

Introduction: Adversity is the only diet that will reduce a fat head.¹ In these verses Paul deals with more than a fat head. He addresses the guilty heart. In Romans 5:1-2, Paul outlines the benefits of being justified by faith, which are peace in the past, grace in the present, and glory in the future. Now, this experienced pastor moves on to some possible questions about what he has been teaching. The first question in verses 3 to 5 is about adversity, tribulation, or suffering.

There is no congregation or Christian in the world where suffering is not a reality. There is no minister in the world who is not confronted with suffering over and over. In these verses, Paul offers four directives about suffering:

- 1) Recognize the problem of suffering
- 2) Rejoice in the presence of suffering
- 3) Relish the purpose of suffering
- 4) Respond to the process of suffering

A. RECOGNIZE THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

Paul has painted a glowing picture in verses 1 and 2. In justification we have a rich privilege and infinite blessing. But suddenly he states the apparent contradiction of sufferings. The Greek word for “tribulation” [θλίψεσις] is very strong meaning oppression, affliction, hard and difficult suffering. It exists for Christians – like the grieving widow, the suffering of a handicap child, those who have constant pain. Some of God’s people suffer from various illnesses. Some of God’s people are lonely. Some of God’s people are very disappointed and disturbed. Some of God’s people are misunderstood.

Paul has written about peace and hope and rejoicing. How does that relate to suffering? If the gospel is to be received we cannot be escapists. We cannot ignore suffering. It is a LIE to assert that if you have enough faith all your troubles will vanish. How can true faith deal with suffering? How do we respond when suffering comes personally to us?

Suffering seems to contradict the love and power of the Savior. Why are you going through these things? Why are people suffering as they are? Suffering is in part a mystery. However, Paul has some instructions. When he writes about suffering he is communicating that the Christian faith is honest. It is real. It is truthful. The Christian faith is grounded in everyday life and experience. Paul identifies with suffering as he writes “we glory in tribulations” [KJV, NKJ]. Recognize the problem of suffering.

B. REJOICE IN THE PRESENCE OF SUFFERING

In dealing with suffering, Paul seems to make the problem more perplexing by asserting that we should rejoice in the presence of suffering. Verse 3 reads, “And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations.” Two Greek words, “glory in,” are very interesting. “Glory,” or “rejoice” [καυχώμεθα] is a very strong word. It means “to boast, to delight, to be filled with wonderful joy.” We rejoice in our sufferings!

Then, look at the preposition “in” [ἐν]. To make this clear, listen to two expressions that Paul does NOT say. The first, Paul does NOT say that we rejoice in spite of our sufferings. Yes, we have them but we try to think about other things. We try to ignore the sufferings and think about happy things. No, that is not what he says. The second, he does NOT say that we rejoice after our sufferings. The time will come when we go to heaven and all our sufferings

¹ Vern McLellan, *The Complete Book of Practical Proverbs & Wacky Wit*, p. 7

will end. Then we will rejoice. We will rejoice about our sufferings later. Both of those expressions are true, but that is NOT what he is saying here. Right now we rejoice IN our sufferings!

This man knows what he is saying. Paul knows a great deal about sufferings as recorded in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33. He is one who was beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisoned, whipped, deserted, and betrayed. He has gone hungry. He has lost his family, his money, and his friends. He is one nearly crushed by suffering. Remember his life and his experiences. He is not an abstract theologian. He speaks from personal experience about sufferings.

Some suggest that he is psychologically odd. Is he a person who loves pain? No, not at all. Suffering causes him distress. He longs to be free from tribulations. He writes in Romans 8:23, “we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for ... the redemption of our body.” He understands our sufferings. Yet, when pain comes, we rejoice in our sufferings. How?

Is this a view peculiar to himself? Did Paul believe that we should rejoice in suffering, but no one else believed that? So, we do not need to pay attention to what Paul says about himself. However, this argument is not factual. In Matthew 5:11-12, Jesus says to His disciples, “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” James 1:2 says, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.” 1 Peter 4:12-13 says, “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings.”

The New Testament has one consistent message: Rejoice in your sufferings. In some way the Christian faith enables us to face problems of tribulation. When troubles come to you in any way that we can describe, we can handle it. We can deal with it. We can even rejoice in it. Recognize the problem of suffering. Rejoice in the presence of suffering.

C. RELISH THE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING

In verse 3, he writes “knowing that tribulation produces perseverance.” Suffering produces endurance. Notice that he writes “knowing that” NOT “feeling that.” There is an enormous stress currently on feeling in the world and in the church. So-called Christian meetings are designed to produce good feelings and stirring up pleasant emotions. With rhythmic music, optimistic monologues, and varied lighting a euphoric mode is produced. You feel good.

Feelings are important. Sometimes in our gathering we may not emphasize feelings enough. We may not sing joyful psalms with a smile on our faces. When we listen to the Word of God sometimes we should be moved to tears, sometimes to laughter. There may be something wrong with our expression of feelings, but it is never primary. What is more important than what we feel is what we know. According to Martin Luther:

Feelings come, and feelings go and feelings are deceiving.

My warrant is the Word of God, naught else is worth believing.

Though all my heart should feel condemned for want of some sweet token;

There is One greater than my heart, whose Word cannot be broken.

I'll trust in God's unchanging Word, 'till soul and body sever.

For though all things shall pass away, His Word shall stand forever.²

² <https://www.goodreads.com>

We need to be informed. We need to be taught. We need to be instructed. That is the chief purpose of the Christian ministry. God's people must know the truth. In the time of trouble past feelings will not help you. Only what you know and understand of God's truth will protect you.

There was a grieving mother who lost a child very early. She was broken hearted. Her pastor gave her a book on the sovereignty of God. That book changed her and helped her. She was comforted and reassured by understanding the sovereignty of God. Christians can rejoice because of what they know.

What do they know? In God's providence even intense suffering has a good purpose. "Knowing that tribulation produces ..." Suffering for the Christian works something good and worthwhile, some good that could not come about in any other way. You can rejoice in suffering if you are persuaded that it is for a good reason. You can rejoice in suffering if you know that it comes from the God who "upholds heaven and earth with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things come not by chance, but by His Fatherly hand."³

Some years ago a man had to undergo a very serious operation. The operation involved quite a bit of pain and discomfort. He was not upset because he knew it was to heal. That pain of healing was not a problem. For the Christian, suffering always has a good and loving purpose.

Remember Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." All things work together for good. What benefit do you receive from knowing the providence of God? You will be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for what is future have good confidence in your faithful God and Father, that no creature shall separate you from His love, since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.⁴ Recognize the problem of suffering. Rejoice in the presence of suffering. Relish the purpose of suffering.

D. RESPOND TO THE PROCESS OF SUFFERING

Sufferings are a process by which God does something to us. He changes us. We are blessed. He draws us closer to Himself. That is why we can rejoice in suffering. Job 23:10 says, "But He knows the way that I take; When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." This is a picture of a furnace. We are in the furnace. The burning is fierce and painful. But, it is going toward a goal, toward an end.

In Romans 5:3-4, Paul breaks down the process for us. Tribulation (or suffering) produces perseverance (or endurance). Perseverance produces character. Character produces hope. When suffering comes upon us it calls out from us qualities not seen before. In general, suffering produces humility in the presence of God. We cannot sit before Him with contempt or uninterested. Rather we listen. There is prayerfulness and conscious dependence.

In a similar way, we don't appreciate light until it is dark. You're not concerned to go outside with a flashlight until it is dark. These qualities that Paul lists cannot be fully developed until times of hardship. Through sufferings we are able to persevere, to keep

³ *Heidelberg Catechism 27*

⁴ *Heidelberg Catechism 28*

going. We are not falling down, or running away. The Holy Spirit enables us to endure. As we persevere we develop character. Tested Christian character comes through enduring. There is a new depth and strength in us. There is a new maturity and a new steadfastness. Haven't you seen this in people? After they passed through suffering they are different. There is a strength and depth in them. As you endure, pray that it develops your character.

A strengthened character increases our hope. There is fresh confidence. We know that we trust Christ. We know that Jesus loves us. We know that God answers our prayers. We know that His grace is sufficient. Before we knew this in theory, but now we know this in practice. There are too many who can talk about a doctrine, but have not experienced it in their life.

Hope will never fail us. Verse 5 reads, "Now hope does not disappoint." We are strengthened by this. Paul concludes this paragraph by writing, "because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." God's love is poured into our hearts in a special way.

There was a family with many children. One of the children was very ill for quite a long time. The parents were kind and loving to that child. One of the parents said, "Don't misunderstand us. We love all our children equally, but at the moment we love this one more." The ill child needed them more. They had to spend more time with that child.

When we are in trouble, when we need God in an acute sense, then our heavenly Father pours out His love on us. We shouldn't think that He loves us more than His other children. However, we more ardently sense His love like the embrace of a father around his hurting child. In our suffering, God's love is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. As we respond to the process of suffering we are blessed, we are helped, we can rejoice in what God is doing.

Paul explains the divine use of tribulations. Tribulation produces perseverance or endurance, the ability to continue. Perseverance produces character, the quality of being approved. Character produces hope, the expectation of something certain. As you pass through sufferings you know God better than before. You know more of His love, faithfulness, and wisdom. You can say with the psalmist, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted ..." (Psa. 119:71). Recognize the problem of suffering. Rejoice in the presence of suffering. Relish the purpose of suffering. Respond to the process of suffering.

Conclusion: Suffering is inevitable for every human being. Certainly it is inevitable for Christ's servants. Jesus told his disciples as He was preparing them for the future, John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation." You and I need to know that. It will come in a myriad of different ways. We will have tribulation. Paul exhorted the churches to continue in the faith and said, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Act. 14:22). Paul wrote to Timothy, "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12).

Tribulation or suffering is not destructive for God's people. He draws believers to Himself. Suffering is God's unique way of blessing us. He changes us. He brings us closer to Himself. That is why we can rejoice in our sufferings.

Have you prayed to become more Christ-like? Have you thought about what that might mean? Have you thought how God might do this? Often, He makes us more Christ-like by suffering. Our prayers are being answered.

There is the story of a young girl who was losing her sight. She went to the famous British Methodist preacher Dr. W.E. Sangster (1900-1960) crying, "God is taking my sight!"

Sangster said to her, “Don’t let Him take it. Give it to Him.” The preacher was instructing her to think, “You are not taking this from me Lord. I’m giving it to You.” So, you too, give your pain to God. Give your loss to God. Give your burdens to God. Give your sorrows to God. Watch Him turn them into gold, for that is what He does.

C.S. Lewis provides a great analogy. Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild the house. At first, perhaps, you understand what He is doing. He is clearing the drains. He is stopping the leaks in the roof. You knew that these jobs needed doing, so you are not surprised. Then He knocks about the house and that hurts. It doesn’t seem to make sense. What is He doing? The explanation is that He is building a quite different house from the one you thought of. He’s running out a wing here, putting up an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you would be made into a decent little cottage, but He is building a palace. He has come to live in it Himself. He is making a dwelling place of God by the Spirit.

Adversity may be the only diet that reduces a fat head, yet suffering from our Heavenly Father produces endurance, character, and hope. These are occasions by which God’s love is poured into our lives in a special way by His Holy Spirit.

Whatever the pressures on our lives, they are not out of God’s control, but God designs to use them to transform you from what you are to what He wants to make you. Under that pressure you can grow strong. Under that pressure your Christian character can be formed. Under that pressure your Christ-likeness is matured as you learn the principles of suffering, as you experience the pattern of suffering, and as you understand the priorities of suffering.

*Whate’er my God ordains is right; Holy his will abideth;
I will be still whate’er he doth, And follow where he guideth:
He is my God; Though dark my road, He holds me that I shall not fall;
Wherefore to him I leave it all.⁵*

*Though troubles assail us, and dangers affright,
Though friends should all fail us, and foes all unite,
Yet one thing secures us, whatever be tide,
The promise assures us, “The Lord will provide.”⁶*

We can be sure of this because of Calvary. God watched His beloved Son suffer, so infinitely and terribly. That suffering for the child of God produced supreme good. No follower of Jesus should be afraid of a cross. It is not easy to carry, but we know why it is given. We should thank God and go on being prepared for glory, for that is what He is doing. Rejoice in your suffering.

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, You speak to us again and again. We do get muddled and forget that You are so loving and kind. You are our Father and we come to You through Your beloved Son, our Savior. Lord, in our own hearts we give to You our sufferings. We ask You to use those sufferings to make us more and more like Christ. We believe that You will. We shall look back and understand more. Grant those who can hear to rejoice in the presence of suffering, relish the purpose of suffering, and respond to the process of suffering. Because of

⁵ Samuel Rodigast, *Trinity Hymnal*, 94

⁶ John Newton, *Trinity Hymnal*, 79

Your tender mercies, Heavenly Father, I plead that You would grant hope to Your people who are suffering. I pray in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.

Resources: Edward Donnelly, **Suffering**, Romans 5:1-5, Feb. 5, 2017, Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church, NI, www.sermonaudio.com
Edward Donnelly, **Coping with Life**, Romans 5:3-11, 09/12/2010, Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church, NI, www.sermonaudio.com
Sinclair B. Ferguson, **Rejoicing in Suffering?**, Romans 5:1-5, Mar. 22, 2009, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC, www.sermonaudio.com

The Book of Psalms for Singing: 66B, 71D, 119G, 119I

“You can do as you please, but you cannot please as you please.” – Jonathan Edwards