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JOYFUL, PRAYERFUL PERSEVERANCE

Romans 12:12

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Romans, Lesson 83

Joyful, Prayerful Perseverance Romans 12:12

Over the years, I've encountered many Christians who think that God is supposed to protect them from all trials. They will say, "I just don't understand why I'm going through these trials. I'm reading the Bible every day. I'm trying to obey the Lord. Why is He allowing these things to happen to me?" Their expectation is that following the Lord is supposed to exempt us from trials.

I don't know which Bible version these folks are reading because from cover to cover the Bible makes it clear that godly people often suffer intense trials. Job was the most righteous man on the earth in his day, but look at what he suffered! David was a man after God's own heart, and yet he spent the better part of his twenties running for his life from the mad King Saul. Daniel was a faithful, godly prophet, who witnessed boldly about God to pagan kings, and yet as an old man, he got thrown into the lions' den. And there are many other examples in the Old Testament of godly people who suffered terribly (Heb. 11:35-38).

When you come to the New Testament, Jesus said that John the Baptist was the greatest man ever born (Matt. 11:11), and yet he got thrown into prison and beheaded because he confronted the wicked Herod for his sin. The apostle Paul was one of the boldest, most faithful witnesses for Christ who has ever lived. And yet he went through false accusations, beatings, imprisonments, threats on his life, being stoned, three shipwrecks, and much more (2 Cor. 11:23-28). He also endured many disappointments and difficulties in his labors for the Lord. He instructed new believers (Acts 14:22), "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

When the apostle Peter wrote to believers who were enduring horrible persecution, he exhorted them (1 Pet. 4:12-13), "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but 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." In the same vein, James (1:2-4)

wrote, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

Or, look at the Lord Jesus Himself. He was the sinless Son of God, who went about doing good for everyone. Yet look at how He suffered! If our Lord suffered so horribly, why should we think that we would be exempt, especially since the Bible repeatedly tells us to expect suffering? Jesus plainly warned the disciples (Matt. 24:9), "Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name." The Bible never promises those who follow Christ a trouble-free life.

And so in the context of loving one another and serving the Lord (Rom. 12:9-11), Paul indicates that we will face tribulation and he tells us how to endure it (12:12): "rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer."

As I said last week with regard to verse 11, I need to ask myself regarding verse 12, "Do these three phrases describe me? Is my life full of joy in hope? Do I joyfully persevere in tribulation or grumble as I muddle through it? Am I devoted to prayer or do I dabble at it?" To the extent that you and I fall short of these qualities, we need to grow!

As I've said repeatedly with reference to 12:9-21, these commands are built on 12:1-2: "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

Everything in 12:9-21 assumes that you have personally experienced the many mercies of God that are spelled out in chapters 1-11. You must come to God as a guilty sinner and receive the free pardon and redemption that is offered through faith in Jesus Christ. That is the foundation and motivation for these commands. We should desire to grow in these qualities because we have received God's many mercies in Christ, shown to us while we were yet sinners.

Let me try to deal with a difficult question that comes up regarding 12:9-21: Is there any logical flow to all of these commands or are they just random thoughts that came to Paul's mind in no particular order? Many argue for the latter. Douglas Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 772) says that Paul is using a style known as "parenesis" (a technical term for "exhortation"), which is characterized by a lack of concern for sequence of thought and development of a single theme. That may be so.

But, since Paul is always so deliberately logical (especially in Romans) a few try to establish a flow of thought (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Christian Conduct* [Banner of Truth], pp. 332-333). Here's my stab at it:

In 12:9-21, Paul is spelling out the specifics of what mercy-motivated, sacrificial, transformed (12:1-2) Christian living looks like. Each person must humbly evaluate himself or herself in light of God's grace (12:3). This evaluation will recognize that God has gifted us as unique members of the one body of Christ, each with different functions (12:4-5). Our spiritual gifts (12:6-8) must be exercised in genuine love (12:9-10). We must not be lazy or lagging behind in showing love or in exercising our gifts, but be fervent in spirit as we serve the Lord (12:11). Even when trials come, we must maintain the right attitude, rejoicing in hope, persevering in the trials, and sustained through devotion to prayer (12:12). And in those trials, we must not become self-absorbed, but keep an eye out for how we can contribute to the needs of other believers and go after opportunities to show hospitality (12:13).

Then Paul focuses on what transformed attitudes toward others look like: When persecuted, mercy-motivated, transformed believers bless their persecutors (12:14). Even under persecution, they do not become so self-focused that they are oblivious to the feelings of others; rather, they enter sympathetically into their joys and sorrows (12:15). This focus on others also means that mercy-motivated, transformed minds are humble, not proud (12:16). Even when wronged, whether by unbelievers or by believers, mercy-motivated, transformed believers do not seek vengeance, but seek to bless the wrongdoer and overcome the evil with good (12:17-21). All of this is so that Christ will be glorified as people see Him in our loving relationships.

With that as a general overview of the context, let's zero in on 12:12, where Paul tells us that...

The mercies of God call us to joyful, prayerful
perseverance in trials.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes (*ibid.*, p. 402), "Tribulation, hope and prayer always go together in the New Testament and it is a very good way of testing ourselves to ask whether they always go together in our experience. They should."

Paul has linked hope, tribulation, and perseverance in Romans 5:3-5, "And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

And, he links hope, perseverance, and prayer in 8:24-26, "For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he *already* sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for *us* with groanings too deep for words." So, again, it is important to keep in mind that just because we have experienced God's mercies does not mean that we will be exempt from trials. Rather, the Bible shows us how God uses trials to conform us to the image of Christ and to be glorified through us as we joyfully depend on Him in our trials.

1. The mercies of God call us to rejoice in hope (12:12a).

Romans 12:12a, "rejoicing in hope." Does that describe you, especially when you're going through a difficult trial? According to the U. S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, about nine percent of those in the United States report that they suffer from current depression (within two weeks of the survey), with four percent suffering from major depression (www.cdc.gov/Features/dsDepression). And believers are not exempt. Some godly saints, such as Martin Luther, Charles Spurgeon, and the hymn writer, William Cowper, have suffered from severe depression. Probably some of you are depressed right now. But since joy and hope are the opposite of depression, we all should try to understand what

the Bible teaches about how we can have such joy and hope, especially in the face of difficult trials.

Before we look at what the Bible says, let me say that the causes of depression can be very complex. It can stem from various diseases, from physical conditions (such as post-partum depression in women), from grief over loss, or from our genetic brain chemistry. Psychiatrists do not understand exactly how brain chemistry or anti-depressant drugs work. If you suffer from inexplicable depression, the first thing you should do is get a medical checkup, to see if a doctor can determine the cause.

Regarding anti-depressant drugs, my view is that if you need them to get out of the pit so that you're able to function somewhat normally again, then take the drug as you would any other medication if you were sick. But once you're stable, unless you absolutely need the drug to remain depression-free, I would advise weaning yourself off the drugs under a physician's supervision.

But having said that, I have a caution: If your depression stems from some known sin, taking an anti-depressant so that you feel better and moving on with life without dealing with your sin is spiritually and emotionally damaging. God designed things so that our sin has negative emotional effects to get our attention. The proper response to sin is not to take a pill, but to repent and seek to please Him.

Depression is often an emotional indicator that you are living to please yourself, not to please God. Those who are severely depressed to the point of being suicidal are not thinking about pleasing God or about the effect their action would have on others. Rather, they are focused on how to get out of their pain, with no regard for pleasing God or serving others. So when you're battling depression, seek to please God beginning on the thought level.

The first man born in sin disobeyed God and became jealous of his brother, who obeyed God. When Cain sinned, he became depressed and angry (those emotions often go together). God didn't prescribe an anti-depressant. Rather, He confronted Cain with his sin and told him to counter it with godly behavior (Gen. 4:6-7): "Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not *your coun-*

tenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.” God’s prescription for Cain’s depression and anger was obedience.

The Bible often (as in our text) says that believers are to be full of joy and hope, even in the midst of severe trials. Joy is *not* a minor theme in the Bible. The Psalms are full of commands to praise the Lord and rejoice in Him. Joy is promised to all that walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Paul wrote Philippians when he was in prison and other believers were attacking him. That short book is brimming with joy in the Lord. He writes (3:1), “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things *again* is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.” In case we missed it, he repeats (4:4), “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!”

To help you understand this important matter, let me mention three things that biblical joy is not and then show how to get it. By the way, no one has written more capably on this than John Piper. All of his books deal with it, but I especially recommend *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* [Crossway]. As he often says, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” Our joy is all about glorifying our merciful God and Savior.

First, biblical joy is not a matter of personality or temperament. Some by nature are cheery and optimistic. Others are naturally more gloomy and pessimistic. But biblical joy comes from walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, not by natural temperament. Those who are naturally more melancholic will have to fight harder to attain biblical joy. But those who are naturally cheery should not assume that they have *biblical* joy, unless they know that their joy comes from dependence on God and His promises.

Second, biblical joy is not a matter of happy circumstances. Paul could rejoice in prison and in the face of many trials because his joy was *in the Lord*, not in circumstances. In the Psalms, the psalmist is often in horrible circumstances, sometimes despairing of life itself, but when he puts his trust in the Lord, he ends up praising and thanking Him and literally singing for joy.

Third, biblical joy is not a phony, superficial happiness that smiles on the outside when the heart is hurting on the inside. Just three verses after our text, Paul tells us to “weep with those who weep.” He doesn’t say,

“Tell those who weep to buck up and smile!” There is a time for grieving and sorrow. Paul described himself (2 Cor. 6:10) “as sorrowful yet always rejoicing.” The shortest verse in the Greek New Testament is 1 Thessalonians 5:16, “Rejoice always.” The shortest verse in the English New Testament is John 11:35, “Jesus wept.” There is no contradiction. Biblical joy is a solid undercurrent that is not affected by the surface storms of life.

Then *how do we get this joy?* Paul says here that *it comes from hope.* And *hope comes from focusing your mind on the sure promises of God for the future.* The Bible tells us that we can set our minds on certain things that are true of us in Christ (Col. 3:1-4):

Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Either Jesus and Paul were liars and you can chuck the entire Christian faith, or they spoke the truth. Jesus promised to come back and complete our redemption, so that we will share His glory. Focus on that truth, even if you don't feel like it! Feelings eventually follow your thoughts. Set your mind on the hope of eternal glory and joy in the Lord will follow.

2. The mercies of God call us to persevere in tribulation (12:12b).

Romans 12:12b: “persevering in tribulation.” I’ve already shown how to persevere in tribulation, namely, by rejoicing in the certain hope of eternal life. So persevering is not a matter of gritting your teeth and grimly enduring it. “Rejoicing in hope” is how you persevere in tribulation.

The Greek word translated “tribulation” means “pressure.” Our English word actually comes from the Latin, *tribulum*, which was an instrument used to crush corn in order to get flour. So tribulation refers to events that bring pressure upon your mind and heart, which tend to get you down or crush your spirit. “Persevering” comes from a Greek verb meaning to remain steadfast, to stand your ground, or to bear up under a situation.

Often when we're in a time of trial, we pray for relief from the trial, and that's not necessarily wrong. But Paul prayed that believers would be strengthened with God's power so that we could endure trials with joy and thankfulness (Col. 1:9-12):

For this reason also, since the day we heard *of it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

You don't need "steadfastness" (the same Greek word root translated "persevering" in our text) unless you're going through a trial. So our experience of God's mighty power is not necessarily to miraculously deliver us from the trial, but to give us joyful, thankful hearts as we persevere through it. Finally,

3. The mercies of God call us to be devoted to prayer (12:12c).

Romans 12:12c: "devoted to prayer." I intended to cover this point adequately in this message, but I'm out of time and can only touch on it here. Next time I want to devote the entire message to how practically we can grow to be more devoted to prayer.

For now, let me point out that it is our trials that often drive us to be devoted to prayer. You've probably had the same experience that I've had, where you work through your prayer list, but without much intensity or fervency. But then a trial hits and you pray often and fervently. The more intense the trial, the more intensely you pray. As you think about the trial often during the day, you cry out to God for help. Prayer is the lifeline that lays hold of the living God to supply our needs during times of tribulation. Being devoted to prayer is the only way that you can rejoice in hope and persevere in tribulation.

The God who poured out His mercies on us in salvation is not going to abandon us in our trials. So as the psalmist exhorts

(Ps. 62:8), "Trust in Him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us." Be devoted to God in prayer.

Conclusion

How can we put verse 12 into practice? *First, honestly evaluate yourself in light of these three phrases.* Are you grumbling in depression or cynicism? Then you're not "rejoicing in hope." Are you giving up or despairing in your trials? Then you're not "persevering in tribulation." Are you grabbing every remedy that the world has to offer to get out of your trials? Then you're not "devoted to prayer." You can't begin to grow in these qualities until you honestly evaluate where you're falling short.

Second, begin each day by focusing on the hope that you have in the gospel. Even if you have small children demanding your attention first thing in the morning, you can still direct your thoughts to the mercies of God that saved you from your sins. You can focus your mind on the hope of the glory of God that you will share when Christ returns. As soon as you're able, spend some time in God's presence through His Word. Bring all of your needs before Him, knowing that He is your loving, all-powerful Creator and Father.

Also, put key promises from God's Word on 3x5 cards and read them over often during the day. Here's one (Jer. 32:17): "Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You...." There are hundreds of wonderful promises like that in God's Word. Meditate on them often when you're depressed.

Finally, *don't try to go it alone.* You're part of the body of Christ. The Lord intends for you to share your burdens with other believers (men with men, women with women, or with your spouse). God's many mercies call us to be "rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer."

Application Questions

1. Discuss the four application points in the conclusion with your spouse or a trusted Christian friend and begin to practice them daily.
2. How long is it healthy to grieve or be sad over a difficult loss or disappointment? When is it time to move on?
3. Are you more naturally prone to being cheerful or gloomy? Given your natural personality, how can you develop true joy in the Holy Spirit?
4. How do you usually pray when you're in a trial? In light of Col. 1:9-12, should your prayer focus shift? If so, how?

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