

Not Only That

Romans 5:3-5

In a very real sense, my sermon last week was easy to preach and easy to receive, while today's sermon, by comparison, is rather hard. Last week, the idea was that, as Christians, we are able to rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. It's not hard to understand that. As this chapter of Romans 5 begins, the encouragement is that "having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." I made the point last week that this hope is at the very heart and center of the gospel promise of God. I made the point that those first two verses of chapter 5 might well be the climax of everything that Paul has to teach about salvation.

So it is not hard to proclaim the joy of such hope of your eternal salvation. It is not hard to proclaim the joy of having peace with God, nor is it hard to explain that that peace comes only through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. It certainly isn't hard to receive that, and many of you commented to me last week about the encouragement of the sermon, for which I was thankful.

But again, that sermon was easy to preach and easy to hear, because the idea was easy to grasp. "Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

But Paul continues in verse 3, "not only that...". Not only is that our context for rejoicing, peace with God, but also this, tribulations. So here is the hard part. We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. It's easy to say Amen to that, easy to hear that, and easy to proclaim it. But the hard part is this—not only is that true, not only do we rejoice in the awareness of our relationship with God being restored to a state of peace, giving to us the

confident hope of eternal glory, not only that, verse 3, "but we also glory in tribulations." And that word translated "glory" is the same word in verse two translated rejoice. That's the hard part. Hard to preach, and hard to hear.

It's hard to preach, because I despise pat answers and simplistic responses to the hard realities of life. It's also too easy to live in denial, as if troubles don't really exist. And it is too easy to live as if spiritual strength and maturity meant that you just keep on smiling and pretend that everything is fine even when it isn't. Even in the midst of trials. You live as if troubles don't exist, and if you were really strong in your faith you wouldn't cry or grieve. But that simply is NOT the picture that the Bible paints for us of maturity.

Still, Paul does give us additional occasions to rejoice, additional circumstances in which we glory. Not only that, with reference to the central promise of the gospel, namely peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Not only that, but also this, verse 3, "we also glory in tribulations." Hardships, sufferings. Those things that are characteristic of this age, inevitable experiences in this age here and now. And so I want to start this morning with that reminder, the encouragement, that,

I. IT IS POSSIBLE TO REJOICE HERE AND NOW.

This experience of rejoicing is not limited to the future age. It is focused there, it finds its climax and conclusion there. But we are not restrained as Christians from any experience of rejoicing here and now in the present. But it must be said, and it must even be emphasized, that this here-and-now world is full of troubles. Nothing new there.

John 16:33 "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

We'll get to that second part, be of our good cheer. But I don't want to skip over the first part. "In the world you will have tribulation." From beginning to end, since the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden until the triumphant return of Jesus in glory at the end of the age, from creation past to the second coming of Jesus future, we must acknowledge and come to terms with,

A. The reality of tribulation in the present age.

I don't want to skip that, as if it isn't true. And that reality of tribulation doesn't mean that you have sinned and are being punished for some specific sin nor that God is somehow unfaithful. Faith and life is just not that simple. Tribulation is reality. "In the world you will have tribulation."

This is an isolated matter, but a prominent theme throughout Scripture. Both James and Peter identify what is translated "various trials" and their letters begin. Peter refers to believers as those who have been "grieved by various trials," grievously affected by them. Distressed. Indeed, the whole first epistle of Peter is designed to give the Christians of his day the hope and encouragement they would need because of that awful reality. I believe Peter wrote that epistle shortly before the great first of Rome in AD 64, after which Emperor Nero afflicted the Christians in his kingdom all the more grievously. It would be a terrible, terrible time.

And Peter would emphasize that expected reality of those trial, 1 Peter 4:12 "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you."

Don't think it strange. Don't be unsettled by it. The reality of life in this present age is that troubles, tribulations abound. We

suffer and are hurt. Our fellowship with one another includes, therefore, weeping with those who weep. Suffering together.

And in that context, when you are rightly able to acknowledge that reality, only then do these words come to you with any sense of hope or purpose.

v.3. "And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations..."

The biblical testimony is that as Christians, there is,

B. The ability to rejoice in tribulation.

Peter gives an explanation for that ability, in terms of our fellowship with Jesus himself.

1 Peter 4:12 "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. 14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."

There is nothing superficial here. Nothing of the stoic, stiff upper lip mentality of those who simply do not allow themselves to feel pain. There is plenty of pain to be felt, but the point is, that experience of suffering is part of our fellowship with Jesus himself.

Paul goes so far as to make this astounding comment, Col. 1:24 "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church."

So our ability to rejoice in tribulation must be considered in terms of our fellowship with him. And there is encouragement in

that,

2 Cor. 1:5. “For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.”

The reality is that as we suffer in this present age, we suffer with Jesus, in union with him, in communion with him, in fellowship with him. And that communion with Jesus is the foundation for our ability to rejoice despite those sufferings. So it is possible to rejoice here and now. And, to go one step further, we see in that experience of suffering the working out of,

II. THE PROCESS OF MATURITY.

I want to be careful here to avoid easy answer, simplistic solutions that might even seem heartless. Our Christian culture often doesn't know how to respond to the sufferings, because we either want to give thoughtless platitudes about how everything is going to work out fine, or we want to present some sort of super-spiritual facade as if your maturity is measured by the ability to suppress the actual experience of suffering.

The apostle gives us neither of those extremes, but rather describes a very profound process of growth in maturity. Maturity is hard to define, whether that is emotional maturity, maturity simply in terms of the ordinary affairs of life, or even so-called spiritual maturity. It isn't a binary circumstance, as if you have it or you don't. There are not just two options, two positions, as if you move from one to another.

No maturity, as we would observe in the growth of children, for example, is an ongoing process. Over an extended period of time. It is a step by step process, and not necessarily a straight path that always goes in one direction. But the Bible does picture for us that path, and it is a path we must acknowledge, identify and pursue.

In the context of Romans 5, Paul connects that path toward maturity with the experience of suffering, and begins with the subject of perseverance. As I formulated my outline for this sermon, I decided to call it,

A. The grace of perseverance.

My reasoning for that language is to emphasize that this is not self-help. This is not a process you undertake yourself, by the strength of your own power. Rather, perseverance is a work of God in you, enabling you to persevere, hence the language, the grace of perseverance. It is the work of the grace of God in you, enabling you to persevere in the midst of tribulations. That's the first step in this long process of maturity, and the foundation of your ability to rejoice nonetheless,

v.4. “...knowing that tribulation produces perseverance.”

There is only one way to learn perseverance. There is only one way to learn endurance. By experience. James makes the same point,

James 1:2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. [Better translated, endurance.]. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

I fear we use those verses too quickly sometimes, too thoughtlessly. As if we should be “happy” in an external sense all the time. Perhaps we use those verses without compassion, without the willingness to legitimately grieve with those who grieve, to feel the sorrow of those who suffer. Sometimes, these verse become a hindrance, creating a sense of being overwhelmed by trouble only to have the situation made worse by the refusal of others to validate the reality of the suffering. And I don't want to do any of that.

The point is that the actual experience of suffering is one element of the process of maturity. The actual experience of suffering is where perseverance is developed and exercised. And that is the context in which maturity grows. So God is at work, even if he doesn't remove or relieve the suffering. He is at work in your life with this grace of perseverance, this work of his grace enabling you to persevere.

Perseverance doesn't always have an objective answer, a reason, something specific that God is doing in your life, something specific you are supposed to learn or discern. I don't doubt that sometimes that might be the case, but not by definition. By definition, perseverance is its own purpose. Perseverance is, itself, the goal.

Sometimes it is perseverance even unto death. Sometimes the sufferings of life bring about death. Our our perseverance is nothing less than the call to faithfulness.

Rev. 2:8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: 9 "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Be faithful until death. But with this purpose in mind, not a bare perseverance, as if life is nothing but trouble and tribulation. Be faithful unto death, not with some hopeless nor despairing sort of despondency. But rather, in terms of the second step of maturity with Paul identifies here, let perseverance be the opportunity and occasion to develop,

B. The virtue of character.

v.3 "...knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character."

There isn't a lot of talk today about character, but there should be. Character is the definition of what is in your heart. Character is what defines your motives, your goals. Character is the willingness and the commitment to do what is right. Not necessarily what is easiest. Or the most natural. Or the most outwardly beneficial, the most practical or pragmatic. It certainly doesn't mean doing what is the most popular or the most enjoyable. It means doing what is right, from the pure motive of the heart, doing what is right because it is right. Because it is honest, because it is truthful, because it honors God, because it profits someone else. That's character. In many ways it is the very opposite of selfishness, the very antithesis of being self-absorbed or stubborn.

Character is learned through fire. And that is the point that James makes so clearly, as I read a few moments ago.

James 1:2 "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing."

Let perseverance have its perfect work that you may be perfect and complete. That's character. That's the focus of Peter, too, in the familiar words of,

1 Peter 1:6 "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 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, 8 whom having not seen you love."

Your faith is being made pure, tested by fire. That through fiery trials, through perseverance and faithfulness in the midst of those fiery trials, you might gain character. Proven character. With one final step in this process of maturity, namely hope.

C. The encouragement of hope.

We need hope. We always need hope. And the process by which character is developed through perseverance is a process that leads toward the great hope of the gospel. There is something beyond the tribulations of this world. There is something for which we long, to which we aspire. That's why we should often cry out, "Lord, come quickly." There has to be something more than the sufferings of this world. And there is!

v.3 "...knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint."

All of these passages on suffering focus upon this hope, necessarily so! Peter stresses not simply the fiery trials which we endure, but that our faith "though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love." There's the hope!

And Jesus too!

John 16:33 "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

There's the hope! And Paul would give us plenty of hope as well, especially in that great and triumphant chapter 8 of Romans.

Rom. 8:16 "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. 18 For I consider that the

sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us....24 For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance."

And then as that chapter ends,

Rom. 8:35 "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." 37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And so we have,

III. THE CONFIDENCE OF HOPE.

Hope does not disappoint! Truly, lots of things in this world disappoint. Lots of circumstances disappoint. Lots of things that we ascribe to God's providence, to his own sovereign will and purpose, still disappoint. They are frustrating, even exasperating. But this hope always exists. The hope of the contrast of the glory that we shall receive compared to the tribulations of this world.

2 Cor. 4:16 "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, 18 while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

In our text this morning, Paul identifies two things upon which this hope is based, and the first is,

A. The reality of the love of God.

v.5. “Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts.”

The idea is that even when he allows our suffering, even when tribulations are included in his own sovereign will and purpose for our lives, still his love has been poured out in our hearts. To repeat Romans 8, nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Certainly not tribulation nor distress of any kind.

These words in Romans 5 are to Christians, of course, because this particular emphasis upon God’s love is his saving love, his redeeming love. This is the love by which he has promised us an eternal inheritance as his own beloved children. And the promise of that love, the reality of that love, is the foundation for the confidence of our hope.

Along with,

B. The reality of the Holy Spirit.

Don’t miss that reference in verse 5. Don’t miss that emphasis on the third person of the Trinity.

v.5

We have the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who empowers us, who lives and dwells in us. It is the Holy Spirit who helps you, enables you to persevere. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that you receive the grace of perseverance, and through whom you learn and experience character. It is by that Holy Spirit bearing witness with your spirit that you are able to know this living hope in which

you are saved.

It is the Holy Spirit who has the name “comforter.” A helper. And Jesus promises him to us.

John 14:16 “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— 17 the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.”

That’s your hope. That’s the confidence of your hope. And that is the reason why you can rejoice, even in the midst of tribulations. When it comes to the details of your life, I can’t promise that everything will work out fine. Nor can I promise that God will remove from you the very real experience of suffering. But I can promise you this, you who believe in Jesus, that absolutely nothing in heaven or on earth “shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

And because of that, by the grace of God at work in your heart, you can rejoice even in tribulations, knowing that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”