

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 28, 2016**

**THE BENEFITS OF GRACE:
JOY IN SUFFERING**

Romans 5:1-5

I have spoken to you a number of times over the years about what the Bible says about suffering and how God uses it in our lives for His good purposes. From time to time I have talked about some of my own experiences of suffering. I hope I won't sound like a broken record if I share some of it with you again today as we consider what the apostle Paul says here in Romans 5 about the counter-intuitive idea that we should "rejoice in our sufferings" (5:3). I realize that what I share today may be new to some of you. (By the way, if you don't know what I mean by a broken record, ask your parents or anyone over 50.)

Today is an anniversary of sorts for me. It is not my birthday or wedding anniversary. It is not my spiritual birthday. Nothing like that. What it is, is this: On this day eight years ago, on February 28, 2008, I underwent brain surgery at Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore to remove a benign tumor known as an acoustic neuroma (or vestibular schwannoma) that was growing on the 8th cranial nerve that goes from the inner ear to the brain. The tumor, which was growing on my left side, was discovered as a result of some hearing loss I had been experiencing for some time. The effects of the tumor could have been much worse, and likely would have become worse if I had not had surgery to remove it.

The surgery and its aftermath were not without complications. My surgeon (whom I hold in the highest regard) told me there was a 50-50 chance of losing the remaining hearing in my left ear. I hoped I might be in the other 50 percent. But it was not a big surprise when the hearing in my left ear was completely gone after the surgery. It has never returned.

Though my recovery after surgery was fairly normal for the first few weeks, it was anything but easy. Not for me. And not for Mary Sue. I had monster headaches – not the same chronic daily headaches I had been dealing with for a decade or so prior to the surgery, but excruciating headaches that were a normal side effect of this surgery. I had no energy. And I needed help to walk. I needed Mary Sue or one of the kids to hold onto me even to take a few steps, because the location of the tumor and the surgery severely affected my sense of balance. I was in danger of falling anytime I tried to walk on my own.

It got better, though, until the night I suffered a major setback. In the middle of the night, about a month after surgery, I took a bad fall and suffered a traumatic brain injury with bleeding in two lobes of my brain. I spent four days at Fairfax Hospital, and then two more weeks back at Hopkins, so my neurosurgeon could oversee my recovery.

My recovery took months, even with the aid of a terrific outpatient rehab program at Mount Vernon Hospital, the care of some exceptional physicians, the sacrificial love and care of my wife, the love and support of our kids, and the loving kindness of a wonderful church family and other friends.

In addition to my hearing lost, I essentially had to learn to walk all over again. As I hope you can tell, I succeeded, by the grace of God! I am extremely grateful to the Lord for His mercies and grace to me. The monster headaches associated with the surgery eventually went away. Life slowly returned to normal for Mary Sue and me. Not the normal we had known before, but a new normal, colored by the experience of suffering.

I have had other experiences of physical suffering, as you know. Most recently, last summer I had total knee replacement surgery, which, as anyone who has gone through it can tell you, is not like a picnic in the park. The previous year, in June 2014, I underwent nerve decompression surgery to try to alleviate or eliminate some of the chronic daily headache pain I had been living with for a long time. Headaches had been a daily part of my life – 24/7 – for the previous 15 years or so. I couldn't remember what it feels like to *not* have a headache. This surgery was partially successful. Have my headaches gone away completely? No. They are still with me. But they are less intense, less debilitating than they were before the surgery. For the most part, significantly less intense. For which, again, I am truly grateful to God.

As a result of these and other experiences that God has used to refine me like gold or silver, I am not the same man I was before. I hope and believe I am, by the grace of God, a better man. A better husband. A better father. A better pastor. A better Christian.

Of course, my experience of suffering is not unique. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, begins his book *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* with this sentence: “Suffering is everywhere, unavoidable, and its scope often overwhelms” (Keller, 1). We know it is true. Suffering is a fact of life. Afflictions, trials, tragedies, pain, and loss come in all shapes and sizes. And they come to us all. No one is immune.

Obviously, not everyone's experience is the same. Suffering takes different forms and has different causes. Keller points out four basic varieties of suffering. Some suffering we bring on ourselves by our own choices or behavior. Sometimes (but not always) pain or suffering or trouble or loss is a direct result of a choice or series of choices we have knowingly made. A second variety of suffering is caused by betrayal or rejection or attacks by others.

A third variety is what Keller calls the suffering of loss. “It is grief and loss in the face of mortality, decay, and death. In the Bible” (to give just one example) “we see this when Jesus comforts Mary and Martha, who have just lost their brother [Lazarus] and are mourning for him.”

“Everyone comes to know this kind of suffering,” writes Keller, “yet even within this category there are almost endless variations. It is one thing to face the death of a spouse after fifty years of marriage, another to do so when young children are left behind. It is one thing to face your own imminent death from disease when you are eighty, another when you are thirty. It is one kind of grief to lose a relative (with whom you have) a good relationship, another when there (are) unresolved issues and your grief is shot through with guilt and resentment. And then there are different modes of decay and death. There is the slow but

sure decay of aging, and the swift deaths of automobile accidents, floods, and landslides [or tornadoes]” (Keller, 210-211).

This category includes the “universal” forms of suffering and loss that happen regardless of how a person lives – not only one’s own death or the death of a loved one, but financial reversals, depression, chronic pain, terminal illness, or a fire that destroys your home.

The fourth variety of suffering is what Keller calls “‘none of the above,’ though it may overlap with one or more of the others.” He refers to it as the suffering of mystery, the kind of “horrendous suffering that people most often call ‘senseless,’” such as mass shootings (Keller 211, 320), which are tragic and shock our sensibilities whenever they happen. There is at least one other kind of suffering as well. The word Paul uses for “sufferings” in Romans 5:3 is the Greek word *thlipsis*, which can also be translated “pressures” or “troubles”, and refers primarily to the opposition or rejection or persecution experienced by Christians living in a hostile world. Paul experienced it personally. Christians living in the Roman Empire in the first century experienced it. Christians in some parts of the world today have experienced it or are undergoing it now – especially those Christians living in places like Iraq and Iran and other nations ruled by repressive governments. Even in the U.S., we see signs of a hardening attitude toward Christians and Christian values on the part of those who see Christians standing in the way of the fulfillment of their dreams of a secular utopia where sexual license reigns.

Although this is the primary meaning of the word *thlipsis*, it does not rule out other kinds of suffering or pain or trials or trouble we encounter, such as the ordinary difficulties of life. As I have already said, no one is immune. No one.

The truly remarkable thing is not that everyone experiences suffering of one kind or another. What is most remarkable is the way Paul says we are to respond to suffering when it comes into our lives.

There is a scene I love in the movie *A League of Their Own*. Tom Hanks plays the role of Jimmy Dugan, the manager of an all-women’s professional baseball team during World War II. At one point, one of his players starts to cry, despite her efforts to stifle her tears. She tries to hide it, but Dugan sees her and yells: “Are you crying? There’s no crying in baseball!” (The American Film Institute has rated this as one of the top 100 movies quotes of all time.)

For Jimmy Dugan, baseball and crying don’t go together. They just don’t belong together. Our natural inclination, I think, is to look at suffering and joy in the same way. *Rejoice in suffering? Are you kidding me?* (A little John McEnroe for you.) *There is no joy in suffering!* Who in their right mind wants to suffer? Who takes pleasure in their own pain or suffering? Nobody in their right mind is happy about suffering, are they?

But then we read Romans 5:3, where Paul says: “We also rejoice in our sufferings.” This is a startling statement. It is not the only place in the New Testament that speaks of the connection between suffering and joy. And Paul is not the only one who puts suffering and joy together. For example, we read in Acts 5 that the apostles in Jerusalem were arrested,

thrown in jail, set free by an angel of the Lord, re-arrested, brought before the Jewish Council, beaten with whips, and then released with a warning to stop speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus. That is an example of *thlipsis*. How did they react to all of this? Acts 5:41 says they *rejoiced* because they had been counted *worthy of suffering disgrace* for the name of Jesus. *They rejoiced in their suffering.*

Through his own experience with a “thorn in the flesh” that God chose not to remove from his life, Paul discovered the sufficiency of God’s grace, and learned to rejoice in weaknesses, insults, hardships, difficulties, and persecution (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Peter writes in 1 Peter 4 that we should not be surprised if trials or suffering enter our lives as a result of our faith in Christ. Rather, he says, “rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:12-13).

James, the brother of the Lord Jesus and author of the Letter of James in the New Testament, writes in James 1:2: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers (and sisters), whenever you face trials of many kinds.” How are you doing with that? In *The Message* it says: “Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides.” Pure joy? A sheer gift? Are you crazy? There is no joy in trials or suffering! Or is there?

In Hebrews 12:2, the Bible tells us to “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” – the place of highest honor and glory in the entire universe. Don’t try to tell Jesus there is no connection between suffering and joy.

Still, the idea of rejoicing in suffering may be difficult to digest, especially when it becomes personal. Hypotheticals are one thing. The actual experience of suffering is another.

How in the world is it possible to rejoice in our sufferings, in those things that have brought great pain into our lives? And why would God want us to do so? Yet He does. Not because suffering is inherently good. It is not. Not because headaches or hearing loss or brain injuries or cancer or MS or arthritis or Parkinson’s disease or abuse or betrayal or rejection or losing your job or unfair criticism or false accusations or losing someone you love or any other experiences of suffering or grief or loss are good. They are not.

God wants us to rejoice in our sufferings because it is a sign that we trust Him even when we don’t understand what He is doing. We honor God when we trust Him, especially in the hard things of life. He wants us to rejoice as well because of what He is able to accomplish or produce in our lives through our experiences of suffering. God uses our sufferings, our trials and troubles in life, as part of His step-by-step process of refining and reshaping us to make us more and more like Jesus (Romans 8:30). Suffering, in one form or another, is part of God’s good, loving, gracious, sovereign plan for our lives. Some things in life are intuitively obvious to the most casual observer. This is not one of them.

How is it possible to rejoice in your sufferings? Only by trusting in a wise and loving God who, as Paul says in Romans 8:28, “works in *all things* for the good of those who love God

and have been called according to His purpose” (emphasis mine). It is possible, too, because we know that God uses our sufferings and hardships to produce in us a depth of faith, understanding, and spiritual maturity that we might otherwise never experience. I know this is true in my life. God has used suffering to deepen my faith, to enlarge my understanding of grace and my appreciation of how amazing it really is, and to mold me in ways that would not have happened otherwise. Because of this, I can say that as much as I have not enjoyed going through it, I do rejoice in my sufferings.

Suffering, Paul says, produces a chain reaction of Christian virtues in a person’s life. It is like a series of dominoes falling. “Suffering,” he says, “produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3-4).

Perseverance is patient endurance. It is the determination to keep going, even when the road is long, with many a winding turn, and you don’t know what obstacles you may encounter ahead. Perseverance is the opposite of panic. It is the opposite of bailing out or giving up. It is a kind of grace or steadiness under pressure.

Perseverance produces character, which is the quality of a person who has been tested under fire and proven. The trials of life, says Chuck Swindoll, become instruments in the hands of the Holy Spirit, who crafts within us “proven character” (Swindoll, *Insights on Romans*, 114).

The chain reaction moves from suffering to perseverance in character to hope – the kind of hope we talked about last Sunday, which is nothing less than the assured expectation or certainty of a promised outcome. This promised outcome is expressed by Paul in Philippians 1:6, where he says that God, having begun a good work in us, will bring it to completion, and we will share in the fullness of God’s glory to be revealed when the Lord Jesus returns and sets everything right. All of this is a reason to rejoice. Even when it includes suffering.

Joni Eareckson Tada is an expert on suffering, having lived her whole adult life as a quadriplegic since a diving accident as a teenager now almost 50 years ago (1967). In her book *A Place for Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God’s Sovereignty*, she reflects on how we tend to fear that our problems, troubles, and afflictions – the hard things in life – will wear us down, dull our joy, dilute our hope, and rob us of the radiance we once had in our walk with Christ. “In fact,” she writes, “it may be the very opposite. It isn’t the hurts, blows, and bruises that rob us of the freshness of Christ’s beauty in our lives. More likely, it is careless ease, empty pride, earthly preoccupations, and too much prosperity that will put layers of dirty film over our souls.”

She tells of visiting the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris some years ago and being taken aback by how black it was, covered with hundreds of years of dirt and soot and grime. It was hard to make out the beautiful carvings and details on the exterior. But then the cathedral went through a massive renovation. Scaffolding was set up, and the entire exterior of the cathedral was sandblasted. The transformation was stunning. The ancient stones now glowed bright and golden. You could see details on carvings that hadn’t been visible in decades.

“When I think of how that process [of sandblasting] changed that cathedral,” she writes, “I can’t help but consider the way God uses suffering to sandblast you and me. There is nothing like real hardships to strip off the veneer in which (we) so carefully cloak ourselves. Heartache and pain reach below the superficial, surface places of our lives, stripping away years of accumulated indifference and neglect. When pain and problems press up against a holy God, suffering can’t help but strip away years of dirt. Affliction has a way of jackhammering our character, shaking us up and loosening our grip on everything we hold tightly. But the beauty of being stripped down to the basics, sandblasted until we reach a place where we feel empty and helpless, is that God can fill us up with Himself” (Tada, *A Place for Healing*, 86-87).

Dear friends, when I think in this way about “our sufferings” in general and my own experiences of suffering in particular, I can and do rejoice in suffering. Not because suffering in itself is good or enjoyable, but because of the redemptive, refining, purifying, sanctifying work God does in us while we are suffering.

“Rejoice in suffering? Are you crazy? There is no joy in suffering!” O yes, there is. By the grace of God, there is.

Whatever you are going through, whatever you may yet go through in the providence of God, rejoice in the midst of your suffering, knowing that you are in the grip of God’s amazing and all-sufficient grace. Let God use it for your good and His glory.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.