thorn in the flesh.”

Let’s see what Paul did about his “thorn.” Read the scripture there. 2 Corinthians 12:8-9. “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But, he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” meaning, your weakness, my weakness. “Therefore” Paul says, “I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” Now, you and I respond the same way when we go through trouble. Like the apostle Paul, we pray, “Lord, take it away! Lord, please take it away! Heavenly Father, please take this pain away!” Sometimes, we wonder why he doesn’t take it away. The reason he does not take it away is he wants us to realize how valuable is his grace and his power. That way, we don’t depend upon ourselves. We value his grace.

3. Suffering connects us with the sacrifice of Jesus

Here’s the third reason God allows suffering. It is because suffering connects us with the pain and the suffering of Jesus. Now, would you agree for every marriage it is important that the bride and the groom be compatible? In fact, today, one of the grounds of divorce everybody uses is “incompatibility.” Brides and grooms need to be compatible. Well, our bridegroom, spiritually speaking, is the Lord, Jesus Christ. We are the bride, the church. God is just trying to get the church, the bride of Christ, compatible for the bridegroom.

The bridegroom suffered a lot, didn’t he? Just think about all the ways he suffered. He suffered rejection. He suffered loneliness. He suffered betrayal, and he suffered physical pain. All the kinds of suffering he experienced, we’re going to experience. In fact, read what Paul writes in Philippians 3:10. He says, “I want to know Christ.” I like that. “and the power of his

resurrection.” I like that. “and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering.” I don’t like that. “becoming like him in his death” I don’t like that. Some folks think the Christian life is like ordering a hamburger at a fast food joint. “I want a hamburger, but hold the onions and the lettuce.” Some people say, “I want the Christian life, I want forgiveness of sins, home in Heaven, name written down in the Lamb’s Book of Life, but hold the suffering, hold the being conformed to his death. I’ll pass on those.” No, friends. When you accept Jesus, you get the full meal deal. Do you know what I am talking about? You connect with his suffering with your suffering. You say, “What are you talking about?”

When I was in high school, my dad was a timber broker. That meant he knew all these guys in the sawmills in South Alabama, so every summer I worked in the sawmills. It was a great motivation for me to go ahead and get my education, I want you to know. I remember one afternoon I was pulling green lumber off a green chain in the hot summer, and I wasn’t paying much attention when I slid a big, old board with a long nail-like splinter onto the stack and that nail-like splinter went right between my two fingers and pierced my canvas work gloves, and went right between my two fingers, and right into my hand. It was terribly painful. You can just imagine. They stopped the green chain. They took me to the emergency room and the doctor cut the glove off, and then he used prongs and reached in there and pulled that thing out. I want you to know I was not a happy camper, I was screaming the whole way. It was really, really painful. I have since learned what some of you realize is the most sensitive nerve in the body is the median nerve that runs into the palm of the hand and branches out to your fingers.

I was in high school at that time, and that was a time when I was trying to live for Jesus. As soon as the doctor pulled that splinter out, do you know what thought came into my mind? I thought about Jesus. I thought about how they took nails and they pounded those nails right into his hands, severing that median nerve. I thought about how I only experienced that pain for about 30 minutes until somebody pulled it out, but for *six hours* he endured that pain. Do you know what I was doing? I was sharing in the fellowship of his suffering in just one teeny, tiny way. What I was thinking was as much as that hurt, it must have hurt a hundred times more for the Lord, Jesus, to suffer that. Any kind of pain you go through, there is a connection point with the pain and suffering of Jesus. That’s positive. That’s why God sometimes allows us to suffer.

II. HOW SHOULD I REACT TO MY SUFFERING?

I want to move on and talk about not why does God allow suffering, but number two, how should I react to my suffering, because you have no choice about the reality of suffering. It’s going to happen. Just hang on. If you’re not hurting right now, just hang on, you will. The only choice you have in the matter is how you are going to react to it. How you are going to respond. You have three options.

Option #1: Revolt in anger

Number one, some people revolt in anger. They are angry at God and shake a fist in God’s face! “God, why, did you let this happen to me?” They take the attitude of Job’s wife who said, “Just curse God and die.”

If we could pull down the walls of this church and walk out into this community and we could look into the homes of some of the people who are not in church today, who at one time were right where you are today. They were in church worshiping the Lord. If you were to ask some of them, “Hey, why aren’t you in church anymore.” Do you know what some of them would say if they were honest? They would refer back to some bad experience in their past, when their marriage failed, or when their business failed, or when their health failed, or when somebody did them dirty, or some important family member died. They look and they say, “How could God make that happen, or even allow that to happen?” They are still angry at God. They are living in a state of constant spiritual rebellion. Why?

Option #2: Resign in apathy

Here’s another option. Some people don’t revolt in anger; instead they resign in apathy. They say, “Hey, life is just a big dirt sandwich. You have to eat it one bite at a time. Bad things are going to happen. There is nothing you can do about it.” They don’t say, “Grin and bear it.” They basically say, “Scowl and bear it. Just hunker down.” They live by Murphy’s law. You know what Murphy’s law says. “Anything that can go wrong will go wrong. Murphy’s law says, “Anything you try to fix will take longer and cost more than you think.” Murphy’s law says, “You’ll always find a lost item in the very last place you look.” That makes sense if you think about it. Murphy’s law says, “The chance of a piece of buttered bread falling with the buttered side down is directly proportionate to the cost of the carpet.” That’s true. Murphy’s law says, “The other line is always going to move faster than yours.” Murphy’s law says, “When a broken appliance or automobile is demonstrated for the repairman, it will work properly every time.” Some people live by the fact that this is just a tough life and are just resigned to it. They say, “Whatever is going to happen is going to happen.”

A group of guys was playing golf one day and some duffer walked up who wasn’t much of a golfer at all. They were going to let him play with their group. He stood up there, addressed the ball, swung the club and missed the ball completely. He tried it again. He swung the club and missed the ball completely. These guys were in the background thinking “This is going to be a long day.” He swung the third time and missed the ball completely. He bent down, picked up his ball, and said, “This course is too hard for me.” That’s what some people do. They pick up and walk off and say, “Hey, this life is just too difficult for me, I’m just resigning, and they give up.

Option #3: Rejoice in obedience

You must make the choice to rejoice–It is not a feeling!

Don’t revolt in anger. Don’t resign in apathy. What do you do? Number three, you rejoice in obedience. You don’t do it because you feel like it, you do it to obey God. Here’s a very important statement about rejoicing: You must make the choice to rejoice–it is not a feeling! So many times people say, “Well, I don’t feel like rejoicing.”

Would you help me here for just a moment? Wake up and help me now because we are going to do a little social experiment. I’ve been looking at you out here for a few minutes, and I can tell most of you, you know, you’re not all that pleasant. You’re just sitting there, enduring church,

saying, “It’ll be over in a few minutes.” You may not feel like rejoicing right now. That’s the point I want to try to make. I’d like for every one of us in this room to say something together five times. I want us to say, “Praise the Lord.” I want you to mean it from your heart sincerely, and each time we say it, I want us to get a little louder and a little more exuberant. Let’s just see what happens:

Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

PRAISE THE LORD !!!

Now, you be the judge. When we started out doing that, you probably didn’t feel like praising the Lord. That’s all right, but we did it anyway, didn’t we? After the fifth time you kind of felt like praising the Lord, didn’t you? Sure did! I have news for you. This is the truth about rejoicing. You rejoice when you don’t feel like it. You keep on rejoicing until you do feel like it, and then you rejoice because you feel like it. It’s not how you feel. You don’t let your feelings tell you how to live. You tell your feelings how you’re going to obey God. You make a choice to rejoice.

III. HOW CAN I REJOICE IN SUFFERING?

One final question, and this is what you are thinking. “Number three, Pastor, how? Tell me how can I rejoice in suffering? I just want to know how I can do it.” I think the key is found right here. You focus on the process instead of the present pain. God is trying to do something in you, and through you. It is a process. This process is mentioned there in Romans 5:3-4. You notice those things it says, perseverance, character and hope.

1. Suffering produces a commitment

Notice the things suffering produces. Number one, it produces a commitment to endure. Any time you go through a bad experience and you hang in there, it produces in you a commitment to endure adversity. That is a very valuable personality characteristic—persistence. It’s a commitment just to hang in there.

You know, it’s true in marriages that romantic feelings rise and fall. They really do, but it is that commitment to stay together that is the most valuable aspect in your relationship in marriage. That’s why I have said many times that the three most important things in marriage are commitment, commitment, commitment. You just stay enduring in that. You keep loving that person even when you don’t feel like loving them. The same is true with your faithfulness to God in those times when you are going through suffering. Even in the darkest hours, you stay committed to the Lord, and you don’t quit. That’s persistence.

One of our heroes in history is Winston Churchill. Winston Churchill was a small man who was about as wide as he was tall, but he had such bulldog tenacity that during World War II, when London homes and churches were being bombed nearly every night by the Nazis, he spoke to the people and what he said to them gave them such courage to persist that it bears repeating. He went on the radio and he said: “We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France. We shall

fight on the seas and the oceans. We shall defend our island, whatever the cost shall be. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields, and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender!” That kind of determination to endure to the end was what allowed that nation to survive the blackest experience in their history. When you go through tough times, it ought to be what you do. You say, “I’m going to hang in there. I’m not going to quit.”

2. Suffering produces character

The second thing suffering produces is a character to enrich you. God is more interested in your character than your comfort. He is more interested in developing you to become more like Jesus than he is in your happiness. In fact, look at 1 Peter 4:13. It says, “Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” He is trying to teach you something. What is he trying to teach you? That every bad experience of your life can develop character in you that will serve you later in life.

Those of you who love Texas Aggie football will recall that in 1954 the Texas A & M Aggies coach was Paul Bear Bryant. He took two busloads of Aggie football players down to a place called Junction City. It was one of the hottest summers on record, and he was so tough and demanding on those players that more than half of them quit before the end of those ten days. There was one player, however, Gene Stallings, who stayed on for the entire ten days of the Junction City camp. He said a hundred times every day he thought about quitting, but every time he thought about quitting, he said, “No, I’m going to go on just a little bit longer.” And then he said, “I’m just going to go on a little bit longer.” He survived. Gene Stallings said they went down to that camp in two buses and they came back in one bus with plenty of empty seats. Two years later those Texas A & M Aggies went undefeated, and won the Southwest Conference. Gene Stallings went on to become a very successful coach, having coached for the Dallas Cowboys as an assistant, and then the Arizona Cardinals. Then his players won the state championship at the University of Alabama. Gene Stallings will tell you the greatest challenge of his life was not that camp in 1954. It was not coaching in the pros or on the college level. The biggest challenge Gene Stallings ever faced was in 1962 when his son John Mark was born. Gene Stallings said he had always wanted to have a boy who would be a great athlete. Instead, God gave him a little boy with Downs Syndrome who needed more love and attention than anybody else. Gene Stallings said the character that had been developed in him from having gone through the tough experiences in sports prepared him to face the biggest challenge of his life. I think Gene Stallings has been successful and is successful. He is right up there at Paris, Texas, taking care of his boy, John Mark.

3. Suffering produces confidence

When you go through tough times, you must realize God is trying to build character in you to get ready for tougher times. That really leads us to the third thing suffering produces: It produces a confidence to enable us—and the Bible calls that hope. Look at 1 Peter 5:10. “And the God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ after you have suffered a little while,” that’s the key “will himself restore you, make you strong, firm and steadfast. You’ve all been through some times of suffering. If you endured and you stayed faithful to God, it is developing character

in you, because, friends, on the horizon go ahead, look ahead without any fear. There are some other times of suffering you are going to face on the horizon. Because God has brought you through the past, you can have hope and confidence he is going to carry you through whatever happens in your future. So, don’t live in fear.

CONCLUSION

A friend of mine went up to New England not too long ago. He said he visited an apple orchard. He walked through this orchard, and there were some apple trees so loaded down with fruit that the branches were leaning over, and they had to prop the branches up. He said there were other trees with a lot of leaves, but very little fruit. He examined one of these trees loaded down with apples, and he noticed gashes and gouges on the trunks and on some of the larger branches. He asked the owner of the orchard, “Why is that?” The owner said, “We discovered a long time ago that when you take a healthy apple tree that may not be producing a lot of fruit, and you cut it, gouge it, or slash it, there is something in that tree that causes it to respond in a positive way. It never fails. The trees with the most scars produce the greatest fruit.”

I am looking in the faces of a lot of people today who have some scars, who have some gouges and gashes in your personality, in your psyche. You have to realize sometimes God allows that to happen because he wants you to be fruitful. “Herein, is my father glorified,” Jesus said, “that you produce much fruit.” So when you are going through that suffering, that’s how you can say praise the Lord, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, PRAISE THE LORD!!

OUTLINE

I. WHY DOES GOD ALLOW SUFFERING?

Suffering:

1. Forces us to depend on God

We do not want to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. *2 Corinthians 1:8-9*

2. Shows us the value of God's grace

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. *2 Corinthians 12:8-9*

3. Connects us with the sacrifice of Jesus

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. *Philippians 3:10*

II. HOW SHOULD I REACT TO MY SUFFERING?

The options:

1. Revolt in anger
2. Resign in apathy
3. Rejoice in obedience

You must make the choice to rejoice—it is not a feeling!

III. HOW CAN I REJOICE IN SUFFERING?

Suffering produces:

1. Commitment
2. Character
3. Confidence



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes