

“SPRING TRAINING”

Romans 5:1-5

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In Athens, Greece there once lived a little boy named Demosthenes, who stammered so badly that people could barely understand him. He decided to do something to cure himself. So he would put little stones in his mouth and practice speaking with this added impediment. It worked. He grew up to be a great statesman and orator.

There was an English minister who had a son named Horatio. Horatio was a frail child. People in the parish were sure the boy would never survive to adulthood and doubted if such a sickly child would ever amount to much. While he was still very young, Horatio fell in love with the sea. At age 15 he joined the navy. When he was not yet 21, he was given command of a sailing ship. He was sent on a cruise to Central America. There he became ill and had to return to England. But he recovered. In 1793 he was given command of another ship and became a war hero. History knows him as Admiral Lord Nelson.

Julius Caesar was an epileptic. Both Thomas Edison and Ludwig von Beethoven were deaf. But not one of these people let their afflictions stand in their way.

I want to tell you about a little girl named Wilma Rudolph, who was born in the backwoods of Tennessee to very poor parents. She was born prematurely, weighing only 4½ pounds, frail and with a poor prognosis. When she was four years old she had pneumonia and scarlet fever, which left her with a paralyzed and useless left leg, on which she had to wear a steel brace. But she was fortunate in having a good mother, a mother who told little Wilma, who was a very bright girl, that despite the brace and the useless leg, she could make something of her life. Wilma’s mother told her that more than anything else she needed faith, persistence and courage, and a never-give-up spirit.

So, at age nine, Wilma did away with the brace and took a step her doctor had told her she could never take. She was not willing to accept the verdict that she could never walk normally. In four years time she developed a rhythmic stride which was a wonder, medically. Then she got the notion, the incredible notion that she would like to be the world’s greatest woman runner. Everyone said, “What do you mean, be a runner with a leg like that?” But remember, we are talking about mountain moving faith. So it was that when she was 13 and in high school, she entered a race.

She came in last --- way, way back. But, undeterred from her goal, she entered every race they had and in every race she came in last! People begged her, in the name of pity, to quit trying. They told her it was no use. But she kept on, and one day crossed the finish line first! She won a race. And from that time on, she won every race she entered.

It came time for college, and she went to the University of Tennessee where she met a coach named Ed Temple. He saw her indomitable spirit, and that she had great natural talent. With his training, she did so well that she went to the Olympic Games! There she was pitted against the greatest woman runner of those times, a German girl named Yetta Hynie. Nobody had ever beaten Yetta Hynie, but in the 100 meter, Wilma beat her! Again in the 200 meter, she won. Now she had two gold medals. Then it came to the 400 meter relay. The first two stages went beautifully. In the last stage, the two runners were Wilma against Yetta. When the baton was handed to Wilma, in her excitement, she dropped it. Looking up saw Yetta taking off down the track. It was impossible that anyone could catch this sleek and nimble girl, but Wilma did! Now she had three gold medals. How did she do it? She had faith. She never gave up, and she never gave in.

If we look at life honestly, we see that living involves dealing with pressures and hardships, troubles and setbacks. Our problems may not be the obvious ones that Wilma Rudolph experienced, but each of us has our share of handicaps --- be they physical, mental or emotional. The question, it seems to me, is not whether we have problems. The question is, how will we deal with our problems? As we face pressure at work or school, unanticipated reverses in business, problems in our family life, the sickness and suffering of those we love, what will our attitude be? Will we turn our backs on God? Will we say, "What did I do to deserve this?" Or we will develop a more mature attitude such as Paul teaches us in the book of Romans, where the apostle exhorts us to ***"rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts."***

Now you may be thinking, "Well, that's easy for him to say! For after all, Paul was a saint, and I'm, well, I'm just an ordinary person." We often think of people who wrote the Bible as being so otherworldly that they didn't have to go through the hassles that we have to put up with. But wait a minute. Paul wasn't a saint because he got through life so easily. He was a saint because he suffered a great deal and didn't lose his faith in the process. In II Corinthians 11, Paul describes what he has been through: *"Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches."* (vs. 25-28) So we see that Paul was not a cloistered monk who wrote from an ivory tower and never rubbed shoulders with the rest of the world. Rather, here was a man who suffered misfortune, torture, and great psychological conflict in his attempts to spread the Gospel of Christ. Here was a man who knew what he was talking about.

Notice that the sufferings that Paul describes are not just the result of what life deals us: a difficult family situation, a frustration of personal fulfillment, a crushing debt. Paul has in view a suffering that comes our way because of our faith. All of us know ordinary suffering. That alone is enough to overwhelm us at times. But Paul is encouraging us to take on suffering, what I want to call "cross suffering," suffering that we endure because of our commitment to Jesus Christ.

Some of you know will know what I mean when I say "Cross training." Cross training is athletic activity in one area that strengthens our bodies for heightened performance in another area. A runner may commit himself to swimming, or a skier to lifting weights. Cross suffering

strengthens our character, according to Paul. Like the athlete who cross trains, cross suffering strengthens our spiritual lives.

They say, “No pain, no gain,” in the realm of athletics. When Paul talks about “suffering producing endurance,” it sounds like he has been reading an athletic training manual, doesn’t it? Athletes understand that there is a certain amount of pain required in order to achieve a higher level of performance.

Compare the “no pain, no gain” slogan to our life of faith. A speaker at one of the conferences I attended recently said that for many of us, church membership is like a fitness club membership. (If I make anyone uncomfortable, it is purely unintentional!) He said we feel that it is important enough in our lives to join (the fitness center and the church). We have good intentions. The first week in January the health clubs are full of people who have resolved to start the new year right. We don’t go as often as we should (to the fitness center or to church). As a pastor I hear these confessions all the time. And we don’t want to work hard enough to get in shape or to stay in shape. Ouch! That certainly describes me! I can make ten excuses why I didn’t get to the gym to work out. They’re good excuses, too. I also know that if I would eat less and exercise more, I would lose the weight that has made me a bigger man than I used to be. But do I really want to get in shape badly enough to do what it takes to achieve my goal? How much suffering am I willing to endure, you see? God knows, I have quite a bit on my plate right now, just with what life has handed me. Am I willing to do some cross training, some cross suffering for the sake of the Gospel?

Well, if I say “yes,” God promises to open up a whole new world to me. When we follow the way of the cross, we discover that we can live a victorious life, even in the midst of our suffering, for God has already accomplished the victory through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Then Paul talks about the peace that comes as the result of following Jesus. For Paul, making our peace with God is not something that is easily achieved. There is a certain level of anxiety and uncertainty built into every human being. When people tell me that they are never sad or lonely or anxious or afraid because they are Christians, I always raise an eyebrow. There is definitely a peace that comes from knowing Christ and seeking to follow him. But that peace does not come easily, nor is it always present in our lives. With “training,” if you will, we can come to see more and more God’s hand at work in our lives. With “training” we can experience more and more God’s peace in our hearts. Getting in shape is not easy. We can’t go to the gym twice a year and stay in shape. Nor can we come to church only on Christmas and Easter and think that we will develop a mature spiritual life.

Paul tells us that hope does not disappoint us. We may raise an eyebrow about that. Sometimes our hope is very shallow. We may hope we will win the lottery, rather than to be realistic about the future. We may hope we can live without God and the church and still have a happy home and peace of mind. We may hope that we can live wildly and irresponsibly, and not have to pay the consequences. But if we ignore the laws which govern the universe, we will eventually find our hopes shattered. False hope --- failing to come to terms with life, eventually leads to embarrassment and shame. The hope Paul describes is the hope of those who face life squarely and realistically. That kind of hope does not disappoint us. That hope leads, not to despair, but to a deeper and more solid faith.

Recently I read about a man who had been having health problems and was eventually diagnosed with cancer. “When I first learned that I had cancer,” he said, “I was quite naturally upset. But then I sat down all by myself and spoke to the Lord. It was just Him and me. I

reviewed my life and how lucky I had been. Then I was operated on. The doctors feel that my operation was successful and I'll be O.K. But whatever happens is in the hands of the Lord. One thing," he said in an interview, "Tell people that it's not over just because they learn they have cancer. You've got to fight back. And you've got to trust in the Lord. If you have faith, you can face anything."

Now I could share with you many illustrations from the life and ministry of this congregation: times when life has dealt us setbacks and blows; times when circumstances have been less than ideal. I have seen many of you respond to tragic circumstances, not with despair, but with courage and hope. God has been able to work, even in the midst of tragedy and pain.

So we rejoice, not that there is suffering, never that. But we rejoice with the Apostle Paul in the fact that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because we have experienced God's love in our hearts.

Before the season begins, professional baseball teams have several months of spring training to get them in as good of shape as possible for the challenges they will face. God provides resources to each of us through our faith in order to help us cope with the seasons of life. God offers "cross training" in order to get us in better shape for what is to come. More than that, when the hard places of life come our way, when we experience "cross suffering," God promises to be with us and to see us through. With God, we can overcome life's handicaps. With God, we can endure the tragedies, sorrows, and pressures that come our way. With God, we can have hope, which is not wishful thinking, but a steady confidence that the God who has been with us thus far along the road of life will bring our venture with him to a successful completion.

All we need is to do what the Apostle Paul is telling us: open our lives wider and wider to the Holy Spirit and let God pour his love into our hearts. That's what I need to do. What about you? It's not too late to begin spring training. No pain, no gain!

Prayer: Help us not only to accept the suffering that comes to us as part of life, but also the "cross suffering" that comes from following your Son. In his name we pray. Amen.