

Modern-day Proverbs Sermon Series
This, Too, Shall Pass – Romans 5:1-5
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We're in the middle of our Modern-day Proverbs sermon series, looking at sayings that probably should be in the Bible but aren't. I wasn't sure whether or not to include today's phrase, "This, too, shall pass," because said in the wrong way it can sound a little flippant or dismissive. To say this to someone in the midst of a challenging time can sound callous and ignore the real struggle they are going through. One version of this saying I read said, "This, too, shall pass. It might pass like a kidney stone, but it will pass."

The phrase is based on a Persian adage that has been passed down through time and was made famous in an 1852 poem by Edward Fitzgerald. In the poem, titled "Solomon's Seal," King Solomon aims to create a sentence that will always be true, whether times are good or bad. He comes up with the phrase, "This too, will pass away." That can be comforting when your sports team loses, but not so comforting if you've just been diagnosed with cancer. Yes, this might pass away, but so might I. Does this statement have any value?

I believe it does, because what it points to is the important role of hope in a life of faith. For one of my first classes in seminary, I was asked to write a paper about why I had faith. That's the moment I knew I was going to fail seminary. How do you answer that? Do you have faith in order to get into Heaven? Do you have faith because you believe it makes you a better person? I said the reason I have faith is because it gives me hope, and I would rather live with hope in something and Someone bigger than me than to live as if this world is all there is.

Hope can be hard to come by these days. There are plenty of reasons in this world to be hopeless. That might seem a strange thing for a pastor to say. Doesn't faith automatically generate hope? Not necessarily. I think having faith means living with the tension of the promises of God and the world's hopelessness. Sometimes I lean one way, and sometimes I lean the other. When I'm leaning toward hopelessness, which seems to be happening more often these days, I remember what poet Emily Dickinson wrote: "Hope is the thing with feathers/that perches in the soul/and sings a tune without the words/and never stops at all."

Paul also has something to say about hope. He's writing to the Christians in Rome, who are undergoing intense persecution at the hands of both the Romans and the Jews. Christians had to meet in catacombs and under overturned boats so they wouldn't be found out. They were under constant pressure to renounce their faith. And then there was the whole "getting eaten by lions" business, which was not much of an evangelistic tool.

So, Paul is writing to encourage the Roman Christians to keep the faith in the midst of their persecution. He spends the first four chapters laying out his theory that there's nothing we can do to earn God's grace. We are justified with God by our faith alone. It's the faith side of the "faith vs. works" argument. Paul is making the point that we are not justified with God by following the law and doing all the right things, but by the faith that underlies our actions.

Chapter 5 marks a shift in Paul's direction to addressing the "so what" question. So what if we are justified through faith instead of works? What does that mean in our daily lives? Paul says because of our good standing with God, Christians don't have to be afraid, even if we are suffering. This, too, shall pass. Paul makes that point at the beginning of chapter 5, when he says because we are at peace with God, we have every right to boast.

That might seem like an odd declaration, but then Paul adds a twist. We have every right to boast, even in our suffering. Huh? When I'm suffering, the last thing I want to do is boast about it. "Look at me, I have MS!" Just the opposite! I want to dwell in it, to wallow in it, I want people to put their arms around me and comfort me and tell me everything's going to be OK and feed me barbecue. I want God to intervene and take away the source of suffering and, if it's a person, make them suffer the same way I do. When I'm suffering, there are a lot of things I want to do, but the last thing I want to do is boast about it. Why would Paul say that?

Remember, Paul is writing to a group of Christians who are suffering daily for their faith and are close to giving up and just staying home Sunday to read the paper. But Paul says, having God's peace within us gives suffering a transformative property. Suffering is not the end of our journey. The Greek word he uses for "suffer" can also be used for "pressure," like the pressure used to squeeze grapes to make wine. It's pressure with purpose, suffering with a greater goal. Paul says through suffering, we develop endurance. The word "endurance" is from the French word which means "to harden." To endure is to carry on through hardships, to persevere despite obstacles. Other translations say that suffering produces "fortitude," which means to have an attitude like a fort. As we call on God's peace to help us endure our suffering, we are made strong, we are hardened against despair and surrender. But endurance is not the end.

This experience produces in us character, or what The Message calls "the tempered steel of virtue." Our perseverance builds in us brick-by-brick a maturity that cannot be swayed. Character is about consistency and respect and authenticity. The Greek word here is the same word used to describe metal that has been refined through fire. We are not born with this type of character. It is forged through suffering and endurance. But character is not the end.

No, Paul says the point of suffering is that ultimately it produces in us hope. This is not pie-in-the-sky hope. This is not genie-in-the-lamp hope. This is not merely "wishful thinking." This is hope that emerges through hardships because we know if we can make it through that then we can make it through anything. This is the hope that looks life in the eye and says, "I'm still standing because God is standing with me." This is hope born from the peace we have with God, because we know that if God is for us, it doesn't matter who's against us. As Winston Churchill said, "When you're going through Hell, keep going." We keep going because we know God will see us through. God will make a way. This, too, shall pass.

This hope that we find through suffering is often ragged and threadbare, like the Elmo stuffed doll my daughter Molly used to sleep with when she was a toddler. She had Elmo since she was an infant, and Elmo saw her through countless stormy nights and bad dreams and ear infections. He had been washed, dried, trampled, lost, cried on, stuck under a bed, and moved to Kentucky. He was in pretty bad shape. But every night, before Molly could go to sleep, she had to have Elmo. So, it is with hope. We put it through the ringer, wear it out from use, and it is still there because God is still there. Hope is a thing with feathers. Hope does not disappoint.

I cannot preach about hope without referencing one of my favorite movies of all time, "The Shawshank Redemption." In the movie, Andy and Red form a strong friendship while in prison, and Andy promises Red that if they ever get out, they'll move to Zihuatenejo, Mexico, and live on the beach. At the end of the movie, after Andy escapes from prison, Red finally gets released after decades of incarceration. Red has seen more than his share of suffering, but even after freed from prison, he still struggles to have hope.

He goes to a particular spot Andy told him about and finds \$1000 and a note that reads, "Dear Red. If you're reading this, you've gotten out. And if you've come this far, maybe you're willing to come a little further. You remember the name of the town, don't you? I could use a

good man to help me get my project on wheels. I'll keep an eye out for you and the chessboard ready. Remember, Red. Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well. Your friend. Andy." Suffering produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope, and hope, which is such a good thing, does not disappoint.

"This, too, shall pass" can be a flippant dismissal, or it can be a reminder that, whatever we're going through, God is going through it with us. We are not alone as we suffer, because God is with us, working through the suffering to help us persevere, to help us build character, to help us have hope. We're not born with hope. It grows within us as we endure difficult circumstances and come out the other side. We may be a little battered, a little bruised, a little less OK than when we started. But God never promised us everything would be OK. Instead, God promised to be with us until our suffering passes.

You've been through it. I don't know what "it" is, but you have. For many of you, I've seen it first-hand. It was hard, wasn't it? It hurt so much, it felt like you weren't going to make it, you would have given anything to stop the pain. You didn't know what was waiting for you on the other side. At some point, you probably wanted to give up. But guess what? You're here. God saw you through it, and in the midst of the journey, God was at work within you, strengthening and fortifying you. As Leonard Sweet writes, "A boat-full of suffering can either be a casket or a cradle." Life may not be like what it was before it happened, but you're here. It passed.

There's so much I don't know about faith. That might get me fired, because y'all are paying me to know those things. I don't know them; that's what makes it faith. But I have hope, and hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I know things are hard. I know it's scary. I know the future is unknown. So, we have two choices. We can give up, or we can keep going, trusting that God is at work within us and around us. Every time you want to give up, give in, throw up your hands, remember...suffering produces endurance...and endurance produces character...and character produces hope. And hope, that thing with feathers, that best of things, does not disappoint.