

**Ps 95; Ex 17:1-7; Ro 5:1-11; Jn 4:5-42**

## **Suffering, Endurance, Character and Hope**

Let's look in on the Israelites as they begin their Exodus through the Sinai Desert. God has given them this amazing bread, manna. God has provided meat (flocks of quail) to strengthen His people. Meanwhile water skins and water jars are getting low – they are running out of water. Imagine the Sinai in March: av temp is 86° F and rainfall is about .04" for the whole month. With so little water, you wouldn't wash clothes, but if you did your jeans would be dry in about 3 minutes in the Sinai. The Israelites panic and they all gather around Moses to complain and accuse him of trying to kill them. They want to go back to Egypt. They moan and weep. They long for the good old days. They dread every step of the journey forward. Does this sound familiar?

There are valid comparisons between the desperate children of Israel in the Sinai and us journeying through life in the 21<sup>st</sup> c. We have many stressors in our lives. US News & World Report states that up to 70% of Americans live paycheck to paycheck – with very little savings as a cushion against medical or other emergencies.

We don't face scorching heat or complete lack of water, but we do face political, social and health threats in our lives. Some of our troubles are heart-breaking. Do we complain first? Or do we pray first? Do we call out to God for help? Just asking.

Remember that we here at Banks Community UMC are called upon by our neighbors, time after time to pray for their suffering and challenges. This is one of our purposes – the reason we are here.

The Apostle Paul lays out a brilliant explanation (the Letter to the Romans) of the promises we have been given – by our heavenly Father through the prophets – culminating in: super-abundant grace – like a deep well – like a river – like a huge lake – like an ocean of the outpouring of God's love upon us. Like the water that gushed out of the rock of Meribah – and the Israelites drank deeply and filled every jar and every container with fresh water. (Ex 17:6) This is the image of Jesus Christ in the world. Jesus is our Rock. He gives us abundant life.

This 40-day journey of Lent is a gift. We pause in our struggles – perhaps for only a half-hour a day. In the days of Lent we listen to His calling to turn aside and give thanks for this grace in which we stand – Paul says we “exult in the hope of the glory of God.” (v 2)

Paul knew trouble all his thirty-odd years of church planting, teaching and preaching. From the moment Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, Paul began to come out of the prison of being a super-religious nut. Through his understanding and insight into Scripture and the working of the Holy Spirit, Paul grew in faith – in grace and in the gifts of the Spirit. While his fellow Pharisees worked to hold fast and keep the status quo, Paul moved out to share the Good News of hope in Jesus Christ.

Paul told the church at Corinth: I have been imprisoned, “whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at

sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.” (2 Cor 11:23-26)

You and I have not suffered the way Paul suffered for the sake of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Yet, we each have our own trials and troubles. The Lord knows this. God does not take our suffering lightly. God is full of compassion for us. Jesus suffered to bring the truth to the world. He longs for us to rest in Him.

Today, you and I are invited to quench our spiritual thirst with the water of Life. This is not one glassful that makes it so we can go to heaven when we die – or when the trumpet blows at Jesus’ appearance at the end of time.

No, we are splashing around in grace, we are soaked in justification through Christ and reconciled with God by faith – leading to peace in our hearts through every kind of trouble – now – today. The Apostle Paul encourages us to live as he lived – depending on our dear Savior for everything.

Paul says, “We can rejoice...when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops (*strong*)\* character, and character strengthens our confident hope...And this hope will not lead to disappointment...we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit who reveals the truth and fills our hearts with his love.” (Ro 5:3-5 NLT)

Rest in the Lord – give all your testing and trials to Him – exercise your freedom to reach out to those around you. We who have this hope share it with an anxious and troubled world.  
Amen.

\*italics mine