

“Walking the Way of Faith: Stay the Course, Regardless of Suffering”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: November 24, 2024



In our New Testament reading this morning, James talks about suffering.

My friends, we have to acknowledge a hard truth about suffering . . .
No one escapes suffering. No one avoids hardship.
Suffering and hardship are a part of all of our lives.

No human being escapes our broken, sin-shaped world and the suffering that is a part of it.
We will all know disease.
We will all sin and be sinned against.
We will all know loss.
We will all know death.

It is tempting to think that because we follow God and because we are a friend of Jesus, that we will be spared the brokenness of our sin-shaped world.
But if we think that following Jesus is a way out of trouble, then we are mistaken.
Jesus Himself had a life of trouble.

Jesus knew firsthand of suffering . . . from experiencing grief at the death of his father Joseph, to being beaten and hung on a cross.
Having a close relationship with God did not save Jesus from suffering.
Having a close relationship with God will not save us from suffering.
But having a close relationship with God saw Jesus through His suffering.
And having a close relationship with God will see us through suffering as well.

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My friends, we need to acknowledge another hard truth about suffering . . . suffering can separate us from care and can put our faith at risk.

You see, when we suffer, we can isolate and get disconnected from community.
And when we suffer, we are vulnerable to a false argument that causes us to distance ourselves from God.

The false argument goes this way . . . if we are suffering, then God must not really love us.

As one person I know put it — suffering makes us vulnerable to Satan whispering the lie that our suffering is proof that God doesn't care.

But that is a lie . . . the truth is that God loves us deeply . . . faithfully . . . fully.

We see this in the way that God came in the flesh to dwell among us and to lay down His life for us.
God is with us still in this broken, sin-shaped world.

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Jesus models for us the keeping in touch with God through prayer with the help of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' time in the Garden of Gethsemane models for us a way we take our deepest suffering and questions to God.

Research by neurologist Dr. Curt Thompson affirms the healing power of naming the suffering we are experiencing so we can walk through it rather than get stuck..

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus names the suffering and names the path that He does not want to walk, and God meets Him there — even sending angels to care for Jesus. God extends the same care to us when we suffer.

This morning, James reminds us that when we suffer and while we waiting for Jesus to return, it is imperative that we “stay the course.”

To “stay the course” means to stay connected to God and God’s people while we experience the pain.

This fall, I had the privilege of hearing Professor Ellen Davis recount an experience of sitting with God and community in grief.¹ Ellen Davis is an Old Testament professor at Duke Divinity School.

Dr. Davis shared with our group that her beloved husband had died the year before.

As an Old Testament scholar, she has many Jewish friends, and some of these friends invited her to come to their synagogue each week and pray a prayer of mourning called the Mourner’s Kaddish.

The Mourner’s Kaddish is a prayer that is millennia old. It is similar in form to Psalm 145 — a prayer that Jesus Himself would have recited.

Interestingly, “the prayer never mentions death or dying, but instead proclaims the greatness of God. By reciting it, mourners show that even as their faith is being tested by their loss, they are affirming God’s greatness.”²

¹ Doxology Gathering, September, 2024.

² <https://sharonmemorial.com/customs-and-traditions/the-mourners-kaddish/>

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In her lecture, Dr. Davis shared how powerful it was — week in and week out through her devastating grief — to sit in community and to affirm that God’s name should be praised. There were weeks when she was too numb to fully own the prayer and yet the prayer owned her and offered her resilience in the face of suffering.

The Mourner’s Kaddish is said each week for 11 months. Over that time Dr. Davis came to see this prayer not only as an act of resilience — but even as an act of resistance.

During the 11 months, Dr. Davis thought about all of the Jewish people over the centuries who have offered this prayer in the face of grief and suffering. In the middle of the Spanish Inquisition, when Jews were persecuted, the Mourner’s Kaddish was being prayed. Throughout the holocaust, when Jews were being murdered, the Lord’s name was being praised. Dr. Davis realized that outsiders to the prayer might think that the Mourner’s Prayer is insignificant against the might of violence and injustice, pain and grief — and yet to her, the prayer developed in her a deeper resilience in the face of grief and a deeper resistance to those who commit violence, oppression, and injustice. Those who continued to say the prayer on the face of the world’s brokenness were resisting. They stood against the lie that God doesn’t care.

Dr. Davis came to see that there is a kind of power in the ability to praise God in all circumstances, to believe in God in the midst of pain, to affirm God’s loving care, and to align ourselves with the God of the Universe.

This past week I attended a Bible Study on the fourth chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. This is the chapter where Paul tells us to “rejoice in the Lord always”³ in all circumstances. This, of course, feels impossible, but Paul tells us how that is even possible.

Paul explains that God offers us “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding — a peace that guards our hearts and our thoughts in Christ Jesus.”⁴

My friends, did you hear it? God’s peace has the ability to guard us.

This is no passive peace — this is a peace that is rugged and active.

This is a peace that offers protection and partnership and a peace that makes room resilience, and even resistance.

May God’s great name be praised throughout all eternity!⁵ Amen.

³ Philippians 4:4

⁴ Philippians 4:7

⁵ From The Mourner’s Kaddish