

“This Grace Given: 3) Finding Peace With God”

a sermon by

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Text: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

On Thursday May 15th, the London Times printed the following world news. The lead article was about the earthquake in China, now estimated to have killed more than 50,000 people. It was titled “Tiny Bodies in a Morgue and Unspeakable Grief in China.” Another story about the recent cyclone in Myanmar estimated the number of deaths at anywhere between 68,000 and 128, 000.

James Wood, writing in *The New Yorker Magazine*, chronicles these events in an article he titles “Holiday in Hellmouth.” The author points out that most of us may hope to go through life with a minimum of suffering: stern parents perhaps, a few humiliations at school, a love affair or two gone wrong, maybe a broken marriage. Our parents will die, and farther off, ideally deferred, will come our own steady demise. That, of course, is suffering enough, but most of us hope that we will be spared the truly unbearable— “murder, rape, the death of a child, torture, war.” That is what novelist Norman Rush calls “Hellmouth”—the opening of the mouth of hell right in front of you, without warning, through no fault of your own.

“Hellmouth”—that is what the people in China and in Myanmar have gone through and they are not the only ones.

I.

Over the weeks of June we are looking again at Paul’s letter to the Church at Rome, specifically the first eight chapters. In these chapters Paul explicates the Christian gospel. There is a movement present in Paul’s argument. He begins with the notion that all of us stand in need of God’s grace. “All have sinned,” he writes, “and come short of the glory of God.” Paul then

goes on to speak of God's justification by grace, that we who are sinners are now righteous (Romans 3:21-31) by the death of Christ.

Paul now declares "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1). Then he delineates the benefits of this reconciliation.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this passage has to do with human suffering. Paul puts it like this: "Suffering," he writes, "produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

Now, there is no greater problem that Christians have to deal with than the problem of "theodicy" or human suffering. How can a person believe in God in the face of the kind of suffering that we find in our world? And I do not just mean these great tragedies such as the ones in China and Myanmar, but also that ordinary people face every day of the week.

II.

For one thing, trouble has a way of calling out the very greatest of our powers, and who a person is oftentimes is defined in times of great testing.

That is certainly true in Scripture. It calls it a "refiner's fire." It separates the true metal from the alloy. It calls it "tribulation"—it is the threshing that separates the wheat from the chaff. If our vocabulary did not have in it words like "trouble, adversity, patience, and self-sacrifice," how would we understand words like "bravery, fortitude, patience, and self-sacrifice."

Over the past few months I have watched with interest the HBO series on John Adams, based on the book by David McCullough. In an essay on John Adams, McCullough pays tribute to Abigail Adams. Many people, he observes, believe that life was simpler in those days. It was not. In the face of her husband's absence Abigail Adams performed herculean tasks, rising early in the morning and not retiring until late at night—managing a household, raising children, supporting her husband, and voicing her own opinions about the American Revolution. She was one of the most remarkable people our nation has produced. But as McCullough points out, she was a product of some of the most extraordinary difficulties that anyone could imagine.

Now, please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that trouble alone brings out our best. I am saying that if we have anything approaching the spirit of Christ, we can make trouble bring out our best. Trouble by itself is neutral. It can do almost anything to a person. It can make a person bitter and resentful. It can make a person hard and cruel. It can plunge a life into despair and wreck a person's life.

And yet there are people like Abigail Adams, who, in the face of trouble, find a dimension to life they had never imagined.

II.

Trouble can do something else as well. It can be used to deepen our sympathy and intensify our usefulness. One of the most remarkable people in English literature was the novelist Charles Dickens. He was not simply a wonderful story teller. He was a reformer as well. He was an essential part of the humanitarian movement in England in the Nineteenth Century that abolished debtors' prison, improved the conditions of laborers, and cleaned the English school system of some of its worst barbarities.

The reason Dickens was so effective in describing these terrible evils was because he had experienced them. Micawber was his father. His father had been in a debtors' prison. As a young boy, crushed with shame and crippled by poverty, Dickens had visited his father in prison. When Dickens was ten years old, he worked long hours for a pittance, pasting labels on bottles in a blacking factory, and in his own school he suffered the debilitating effects of the English school system. Then he rose above his adversity, transmuted by magic its lead into gold, made of it deep insight, profound understanding, keen sympathy, and wide-spread public service. That is trouble finely used.

III.

There is something else that trouble can do. It can serve our intellects as well as our characters and can cleanse us of some dangerous illusions. In particular, it ought to cleanse us of the vain notion that life is always fair. Scott Peck, the distinguished psychiatrist, in his book *The Road Less Travelled*, begins with a sentence that says, "Life is not fair."

Sometimes I wonder where people get the notion that life is always fair. Where have they been living? What books have they read? Was life fair to Jesus? Was the cross fair? When Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, did he think that he would be greeted with justice?

Paul understood this. When he wrote that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope," he wasn't just speculating. Those verses are autobiographical. He had experienced suffering. In his letter to the church at Corinth he lays out his own experience, "Five times," he writes, "I received the forty stripes save one." Three times he had been beaten with rods. One time he was stoned by an angry mob. He had been shipwrecked, abandoned by his closest friends. Many of the churches that he established turned against him (II Corinthians 11). Yet, he did not lose hope. Why? Because he was convinced that he had been justified by grace and therefore he had peace with God.

There is today a real uneasiness in our city. The financial industry, the backbone of our economy, is in the midst of a real crisis and many people are worried about the future. They are worried about their jobs. They are worried about their families. They are worried what will happen to our community. That is why we need to understand what Paul means by hope. It is not a simple optimism based on a generalized notion that things will get better. It is a quality of character that is called out precisely when things are bad. So often we are blown about by the winds of chance, when what we need is a courage born of hardship and testing.

Martin Niemoeller was a Lutheran pastor in Germany during the time of Hitler's Third Reich. Because he was opposed to the policies of the Nazis, he was sentenced to prison. In a letter to his parish office this is what he wrote: "Let us thank God that He upholds me as he does and allows no spirit of despair to enter into Cell 448. Let the parish office know that in all ignorance of what is coming I am confident, and that I hope to be ready when I am led along paths which I never would have sought for myself." Trouble, endurance, character and so hope!

In the presence of a life like Martin Niemoeller, how petty we sometimes appear to be, filled with resentment and self-pity. Let us not hide from trouble, but rather let us expect it, so that when it comes to us we may handle it well.

That is what Jesus did. He set his face to Jerusalem and he faced a cross.

IV.

Then, too, trouble nobly used can open within us deep interior resources of spiritual power. Someone once observed that suffering, accepted and vanquished, can give a person a sense of serenity which may prove the most important thing in our lives.

That is a strange thing, isn't it? Suffering brings out serenity? That is not what most of us get out of it. We get resentment out of it. We get rebellion out of it. We get self-pity out of it. But how does a person get serenity?

Harry Emerson Fosdick once told of a physician in his congregation who contracted a terrible illness and for eighteen months struggled with this illness, before death came. Fosdick writes, "Those who were fortunate in seeing him during those eighteen months when he and death sat face to face—who dread their first visits and then came out gladly inspired with a new faith in the nobility and courage to which rare individuals can attain—these know that the ugliness and cruelty of death were defeated. Death had not triumphed, and he died as he had lived, with the simple faith of a trustful child, and the superb gallantry of a great soul."

Now, I think we ought to be honest. There are no easy answers to the problem of suffering and the question of God's presence in a world of suffering is as troubling one as our faith will ever have to face.

But, we should not give up in the face of suffering. Bart Ehrman, in his book *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*, relates an experience he had on Christmas Eve a few years ago. He had agreed to go with his wife to a midnight worship service. As he sat in the dark, he thought to himself that there was a darkness to the night that matched the darkness of the world of human suffering. For him, it confirmed his own question about God.

As I read that story, I could not help but think of the people who gathered in this sanctuary on Christmas Eve. We too understood the darkness. But one of the distinctive aspects of our worship here on Christmas Eve is that we receive a special offering to help fund the Men's Emergency Winter Shelter. Each year on Christmas Eve we raise \$10,000 to help provide shelter

for homeless men in the winter. And maybe it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

So suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God has given us peace through the death and resurrection of his son Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God! Amen.