

## **What is our hope? (Romans 5:1-5                      January 27, 2008)**

Major Harold Kushner was a US Army medical officer imprisoned for five and a half years during the Vietnam War.

Kushner got to know one POW, a tough young marine who had already survived two years of prison camp life. The marine was a model POW, keeping himself in good health and leading the camp's thought-reform group, mainly because the camp commander had promised to release those who cooperated. As time passed, however, the marine gradually discerned that his captors had lied to him. When the full realization of this fact sunk in, he became a zombie, refusing all work and rejecting all offers of food and encouragement. He simply lay on his cot sucking his thumb. In a matter of weeks he was dead.<sup>1</sup>

Compare that to the Apostle Paul in Philippi. He had been beaten, placed in stocks – but his response was to sing hymns of praise to God throughout the night.

Both men were in difficult situations. But the responses couldn't be more different. One ends up curled in a corner sucking his thumb – waiting to die. One ends up praising the glory of God – regardless of whether he lived or died – was freed or remained imprisoned.

What is the difference?

I want to suggest that the difference is hope.

It is not that one had hope and one didn't. Both of them had hope – but one had fixed his hope on changing his circumstances in this life – the other fixed his hope on the life to come.

One hope disappoints – one cannot disappoint.

Why is this important for us? Because every one of us **will** face trials – and hope is what we will cling to in those trials. But there is only one hope that will not disappoint.

Worldly hope may or may not come to fruition – and all too often it does fail.

But heavenly hope will never fail.

I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, not anything in all creation is able to separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus my Lord. Romans 8:38-39.

Paul understood hope. In Romans 5:5 – he says – **[heavenly] hope does not disappoint us.**

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Philip Yancey, *Where is God When It Hurts*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) p. 215.

However, I have to say that as a pastor – one of the greatest problems I have to deal with is that even Christians continue to place their hope in this world. And when this hope disappoints – it is one of the most difficult times of counselling I face.

Almost weekly – I speak to someone who believes that hope has disappointed them.

Hopes for a husband or wife – hope for the blessing of children – hope for a cure for paralysis or cancer – hope for a way out of a financial black hole – hope for healing a shattered marriage – hope for a way out of a seemingly hopeless situation.

It is natural to hope for what our heart truly longs for. And in some cases we receive it – in most we don't.

It is here that we come to a crucial question.

### **Why does God allow our earthly hopes to fail us?**

This is a question I am constantly asked.

We know that God *can* do anything. He *can* cure cancer, raise the dead, send a wife. We know that God loves us. So if He loves us – why not give us what our heart longs for? Why leave our hopes disappointed?

Scripture gives us an answer – but it is one that is often difficult to accept.

The truth is that God has a bigger plan for us than fulfilling our earthly hopes – His plan is to give us a heavenly hope – a hope that cannot fail us.

**And** – Scripture says that suffering, trials, pain – in many cases these are the midwife that gives birth in us of this heavenly hope – the hope that does not disappoint.

We are meant to see suffering and trials as a gift to refine our hope of heaven.

That is what the Bible tells us – but this is a truth that we find so hard to grasp – I have to confess – this is something **I** find so hard to grasp.

But when we pause – we realise that Christians believe that:

As earthly hope fades – the hope of heaven grows.

What do I mean by this? One of the great divides between the Christian and the world is how we respond to the trials and suffering and the fading of hope in this life.

Suffering and pain in a non-Christian leads to depression and anxiety and anger – and if these remain – if the cause of the suffering is not removed – then earthly hope fades.

Some strong non-Christians do manage to overcome shattered hopes. But many more end up curled in a corner shattered and sucking their thumb.

But, what happens when a Christian faces trials?

There are a few Christians who are like Paul – who so mature in their faith that when they face suffering – their first response is to praise God – to delight in joining in the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings.

But unfortunately, that is not me – and that is not most of us. I wish it were me – but the reality is that most of us initially respond to trials in the same way as a non-Christian.

There is some depression and anxiety and anger. Pleas to God to bail us out. To give us the desire of our hearts.

What we find is that it is at this point that trials become a watershed. In a non-Christian – suffering causes earthly hope to fade. In a Christian – suffering causes eternal hope to blossom.

Let me put it another way.

You are driving home – you have an accident – you wake up a paraplegic.

No doubt there would be anger and depression. There would be pleading with God. There would be the questions – why God?

There would be a time of earthly hope – God can heal – perhaps God will show His power in healing you.

But in this case – God does not heal. Time passes and hope for healing in this life fades.

Yes it still hurts. Yes you will always long for healing. But with time – the suffering and pain make you realise that your real hope is eternal – not in this world.

There is a world to come that ends the pain of this life – a place without tears – a place without sin and its consequences – a place you will live in eternally.

Don't get me wrong – even after God sets your heart on heaven – there is still pain – it still hurts – but through the pain you draw closer to the Lord – the hope of heaven grows – and finally you come to consider this trial all joy.

This is a hard lesson – but one every Christian must learn. If you don't truly grasp this – you don't grasp the gospel.

Over the years I have read many books written by Christians who have indeed suffered greatly. And what they all say is that they have come to know that despite the severity of the pain – they have learned that the glory of grasping this hope that cannot fail is worth the suffering.

As bad as it hurts – the spiritual benefit more than compensates.

The passage that has helped me most in understanding this is Romans 5:1-5. Coming to grips with this passage is essential for preparing us for the trials we will all one day face.

Look with me at this passage. Beginning with verses 1 and 2:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

These verses are a summary of the gospel.

Once we were enemies of God – condemned – under the wrath of God.

But through faith in the work of Jesus – we have peace with God.

Faith has brought the grace of God into our lives and given us access to God.

Then at the end of verse 2 comes this key promise:

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

This is our hope – the glory of God. Because we are justified and forgiven – because we have peace with God – our hope is that we will spend eternity in the glory of God.

Then comes three of the most incredible verses I know of – verses 3-5:

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

I want to put this in perspective for you. Joni Eareckson Tada – who became a quadriplegic as a teenager – wrote a chapter in *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*.<sup>2</sup> In it, she talks about an email she received from Beverley, a pastor's wife. Here is the email:

Dear Joni,

I'm out of hope. [But I am wondering if] you might be able to help my husband Ron, who was in an accident last year.

My husband is a pastor. The accident left him a quadriplegic. When he came home from the hospital he continued to pastor from his wheelchair, but then two months later he was back in the hospital with an infection. And there have been many infections since and many visits to the hospital. My husband, Ron, began to become depressed. He has now resigned from his church, and he does not

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<sup>2</sup> John Piper and Justin Taylor, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006) p. 191ff.

get out of bed. He does not talk. And if he answers a question, he only says, “I don’t know.”

I am at a loss. He does not want the lights on in his room and no TV. He does not want to live, and he does not care about our family. We have no medical insurance. We all seem to be falling through the cracks. My husband feels useless and hopeless. We need help.

How would you respond to an email like this? The man is a Christian – a pastor – but the trial seems too great – he is depressed and wants to die.

What can you say to a man like this?

Joni called him and she says that she thought to herself, “This man’s a pastor. Surely he knows the Word of God.” So she started to share the verses that sustained her. She shared James 1:2-4:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

At first I was a little shocked. She is telling a man who has become a quadriplegic to consider this pure joy.

Then she shared Romans 8:18:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

This is a man who was suffering greatly, but, she was right. She pointed him to the coming glory – that is his hope.

And Joni – of all people – knew that it is through suffering that hope rises.

This man knew the word of God and these verses led him out of his depression and back into ministry.

How does this happen? Look again at Romans 3-5:

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings.

It sounds almost impossible – to rejoice in our sufferings. How does a man with a family, a ministry – so much to offer – cut down in his prime – confined to a wheelchair – how does he rejoice in these sufferings.

You rejoice by seeing what suffering is doing in you. This is the perspective we need.

Because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Paul draws a direct line from suffering to the hope of eternity.

Look at this line.

Because we know that suffering produces perseverance.

When you have it easy – you don't have to persevere.

When we have health, a great family, a good church, a stable government, financial security – we breeze through life. Life is good. Our roots are in this world.

Suffering causes us to choose – to give up or to persevere. When tragedy strikes – you have a choice – roll up in a ball – suck your thumb – and wait to die.

Or endure, persevere.

In a Christian, the choice is ultimately – to persevere.

I think of William Wilberforce the great English parliamentarian.

On October 28, 1787 he wrote in his diary:

God almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners [Morals].<sup>3</sup>

In 1787 he informed the House of Commons that he would be introducing a motion for the abolition of the slave trade.

But the British economy was built on the slave trade and slavery was not widely seen as a moral evil.

When Wilberforce announced that as a Christian he took it as his life's work to abolish slavery – he received death threats, his friends disowned him and political friends and enemies alike attacked him. He suffered.

And he was a man with many physical ailments. Yet he determined to endure.

Although Wilberforce announced his intention to bring the bill to parliament in 1787, he had to be patient. It took two years before he could give a major speech on the bill and it took until April 1791 for the bill to be introduced. It was easily defeated by 163 votes to 88.

Friends urged Wilberforce to drop this crusade.

In 1796 he wrote:

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<sup>3</sup> Cited in John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), p. 129.

The grand object of my parliamentary existence [is the abolition of the slave trade]. ... Before this great cause all others dwindle.<sup>4</sup>

Wilberforce continued to bring the issue of the slave trade before parliament. He introduced the bill *eleven times* – it was defeated *eleven times*. That is patience and endurance.

Finally, in 1807 the bill was narrowly passed.

But the battle was not over. Although there was now a bill outlawing the slave trade – slavery itself was still legal.

He began to introduce bills to abolish slavery as an institution. These were continually defeated.

By 1833 Wilberforce was a sick man. He was clearly going to die soon. But he was persuaded to rise from his sick bed and introduce one last petition against slavery to parliament.

He declared:

I had never thought to appear in public again, but it shall never be said that William Wilberforce is silent while the slaves need his help.<sup>5</sup>

His love for others drove him on.

Finally, on July 26, 1833 three days before Wilberforce died – the bill to abolish slavery in Britain and its colonies was passed. The actual bill required legislative changes so it was that on the night Wilberforce died – the bill actually became law.

Too many men and women give up when the going gets tough. They don't fight on if the tide is running against them.

But – it is suffering that focuses us and encourages us to persevere.

In the phone call I mentioned earlier – Joni said this to the paraplegic pastor:

“Ron, there are ten thousand other quadriplegics like you and me across America, not to mention who knows how many beyond the borders of this country. And all of them were lying in bed this morning wondering whether or not they should get busy living or busy dying. Ron, I'm going to make a choice to get busy living. Do you want to join me today?”

“Yes, ma'am. Yes, I do.”

“Good for you, Ron, because now you're in the fellowship of sharing not only my suffering by Christ's sufferings. And he'll give you the grace one day at a

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), p. 132.

time, one day at a time. Sufficient unto this day are the evil and trials and the troubles that you're going to face.”

I met Joni Eareckson Tada sixteen years ago – and one of the things that struck me was her incredible endurance to choose to make a difference, each day.

This is not natural. It is a gift from God to His children.

When the trial comes – so does the strength to endure.

And then Paul says:

Perseverance produces character.

Character is the word – *dokime* – it is a word unknown before Paul. The word speaks of being severely tested – but standing the test.

Paul is not saying testing is easy. Trials are incredible painful – they test our very souls. They shake our faith.

The depression they cause can be bad. I personally know of godly men – spiritually mature men and women – whose lives have been overtaken by dreadful circumstances – and despite their faith – as they have found earthly hope fading – they became so depressed – so shattered – some even considered suicide to make the pain end.

But here is the difference. It is at this point – the make or break point – the point where our faith is put to the test – that the reality of our hope crystallises.

C.S Lewis wrote a book *The Problem of Pain*. It is a good book where he looks at pain and suffering intellectually. How we should deal with trials.

But years later his wife died and excruciating death from bone cancer – and through her death – Lewis suffered in a way that he had never experienced before. He then wrote another book – *A Grief Observed*. In this book he wrote:

You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life or death to you.

It was one thing to write about how he should deal with pain – it was another to actually live through it.

As a Christian I know how I should respond and believe if one of my children developed terminal cancer.

I could preach a pretty good sermon on how we should respond to something as horrific as that.

But if it happens – if it actually becomes a matter of life and death for me – it is then that my faith would be put to the test.

And I suspect that my initial responses would not be entirely good.

However, as a child of God, I know that the Spirit of God will remind me that my hope – and the hope of those I love – is not in this life – but in the world to come.

And through the pain – real hope will grow. I would be weaned from hoping for merely temporal blessings and taught to long for eternal blessings.

When I cry out to God – the answer I receive is – My grace is sufficient for you.

This is – *dokime* – this is being severely tested – but standing the test.

God will not let our faith fail. And when our faith is tested – and it stands up to the testing – we have *dokime* – character.

And then Paul says:

Character produces hope.

When you are tested – what happens is that your hope in this world fades. You see with new eyes that this is a passing, fading, dying world – and you see anew the glory of the Lord.

You realise that there is no hope in this world. But a new hope dawns and grows – the hope of eternity. A hope that cannot fail.

And your hope become fixed where it should be – on heaven.

In Hebrews 10:32-34 the writer recounts the results of persecutions:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property— ***why? – why did they do this?*** – because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

Because they were living for eternity. Because their real treasure, their real life was in heaven.

I want to tell you about a friend of mine. His name was Scott. I met Scott while I was over in the U.S. Scott turned up one Sunday and joined the singles group which I pastored. There is one thing I remember about Scott – he had a passion for missions and a love of sharing the gospel.

He was employed by missions organisation because that was his love. In our group, he organised a number of outreaches and missions trips. He was always talking about the Lord.

But there is something else about Scott – he had Cystic Fibrosis. His brother had Cystic Fibrosis. His closest friends were those he met in hospital with Cystic Fibrosis.

He used to spend about a third of each year in hospital. He called his time in hospital missionary journeys because of the opportunity to share the gospel with the doctors, nurses and other patients.

I knew that when I left the States, I probably would not see Scott in this life again.

Two year's after I came back to Australia – I got an email from Scott.

His health had deteriorated markedly. He was on oxygen full time. He only left his home to go to church, the rest of the time he had to lie on his bed. He had no energy to do anything else.

In the email he said that his only hope of living beyond the next few months was a double lung transplant. He carried a beeper 24 hours a day. If it went off, he had to be at the hospital in an hour.

Scott, wrote of how he planned to share the gospel with the transplant team in the few minutes he would have before he went off to sleep.

Scott had seen his brother die of Cystic Fibrosis. He had seen almost every friend he had with the same disease die over the years. He was critically ill. Any one of the numerous antibiotic resistant infections he was prone to could kill him. Realistically speaking, Scott knew he was going to be with the Lord soon.

When I got the email I remembered how often he had talked to me of his great hope. To die and wake up in the presence of the Lord.

I want to read one paragraph of his email:

We don't live here on earth for very long ..... Lord help us to realise how brief our time on earth really is and that we may be here only a moment more. No one knows the hour when Jesus Christ will return, but the wise man, the one who fears the Lord and puts his faith in Him, tries to keep his life in order (holy and pure) for the expected – though nearly always unexpected – visit.

The suffering, the endurance, the character – led Scott to the place of hope. His hope was in eternity.

Scott did go to be with the Lord.

But his hope was not in a lung transplant – or being able to breathe – his hope was in heaven.

By the grace of God, suffering in a Christian leads to endurance and character and hope.

Not so in the world.

Dena often takes me to art exhibits. Yesterday we went to see the Andy Warhol exhibit.

Not my thing at all. But what struck me was the absolute sense of hopelessness in this man as expressed in his art.

So much fascination with death and suffering.

He sought peace in fame, celebrity, wealth, notoriety. And it was all vanity of vanities. His art was so depressing and void of any hope.

Because ultimately there is no hope in this life. All men suffer – sooner or later. All men find their hope in this world fails – sooner or later. All men die – sooner or later.

But for the Christian, suffering leads to endurance and to character and to a hope that cannot fail.

In his article – *Don't Waste Your Cancer* – John Piper writes this:

We will all die, if Jesus postpones his return. Not to think about what it will be like to leave this life and meet God is folly. Ecclesiastes 7:2 says, “It is better to go to the house of mourning [a funeral] than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.” How can you lay it to heart if you won't think about it? Psalm 90:12 says, “Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Numbering your days means thinking about how few there are and that they will end. How will you get a heart of wisdom if you refuse to think about this? What a waste, if we do not think about death.

We will all die. Where is your hope?

If you live for this life – your hope will fail you.

Joni Eareckson Tada said something in the article I mentioned that made me think.

She wrote:

Do you know who the truly handicapped people are? They are the ones – and many of them are Christians – who hear the alarm clock go off at 7.30 in the morning, throw back the covers, jump out of bed, take a quick shower, choke down breakfast, and zoom out the front door. They do all this on automatic pilot without stopping once to acknowledge their Creator.

Often God sends pain and suffering to slow us down – make us endure – to develop character – and to fix our hope on heaven. To make us think about this life and eternity.

This does not inhibit life – we gain life.

And then we learn to rejoice in suffering.

And where does all of this lead? Romans 5:5

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

God loves us. The enormity of His love is seen in the cross. And the goal of that love is not to cure our paraplegia in this life – or to give us the desire of our hearts in terms of a spouse – or to give us a new Porsche.

His plan is to give us eternal life enjoying Him forever.

And this hope **cannot** fail – it will not disappoint us.

Paul writes this because he wants us to prepare our minds **before** the suffering comes. To know that this is often a gift from God to purify us – to move our focus from this world – to make us heavenly minded.

Paul understands this. He lived it. When Paul writes – we rejoice in our sufferings – hope does not disappoint – these are not an academic – detached statements.

Paul has suffered.

Listen to what he says in 2 Timothy 3.

Listen to verses 10 and 11:

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings.

Paul had been tested and his faith had been approved. He has suffered and his heart had turned to eternity.

You know my *persecutions* and my *sufferings*.

Paul suffered for his faith. Read Acts. Read 2 Corinthians 11.

See how often Paul had been in prison and been flogged and been exposed to death again and again.

Five times he received the forty lashes minus one. Three times he was beaten with rods, once he was stoned, three times he was shipwrecked, he spent a night and a day in the open sea. He laboured and toiled and went without sleep. He knew hunger and thirst and cold and exposure.

He asked Timothy to remember:

What kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured.

When Paul entered Lystra – he was fresh from being persecuted in Antioch and Iconium.

In Antioch – the Jews stirred up the God-fearing women and the leading men of the city. We are told in Acts that they persecuted Paul and threw him out of the city.

He then went on to Iconium. His preaching caused division. The Jews and Gentiles joined together to rid the city of Paul. They planned to mistreat Paul and stone him. But Paul found out and fled to Lystra – the home of Timothy.

Soon after, some Jews from Iconium arrived. These were the ones who had planned to mistreat Paul and stone him. Now they had their chance. They stirred up the crowd – and they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city and left him for dead.

When you read Acts 13 and 14 – this is not a great start to your life as a missionary. The first three cities Paul spent any significant time in had persecuted him. In at least two of the cities they wanted to kill Paul. And in one of them – they stoned him and thought they had killed him.

I think that after getting up from the ground, many of us might be tempted to say:

Ahh Lord. I know when you called me on the road to Damascus you said I would suffer for Your name. But I thought being Your Apostle to the Gentiles might be a little easier.

Preaching Christ and that all men are sinner seems to inflame them to the point that they all seem to want me dead.

I think being stoned and left for dead at the beginning of your career as a missionary is grounds enough to resign. I have done my bit.

I hereby tender my resignation as Apostle to the Gentiles.

But not Paul. Suffering produced endurance.

In fact Acts says that after he got up from where he was left for dead, he went *back* into the city – the very city where those who had stoned him were.

The next day he did leave and go on to Derbe.

But in verse 21 we find that later he returned again to Lystra and Iconium and Antioch. The *very* cities that had persecuted him and tried to kill him.

And he addressed the disciples in those cities and said:

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.

Suffering leads us to the hope of eternal life.

Paul knew what it was like to suffer for Christ. Paul had lived it. He had suffered. And suffering had produced endurance. And endurance character. And character hope.

That is why after writing these things – Paul says this in 2 Timothy 4:6-8:

I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Brothers and sisters, suffering will come to us all. 2 Timothy 3:12:

Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

The question is how you deal with it.

I want to say to you – that if you are a child of God – suffering is a gift. God will strengthen you. He will support you through the pain.

You will not end up in the corner, sucking your thumb, waiting to die.

Eventually, you will rejoice that God is moulding you – shaping you – developing – *dokime* – character in you. Weaning you from this earth and fixing your heart on eternity.

And the key is hope. What is your hope? Is it earthly or heavenly? Because suffering and trials will come – and they will show where your hope is.

And when they come – rejoice – for God has gifted you to be conformed to the image of His Son – to fellowship in His sufferings – to develop a hope that cannot fail.