



## In Liberating Strife

*"...we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."*

Romans 5:3-4

This weekend many of us will, with appropriate social distancing, join family and friends to indulge in barbeque and fireworks as we celebrate the 4th of July and our nation's 244th birthday.

Our festivities this year will be a little more somber than usual because the last few months have been dominated by a global pandemic, a national state of emergency, an increase in racial tension, protests in major cities, looting, violence, and a dreadful sadness at the loss of life.

As a nation, we are living in challenging days. At times we have moved from uncertainty to deep concern and fear about our future.

This weekend as we give thanks to God for His faithfulness to us as individuals, as families, and as a nation, it is worth asking how we prayerfully, carefully, and constructively respond to the significant challenges that lie before us.

Amidst our somewhat muted celebrations this year, may we keep one eye on the past while also looking to the future. John Adams—statesman, attorney, diplomat, writer, founding father, Vice President under George Washington, and President from 1797 to 1801—wrote to his wife Abigail the day after the Continental Congress voted for independence in 1776: "The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epoch, in the History of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more."

As we celebrate and give thanks to God for His faithfulness to us, it is worth exploring a compelling passage of Scripture that will help us respond to the challenges in our own lives and the challenges we face as a nation.

**"Suffering produces perseverance..."**  
(Romans 5:3-4)

We turn to the New Testament book of Romans, considered by many to be the premiere New Testament book for Christian truth and doctrine—Paul's *magnum opus*. It could well be argued that what the Constitution is to our United States, Romans is to the Christian life. Anyone wishing to grow deeply in their understanding of the truth of the gospel must become familiar with Romans and anchor their minds in its pages.

As you begin to explore Paul's words in Romans 5:3-5, you may find yourself surprised to read, *We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.* At first glance, rejoicing in suffering may strike you as not so much a paradox as an absurdity. We are tempted to ask: How can we possibly rejoice in suffering?

It is helpful to understand that Paul is not suggesting that we simply grin and bear suffering in some mindless mirth. Paul is instead encouraging his readers to look beyond their immediate circumstances. After writing at great length in the earlier chapters of Romans about justification, Paul now moves his readers on to understanding sanctification, the process by which God uses circumstances and difficulties to make us more Christ-like.

When we face significant and daunting challenges, we often find ourselves focusing on the difficulties, yet God is focused on you. He is looking at you. He is looking for growth and maturity in grace. Paul is taking his readers to a deeper level, teaching them a profound spiritual truth: *suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope.*

## Beginning... again

In Jamestown, Virginia, during the winter of 1609-1610, there were about 500 residents at the beginning of the winter season, yet by the following spring only 60 people remained. By late 1609, the residents of Jamestown had gone through a relatively dry season, and a lack of access to fresh water crippled their ability to grow food and thus survive.

On June 7, 1610, the survivors abandoned the colony and sailed toward Chesapeake Bay. During this journey, they met a supply convoy sailing in their direction with new supplies, fresh water, and a new batch of colonists. Together they returned to Jamestown with renewed hope.

I sometimes wonder if, when they returned, they remembered the words of the apostle Paul: *suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.*

Some moments in our lives, both personal and national, are so painful, so dark, and so agonizingly awful that we are tempted to give up hope. Yet we can never submit and surrender to the parasitic sins and pathology of suspicion and fear, hatred and violence, despondency and despair.

When the residents of Jamestown returned, they were filled with hope and embodied words that would come to define subsequent generations: "we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God... shall not perish from the earth."

Please do not miss understand me. We are not a perfect people—far from it. There are moments when we sin as individuals and as a nation, and we sin badly. We fall and fall badly, yet, by the enabling grace of God, we get back up. We learn, we grow and reform, and we mature in the process.

As we celebrate this holiday weekend, we do so by responding prayerfully and carefully to the challenges we face, determined to remember that *suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.*