

Rejoicing Within Our Pandemic

by Jason Cheung

“...we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that...”

Romans 5:2b-3a

After our Sunday worship services on Zoom, some brothers and sisters stay behind to catch up with one another. Over these past four months, an unexpected joy filled my heart when I noticed crawling babies develop the ability to stand! And then, to walk! One week, they could not stand on their own; the next week - they're on their own two feet...ready to conquer the world.

Part of me realizes this is normal. But given how much our life together has been disconnected - this simple joy has become a surprising source for rejoicing. It's like spotting the first sign of a tomato on the vine. Like taking in the glorious view after a grinding hike to the summit.

Still, for me, finding reasons to rejoice during this pandemic has been a real struggle. I feel pulled within this paradox: as the pandemic continues, *how can I truly find joy?* As every aspect of our life has changed, *what reason do I have to rejoice?*

Paul speaks of two reasons for rejoicing in **Romans 5:1-5**, and the distinction of these reasons help us today.

The first reason for rejoicing, Paul says, is that *because of faith* “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). This is wonderful! Sinners justified *by faith*, now have peace with God. This is all grace, Paul says, and a grace *in which we stand* (a wonderful image). And the response to such peace with God, and standing in this grace, is a *rejoicing* “in the hope of the glory of God.”

This hope, assured in Christ, gives bright hope for tomorrow, hope for life eternal. This hope is unshakable; it will forever be ours. And so, of course we will rejoice in this!

But Paul continues at verse 3, and tells of the second reason for rejoicing: *“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings...”*

Why is the first reason for rejoicing not enough? By itself--being reassured of having peace with God, sounds quite good already! So why does Paul press further? Why does he say, *“Not only that...?”*

It is precisely because Paul understands that this future, eternal hope is *not only* a joy to wait for, but a joy to see and experience now and today. And Paul knows what now and today looks like; it includes *suffering*.

A great deal of burden I feel these days is hearing of the suffering people are enduring amidst this pandemic, sometimes even caused *by this* pandemic. Times are heavy for families fighting illness or cancer together with their loved ones. New pressures are magnified in this time, stressing lives to the brink: job uncertainty, health concerns, the question: *Will things ever be the same again?* Some even

feel guilty for their suffering - particularly in our times - thinking, *I don't have it worse than others, so why should I feel so bad?* And so suffering continues silently.

It is remarkable how Paul reframes suffering with this sublime vision of hope. He startles us with this phrase, "...we rejoice in our sufferings," but he immediately explains what he means. And Paul does this as though he is constructing a picture frame with four sides.

Side One: *Suffering produces endurance.* There is purpose to suffering, and within this new vision, we are called to endure whatever comes our way. As yet, in this first 'side' there is little solace here; only a hint of purpose, and an acknowledgement that suffering can produce in us perseverance.

Side Two: *Endurance produces character.* As suffering is endured for any amount of time it can harden you, or strengthen you. The word "character" here is proved through trials, a strengthening. Tutorials, webinars, workshops cannot produce character; only endurance through trials. This is a slow forging of strength through fire.

Side Three: *Character produces hope.* How does this happen? Perhaps reflecting upon all that has been endured--the trial, the suffering--and yet, still having the strength to stand...this can stir up hope within us. But make no mistake, this hope is the same hope Paul spoke of earlier: this is the hope of the glory of God.

Side Four: *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.* Paul's paradigm of hope *here and now*, is understood through the tracing of God's love, given by the Spirit, along every side of the frame. God, in his love, is here with us in suffering, in our endurance, and in the forging of character. This is no solitary journey. Even the *producing* of hope is a gracious, loving gift of God and his very presence with us.

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There are two reasons to rejoice, and in the end, both land us firmly on the hope of God. And these two reasons do not oppose one another; they are of the same vision. While the first reason is cause for immediate rejoicing for the sheer gift that is the grace and peace of God, and while the second reason grows in us a maturity through the hard experiences of life, both are gifts of grace, both are good, both help us see, wait, experience and yearn for the glory of God.

Can we rejoice within this pandemic?

Can you rejoice, despite the trials you are facing, the uncertainty we are all up against?

We certainly can. By God's good grace, we all can.