



You have heard it said more than once that, when we're asked what we want for our children or loved ones, most of us would say, "I just want them to be happy."

However, it would be mo' bettah if we could say, "I just want them to be wise." If you are wealthy and not wise, you will lose it all or spend it in unhealthy ways. If you are physically healthy and not wise, you might hurt yourself by taking something that's not good for your body or taking too much of it. If you are gifted in many skills but are not wise, you will find that competency is not as important as character and that eventually, your life will become a dead end.

Wisdom is what we should always seek in life. Wisdom should be the highest quest in our life. Wisdom will give us resiliency during tough times.

If we claim to be followers of Jesus but are choosing not to read the Bible, we are actually limiting our wisdom. And having no wisdom while in the midst of pain and suffering might make us weaker because we have no context to understand what is happening, why it's happening, and how we can cope in the midst of pain.

How do I find joy in the midst of pain and not apart from it? Wisdom is the answer.

So today is a talk about wisdom in suffering. When we suffer with wisdom, we discover Pain With a Purpose, which is the sermon title for today.

There will be times in our lives when people will hurt us, betray us, and deceive us. There are or will be times when we grieve or get seriously sick. There will be many times when we won't get our way.

And so how do we keep a healthy self-esteem, a balanced view of who we are, and the hope that the pain we are going through could have the purpose of making us better people whom God will never leave?

Here is where I will begin, with something that will seem so puzzling, unbelievable, and might be actually difficult to wrap our heads around. But you are really smart, so I am banking on you will get it by the end.

Here is our Bible passage for today as scheduled in our Lectionary series. This is written by St. Paul in his letter to the local church in Rome.

Romans 5:3-5 (NLT)

³ We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. ⁴ And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. ⁴ And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because He has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with His love.

This is the word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!

Let's really delve into this passage. There is a natural outline right there. When problems and trials come, this passage says we can rejoice for we will develop:

1. Endurance
2. Strength of Character
3. Hope
4. Joy

I know there is a part of you saying, "What? How can pain help me develop that? There is no purpose of pain in my life!"

First of all, let's remember the context of what Paul meant when he wrote that you can rejoice when you enter into problems and trials. What kind of problems?

He's not talking about you standing in a long line at Costco. He's not talking about you getting stuck in traffic. He's not talking about your disappointment that you are one taco short in a family pack!

The Church in Rome was facing incredible persecution: Imprisonment, torture, being fed to lions and, as what happened to Paul at the end of his life, crucifixion. Yet Paul says *rejoice* during your suffering. He is not saying to be masochistic – “Oh, I love suffering! I'm into it.” No. Nor is he saying be stoic and ignore the pain. Plus, I don't think Paul is delirious. He knows, when he earlier wrote the church in Corinth, they might have thought he was delirious, as you'll see in the Bible verses I'm about to read.

But one thing they can't argue about is that he knows suffering. He has the credentials to talk about suffering. Here is what he wrote to the church in Corinth:

2 Corinthians 11:23-28 (NLT)

²³ Are they servants of Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served Him far more! I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. ²⁴ Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. ²⁶ I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. ²⁷ I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.

²⁸ Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches.

This is a man who has really suffered and yet, at the end of this passage, he could write that he was concerned about the churches in spite of all that suffering. And will the Christians have a faith that is durable, enduring, strong, hopeful, and even joyful in the midst of pain?

Okay, so it is established that, when Paul talks about pain and problems and trials, he knows what he is talking about.

But how does pain build endurance?

I believe the most growth in life comes from pain. Pain teaches us. It humbles us. What pain teaches us is that we are not in control, which is humbling. And wanting to control everything leads to anxiety. We must surrender our life to God because we can't control everything. Part of endurance is realizing for the long haul you can't control everything, so relax a bit. Conserve your energy for what will be unveiled to you. Your heart and your nerves will last longer if you aren't trying to control everything.

John Mark Comer said in a HIM webinar last December that “we don't know what's going to happen and that's okay.” When we overly control, it can be an addiction or a sin as we no longer trust God to work things out. John Mark said in the webinar, “Control is at the root of what is wrong with the human condition.... It is the issue underneath so many of the issues that block and hamper and derail our spiritual formation of love, joy, and peace.”

Is your constant attempt to control events, people, and outcomes giving you anxiety? Part of endurance is to live not knowing exactly what comes next, but reside and rest in trusting God. If we really think we can control every detail of our life, we are deluded. And it hurts our faith.

Tim Keller says, “The reason your life is out of control is because you're afraid of giving control of your life to God.”

You might say, “But I have to do something.” We want to live by control. But that can lead to anxiety and stress, and lessens our endurance.

This leads us to the second aspect of what Paul is saying. Pain can lead us to endurance, which then leads us to strength of character.

Character is formed by doing the right thing in the midst of pain, even in long periods of pain.

Character-building is like being in a furnace. Painful. Hot. Things melt. Suffering melts off the false gods we've started to worship, things that we've given a higher priority than God. The false gods of money, power, sex, and fame. Suffering reminds us of what is important. It gives us new priorities. It makes us grateful for what we do have. It realigns our calendar, allowing us to spend time with people who are important to us. Pain can remind us of what is true. Pain shows us the real character we have and what kind of faith we have.

I know Pastor Tim shared this before but it's worth repeating. It's a true story that the president of my seminary, Mark Labberton, shared of a time when he was a pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, Tim's former church.

The church receptionist was a woman in her 80s named Doris. One day Doris parked in her normal spot near the church. As she was reaching back to get a basket of oatmeal muffins, she was struck from behind and pushed across the console into the front passenger seat. A young man jumped into the driver's seat and drove off with wounded Doris riding shotgun. She had just gone to a beauty appointment to coif her silver-blond hair and now suddenly her head was smashed and she was being kidnapped.

She tells the incredible story of this and I quote her: "After he took off in the car, the first thing I did, of course, was to ask him his name. He said it was Jesse.

"So I said, 'Jesse, what are you doing?' 'I'm kidnapping you so we can go to your ATM and get money out of your account.'

"So I said, 'Jesse, why are you doing this?' He told me it was because he needed the money for drugs. He was addicted and needed a hit.

"So I just said, 'Well, Jesse, it's a terrible thing to be a drug addict. You really shouldn't be a drug addict. It's not the way you should be living your life.'"

They arrived at the first ATM. He forced her to reveal the password, and Jesse rushed out to get the cash. As they sped off to the next branch, Doris said she conversed with Jesse that he really needed help, that this drug problem was much bigger than he was. But even more importantly, He needed help from God, who really loved and understood him.

After getting more money from another branch, the saga continued. Doris told Jesse he also needed an effective drug rehab program. He said he had tried that, but Doris suggested he needed a *better* program than the one he related to her.

Then she continued, "Jesse, God wants to help you."

By the third bank stop, Jesse had hit the daily withdrawal limit for Doris's account. Now she was no longer of use to him, so he pulled the car to the side of the street and explained he was going to leave her there. He had what he needed, he said.

But Doris was not finished. She said, "Jesse, I am going to pray that you get caught for this because it's wrong and you shouldn't get away with doing this to people. I'm also going to pray that you will be caught so I can not only testify you did it, but so I can plead with the judge to get you into a really good drug rehab program. You need to get caught, so you can be stopped and helped. You need God to give you the strength to get off drugs and have a better life."

Doris said, "Jesse was just going to leave me there, but I couldn't get out of the car because I was so battered and stiff. So Jesse said he would come around to the other side and help me, which I really appreciated. He came around, opened the door, helped me out, held my arm so I could get to the driver's side, and then gave me his arm so I could get into the car. Then he put the seatbelt across me, leaned in, and kissed me on the cheek.

"So, that's what happened," Doris said.

Her pastor Mark said to her, “I am so sorry this horrible thing happened, Doris.”

Doris replied, “It’s true, it is horrible.” But then, without much of a pause, she added, “But the really horrible thing is Jesse’s addiction to drugs.”

Mark responded, “But it’s awful that you should get attacked and kidnapped like this.”

Doris replied, “Well, yes, but really, why not me? This sort of thing happens every day to thousands of people. There’s no particular reason this shouldn’t happen to me. Let’s pray for my getting over this, but also for Jesse.”

As Mark described it in his book, *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor*, “Within a couple of months, Doris was at the police station identifying Jesse. Soon after that, she sat in the witness box at the courthouse: “Yes, hello, Jesse, remember me? Doris? I said I was going to pray for this moment and I told you why. Here we are! Yes, Judge, Jesse was the one, and yes, he did do all those things. And, another thing, Judge, Jesse really needs a good drug rehab program so he can get his life back. I know he’s guilty. But he also really needs help, please, Judge.”

[Labberton, Mark. *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.]

An amazing story of resilience, endurance, character, and hope.

When suffering hits us, we can say things like, “I don’t deserve this,” as if to say “I am such a good person that, due to my works and accomplishments and intentions, I should not have this kind of pain.” That’s a salvation of our works.

No, no, Bruno, no! Suffering reminds us that God gives us salvation not because of our works, but it is a gift to us because of the work of Christ who died for us. We have hope not because of anything we did, but because of what Jesus has done for us.

Or as Tim Keller said, “Every other religion says, ‘Live as you ought, and then God will bless and accept you. Only Christianity says, ‘You receive God’s acceptance and blessings ... a free gift through faith because of

Jesus’ record, not your record. Then you can and will live as you ought.’ Total reversal. Very revolutionary. To be a Christian is to be someone who is now justified by faith.”

[Keller, T. J. (2013). *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church.]

The character we desire deep in our hearts is that we need not worry about the stock market or our money for they are not our real assets. Our real assets are in God who is always with us and can supply our deepest needs. And, in that sense, we need not fear failure.

As Keller says, “Whenever you start to feel this deep anxiety over failure, you need to realize something very simple. If God and His relationship with you, if His love for you, if your identity in Jesus, if your salvation, if His grace — if those things were your real, most valuable assets, then you wouldn’t be that afraid. Do you know why? Because [for] a Christian who’s not just a Christian up here [in the head], but who existentially says ‘you are my glory, you lift my head up’...there’s never really risk to your real assets.”

[Keller, T. J. (2013). *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church.]

I’m talking about the riches of blessings in Christ that helps us rejoice in suffering.

Staff member Patty Kamahele has a sister who suffers from a list of ailments including colitis, diverticulitis, rheumatoid arthritis, migraines, spinal stenosis, and an electrolyte disorder, as well as osteomyelitis of the jaw, ischemic colitis, encephalopathy, and long-term shingles.

Each day—yes, *each* day—she faces health challenges yet, in the midst of them, she stands strong in the Lord. Patty said to her, “ I don't think I could do that if I experienced these things every day without being mad.” Her sister replied, "How can I be angry at the Lord when He has done so much for me, especially that He gave me the gift of salvation!" That is how we still rejoice in suffering.

Hence, we move on to the final concept of hope in our passage. If we truly have God in our hearts, then we will have hope that, even in the midst of pain, we can have an outlook that, if God is with us, we can grow,

we can be more loving, and we can be more aware of God's blessings in our lives. We have hope in the midst of pain because God is with us and has saved us.

Character always is birthed in pain, not apart from it. Maybe it is like giving birth: painful at first but then what bursts forth is new life—a vibrancy, a strength.

In the Congo, where there is tremendous pain; in China, where our brothers and sisters must hide in house churches; or think of the African-American churches during slavery—even though their lives were surrounded and permeated with pain and trials and persecution, their worship services were of great rejoicing, for they would sing:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' name

On Christ the solid rock I stand
All other ground is sinking sand
All other ground is sinking sand

Rejoicing is a choice, whether in the Congo, China, or the USA.

I remember, early on as a Christian, I learned a valuable lesson from the late David Hubbard, another president of my seminary, when he said, "If I go through a tragedy, I run to the cross as soon as possible and there I get my clear picture of God. John 3:16 is as important in the midst of tragedy as before tragedy. We can't keep it simple. We must take it as it comes with confusion. But we have the incarnation and the cross as our anchor to stabilize us. [The story of] Job tells us to give God room."

I've always, in my mind, run to the cross when in pain.

There is a very popular show out right now called *Stranger Things*. It's a little scary for young children so I am not recommending it for them, or actually to anyone. But in the last episode—don't worry, I am not going to spoil it and tell you that everyone dies—no, I

am just kidding. In the last episode of the series so far this year, you will hear a song that was recorded back in 1985 by a woman named Kate Bush. Due to that show, *Stranger Things*, that song became in this last month the number one song in the nation as people flocked to their digital music service to record or hear it. It's called *Running Up That Hill (A Deal with God)*. Originally, it is a song about a guy and a gal, but the show transforms it into a song about running away from evil.

When I heard the song, I transformed it to be about Jesus. (Okay, I'm a pastor. Who else would think of that?)

Here are some of the lyrics and you might be able to see why I thought that and it *might* give you hope and more context to my quote from David Hubbard about running to the cross as soon as possible.

Do you want to hear about the deal that I'm making?
And if I only could
I'd make a deal with God
And I'd get Him to swap our places
Be running up that road
Be running up that hill
Say, if I only could, oh

I'm thinking, when I suffer, I might wish I could make a deal with God and get Him to swap our places. But then it hit me that is exactly what Jesus did. He, in a sense, swapped His place up in heaven, got off of His throne. so to speak, and came down to earth to be a human. He swapped places and became Jesus of Nazareth. Though He did not sin, He was tempted to sin, tempted by the devil. Jesus suffered injustice and was whipped, punched, beaten and, yes, crucified to swap places with us on the cross. We were the sinful ones who should pay an eternal punishment and be on a cross, but He swapped places.

When I truly understand and believe that, not in my head but in my heart, then when I am in pain, I want to sing that song and say "I'm running up that road, running up that hill." What hill? It's the hill of Calvary, where the cross was placed, where Jesus was crucified in my place. It's the Gospel hope.

We at times need to hold on tightly to the cross to remember, in the midst of all of our pain, that He knows what pain and betrayal and injustice and the loss of loved ones are like.

So, if you have:

- the pain of a widow or widower,
- the long train of an illness or injury,
- the disdain of a job transition,
- the drain of the loss of money,
- the weighing of a betrayal or maybe a divorce ...

... then I say, run to the cross, hold it tightly, hug it, in your mind, in your heart, and cry—cry out and remember how much Jesus loves you and what He has done for you and what He has prepared that is awaiting you and the hope you have in Him and the strength and courage and endurance through Him that He offers and hope because of the love of God. He didn't leave us. Our passage ends with the message that He gave us the Holy Spirit. Turn to His presence.

Pastor Tim reminded me that there is no bottomless pit when it comes to pain. There is a bottom to suffering! Jesus is at the bottom of the pit and He is good and He is there with you.

When it happens, the rejoicing can begin! It might be just a tiny shaft of light at first, but then you see a trickle of sparkling joy ...

- a joy that you are not alone ...
- a joy that there is hope ...
- a joy that you will get stronger ...
- a joy your character will get muscular ...

For now—yes, now—you understand it when Paul says we can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know—yes, we can know—that pain will help us develop endurance, character, hope, and joy for the journey ahead.

Note: Sunday sermon texts, as well as audio and video recordings of sermons, are available at www.fpchawaii.org/messages.

A sermon podcast is not available for this title due to a power outage during Sunday worship services on June 12, 2022.