

Lenten Midweek 2025
The Suffering of Christ and Hope
(The Antithesis of Self-Pitying Despair)
Romans 5:1-11
John 19:1-16

There can be no Christian hope without trust. Trust is the open door to hope. Sometimes we close that door on ourselves when we endure difficulty. A weak trust comes under trial when suffering enters into one's life. St. Paul tells us that suffering produces endurance and that is most certainly true. It is also true that endurance is not the only thing that suffering produces. Suffering can often produce self-pity. Feeling sorry for yourself ~ that's the short definition of self-pity. There's a drawing of self-pity. Two ladies are out for a walk, dressed similarly, and one of the ladies is holding up a rain cloud over her head and only over her head. The rain is falling on her and only on her. The artist made sure to capture the essence of self-pity in the other lady, whose attention is naturally drawn to the cloud above the first woman, which is the first woman's objective. Self-pity loves an audience. It can certainly function in isolation, but self-pity yearns to be affirmed, yearns for validation.

Hope and trust are sisters. Hope and trust hold hands and walk together in the life of the Christian. Heaven is our hope. Eternal life is our hope. Hope makes us strong. In some people's minds hope is simply an optimistic but uncertain expectation. Trust, real trust, changes that entirely. Trust is happy to leave the outcome in God's hands. Trust sees through dark circumstances and focuses on an empty tomb. Trust knows that when we are filthy, mired in trash and soiled in iniquity and covered from head to toe in muck that Christ's blood was shed to make us holy, to cleanse and renew and sanctify and refresh us and that reality is more real, more assertive, more defining than anything else. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18). That is our hope. That hope beats back self-pity. This is Christianity upper level: "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5).

The blood of Christ drips from those words. What Paul describes can only be true of a Christian. What Paul describes in the lives of Christians can only be true because Christ's life invades our own. Most of you know that pain of heart can exceed the agony of pain in the body. Suffering loss, suffering rejection, suffering betrayal and abandonment and scorn and shame and hate – our Lord endured all of that on a scale that can't be quantified. He created man in His image. He poured His love into our being. The Son of God gave, and gave, and gave to the creation that He treasured. And the recipients of His love decided that it would be a good idea to whip and scourge and mock and taunt and jeer Him. And don't adopt the idea that it was only a few bad apples who engaged in this blasphemy, this demonic response to goodness. "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10-12).

How many of y'all believe that you are in touch with cultural zeitgeist? Since culture and news are big industry and folks are plugged into the doings of our nation on an unprecedented level,

then I expect that a great many of you are in touch with cultural trends. The pendulum swings. It certainly appears as though the culture is becoming more conservative. Old virtues are rising from the ashes. Common sense is making a resurgence. There seems to be genuine momentum for this swing of the pendulum. Here's a sign about self-pity that fits the contemporary mold. "Wallowing in self-pity hurts no one except you. Boss up and find a way to get going again." The saying is long on action but short on motivation. Or, put another way, there's no Gospel in that idea – boss up and get going again.

A man that I was ministering to died this week. A tennis friend asked me to visit him. The dying man was afraid that he was going to hell. When a pastor hears that it's like a fire alarm, no pun intended. The impulse is to go immediately with the medicine of the Gospel to help this struggling soul. He was afflicted with a wretched cancer. Over the course of a couple of months and a dozen visits I had the opportunity to pour into this man the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. He knew the Scriptures. He finished my sentences. I did all the talking but we both listened. I've never known anyone who listened strong that he did. One glorious facet of the diamond of the salvation which God has given us in Christ after another went from my mouth to this man's ears. We didn't talk about anything else. It was the beauty of God's Word and the beauty of God's Word alone. In the medical care center, in the ER, in the regular hospital room – I brought the wonder of Christ crucified and risen and this man received it. Someone had impressed upon him that he wasn't enough. Someone had impressed upon him that he didn't measure up. And he believed it. His faith needed something to hold onto. There was no way that this guy was going to "boss up and find a way to get going again." He needed more.

You need more. I'm not saying that you're full of self-pity but you could be. Without something to hold onto we all could be. Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2). The shame; the Lord of glory was stripped of His clothing and hoisted up on a cross and crucified as a disgrace to humanity. It's stunning. He commended Himself to His Father's care because there was a trust within Him that was unbreakable. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit (Luke 23:46). Jesus was forsaken and yet His trust was unbreakable – that is the life that is in you. You've been crucified with Christ and you no longer live but Christ lives in you, and the life you live in the body you live by faith in the Son of God who loved you and gave Himself up for you (Galatians 2:20). The Lord Christ is the One who is building character in you – sometimes by suffering. It's not pleasant, but it is good. The more of Him you see the more you can interpret your suffering aright. That is God's way, that is His intent, to mold you into the image of His Son – sometimes by suffering.

Along with faith and love, hope constitutes Christian existence. "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" (Romans 12:12). In John's Gospel account, he gives us insight into how the world tried to break the Lord Jesus. "'Hail, King of the Jews,' and they struck him with their hands" (John 19:3). The pain of those blows was more than what His body felt. A crown of thorns was intended to mock Him, but we see the radiance of a Savior who would endure such a travesty to save a wretch like me. That is where your hope lies. Pilate had the gall to say "I find no guilt in him" *after* he had Jesus whipped (John 19:1, 4). The chief priests were not satisfied. "Crucify him, crucify him!" (John 19:6). Pilate asked derisively, "Shall I crucify your king?" (John 19:15). The reply was just as derisive and one of the most repellant things in

the bible: “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15). The Messiah who had come to bring life and light was smeared with that and be assured, Jesus felt the pain of it. His glory is in His suffering. High and exalted, He is our King – the King of the cross, the King of hope, the King of humanity, the King of heaven and earth... and we are the people of Christ the King.