

Hope In Tribulation

Romans 2017

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Open your Bible to Romans 5 for our morning message and if you have forgotten your Bible, we always keep a few at the back and we can share. So just lift up your hand and we should have some to go around.

The best-selling book ever written in English is the great classic "Pilgrim's Progress." If you haven't read it, please do. I have read it five or six times. The great Charles Spurgeon read it twice every year. I think he had it memorized. It's a make-believe story of a man who at first becomes a Christian and then he makes progress along the road that ends up in the Celestial City, and along the way he meets various enemies like Giant Despair, who lives in Doubting Castle. It's very symbolic. He also meets friends like Mr. Faithful that helps him out and encourages him. And I like that picture. I have often said that the road that Christians take on the way to heaven takes them up great mountains of hope and glory, but also down in deep valleys of gloom and despair. We go through green, verdant, living forests but also very dry deserts, don't we? We experience pleasant springtime and fall, but also very cold winter and hot summers on the way to heaven. But the good thing is that it does end in heaven. Once we are on that road, we will make it.

Today we're going to look at how as Christians we can face some of the tough times, the tribulations that all Christians face on the road to the Celestial City. We'll concentrate our thoughts on Romans 5:3 and 4, and say maybe one or two words about verse 5. He begins by saying, "And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations." Now that first phrase points back to what we looked at in verses 1 and 2 last week. Verses 1 and 2 tells us great blessings that we can rejoice in, but Paul is honest to say not only are there blessings we can rejoice in but there are also tribulations we don't rejoice in but they are for our good once we learn the secret.

I call your attention to the word "tribulations" found more than once in this section. Paul wrote the original Greek language and the word there is "thlipsis." That's kind of a tongue twister, a little hard to say and even harder to live through. Thlipsis, literally it means something that is pressed together like an old-fashioned printing press. We get the picture, we go through times of pressure at work or in other situations and you feel, "I'm being pressed together and I don't like it." Pressure situations and tribulations is just one

of several words all beginning with T that describe this situation. We go through tribulations, trouble, tough times, temptations. Tribulations and trials.

Now according to the Bible, in one sense everybody goes through tough times whether you are a believer or not. It says in the book of Job, "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." But the tribulations that Paul speaks about here are ones that are only for Christians and that in addition to the ones everybody goes through, we go through some that non-Christians don't. So what he is saying here applies to Christians. It's good to know in advance that these have been promised to us already so we shouldn't be surprised. In fact, it later says in the New Testament, "Don't be surprised by the trial you're going through."

Let me quote you these verses. Acts 14:22, it says, "strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith," making progress, "and saying, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.'" So again, Pilgrim's Progress means if you're going to make progress, you're going to have to face these tribulations. Some of you are in tribulations right now and you're saying, "Pastor, you've got my attention. I'm listening with both ears." But if you're not going through one today, the Bible says you will tomorrow or next week. They are out there waiting for you. The Bible says through many tribulations.

Jesus also said this, John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation." He promised it. He's out there waiting for you at your next tribulation. You don't know what it will be. It's very possible that someone here will face a major tribulation in the next 24 hours, or the next 24 days. Don't be surprised but also don't give up hope. God is waiting for you there.

Thirdly, 1 Thessalonians 3:3 says, "no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this." It's been appointed. Just like the Bible says it's been appointed unto man once to die, we are also appointed to go through tribulations and trials. God has planned it. He has marked the day of appointment on the calendar so you can be ready for it.

Now according to the Bible, there are three general categories of the tribulations that Christians face. The first one is persecution, in other words, tribulation because we are following the Lord Jesus. Again, this is something that a non-Christian doesn't face. He's not following Christ. Some of you have memorized the great Beatitudes of Matthew 5, that's the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Did you notice what the last two are? They are both the same where Jesus said, "Blessed are you when you suffer persecution for my name's sake." Rejoice because this is an honor. 2 Timothy 3:12 says, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." Jesus said, "Count the cost." It's going to happen and it happens in various degrees. It has been given to you. Philippians 1:29 says, "to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." We suffer persecution because we are a Christian.

Now, over in 1 Peter, it says sometimes we suffer not for Christ's sake but because we are fools and because of our sins but sometimes we suffer persecution not because of our sins but because of our Savior. We need to keep following him and what's the right attitude? Acts 5:41. The early Christians were persecuted, they were thrown in jail, they were beaten with sticks, and here is their response, "They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name." That's the right attitude when we suffer persecution because we are Christians.

Now, there are degrees of this persecution. I guess the minor one would be where someone simply ignores us and says, "Well, you go your way and good for you, but I'll go my way." That's the mildest form. Or we lose friends when we become Christians, maybe even relatives will give us a cold shoulder, they won't invite us over to Thanksgiving, they want to keep a distance from us. Or we are laughed at and they say, "Oh, only a fool would become a Christian. Christians are stupid idiots." So that's mild persecution. Or word gets around at work that you're a Christian so when it comes time to be promoted, someone else gets the promotion or the pay raise and you know why it is, because you are a Christian and you say, "That's not fair." Of course that's not fair from their point of view but God looks upon it as a blessing. You are being persecuted for his name's sake. He'll make up the difference.

Or, then it gets worse and then gradually laws are passed to take away some of our Christian liberties. That's going to happen and that's happening in other parts of the world as well. We can expect it here. In other parts of the world, Christians are thrown in prison. Did you know that? They are arrested because they dare say, "I am a Christian." Then when they are thrown in some dirty dungeon, sometimes they are beaten, they are tortured, or even they are put to death. That's how the early church started. One of the early Christians named Tertullian said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." It now produces more Christians. And you look over the last 2,000 years, there have been tens of thousands, no, hundreds of thousands, millions of Christians that have gone to the torture stake, they have been burnt alive, they have been martyred in other ways, but that's not just back then, it happens today, extreme persecution, people dying for the sake of the Lord Jesus, and that might happen in America one day.

So there is the first kind of tribulations, but then there is another kind. You see, that's tribulation because we are a Christian, the second one happens only to Christians, Hebrews 12 says it's when we go through tough times not just because we're Christians but because we've sinned. It's called chastening. It's what parents do to their children when they misbehave. They spank them or send them to their room without supper or take away some privilege because they've misbehaved. We are children of God if we are Christians, Hebrews 12 says he chastens us for our good because he's a loving Father. It's not retribution from an angry judge but it comes to us from a loving Father for our good; and it takes many forms, just like parents can discipline their children in many forms, our heavenly Father does that. Are you being chastened? You see, when you go through a tough time, first find out is this persecution, is it chastening, and if it's chastening, submit to it, learn the lesson. You see, it's for your good to teach you not to sin.

Ah, but there's a third category of tribulations and it comes under the heading of afflictions. We are now speaking about something different than chastening. We deserve chastening but that doesn't mean all affliction is because we've sinned. Read the book of Job. That was the lesson. His friends were saying there must be some big sin in your life to bring this on, but there wasn't any.

So learn the lesson. First discern is it persecution. Secondly, is it chastening. But thirdly, it may not be chastening and you say, "Why am I going through this tribulation?" It might be a physical affliction. It might be a major financial challenge. It might be an emotional struggle where you just can't sleep and you're going through great stress and you search your memory banks and you find out it's not because of some special sin, why do we go through this. That's what we're looking at this morning. All these afflictions, whatever they are, are actually for the good of Christians. Later in the book of Romans we'll look at that golden verse that says, "All things work together for good for those that love God and are called according to His purpose." Persecution is for our good. Chastening is for our good. And also afflictions, they test us.

Now let me show you two parallel passages later in the New Testament so put your hand or the morning bulletin in Romans 5. First turn with me to the book of James 1. James was the half-brother of the Lord Jesus and he says something here very important for us to learn as we face tribulations and trials. Look at James 1, starting at verse 2, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing." Skip down to verse 12, "Blessed is the man who endures temptation." Now the word for "trial, temptation," all talking about the same thing, tribulations. "Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."

Next turn just a few more pages over to 1 Peter 1 and you'll notice the parallels with Romans 5, starting in verse 6, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Do you see the parallels? In each of these sections, Paul, James and Peter are writing to people going through great tribulations but he says you can rejoice. Why? Because it's for your good. It produces this perseverance, this endurance, or as Romans says, this perseverance and character.

Go back to Romans now. He says you can rejoice in this and hope, because tribulation produces perseverance. Now I call your attention to the word "perseverance." Again, the original Greek word is "hypomone." Well, what does that mean? Well, the King James version translates it as "patience," and it's included in that. We do need patience. If I can spin it upon you in a way, it's not just doctors that need patience. Doctors need patients, of course, to pay the bills but doctors need patience to deal with some of their patients who are ornery and maybe impatient. We need patience. We are not born as patient people. Have you ever seen a patient baby? I never have. When that baby is hungry,

needs a change, is sick or whatever, that baby doesn't sit up and say, "Mommy, I can wait. Come back in one or two hours. I know you're very busy." No, that baby wants that help now and that's simply a symptom, we are born impatient. God has to give us patience and how does he give it to us? Well, sometimes we say, "I want patience and I want it now!" That's not God's way. God puts us in tribulations, as it says here, that produce it in us when it doesn't come natural to us.

I came across this little piece of doggerel poem that I'll recite for you. "Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can/ Seldom found in woman, and never found in man." There is some truth in those words but the word "hypomene" means more than simply an acquiescent patience, you know, you feel like you're laying on a beach and everything is, "I can be patient. I can wait." That's not what the word means. It's more than passive acquiescence, brethren, it means active perseverance. It means stick-to-it. It means endurance; keeping on keeping on; not giving up. In fact, instead of being bowled over by the tribulation, you see it as a challenge to now stiffen up your resolve and fight back, as it were, with perseverance.

Now, when I was preparing the message, I said, "I've got an illustration of this of a great athlete who had learned the secret of being a great athlete." You see, some people, let's say they are playing football, when someone begins to tackle them, they automatically get weak and they give up and they are tackled. But that's not how a running back scores. Whenever he is about to be tackled, he doubles up, and the example I thought of was perhaps the greatest running back in all history whose name is still whispered in hushed awe in locker rooms around the world: Jim Brown. Some of us are old enough to remember him. Remember, for nine years he was Most Valuable Player. He still has records that have never been broken. He learned the secret when someone would go to tackle him, he would fight back aggressively and it usually took two, three, or four people to tackle him. You know, he held the record for many decades of average carrying 5.5 yards per carry. They'd have to gang-tackle the guy, and I remember in interviews he'd say, "I learned that when they came after me to tackle me, I'd fight back" Now, do you see the illustration? Tribulation produces that in us when we say, "I'm not going to cave in, I'm going to persevere. I'm going to just keep on going"; not with apathy but with perseverance and rugged determination.

Now in theology we speak of the perseverance of the saints as the fifth of the Five Points of Calvinism. What does that mean? We persevere in faith and in repentance and in obedience. It says in the book of Revelation in the midst of trials, it says, "Here is the perseverance of the saints." The perseverance of the saints also is in trials and tribulations. We persevere. We don't give up. Oh, sometimes we fail but God picks us up, throws us back in the race and we persevere. We keep on.

Now the question at this juncture is this: how is perseverance produced by tribulations? You would think tribulations would take the wind out of our sails and we'd give up. No, here's the secret: tribulations humble us. Yes, it takes the wind out of our sails and takes all hope in ourselves out of ourselves, it humbles us so that we now don't trust in ourselves. Are you listening? We now trust only in God. We are at the end of ourselves.

That's what tribulation is meant to do to us when we say, "I can't make it another day. God, help me!" That's what tribulation is doing, it is forcing you to rely on God's strength and not your own, and through this process we build spiritual muscles. We have some men here in the church that work out. I am not one of them. I envy them. But some of you men are great athletes and I have several of you in mind here. Go and feel their muscles. That didn't come about overnight. They pumped iron and they know the secret, you just work until you sweat, and any physical worker will tell you that's what builds muscles. You go to the very length and the extreme and that builds up the muscles like that. You know the little jingle, "No pain, no gain." The same thing is true in the Christian life, brethren.

By the way, there is another illustration of that in physical therapy. Some of us know what that's like. You've been in an accident and then you're in the hospital. You're at home, you're on crutches. A physical therapist comes and helps you out and you say, "I can't walk," and she says, "Take another step." "It'll hurt." "Stretch those muscles lest they atrophy. Stretch it." "It hurts!" By the way, I have been there several times and I know that physical therapy can hurt but it helps. If it hurts, it will help.

Now, there's the illustration. It says here tribulation brings about perseverance and this is necessary for us to become spiritually mature. The great John Calvin said, "It is certain that those who do not learn patience, do not make good progress." God puts us in the fires, it says in the book of James and in Peter. Fire is actually good, not just to cook with or to keep your hands warm on a cold winter's night, God has put fire in nature for another unusual purpose. Let me tell you what it is. The fire rangers out in Yosemite know what it is because early in the 20th century when they'd see a fire, they'd say, "We've got to go and put it out. It'll burn down the big Redwoods." Then they learned that without those fires, those giant Redwoods and Sequoias wouldn't grow properly. What they did was they did tests and they found out that the fire will burn off some of the bark in such a way that it will release some sap and it will open up some of those cones. This is good for the health of the tree. So they actually will start certain fires and do it in a guarded way for the good of the tree. The fire will help the tree become more healthy. The fires that we go through as Christians will make us stronger, so don't run from the fire, seize the fire and say, "Lord, you've got a purpose for me being in the fire. It's for my good so, Lord, I submit to you."

There is another illustration. Thomas Robinson, the writer, put it like this, "The flood in Noah's day not only did not overwhelm the ark, but it raised it higher. Tribulation not only does not drive us from Christ, it draws us nearer to Christ." Do you see the secret here? These things are really for our good because they release from us all hope in our own strength so that we now depend only in God's strength and that builds up our faith and our perseverance and our character. I'll put it like this: the tears of tribulation water the garden of spiritual perseverance and that makes it good for us. So accept them by faith, dear brethren, and ask God to use these tribulations to make you a stronger Christian.

Also, according to Matthew 13, tribulation sorts out true Christians from false Christians. You know the story. Jesus told about a farmer that was planting seed, just kind of throwing some here and throwing some over there, and he said some fell on stony ground, and it says that's a picture of different kinds of people that hear the Gospel, and it says some seed falls on the stony ground and then when it got real hot or really cold, that it died. He says that's the kind of person that hears the word of God and says, "I'm a Christian," but it specifically says, "But when tribulation comes, they fall away and they walk away from Christianity."

Tribulation sorts out the true Christians from the false Christians. You see, a false Christian when tribulation, especially persecution comes, they say, "I didn't count on this," and so they leave. They say, "I don't want to be a Christian anymore." But a true Christian will say, "I can face those tribulations." He will see it all the way through to the end.

Let me show you something else. Turn back to 2 Corinthians 12. Remember, the sections that we've just read, Romans, James, 1 Peter, all say that we can rejoice in these tough times, even in the midst of tears of tribulations once you learn the secret. Look at 2 Corinthians 12. Paul is talking about a thorn in the flesh that's been given to him, verse 7. We're not sure what it was but it was something very painful, very annoying. So he pled with the Lord, verse 8, over and over and over again, "Take it away, Lord!" Do you ever pray like that with your affliction? With tears, "Lord, take it away! I can't go on one more day with this stress or this affliction," or whatever. Paul felt like that and God replied to him, "My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in weakness." So he says, "Paul, I'm not taking it away from you." But Paul learned the secret. Look at the rest of verse 9, "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong." You say, "Paul, you madman." No. He's learned the secret. In the midst of trials and temptations and tribulations, it is producing something in us that is good for us and when we see that, we can say, "Bring it on. Bring it on. It's for my good. I can trust God that he is in the midst of these afflictions with me." Have you learned that secret in whatever tribulation you are facing right now?

Go back to Romans. The chain isn't over yet. Look at verse 4. It says we glory in tribulations, tribulation produces perseverance, verse 4, perseverance produces the next link: character. The word is translated "character" in the New King James version, the ESV and the NIV, the NASB translates it as "proven character." Phillip's translation has it "mature character," and the Living Bible has it "strength of character," which is probably more accurate than the King James that says simply "experience." What does it mean? It means maturity. It means integrity. Or to put it in street language, it means strong stuff. That's what God wants to produce in his children. He wants us to grow up and be mature.

The Greek word here he uses is "dokime," which literally means something that passes the test, and you remember, that's what James and Peter are talking about. This is what tribulation does, it tests us for a purpose. Just like students will study their lessons and

they take the test, the examination, and they get a grade and if it's above a certain mark, they pass, and if it's below a certain mark, they fail, God puts us through tests as well regularly and the tests are these tribulations that we face. We learn about this in the Bible. It's like our classroom. God will put you through a test. You know, it's like the teacher will give you a lecture and say, "Now pay attention. There will be a test." Dear brethren, I'm instructing you as your teacher this morning, "There will be a test." Not from me, but from God. He will put you through tribulations. Please remember then what you are learning now. There will be a test. How will you survive it?

Now, 1 Peter describes the test as like gold in the fire being refined. My mind goes back to when I actually saw that. A good friend of mine used to work for the railroads and he retired from that and turned his hobby into his next career. His hobby was making gold jewelry and he said, "Curt, come into my shop," and he showed me these gold nuggets that were mixed with ore and various things and I said, "That's gold?" He said, "Yeah, there's gold in them there nuggets, Curt." So what he did was he got out this stone crucible and he turned on a blowtorch underneath it and he dropped in some of those lumps of ore and he said, "Now watch it closely. This is going to take a little while." And he heated it up several hundred degrees and gradually those nuggets began to crack open into little bitty pieces and you could see a little bit of the shining gold in there. Then a little smoke began to come out of the rock, and then the heat would burn up that rock and then all that was left was simply pure gold and you'd look in there and it was like a mirror. It was smooth on top and he said, "Now that is 100% gold. It's passed the test of the fire."

That's what Peter is talking about. That's the tribulations we go through, the fiery trial of our test and it burns away the slag. Job 23:10 and Job was going through the fire and he said, "When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." And brethren, it doesn't come about overnight. Ignore these fools that say, "Oh, you can get spiritual maturity immediately in some great second blessing." Baloney! It's not an elevator trip to the top, it's a long hard climb up the stairs and sometimes on your hands and knees.

Going through the fire. Let me put it like this and I want you to think about this. You can detect how much spiritual character a Christian has under the heavy burden by how he prays. And examine your prayers. If he's carrying a heavy burden, is he praying, "Lord, lighten the burden!" Or is he praying, "Lord, give me strength to carry this burden!" What are your prayers made of when you have a heavy burden? Now there are times we're at the breaking point and we say, "Lord, lighten the burden!" There are verses in the Bible that says God will give us relief, but when we're feeling this is too heavy for us, remember what Paul said, "When I am weak, then I am strong." Learn to rely upon God's strength and he will give it to you and then you can be able to carry the burden even more.

Once every year or two, I'm asked to provide a character reference for somebody I know, usually on a job application, and they often ask you, "Now, what are his strong points? What are some of his weak points? Would you hire this person? Would you recommend him?" How would an angel fill out a character reference for you? Have you ever thought

about that? What if he came flying in and he was invisible and he had a clipboard with a piece of paper and said, "Now how does Such-and-such, how does Mary or Bobby pass this test or that test?" He says, "Well, on a scale of 1 to 10, I'll give him a 5, a 3 over here, an 8 on that." How would you rank in an angelic character reference?

Well, we find one character reference in Philippians 2:22 where Paul alludes to Timothy who had served with him and served the Philippians, and he said this, "you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel." He didn't turn tail and run, he proved his character. Do we prove our character? It's proven not on the mountaintop but in the valley, not in the forest, but in the desert, in the crucible of the fire, and God is using your tough times, brethren, to build spiritual character.

Look at the verse here: it produces endurance, it produces character. God's working on you and it ain't always easy. Sometimes it just hurts. It's meant to. You've heard the old joke about the sculpture that had a huge chunk of marble and his friend said, "What are you doing?" Well, I'm chiseling out an elephant. "Well, how do you do that?" Well, I just simply knock off everything that doesn't look like an elephant. Well, God's working on us to knock off everything that doesn't look like Jesus Christ and it's like a master sculpture, he hammers and that chip goes flying and if that marble could talk, it would say, "Ouch!" He says, "Shut up. I'm working on you." And then he chips away, he chips away, and then he gets sandpaper and then he gets out a fine silk cloth and polishes it so it's smooth. This is what God does in the life of a Christian through tribulations. It hurts and sometimes it pounds on you, and other times it's just sandpaper that grates on you, but do you know what it's like when he gets out the soft rag and polishes it? He says, "That looks good." Now it's beginning to resemble Jesus.

Now let me take the metaphor of chiseling on marble and change it to another story. The great Billy Graham who died recently, he used to tell the story of a Christian that was walking down the street of a big city once where they were building a huge cathedral and it was almost finished. It was really tall and about the only thing left was the top of the steeple way up in the sky, and he noticed one of the workman was down here on the street with a block of marble chiseling away on it. So the man said, "Well, what are you doing with that?" He said, "Oh, I'm working on it down here so it'll fit in up there." That's what God is doing on our lives. He is working on you down here on earth so you will fit in up there in heaven.

Let's begin to wrap it up. Fellow pilgrims, keep making progress along that road that leads to the Celestial City. Keep on keeping on. Keep on persevering through those dark valleys and the dry deserts and the dangerous canyons. God has given you a map, he's given you a Holy Spirit to lead you. Don't give up. Keep making progress in the midst of the tribulations. You see, rough as it is, it's better to be on this road that leads to glory than on the other road that leads to eternal hell. Just remember, you are on the road and you're going to make it. He's going to guarantee it. He's going to lead you there. Better to be on that road.

But what if you're not a Christian here today? You are on that road that leads to destruction. You are on the road that will lead you to eternal hell fire. What does the Bible say? The Bible says, "Get off that road," we call that repentance, "and get on the right road," that's called faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That road will lead you to heaven. But if you're not a Christian, let me also give you these words as we close: get off the wrong road and get on the right road but be forewarned, if you get on this road, you will face tribulations but it's worth it. You will make it to the Celestial City.

Shall we pray?

Our Father and our God, we thank you that you are the one that holds the hammer and the chisel that is working on us as blocks of marble. You are putting us through the fire, you are building up our character by weakening us so that we might be strong in your strength. Give us the faith to see what you are doing so that we can humbly submit and trust you. In Jesus' name. Amen.