

Where Faith Meets Suffering
Romans 8 (selected verses)
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When guys get together one topic that usually comes up is sports: Cubs, Sox, Bulls, Bears. Sometimes the conversation will turn to our own athletic careers. Many of those discussions will begin to flow under the umbrella of “the older I get, the better I was.” It is in this area of athletics that I confess to you that for twenty years I have been living a lie. Not exaggerating my own exploits, but in conversation if someone were to ask me if I played high school football, I would say no. But I did. And I had one tackle on the statistical report to prove it.

I never wanted to play football, but the summer before my sophomore year, wrestling coach told us that we should go work out with the football team to start getting into shape for wrestling season. So I showed up at the football team’s summer camps and we’d run and work out and then they’d split the group up: the linemen over here and the backs and receivers over here. At that point in time I’d go with the backs and receivers and they’d start running passing patterns and doing drills and I would sit down and get some sun.

One day the coach said to me, “Day! Why don’t you just go stand out there so these guys will have someone to mark up against.” I guess something in the way I stood impressed him because he came up to me after that practice and said, “Day, you ought to go out for football.”

I said, “Coach, I don’t want to go out for football, I’m just here to get in shape for wrestling.”

He said, “Son, you have some skills, you ought to go out for football.”

I said, “Coach, I don’t want to go out for football.”

He said, “I’ll tell you what, you come out for a couple days, give it a try. If you don’t like it, come talk to me and we’ll work something out.”

I went home, talked to my parents about it, and thought ‘alright’. So I went out, and something happened to me when I put those pads on. Suddenly my standing abilities were no longer quiet as impressive. I couldn’t run, I couldn’t see, I couldn’t turn, I couldn’t do anything and I hated it. After a couple days I went up to my coach and I said, “Coach, I’ve been out here a couple days, I don’t like it, I’m here to work something out.”

He said, “Well, we have a rule in this school. If you quit a sport you have to get that coach’s permission before you can play another sport. So if you quit football, I won’t let you wrestle.”

I said, “But coach, I never wanted to play football!”

He said, “Son, it’ll be good for you, it’s a character builder.”

Thus began my career. I was bad. I was fourth string in my particular position, and if there are some other fourth stringers out there that are saying, hey now Patrick that’s not so bad. When you actually do the math, I ended up being around seventh or eighth because when the first three guys got hurt they started moving other people into my position to play in front of me.

My non-football playing friends would be supportive in the way that teenage boys are always supportive of their friends. They would save me a seat up in the stands. The entire game they would yell down to me, “Hey Patrick...you can see much better from up here!”

The last game of the season, no thanks to me we were winning rather handily. In the fourth quarter of the game my football playing friends started assaulting the coach saying, “You’ve got to put Patrick in the game, put him in the game, just put him in the game!” So they put me in. I was playing defense, I was playing cornerback. The other team runs a sweep to my side, all of a sudden I’m facing the running-back and I remembered suddenly everything I had done my best to ignore over the previous three months. I square up against this guy in perfect tackling form and I am just going to lay into him. Except all of a sudden I get hit by a truck, and as this guy with the ball is literally running over me, stepping on my chest, his cleat gets caught in my facemask. He trips and falls to the ground and is now down and the play is dead. My friends are over at the statistician going “you’ve *gotta* give him credit for the tackle!” That was the glorious end to the four months that I spent suffering through high school football.

Now hear me clearly. When I share this story of my suffering I don’t do it in anyway thinking that it compares to the vast majority of suffering that takes place in this world. I share this story because it raises two things for me. One, suffering in this world is inescapable. If it hasn’t found you yet, it will. It is unavoidable in this world. We live in a temporal world; the things here are not permanent. Last week our youth group shared with you and lead in worship describing the construction and the work that took place in Camp Wonderland

on their work trip. I can guarantee you that at some point, the things that we built and the things that we repaired will need to be rebuilt, will need to be repaired again. Nothing is permanent in this world.

The wealthiest person in this room will not be the wealthiest person in this room 100 years from now. The best looking person in this room will not be the best looking person in this room 20 years from now. Nothing is permanent in this world. So if suffering hasn't found you, it will.

The second thing that this story raises for me is that sometimes when we are in the middle of suffering, it becomes all consuming. We are overwhelmed by it. Even in the silly four months that I spent standing on the sidelines of a high school football game, to me that was all that was happening in my world. Suffering can overwhelm us. We can be consumed by it. We can even look at the good things that are happening around us and be repulsed by them. We shake our fist at the sun, feeling like the very light that is shining down on us is mocking us because of the pain that we are feeling.

Being the good Christian people we are, we turn to the Bible for help, for comfort. Be careful when you do that. If you turn to Ecclesiastes you can read something like it says in chapter 9, verse 3, "this is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone." Psalm 10 says "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" Paul himself in the passage that we read in verse 36 of chapter 8 he is quoting Psalm 44, "are we accounted simply as sheep, to be slaughtered?" Paul says no, he disagrees. Paul knows that through God and through Christ, our suffering is not the end of our story. Suffering does not have the last word. God's love has the last word for each of us.

In our tradition, we do not spend much time talking about the life that will happen after this one. In some Christian traditions that is much more of the focus; that all we are doing here, all that we are about here is the life that begins when this one ends. We don't talk about that a great deal, but we do believe it. There is more, there is *more* to this life and to the next life with Christ than the suffering we have experienced, the suffering you may be experiencing now, and the suffering that inevitably lies ahead of us.

Paul is convinced that there is nothing, nothing that we can do, nothing that anyone else can do; nothing that this temporary world can create that will separate us from the love of God. That love of God is permanent. What is the

take-away? What are we supposed to go out of here and do? If you read Ecclesiastes again, there is this feeling that things bad happen, things good happen and just accept it. I'm with Paul, I want you to go out of here and know that God loves you. I want you to trust that love is eternal, and there is nothing out there that can stop it.

I say don't accept it. Instead, I say cry out. Cry out to God, ask God the questions you were taught as a child to never to ask. Sometimes it is only when we completely lay our souls bear in front of God that we can begin to feel the loving arms of God around us. Cry out, ask God, challenge God, but trust God. Trust God. Know that God's love is the end to our story.

Amen.