

Title: Whose Story?**[Slide 1]****Text: Romans 12:21 and 5:1-4****An unlikely combination?****Biopsy:**

"You have cancer." Funny how those three words change you forever.

The journey to the doctor's appointment had really begun over 20 years before when my dad had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. He passed away from the disease 7 years later. Now, here I sat, 14 years later, hearing the urologist tell me that I had prostate cancer.

A moment before, I was sitting in the doctor's office hoping for good news. Now, with those three little words I felt myself tumbling into another world. I felt helpless, trapped, confused, afraid. Dark memories of my father's battle with his cancer swirled around me. Would I be forced to go down that path?

What would my battle look like? How would it change me? What would my story be?

Trouble:

There's a powerful word in the Bible for these kinds of circumstances. It's the word we translate as 'tribulation,' 'affliction,' 'distress,' or simply 'trouble.'

The root meaning of the little word '*thlipsis*' is *pressure*. It describes being *hemmed in with no way of escape*. It's the word Jesus used to describe the final agonies of this old world: Tribulation.

And it points to a reality that we all have experienced: feeling trapped and hopeless, our world unraveling before our eyes. Between a rock and a hard place. No way out.

An unlikely combination?

Paul was no stranger to this kind of trouble. He tells the Christians in Corinth:

[Slide 2]

2 Corinthians 1:8-9a NIV

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles [thlipsis] we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.

So it may come as a surprise that Paul can write to the Christians in Rome:

[Slide 3]

Romans 12:12 NIV

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Hope and trouble in the same breath? Isn't that an unlikely combination? Joyful hope and gut-wrenching trouble go together like oil and water, or like putting a cat in the same crate as my dog. So what is Paul saying?

The answer is found in the story you choose when you are facing difficult times. Will it be a story defined by your troubles, or will it be the bigger story that God is writing for you?

The Bigger Story

Starting point:

Every story has a starting point: think "Once upon a time." My afternoon visit to the urologist felt very much like the beginning of a new story, one I had dreaded for many years.

But Paul challenges us to think in terms of a story that is bigger than our troubles. He goes so far as to say to the same Christians in Corinth:

[Slide 4]

2 Corinthians 4:17 NIV

For our light and momentary troubles [thlipsis] are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

Our troubles are part of a bigger story, God's story. Once we discover that greater story, we can be "joyful in hope" and "patient in affliction" at the same time!

"Once upon a time"

Paul describes this bigger story in the same letter where he puts hope and trouble side by side. The story begins with our becoming part of God's family:

[Slide 5]

Romans 5:1-2 NIV

Therefore, since we have been justified [made part of God's family] through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

God has written us into His greater story. To be "justified" means to be declared innocent, and thus able to be part of God's New Creation family. When we choose to believe that God conquered sin and death through Jesus, God writes us into His greater story. That story becomes our new reality, our new path, and the source of our new identity.

Instead of strife, we experience peace; instead of despair, we boast in the hope that our story will have the same ending as Jesus' own story. When trouble comes knocking on our door – as it surely will – it no longer defines us. Instead, our troubles are just a part of the transforming work of God's Spirit in our lives.

The bigger story:

Paul says that when trouble comes knocking, we can see it from a totally new perspective:

[Slide 6]

Romans 5:3-4 NIV

Not only so, but we also glory [boast] in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

The trouble isn't the beginning of the story; it's part of the bigger story. This is a story that Paul describes as having 3 parts:

- **Trouble grows perseverance.** To persevere means to actively stand up to the problem. For instance, the foundation under your house is designed to be stronger than the weight of your house and belongings. This is the idea behind Paul's choice of words in this verse. Trouble helps us build a more powerful foundation.
- **Perseverance grows character.** The word Paul uses for 'character' comes from the technology of extracting metal from ore. Crushed rock is placed in a furnace and melted down. Only then can the pure metal – copper, iron, silver or gold – be separated from the slag. The resulting metal is "refined" and "tested." The same thing happens when we go through the fires of trouble and affliction.
- **Character produces hope.** Troubles are the true test of our hope. It's easy, after all, to believe nice things about God and His story when everything is going well. But when the dark clouds of fear and doubt roll in, we are forced to clarify our understanding and commitment to God's story! The pure gold that results is a stronger *hope* in God's promise that like Jesus, we will conquer death itself.

Whose Story?**Happily ever after!**

Unlike this world's stories, God's Story is the one story that actually ends with "happily ever after!"

Romans 5:5 NIV

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

We've come full-circle. Paul began with boasting "in the hope of the glory of God." Now he puts it the other way: "and hope does not put us to shame" regardless of the trouble this world throws our way. No matter what happens, the end of our story is just like Jesus' story: resurrection. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit pours God's love into each situation, transforming us each step along the way.

Meanwhile, back at the doctor's office...

A few days after getting the bad news from the doctor the Holy Spirit spoke to me. The message was simple and to the point: "Don't feel sorry for yourself!" God knows us so well. He knew precisely what I needed to do in order to make His story my story.

Feeling self-pity, however justified I might feel in going down that path, wasn't going to fix a thing. I could see that it was the ultimate dead-end – a doorway into spiraling into chaos. Nothing good there.

Instead, God challenged -- and continues to challenge – me to make His story my story. That's where "praying faithfully" comes in. The Lord and I have had long conversations about this story I'm discovering. Meanwhile, those three dreaded words – "You have cancer" – have burned a lot of junk out of my life already. I don't claim to have this all figured out by any means. But I'm a different person than I was before that fateful visit to the urologist. And I have a bigger story than anything anyone in this world can even imagine.

Whose story?

Making our church "A Place for You" means making it a place where people can discover God's story. This is one of the greatest things we can do. We, after all, are God's story tellers. When we tell – and live out – His story, others will be able to make the choice: my story or God's bigger story?

Anything we can do to make our church a warm, inviting place will help us tell His story more effectively. Even things like pews, carpet and audio-visual equipment can help tell the story of the God who makes all things new. A refinished sanctuary announces to our community that they are welcome

and that we are so sure of God's story that we're willing to invest ourselves in making it known.

Please take time to pray about how God wants to work through you to fulfill our goal. Together, we can make our church "A Place for You" for a whole new generation, both young and old.