

Exulting in Tribulation

Romans 5:3-5

ABC 9/14/14

Open to Rom 5. What happens to make a person a Christian, a child of God? 1st, the gospel is made known to him; the historical fact that God sent His Son into the world to die for sinners & He rose victoriously from the dead for all who believe in Him. The Holy Spirit opens the heart to see in this gospel that Jesus is trustworthy & more to be desired than anything else. & so the heart trusts in Jesus for all that God promises in & through Him. When that faith happens, we are justified before God. In other words, by faith the Spirit of God unites us to Christ so that His death becomes our death & His life becomes our life. God laid on Him our sins & gave to us His righteousness. He takes our sin, though He committed none. & we take His righteousness, though we have none of our own. & so by the faith that unites us to Jesus we stand before God forgiven & righteous with the imputed righteousness of Jesus Himself. On the basis of that great foundation that makes us Christians, Paul says in Rom 5:1 that **we have peace with God** & says that we now stand in grace & exult **in hope of the glory of God**. This is where all of the Christian life is moving. Justification by faith is designed to help us exult **in hope of the**

glory of God. We are reckoned right before God so that we can finally be with God & enjoy Him forever. But before that eternal day, something else comes to every Christian: Tribulations. **5:1-**

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I always dread preaching about suffering because preaching is like throwing a boomerang. I proclaim God's Word to you, but it comes back & hits me 1st. & who wants to be hit with the thought of *exulting in suffering*? I'd rather not have to practice what I preach on this topic. But trials are a fact of living in this fallen world, so we all need to learn what God's Word tells us about how to handle them. The problem is, the biblical approach to trials goes against human reasoning! Paul says to **exult** in tribulations. Maybe we could explain him away as being a bit carried away, but then what do we do with Jesus? He tells us,

Blessed are you when people insult you & persecute you, & falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice & be glad, for your reward in heaven is great (Mt 5:11-12).

But it's not just Paul & Jesus. James says the same thing:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance (1:2-3).

Peter agrees. **To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation (1 Pt 4:13-14).**

When you trace the behavior of the apostles through Acts, you find that they really did this! When the Sanhedrin flogged them, we read, **they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name** (Acts 5:41). When Paul & Silas were illegally beaten, imprisoned, & put in stocks in Philippi, we read that **about midnight Paul & Silas were praying & singing hymns of praise to God** (Acts 16:25). Paul told the Corinthians,

Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:9b-10).

& the author of Hebrews reminds us,

For you showed sympathy to the prisoners & accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession & a lasting one (Heb 10:34).

We can't escape the fact that this strange response of exulting in trials is the teaching throughout the NT. But if you're like me, you have to admit it's not your default setting! There's nothing more unnatural than to boast, glory, or rejoice in afflictions. It's something we try to avoid. However, once we've been justified, we have a whole new perspective. We no longer see suffering as an exercise in futility, something that takes

away our hope. Once we have the anchor for our soul (Heb 6:19), it holds when tribulation comes. It's not that we just stoically grin & bear it; it goes beyond endurance to rejoicing in tribulations. I believe we all have something to learn here. We have found the pearl of great price, & no matter how much pain we have to go through, as bad as things may be, these things aren't worthy to be compared with the joy that God has set before us in Christ. If we lose everything the world can give, we still have that priceless pearl of our salvation. Because God has redeemed us, we're able to rejoice no matter what life brings. In the flow of Rom 5, Paul is continuing to list some of the blessings of being justified by faith (5:1-2). He might be answering an unexpressed objection to his teaching in vs 1 & 2:

You say that you have peace with God & now stand in His grace. But why doesn't God protect you from trials? If you're the object of His grace, shouldn't you be enjoying a trouble-free life?

Paul is showing us why God brings or allows trials into the lives of His children. It's through the trials, we grow in endurance, character, & hope. & our hope will not disappoint, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. We can exult in trials if we develop

God's perspective & keep in mind that tough times don't nullify His love for us. Are these **tribulations** just when we're persecuted or suffer for our faith? I don't believe so. They include that (Christians in Iraq/Joel in Inner Mongolia), but they're also the everyday hard times & trials that everyone experiences. Paul knows that anything that we experience in a fallen world by the way of tribulation falls into the category of tribulation. Anything that makes life harder & threatens your faith in the goodness & power & wisdom of God is tribulation. But there's no tribulation we experience which we can't rejoice in. We are able to rejoice in present suffering because we know God is for us & therefore nothing can be against us.

1. To exult in our tribulations we must have God's perspective because He's using them to shape our character into the image of Christ. What does **tribulation** actually mean? It was the word used for pressing grapes or olives to extract the juice or oil. From that came the sense of pressure that squeezes people. To get a handle on what Paul means & how we can grow in this strange virtue, let's look at 4 thoughts:

A. Exulting in trials isn't an automatic response: It requires deliberate focus. Grumbling about trials is far more common than rejoicing or exulting in them. Whether it's being caught in

a traffic jam or being diagnosed with cancer, our knee-jerk response is to grumble, not to exult. We see this with the Israelites after the exodus. God brought them out of slavery in Egypt & they celebrated God's salvation with singing & dancing. Then we read that they went 3 days in the wilderness & found only bitter water. Did they rejoice & exult, saying, *Let's see how the Lord will provide?* No, we read, **So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, *What shall we drink?*** (Ex 15:24). & so it went for the next 40 years. Paul uses their story as a warning to us in 1 Cor, so that we won't grumble in our trials, as they did (10:6-11). Instead, in Phil 2:14-15, Paul exhorts us to follow the example he set when he was falsely accused, beaten, & wrongly imprisoned:

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless & innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked & perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world.

We live in a grumbling world. If we don't grumble, but exult in **tribulations**, whether they're minor irritations at work or the major trials in our lives, we're going to shine like lights in the darkness. But this doesn't happen automatically. It requires right thinking. Whatever may bring the squeezing pressure or pain of tribulation, Paul says that we can have reason to exult.

B. Exulting in trials doesn't mean denying the pain. The Bible doesn't tell us to deny reality, put on a happy face, & pretend we're just praising the Lord, when in fact we're deeply hurting. Later in Romans, Paul says, **weep with those who weep** (12:15). He doesn't say, *Exhort those who weep to exult in their trials!* Paul acknowledges the tension when he describes himself, **as sorrowful yet always rejoicing** (2 Cor 6:10). He goes on to describe how in his trials his emotions were all over the chart, but he had God's comfort.

I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction. For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus (2 Cor 7:4b-6).

Undergirding all of Paul's sufferings was genuine joy in the Lord. The author of Hebrews recognizes the same tension when he says, **All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness** (12:11). There's nothing wrong with feeling sorrow or pain or grief in the midst of suffering. We shouldn't deny these feelings in an attempt to look more spiritual. But through our tears & pain, we should be sustained by our hope in the promises of God. We

know that He is sovereign over all things & that He cares for us. Exulting in our tribulations doesn't mean denying they hurt.

C. Exulting in trials is possible when we keep in mind that God is using the trials to shape our character. 3b-4

Don't miss the word, **knowing**. This is part of the right thinking we need. As Christians we know that God is using the tribulations to shape our character. We rejoice in suffering because of what we know about God & His plan. We know He's sovereign & that He's using these trials to make us more like Jesus.

Note the chain of thought here: **Tribulation** (literally *pressure*) brings about **perseverance** (endurance or steadfastness). **Perseverance** comes from the words meaning to remain under. It means to stay under the load of something, to endure it. If we picture **tribulation** as a great weight of pressure squeezing us, then perseverance is holding up under the pressure, remaining steadfast & constant & not caving in or giving up in the stress. We don't develop endurance unless we go through trials. You don't have to endure when everything's going your way. It's not difficult to trust God when you're experiencing nothing but blessings. But will you endure by faith when life is hard? Will you trust God & submit to Him when you lose your

job or when you're going through a hard time in your marriage or when you're diagnosed with a serious disease? If something happens in your life that's hard & painful & frustrating & disappointing, &, by grace, your faith looks to Jesus & to His power & sufficiency & wisdom & love, & you don't give in to bitterness & resentment & complaining, then your faith endures & perseveres. It becomes stronger the same way tempered steel is stronger. Tribulation is like the fire that tempers the steel of faith. The fiery tests are meant by God to make your faith unbreakable. It's as we persevere through suffering that **proven character** is produced. This is a single word in Greek that means something that has passed the test. It comes out approved. The idea is that when you put metal through a fiery testing & it comes out the other side persevering & enduring, what you call that metal is *proven*, *authentic*, or *genuine*. When you go through tribulation & your faith is tested, & it perseveres, what you get is a wonderful sense of authenticity. You feel that your faith must be real. It's been tested. It's stood the test with endurance. & it's therefore, real, authentic, proven, & genuine. When you go through a trial trusting in God, your faith becomes proven. You've been through the test & passed. You know by experience that you

can lean on His faithfulness. It proves that you're not just a flash in the pan Christian, like the seed on the shallow soil, which faded quickly under the heat of trials. **Perseverance** brings about **proven character**.

Then Paul adds that **proven character** produces **hope**. This brings us back full circle to vs 2, where we who've been justified by faith **exult in hope of the glory of God**. It's the same hope, but now it's stronger. It works like this: The initial hope comes from understanding the blessing of being justified by faith. We begin the Christian life full of faith & hope. Then we get hit by difficult trials. We cling to God like we've never clung before. We prove His faithfulness & He develops proven character in us as we endure. We come out the other side more certain of the hope of eternal glory with Him than we were before the **tribulations**. Our hope is stronger because it's been tempered in the flames of affliction. That leads to the last thought under this heading:

D. Exulting in tribulations requires developing & remembering the hope of heaven. Our hope isn't in a trouble-free life, but rather in a glorious, trouble-free eternity. To exult in our present trials, we have to keep our focus on the hope of the

glory of God, which we'll experience in heaven. Paul put it this way:

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Cor 4:16-18).

Paul could maintain hope & not lose heart in what he describes as **momentary, light affliction** because his focus was on the eternal hope of heaven. Your decaying body with its graying & thinning hair, failing eyesight & hearing, & increasing aches & pains, are giving you the clear message that you're going to one day die. Either you have the hope of heaven because you've trusted in Jesus or you have no hope. The only way to exult in suffering is to develop & remember the sure hope of heaven. It's certain because it's based on Jesus' resurrection & His promise to return & take us to be with Him (Jn 14:1-3).

Paul then adds, **& hope does not disappoint**. Literally, *hope does not make us ashamed*. The phrase is rooted in the OT. In Ps 22:4-5, the psalmist cries out in distress, **In You our fathers trusted; they trusted & You delivered them. To You they cried out & were delivered; in You they trusted & were not disappointed**. That last phrase is literally, *they were not put to*

shame. In Ps 25:3, David proclaims, **Indeed, none of those who wait for You will be ashamed**. The idea is, if you trust in God & He fails, you're going to be put to shame. Others will mock & say, *You trusted in God, but He didn't come through! What a joke!* As Ps 22:7-8 says, **All who see me sneer at me; They separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying, *Commit yourself to the Lord; let Him deliver him; Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him.*** Remember that Ps 22 is a picture of Jesus on the cross. His murderers were gloating in His death. Sometimes God permits His children to go through terrible persecution & even martyrdom. They are only vindicated in the final resurrection. So if heaven isn't real, we'll be put to eternal shame. We'll be eternally disappointed. But if it is true, (& the resurrection of Jesus guarantees it is), then even if we suffer persecution & a martyr's death, our hope won't disappoint or put us to shame. We will wear the victor's crown in the glory of heaven throughout all eternity. Thus, to exult in tribulations, develop & maintain God's perspective: He's using trials to shape our character & prepare us for heaven. May God help us see how the gospel transforms our pain so that we'll be ready to respond rightly to hard times. *But*, a critic may ask, *what*

about God's love? If God really loves you, wouldn't He spare you all of this suffering?

2. To exult in trials, we must know that tribulations don't nullify

God's great love for us. The reason that hope doesn't

disappoint is **because the love of God has been poured out**

within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us

(5). Paul is talking about God's love for us, as vs 6-8 plainly

show. He didn't see suffering as an indication that God doesn't

love us. Just the opposite, as he'll show at the end of chpt 8

where he says that neither tribulation or distress or persecution

or famine or nakedness or peril or sword can separate us from

God's great love. Keep your focus on God's love & you can

exult in trials. Paul says that God's love **has been poured out**

within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

The tense of **poured out** indicates past action with continuing

results. **Given** points to the fact that the Holy Spirit is given to

every believer at the moment of salvation. Because the Holy

Spirit is God, it means that God Himself comes to dwell in our

hearts. The Spirit makes us aware of God's great love in

sending His own Son to die for our sins. We have an abundant,

continued supply of His love refreshing & sustaining us,

especially in our trials. This experience of God's love comes to

us as we contemplate & meditate on the amazing truth of the gospel: That the Father gave His eternal Son, who willingly took the punishment we deserved so that God can be both just & the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. As Charles Wesley put it, *Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me!* Don't ever get over the wonder of it! Let the Spirit wash you daily in the amazing love of God! In your trials & tribulations, whether minor or great, remember Jesus' words just before the cross:

A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they keep My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me (Jn 15:20-21).

Did Jesus' tribulations even hint that the Father didn't love Him? Of course not! Neither do yours. To exult in them, drink deeply of God's great love, poured out in your heart by the Holy Spirit whom He gave to you.

James Boice concludes his sermon on these vs by telling how the church in China grew exponentially during the persecution under the Communists. An American student was going to Hong Kong to study the Chinese church. Before he left the States, a friend asked him, *If God loves the Chinese church so much, why did He allow so much suffering to come upon it?* The student had no answer.

But after he had traveled to China & had talked in depth with many Chinese Christians, he decided to go back to America & ask his friend this question: *If God loves the American church*

*so much, why hasn't He allowed us to suffer like the church in China?*¹

It's a good question because trials aren't to harm us. Rather, God uses them to shape us into the image of Christ. He uses them to strengthen our hope of heaven. Trials are a part of the **all things** that He works **together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose** (8:28).

Salvation isn't like receiving just one gift at Christmas but gift after gift, all wrapped up together. The 1st package is our justification & when we open it we find inside it another: Peace with God. Inside that is access into His presence & inside that is the ability to rejoice in glorifying the glory of God. Inside that gift we find there's joy in the midst of tribulation, & that very tribulation gives us another gift: perseverance. Tear off the ribbon from that gift & there's another one, which is the character that perseverance gives us, & within that gift is hope that will never embarrass or disappoint us. Finally, we open one more present & it's the love of God poured out liberally into our hearts by the grace of God. Amazing, isn't it?

I don't know what you're currently going through, what trials & tribulations you are facing. But when we're justified by faith we

¹ *Romans: Volume 2: The Reign of Grace*, pp 533-534

have a new way of looking at the trials of life. We can truthfully say in the midst of a trial,

Father, thank You for this token that You are my Father & that you love me. Thank You for breaking my heart so that I could again see that Your love is better than any love that can exist in this world. Thank You, Father, for showing me again that You care so much for me that You'll wean me from the affections of the world to trust in & love You only?

Hymn #275 is *How Firm a Foundation*. Vs 3 says, *When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie, My grace all sufficient shall be your supply. The flame shall not hurt you; I only design your dross to consume & your gold to refine.* His purpose in our trials is to refine us into the image of His Son & our Savior.