

# We Rejoice in Our Sufferings (7pm)

by Stewart Ruch

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*The sermon explores how Christians can find joy and purpose in suffering through a deeper relationship with Jesus.*

**Duration:** 29:25

**Scripture:** Romans 5:1-3, Romans 8:5-8, Ephesians 2:18, James 1:2

**Topics:** "Suffering"

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## Description

In this sermon on the outpouring of God's Father love, Paul teaches that suffering can lead us to a closer relationship with Jesus. He emphasizes the importance of understanding our foundational relationship with God, being justified by faith and having peace with Him. Paul encourages believers to embrace suffering creatively, not shunning it, as it can produce hope and a deeper closeness with Christ. He emphasizes the importance of having absolute confidence in Jesus' closeness and power, both in the present and in the future, even in the midst of suffering.

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## Transcript

This is Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois. Today's sermon from our 2017 Good Friday service is by Bishop Stuart Ruck. I had a beloved Bible professor when I was studying Bible and theology in graduate school.

His name was Dr. Walter Elwell. He was renowned for a certain kind of genius. He went through about a book a day and he had that unusual gift to remember everything that he read.

He had the entire New Testament in its original language, which is Koine Greek, literally memorized. You'd ask him about a scripture or a verse and you could watch him in his mind flipping through the pages to get to the exact place. He once said something I have not forgotten.

He said, I've always been perplexed by the question of suffering. So I've read literally every book in English and in German on that question. But it wasn't until a day came when I was called to suffer that I understood what it meant to be a Christian and to suffer.

This evening I want to teach out of Romans chapter 5, which is there in your order of service, and I want to encourage you to go to that text. We're going to work with that text this evening. The question that the Apostle Paul is trying to answer is not the important question, why is there suffering? And that is an

important question.

That may be an important question for you to work through and to do Bible work on and study on. And if that is a pressing question for you, please reach out to me by email and I'll get you resources to work on the question, why suffering? But that's not the question that we're going to try to answer tonight. Instead, what Paul is answering in Romans chapter 5 is not so much the question, why suffering, but how do we suffer? What happens and what can we do as Christians when suffering comes? There are those small sufferings, those slights, those relational awkward moments, those hurt feelings.

And then there are those great sufferings, those diagnoses or financial crises or loss of relationship, the ending of a marriage, the loss by death of someone dear and close to us. There are the small sufferings and there are the epic sufferings. How do we as Christians handle those sufferings? Paul gives two guidelines in this text.

We'll focus primarily on the first eight verses of Romans chapter 5. He first calls us to suffer creatively. And secondly, here's a call to stand in the outpouring. Suffer creatively, verses 2 to 4. Stand in the outpouring.

The outpouring of God's Father love, verses 5 to 8. Paul teaches that suffering in our lives can be transformed to be a map that will lead us to a closeness with Jesus. The map that will lead us to a God who is so personal and so powerful. In the first two verses of chapter 5, Paul is objectively laying out somewhat abstract but critically important foundational understandings of our relationship with God.

We have been justified by faith. We have peace with God. We have obtained access into the gift of God or the grace of God by faith.

And then in verse 3, after laying out this foundation, he turns into a concrete moment. And he says not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings. If that phrase doesn't in some way at first disturb you, it is either because you have done a great deal of work to understand what this means scripturally.

Or perhaps you're in some denial of the reality of suffering in your own life. That phrase, I suspect, is meant to shock and it should shock us. It should cause us to step back when we read it.

Rejoice in our sufferings? How could that ever be said by anyone, but especially by a Christian teacher and leader? What could he possibly mean when he says rejoice in your sufferings? If this were anomalous, perhaps we could do some kind of scripture work to say, well in this context it doesn't really mean that, but it's not anomalous. It's taught in other places of the Scriptures. James, a key leader in the early church, writes in James chapter 1, count it all joy, brothers and sisters, when you experience various trials and sufferings.

This is a theme built on the cross of Jesus Christ that we as Christians need to step into to understand how is it that we're called to suffer. Why would Paul teach this? First, let's be clear, in the way the language is designed, when Paul says rejoice in our sufferings, he's not saying rejoice in the sufferings themselves. He is not saying rejoice in the loss of your loved one in that reality itself, but instead in the construction of the sentence he is saying rejoice amidst your sufferings.

Rejoice from your sufferings. What he is implying is that when suffering comes our way, we have a choice to make. Suffering can be pure anguish or by the power of Jesus, by the ministry of the cross, suffering can be a way to access Jesus.

Suffering in itself will not lead potentially to the Lord Jesus. It is not in itself catalyzed that. It requires a choice, a kind of creativity as to how we take our suffering, how we understand our suffering in the scheme of Jesus, in the scheme of the cross.

And that Jesus wants to transform our suffering as he transformed the reality of death, as he transformed the reality of the sin that besets and besieges us, so he wants to transform our suffering. Let it not be ultimately anguish, but that it lead to access to his very presence. But this must be learned.

We often find that when suffering comes, it comes as almost a kind of insult. We're insulted at the presence of suffering in our lives, aren't we? Why would this happen to me? The very first thing that often comes to our minds are our hearts. It's an intrusion that disrupts that carefully wrought sense we had of life control.

It is especially debilitating. We think we've survived one suffering only to have another suffering follow on its heels, or a simultaneous suffering. But in the cross of Jesus, suffering is not an insult.

Indeed, our Lord Jesus did not take his suffering as an insult from God the Father. Instead, in the cross of Jesus, the suffering becomes not an insult from God, but an icon of God, which is to say this, that in the suffering of the Lord Jesus on the cross, we are given an icon, which simply means a picture to see who God really is. The most creative act ever enacted is the forgiveness of sins, the forgiveness of the sinful nature of the human person, and this creative act, this creative suffering happens amidst the suffering of our Lord Jesus on the cross.

Our suffering becomes creative in the Lord, insofar as it can create a path to closeness with Jesus. I can't remember if it was Africa or Asia, but I think it was Africa, where I learned among those who shepherd that they would collect the dung of cattle. And for those that were shepherding, there was a proliferation of cattle dung, and they would collect all that dung, they would dry it in the dry season, and then when the wet season and the cold season would come, they would burn that dung as fuel.

It was creative and ingenious. It took what would be viewed as waste, as refuse, as that which is to be avoided, and instead employed it to warm a home. There is so much suffering, and it's like refuse, it's like waste.

And when Paul says, rejoice in your sufferings, he's saying collect the dung of your life, collect that which is waste, that which is onerous to you, collect that very thing, bring it into the light of Jesus Christ. It can actually become that which brings you close to Him, which brings you close to the warmth of the light of Christ Himself. Rejoice in our sufferings.

I would refer to that as creative suffering, knowing then, we've gone in verse 3, that suffering produces endurance. Now, in light of what we're teaching already, we need to be clear that suffering can produce endurance. Not all suffering produces endurance.

That suffering which is not given over to the Lord Jesus, that suffering which is not imbued in a creative way, can simply be anguish. But suffering can produce endurance. Another word for endurance here would be patience.

When suffering comes, there can then be a kind of slowdown. Suffering is a kind of speed bump that God uses to get our attention. The suffering itself, coming from some form of evil or some form of disorder in this world, is not from God Himself.

He is not the author of evil, but He employs it like a speed bump, like a slowdown. Creative suffering can produce patience, slowdown. I'm hurting right now.

I need to slow down. I need to deal with this hurt. I need to deal with this loss or this betrayal or this suffering.

In a slightly different but similar metaphor, the Christian thinker C.S. Lewis wrote that pain is God's megaphone to rouse a dulled world. Suffering is God's speed bump to slow a hectic, hastened, frenzied man or woman. I recently faced a suffering, a smaller suffering, but it was acute.

I felt it. I was aware of emotional pain and I thought about it a lot. I couldn't stop thinking about that particular incident.

But I didn't want to face it. I wanted to act like it had no influence over me, but the pain would not go away because it was requiring that I stop. It was producing, actually, a patience that I was resisting.

But once I stopped, once I was clear that I needed to spend time with the Lord, to hear the megaphone, to hear the rousing, I then and only then could find deep companionship with Him. This creative suffering can produce a patience, which then we are able to go, do I need to forgive him or her from whom this suffering came? In this suffering, am I not aware, am I now aware of how I have offended another and I actually need to go in this time and this patience and ask for forgiveness of someone else? In this time that I'm now being given, is there an acceptance I need to work through with the Lord of the reality perhaps of a chronic suffering? In this slowdown, do I need to vulnerably cry out for the help of another Christian? We read then as suffering produces endurance or patience, verse 4, that endurance produces and can produce character. In this context, I would define character as a capacity.

Character is a capacity to live the Christian life, to live a life of love, to live a life of sacrifice. So what happens as we suffer and we suffer and we choose to suffer creatively, we choose to take the dung of suffering and employ it for God's work, we slow down, we take the speed bump, we quiet ourselves. We then find that in that quiet, in that forgiving or receiving of forgiveness, in that work that we're doing, we begin to build capacity.

We begin to expand and extend our hearts and our arms. We begin to receive more the love of God and see those who are unseen, care for those who are not cared for. There's a broadening and extending that in that character there is capacity given.

We know without any question that our Lord was always sinless, and yet we also know that our Lord had to grow. He matured. He increased his capacity even as he never sinned.

In Hebrews chapter 5 verse 8, we learn that he learned obedience. He gained character through what he suffered. Our Lord was the expert of creative suffering, the expert at that patience, that stillness, and then the receiving of capacity.

This is true in physio-science as to how we build greater actual muscle capacity in our bodies. Science tells us that muscle is built on stress, and in that stress is a micro tearing of the muscle, and then, and only then, after the micro tearing when there is rest, the muscle heals and builds to gain greater spiritual capacity. There is a tearing of our spiritual muscles.

There is a suffering that comes, and in that tearing, as we stop and are patient and rest and endure, it is then that capacity, spiritual muscle, is built. We struggle with this in our culture and in our country. We struggle to be and to grow as mature Christians, perhaps because we live, particularly in this area, in an affluence and a comfort and a kind of idolatry of convenience that actually constantly pushes against our stopping to suffer.

Indeed, many of us are ashamed to admit we're suffering, and many of us have built lives to look as if we're never going to suffer, and just in case that suffering comes, we've done everything we can to prepare ourselves financially, organizationally, logistically for that suffering, and we think that by living our lives that way we're winning our lives, but the truth from this is we're actually losing our lives, that our lives will only be built in Jesus as the suffering comes, and we creatively engage it in the Lord, in the cross. Athletes love a really hard workout, because as hard as it is, it builds strength, but what good is bodily strength if not in Jesus? We've not developed our capacity to love. Don't shun the suffering.

We then read the character produces hope, the second part of verse 4. Capacity produces a hope. Hope I would define in this context as an absolute confidence that Jesus is close, that Jesus is powerful. It's an absolute confidence that he is close and powerful now, whether I feel him or sense him or not, and that he will be close and powerful in the future that lies ahead of me, a future which will likely include suffering and without question include my death.

It's a hope that he will be close and personal, both now and literally eternally. Creative suffering brings a kind of Christ closeness, that for those of us who have suffered and drawn closer to the Lord, it actually can become precious. Kev and I have a very dear friend who is HIV positive.

After many years away from God, he returned to God, gave his life to Jesus, and others who learn of his illness have asked him if they should pray for his healing. Here's what he says, please don't. Oh yes, on one hand of course I would love to be relieved of this chronic disease, but please don't.

This suffering brought me to Jesus. This suffering keeps me close to Jesus. I've learned how to love others through this suffering.

That certainly does not mean that our Lord could not heal this chronic illness and may not still heal this chronic illness, and if I were him, I'd ask for both. But you get the point, I hope, of what he discovered, that what so many of us would be in absolute terror of ever happening, a chronic illness like that, a terror that would awaken us at night, that very terror he has faced into and has found the Lord in such personal measure. What happens when we suffer, as a spiritual mother in Christ here at Resurrection once said, and it's a cliché but my goodness is it a really good cliché, that when suffering comes it can make us bitter or it can make us better.

Better insofar as it can make us one who has a greater capacity to know the Lord and to give our lives for others. So we suffer creatively. This hope that we then gain, this confidence that Jesus is close, does not put us to shame because we stand in that reality of Jesus close now.

We're not put to shame in something that we're hoping for in the future because while it is in the future, it is also present now. Look at verse 5 with me. Very important.

The hope has not put us to shame because, so here we have a causal link here in the sentence in verse 5, because God's love has been, and this can be translated, and continues to be poured into our hearts.

We're not put to shame in this process of creative suffering because the love of God is here now as it will be here in the future. We're not just intellectually banking on this hope, but that love of God is being poured out for us now.

So we have no shame because we are immersed in the pouring out of the love of God. Earlier Paul called us to stand in the grace, into this grace in which we stand. Verse 2, this grace is a gift.

The gift is the outpouring of God's Father love. God's love has been poured. It's a beautiful picture to have a liquid that you want to drink poured out.

It's a beautiful image. When Paul writes that God's love has been poured, it's like saying, I have made dinner, which is to say, I've made the dinner, now let's eat. God's love has been poured out in the love of Jesus Christ on the cross, ministered to now by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

It has happened and it is happening. Ask God for this. Ask God for this.

Ask not too little. Ask not too timidly. I know that for some of you, you've been locked emotionally for a long time.

I'm not saying ask God necessarily for the emotions of this, although that may be a gift. I am simply saying, ask God for this, for the pouring out of His Holy Spirit, for the reality of His Father love. It may minister to you intellectually, then praise be to God.

It may minister to you in your gut, then praise be to God. You may have on this night or in the days to come a physical sensation of God's Father love around you. Several summers ago, we visited Caribou Falls in northern Minnesota, where my brother and sister-in-law were vacationing, and to wade through the pool at the bottom of this massive waterfall, and then to thrust yourself under the outpouring of water that kept coming down.

Do you know there was nothing in me that was dry after that? Nothing, nothing in me was untouched when that waterfall, that pouring out. It's a beautiful painting as I conclude. The painting is by a German artist, Caspar David Friedrich.

It's called The Winter Landscape, and in this painting of The Winter Landscape, it's a winter scene, and we look at the painting. In the foreground are two crutches that are left, and as we follow the crutches, we see that leads to a little grove of high pine trees, and then a massive wooden cross in the middle, right in the middle of winter, and there at the bottom of that cross is a man who is worshipping. He's seated.

We don't know if there's been a healing and he's walked to the cross, or if he dragged himself to the cross, but we know there's been a suffering, and we know he is now at the foot of the cross. We know he is now enduring. We know that he is now building capacity.

We know that he is now having the love of God the Father through the cross of Jesus Christ poured out on him, and he is just seated there, and after you dwell on that beautiful scene, your eye is drawn to the background, where there is in the background a beautiful cathedral, a picture of the kingdom of God, but there is a bridge between that cross and that cathedral. There's a bridge that you see. You have to look for it, but then you see it, and you realize that the cross of Jesus Christ, which can transform our suffering to a hope that will not put us to shame, that is the bridge to move from the sufferings of this life and the dreariness and often depression and anxiety, the falls that we make again and again and again of this life.

There is a bridge that moves us into the kingdom of God through the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ himself, the power of his cross, and tonight I pray that as we come up to pray at the cross, it'll be like you crossing that bridge up those stairs, and wherever you've been locked down emotionally, you're locked down spiritually, locked down physically through ailments or disease, you're crossing that bridge into the cross of Jesus Christ, into the one place where the healing of humanity can truly happen, that the sufferings that you carry right now, you bring to the cross of the Lord. The suffering servant that by his wounds, Isaiah said, you will be healed. So bring the anxieties, bring the depression, bring the relational slight you can't stop thinking about, bring the email that hurts so badly, bring the betrayal in that scene you can't get out of your head or that person walking out of your life, bring the anger on the face that you saw in somebody that you loved, that you thought would never become that angry at you across the table, when you bring that to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Cross that bridge because suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces absolute confidence that Jesus is close. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. Thanks for listening.

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