

This morning, I would like for us to look at one of my favorite passages from the Bible, and one that I hope all of you are familiar with. I will be reading from the fifth chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, the first five verses.

Read Romans 5:1-5

Since I entered the ministry, I have observed an increasing problem that I could sum up in one word "hopeless;" lack of hope in our personal lives and the world around us. Everywhere you turn these days – in the newspaper, TV, internet, social media, work, home, and personal lives – people are overwhelmed with problems and depressed. Perhaps the greatest psychological, spiritual, and medical needs that all people have is the need for hope. Dr. McNair Wilson, a famous heart doctor, remarked in his autobiography *Doctor's Progress*: "Hope is the medicine I use more than any other; hope can cure nearly anything."

A man approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded: "Eighteen to nothing; we're losing." "Boy," said the spectator, "I bet you're discouraged." "Why should I be discouraged," replied the little boy, "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet."

Three men were discussing life and how they wanted to be remembered. The first man said that when people viewed his casket, he hoped they would say that he was a generous person, always giving to others. The second man said that he hoped that people would look at him and say that he was a great family man. The third man said that when people looked into his casket, he hoped that they would shout: "I see movement; he's moving; he's alive." Now that's hope!

The Apostle Paul knew what Dr. Wilson, this little boy, and this man were talking about when he wrote this beautiful passage to the early Christians in Rome. Paul indicates that because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can all have hope even in the midst of life's most difficult situations and an uncertain future. Life back then was not easy, and even with all our advances in technology nothing has changed. In this passage, do you see the equation that Paul is giving us for making it through life? Suffering equals perseverance which equals character which results in hope. Unfortunately, whether we like it or not, it all starts with suffering. One translation of the Bible calls this "troubles." Of course, this is something that we all have in common. We all know what it means to hurt and experience troubles. Have you ever met anyone who didn't have any problems; of course not, that's just life; problems are part of life.

Now no one enjoys suffering or dealing with problems. But in this passage, Paul is telling us that with Jesus Christ in our life and with the proper attitude, we can find purpose in even the worst situations in life and endure whatever comes our way. Remember the formula: we suffer; this suffering develops perseverance; our perseverance through suffering develops character; character produce hope; and hope results in joy. In addition, Paul points out that even though we suffer, we do not lose hope because God has given us His Holy Spirit to encourage us.

As Christians we confront all kinds of problems every day – strained relationships, sorrow, loneliness, disappointments, illness, and financial concerns to name just a few. Paul says that all this stress produces perseverance. Now the Greek word used here means more than simple endurance. It means a spirit which can overcome the world; it means a spirit which does not just passively endures, but which actively overcomes the trials in life. It encourages us to keep pressing on, trusting in God even in the worst situations. Jesus reaffirms this hope in John 16:33 where He promised: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

A friend of mine at St. John’s UMC in Santa Fe, Bruce Kidman, once said that the most successful people in this world are not the most talented or educated, but those that persevere; those that keep going when life throws them a curve ball. Remember that it was with perseverance that the snails made it to Noah’s Ark.

To me one of the biggest problems in our world today is that people are not willing to hang in there for the long run and work things out. Unfortunately, you see it all the time; people don’t want to make the commitment, to assume responsibility for the situation. When the going gets tough, they give up and quit. Over the years, I have observed that people who come up with excuses always lack perseverance and are never successful.

I see it all the time: people separate without going to counseling; they quit their job because the boss is tough or they don’t like the hours; they stop going to church because it interferes with their recreation; they don’t want to commit to some service activity because it might tie them down and take up their precious time. I could go on and on, but you see where I’m going. And I apologize if I am stepping on anyone’s toes, but believe me, we need to hear this if we are going to make a difference in our lives and the world around us for Jesus, and live life to the fullest. Dale Carnegie once said that most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept trying when there seem to be no hope at all.

Paul realized that the only way that we are going to make it and develop character is to hang in there, to keep going. Remember the old saying: “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Perseverance builds character. Now the word that Paul uses here for character applies

to metal passing through the fire so that it is purified. Think about it this way; the different trials that we face in life are in a way like the different temperature settings on God's furnace. The settings are adjusted to burn off our impurities; to strengthen us or soften us according to what meets our greatest need. Thus, it is in God's refining fire that the true quality of our faith is revealed, and through these trials we become more like Jesus Christ Himself.

Because when trouble is met with perseverance, out of the crisis a person emerges stronger and better; closer to God. One of the by-products of tribulation is that it produces perseverance which in turn produces character. John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach for UCLA, once said that ability will get you to the top, but it takes character to keep you there. Think about it, we could never develop perseverance if our lives were trouble-free. Now I will admit that there have been times in my life when I have cried out: "Lord, I think I have enough character for right now, please let up!" Have you ever felt that way?

But here's the good news; Paul tells us that character produces hope. The person who knows Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and friend walks in the faith and confidence that God will see them through whatever life throws their way. Once a great king summoned his wise men and asked them to come up with an inscription for his royal ring that would sum up all the wisdom of life. They came back several weeks later with these five words for the ring: "And this too shall pass." God's amazing grace carries us safely through the storms of life. The character which has endured the test always emerges in hope; hope that abides.

The Bible is full of stories about hope that abides. Because of the evil in the world God floods the earth, but hope abides in an ark built by Noah and in the sign of the rainbow. God promises Abraham that he will become a great nation, but he and his wife Sarah are well into their nineties with no offspring when hope abides in a baby named Isaac. Jacob's favorite son Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt because of the jealousy of his older brothers. Yet hope abides when Joseph because of his ability to interpret dreams becomes ruler of Egypt, and eventually saves his family and the nation of Israel from extinction. Later in Egypt hope abides in a basket on the Nile River where baby Moses is sleeping. God will call him to lead the people of Israel out of slavery to the Promised Land.

Hope again abides for another elderly couple who are unable to have children. By God's grace Zechariah and Elizabeth have a son named John the Baptist who becomes the voice in the wilderness preparing the way for the Messiah. Hope abides for Jesus as He hangs on the cross carrying all the sins of the world on His shoulders. Though He will die and be buried in a borrowed tomb, He will not be there long before He rises opening the way to eternal life for all who will believe and call on His name. Hope abides for the disciples who are gathered together in the Upper Room uncertain of the future when on Pentecost the Holy Spirit descends on them as flames of fire and all fear is gone.

And this abiding hope is not limited to the Bible. There's John Wesley discouraged because of his failed missionary trip to the colony of Georgia. But on a night on Aldersgate Street in London hope abides when he hears a passage read from Romans, and his heart is strangely warmed, and he finds the assurance, the blessed assurance that he had been searching for. And my friends, hope abides right here this morning at High Desert for each one of us.

Hope does not rest in a system or a government or a philosophy, but in the cross of Jesus Christ. It is said that if your cup seems too bitter, if your load seems too heavy, you can be sure that it is the wounded hand of the Lord that is holding the cup and that it is He who carried the cross that is carrying the load for us. In the 11th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus promised: "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ... for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Never lose hope.

Paul reassures us that this hope will never disappoint us. We can go on in the midst of even the most difficult times knowing that God will be there with us loving us and enabling us to hold on. This hope is not a whistling in the dark. It is a sure and certain hope, and is not to be confused with unfounded optimism. On the contrary, it is the blessed assurance of our future destiny is based on the love of God which is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit and demonstrated to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now the hope we are discussing here is not like our English word which conveys something uncertain; biblically, **hope** means something has not yet happened but will certainly come to pass, and is the reason for praise and thanksgiving. Normally we think of hope like this: a child hopes that she will get a doll for Christmas; a woman hopes the man she loves will ask her to marry him; and a retiree hopes that his pension will last. But when the Bible speaks of hope, the thing anticipated is as certain as if it had already been received. An equivalent English word is **confidence**. We have hope and confidence in the promises of God; we have blessed assurance in His Word.

Listen to what was recently written on the inside cover of a Cokesbury catalog: "Sometimes hope is a sit-back-and-wait-for-something-good-to-happen-in-the-future sort of passive feeling. But what if Christian hope is different? And for that matter, shouldn't the way Christians live in the world reflect a different kind of hope? Because our hope is grounded in God's unfailing promises, it motivates us beyond mere wishing to a way of being and doing. We don't wait for God's hope; we do God's hope. Hope is an action verb. The hope found in God effects change for the good, multiplies inwardly and outwardly, and gives thanks."

In this morning's text from Romans, we learn that suffering can teach us patience, and that patience or endurance produces character. As our character is strengthened, so is our hope. This hope is based on God's great love for us, which comes to us through the Holy Spirit.

There is a story about a man whose shop was among the many buildings destroyed in the 1871 Chicago Fire. The next morning, arriving at what had once been his place of business, the man set up a table in the midst of the burned debris. Above the table he placed a sign that read: "Everything lost except wife, children, and hope. Business will resume as usual tomorrow morning." Hope is something that we can't do without. Someone once said: "What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope to the meaning of life." Life will certainly test us and try us. If we lose hope, we will never survive.

George Frederick Watts, a 19th Century British painter, skillfully pictured hope in one of his works. The scene is of a woman sitting on a globe of the world playing her harp; every string, except one is broken. Watts could have easily entitled the painting *Despair*, but instead, he titled the picture *Hope*, because he knew that as long as one string remained, there was still hope of making music.

Christian hope is a two-pronged thing; not only does hope give us victory in life's current crises, but it also gives us assurance of rest and peace with God when this life is over. Paul writes in the second verse: "We rejoice in the hope of sharing in the glory of God." We live in hope that tomorrow will be better; that life will be sweeter; that the future is bright. Hope is as natural to believers as the beating of our hearts. It is within us because God put it there. It is something that we cannot live without. A hopeless Christian is a contradiction in terms.

It is God's desire that His people never lose hope. As a believer, we have a future built on hope. No matter how bad a day may be, a better day is yet to come. No matter how concerned you are about the future, remember God is still in control. With the dawning of each day God is in heaven smiling and saying: "Hope abides, hope abides." Amen