

My great uncle, Armund Eichers, enlisted in the U.S. Navy in January 1940 at age seventeen. Stationed in the Philippines, the Japanese captured him and many fellow soldiers at the May 1942 Battle of Corregidor. For 39 months, Armund was a Japanese prisoner of war doing hard labor for minimal rations. He caught any number of illnesses such as pneumonia, dysentery, malaria, and typhoid.

In an unpublished 64-page memoir titled “Of Rice and Men” he details the suffering that he experienced and witnessed that cannot be repeated in polite company.

Yet despite the dark and hopeless times. He also outlines the resilience and acts of bravery of his fellow POWs even in the face of extreme hardship. Armund reports that in his time as a POW, the Japanese worked to break morale, but he never witnessed an American soldier breaking down and begging for mercy.

Near the end of the memoirs, he wrote on August 1, 1945: “Today the Japanese received some Red Cross packages for us but would not issue them. They kept telling us if we did good work in the mines that they might give them to us.... The Japanese had been trying to break our morale for over three years now. If a man did give up here, he didn’t last long. There’s something about morale that gives a man hope and a will to live. That’s about all that was keeping us alive.”

How’s your morale today? Likely, your situation is probably looking better than like in a POW camp, but there are all sorts of hardships and burdens we come with here today. Our Epistle lesson gives us an insight on how to thrive even in difficult circumstances. **BECAUSE JESUS DIED AND ROSE TO RECONCILE US, WE SUFFER WITH HOPE.**

First, I. While we were ungodly, Jesus died and rose at just the right time. Paul writes, “**For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.**” At the right time Christ died for you. At just the right moment Christ did what He needed to do to save you.

Armund wrote in July of 1945, that their rations were so meager that they knew that if the war didn’t end before winter, they wouldn’t survive. Some war historians also point out that the Japanese military had a plan to execute all the POWs in the event of an Allied land invasion to prevent the Allies from liberating camps and having the prisoners return to fight. The date of that kill order was set for late August. If that were the case, the end of the war on August 15th came just in the nick of time.

But Paul goes on, “**For one will scarcely die for a righteous person— though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**” Books have been filled with stories of heroism and sacrifice of fellow soldiers in World War II. But I am not aware of a story of an Allied soldier laying his life down to save an enemy combatant, or vice versa.

At that right moment, Jesus died to set you free, even when you were still an enemy of God. On the Korean War Memorial in Washington D.C. is inscribed the phrase, “Freedom is not free.” We can reflect on the stories of servicemen and women such as my great uncle and marvel at the sacrifices Americans have made for us.

But much more than any combat veteran, we reflect that our freedom as Christians is not free. It cost Jesus everything. Consider that right moment in your life. Maybe it was in the middle of your darkest day, in the right moment Jesus died to free you from the sadness of that day. Maybe you sinned against a loved one in a huge way, in that right moment Jesus died to forgive you. Maybe you kept quiet when you should have said a word of hope to someone in need, in that right moment Jesus died to forgive you. Maybe you got caught at work doing something unethical and now you’re going to get fired, in that right moment Jesus died to forgive you. Jesus isn’t for perfect people; He is for sinners like you and me.

And II. Jesus died and rose to restore us to the Father. **“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”**

Not only are we forgiven, but our relationship with God the Father is restored. We’re part of the family. We don’t need to keep looking over our shoulder to know whether we are making the grade. In Christ, the Father loves us completely. You are a beloved child of the Heavenly Father. But what’s more, your Heavenly Father doesn’t just love you, He likes you.

He doesn’t love you just because He has to since He’s God. He actually enjoys your company. He wants to hear your voice. He wants to spend time with you. He made you a unique individual and He enjoys even your little quirks and foibles. To be clear, He doesn’t love your sins, but He loves you.

By the 1950s, the United States buried the hatchet and ended the occupation of Japan. Most improbably, Japan and the United States became allies. Today, most Japanese consider America to be the most important ally Japan has. In a Japanese prison camp, my great uncle would have never imagined that was possible, it would have taken a miracle.

More miraculous yet is the restoration of a sinful humanity with the holy God who cannot stand to be in the presence of sin. Jesus is the bridge between sinful humanity and holy God because Jesus cleanses sinners and gives them His holiness.

Finally, III. Because we are reconciled to the Father, we suffer with hope. Paul writes that because of this restoration of our relationship with the Father, we have hope. **“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and**

character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

If you open your Bibles and you look at the footnote, likely there’s a footnote that says the word rejoice is actually boast. Other translations say we glory and still others say we celebrate our sufferings.

Despite the hardships of 1945, Armund wrote that it was a new era because the Americans were bombing Japan every day and every night. Whereas the Japanese guards were terrified in every bombing raid, the POWs were fearless because they knew help was coming. One day, the POWs got the attention of the U.S. naval dive bomber pilots by waving their shirts at them. The pilots dove down and gave the prisoners a salute by wobbling their wings. It made Armund happy to know the Americans were so close.

The night of March 13, 1945, the Allies started a bombing raid of Osaka and Kobe where Armund was stationed. He wrote, “Every time [a bomb] exploded, the barracks we were in seemed ready to cave in, but this was still the happiest night since captivity.” It was a tense night of fighting fires in the prison camp and bombs dropping all around them, but still he said it was the happiest night of captivity.

After being transported to the country to do hard labor in copper mines, Armund was freed from camp at the end of August. He and some buddies made it to Yokohama where the Allies had an aid station. He joked saying he ate twenty donuts and drank a gallon of coffee and that the Red Cross girls must have wondered if he was a human or an animal. By October 4th he made it back to San Francisco and later took a train back to Minnesota.

Unlike POWs who may at times have wondered who would win the war, we *know* who has won the war for the cosmos. At the right time, Jesus died and rose again to defeat sin, death, and the devil, and your relationship with God has been restored. He is on your side and He fights for you.

God is using your suffering to produce perseverance. He is using that perseverance to create in you tested worth, this tested worth produces hope. This is all so that when suffering comes, it isn’t your first rodeo, you know how to handle hardship and you can even help others who might not have the same patience and character.

The bombs may be falling around you; you may be fighting fires big and small. At times, you may feel imprisoned to a sin addiction. All this may be true, but take heart! The cavalry is coming because Jesus died on Calvary for you. You suffer with hope because these things are signs that the enemy is taking his last stand, and as surely as the Americans liberated their prisoners of war, Jesus is coming again to liberate us from our tribulations. In this we hope and pray.