

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Romans 5:1-11

Sermon Title: "Moving Up and Out of the Suffering" (A Journey through Romans)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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{SLIDE 1, TITLE SLIDE} We are back to looking at Romans. After a few weeks off, we return to the letter of Paul to the Romans, and continue to observe what sort of ideas he has to share with these new Christians. Do we remember to whom Paul is writing? These are new Christians coming from Jewish and pagan traditions. These are new Christians in a city that is not to favorable toward Christians. In fact, years after this letter is written, a great fire will break out in Rome, and the emperor Nero will blame the Christians for it.¹ Being a follower of Christ can be a dangerous stand to take.

Paul continues to build confidence in these new Christians. He doesn't want them to lose what they saw and learned in Jerusalem, where they were traveling during the time of Jesus' death and resurrection and during the time of disciples speaking different languages on Pentecost. Their faith in Christ is young, and it still needs time to grow. All of our faith in Christ always needs time to grow, mature,

¹ It is thought that Romans was written in 57 AD (Thomas Nelson Publishers, *The Nelson Study Bible (NKJV)*, cf. 1876). The fire broke out in 64 AD.

flourish.

{SLIDE 2} Faith definitely needs to be deep when things aren't going well. When it seems as though the world stands against us, that nobody takes our side and supports us in what we are trying to do... this is when our faith in Christ needs to be solid. Faith in Christ and Christ himself need to remove the obstacles, knock down the barriers, and move us down the path with courage and strength.

Paul speaks to these new Christians about sufferings. The Greek word literally and figuratively means pressure. A pressure that somebody places on us that is physically uncomfortable, and even a pressure that people place on us that are mentally and emotionally uncomfortable. The Greek word for sufferings may also affliction, anguish, and burden. When Paul uses the word, he means the persecution that Christians might face for their beliefs. Those new Christians in Rome could face any kind of persecution at any moment. Someone could ask one of them to swear allegiance to the Roman government, and if the new Christian doesn't, he or she could be brought to said government for an inquiry. If Christians go around calling Jesus Lord, and the emperor demands his citizens to call him lord, the new Christian could find himself or herself tortured and killed. **{SLIDE 3}**

Paul knows what it is like to be persecuted for his faith in Christ. He could speak to crowds and have some of them yell insults at him. Some could pick up rocks and throw them at him. The police might show up and arrest them, stick them in jail for a later sentencing. Paul knows the dangers he faces any day at any time, yet he pushes through them with faith in Christ. He leans on his faith, and trusts that Christ will move him through to the next day and the next situation. God would never reject him or abandon him, as God would never reject or abandon us. Paul wants these new Christians to realize this, no matter what sufferings/pressure might come upon them. “Paul knows well what he is doing when he says that, in proclaiming the Gospel, he brings [people] hope, a great hope, full of joy, the hope beyond all other hope, the hope of the glory of God.” John Calvin, the founder of our Presbyterian Church, said, “In the Gospel there shines forth upon us a hope that we may share in the divine nature. For when we shall see God face to face, we shall be like Him.”²

{SLIDE 4} Now, before we move on, we have to say something about Paul’s words in Romans 5. One might think that Paul is saying that

² Both quotes from Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 153.

sufferings/persecutions/pressures are a good thing. “We boast in our sufferings,” Paul says in verse 3, which could be misinterpreted as “We are happy to have sufferings.” “We should welcome our sufferings and welcome more to come.” Sufferings are such a wonderful thing to have, can’t get enough of them.”

This isn’t what Paul is saying. He doesn’t give a thumbs-up to sufferings. He is being realistic: In his world being a Christian would bring arguments. Being a Christian who shares the good news of Jesus Christ would face strong opposition. The good news of Christ smacks against the way the world wants to run things. Some people like how the world is run and do not want any disruptions or changes. Christ means to change the world and all of us, and that means some will fight back. Some will place pressure on Christians and cause them to suffer for their faith. Paul doesn’t welcome his sufferings, but he will stand against them in faith. He calls the Christians in Rome to do the same.

Jesus told his followers that in this world they would have troubles.³ Jesus didn’t wish for his followers to have troubles, but since Jesus had troubles with being the Son of God, he warned his followers that they would have similar troubles, if they

³ Cf. John 16:33.

believed in God's Son. Paul also warns those who have become Christians in Rome that they must go through hardships to enter God's kingdom.⁴ Again, not that he wished it but that it would happen.

However, Paul tells those Christians that suffering/persecution/pressure can be productive. For the one who believes in Jesus Christ and holds on to Jesus Christ, they see the suffering as an opportunity to grow.

{SLIDE 5} Suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character. Character produces hope.⁵ The Greek word for *endurance* means patience and waiting. The suffering doesn't last forever. It may last a day or a week or a year, but that isn't forever. It might feel like forever, but it isn't. Suffering produces a cheerful waiting, a joyful patience that says something better will soon come. Something better will come from God at God's right time.

{SLIDE 6} When I broke my clavicle almost four years ago, I had a boatload on pain. I couldn't sleep well. The shoulder and arm hurt constantly. It felt as though it would never go back to the way it was. But suffering produced endurance within me. I knew my time would come to work on this thing. There

⁴ John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, cf. 141.

⁵ Cf. Romans 5:3-5.

might be a huge bump above my chest, but I would be able to move my arm again. The pain in my shoulder would disappear. I couldn't wait for that to happen, and looked forward to the time it would happen.

The Christians in Rome would suffer pressure/persecution to change their beliefs, but Paul told them they could hold on. Such suffering produces endurance. High school students who go off to college will run into other students who think their beliefs are boring, stupid, unhappy, and un-fun. College students trying to keep to their faith in Christ will suffer for it, but such suffering will produce endurance. Suffering always produces endurance for the person who holds tightly to Christ. They experience a drive that says, "We will get through this eventually. God will see us through this."

{SLIDE 7} Endurance produces character. The Greek word for *character* means experience that only can be had through trial. We do not get better at something unless we have tried to do something and failed. We fail and it hurts – nobody likes to fail – but such failure shows us that we have learned something new. Fail makes us try again and learn the right way to do something. We get smarter. We gain experience. Character is built within us.

{SLIDE 8} Neil deGrasse Tyson is a really smart

guy. He is a well-known astrophysicist who can talk to people about science in highly-technical and in highly-simple ways. He has written book and appeared a many talk shows on TV. He appeared on a show over the radio, in which he was supposed to answer three question of which he didn't know the answers. The host of the show expected him to answer all three question correctly, because he is Neil deGrasse Tyson. He is a highly-intelligent man. Dr. Neil only answered one question corrected, and the host was stunned. He couldn't believe how he had failed. Dr. Neil said that he didn't fail at all. "Because I got two answers incorrect," he said, "I have now learned two things I never knew. If I had already known the answered, I would have learned nothing today."

Endurance produces character, a Christian who learns how to endure the pressure/persecution on their faith, and character that says he or she knows how to act when such pressures come. Christians who get beaten up for their faith do not become arrogant. That is not character. They become more trusting in their God, who will give them the words to say when the time is right. They become more trusting in their God who gives them the correct ways to act in any situation. They trust their God to help them mature and become more confident in faith.

{SLIDE 9} And character produces hope. The Greek word for *hope* means anticipation, expectation. We are in the position of knowing who we are and whose we are. The pressure/persecution we face tells us to walk away from God. Ignore this faith in Christ, because it is so stupid. Yet, as we move from suffering to endurance to character, we finally reach place in which we know who we are and whose we are. Yes, we are sinners who do not deserve God's love, but God loves us nonetheless. Yes, we are Christians whose faith might not be titanium solid, but God will continue to build on our faith and make it deeper. Yes, we are people who do not believe as the world does, but God continues to transform us all. God speaks to each person, trying to convince people to come to him in faith.

When character produces hope, we find ourselves in a place to trust God's love for us and for all. We look to those who pressure/persecute us, and we pray for their eternal spirits. We aren't angry with them – we pity them. We wish they had what we have. We wish they would experience the love of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit as we do. It is a wonderful life for all to gain. We wish they could stop wasting energy with their pressure/persecution, and use it constructively by learning about life in Jesus Christ. They too could have faith, and we pray they do.

This leads us into verses 6-11, which could be a separate sermon itself. I'm not going to preach another sermon right now, but I am going to say how I think verses 6-11 match up with verses 1-5.

{SLIDE 10} “For while we were still weak,” Paul says, “at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” These new Christians in Rome were once weak. They were oblivious to the idea that God sent his Son to the world to save it. And yet God died for the ungodly, died for every person who was oblivious to Jesus’ saving grace. Jesus died and rose for those new Christians in Rome, and he died and rose for all those who oppose those new Christians with suffering/pressure/persecution.

“Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous man – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.” For good or righteous people a person might think about laying down his or her life, but nobody would die for a sinful person, right? Nobody would dare risk life and limb for people who are oblivious to God’s only Son. “But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” God still loved us so much to rescue us from our sin. We didn’t deserve it, but God gave us the chance to be counted as righteous through Jesus Christ, and we are counted as righteous through our faith in Christ.

Wouldn't it be nice if those who pressured/persecuted the new Christians in Rome knew of this saving grace? Wouldn't it make life so much easier, if those who spent so much energy opposing Christ actually gave in to Christ, and saw themselves as sinners needing a Savior? Those who pressure and persecute could also build on faith through suffering. They could produce endurance from their suffering. They could produce character from their endurance. They could produce hope from their character. Their faith and their lives would grow much deeper, much more vibrant.

Alas, those who pressure and persecute Christians have no chance of knowing God's saving grace, and that is really sad. They will not produce endurance or character or hope. They will remain weak. They will stand as enemies who never grow, who never mature. Christ still died for them, yet they will not see it. They remain lost.

And that is why in our hope we pray for them. That is why we don't see their pressure and persecution as things we have to fold under, cower away from, even accept. We see their actions as the actions of lost, weak, obvious people. We see their actions as actions of an enemy toward God, who do not have to remain as enemies anymore. They too

could be reconciled to God as we are. They too could have their lives saved through the life of Jesus Christ.

We have a final place with God one day. We have a final comfort with God when it is all said and done.⁶ We boast in having such a place and comfort, but we can only boast because it is Christ's free gift to us. Christ's free gift lifts us above the sufferings and pressure and persecutions. We still live in freedom to love and serve our God in joy. It is our hope that all could live this way. It is our hope that all could have such freedom.

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, cf. 153.

Assurance of Pardon:

(Jeremiah 29:11-13) The good news is that God cares deeply for us, so much so that God desires to be a part of our lives, in all our daily chores, all in our future plans. God's love runs so deep, that God yearns to forgive all our sins, no matter how mild or severe they are. Believe the good news, that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Thanks be to God. Amen.