

From Suffering to Hope

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Scripture Reading: Romans 5:1-5 (NIV)

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.

⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Introduction

All of us can relate to suffering, and we don't like it.

But have you ever wondered what it means to suffer? It means that you are going to experience something you will not enjoy, like an illness, or a situation and you have no choice but to go through it. Suffering means that this something that you don't like is not going to go away. You are going to go through it; a passage of time lay ahead, and you are going to suffer through it. And it is going to hurt you, possibly also those around you.

Yet, this morning's Scripture says that we are to "glory in our sufferings," not because of the suffering itself, but because of the goal that lay ahead. The position of Scripture is that you must embrace suffering and not back down or give up. Scripture is looking through the present towards the glory of God revealed through your suffering.

It reminds me of the words of Mildred Struven, "*A clay pot sitting in the sun will always be a clay pot. It has to go through the white heat of the furnace to become porcelain.*"

The Glory in Our Suffering

Scripture makes mention of "glory" in suffering. At face value, this makes little sense unless

suffering itself was to be something not to be feared. Here is the “thing,” whether or not suffering is to be feared or not is influenced by your world view, meaning, how you see and experience the world around you. Life has meaning and according to John 10:10, Jesus came so that we may have life, and have it to the full. The meaning of life springs forth from the restoration of our relationship with God.

In this context then, suffering is incapable of altering the meaning of life. There are some facts to keep in mind: (1) that we are reconciled to God through Jesus; (2) we have received the Holy Spirit and (3) we take into our suffering the victory of Jesus and the joy of our salvation. Suffering cannot alter these facts!

For the Christian, the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus is a reality, and so is the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. If 2 Corinthians 5:17 (“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”) is a reality in the life of the Christian, then the believer takes the joy of salvation, as well as the victory of Christ, into their suffering.

Our suffering is foretold by Jesus in John 16:33, but at the same time, He promises us His peace. In other words, suffering does not mean the absence of the peace of Christ.

All of us have been/are victims of suffering, at some point in our lives. Neither you nor I can be “unvictimized.” Things are what they are, and they are going to last for a while, but you have a choice whether to lie down in defeat or to persevere.

Suffering to Perseverance

Suffering produces either perseverance or rebellion. Let’s think about this for a while. We don’t need to talk about rebellion right now, but if perseverance, by definition, is hard work because it refers to a continued effort despite difficulties, failures, illness and situations – then what is perseverance saying to us?

I say this with respect and reverence, but a simple “Scripture reading and prayer” may not carry you through your suffering. The anguish, burdens, persecution, sufferings and troubles of this life demand your attention and effort.

Scripture reading and prayer will certainly strengthen you and your efforts because you will be in fellowship with the Lord, but you also have to face this thing causing your suffering head-on! Inside Scripture, you will find all the advice and principles that you will need to face every

storm of life that causes you to suffer. You cannot passively “read and pray,” you have to actively “read and pray” meaning that you are searching the Scriptures and are willing to apply the results to your life and situations.

Now, that is to take into suffering the victory of Jesus and the joy of our salvation. That is a character-forming decision!

Perseverance to Character

Did you know that your character defines who you are? Your character is what makes you different from others, it is that combination of qualities that makes you, you. Character is your honesty, kindness and all the other *stable* qualities of being you. Another thing, do you realize that your circumstances will quickly reveal what your character is?

I recently read a quote – can’t remember who wrote it, but it said, “*Character is not made in crisis, it is only exhibited.*” Initially, I disagreed because I understood that as we suffer, as we persevere, our character changes for the better. Until I realized that we enter into our suffering as people already made new by Christ and in this sense, character is revealed as we grow in Him through the crisis. You are who God says you are.

In this sense, suffering is an opportunity to break old patterns and belief and to uncover the new. For some of us, this is where we will actually meet the “new.” The “new” does not lay in defeat, the “new” shows in the enfleshment the fruit of the Spirit in the most difficult of circumstances, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and actively applying the principles of Scripture to all spheres of life. This is part of the character God has given His children, meaning that as we persevere our “new” character is unveiled as we grow in His grace toward becoming ever more Christ like.

Let’s come back to that quote, “*Character is not made in crisis, it is only exhibited*” and look at it in another way. You are who God says you are. Your suffering will not change who God says you are, but it may just cause you to begin to realize who God says you are. Grow into what God already knows. Your justification was a once-off work of God, and now, you are on the road of progressive sanctification, meaning that justification was the starting point of your “new” life in Him and progressive sanctification is the rest of your life as you become more and more like Jesus, and this has a lot to do with character.

Suffering, perseverance and character are reminders that we don’t enter into suffering as

victims, we don't endure suffering and we do not exit suffering as the old non-born-again Christians. We enter it as God's children, endure it as God's children and exit it as God's children.

Dr Isaac Watts wrote a hymn with these words, "Firm as the earth thy gospel stands, My Lord, my hope, my trust; If I am found in Jesus' hands, My soul can ne'er be lost."

Yes, we can choose to still show some of the old during suffering, but since that action points to the "before," the same suffering can rapidly become be a testimony to the radical transformative power of God in action.

Character to Hope

Suffering has the potential to rob our souls of a sense of a future. Without a future vision, life becomes impossible. Hope is finding purpose, meaning and definition of who we are in Christ.

My dictionary says that hope is, "expectation of fulfilment or success." In one of my previous messages, I described hope as follows, "Hope has no evidence and speaks to a positive future. Hope alone, is fragile and is best supported by belief, faith and trust. Hope is to be cultivated."

And that is what suffering allows the believer to do; cultivate hope. The whole element of the suffering per verse 3 is framed by verses 1 and 5, read carefully:

- Verse 1, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,"

We have already been justified by faith and we have peace, even before the suffering arrives. Therefore, as we enter into suffering, it is with the hope of a positive future, not because of your or my abilities, but because of belief, faith and trust in God.

- Verse 5, "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

This frame to hope speaks to reasons. (1) God's love, into (2) our hearts, by (3) the Holy Spirit, (4) given to us.

This is real hope and why we carry into our suffering, the joy and victory of Jesus Christ and why Godly hope will not shame us in our hour of need.

Conclusion

Something else to think about, since nobody enjoys suffering, can one “skip” perseverance and character and move directly from suffering to hope? I am not sure, in fact, I don’t think so, because suffering has a time element. In other words, suffering ends when it is over. We must keep in mind that in suffering, meaning is found and Christian character is revealed.

The fact is, since the Holy Spirit has been given to us, we can boldly proclaim, in our moments of suffering, God is with us; I am not alone. God is a present reality in every situation, challenge of difficulty that gives rise to suffering.

In 1962, Victor and Mildred Goertzel published a revealing study of 413 "famous and exceptionally gifted people" called Cradles of Eminence. They spent years attempting to understand what produced such greatness, what common thread might run through all of these outstanding people's lives. Surprisingly, the most outstanding fact was that virtually all of them, 392, had to overcome very difficult obstacles in order to become who they were.

Amen.