

It has been suggested that children with the most athletic talent do not always turn out to be professional athletes, even with the physical gifts they possess. One possible reason for this is that when they were young everything flowed to them. They didn't have to work very hard. But when they get to the higher levels of competition, they find out that everything is faster; more difficult, it's harder just to score. Since they were never really challenged in their youth, they tend to give up rather than keep pushing. They didn't know how to dig their heels in and develop their skills more. They didn't know how to persevere.

Now, hold that thought.

Back in my high school days, I had art class with a teacher who would often tell my class, “Art is a process, not a product.” I'll be candid; at first, I didn't really know what she was getting at. But over time, it became a little clearer. What she was expressing to us was that it is easy to get caught up in what the finished product looks like and treat that as the highest good; the most important thing. Especially with high schoolers, you don't want to draw a picture and have it look stupid. You're very concerned about that. But my teacher wanted us to set that worry aside, and engage in the process of trying things, experimenting, making mistakes, using those imperfections to make something new. In that sense, you're never really done with art, even if you finish a piece. I don't know if I totally ‘got it’ in high school, but it makes more sense now.

Of course, I'm not here to reminisce, but this art class memory came back to me as I dealt with today's Epistle reading. In this letter to Roman Church, Paul says that being a Christian is both a process and a product. It's not either/or; it's both/and. What's fascinating is that Paul takes this and flips it around. Being a Christian, he says, is being a product first; a finished product that continues to be shaped by a process. To hang some Biblical terms on this—you and I are products. There is a sense in which we are finished works. Meaning that you and I have been justified by grace through faith in Jesus. That is true of you right now, the whole package. Because Jesus lived perfectly for you and gave His life as a perfect sacrifice for all of us, divine justice is satisfied, and you and I are declared not guilty. Now. Not after a long life of trying to earn it. Now. The verdict is in. Not only are you not guilty; you have the perfect record of Jesus slipped into your file. The payment Jesus made on the cross is credited to your account—the balance reads ‘zero.’ Not later. Now. We are finished products, because Jesus said, “It is finished.” This is the baseline truth for life with God. Paul leads with that very idea here, writing, “...since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” We have been justified. Past tense. Done. We have peace. Present tense. Now.

And because that is true, Christians can submit to a process. This is not a self-salvation process. This is not a process of redeeming ourselves. Remember, the verdict has been handed down and read. “Not guilty.” That's you! The process is a process of growth, of changing, of becoming something that you would not otherwise be. Remember I told you to ‘hold that thought’ about the young athletes? Their talent only got them so far, until adversity hit. For the first time, they struggled, and it threw them for a loop, because they had not practiced

perseverance. Paul says in this passage, there is a process God leads us through; a process that builds something into us, by which we can handle adversity and not crumble when the storms of life hit.

What is that process? Paul makes an amazing claim about it. Some might say it's an outrageous claim. He says that the thing that kick-starts this process is suffering. His claim is that suffering starts a chain reaction that leads to hope. I'm not making this up. Let's look at how he lays it out.

“...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

There it is. Suffering initiates a process by which we grow and become more equipped to deal with life's challenges. How exactly does this work?

To start, it is crucial to remember that Paul is telling us how suffering affects a person who knows he or she is justified by grace, and not works. In that case, suffering kicks off a chain reaction. The first part is: suffering leads to perseverance. What are the qualities of perseverance? Well, determination, or singlemindedness are ways of saying it. Perseverance is the focus caused by suffering. It makes us remember what is lasting. It removes distractions.

The next part is: perseverance leads to character. The great basketball coach John Wooden once defined character as what a person does when no one is watching. What is implied there is a kind of test. Character is the confidence that comes from going through an experience having done the right thing. To stick with basketball for a moment, a team new to the playoffs may play poorly because they've never been in that position before, but a tested team, who have experienced the playoffs in previous seasons, will have fewer jitters, and will perform well because they have been there before. Without the first step, the second step doesn't happen. It's a process. Perseverance narrows the focus on God—character is using that focus on God in order to function. As you do, confidence grows. God proves trustworthy yet again.

The last part: character leads to hope. Hope is expectancy. Hope is “there is a better day coming.” Hope is knowing what God has promised and trusting that it is only a matter of time before every last one of those promises comes true. Do you see the benefits of this? A heart filled with hope in Christ has very little room for worry.

It might sound completely counterintuitive, but I can't tell you how many Christians I've known personally who have told me that they have felt more of God's presence and love during suffering than at any other time in their lives. It's the process that grows us. Suffering sets off a reaction that goes all the way to hope in Christ.

What a surprise—that we can rejoice in our sufferings. The blessings of Jesus justifying you are not diminished by suffering. They are enlarged by it.

