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Real Hope
Romans 5:1-5

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access^[b] to this grace in which we stand, and we^[c] boast in our **hope of sharing the glory of God.** ³ And not only that, but we^[d] also boast in our afflictions, knowing that suffering produces **endurance,** ⁴ and endurance produces **character,** and character produces **hope,** ⁵ 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.*

Today I want to draw your attention to a ***painting entitled HOPE.***
This 1886 painting is by George Frederic Watts.

It's of a woman, a symbolic figure of Hope, seated on a globe, blindfolded, holding on tight to her wooden lyre—which has only one string left. Her dress is tattered, her feet are bare. She looks as though she has been through a lot in her life. And she is bent over, As if she is trying to make music with the one remaining string.

It's a famous painting.
Martin Luther King, Jr. referenced the painting *Hope* in his sermon *Shattered Dreams* in his collection of sermons, entitled *Strength to Love.*
The South African leader **Nelson Mandela** had a print of the painting on the wall of his prison cell. After Egypt was defeated by Israel during the Six Day War, the **Egyptian government** issued copies of it to its troops.

Watts said this about the painting,
"Hope need not mean expectancy.
It suggests here rather the music which can come from the remaining chord".

Listen to that again:

The music that can come from the remaining chord.
 That's **hope**—even if it's just one string.
 The woman in that painting is focused
on the hope---the music can come from the one chord.

That's what people do when they find hope in suffering, isn't it?
 They find that **ray of light--**
 They hold onto the **last string**, right?
Have YOU ever been there—holding onto that last string?

But I wonder--is it **always** possible to find hope in suffering?
What about the horrific suffering we've been seeing?
Refugees fleeing Ukraine,
 families who've lost loved ones to covid, or hatred,
 Those who grieve after the senseless gun violence like in Texas this week that
 took so many young innocent lives.

To say that we can find hope in suffering can sound **ridiculous**.
 Where is there hope in some of these situations?

But Paul's words are about--the **power of hope even in** the darkest hour.
 Hope is what sustained **Paul and Silas** in prison—
 so much so that they could sing and pray for release!

We've all heard **stories of hope** after a tragedy.
 And the painting by Watts reminds us that there is often **something—**
 even if it's just **one string**,
 That we can hold onto.

But maybe these verses in Romans about hope,
 are also about what **GOD can do in our suffering**,
 Even more than what we are “supposed” to do.
 It's not always possible to just go out and find hope--
 Some situations are pretty hope-less, right?

These verses are kind of like **Romans 8:28**,
*“for we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who
 are called according to his purpose”*
 It doesn't say that all things **ARE** good,

or that we are *supposed* to find the good in all things.
It says that *God can bring good* out of all things.
Even the worst suffering.

But—it sounds *impossible* if you're the one in the middle of suffering,
doesn't it?

So let's remember-- God is not saying that suffering *itself is good*.
Time and again we are reminded by Jesus and the early church,
that all creation is suffering...and groaning for redemption....
And we live in a *fallen and imperfect world* full of pain, disaster, and
violence.

That's exactly what we see.
We saw it in Texas this week.
And yet we believe that somehow God suffers with us,
and *God is right* in the midst of the pain,
Just like Jesus suffered for us on the cross.
And, we believe that one day all this suffering will end.

No, God *does NOT call suffering good*.
I *never say* to people in the midst of their suffering—
It'll be fine, or cheer up, or this is God's will.
I can't say that!

So what can we say when someone is suffering?
We can say *God is with you*.
Because what we know from scripture is that *God suffers with us*.
We know that *Jesus suffered*, not just on the cross,
but also at loss, like the death of his friend Lazarus.

We can also BE WITH those who suffer.
We can pray for them.
And we can *stand with them* as well.

After all these mass shootings,
we can join those who want to avoid further senseless gun violence.
We can vote.

We can write our legislators and speak up.
 We can stand for change and help for those who need it.
We can stand beside those in pain, just as God stands with us.

In Isaiah 43 God says:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 2
 When you pass through the waters, **I will be with you**; and through the rivers,
 they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be
 burned, and the flame shall not consume you. 3 For I am the Lord your God,
 ...you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, ...
 Do not fear, **for I am with you**; ...*

Our ***God is so good***,
 To ***walk with us*** through suffering.

And sometimes, by God's grace, we find ***something good***
 Even after the worst circumstance.

I think about the ***Doctor who sacrificed his life*** at the Taiwanese Presbyterian
 Church, for other church members.

I think about the security guard, the Deacon, the church matriarch, and others
 lost in Buffalo—and how many lives have been touched by their stories.

I think of the ***innocent lives lost*** in Texas this week,
 and how people can carry on their joy, love, and legacy,
 I think of how people hopefully will be inspired to stand up to violence.

It also makes me think of all the ***heroes in our world***.
***Think of all those who gave their lives defending our country—
 for our freedom.***

The people we remember this Memorial Day,
 The people who inspire us this weekend.
 Think of the hope we find in their bravery!

Isn't it true that we often see heroes in suffering?

I think about the faith and determination of some of
our church members who are suffering right now.
 And others who have told me how much these saints
 inspire them to keep going—
 Because if they can do it, so can we!

It seems that often out of suffering God can bring forth ***inspiration and encouragement***, you know?

Just like we can see ***stars*** best on the darkest nights,
 Maybe we can find hope even in suffering--
 Because of God's amazing grace,
 and ***God's power*** to bring forth goodness.

When have you received ***hope***--in the darkness?

You know in these verses, Paul says we ***boast*** in our sufferings.
 What the Greek word means is actually ***rejoice***.
 Paul is saying, "***We rejoice in our suffering because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.....***"

Now, that can sound kind of like one of those irritating ***slogan posters***
 on the wall of a gym,
 You know—like "***No pain, no gain***".
 But what if this is ***not just a pre-scriptio***n for our lives?
 What if this is a ***de-scriptio***n of life with Jesus?

What if--God can bring us goodness from suffering?
 And use it to transform us,
 With endurance, character, and hope?

Pastor Peter Steinke recalls a time when a friend told him,
"Don't waste the pain!"
 Don't spend all the time in the dark valleys
 avoiding, denying, or dwelling in the pain.
Let God do something with it, and with you.
 Then that pain can become a source of 'life'.
 (Peter Steinke, Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach, 2006, pg. 52)

Haven't we all seen stories of ***pain that became a source of life?***
 In college one of my best friends was killed by a drunk driver.
 Nancy's parents went on to talk at every local school about drunk driving,
 inspiring and encouraging students to do the right thing.

As a fire chaplain, I was trained to debrief after tragic events.
 Besides listening to people recount their story,
 And making space for all the pain,
 We also ask—
is there anything good that has come out of this?

I remember when a local firefighter drowned trying to save a family from floodwaters, it was devastating.
 It also changed some policies and practices of the departments—
 for the better.
 To prevent further tragedy.
 Sometimes good comes, after the pain.
Sometimes the hope is that change can happen.

This does ***not mean we should FORCE ourselves***
 or others to find the good in suffering. Not at all.
 It does mean that somehow, miraculously God can find the good,
 Even if it's the ***last chord***.

And, what if finding hope--- is ***not something*** that we have to do on our own,
 But something we can ***allow God to do FOR us?***
 When we ***surrender*** to God?

Missionary Annie Johnson Flint famously wrote,
Jesus Christ is not my security against the storms of life,
 but He is my perfect security ***IN*** the storms,
 (*Streams in the Desert*, ed. Cowman, pg. 136).

Pastor Linda Thomas puts it this way, “...*the suffering of life helps us grow stronger and build our character and patience..... but we can do this only if we have an abiding sense of the **reality of God** ...then a marvelous thing happens: we have the ability to hold our head high, no matter what comes our way. Even in a storm we know all is well, because we are convinced of the **utter love** of God.”
 (Linda Thomas, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, pg. 42)*

Some of life's storms seem impossible.
 Loss can be ***devastating***.

Totally devastating.

Days go by and you can't imagine even going on, right?

Just this past week, everyone I know was grieving and mourning those precious children in Texas.

It seems unfathomable—the loss, the suffering, the senseless violence.

But what if somehow, even in these times,

God can bring hope?

Kind of like the ***one string*** left,

The one chord we can still play when all seems lost.

A hope we can hold onto.

Through suffering our lives ***are often changed.***

How has your ***own life*** been shaped and changed by your suffering,

And what you have survived?

I wouldn't be here without the path I've had.

What about you?

The ***Greek word for character*** in Romans 5, means tried through affliction, or experience.

It comes from the image of a ***refiner's fire***,

of taking precious metal through a fire to purify it.

And ***suffering often feels like a fire***, right?

What if God can use some of that--

In the larger story of our lives?

Pastor Michael Jenkins says—

This means ***we aren't waiting til heaven*** to be transformed. He says, "*the life we live, with family friends and strangers, amid gossip, good news and bills to pay—is rich in eternal significance. God does not forgive us our sins as we sit among the clouds, but as we go about the business of ordinary life. God does not reserve our spiritual transformation to the afterworld, but delivers it with the morning paper to our front door. We are washed, cleansed, in water and fire, and we drip the holy stuff wherever we go. We track it into every room of our lives and out into the world.*" (Michael Jenkins, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3, pg. 42*).

When we find hope in suffering,
Paul says that
hope does not disappoint us because the love of God
is ***poured into our hearts*** by the Holy Spirit.

That's our promise---that God ***can bring hope***—right in our suffering.

Right to our own front door!
A love poured into our hearts!

Look at that **cross** on the wall.
Have you ever heard of more **suffering**?
And have you ever seen more **hope** than that gift--for each one of us?

Hope in suffering is a gift of God!

And, what if the last string we have left... *IS God?*

What if the last string ***is the string of hope?***
The hope of God's love?

Friends, hear the ***Good News of the Gospel,***
We have this gift of hope,
And for the gift, all God's people can say together, Amen.