

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 26, 2011**

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

**Romans 5:1-5**

**INTRODUCTION**

I got back yesterday from the 31<sup>st</sup> General Assembly of the EPC, which was held just outside of Memphis at the largest church in our denomination, Hope EPC in Cordova, TN. Pastor Bob, Pastor David and I were all there, as were Elders Zelda Artz and Alan Smith, along with newly-ordained Teaching Elder Helen Franssell and about a thousand of our closest friends, including Justin Sembler, who drove to the Assembly from St. Louis.

It was a rich time of worship and fellowship, as always. It was, as always, a time to reconnect with old friends and to make new connections as the EPC grows. It was a time, as always, to reflect on and to celebrate what God is doing in and through the EPC both here in the US and in different parts of the world where our World Outreach missionaries are serving. And it was a time to discern how and where the Lord is leading us as we seek to serve His Kingdom purposes in this generation.

In case you're wondering, I did not make a pilgrimage to Graceland, where Elvis Presley used to live. But I'm OK with that, because, as I have said before, grace-land is where we now live as the adopted children of God our heavenly Father and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Elvis doesn't live at Graceland anymore. But the land of God's grace is our home.

I thank God for the EPC. I'm so glad to be part of a denomination with an uncompromising unity in the essential doctrines of the Christian faith, a grace-filled liberty in things that are non-essential, and a spirit of charity or love in all things – a love that seeks to reflect the love Jesus has for us. All of these were on display in Memphis this past week, which is a reason to rejoice and give thanks and praise to God.

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We turn once again to Romans 5 today as we continue to consider together the benefits of grace which are given to everyone who has been justified or declared righteous in the sight of God by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God, who demonstrated the immeasurable love of God for us by giving His life for us on the cross to redeem us, undeserving sinners that we are, from our sin and guilt, and to restore us to a right relationship with God.

These benefits include:

- 1) Peace with God;
- 2) Access to the grace we need at every moment, in every situation, and for every need;

3) A hope in Christ our Savior that will not disappoint us – the hope of seeing and experiencing the fullness of the glory of God, which is a hope that both sustains us and gives us joy in the here and now.

Now let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word from Romans 5:1-5.

### **REJOICE IN SUFFERING?**

In the movie *A League of Their Own*, which featured Geena Davis, Rosie O'Donnell and Madonna, Tom Hanks played the role of Jimmy Dugan, the manager of an all-women's professional baseball team during World War II. At one point in the film, one of his players starts to cry, despite her efforts to stifle or hide her tears. Dugan sees her and yells, "Are you crying? There's no crying in baseball!" (According to the American Film Institute, it is one of the top 100 movie quotes of all time.)

For Jimmy Dugan, crying and baseball just don't go together. They don't belong together. There is no place for crying in baseball. Our natural human inclination, I think, is to look at joy and suffering the same way Jimmy Dugan looked at crying and baseball. *Rejoice in suffering? 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 enjoys suffering.

But then we read these startling words in Romans 5:3: "We rejoice also in our sufferings." And when we search the Scriptures, we discover that this is not the only statement in the New Testament about the connection between joy and suffering. 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, arrested again, brought before the Jewish council, beaten with whips, and then released with a stern warning to stop speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus. Acts 5:41 tells us the reaction of the apostles: They *rejoice* 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 (his) flesh" which 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 persecutions (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Peter told the believers to whom he was writing in 1 Peter not to be surprised if trials or suffering entered their lives as a result of their faith in Christ. Instead, he said, "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, had the audacity to write at the very beginning of the New Testament Letter of James: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers (and sisters), whenever you face trials of many kinds" (James 1:2). In *The Message* it says: "Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides." To which we are inclined to respond: "Pure joy? A sheer gift? Are you crazy? There is no joy in trials and sufferings!"

But then we fix our eyes on Jesus who, the Bible tells us, “for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising its shame, and now is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” – the place of highest honor and glory (Hebrews 12:2). Don’t try to tell Jesus there is no connection between suffering and joy.

Still, this idea of rejoicing in our suffering is pretty difficult to digest, especially when you personalize it. The word Paul uses for “suffering” in Romans 5:3 is the Greek word *thlipsis*, which is sometimes translated “tribulation” or “trouble,” and refers to something that causes distress or suffering, or the experience of affliction or opposition. It is the same word used by Jesus in John 16:33, where He says to His disciples: “In this world you will have trouble (*thlipsis*).” Count on it. Don’t be surprised by it. Don’t let it cause you to despair. The trials and troubles and tribulations of this world do not have the last word. “In this world you will have trouble,” says Jesus. “But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Knowing this still doesn’t make it easy when you’re going through it. Suffering, or trouble, of course, comes in many shapes and sizes, wrapped in different packages. To get the impact of what Paul is saying here, replace the plural *we* with the singular *I*, and the words *our sufferings* with *my* \_\_\_\_\_, and fill in the blank with whatever form of suffering or pain or loss you have gone through, or may be going through right now.

For me, it means saying: “*I rejoice in my brain tumor, in my brain injury, in my hearing loss, in my headaches that just don’t go away.*” I don’t *enjoy* any of these things. But I *rejoice* in them and *give thanks* for them because of what God has done in me through them.

For you, it may mean saying:

- *I rejoice in my cancer.*
- *I rejoice in my back pain.*
- *I rejoice in my multiple sclerosis (MS).*
- *I rejoice in my arthritis.*
- *I rejoice in my Parkinson’s disease.*
- *I rejoice in the loss of my job.*
- *I rejoice in the death of my loved one.*
- *I rejoice in the abuse, or the betrayal, or the rejection, or the hostility I have experienced.*
- *I rejoice in the pain of undeserved criticism.*
- *I rejoice in the fire (or the tornado or the flood) that destroyed my home and my most treasured material possessions.*
- *I rejoice in my \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank).*

### **GOD’S PURPOSE FOR OUR SUFFERING**

How in the world can anyone possibly rejoice in any of these things? And why in the world would God ever want us to do so? Yet He does. Not because suffering itself is inherently good. Not because any of these things is good. They are not. Nor is it because it just feels so *good* to suffer. That is not it. God wants us to rejoice in our sufferings because of what He

can accomplish or produce in our lives through our experiences of suffering. God wants us to rejoice in the sufferings we experience in this life because He can and does use them as part of His step-by-step process to make us more and more like Jesus (Romans 8:30) and to make us full in the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19, MSG). Suffering, in one form or another, is part of God's loving, gracious, sovereign will 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 our sufferings? It is possible only because we trust in a wise and loving, gracious and sovereign God who, as Paul says in Romans 8:28, “works *in all things* for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose” (emphasis mine). It is possible, too, because we know that God uses our sufferings to produce in us a depth of faith and spiritual maturity we might otherwise never experience. Have you found this to be true in your life? I am convinced it is true in mine. There is no question in my mind that God has used suffering in my life to teach me lessons I would never have learned apart from it. He has used my suffering to deepen my faith, to enlarge my understanding and appreciation of how amazing His grace really is, and to change me as a person. Because of this, I can say that I rejoice in my sufferings.

Whatever form they may take, we can rejoice in our sufferings, Paul says, “because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3-4).

Think of perseverance as patient endurance when the road before you is long, with many a winding turn, and as-of-yet unknown obstacles 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. To persevere in the face of suffering or any other obstacle is to stick with it without becoming discouraged.

### **WD-40**

You probably have a can of WD-40 somewhere in your house. Do you know why WD-40 is called WD-40? The WD in the name stands for “water displacement.” The chemists who developed it at the San Diego Rocket Chemical Company in the 1950s were trying to find a formula to prevent rust and corrosion, which is accomplished by displacing water. It was originally used to protect missile parts from rust. Why WD-40? Because the first 39 formulas they tried didn't work. It took perseverance in the face of 39 failed attempts. (Source: Ted De Hass, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com)).

Perseverance pays off. Perseverance pleases God. God uses our sufferings to produce the fruit of perseverance in us.

### **THE PERSEVERANCE OF WILLIAM WILBERFORCE**

Another example: As a follower of Christ and a member of the British Parliament, William Wilberforce labored for 20 years to persuade Parliament to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire. There was vigorous opposition from slave traders, who had powerful allies in

Parliament. There was resistance, too, because the cause Wilberforce championed was rooted in moral and spiritual convictions. One Member of Parliament complained: “Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life.” (Some things don’t seem to change, do they?) But, motivated by his faith in Christ and with the support of Christians throughout England, Wilberforce did not give up. He persevered in spite of huge obstacles until, in 1807, Parliament voted to abolish the slave trade throughout the British Empire. Ultimately, just before Wilberforce died in 1833, slavery itself was abolished in the Empire.

God can use suffering in our lives to produce this kind of perseverance that refuses to panic or give up when life is hard. But perseverance is not an end in itself. Perseverance produces character, which is “what you are (or who you are) when no one is looking.” It is not necessarily the same as your image or reputation. It is not what other people think of you or how they view you. It is what you really are. God’s purpose in our lives is to form in us the character of His Son. And, as the character of Christ is formed increasingly in us, we are filled with hope – the confident assurance in Christ that He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6), and that 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 involves suffering in our lives.

### **GOD USES SUFFERING TO SANDBLAST US**

I think it is fair to say that Joni Eareckson Tada is an expert on the subject of suffering, having lived her whole adult life as a quadriplegic since a diving accident as a teenager back in 1967. In her most recent book, *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain and God’s Sovereignty* (2010), she reflects on how we tend to fear that the problems, troubles and afflictions of life will wear us down, dull our joy, dilute our hope, and rob us of the radiance we once had as followers of 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 continues: “I’ll never forget years ago when I had the chance to visit Notre Dame Cathedral while I was in Paris.” (Some of you have been there, no doubt.) “There it was, almost one thousand years old, standing there so huge and ... black. I had never seen such a dirty cathedral! After hundreds of years of soot, dust, and smoke, Notre Dame was covered in layers of black grime. It was even difficult to make out the beautiful carvings and details on the exterior. But then the grand old cathedral went through a year-long restoration. Scaffolding was erected, and the entire exterior was sandblasted. I was stunned when I saw a recent photograph of the cathedral. It was so beautiful – and so very different from the way I remembered it... The ancient stones glowed bright and golden. You could see details on carvings that hadn’t been visible in decades. It was like a different cathedral. What a wonder a bit of sandblasting can accomplish.

“When I use the word ‘sandblasting,’” she writes, “and when I think of how that process changed that cathedral in Paris – 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 you and I so carefully cloak ourselves. Heartache and physical 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. When pride and pettiness have been removed, God can fill us with 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Colossians 1:26)."

Dear friends, when I think about "our sufferings" in general, and my own experiences of suffering in particular, in this way, I can rejoice in suffering. Not because suffering in itself is enjoyable, but because of the redemptive, refining, purifying, sanctifying work God does in us through our suffering.

"Rejoice in suffering? Are you crazy? There is no joy in suffering." O yes, there is. In the grace of God, there is.

Whatever you are going through, whatever you may yet go through in the providence of God, find joy in the midst of your suffering, knowing that you are in the grip of God's amazing and all-sufficient grace.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.