

May 14, 2020
By Bishop Steve Breedlove

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope . . .
Romans 5:3-4

We who serve the people and mission of the Diocese of Christ our Hope think and talk about **hope** often. Scriptures that mention **hope** get our attention. As we entered this pandemic, we shifted the title of our newsletter from *AnchorLines* to **Hope in Times of Pestilence**. Why? We want the people of our Diocese to understand the substance of **hope** in Christ during this season of anxiety and loss.

In Romans 5:1-5, a landmark Gospel text, St Paul twice mentions the growth of **hope**. The first is in the context of limitless grace. Verses 1-2 remind us that, through Jesus, we have peace with God. The core reconciliation of human existence has been achieved and given to us. Paul paints a picture: we are standing in grace. We have been led by Jesus into a vast “spiritual Alpine valley.” Wherever our eyes turn are breathtaking vistas of grace. Standing on this bedrock of grace, Paul says, “We rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (never-ending majesty, beauty, and weightiness). There is more, we can look ahead to a sure **hope** of eternal existence in the inexhaustible glory of God. **Hope** flourishes and grows.

But Paul takes a hard 90-degree turn in Romans 5:3. “We also rejoice in suffering.” Why? Because suffering is just as fruitful as contemplating God’s glory.

The promise of glory leads to **hope**. Suffering also leads to **hope**. How does that work?

Paul shows us the road to that hope. When we suffer, we are presented with a basic choice: Will we continue to walk steadily on the path of faith, or when we feel relentlessly confused or disappointed, will we turn from seeking God? Will we give up and slap on a bumper sticker like one I saw recently, “Answered Prayer is a Lie.” We have a choice: we can endure in faith like Abraham, who believed God “in hope against hope” (Romans 4:18), or not.

Paul continues in v. 4: Endurance – choosing to stay the path, or getting back on it when we’ve stumbled and fallen – leads to character. Habits of the heart develop character of one kind or another. We become different, transformed into a person who looks more like Jesus than a year ago, or someone who is increasingly hardened, angry, cynical, lustful, proud, indifferent, or just plain mean.

Assuming we follow this path of deep spiritual transformation (Paul seems quite confident that we will), **hope** grows. How? We cry to God for help and strength to endure. He speaks his word to us. We are delivered from temptations. We learn to face

the voices of doubt that nip at our heels, “You’ll never change! This Christianity stuff is just wishful thinking. Give it up.” We see enough “signs for good” to begin to actually believe that change is in the wind and will continue to completion (1 John 3:1-3).

The promise of tested, proven hope is that **it will not disappoint** (v. 5). Life, here and in eternity, will be what the Gospel promises, “From glory to glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Suffering that forms a path to hope requires choices, but the fulfillment of this path is not based on those choices. If hope comes only from ourselves, it is only as good as our steely wills. It is no hope at all: we are simply good Stoics. “Hang on; then you die.” No, the essential reality is that all along, we are walking on bedrock that we did not create and we cannot maintain. We are breathing air that we did not manufacture but we cannot live without.

The bedrock on which we walk this life of growing hope is limitless grace. Grace does not materialize through our choices – it is the *solid pre-existing ground* beneath every step we take. Look around you. Take stock. Grace is already there! The air we breathe is the love of God *that has already been poured out* by the Breath of God, the Spirit. “This hope that has developed in us (along this path of suffering) does not disappoint, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5).

I can’t explain this wonderful alchemy of grace-hope-love, but this I know: because we who are Christians stand on the bedrock of grace and are swimming in an atmosphere of love, we have all we need to endure suffering. Endurance, which only comes through testing, produces a life of growing hope. Real hope that, in this life, we are being transformed!

The COVID-19 pandemic is a strict schoolmarm, a fierce trainer. We are being stripped of excesses. We are letting go, suffering substantial losses, shedding tears. I talked with a friend this week who used the word “disappointed” ten times in response to, “How are you doing?” Many are facing deep-seated idols. Like Peter, many are answering Jesus’ question, “Do you love me more than these?” Many are asking, “How do we live in a world that will *never* offer the possibilities we had come to assume?” Many are realizing that political systems will *always* be flawed, filled with contradictions. Many weep over a creation that is tipping crazily. Many are “weeping over Jerusalem.” We are learning that this world is a “vale of tears.”

But while we grieve, we need not “grieve without hope.” Grief over death is met by the Christian hope of resurrection. Grief over loss and suffering in this present life is met with the sure hope of transformation into the image of Christ. Why? We always walk on the bedrock of grace, breathing air of outpoured, immeasurable love.

Grace and peace in Jesus,

Bishop Steve