

Paul said, “Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, character produces hope, and hope will not disappoint us.”

When I read this passage I think of John Donne. He was an English poet who lived during the time of the Black Plague. His brother died during the religious persecutions, he was imprisoned by his own father-in-law, and his wife died after giving birth to their 12th child (think about that). Two years later when the doctors told him that the Black Plague had come to him, John Donne quoted the book of Lamentations saying: “Lo, I am a man who hath seen affliction.”

Out of all this came some of his greatest writings. “No man is an island.” Have you ever heard that? John Donne wrote that because he experienced it. Or, how about this: “Send not to ask for whom the bell toils, it toils for thee.” Later Ernest Hemmingway would write a novel based on that line, but John Donne was the first to say it because he lived it. In my opinion, however, the greatest thing that John Donne wrote was a question - a simple, honest, straight-forward question that cuts to the heart of life. In the midst of his suffering he asked: “*Will I trust God with my pain and my fear?*”

That question kept coming to my mind as I studied our text this morning. Let me give you the background.

In the first three chapters of the book of Romans, Paul is building the argument that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23). None of us deserve God’s blessings. But in the 3rd and 4th chapters Paul gives us the good news. God has reached out to us through Jesus Christ. When we put our *faith* in Him (when we put our lives in His hands) God forgives us, accepts us, and begins the process that leads to new life.

Saint Paul calls this being “justified.” Justified is when we are made right with God. It is when God says: “John Fitzgerald, I know who you are. I know everything about you. Give yourself to me and I will accept you just as you are with the power to make you what I created you to be.

The 5th chapter of Romans begins by saying: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through Jesus Christ.” When we give our lives to Christ we are no longer at odds with God. We are no longer struggling to prove ourselves or facing life on our own. Saint Paul said, “We are standing in grace... and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.”

But then Paul does something very interesting. It is as if he picks up his pen and ponders. Are we saying that once we put our faith in Christ then all the hardships of life will be over? That certainly was not the case for Paul. Are we saying that once we become Christians then life becomes easy? No. Saint Paul said: “We rejoice in the glory of

God...” then he picks up his pen and then adds, “...we also rejoice in our suffering.” Why would Paul say that? Why would anyone rejoice in suffering? Paul said, “Because suffering produces perseverance.”

My great Aunt Ethel was an amazing Christian woman. She lived in the Old Fitzgerald family farm house up in Davidson County. The house was so old that it leaned. We called it the “Tiltin Hilton.” You had to walk down hill to get to the kitchen. The house had no electricity, except for one wire that dangled along the ceiling to a bare light bulb. It had no heat, except for a woodstove that Aunt Ethel used for cooking. I can not tell you how many times we said: “Aunt Ethel, come live with us.” But every time we said this she replied: “Don’t you worry about me. I’ll make it just fine.” And as her family, we respected that. But then again, you have to know her story.

Her story goes back to a summer day in 1932 when her husband, my Great Uncle Rodger, was bailing the hay. The tip of his shirt sleeve got caught in the hay bailing machine and before it stopped it had taken his arm and part of his chest cavity. He died four days latter. It shook the whole family and for the longest time Aunt Ethel grieved. Then one night she got on her knees and prayed: “Lord, give me strength.”

The next morning she got up and she fed the chickens, and she chopped the wood, and she bailed the hay. She taught her children to read, she taught them the bible, and she made sure they were in church every Sunday morning. She put food on their table, clothes in their closet, and handmade quilts for their beds. When Chris and I got married she gave us one of her quilts and it is my most prized possession. She took a broken down farm, during the heart of the Great Depression, and she made that farm work. Today that farm is still working! So, whenever Aunt Ethel said: “Don’t worry about me. I will make it just fine,” there was no question about it. Aunt Ethel was going to make it just fine.

I hope that none of us ever suffer. But if we do, Saint Paul said: “suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character...”

Have you ever been going through a hard time and someone says: “This builds character?” You want to say, “Thank-you, but I am a character enough already.” That is not exactly what the bible says. Paul said, “suffering produces perseverance, but it is perseverance –it is when we get on our knees night after night and say: “Lord, give me strength.” It is when time after time the Lord sees us through; it is perseverance that produces character.

In the New Testament the word *character* is similar to our word *sterling* as in silver. It describes the refining process where you put metal in the fire time and time again to burn away the impurities. When we walk through life with faith in the Lord it brings out the best qualities in us as Christians.

I think of Lester Reed. (I have permission to tell this story.) Every Sunday morning he was on the third pew. When he was not in church he was at the Guardian Care Nursing

home with his wife. Mrs. Reed had medical problems; both of her legs had been amputated. Every day and night Mr. Reed would sit by her bed, he would read the newspaper or the bible to her, and he would hold her hand. One day I went to visit them and after the visit I asked Mr. Reed to step out into the hall. I said: "Mr. Reed, let us help you. I can have people from the church visiting and fixing you meals. We can give you a break from all this." Mr. Reed looked at me and said, "Anything that the church can do would be appreciated, but you need to let me do what I need to do." Then he looked at the door as if he could see his wife through it, and said: "We were teenagers when we met. We have walked hand and hand through life, and now that she is no longer able to walk, I'm not about to let go." I said, "Mr. Reed, when I come to this part of my life I hope that I will be as good to my wife as you are to yours." Lester Reed was a sterling Christian.

Saint Paul said suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character (it brings out the finest qualities in us as Christians) and finally, said Paul, character produces hope. When Paul speaks of hope, he is not talking about a whimsical wish: "Gee, I hope everything turns out alright." Rather, to Paul hope is assurance, it is conviction, is it the knowledge that God will see us through.

In the 4th chapter of his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul was speaking to Christians who had lost loved ones when he said: "Comfort one another with these words... for we do not grieve like those who have no hope." Yes we grieve. Of course we grieve. Don't let anyone tell you that Christians do not grieve. We do. But on the other hand, don't let anyone tell you that we have no hope.

My favorite Ken Goodson story is when he became Bishop down in Alabama. There was a preacher in Alabama named John Laken Bracher who had just turned 101 years old. So Ken Goodson called a friend who was the editor of the newspaper and said, "I've got a preacher who just turned 101 years old and I thought that you might want to write an article about him." Well, they didn't. Evidently old preachers are not newsworthy. But as a favor to Ken Goodson, the editor said, "I'll send out a rookie reporter. Maybe we will have some filler space."

On the day of the interview they found John Laken Bracher on his front porch in his rocking chair. This was the 1960's. Bracher was 101 years old. This guy remembered the Civil War. He remembered World War I, World War II; he was a walking history book. And at each interval he talked about his faith in God. Have you ever met someone who glowed with the Spirit? This guy was radiant! And when the interview was over the reporter had his story.

But as they were walking back to the car, the reporter stopped and said to Ken Goodson, "There is one more question I need to ask him." "Then let's go ask him." "Wait," said the reporter, "It's personal. He might get offended. Would you ask him if he will answer one more question?" So Ken Goodson walked back up on the porch and said, "Rev. Bracher, the boy wants to ask you another question." "Well, what is it?" "I don't know" replied Goodson. "Well, does he know?" "I suppose so, he said it was

personal.” “Tell the boy to come up here and ask it.” So the young reporter walked back up on the porch and said, “Reverend Bracher, I don’t know how to ask this, but you are 101 years old. Just how long do you expect to live?”

When John Laken Bracher heard this he got up out of his rocking chair. He stood to attention and looked out across the horizon and beyond to heaven. “How long you ask?” And with the confidence of a child of God he answered, “Forever Sir, Forever.”

The next day the headlines of the religious section of the Birmingham Daily New read in big bold black letters the words; ***Forever Sir, Forever!***

Friends, that’s our hope. That’s our assurance and our conviction. This is why we do what we do at Providence. This is why we teach Sunday School, why we have promotion Sunday, and why we are intentional about faith development. We are building relationships with God through Christ that will last forever!

So you can see why John Donne’s question kept coming to my mind. He didn’t ask, “Can I trust God?” Yes we can trust him. Of course we can trust Him. John Donne asked, “Will I trust God with my pain and with my fear?” I can’t answer that for you this morning. That may be the kind of question that none of us can answer until we are in the midst of it, but when those times come this much I can say: suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, character produces hope, and hope will not disappoint us.