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Heart Check
Romans 5:1-5

Rev. Jared Miller

Jon Foreman is, for many in my age group the voice that we wished we had. Equal parts poet and prophet, Jon has fronted the band Switchfoot for more than a decade. When asked how he gets up on stage and sings the same songs night after night, for weeks and months at a time, this is how he responded: Tonight we will sing our songs in an old theater in Fresno. And before we play a note, you'll find me praying for strength. Strength to live out a life of love and service. Strength to sing these songs of hope. Because our world is splintered with fear and hatred and pain. Because one individual does not define a nation, we the people do. Because the cynic is just a dreamer with a broken heart. Because love tells a better story than my fears do. Because hope deserves an anthem."

More than a century earlier, Emily Dickinson called Hope "the thing with feathers"

When we look at our story as it has unfolded behind us, it seems like Hope has been elusive for a long time.

Even in this morning's reading, Paul lights a torch for hope as that which does not disappoint. And it's impact is bigger than those words might suggest. Hope, he says, is so essential in the life of the Christian that it is connected intrinsically to our salvation. "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith." Hope is the DNA of discipleship. A Christian who does not live in hope is not a Christian, and it is only the Christian who can live in hope.

Because hope is not something that we do. Hope is not wishful thinking, or idealistic dreaming. Hope is not pie-in-the-sky or positive living. Hope is not manifested and cannot be faked. Hope is something that is done within us where we are made passive participants. It is the Spirit of God constantly and consistently making us holy; what theologians call Sanctification, and what we reflect on in this season of our church's life as Discipleship.

So why is this important?

I think there are two reasons: First, this is important because we need to be a people of hope today more than ever. Uncertainty, insecurity, and doubt are all around us. Who are we, where are we going, and when will we get there are the questions of this season of our life as a church. And into that anxiety, the spirit of God calls the church to do one thing and one thing only: Hope. Hope. Let the Spirit of God work in your mind and heart and find rest in God.

And Second, because if hope is not something that we do, then we need to understand how we become a people of hope. The simple truth is that the church cannot be the instrument of hope that it needs to be in difficult times if the people who make up the church are not people of hope themselves. And if that makes you want to throw up your hands and say, I thought you just told me that hope isn't something we do, then stay with me, because what Paul lays out for us here in Romans is a roadmap that takes us to hope.

The Journey that Paul lays out for us hits three markers on the way to hope. The Reality of suffering, the task of endurance, and the cultivation of character.

Taken together, these four stepping stones create the life cycle of the Hopeful Christian. And just like real life where you don't get a say in where or when you're born, or who your parents are going to be, neither do you get a say in where the life of the disciple begins. Because the New Testament knows no world where suffering is not the expectation, no world where life is all smooth sailing, and no world where Christians are exempted from life's hardest times. The reality the New Testament draws back the curtain on is the reality that our culture has worked really hard to cover up: No one is immune to pain, suffering, loss or doubt. There is not a person in this room who could not have their whole world turned upside down by one phone call. We are born into a world that is broken, and so brokenness is part of the package.

Suffering is not an option.

What is an option is how you respond.

Philosopher Peter Kreeft argues that suffering actually draws us deeper into discipleship because that suffering pairs us with the God who knows our pain and our sorrow. Suffering, he argues, is not an answer at all but the *answerer*. The answer is not a bunch of words, but is the

word. It's not a tightly woven philosophical argument. It is a person – the person. The answer to suffering cannot be an abstract idea because suffering is not an abstract issue; it's a personal issue. Therefore, it requires a personal response. The answer must be someone, not something because the issue of suffering always comes back to this: God, where are you? And his response is right here. That's why Paul can write so confidently that suffering produces endurance. The hard times draw us closer to the God who is. When we take shortcuts out of hard times or try and pretend like they don't exist things seldom get better because we are literally running from God. Paul doesn't say rejoice through your suffering. He says rejoice in it. Like the exiles in Babylon, plant gardens and build your homes here. Put down roots in the hard places, because suffering produces endurance. No one wakes up and says, I'm going to run a marathon today.

You start by jogging around the block, then run a mile, 3 miles, five miles, building slowly and steadily on a foundation. Your legs will hurt, your lugs will burn, but stick to it for long enough and you will cross the finish line. Suffering produces endurance.

Bob Reccord tells the following story of his recovery from Spinal surgery

The pain was so excruciating that the hospital staff couldn't do an MRI until I was significantly sedated. The MRI showed significant damage at three major points in the cervical area. Because of the swelling of injured nerve bundles, the only way I could relieve the pain was to use a strong, prescribed narcotic and to lie on bags of ice. Sleep, what little there was, came only by sitting in a reclining chair.

Approximately forty-eight hours from the onset of the injury, doctors estimated that I had lost

about 80 percent of the strength in my left arm. Three fingers on my left hand totally lost feeling. The slightest movements would send pain waves hurtling down my left side and shoulder. I had to step away completely from my work (which I love) and wear a neck brace twenty-four hours a day for five weeks.

About halfway through that experience, I was sitting on the screened-in porch behind our home. The day was cold and blustery, but I needed a change of scenery. Suddenly a bird landed on the railing and began to sing. On that cold, rainy day, I couldn't believe any creature had a reason to sing. I wanted to shoot that bird! But he continued to warble, and I had no choice but to listen.

The next day I was on the porch again, but this time it was bright, sunny, and warm. I was tempted to feel sorry for myself when suddenly the bird (at least it looked like the same one) returned. And he was singing again! Where was that shotgun?

Then it hit me: the bird sang in the cold rain as well as the sunny warmth. His song was not altered by outward circumstances, but it was held constant by an internal condition. It was as though God quietly said to me, "You've got the same choice, Bob. You will either let external circumstances mold your attitude, or your attitude will rise above the external circumstances. You choose!"

You don't get a choice in whether or not there will be hard times. What you do get a choice in is how you respond to those times?

Suffering produces endurance, says Paul. And endurance produces character.

At the 1993 annual meeting of the American Heart Association in Atlanta, three hundred thousand doctors, nurses, and researchers came together to discuss, among other things, the importance a low-fat diet plays in keeping our hearts healthy. Yet during mealtimes, they consumed fat-filled fast food, such as bacon cheeseburgers and fries, at about the same rate as people from other conventions. When one cardiologist was asked whether or not his partaking in high-fat meals set a bad example, he replied, "Not me; I took my name tag off."

Character is who you are when no one is looking. And that's the real test.

It's not about how much we can put on a show when we walk through the doors of that sanctuary on Sunday morning, or how well we can convince other people that we are the best version of ourselves we can be. If I stand up here and tell you that I have all the energy in the world, and then go home and fall asleep before my head hits the pillow, which one is the real me? Which version is the real you: the version you work hard to project as soon as you get out of your car in the parking lot, or the version that stares back at you from the other side of the mirror? Because that is the real test of endurance: how much does who you are when no one is looking resemble God? I could stand up here and cite studies and statistics that show we give

less to charity if there is no tax receipt for the gift and we do less if what we do goes unnoticed, but I'm not interested in your mind. I'm interested in your heart, and you're the only one who can do anything about that.

That's why this is a discipleship issue. Because if we are a church that is in the business of cultivating character, hope will naturally flow. Character produces hope. Hope is not wishful thinking, or idealistic dreaming. Hope is not pie-in-the-sky or positive living. Hope is not manifested and cannot be faked. Hope is something that is done within us where we are made passive participants. It is the Spirit of God constantly and consistently making us disciples.

Hope is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul,

And sings the tune without the words,

And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;

And sore must be the storm

That could abash the little bird

That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land,

And on the strangest sea;

Yet, never, in extremity,

It asked a crumb of me.