



Suffering proves we are real

By Marshall Segal

When suffering comes, we often stop and ask God to give us what we need to suffer well. Sometimes, the suffering itself unexpectedly becomes his answer to that prayer.

One experience of suffering — with the presence and help of God — can prepare us for some future experience of suffering. Scripture actually goes even further and says that when we receive and experience suffering in a certain way, we can actually begin to rejoice in our suffering. I haven't suffered as much as many have, but I've suffered enough to want to know how that happens, how we can rejoice even while still in the midst of our sufferings. What miraculous filter could I put on my hardest days to make me respond like that? How could joy possibly take root and bloom in the dark and dry ground of suffering?

One of the clearest texts along these lines is Romans 5:3–4. If you've heard these words over and over before (like some of us have), read them again, but slow down enough to hear just how startling they are.

We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. (Romans 5:3–4)

Who in your life talks about suffering like that? We don't merely receive and tolerate suffering when it comes; we rejoice in it. Our hope doesn't merely survive suffering; suffering strangely makes our hope stronger. Suffering produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope. Has your experience of heartache and loss felt like that?

Before Suffering Comes

Now, suffering in itself does not produce hope from scratch. Suffering will not create hope where there is none. But it can serve to strengthen and refine an already living hope. No matter what we suffer and for however long we suffer, no one suffers well without a real and abiding hope in God. Look at the verses immediately before:

We have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings. . . . (Romans 5:2–3)

Before suffering can strengthen our hope, we first need to put our deepest, strongest hope in God. Those who can rejoice in the hope-building experience of suffering can only do so because they have some hope to build upon. They already rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

That means the first step to suffering well is to die to all our confidence in self and learn to rely instead on God. If suffering turns you inward (as it tends to do), you're likely to fall into downward spirals of despair, like so many do. If, however, suffering lifts your eyes to someone above and beyond this pain or problem, then it can become a staircase into greater courage and joy. The staircase may be arduous and harrowing, but it can carry you onto firmer ground and into fairer fields — if you are not your own hope in suffering. Suffering will not stoop to serve you if you will not bend your knee before God.

Suffering Produces Endurance

We all can see how hope might help someone embrace and endure suffering, but the apostle Paul doesn't settle for mere survival. He demands that suffering strengthen hope and serve joy. So how does that happen? First, by showing us how much God can do when we come to the end of what we can do.

Part of the suffering of suffering is the creeping suspicion that we won't make it, that this will cost us more than we have to give, that tomorrow will be the last straw. If you've felt like that, Paul knows what you feel: "We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death" (2 Corinthians 1:8). That doesn't sound like hope rising. That doesn't sound like rejoicing. How could God rewrite a death sentence and make it give life? Next line: "But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9).

We find hope at, and beyond, the end of ourselves — at the end of all we can do and say and feel — if we find God there. Suffering produces hope because it shows us, like nothing else can, that we can handle more than we think — with God. In other words, suffering produces endurance. As we lean on God, he strengthens us with all power, "according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy" (Colossians 1:11).

Endurance Proves Character

Second, suffering strengthens hope by revealing and refining who we really are. We may not like what suffering reveals, but it unveils us. We thought we were patient, until the car died

for the third time this year. We thought we were kind and gentle, until our child pitched another fit at bedtime. We thought our faith was firm and unshakeable, until our spouse got sick, and then more sick, and then more sick. Suffering shakes our souls, bringing sin to the surface, revealing the worst in us.

And, if God has begun his work in us, suffering also reveals and nurtures the God-wrought best in us. The apostle Peter describes the beauty and worth of this painful process:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith — more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6–7)

The miracle of Spirit-filled patience shines brightest in moments that test patience. The miracle of kindness sparkles most where we expect to find irritation and rudeness. The miracle of love looks most miraculous when we have every painful reason to focus on self. Comfortable circumstances may draw a veil over these miracles, but suffering draws light to them, exposing the hidden work of God within us.

In other words, endurance produces proven character. Our patient perseverance through suffering, with joy, says we are real — that we are not the sin-enslaved soul we once were, but a new creation by God, one he promises to complete (Philippians 1:6).

Character Produces Hope

If we could see that we're real in Christ, how would that make us feel about our future? If we're real — if the King of heaven lives in us, and intercedes for us, and promises to come back for us — then our future is overwhelmingly bright and secure no matter how unbearable our present may feel for now. In other words, character produces hope.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2–4)

Suffering demands endurance, allowing us to see what God can do when we come to the end of ourselves. Enduring hardship with God reveals what's happening inside of us, as he conforms us degree by degree to the glory of his Son. As that happens, we get to see glimpses of the wonder of who we are in Christ. Through suffering, then, we see that we are someone we could never have been without grace.

Bigger Than Relief

So, instead of praying that God might preserve our hope through suffering, we might begin praying that God would build our hope through suffering — that this season of darkness actually might leave us nearer to and more confident in him. Instead of merely praying that God would heal us and restore us to where we were, we can pray that he would use suffering to grow us and lead us forward to where he wants us to be.

I've learned more about suffering well from Vaneetha Risner than from anyone else on earth. She's suffered in more ways than most — diagnosed with post-polio (a painful and debilitating condition), lost an infant son because of a doctor's mistake, and then in the midst of the hurricane of her pain and loss, was abandoned by her husband. And yet by God's grace, she's suffered more joyfully than most. When you meet her, you cannot explain her — but for God.

She says this about the transforming power of her trials:

I cried out asking God to help me to trust him, to reconnect, and to find hope in what seemed like impenetrable darkness. I needed peace and I couldn't find it anywhere besides Christ. It was then that my faith radically changed. I found an inexplicable peace and hope that I had not experienced before — my easy trouble-free life had not yielded anything but an enjoyment of the present. But suffering was producing something unshakeable. Suffering is a catalyst that forces us to move in one direction or another. No one comes through suffering unchanged. ("Suffering Will Always Change You")

Suffering will change us. The question is whether it will change us for the better, driving us nearer to Jesus and making us more like him. By all means, when suffering comes, pray that God would give what you need to receive it, to survive it, to endure it. But don't stop there. Ask him to do what he has done again and again for Vaneetha. Ask him to make suffering a servant of your peace and hope and joy in him.