

Text: Romans 5:1-8

Theme: Suffering 101 - The Basics

February 25, 2018

How many of you remember taking basics entry level courses in college, courses you always wondered where you would ever use such information? As I recall, many of those courses were titled as 101 courses. History 101, Geography 101. English Composition 101. In today's text, Paul gives us some basics. However, his basics are actually important and useful. As we focus on the basics of suffering, a topic we don't particularly enjoy, we focus on our theme: "Suffering 101 - The Basics."

I. In God's infinite wisdom, He has chosen to allow suffering. A. Even so, we don't like suffering. 1. We don't like it because it hurts. How many of you cut yourself at least once a day just because it feels good? We don't like suffering because we don't like pain. When we experience pain, we want it to go away. We don't care who makes it go away, but someone needs to do something to relieve our pain. Pharmaceutical companies make billions every year by selling pain relievers, many of which still do not alleviate our pain. As we look at the basics of Christian suffering, we first need to realize that we avoid suffering because it hurts and we don't want to hurt.

2. We don't like suffering because we fail to realize its purpose. Suppose that for the next week your body felt no pain, that all physical pain stopped registering in your brain. What would you notice seven days from now if not much sooner? Pain tells us something is wrong, something is broken, something needs attention. As much as we don't like pain, pain serves a good purpose. Likewise, Christian suffering serves a good purpose. It tells us something is wrong spiritually, that something isn't how it needs to be. In the book of John, we're reminded that as branches attached to the Vine, He prunes us, not to torture, but so that we can bear more fruit.

3. We don't like suffering because we think we should be immune. How many, because they are Christians, believe they should be immune to suffering or, at the very least, immune to any major mental, physical, or spiritual crises? We've all had our moments, moments when we said to ourselves, "Why me, Lord? Why now? Why this?" When the Holy Spirit worked faith in our hearts at Baptism, He never promised a pain-free or even a pain-reduced life. His promise was that He would be with us, that He would guide us, strengthen us, empower us, and get us to the other side, not that He would erase suffering from our lives.

B. We may not like suffering, yet it becomes more acceptable when we understand the basics. 1. Basic #1 - Suffering always serves good purpose. In our finite minds, we sometimes talk about "random suffering," suffering that has no rhyme or reason. But, in the mind of God, random suffering doesn't exist because suffering always has a purpose. Our challenge is to accept that reality even when God doesn't explain the purpose. What the devil uses in his attempt to destroy our faith, God uses to build our faith. We may want to know the purpose, but whether it makes sense or not, our response is to accept it as having a God-directed purpose.

2. Basic #2 - Suffering produces endurance. Paul writes, "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance." Notice what Paul says, "Suffering produces." Suffering is productive, not destructive. It may look and feel

destructive, but Paul assures us that productive is God's intention. But why do we need endurance? Suppose you were cross-country skiing. How far would you get if you lacked endurance? Would you even make it to the end of the bunny trail before you sat down or turned around and went back? Suffering produces endurance and that's a good thing because endurance enables us to face what is coming next.

3. Basic #3 - Suffering enhances our character. How many times have you heard or used the phrase, "He or she is a real character?" That's not how character is used here! Character is anything that is used by God to make us more like Christ. Suffering serves a good purpose because it makes us a better person - more caring, more kind, more thoughtful, more understanding, more willing to notice and to help others, more aware of how pain is affecting someone else, more prepared to respond in appropriate ways. As you think about that list, Christian suffering takes on a new understanding, an understanding that makes us better prepared to endure it as it arrives.

4. Suffering also ultimately leads us to hope. Suffering produces endurance, which leads to character, which leads to hope, to the realization that there is something beyond our suffering. But what is this hope? It's the confidence, the conviction, the absolute assurance that God is with us, that He will get us to the other side, and, most importantly, that God continues to hold our room in heaven, a room we will enjoy after we have completed our journey down suffering road on this side of heaven. That's the hope that keeps us going, the hope that renews us when we think we can't take another step, the hope that says, "The best is yet to come!"

5. Basic #5 - Suffering teaches us how and who to follow. In our Gospel, Jesus says, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." Can we follow our own path and still arrive? Suffering sets us back on the right path, the path that follows in the footsteps of our Lord. It's a great day when God brings someone back to His flock, even if it's the result of suffering. Not only does suffering teach us who to follow, it also teaches us how to follow, to follow by denial and by taking up our cross. Neither of those promise an absence of suffering, but they impress upon our minds that suffering shows us who and how to follow.

6. Basic #6 - Suffering teaches us how to forfeit. "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to forfeit his life?" If you accomplish and acquire everything you want here at the expense of life there, you lost it all. Suffering teaches us to forfeit because if we don't forfeit all of this, we will never see and experience all of that. Yet that statement creates a tremendous challenge for us because we live a world where forfeiting, where surrendering is a sign of weakness, where winning is everything. Even so, suffering says, "There's only one way to arrive. It's only when you surrender all this that you can obtain the crown of life!"

7. Those basic, gen ed college courses may have seemed and many of them may still appear to have been useless, yet the basics of Christian suffering, those field experience courses, those are and will always remain priceless. Amen.