

## Three Joys

### Romans 5: 1-11

In January of 1941 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt addressed Congress and the nation in the Annual State of the Union address. The state of the union at the beginning of the year was not so bad for the American people as the nation continued to experience a strong post-Depression recovery. But FDR and his administration knew that, no matter the illusion of peace and prosperity, the state of the world was perilous, and he somehow needed to effectively communicate this new reality.

To underscore his message, the President spoke of the infestation of tyranny both in Europe and in Asia, reminding his national audience that Great Britain was now alone in standing against Hitler's European aggression. FDR used the image of four freedoms that were threatened by the rise of the Axis powers, not just in those places "over there," far from the nation's borders, but for all of democracy, including America: *In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want—everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear—anywhere in the world.*

In elevating the image of the four freedoms, we can hear FDR shift the context of American life from a parochial view to a global vision, using democracy as the concept that would break the chains of political isolation. The President was clearly seeking to awaken America to a new and grim reality, while at the same time inspire and call the country to a

**new purpose; he was also preparing them for an inevitable time of suffering, finally realized by the end of that year with the bombing of Pearl Harbor.**

**As FDR knew, it is practically impossible to call people to suffering, no matter how urgent the need or inspiring the call. Yet, beyond the inevitability of human suffering because of our mortality and fragility, suffering can also be met with an appropriate and meaningful response, even to the point of lessening its grip upon human nature. Behind every medical discovery and safety innovation that we enjoy in our time, there are millions of tears. Today we take the safety of flying for granted. When we get a sniffle or a fever, we do not even consider that they are the first symptoms of our deaths. In technological cultures, when women give birth, they not only expect their infant to live, but to thrive. Yet, such was not the case for the generations preceding us, who suffered over the very things we casually trust – their suffering resulted in our blessing.**

**The idea that suffering can be a blessing was never heard of or even imagined until the advent of Christianity and its adherents like the Apostle Paul. That is why the importance of Paul's epistle to the Christians in Rome cannot be understated, especially in regards to our Reformed theology and practice. Martin Luther believed that he and the world were suffering at the hands of a righteous God who could not countenance human sin, and then Luther meditated upon our passage from Romans this morning during his studies at Wittenberg: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us,**

because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

Kelly Clarkson recorded a song called "Stronger," in which she sings, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger/ stand a little taller / Doesn't mean I'm lonely when I'm alone / What doesn't kill you makes a fighter / Footsteps even lighter / Doesn't mean I'm over cause you're gone," That song is clearly one of defiance in the face of suffering and heartbreak – based, by the way, on Friedrich Nietzsche's famous adage "That which does not kill us makes us stronger."

In contrast, Paul's message to the Romans about suffering is remarkably, not defiant, but joyful. Paul declares that Christ has redefined suffering, not as a sign of one's punishment or estrangement from the love of God, but as a mark of our participation in the life of Jesus Christ, who secured our salvation through his suffering. This view of suffering is completely consistent with Paul's understanding of the new purpose given to the lives of those who believe, that purpose being summarized later in Romans when Paul writes, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

In the case of suffering, Paul tells the Christians of Rome that there are three joys that emerge from the suffering of Christ's disciples – endurance, character, and hope, and that all three give purpose to the Christian life. Let's take a moment to look at each of the three joys and how they transform human suffering from the world's view of judgment and misfortune to our Christian view of meaning and opportunity.

Early twentieth-century Scottish minister Oswald Chambers took the concept of Christian endurance and connected it to patience to understand why disciples can view suffering with joy: *Patience is more than endurance. A saint's life is in the hands of God like a bow and arrow in the hands of an archer. God is aiming at something the saint cannot see, and He stretches and strains, and every now and again the saint says--'I cannot stand anymore.'* God does not heed, He goes on stretching till His purpose is in sight, then He lets fly. Trust yourself in God's hands. Chambers reminds us that our ability to endure the losses of this life are not found within ourselves, but in the love of Jesus Christ, a love we access through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comforts us in times of grief, grants us assurance in times of doubt, reminds us to repent in those moments of our deepest regret, and gives us a sense of order when all around us feels chaotic and random. All of these gifts of the Spirit enable the second joy of the suffering Christian – character.

While most of the world recognizes the character of the historical Jesus as a moral model for humanity, we who believe in Christ as Messiah and Savior participate in his characteristic love, obedience, power and grace through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. For us, Christian character is not about our being good or bad, but about our being loved in a way far beyond our worth. Whatever we may encounter or endure in this life, we know that we are always loved; because of this joy, we never lose hope.

When Paul speaks of hope as the third joy of Christian suffering, he redefines the meaning of that word. When the world experiences suffering, hope only means one thing – the end of that suffering. In 2015, two Princeton social economists made a startling discovery – the death rate for middle-aged white Americans was going up, while the rate for every other racial and ethnic group had decreased. Even more disturbing, this

increased death rate was due not to chronic diseases, but to an epidemic of suicides and afflictions stemming from substance abuse, alcoholic liver disease, and overdoses of heroin and prescription opioids. The statistics for middle-aged white Americans indicated not a death of the body, but the death of hope related to changes in our culture, and the situation for the same group today is even worse.

The astonishing budget recently delivered to the Congress by the Trump administration represents a vacuum of hope beyond anything we have ever seen in this nation – it is literally a blueprint for suffering and death. While much of this budget is not likely to pass in its original form, just its intent reminds us that hope cannot rest on the goodwill of humanity, and that John Calvin was more right than wrong in regards to the depravity of the human heart.

Paul's understanding of hope, however, is not grounded on humanity or on what is to come, but on Christ and on what the Messiah accomplished, once and for all time. For believers, our hope is already fulfilled, even in the midst of suffering; we are reminded of this whenever we see the cross or share in the worship, fellowship, and service of God's community. Our Christian lives are a constant reminder that God is for us, and as Paul later asks the Christians of Rome, "If God is for us, who is against us?"

When FDR spoke of the four freedoms, he was trying to warn America that, beyond their nationalistic myopia was an inevitability that would soon awaken the people from their lethargy – a time of suffering for a great purpose. Paul also speaks of a great purpose when he talks about the suffering of those who believe in Jesus Christ, but his message to the Romans and to us this morning is not a warning – it is, instead, a call to celebrate its three joys. Suffering in Christ produces endurance; endurance produces character;

**character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. Hope in Christ can never disappoint us, because, as the old hymn declares, “Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”**

**God is calling us; God is guiding us; God is using us – so let us respond with great joy, and live in the hope of the empty cross and the open grave.**