

Hope
Romans 5:1-5

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Romans 5 portrays not just a strong affirmation of faith, the affirmation of faith found in these few verses is literally tenacious. “We glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; character, hope.” Many people encounter suffering with anything but this strong and tenacious faith. A frequent refrain if not lament or downright complaint when faced with suffering is, “Why me?” I didn’t seek out this suffering, I don’t like this suffering, I don’t think this suffering is fair, I’m tired of this suffering, and this suffering cannot end too soon. Why me?

I wonder if that is not what a certain bricklayer was thinking as he filled out an accident report for the worker’s compensation board. Why me?

Dear Sir: I am writing in response to your request for additional information in Block #3 of the accident reporting form. I put "Poor Planning" as the cause of my accident. You asked for a fuller explanation and I trust the following details will be sufficient.

I am a bricklayer by trade. On the day of the accident, I was working alone on the roof of a new six-story building. When I completed my work, I found I had some bricks left over which when weighed later were found to weigh 240 lbs. Rather than carry the bricks down by hand, I decided to lower them in a barrel by using a pulley which was attached to the side of the building at the sixth floor.

Securing the rope at ground level, I went up to the roof, swung the barrel out and loaded the bricks into it. Then I went down and untied the rope, holding it tightly to insure a slow descent of the 240 lbs of bricks. You will note on the accident reporting form that my weight is 135 lbs.

Due to my surprise at being jerked off the ground so suddenly, I lost my presence of mind and forgot to let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded at a rapid rate up the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel which was now proceeding downward at an equally impressive speed. This explains the fractured skull, minor abrasions and the broken collarbone, as listed in Section 3, accident reporting form.

Slowed only slightly, I continued my rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two knuckles deep into the pulley which I mentioned in Paragraph 2 of this correspondence. Fortunately by this time I had regained my presence of mind and was able to hold tightly to the rope, in spite of the excruciating pain I was now beginning to experience. At approximately the same time, however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground-and the bottom fell out of the barrel. Now devoid of the weight of the bricks, the barrel weighed approximately 50 lbs.

I refer you again to my weight. As you might imagine, I began a rapid descent down the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming up. This accounts for the two fractured ankles, broken tooth and severe lacerations of my legs and lower body.

Here my luck began to change slightly. The encounter with the barrel seemed to slow me enough to lessen my injuries when I fell into the pile of bricks and fortunately only three vertebrae were cracked.

I am sorry to report, however, as I lay there on the pile of bricks, in pain, unable to move and watching the empty barrel six stories above me, I again lost my composure and presence of mind and let go of the rope.

Who could blame this poor guy, lying on the ground beaten and battered as he looks up and sees that 50 pound barrel headed right toward him, who could blame him if he shouted out in despair, “Why me?” My hope is this silly story can provide us the space to laugh a bit, to identify with a person who if he didn’t have bad luck would have no luck. I wanted us to have a bit of a laugh because when we are in the midst of suffering, it is anything but funny. And when we cry out *Why me*, it is a cry that comes from the deepest places of pain and heartache and disappointment and despair.

I am certain Paul understands how difficult suffering can be. When he writes later in Romans 12 that we weep with those who weep, he is aware that suffering can be the cause of deep and devastating sorrow. Nevertheless, here in chapter five of Romans he sees suffering as more than sorrow and pain and loss. He sees suffering as part of an experience that moves from suffering to perseverance to character and finally, ultimately, to hope. In looking at Romans as a whole, it seems to me that rather than chiding us for crying out, “Why me,” Paul might actually take that very phrase and use it to his advantage, and to our advantage.

What if we used the question, “Why me”, not as a complaint when we are suffering, but as a response to all of the blessings God has given us? What if we could come to look at our lives as an incredible gift, a precious and wonderful gift, a gift blessed by God in countless ways, blessed by God in sweet and tender ways, and overwhelmed that all of this goodness and grace would be ours, to ask with humility and reverence, “Why me”?

Earlier in this service of worship we heard someone ask, “Why me?” They were not asking why me in the midst of suffering. This one was not suffering, they were in rapturous worship. The one who asked “Why Me” is the psalmist. Psalm 8 begins, “O Lord, our Lord how majestic is your name in all the earth.” With wonder in his eyes and a sense of awe in his voice he says, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind, what are human beings, that you are mindful of them?” Surrounded by the glory and majesty of God’s creation, God’s vast and amazing and marvelous and beautiful creation, what am I that you are mindful of me? Why me?

With the coming of spring to Westerly I have taken advantage of some of the nicer mornings to take a bike ride. I zip down Noyes Neck into Weekapaug and ride out to the inn and I gaze out at the pond. The sun is just rising, bringing color to the sky that is reflected in the water. Past Spray Rock and following Atlantic Avenue and then Ocean View Highway I ride through Watch Hill and out to the lighthouse. Each time I have been at the lighthouse alone, all by myself. Slowly turning I take in Fisher's Island, Napatree Point, the mansions and The Ocean House, the sand along East Beach and Misquamicut, with waves and the wind and the birds and flowers that bloom. It is all too much, too marvelous. I'm there all alone, surrounded by God's beautiful creation. Why me?

Paul is aware of that sense of the wonder and awe of creation that can cause the human heart to cry out in praise and adoration, "Why me?" And yet Paul believes there is more, so much more than the gift of creation that causes us to ask, "Why me"? What Paul presents in Romans is more amazing than creation, more stunning than the stars, more glorious than the highest heavens, more beautiful than any rising or setting of the sun, and more breathtaking than any supernova. In Romans Paul presents Jesus Christ. In presenting Jesus Christ we become shockingly aware that the gift of Jesus Christ is not something we deserve.

The early chapters of Romans portray us in the depths and despair that mark our human condition. Substituting idols for God we turn to our own selfish desires. Those who had the law found that not only did they fail to live up to the law, they allowed the law to build within them a sense of pride that caused them to see themselves as better than others. Those without the law sometimes got things right, but all in all it was total failure. By verse nine in chapter three we are told that Jews and Gentiles alike are under the power of sin...that there is no one righteous...all have turned away from God. Romans 3:23 states the condemning verdict: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." That is part of the story, a part of the story that must be told. That is a part of the story that we must recognize, and a part of the story that we must own. All of us alike are under the power of sin.

While the power of sin which we are under is part of the story, it is not the whole story. Before Paul begins talking about the power of sin, he has already made sure to tell the people about the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need that word gospel, because gospel means good news. Before the people hear about the bad news and the power of sin and how we all live under that power and have fallen short of God's glory because of that power, and how we are under the judgment of God, before any of that Paul has clearly stated that what he is sharing is good news. He is sharing the good news of the gospel. The good news of the gospel is how God will confront the power of sin. The good news of the gospel is how God will conquer the power of sin. The good news of the gospel is how God will redeem a humanity enslaved to the power of sin by literally buying us back at a great price. The good news of the gospel is how God will reconcile himself to this fallen humanity, finding a way so that our sins are not counted against us. The good news of the gospel is that the downward spiral that began in Adam, a representative figure of all the rebellion of human beings, has been completely transformed by one man who was righteous, by one man who offered his life as a sacrifice of atonement for the sinfulness of humanity. The good news of the gospel is that what was broken has been made whole. The good news of the gospel is somehow, in a way we will never completely understand, God has condemned the complete utter darkness of sin by taking that condemnation upon himself. By standing in our place, he has provided for us a way to stand in his place, in a place of righteousness and wholeness and freedom, a place where we literally have peace with God. That is how chapter five of Romans begins. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God."

How? How did God do all this? The answer is that God sent Jesus Christ to live in this world, to be fully human in this world, to suffer and die at the hands of human beings and at the same time at the hands of the forces of darkness, and that in his death and resurrection all of the good news I just rehearsed, all the good news and so much more, was bestowed on us, on you, and on me. It is almost as if Paul shares all of this good news and waits for our response. All this for me? Why me? To find the answer we need only read the verses that immediately follow our ones about suffering and perseverance and character and hope. The apostle writes, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still

powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.” There you have it. At just the right time, when we had nothing to offer, when we were trapped, enslaved, and powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. It begs the question. It anticipates the question. Why would Christ die for the ungodly? Why? Why for us? Why for me? I pray that you and I might hear this answer as the clearest, the simplest, the sweetest, and the most amazing answer we could ever receive. Why us? Why me? Why did Christ die for the ungodly? Because God loves us. Because God loves you. Because God loves me. “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

God loves us, each and every one of us. God demonstrates that love through the death of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ died so that we would be set free from the powers of sin and death. In Romans 6 Paul writes that as Christ died, we die with him. We die to the old, to the powers of sin and death, to selfishness, to despair, to hopelessness. We die to all of these old things, and then just as Christ rose from the dead, we are raised to new life. In Christ Jesus there is new creation, with all the promise that holds. Just as we experience new creation, the promise is that one day all of this world will be made new. Every wrong will be made right, every power will be defeated, everything that is broken will be made whole, and life will conquer death.

By the 8th chapter of Romans Paul is assuring us that we have moved from condemnation to life. The sign of that life is the Holy Spirit who comes and fills us, comes and lives with us, comes and lives in us. The Holy Spirit assures us that we belong to God, that we belong to God in an intimate and loving relationship. We are adopted as children of God, and we cry out to God, *Abba*, Father. We truly belong. We belong to a God whose love for us knows no bounds. It is that love, that Spirit, that presence, that is with us in everything we do. Paul returns to the theme of suffering in Romans 8, and now that we have looked at all of God’s blessings and promises and peace and assurance and love, yes, God’s infinite and enduring love, he writes, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will one day be revealed in us.” Of course there is a human tendency to say *Why me* when we endure suffering. But there is a louder *Why me*, a more

profound *Why me*, that puts our present suffering in context. Because God's love is with us, because the Spirit of God dwells in us and will never leave us or forsake us, our suffering truly can be a means by which we grow in our faith. Suffering produces perseverance...perseverance produces character...character produces hope...and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

Years ago I read about a pastor who preached a sermon that received a standing ovation. That caught my attention, so I read the rest of the story. What happened was a few preachers challenged one another to memorize Romans. They all set to work on it, and then decided to recite it to their respective congregations. No sermon. They just recited the letter to the Romans.

The pastor who wrote the article, the one who said there was a standing ovation, recounted his experience. He said he stood up and recited Romans word for word. He told the part about all having sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. He told the part about God proving his love in Christ Jesus. He told the part about the Holy Spirit filling us with the spirit of adoption so we cry out, *Abba*, Father. And then he came to those verses at the end of Romans 8. They are powerful verses. They are verses about belonging.

What, then, shall we say, the Apostle writes, "What, then, shall we say...If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

The pastor stood before the congregation. All he had was the word of God. He had learned it by heart. The word of God was stamped on his heart. It was like the word of God had given him a new identity, and he was sharing that identity for all, just like Paul did 2,000 years ago. The pastor stood and recited from memory the final verses in Romans 8. The congregation was on the edge of their seats.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.”

I don't know if it was like in the movies, where one person slowly starts clapping and others join in. I don't know if it was like Pentecost when a great rush of a mighty wind filled that sanctuary. But according to the pastor, when he shared those words, “Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus,” the congregation stood and applauded. They rejoiced. They celebrated the identity that comes from being found in Jesus Christ.

Because our identity is in Jesus Christ, and because there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from being united with Jesus Christ, I think it is that very thing that allows the Apostle Paul to look at the suffering that might come our way and not just believe, but know with certainty, that even our suffering can be a means God uses to draw us into an ever deeper relationship of trust. That type of trust leads us to hope in every situation, and in all situations. Hear again these words from Romans 5.

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”