

Character Building
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Romans 5:1-5

A famous evangelist told the following incident: I have a friend who in a time of business recession lost his job, a sizable fortune, and his beautiful home. To add to his sorrow, his precious wife died; yet he tenaciously held to his faith -- the only thing he had left. One day when he was out walking in search of employment, he stopped to watch some men who were doing stonework on a large church. One of them was chiseling a triangular piece of rock. 'Where are you going to put that?' he asked. The workman said, 'Do you see that little opening up there near the spire? Well, I'm shaping this stone down here so that it will fit in up there.' Tears filled my friend's eyes as he walked away, for the Lord had spoken to him through that laborer whose words gave new meaning to his troubled situation.¹

When we think of suffering, we often think of physical or emotional suffering. Like when a loved one dies, or when we are faced with a serious illness like cancer. But suffering can come in all shapes and sizes; like the kind of suffering that occurs when a person who is practicing faith in Jesus and is experiencing hardships. I think of the lone family member whose faith makes him the target for ridicule and humiliation. Or the woman who stands up for her morals only to have them shot down by her friends as archaic and outdated. The kind of suffering that comes from a blow to our ego and makes it difficult to practice what we believe.

There is also the kind of suffering we experience when a friend or relative causes us harm and hardship. An estranged family member makes hurtful accusations or a coworker gives unmerited blame to avoid his own mistakes. We have all experienced suffering in some form or another, from physical agony to emotional distress. No suffering is enjoyable, no matter how small it is. But all suffering can be used for growth. The apostle Paul reminds us that we actually have a reason to boast in our suffering. Sounds ironic doesn't it? To boast of our suffering? And yet, this is why: we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

Suffering produces endurance.

Elena Bonner, wife of Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, says that as he wrote his memoirs she typed, edited, and nursed the work, doing everything she could to make sure it survived seizure by the government. Sakharov worked on his memoirs in Gorky, rewriting sections because they kept vanishing. Then one day he met Elena at the train station and with trembling lips told her, "They stole it." She says he looked like a man who had just learned of the death of a close friend. But after a few days, Sakharov returned to his work. According to his wife, each time he rewrote his memoirs there was something new--something better.²

Ironically, the more suffering we have to endure, the more endurance we end up with. I think of those who persevere with little to no financial resources and yet they endure as if they

¹ SermonIllustrations.com. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/suffering.htm> (accessed May 25, 2010)

² *Ibid.*

had all the money in the world. Or I think of those who suffer physical ailments for decades and yet live as if they had just climbed to the top of Mount Hood. Suffering produces endurance.

Endurance produces character.

I remember when I was in the Gaza strip visiting with an elderly Palestinian Christian who had lived through decades of hostile feuding between Palestine and Israel. She recalled the home she lived in prior to the war of independence in 1948 and how life has dramatically changed since the six day war of 1967. She admitted that through her suffering her faith in Jesus has been strengthened and it has helped her develop into a caring Christian. She also admitted that if things were reversed and the Palestinians had the power than things would still be the same—there would still be tension between the two cultures. This sad reality became part of her motivation for living her life peacefully with everyone. She was tired of war and violence and prayed for resolution and peace in her country.

I think also of those I have met with wonderfully humorous personalities. Knowing the hardships that one man had to endure in Vietnam, it is a wonder he is not bitter and angry. Yet he has used his suffering to produce a healthy sense of humor. Endurance produces character.

Character produces hope.

In the movie *Cast Away*, Tom Hanks plays the character of Chuck Noland, a time-obsessed FedEx systems analyst, who travels worldwide resolving productivity problems at FedEx depots. In a violent storm his FedEx plane crashes into the Pacific Ocean, and Chuck manages to survive only to find himself stranded on a uninhabited island. The hardship and suffering Chuck endures only makes him stronger. He uses items found in drifting FedEx packages to aid in his survival. He even finds company in a face painted on a volleyball. But all throughout the story, Chuck always has hope that he will one day be reunited to the love of his life, Kelly, back in Memphis, Tennessee. The hope of seeing her again is what holds and empowers Chuck throughout his four years on the island.

Character produces hope. But the hope is not just about earthly hopes, it is about the hope we have in our Lord God. Paul says, "...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."

Our hope is beyond earthly living. Our hope is in the salvation given to us through Jesus Christ. With God's love in our hearts and hope in God's promises before us, we can survive through the sufferings that come our way. No matter how bad we may suffer, the outcome gives us growth and understanding. Through suffering we learn to put our trust and faith back in God. Knowing that with God all things are possible we have the hope that can sustain us through any hardship. My hope for you is that you will see your sufferings not as an end to themselves, but as a means to a greater life. For in suffering, you learn endurance, and through endurance you build better character, and through character you receive hope. Amen.

Prayer:

Loving Lord,

In you we trust. May we always come to you first when we suffer. May we look beyond our suffering and hope for the good things to come. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.