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Hold onto the Hope!
Romans 5:1-8

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.
3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,
4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,
5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.
6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.
8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

When I hear this wonderful passage,
I just keep hearing, over and over, '***hold onto the hope!***'

These words come right after Paul describes God's ***grace***.
How our salvation is a gift from God,
not something we have earned.
And how that grace has brought us ***peace***.
And given us a certain ***perspective about suffering***.
A perspective that comes from the ***cross of Christ***.
Because of Jesus, we can find hope—even in our suffering!

When Paul says we should boast, do you know what that word really means?
it means ***rejoice***.
Why would we ***rejoice*** in our sufferings?

Paul says, "We ***rejoice*** in our suffering
because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.....

Now, that can sound kind of like one of those irritating ***slogan posters*** on the wall of a gym,
You know--No pain, no gain.
But what if this is ***not a prescription*** for our lives?
Something we're supposed to just go out and do...
What if this is a ***description*** of life with Jesus Christ?

We do after all, have a Savior who **died on a cross** to redeem our lives and all creation....so maybe suffering can have meaning.

And hope.

What if we are supposed to **hold onto that hope?**

What if God can bring goodness from suffering?

Like more **endurance**, stronger **character**, and **hope?**

What if Paul is basically saying—**hold onto to the hope.**

Even in the middle of pain.

I believe this is such a powerful message—

because all of us face pain in this life,

the question is **how do we find some meaning** in it?

What if it's a **choice**—of where we place our **focus?**

Will we just focus just on the **pain?**

Or look for the **hope?**

And what if we don't have to force ourselves to find hope?

What if it's something that we **allow God to show us?**

By **surrendering** our situation to God?

What if that surrender helps to get us beyond avoidance, and denial, and self-pity, and right on through the storms of life?

Pastor Linda Thomas puts it this way, “...*the suffering of life helps us grow stronger and build our character and patience..... but we can do this only if we have an abiding sense of the **reality of God** ...then a marvelous thing happens: ... Even in a storm we know all is well, because we are convinced of the **utter love** of God.” (Linda Thomas, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, pg. 42).*

What if the **love of God**—revealed in the **cross** of Christ—
is the **very thing that brings us hope?**

Bert and John Jacobs, the brothers who cofounded the \$100 million T-shirt company called, “Life is Good”, grew up the youngest of six children in a lower middle-class family in Boston. When the brothers were in elementary school, their parents were in a near-death car accident. Their mom had just a few broken bones, but their father lost the use of his right hand. The stress and frustration caused him to develop quite a temper. He yelled a lot. But their mom, Joan, still believed life was *good*. So, every night as the family sat around the dinner table, she would ask her six kids to tell her something good that happened that day. Those words changed everything.

Their mom taught them that being happy isn't dependent on your circumstances. “*She showed us that optimism is a courageous choice you can make every day, especially in the face of adversity.*”

Natalie Walters, "[Brothers who cofounded a \\$100 million company say this question their mom asked every night at dinner is what inspired their business.](#)" Business Insider (12-17-15)

These brothers were able to see the goodness of life,
all because of their *loving mother*—
her hope gave them hope!
how much more can we find hope, from our *Savior*?

As a Pastor, I am humbled and honored to hear *people's stories*,
their suffering, and how they've dealt with it.

I find that it can go *one of two ways*:
either people become very *hard and cynical* after suffering,
or they gain new empathy, and compassion,
and just as Paul says here in Romans,
they gain *more endurance, greater character, and real hope!*

I *don't believe* that
going through a trial *automatically* brings about character and hope,
but I *do believe* that you don't find real character and hope
without walking through the pain of life!

I wonder whether we can really learn, and grow, and be people of hope without suffering?
Not that pain is good, just that it can *serve a purpose*.
It can *strengthen us, deepen us, make us more faithful*.
Pain is inevitable, the question is what we do with it!

I smiled when I read how author *Brene Brown* came back to church after many years away.
She remembers thinking that church should act like a pain reliever, like an epidural in
labor. Instead she discovered that church, and faith "*was more like a midwife who just stood
next to me and said, "Push! It's supposed to hurt."*
["Brené Brown on Church as Midwife."](#) In the Meantime (4-11-14)

Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, once spoke about a Jewish
phenomena that applies to Christians as well. "*When it was hard to be a Jew*," Sacks wrote,
"people *stayed* Jewish. When it was *easy* to be a Jew, people *stopped* being Jewish.
Globally, this is the major Jewish problem of our time." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Future Tense: Jews,
Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-first Century (Schocken Books, 2009), page 51

Isn't this a problem for us too?
We *want to avoid* pain, but we can't.
The question is whether in the pain, we *can hold onto the hope!*

Haven't you noticed that if you make a *snap judgment* about someone,
whose life seems rather perfect and easy,
you usually discover a hidden pain or suffering

underneath all that beauty on the outside?

Because we **usually can't tell** what someone is facing by the way they look on the outside, right?

Unless they are prone to complain,
they may look like they have it all together.
They may say "I'm just fine".
It's up to us to listen for the **real story**.

I believe that through suffering our lives **are changed**,
Our lives are shaped by the trials we face.
And we can, by the grace of God, find **endurance, and character, and hope**—right in the middle of our pain.

When Paul talks about **character** in suffering,
he's referring to a Greek word that means
tried through affliction, or experience.
It comes from the image of a **refiner's fire**.
Think about that.
Being **changed by fire**.
That sounds accurate, doesn't it?

What if we are all being **refined** by God?
This is not to say, that God caused our pain,
but that **God can make use** of it in our lives.
And sometimes that feels like a fire.

Pastor Michael Jenkins reminds us that God can use our suffering for good—
He says, "*God does not reserve our spiritual transformation to the afterworld, but delivers it with the morning paper to our front door. We are washed, cleansed, in water and **fire**, and we **drip the holy stuff** wherever we go. We track it into every room of our lives and out into the world.*" (Michael Jenkins, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3, pg. 42*).

What if we **do drip holy stuff**?
The stuff that God teaches us through the fire?
What if in the fire, we find **hope**?
And as Paul says, "*hope does not disappoint us because the love of God is poured into our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit.*"

But **hope in suffering**?
Does that mean that suffering itself is good?
I **don't think** that's what God is saying.

Remember **Romans 8:28**, "for we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose"
It doesn't say that all things **are** good,

It says that **God can bring good** out of all things.
Even the worst suffering.

God **does not call suffering itself good**.
Instead, **God suffers with us**.
Just like **Christ** on the cross suffering for us.

In **Isaiah 43** God says:

Do not fear....² When you pass through the waters, **I will be with you**; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the Lord your God, ...

Do not fear, **for I am with you**; ...

No, our God does not call suffering good.

Our God is so good, that He walks with us through our suffering!

And our God **can bring good** out of it!

That's why we can **hold onto the hope!**

Dr. Jamie Aten, a cancer survivor and researcher, studies trauma, and how people find meaning in it.

He says that most of us operate from ... a "just" worldview:

if we are good, good things will happen.

So it's hard to find meaning when bad things happen to us.

He recalls going to the dr. for shooting pains in his leg. He never dreamt it was cancer. He was overwhelmed with thoughts like, "*Wasn't I a good person?*" He says, "*I remember that a colleague of mine helping after Superstorm Sandy met a man whose **roof had been blown away**.*"

This man surprised the relief team by saying:

"Sometimes you have to lose the roof," he said, "to see the stars."

*There is a man who knows how to **find meaning** in loss.*

Aten's research team has interviewed and surveyed **disaster survivors** about their views of God. **Two people** who go through the same loss can believe different things. One believes God saved them, while the other believes God is punishing them. They found that the person who doesn't find positive meaning is likely to struggle much more. Aten writes, "**I encourage you: Even in the worst moments, look for the stars.**"

Dr. Jamie Aten, "Spiritual Advice for surviving cancer and other disasters," The Washington Post (8-9-16)

Isn't that about right?

Sometimes you have to lose the roof, to see the stars!

Sometimes **hope only comes through the pain!**

Dan McConchie was in a motorcycle accident. He woke up two weeks later with six broken ribs, a deflated left lung, broken clavicle, broken shoulder blade, and five broken vertebrae—leaving him a paraplegic.

"What I learned," Dan said, "is that this life isn't for our **comfort**. Instead, the purpose of this life is that we become **conformed to the image of Christ**. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen when everything is unicorns and rainbows.

It instead happens when life is tough,

when we are **forced to rely upon God** through prayer just to make it through the day. That is when he is most at work in our lives molding us into who he designed us to be."

"My prayers are different today than they were eight years ago. Back then, I looked at God like Santa Claus. I asked him to send nice things my way. Now, I have one...prayer: 'Lord, may I be able to say at the end of today that I was **faithful**.'" Dan McConchie, "Prayer and Faith in the Midst of Personal Tragedy," Washington Times (3-22-16)

What if when we **stop expecting God to be Santa**,
or a genie in a bottle granting us good wishes...
what if **that's when we really learn to hold onto hope?**

I have always been inspired by the story of Jerry Sittser.

After a **drunk driver** smashed into his minivan, Sittser and three of his children survived, but Sittser's wife, four-year-old child, and mother died in the crash. Over the years Sittser has offered some profound reflections about loss, grief, and suffering. In his book *A Grace Revealed*, Sittser shares the following story about his son David.

After the accident, [David] was the least likely to talk about it; but when he chose to, he usually had something significant to say or ask.

I had to be ready to respond to him when he sent cues indicating he was ready to talk. Our best conversations happened in the car.

One particular conversation has stayed fresh in my memory. David was eight at the time; we were driving to a soccer match some distance from our home. Typical for these occasions, David was quiet. ...

"**Do you think Mom sees us right now?**" he suddenly asked.

I paused to ponder. "I don't know, David. I think maybe she does see us. Why do you ask?"

"I don't see how she could, Dad. I thought Heaven was full of happiness. **How could she bear to see us so sad?**"

Could Lynda witness our pain in Heaven? How could that be possible? How could she bear it?

"I think she does see us," I finally said. "But she sees the **whole story**, including how it all turns out, which is beautiful to her. It's going to be a **good story**, David."

Sittser adds: I would not hazard to estimate the number of times I have been asked, "How does Christianity **address the problem** of suffering?" ...

The Christian answer to suffering is **Christ's** suffering and Christ's resurrection ...

God knows **pain** within himself; God knows **joy** within himself.

He knows the **whole story** as one, including how it all **turns out**,

which is glorious indeed. Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Revealed* (Zondervan, 2012), pp. 138-139

Talk about **holding onto hope!**

We have that **same hope**—that our Savior Jesus knows our pain,
 And He knows how it's all going to turn out!
 That's **why we can hold onto hope!**

You know, there are people **right in this church**,
 who know all about holding onto hope.
 We have folks who have battled **cancer** and kept on going day after day.
 We have people who have **lost children**, and they are some of the saints who reach out to
 the kids and families of this church.
 We have people who **struggle with pain and illness** day after day after day, and still they
 come with a smile on their face and hope in their hearts.
 We have people who are **caregivers**, whose spouses can't remember, whose parents are
 aging, whose loved ones are making their lives more difficult, and still they reach out to
 others.
 So many of us here, are **holding onto hope!**

It seems that often out of suffering **God does bring forth hope**,
And that hope brings inspiration and encouragement for countless others.
 The **saints** here have **inspired** others to keep going and have hope—
 Because if they can do it, so can I!

Just like we can see **stars** on the darkest nights,
 it is possible to find hope even amidst suffering....
 Because of God's amazing grace, and **God's power** to bring forth light even in the darkness.

And you know what?
 That's our **Good News of the gospel** today.
 God **does bring hope**—right in our suffering.
 Right to our front door. We can count on it.

Look at that **cross** on the wall.
 Have you ever heard of more **suffering** than crucifixion?
 And have you ever seen more **hope** than him dying for you and I?

I once heard that **all of God's love is in the form of a cross**.
 God's love is revealed in suffering.
And Hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts....

May we all **hold onto the hope**.
 Amen.