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EXULTING IN TRIALS

Romans 5:3-5

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Romans Lesson 26

Exulting in Trials Romans 5:3-5

I always dread preaching about suffering, because as I have told you, preaching is a lot like throwing a boomerang. You aim it at the congregation, but it comes back and hits you first! And who wants to be hit with the thought of “exulting in trials”? 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 is just plain nuts! Paul says that he *exults* in his tribulations. Maybe we could explain him away as being a bit carried away, but then what do we do with Jesus? He tells us (Matt. 5:11-12), “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great.”

But it’s not just Paul and Jesus. James (1:2-3) says the same thing: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.” Peter is of the same mind (1 Pet. 4:13-14): “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. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.”

When you trace the behavior of the apostles through the Book of Acts, you discover that they actually practiced this strange response to trials. When the Jewish Sanhedrin flogged the apostles, we read (Acts 5:41), “So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.” When Paul and Silas were illegally beaten, imprisoned, and fastened into the stocks in Philippi, we read (Acts 16:25), “But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God.” Paul told the Corinthians (2 Cor. 12:9b-10), “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." And the author of Hebrews reminded his readers (Heb. 10:34), "For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one."

So we can't escape the fact that this strange response of exulting in trials is the uniform teaching of the New Testament. But if you're like me, you'll have to admit that it is not your standard response! Some of us may be able to say that we don't complain about our trials. We grit our teeth and stoically endure them. A few may be able to say that you *usually* rejoice *in spite of* your trials. But how many of us can honestly say that we exult *in our trials*? So we all have something to learn here.

Paul is continuing to enumerate the blessings of being justified by faith (5:1-2), as seen by his words, "And not only this" Probably he is answering an unexpressed objection to his teaching in verses 1 & 2: "Paul, you say that you have peace with God and that you now stand in His grace. You exult in the future hope of the glory of God. But why doesn't God protect you from trials right now? If you're the object of His love and grace, shouldn't you be enjoying a trouble-free life?" So Paul is showing why God brings trials into the lives of His saints: because through the trials, we grow in endurance, proven character, and hope. And our hope will not disappoint, because even now God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

By the way, note that Paul mentions the three persons of the Trinity in 5:1-5. We have peace with God [the Father] through the Lord Jesus Christ. God has given us the Holy Spirit. Each person of the Trinity plays a role in our salvation and preservation as God's children. In our text, Paul is saying,

We can exult in trials if we develop God's perspective and keep in mind that trials do not nullify His great love for us.

1. To exult in trials, develop and maintain God's perspective: He is using trials to shape our character and prepare us for heaven.

Regarding exulting in our tribulations, Thomas Schreiner (*Romans* [Baker], p. 255) observes, "This is an astonishing statement since future glorification is prized precisely because afflictions are left behind." To get a handle on what Paul means and how we can grow in this strange virtue, let's explore four thoughts:

- A. Exulting in trials is not an automatic response: It requires deliberate focus.

If exulting in trials were the automatic response, we'd see multitudes of people rejoicing, because nobody lacks trials. Instead, we often see multitudes complaining about their trials. Even among Christians, grumbling about trials is far more common than rejoicing or exulting in them (the word, literally, is boasting or glorying in). Whether it's being caught in a traffic jam when we're late for an appointment or something more major, like being diagnosed with cancer, our knee-jerk response is to grumble, not to exult.

We see this with the children of Israel after the exodus. God has brought them out of slavery in Egypt by inflicting the plagues on the Egyptians and then parting the Red Sea so that Israel could escape from Pharaoh's army, which was drowned when they tried to pursue Israel. Israel celebrated God's miraculous salvation with singing and dancing. Then we read that they went three days in the wilderness and found only bitter water. Did they rejoice and exult, saying, "Let's see how the Lord will provide"? No, we read (Exod. 15:24), "So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'" The Lord told Moses how to make the water drinkable.

But in the very next chapter, we read that the whole congregation grumbled again, saying that they should have stayed in Egypt, where they had plenty to eat (Exod. 16:2-3). So God graciously provided daily manna for them. But then as they traveled across the desert, in spite of God's provision, they grumbled again about having no water (Exod. 17:3). Their history for those 40 years was that of constant complaining in spite of God's gracious provision. Paul uses their story as a warning to us, so that we will not grumble in our trials, as they did (1 Cor. 10:6-11).

In Philippians 2:14-15, Paul exhorts us to follow the example he set when he was falsely accused, beaten, and wrongly imprisoned in Philippi: "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so

that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world." Isn't that the truth! We live in a grumbling world. If we don't grumble, but are cheerful and even exult in trials, whether the minor irritations at work or the major trials in our personal lives, we're going to shine like lights in the darkness. But this doesn't happen automatically. It requires deliberate focus.

B. Exulting in trials does not mean denying the pain.

The Bible does not encourage us to deny reality, put on a happy face, and pretend that we're just praising the Lord, when in fact we're hurting inside. Later in Romans (12:15), Paul says, "weep with those who weep." He does not say, "Exhort those who weep to exult in their trials!"

I'll never forget my 36th birthday. I had to conduct a funeral for a man in his late thirties who died of cancer. He left behind a wife who had already battled breast cancer. Two and a half years later I had to conduct her funeral as she succumbed to the disease. They had two young children. Before he died, Scott asked me to preach at his funeral on his favorite chapter, Isaiah 40.

After the service, as I was consoling the widow, who of course was weeping, her former pastor from another town bounced up with a silly grin on his face and said in an upbeat voice, "Praise the Lord! Scott's in glory now!" I wanted to punch him in the mouth! I wanted to scream, "Let her weep and weep with her!" Exulting in trials does not mean denying the pain.

Paul acknowledges the tension when he describes himself (2 Cor. 6:10), "as sorrowful yet always rejoicing." He goes on to describe how in his trials his emotions were all over the chart, but he had God's comfort (2 Cor. 7:4b-6). Undergirding all of his trials was genuine joy in the Lord. The author of Hebrews recognizes the same tension when he says (12:11), "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." You see the same thing throughout the Psalms. The psalmist is in a situation where he despairs of life itself. His enemies are trying to kill him. Sometimes he even questions where God is or why

God delays. He expresses his anguish and pain as he cries out to the Lord. But by the end of the psalm, even though he's still in grave danger, he is filled with joy and praise to God.

So there's nothing wrong with feeling sorrow or pain or grief in the midst of a difficult trial. We shouldn't deny these feelings in an attempt to look more spiritual. But through our tears and pain, we should be sustained by our hope in the promises of God. We know that He is sovereign over all things and that He cares for us. Exulting in our tribulations does not mean denying the pain.

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

After mentioning exulting in his tribulations, Paul continues (5:3b-4), "knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope." Don't miss the word, "knowing." This is part of the deliberate focus that I just mentioned. Our mental focus must include some vital knowledge, namely, that God is using the trials to shape our character, *if we submit joyfully to Him*. Not everyone grows in the way that Paul describes here. We will grow *only* if we submit joyfully to God because we keep in mind that He is sovereign and that He is using these trials to make us more like Christ.

Note the chain of thought here: Tribulation (lit., "pressure") brings about *perseverance* (endurance or steadfastness). Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Rom. 5:3, p. 190) points out that you don't need endurance if you're not feeling distressed and sorrowful. But, he adds, when you regard your trials as dispensed from a kind Father for your good, you feel great comfort. When you know that God is promoting your salvation, you have a reason for glorying.

So Paul's point is, you don't develop endurance unless you go through trials. You don't have to endure when everything is going your way. It's not difficult to trust the Lord when you're experiencing nothing but blessings. But will you endure by faith when life is hard? Will you trust God and submit to His mighty hand 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?

Perseverance produces *proven character*. This is a single word in Greek that means something that has passed the test. It comes out

approved. In the desert west of here, south of Kingman, there is a Ford proving ground. They put their vehicles through various tests to prove that they will hold up in extreme situations. Once their trucks pass the test, they can confidently say, "Ford trucks are built to last." They've proven their character.

When you go through a trial trusting in God, your faith becomes proven. You've been through the test and 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 works proven character.

Then Paul adds that proven character works *hope*. This brings us back full circle to verse 2, where we who have 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 (I'm following Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Assurance* [Zondervan], p. 71): The initial hope comes from understanding the blessing of being justified by faith. We begin the Christian life full of faith and hope. Then we get hit by difficult trials. We cling to God like we've never had to cling before. We prove His faithfulness and 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 trials. Our hope is stronger because it has been tempered in the flames of affliction. That leads to the last thought under this heading:

- D. Exulting in trials requires developing and remembering the hope of heaven.

Our hope is not 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 will experience in heaven. Paul put it this way (2 Cor. 4:16-18): "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." Paul could maintain hope and not lose heart in what he describes as "momen-

tary, light affliction" (*light!*) because his focus was on the eternal hope of heaven.

Critics will say that Christianity is just "pie in the sky when you die." The answer to that charge is, "Yes, you're going to die. Would you like pie with that or no pie?" Your decaying outer man—graying and thinning hair, failing eyesight and hearing, and increasing aches and pains, are broadcasting a clear message to your brain, which can't remember things any more: You're going to die! Either you have the hope of heaven because you have trusted in Jesus Christ to forgive all your sins, or you have no hope. The only way to exult in trials is to develop and remember the sure hope of heaven. It is certain because it is based on Jesus' resurrection and His promise to return and take us to be with Him (John 14:1-3).

Paul adds, "and hope does not disappoint." Literally, "hope does not make us ashamed." The phrase is rooted in the Old Testament. In Psalm 22:4-5, the psalmist in great distress cries out, "In You our fathers trusted; they trusted and You delivered them. To You they cried out and were delivered; in You they trusted and were not disappointed." That last phrase is literally, "they were not put to shame." In Psalm 25:3, David proclaims, "Indeed, none of those who wait for You will be ashamed."

The idea is, if you trust in God and He fails, you're going to be put to shame. Others will mock and say, "He trusted in God, but God didn't come through! What a joke! There is no reality in trusting God!" (See Ps. 22:7-8.) Keep in mind that Psalm 22 is a picture of Christ on the cross. His murderers were gloating in His death. Sometimes God permits His children to go through terrible persecution and martyrdom. They are only vindicated in the final resurrection. So if heaven is not true, we will be put to eternal shame. We will be eternally disappointed. But if it is true—and the resurrection of Jesus guarantees it—then even if we suffer persecution and a martyr's death, our hope will not 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 trials, develop and maintain God's perspective: He is using trials to shape our character and prepare us for heaven.

“But,” a critic may ask, “what about God’s love? If God really loves you, wouldn’t He spare you all of these trials?”

2. To exult in trials, we must keep in mind that trials do not nullify God’s great love for us.

The reason that hope does not disappoint is (5:5b), “because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” Paul is talking here about God’s love for us, as verses 6-8 plainly show. He did not see suffering as an indication that God does not love us. Quite the contrary, as he will show at the end of Romans 8, 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 and 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, which especially points to God’s great love as we experience it at the time we are saved. “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. “Poured out” implies an abundant, continued supply of His love refreshing and sustaining us, especially in our trials.

This experience of God’s love comes to us as we 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 and 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, whether minor or great, remember Jesus’ words just before the cross (John 15:20-21): “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘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.”

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

Conclusion

James Boice (*Romans: Volume 2: The Reign of Grace* [Baker], pp. 533-534) concludes his sermon on these verses by telling about how the church in China grew exponentially during the terrible persecution under the Communists. An American student was going to Hong Kong to study the Chinese church. Before he left the States, a friend had 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 and had talked in depth with many Chinese Christians, he decided to go back to America and 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?"

It is a good question because trials are not 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). Even as strange as it may seem, we can exult in them.

Application Questions

1. How can a Christian who is a perpetual grumbler break this sinful habit? What steps would you advise?
2. If we feel depressed and discouraged in our trials, should we just accept it or fight it? How would you fight it?
3. If a Christian tells you that she doesn't feel loved by God, how would you counsel her? Are her feelings important or should she just ignore them and "trust God in spite of them"?
4. How can we know that our hope of heaven will not disappoint? What anchors our hope to make it sure?

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