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Heather Holland
hholland@ecs.edu

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Paul and Performing Hope in Romans 5.1–5

HEATHER HOLLAND

The first time I saw a video of Mahalia Jackson singing “How I Got Over,” in Chicago in the early 1960s, I was captivated. The profound and soul-stirring lyrics resonated with me while the slow, yet constantly moving tempo pulled me forward. The music plods along in a stepwise fashion for what seems like an eternity but it is only six minutes and twenty-six seconds—a lifetime in cyberspace! Yet I wanted to hear the song in digital Dolby sound and behold the vision in living color where all the lighting is just right and words ring out crystal clear with every note! Oh, I found various examples, all of them good, perfectly delightful, a blessing in their own right, most of them homages to Mahalia’s classic rendition. But none of them, not one of them, captured that song the way Mahalia sang it. She doesn’t just sing the song. She *is* the song. The melody is born from somewhere in the reaches of her experience; the notes written in the ink of tears on staves of sorrow. But the shape of the song, the very form of it, is hope. With complete abandon she lets the story out and sings like no one is watching. She testifies as the old spiritual says, for her soul is a witness. A witness who looks back and wonders, “How did I make it over?” The camera finally pans to what has been up until halfway through the song a silent, yet attentive audience. They are listening and waiting, giving her the chance to sing the hope she has for her faith. It is only then that the audience begins to join her—not singing but by calling out to her and to one another, affirming the truth of the song.

“As soon as I can see Jesus...” she sings, they say “Yes!”

“The man that died for me” “O, Yes!”

“I want to thank Him for how he brought me” “Thank Him! Thank Him!”

“I want to thank God for how he taught me” “Thank Him!”

“Fallin’ and risin’ all these years, you know my soul look back and wonder,

“How did I make it over?” “Glory! Hallelujah!”

When the people of God sing the song together the faith is made visible and hope is performed.

The apostle Paul sings this same song of faith in the letter to the Romans. Paul’s desire is that they will join with him by mutually encouraging (Rom 1.12) each other to sing the song of faith and therefore perform their hope. In Chapter 5, verses 1 through 5 specifically, Paul proclaims the reality for the evidence of our faithful hope. We have been justified. We are at peace with God through Christ. We have been made by God to stand in grace. We have direct access to God through that grace. We are able to rejoice in our hope of sharing God’s glory. Likewise, we are able to rejoice in our sufferings. Because we know that suffering produces endurance, that endurance produces character and that character produces hope. And that hope does not disappoint us, because God’s hope is poured into our hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We, who have been so graced, now have no excuse and no need to look back and wonder how our souls have made it over; God is able to do in us what God has promised for us (Rom 4.21). We are justified through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus by our God.

Because of God's life-giving power for salvation (Rom 5.1, 2; Rom 1.16) we have been welcomed into a reconciled relationship with God, we prosper in peace and we live in a relationally broad space. None of these blessings are because of our faithfulness but due to the gracious gift of God. Because of all we have been given freely, Paul says, we are able to rejoice in our hope of sharing in the worthiness of God. Therefore, the only reasonable response to the hope of sharing the beautiful reality of God's glory is to rejoice. "Thanks be to our God!"

It is obvious when we read Romans, especially the first four chapters, that Paul has been paying attention to God's redeeming work within himself and in the world over his twenty-five years of following after Jesus. Paul takes what he has learned in a lifetime of faith and pours it out into the church in just a few short chapters of his letter to the Romans. So by the time we reach Chapter 5.1-5, it seems that Paul ought to cue a heavenly chorus to sing "All is well," but instead he pulls the needle across the record. Or perhaps he causes the CD to skip and the background music comes to a screeching halt, as Paul proclaims, "not only that, but we also rejoice in our sufferings." Instead of the choir, perhaps we should cue the crickets! Saying that we can rejoice while we suffer is a shocking statement from Paul, after we have so recently been assured we are justified, at peace with God and standing in grace. Is it crass and out of place for Paul to mention suffering when things are going so well? Why would Paul casually insert a seemingly tangential concept, "rejoice in suffering," into what appears to be such a carefully constructed theology of hope? No one would have guessed that suffering was a logical progression from justification, peace and grace. Yet we know that Paul is not arbitrary. He is an on-purpose conductor offering us a clear gospel tempo. We know that Paul has been set apart for the gospel. Therefore, he has earned our attention when it comes to suffering. Paul testifies to the church in Rome and to the church today that just as justification, peace and grace are constants in our lives of faith, suffering will also always be with us. And it is in our justification, through our peace with God and by means of the grace in which we have been made to stand that we will be able not only to endure suffering but to rise beyond it, upward to hope-giving witness to the story of our God.

When Paul links the concepts of suffering and hope he is actually speaking appropriately and naturally out of Greco-Roman culture.¹ In this case, Paul is familiar with the contemporary philosopher's teaching that suffering leads progressively to the ability to endure and that effort then results in developing virtuous character.² Paul offers yet another surprise in this section of scripture when he appropriates the ongoing cultural discussion regarding suffering and the development of virtue, and then subverts it at the end for his own theological and ecclesiological purposes.³ Paul isn't stealing concepts; he is augmenting themes. He is transposing and enlivening commonly held Greco-Roman philosophical beliefs in order to compose a kingdom-culture faith for the church. Paul adopts and adapts these well-known philosophical opinions about suffering by improvising and building upon them to develop a new and unexpected climax: suffering is part of living in this world, yet we live anew in the hope of God despite our greatest difficulties. Most readers, ancient and contemporary, would not expect that they could experience something as beautifully powerful as hope on the other side or even in the midst of suffering. Paul is up to something. He is laying down a type of *basso continuo*⁴ as a prelude to support his melody line of hope. First-century readers are not being encouraged by Paul to endure their hardships and thereby join their culture's song to suffer to become more virtuous. Rather, ancient and modern readers alike are being offered the opportunity to sing a new song; that out of the riches of our relationship with God, perseverance in suffering is not only possible, but in it God's presence and goodness are often revealed. So for Paul, suffering and hope are part of the same song of faith.

Any singer knows that the hardest note to sing well is the one on the other side of the large interval. The most challenging leap to make is the one over the looming chasm. Paul knows that we cannot just throw

1. J. Paul Sampley, *Paul and the Greco-Roman World* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), chapter 6, "Paul, Hardships and Suffering."

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. *basso continuo* (Italian, musical term): a continuous bass line.

ourselves by means of our will across the pit of suffering in order to reach the far edge of hope. Paul also knows personally what it is to have this world “heap” up troubles on him. Because Paul, the pastoral apostle, is also a clever communicator, he uses descriptive and prescriptive language in verses three through five to do some “heaping” up of his own by intentionally shaping the language to illustrate his point. Paul doesn’t expect us to sing the impossible interval, leap the chasm or turn on a dime. He knows that suffering to hope is a plodding, one foot in front of the other, stepwise motion of faith. It is literally about progress and not perfection. He begins step by step with suffering that leads to endurance. Endurance inch by inch leads to character and character creates hope. This type of linking in the biblical narrative is known as a “chain” for obvious reasons.⁵ It is also known as a *sortes*, Latin for “heap.” Paul knows we often find ourselves at the bottom of a pile of troubles, so he shapes his language to communicate that difficulties are not the only things piling up! We are not just the helpless, hapless recipients of layer upon layer of hard times. We are also presently receiving in spades God’s hard-won benefits on our behalf. We stand in grace with access to God through Jesus Christ. God is pouring love, measure by measure, out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Stack enough endurance and you get character. Pile up enough character and hope is performed. Access the power of the salvation of God and hope will be a testimony, seen and heard by the whole world. No need to stretch for the note or to fling yourself over the pit with crossed fingers. No need to hurry or to be overwhelmed by the ever growing pile of trouble. The world will continue to throw a difficult new thing on the suffering stack every day. But the people of God have historically encountered mountains. And if we keep stepping faithfully, one foot in front of the other, we will be able to see glory from the top of that heap (Rom 8.18).

For the entirety of Romans 5.1–5, Paul reveals his pastoral compassion by employing the use of third person plural. There is salvation good news in the “we” Paul uses here. We are justified, we are at peace, we stand in grace, we rejoice in sharing the hope of glory. We rejoice in suffering and we know. These pronouns are not only plural they are also collective. Together we suffer. Together we endure. Together we share. Together we rejoice. Together we know and are known. Just as worship, life and rejoicing are collective realities made more glorious when shared, suffering finds its holiest context in the community of faith. When we risk sharing our pain with the people of God, we discover not only our best route through trial, we also uncover evidence of our brothers’ and sisters’ great love for and service to God. We in turn are surprised to find in joy how God has been faithful and present for them in their suffering as well. This is a faith-building exercise. God is revealed when we reveal our sorrow to one another. A dear friend with a life-threatening brain disease was the only person who could teach her own daughter how to live well with the same disease when the daughter was diagnosed a decade after the mother. Endurance is learned from the one who has suffered and yet endured.

We learn how to endure suffering from our community and from the communality of the godhead. We know that the God who did not spare his own Son (Rom 8.32), but gave him up on our behalf has suffered loss, grief and sorrow. The obedient Son was crucified, excluded, tortured and murdered. The Holy Spirit of God grieves and is sorrowful when we rob others of their hope (Eph 4.30) and when we live in ways that do not give honor to God (Rom 1.28). The friendship we share with one another and with God through Christ Jesus is a participation in both the love and the suffering of God. And it is God’s love for us that allows God to suffer on our behalf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell prior to his own execution by the Nazis, “Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence but by virtue of his weakness and suffering... Only the suffering God can help.”⁶ It is a great comfort to know that suffering has not extinguished the love or the life of God. So because death has been put to death, we like our Lord will be raised from the dead and we will not be lost to God or to ourselves. We have as our companion in suffering, endurance and character faith formation, a triune God who suffers, endures and submits in faith. We are not alone, and in this loving and suffering God we find power; power borne from vulnerability and love.

5. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys Publishing Co., 2001), 85.

6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: MacMillan 1972), 361.

I remember watching grief stricken as my dear friend struggled with a rare and treatment-resistant form of leukemia. After living with his diagnosis for several months, he asked my husband and me to go for a walk with him and his family. The greenbelt we were on was beautiful and from appearances, all should have been right with the world on that beautiful June day. But all was not well. Our friend was dying and when the children played just out of earshot, he said he had asked us to join them there so he could seek our advice about how to talk to his children about his rapidly approaching death. I was not ready to move so quickly from the joy of justification, peace and grace, to the despair suffering. It seemed out of place to talk of suffering on the greenbelt, amid such beauty. But my friend was not afraid of the tension, and rejoicing in suffering was not incongruent to him. Once when I was trying for the umpteenth time to get him to “fight this cancer” and “go to the Mayo clinic” he stopped me short by saying, “In my suffering somehow I am united with Jesus in his suffering. It is one of the few things I have left that gives me hope.” I can tell you that even to this day I am still trying to unwrap the mystery, beauty and the faith of his statement. As I witnessed my friend endure his suffering, I also saw him become more beautifully conformed to God’s character. He took it as his mission to live fully every day. The employees of the blood clinic where he began to have to spend more and more of his time began to look forward to his presence because they said he brought them hope! For a disciple of Jesus, suffering can reveal God in ways other experiences cannot. God revealed in this way is hope performed.

Paul says that endurance produces character. Here Paul uses the Greek word for character, *dokime*. When translated into English, *dokime* means “document of authenticity” or the “proof” needed to certify something as true. My friend’s character was documentation to anyone who was watching and listening that God loved my friend and did not abandon him in his suffering. He was coming to know God in a more profound and beautiful way and therefore giving witness to God’s love. These are excellent reasons to rejoice! Hope is not some wishful, distant and vague idea. Hope is not a happy feeling to reward the persistent. Hope is not a virtue achieved in self-actualization. The enduring, Christ-shaped character of the one who finds, even in suffering, the opportunity to document the presence of the powerful, compassionate and loving God, performs hope.

Hope performed is the mother who can relinquish her child’s body for organ donation even while the world shakes its head and says, “There is no hope.” Hope performed is the man who draws steely-spirited ICU nurses close to him and speaks tenderly, “You are such a blessing for us. You will always be our daughters,” while his wife lies in a nearby hospital bed, irreversibly comatose. Hope performed is the baby given up by her addicted parents, raised by a godly grandmother to become a minister of the gospel. When Abraham believes God will keep his promise to make him the father of many nations (Rom 4.21), even though Sarah is barren and he is as good as dead, hope is performed. When Jochebed weaves a basket despite a river’s dangers and Pharaoh’s murderous rampage, hope is performed. When Moses goes back to Egypt to lead the people of Israel to freedom with an outstanding warrant over his head and no experience leading anything but livestock, hope is performed. Hope is performed when Mary magnifies the Lord, when Joseph swallows his pride, when John humbly steps aside, when Simeon and Anna listen to the Spirit year after year after year, when James and John walk away from their lives and into Jesus’ life. Hope is performed when Peter enters Cornelius’ house, baptizes him and ushers Gentiles into the kingdom without so much as a congregational meeting, and when Saul presents himself humbled and redeemed to the same church he martyred. Hope is performed when Jesus prays, grieving the cup yet still offering himself to the Father’s will. Hope performed allows the singer to rehearse with confidence the ancient strains of faith even when sorrow tries to shout us down, demanding we be silent in the despairing face of “obvious facts.” Hope performed allows us to sing what we are not yet able to see. Hope performed allows the faithful to know that their belief is the documentation of God’s ever-present goodness. Hope is performed by hearts overflowing with the love of God poured into us by the Holy Spirit. Hope performed is the incarnation of the power of God for salvation.

Mahalia Jackson sang “How I Got Over” in the church that night in Chicago because her friend and pastor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asked her to sing it. This was one of his favorite hymns and it complemented the sermon he would preach after she sang. The title of his sermon that night was “I Have a Dream.” He would preach a nearly identical sermon some months later to over 200,000 people in front of the Lincoln

Memorial. Again he asked Mahalia to sing “How I Got Over.” He proclaimed to the crowd, “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”⁷

Dr. King and thousands of others who struggled for basic human civil rights didn’t just hope for a different future. Hope was what they did in the present as a response to the faithfulness of God. Hope lives and is carved out of despair. Hope doesn’t shame us, but rather is our active revelation of the love of God that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers us to perform our hope. We are God’s witnesses to the world and this is the song of faith we sing: God is with us. God is love. Alleluia! Amen!

HEATHER HOLLAND IS CHAPLAIN AND DEAN OF STUDENT LIFE AT EMMANUEL CHRISTIAN SEMINARY IN JOHNSON CITY, TENNESSEE (HHOLLAND@ECS.EDU).



7. Full text of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/sns-mlk-ihaveadream,0,36081.story> (accessed October 24, 2012).