

My mom's cousin Esther turned 100 years old last fall. Esther has been a ball of energy all through her life. After her kids were grown, she decided to take up a new hobby. I know you'll find this hard to believe, but she became a professional clown – the costume, the makeup, the works. All through her 80s and 90s, she continued to dress up for special occasions, and her friends convinced her to wear the clown outfit for her 100th birthday party last November. Esther says she's ready to die any time, and when she does, she would like to be laid out for the wake with her clown shoes resting on top of the coffin. When you're on view, the coffin conceals the lower half of your body, and she is concerned that if she wears her shoes, no one will know she has them on. One of her friends suggested that she wear the shoes, but have the funeral home display her the other way, so when mourners came up to get a look at Esther, they would find - where her head should be - her clown shoes on her feet sticking up out of the coffin. Esther just shrugged at this suggestion and said, "I'll be dead. You can do whatever you want."

Many elderly people have no fear of death. They've lived a full life. They're grateful for everything, but their bodies don't work as they used to, and they're ready to move on. Even some younger people who have endured a serious illness say they want to get beyond the suffering; they believe in what lies ahead; they're ready whenever God calls them home.

Saint Paul says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us." The people receiving his letter have undergone persecution, and Paul stirs their hope that God will glorify those who remain steadfast in the faith. He says all of creation hopes to be set free from corruption to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. Every winter, you could say creation is groaning in anticipation of spring, as labor pains precede the birth of a child. In the same way, each of us undergoes some suffering, but it is nothing compared with the glory to be revealed.

We each have a unique experience of suffering. Some people have a very high tolerance for pain; others do not. Some people put up with minor inconveniences rather well; others do not. Sometimes we get stuck because of our pain, rejection, or failure, but when we hear of worse tragedies afflicting other people, it makes us feel more free.

Paul puts suffering in perspective. He does not deny that suffering hurts, but he says it is nothing compared to the glory that awaits us. Once you know the joy of a new child, you can put up with the pains that precede it. Once you experience the happiness of a spring day, you can live through another winter. And once you glimpse the glory of God through prayer, service, or a loving embrace, it is easier to endure sickness and suffering.

The elderly faithful are good spiritual guides for us. They have put a lot of life into context. Even though suffering and dying are difficult to think about, the glory that awaits should paint a smile on our face.