

Suffer!
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Romans 5:1-8 Common English Bible

¹Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. ³But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, ⁴endurance produces character, and character produces hope. ⁵This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. ⁶While we were still weak, at the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people. ⁷It isn't often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. ⁸But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Several of my favorite passages come from Romans. Paul's first four chapters discuss the miraculous justification we have received through the gift of grace. Today's selection is a great passage from Romans. But too often, it's used in ways that I believe are twisted and present God as cruel and manipulative. I'm referring specifically to verses three and four: "...we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope..."

I speak from personal experience as a gay man and my early interactions with the church and how God was presented to me. I was taught early on that homosexuality was a sin according to God and the church's rejection of homosexuals or its attitude of "hating the sin, while loving the sinner" was a benevolent and appropriate response. I believe that I was born gay and so this caused me a lot of angst and pain because I questioned why would God make me gay if being gay was a sin and cursed existence? To believe what the church was telling me, it would mean that God was cruel. I wanted nothing to do with such a God. Well, this scripture from Romans was the church's answer. It said that in making you gay, God is asking you to suffer and fight against it because that will make you a better Christian and you'll learn from being celibate for life.

That interpretation of this passage did not make me feel any better. It did nothing to help my relationship with God.

Another variation on this interpretation and application often stems around untimely deaths, especially in children. While working as a hospital chaplain I witnessed children die from diseases, cancer and even the flu. It was horrible and devastating for me, I could not imagine

what the parents experienced. The only scripture that I could ever find for comfort were passages that spoke of God's own sadness and support.

- Matthew 5:4 – Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
- Psalm 34:18 – the Lord is near the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.
- Matthew 18:14 – It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

However, I learned that some people offered today's passage from Romans as "comfort to parents," suggesting that you should be happy when bad things happen to you because it will build character and give you hope.

I'm sure you've heard it sometimes stated differently as, "It's all part of God's plan." I struggle with telling a parent that their 8-year-old child died of cancer because God planned it that way. Or that it will make you stronger or better somehow. I struggle with the statement "it's all part of God's plan" in general because it takes me back to my feelings that only a cruel God would purposely want us to suffer.

Some folks also manipulate this passage by misusing "suffering" to turn themselves into martyrs.

In May, at the commencement ceremony at Liberty University, Vice President Mike Pence told the graduating class to prepare to suffer for their faith because of assaults on religious freedom in the U.S. Be prepared to be ridiculed, shunned and even discriminated against.

Persecution is defined as when a person (or group) experiences violence, hostility or ill-treatment because of a belief.¹

- In Nigeria, Boko Haram militants have been targeting Christian villages for nearly two decades.^{2,3} People, mostly young girls, have been kidnapped, tortured and enslaved because of their belief in Jesus Christ.
- Christians in Syria are suffering economic hardship and social isolation by the Islamic State and many are threatened to convert to either Islam, pay religious taxes or be killed.⁴ All because they believe in Jesus Christ.
- In the Republic of Iran, Christians and advocates of Christianity are currently intimidated, detained and imprisoned by the country's ideological regime.⁵ Because of their belief in Jesus Christ.

¹ www.merriam-webster.com

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/13/mike-pences-speech-christian-college-graduates-further-evangelical-persecution-complex/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4079755ddaa9

³ <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/christian-persecution-not-just-happening-overseas-many-in-us-targeted-for-their-faith-too>

⁴ <http://justice.crcna.org/religious-persecution-overview>

⁵ <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/may/7/irans-war-on-christianity/>

- On Easter Sunday this year, 257 were killed and over 500 wounded when bombs detonated at 3 churches and 4 hotels in Sri Lanka, all targeting worshippers who believe in Jesus Christ.⁶
- THAT'S SUFFERING.

Mr. Pence's warning to the graduates at Liberty University doesn't quite seem equitable. When Mr. Pence talks about Christians suffering, he really means "white, evangelical, Christians, with a specific interpretation of scripture" – those who look like him, think like him and believe like him. He's confusing the issue for himself and others by making this a black and white or us versus them issue. It's not that simple. In response we need to ask ourselves, is the suffering he's talking about because of what someone believes or is it really have to do with how those beliefs are being enforced on others?

The perfect example is the "gay wedding cake" lawsuit that happened right here in Colorado. The issue that the customers had with the bakery owners was not with WHAT they believed, but how they chose to enforce that belief – which was discriminatory against a specific group.

Paul, the author of Romans, was arrested, beaten, imprisoned and tortured repeatedly for his beliefs and his evangelical actions. He shared his beliefs by preaching and witnessing. His words, nor his actions caused violence, hostility or ill-treatment toward anyone. Paul and his fellow followers of Jesus Christ truly understood what it meant to suffer for their faith.

The reality is that there is a misunderstanding about God and suffering; an inaccuracy that God wants us to suffer and will sometimes purposely create our suffering. God never WANTS us to suffer. I repeat, God NEVER WANTS us to suffer. I believe that God knows we will suffer – in many ways for various reasons because of the world in which we live – and as such, God will be with us IN the suffering.

Can good come from suffering? Yes, I think that it is possible? I believe that God can use evil, persecution and suffering to bring about goodness. As for us, I believe that with time we can find good in suffering. But it's done differently for each individual.

To understand suffering as is written in this passage, we must look at context. As it is said in real estate, the most important thing to always remember is location, location, location. With the Bible, it is CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT.

When Paul wrote to the church in Rome, we need to remember that those early Christians were living under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. An empire that was actually persecuting those who believed in Jesus Christ. The early Christians were confronting "empire" and saying, "you (Rome) say that God is the Emperor, Caesar Augustus, but we say that God is

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/sri-lanka-bombings-latest-updates-190421092621543.html>

really here with the oppressed and marginalized. When you resist or push back against the “empire,” it is a guarantee that you will suffer.

- It is in *that* context that Paul says we will gladly suffer because we know that God is going to help us endure and we have hope that we are in this fight for something better.⁷
- It is in *that* context that this passage is understood more accurately – that suffering is not for suffering’s sake. It asserts that God is not a vindictive God doing horrible things to you that you need to be happy about because God is also using those horrible things to teach you a lesson. That’s twisted theology.
- It is in *that* context that we must remember that “boasting of our suffering” is only acceptable when it illuminated the love and grace of God.

When you fight for the oppressed, “push back against the empire,” God will be with you in the midst of the suffering because God is always on the side of the oppressed.

In the end we have peace and hope....don’t forget where this scripture started –

- We are justified by faith
- We have peace with God
- We boast in our hope

This passage is about our relationship with God. We need to remember that Jesus suffered and died for us. Because of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, we receive all the benefits of being “justified by faith.” We boast in suffering because we know that suffering and death do not have the final word. Faith in God through Jesus Christ justifies us with the assurance that we do not need to earn our way into the Kingdom.

The peace that we have is greater than we truly understand. It’s not merely a lack of war and strife, but complete health and total well-being. Living a life where we have physical, emotional, mental and spiritual peace....is heaven. The Kingdom of God is not a dream but a reality that we live into - when we are at peace with God (through faith) we can begin to live into the Kingdom. Converse if we are not at peace - then living into the Kingdom is impossible - we cannot bless the poor if we feel we do not have enough, we cannot love our enemy if we are focused on how to dominate them, we cannot love our neighbor if we continue to judge them. Peace in the present brings hope for the future. As it says in Hebrews 11:1, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for and evidence of things yet unseen.”⁸

It is in this right relationship of God’s grace that our hope springs eternal and boasting and rejoicing emanate from us. You know that feeling don’t you? The feeling that you are SO loved by God that you want to share that love with everyone. If you don’t know that feeling, I pray that you one day, because it is amazing.

⁷ <https://www.queertheology.com/lgbt-bible-podcast/>

⁸ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/trinityc>

It is from this grace and justification that Paul offers the idea that in suffering, persecuted Christians will develop endurance, character and hope - so much so that they might even boast of it. When you think about the oddity of the idea, first think of Paul. Here is a man who suffered greatly for his beliefs in Jesus Christ and in the midst of his suffering, the beatings, the arrests, the imprisonment, he continued to write to burgeoning Christian churches about sacrifice, faith, hope and endurance. From today's scripture and also in Roman's 15:4 Paul speaks of perseverance giving rise to hope. In 1 Thessalonians 1:3 and Romans 8:25 Paul argues that hope also produces endurance. While being persecuted, Paul witnessed to the early church, "we are justified through faith...I have no regrets in choosing to follow Jesus Christ...all that I endure is worth it...and it will be for you also."

AMEN