

Romans ²⁵ Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶ but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— ²⁷ to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Ecclesiastes 11/12

⁷ Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.⁸ Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.

12 Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; ² before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; ³ in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; ⁴ when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; ⁵ when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; ⁶ before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, ⁷ and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. ⁸ Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity.

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Romans 16:25-27; Ecclesiastes 11:7-8; 12:1-8

Sermon: Life is Difficult, Rejoice Anyway

Life is difficult. There are no easy answers. All people suffer, and suffering is part of faith development. Every theologian, wise counselor, or friend that I've come to trust is in agreement with me on this. The Bible wouldn't be the Bible if you tried to take out its stories of struggle and suffering.

And then there are those positivity selling preachers that I don't trust at all. Just for laughs, I thought I'd check to see what Joel Osteen might say about this subject. All I had to do was open up his website and click on his latest book title to know. The title is "Empty Out the Negative" and the book blurb on his website says this: *Friend you don't have space for both the positive and the negative. When you let the negative things in, they take up space for the positive things that are meant to reside there. If you'll empty out the negative, if you'll make room, God will fill your life with good things. He'll fill you with peace, joy, confidence, health, creativity, and favor.* It goes on to say that if you let go of your guilt, resentment, unforgiveness, anger, worry and doubt – an angel will show up with a delivery just for you. Well, perhaps if you send him a donation of \$50 or more you'll get the book in the mail.

Lord, have mercy.

Snake oil sales are way up, I hear. You can't just empty out the negative like you were taking out the trash. It's not that easy. It's never been that easy.

I know that Ecclesiastes is dismissed for being agnostic at best and overlooked as being a complete downer to read. It's gritty. It's depressing. It's a little more Charles Dickens – without Tiny Tim saying at the end “God bless us, everyone!”

It's no Joel Osteen, that's for sure. Turn the pages in Ecclesiastes and you will read: The days of darkness will be many. Most of what we think of as “good times” is wrapped up in vanity.

Remember your Creator – is about as much God-talk as you are going to get. Remember your Creator while you are young before the days of trouble come and the years stack up, and all you can say is “I have no pleasure in them.” The world the Teacher describes in this book of scripture is BLEAK. It is dead of winter dark. It rains all the time. The guards of the house tremble in fear. Strong men are bent with pain and despair. The women's daily grind is made more unpleasant as there are fewer and fewer of them to do it together. Families live behind locked doors. There is no music, not even birdsong. You'll be afraid of any mountaintop experience, and every road is fraught with danger. Even the grasshopper has no hop left – dragging his body along the ground. The mourners gather in the streets before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl broken. All metaphors for saying that death looms large. Breath simply returns to the God who gave it.

Lord, have mercy.

Life is not as simple as “Think good thoughts, and be happy.” And yet, I hope it's not just a few bright moments in our youth, and then vain drudgery until we die. The theologians, and wise counselors, and friends who have walked with me barefoot through broken glass, have also been the same teachers who count on grace, the kind we learn through putting our faith in the bigger picture, in the Jesus picture.

This is where the Romans text comes in. God will strengthen you – even for the worst of times. The good news and proclamation of Jesus Christ is meant to be a life-changer. For Paul – it was revelatory – as if a mystery that had long been buried was shown directly to him so that he could tell the story to others.

This is far more than a “drop the negative tone, “believe in Jesus,” and send in your \$50 kind of message.

Being a Christian in Rome didn’t curry any favors. In fact, it was more likely to get you thrown into prison if not thrown to the lions. Paul wasn’t speaking to those who already lived in a culturally Christian context, an aligned with religious authority and political power Christian context. In fact, in his day, it was quite the opposite. He was speaking to those who would find it terribly uncomfortable for others to discover their commitment to Christ, but who would also discover that the grace and mercy found in the story were so compelling, so irresistible, that it was worth the risk.

If nothing else this year, don’t bring out the baby Jesus to coo and coddle, and then pack him away without letting him grow up into the man Jesus who suffers for all of humanity. If your faith is only good for when you can dump all the negativity at the door, it isn’t much of a faith, now is it? Our faith is a dying faith, one that reminds us that death looms large, and breath returns to the God who gave it to us. *Suffering is a part of the human endeavor, a feature, not a flaw.* We cut ourselves off from humanity, and put a stain on the deeper message of our faith, if we choose not to be empathetic to the plight of others.

To suffer with. That's exactly what Jesus did. He suffered WITH humanity. Too often we say that he suffered FOR humanity. I don't think that's the right answer. Human suffering didn't exactly stop after the life of the historical Jesus. It continues, and continues, and continues. There are days we want to stick our heads in the sand and pay Joel Osteen his \$50 hoping that he is right and we can just "Empty Out the Negative." There are days we agree with the teacher in Ecclesiastes that life sucks and then you die; and all is stupid vanity. But Jesus offers us a different way, a truly redemptive way to live into the suffering, not deny it, not get crippled by it, but to presume that it is ever-present with us in the world, and our job as those who wish to follow his teaching is to walk through that broken glass with others side by side.

St. John of the Cross, the mystic who gave us deep descriptions of the dark night of the soul had a vision for what this looks like. He says, "I saw the river over which every soul must pass, and the name of that river was suffering; and I saw a boat that carries souls across that river, and the name of the boat was love." Jesus is love. God is love. To deal with the suffering, we have to find ourselves a spot on that boat.

We live in a weary world. I'm not exactly sure that we have any other choice. Though I love all the Christmas music – the familiar hymns especially – there's only one that is on repeat in my mind this year. And it's because of this line. In "O Holy Night" – we sing, "The thrill of hope, a weary world rejoices, while yonder breaks a new and glorious morn." Then, what do we do? Fall on our knees. It's so true. The struggle of this world brings us to our knees. We can rejoice, even in the weariness. It's mixed emotions. In the weariness, rejoice. It's not intuitive to say, "Life is difficult, rejoice anyway," but that's what our tradition reminds us of again and again. Through birth, comes suffering. Through death, comes resurrection. And yonder breaks a new and

glorious morn. That I continue to believe – though some days it's harder to see it than others.

When you see someone suffering, offer them a hand into the boat of love. That's all that we can do, and it is, thank God, enough. Amen.