

**Sermon preached  
by Doug King  
August 29th, 2004  
Romans 5:1-11**

Since it is just us on this quiet August morning, I have a grammatical confession of sorts. I must admit that I am one of the worst offenders when it comes to misusing the word "hope." I use it all the time in watered down and inappropriate ways. I say things such as "I hope the weather is nice tomorrow." Or "I hope Wegman's has salmon fillets on sale." I use the word "hope" in place of the phrase, "wouldn't it be nice if." Well Paul is not nearly so sloppy in his use of the word. When Paul speaks of "hope," he is talking of an expectation, which he is certain will occur. Hope is not some flimsy conditional word of pleasant possibility. Hope is a strong steadfast stone of a word Paul confidently weighs in his hand. There is nothing fleeting about Paul's understanding of hope. Hope is a recognition of the guarantee we have been given in God's love.

According to Paul, our faith in Christ has justified us, reconciled us to God. We stand as people forgiven for all of our mistakes. And as we stand forgiven, God is working in each of us that we may become sanctified, that we may actually participate in the very glory of God.

Paul believes that we, as followers of Christ, are on the journey to the Promised Land. We have been freed from the slavery of our failures and weaknesses by trusting in God. The rest of our lives are about travelling to perfect union with the divine. Although we may be fallible and weak, God's purposes will never be denied and we will indeed share in God's glory. Of course the tricky part of it all is that we remember what that journey to the Promised Land was like for God's liberated people. Freed or not, the journey was no cake walk. It was forty years of hardship, and wandering, and whining, and moaning, and doubting, before the destination was achieved. In Cecile B. DeMille's version we get Edward G. Robinson challenging the wisdom of the Israelites' journey and urging them to return to Egypt. "Yah, see, what has this God of Moses done for us lately?"

It is the juxtaposition of the difficulty of the journey with Paul's almost blind trust in the result, which can seem simultaneously inspiring and facile. A line such as "we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope..." reminds me of some mathematical equation of masochism. Celebrating suffering has always seemed to me to be an inappropriate way of honoring God's creation.

But in actuality that is not what Paul is doing here. As Paul leads us down this chain of suffering to endurance to character to hope, he has already established that we have hope. Our faith in God, enfleshed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, has brought us the promise of sharing in God's glory, which gives us hope. What he is saying is that when we have hope in God suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces an even greater hope.

Without the hope to begin with, the suffering in itself does not produce much of anything. There have been times in our Christian tradition where people believed that we should intentionally seek out suffering as if the more we suffer the closer we can become to Christ who suffered. This is not what Paul is instructing us. Paul is not telling us to lash ourselves, or wear a hairshirt and then go around bragging to everyone about how much we are suffering for Jesus. Paul is acknowledging that there already is suffering in our lives. With his steadfast trust in the promise of our destination in the loving glory of God, Paul is telling us that whatever comes in the journey of our lives it can be used to lead us home to the divine.

It is such a grand and beautiful notion, this standing strong in our hope, trusting that whatever befalls us on each new day is yet another step toward our God. I wish I could stand up here this morning and claim these words as ironclad truth in my own life. I wish I could pump out a few Jimmy Swaggart tears and do some of that old fashioned testifying about how with the Holy Spirit in my heart I never have a difficulty in my life that I do not celebrate as an opportunity to grow closer to my God.

Oh well. I suppose I am weighed down by too much doubt for that. Best of intentions or not, it is awfully hard for me to carry as solid, sure, and strong a hope as Paul does through the crises of life. Sometimes I can and then sometimes I cannot. Unfortunately the way I use the word "hope" in conversation is often the way I live out my trust in God and my journey home to God's glory. Too often I consider it a pleasant possibility rather than a solid rock upon which to stand, regardless of the storms of this life. Now there are times in the midst of this world's challenges where I feel myself standing strongly on the foundation of that hope, but all too often I slip off of the rock. Too often I hear the voice of Edward G. Robinson in my head asking me, "So what has this God of yours done for you lately?"

I do not think it happens necessarily because I stop believing in our destination in God's loving arms. I think it is a question of immediate gratification. It is hard to stop focusing upon whatever suffering today may bring in order that I might raise my eyes to the horizon of God's promised future.

We own hope the way in which Paul owned hope when our vision allows us to see God's horizon as immediate. When we live as if the promises of God have already been fulfilled, our hope is not shaken by the suffering of this world. Then whatever befalls us in this life is yet another transition on our way to God. How I wish I was spiritually mature enough to claim this for myself today.

But I do seek to grow into the possession of Paul's sort of hope. Paul explains that the journey of suffering to hope works "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Perhaps for people like Paul the Spirit poured a little faster into his heart than I am being poured into. However, this metaphor of the Spirit working on our hearts as a poured liquid is very helpful. We know of the vast power of water on the move even when it moves slowly. A steady ever so gentle rain will over time saturate a field for abundant growth. As well a river over time, can carve out the wide-open magnificence of the Grand Canyon. So let us not give up too quickly on Paul's hope just because some of us are not ready to claim it today.

But let us let God's love work in our hearts that they may become fertile enough and open enough that even the suffering of this world will not produce in us bitterness, but will produce endurance, which will produce character, which will produce hope.

There is an important editorial comment to this effort of placing suffering in the context of God's hope. This does not deny the depth of suffering that occurs in this world. And this is certainly not an excuse to ignore other people's suffering by painting over it all with a sweet patina of superficial piety. On the contrary, this solid hope should propel us out into the world to battle suffering wherever it exists. This solid hope reminds us that we have been promised a future beyond suffering and we should give our all to participate in creating that horizon in our world today.

But when suffering does arrive, as it will, let us strive for a hope that is solid and constant. Let us strive for the knowledge that the promises of God are indeed unshakeable. Let us recognize that everything that comes in this world may be used as yet another step toward our God if we only possess the hope we have been offered. Amen.