

## THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

Romans 5:3-5

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The following is a true account. The event took place several years ago. But what helps us this morning are the specifics of this event, as having been recorded by Charles Swindoll, a veteran pastor of many years. He writes:

The weather was bright and cheerful. The rays of a New Guinea sun burned down on a village normally occupied by the Tifalmin natives, but they were out in the field working on their farms and gathering firewood. It was a lazy Sunday afternoon. No one dreamed disaster was about to strike. Walt and Vonnie Steinkraus, a dedicated missionary couple with Wycliffe Bible Translators, were at home resting alongside their daughters Kerry and Kathy.

At precisely 3:00 p.m., a freak of nature occurred. A huge section of the three-hundred-foot mountain on the opposite side of the river from the Steinkraus's house suddenly broke loose. With a deafening roar and incredible force a half-mile wide, a one-hundred foot deep section plunged downward . . . scooping out sandbanks and crossing the river with lightning-like speed. It drove through the opposite bank and covered the village with rock, mud, and debris ten feet deep. The missionary family was buried in the landslide. Death was instantaneous.

It's possible they never even heard a sound. Two eyewitnesses ran three miles to a mining camp and reported the scene.

When the horrible news reached the folks back home, it stung like a shark attack. Swindoll continues his account of the tragedy with these words:

A numbing disbelief gripped relatives and friends across America. The missionary community was stunned, even though many were seasoned veterans, tempered for years in the fires of hardship and affliction. How wrong it seemed . . . how unfair! Why? With a world full of reprobates and rebels, why a missionary family? With a thousand other vacant hillsides many miles from one living soul, why that mountain, at that time?

The couple had been working on translating the Bible into the primitive Tifalmin tongue, but were taken before it was complete. Swindoll openly expressed what many of us feel at times like this. He said, "Forgive the way this sounds, but God's heavenly plan doesn't always make earthly sense. Candidly, His logic seems a little weird at times." [Swindoll, p. 19-20 from an *Insight for Living* brochure and also *Seasons*.]

Pain has been a part of life ever since Adam and Eve chose to ignore God and His instructions. Their disobedience not only led to their spiritual and physical death, but to the irreversible spiritual and physical death and disease of all human beings, the fractured relationships between individuals, and the slow decay and human-led environmental destruction of our world that, at times, leads to further tragedies like the one Chuck Swindoll highlighted years ago.

Heart-rending events happen in our lives that leave us staggering, sometimes for years. These painful events defy explanation and make us feel we have been treated unjustly; and we are told to accept them.

But pain and despair are not the same thing. We do not have to suffer from despair. Despair refers to suffering that has no sense of meaning or possible purpose to it, while pain that defies explanation can still have a purpose and a hope behind it.

When we understand the purpose and the Person behind pain, it eases the problem of pain. That's what our passage of scripture in **Romans 5** focuses on today. Three times in this chapter, Paul repeats the word “**rejoice**” or “**exult**.” Last week we saw that the first level of joy comes when we as believers realize that we are at peace with God, and with that comes the understanding that He is committed to our development in becoming like Jesus Christ.

But the second time Paul mentions “**rejoice**” in this chapter, in **verse 3**, he refers to rejoicing in our present difficulties. Follow along as I read **Romans 5:3-5**.

**<sup>3</sup>Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.**

When peace with God becomes a reality, it does not necessarily bring peace between us and the world. We still face the potential pressures and disagreements with others that come from living in a hostile society, as well as the natural disasters that touch everybody such as earthquakes, landslides, and floods. The writers of the New Testament make it clear that experiencing pain should come as no surprise to Christians. Nowhere in Scripture does it teach that in this world we will be exempt from pain. Paul tells us in **Philippians 1:29**, “**For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake.**”

Again, the apostle Peter tells us in **1 Peter 2:18-21**:

**Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.**

A couple of chapters later, in **4:12**, Peter continues and says, **“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.”** Just because you feel like you are alone in experiencing hard times, or somehow you are being singled out for harsh treatment, get over yourself. Go back and read that verse. The issue of pain and injustice in this world is not to be considered strange. Peter is warning us that tough times will come, and when they do, don’t sit there and bury yourself in self-examination trying to figure out all the things that you might have done wrong. Maybe you didn’t do anything wrong. Bad things simply happen to good people. Don’t ask me to explain it. I can’t. But according to God’s Word, they do. And what’s even more challenging at times is to figure out why our loving God allows it.

The apostle James also speaks to the reality of trouble in the believer’s life. He says in **James 1:2**, **“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, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”**

Finally, Jesus, not wanting us to be surprised by difficulties coming into our lives and not wanting us to believe the lie that bad things never happen to good people, says in **Matthew 5:11**, “**Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**”

So suffering and pain is not something that, when it happens, should surprise us. It is a part of living in this fallen and hostile world.

Look back at that the term in **verse 3**, “**sufferings.**” It is a word that refers to every kind of problem, from a minor irritation to a major disaster. It is everything that causes distress, whether it be people or circumstances.

Paul’s words express hard-headed honesty about the real world. In this life we will have troubles. Things break down, relationships fail, people disappoint us, and we do things we are ashamed of. At times, we seem gripped by problems that we can’t get out of. We have illnesses, loss of jobs, angry relationships, everything you can think of in the way of suffering. Yet the apostle says we “**rejoice**” in our sufferings. And as we will see, our loving sovereign God allows these troubles to come upon us for a good purpose. It is not random or without reason, although it is sometimes hard to understand. And often, we wish that God would sit down with us and explain things to us. But God is not obligated to explain the why of your pain. If you think so, go to your Old Testament and read the book of **Job**. Take some time to read and reread the first two chapters of Job to make sure that you have put yourself clearly in Job’s sandals. Then keep reading the book. One of your conclusions will be: God is not obligated to explain the why of your pain.

Basically, there are two categories under which all of our pain and trouble fall. The first are those circumstances that are under our control. But due to poor or wrong decisions, or foolish choices, or sin, we find ourselves engulfed in difficulties. These troubles come as consequences of our wrong choices.

But not all our problems are a result of our wrong choices, which leads us to the second category under which much of our troubles fall. And these are circumstances over which we have no control. Examples of this are persecution for our faith, natural disasters, plagues, drive-by shootings, terrorist attacks, school shootings, genetic defects, and so on.

So, these things happen to us as believers. When they do, how are we to respond? Paul says that we are to “**rejoice.**” But what does that mean?

First, let’s see what it does not mean and then what true rejoicing in the Lord involves.

For one, it does not mean that we are to become stoics and put on the grin-and-bear-it attitude, or to tough it out, or to keep a stiff upper lip. Many Christians believe that this is what Paul means. But non-Christians can do that. And many of them can put us to shame by what they can bear without complaining.

The kind of rejoicing that Paul has in mind here is a supernaturally empowered ability to rejoice. So I don’t see that the grin-and-bear-it attitude is the thing Paul has in mind here.

Furthermore, I don’t see Paul’s intention to be that we are supposed to enjoy pain. That would be masochistic. There are a lot of people who believe that we are to look forward to painful circumstances. If they are not miserable or made to feel miserable, they are unhappy. Some even come to church, and if they don’t leave the worship service feeling like a worm, they don’t believe they have worshipped or have heard the Word preached.

Neither does Paul mean when he says that we are to rejoice in our sufferings that we are to pretend that we are happy. That would be advocating that we be phonies. And Christianity is never phony. We are not to be artificial and put on plastic smiles. We can be honest, and when someone else asks how we are doing, we can say, “I am hurting over this situation. I don’t like it, and wish it had never happened.”

So, if these three things do not represent what Biblical rejoicing is all about, then what does Paul have in mind here when he says that maturity is revealed when a person can rejoice in difficulty?

Firstly, Paul gives us a little hint here in **verse 3**. He says that this genuine rejoicing comes from something we can know. It’s almost like insider information for Christians only. And that inside information comes from God’s Word.

The basis for true rejoicing comes from the perspective we get from the truth of God's Word concerning the trial and our God who is right there with us in it. As we get perspective from the Word, we soon find ourselves rejoicing.

This leads to my second point. Here is one specific truth from God's Word that creates genuine rejoicing amidst hardship. In **Psalm 103:19** we read, "**The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all.**" "**Sovereignty**" means that the buck stops with God. Nothing happens on this planet without His permission. He does not cause evil, but He may allow evil ones to prosper and use their evil against them for His own good.

Knowing that God is good and that He is in charge may not lead to laughter when a tragedy occurs. However, it can lead to a sense of peace in the midst of the storm--that all is going to be okay--even though it presently may not be as you would have chosen it to be. It is a rejoicing in the fact that no matter what the difficulty, His perspective is that it is not the end of the world, and He is still in control.

Furthermore, when we face the painful pressures of life, we may not be able to jump up and down and praise God right at the moment of a trial. Hence, let's be realistic. Our ability to rejoice may not take place immediately, but it will in time. **Hebrews 12:11** teaches, "**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.**"

Finally, this sense of genuine rejoicing comes from being honest with ourselves about our genuine feelings, from gaining perspective from God's Word, and from knowing that God is sovereignly good. But also genuine rejoicing comes from knowing that suffering produces something good. In the end, it is productive. **Hebrews 12:11** teaches us that God's discipline produces good. **Romans 8:28** teaches us that God uses all things for good for those who know Jesus.

The Christian who truly understands all that went behind God's loving efforts to rescue us from the control of sin and to make us righteous in Christ knows that this trial is going to produce something worthwhile. We know that our God is sovereign, loving, and in control. He would not allow anything to

happen to us, to those whom He did so much for to save in the first place. We may die as a result of the ordeal, but so what? And someday, and for many of us right here on earth, we will look back and say, “Although it hurt, knowing what I now know, I wouldn’t have missed the opportunity for that painful event and for what it produced in my life for anything this world has to offer”.

Paul shows us four products that suffering produces in the believer’s life. The first good productive thing that comes from painful circumstances is the ability to persevere. It teaches one how to abide under pressure, how to hang in there when the going gets tough. Perseverance is the opposite of panicking or bailing out. Maybe a better word is steadiness.

Pressure is something we all naturally try to crawl out from under or to run from. Pressures of life cause us to become volatile, resentful, and manipulative of others. We get backed into a corner and do or say things to others. Often times when I face an uninvited problem in my life, my first reaction is to cry out, “God, get me out of here!” But that is not a correct response.

A more correct response that comes with maturity is to pray for God’s enablement while remaining under the pressure. It’s learning to draw upon the supernatural graces or power of God that are in us, because Christ literally lives in the believer. It is the surpassing greatness of this power of God that is in us that gets us through tough times. For it is only in these testing times that we become steadier and more able to persevere.

Steadiness with the Lord is built over a period of time. We sort of develop a track record of being in tight spots only to see the Lord deliver. He always proves Himself to be faithful. And as we learn to trust Him in difficult times, we become steadier.

Furthermore, during these stressful times we learn more about ourselves, that we aren’t all that adequate to meet all our needs. We aren’t as strong, smart, or in control of our circumstances as we thought. It produces “**proven character.**” What is proven character? The Greek word for “**character**” carries with it the idea of being put to a test, like a new car’s test drive. And when it passes the test, it gets a stamp of approval. It’s the idea of being shown to others or being seen by others as one who is reliable, trustworthy, dependable, and believable.

When people get in trouble they naturally look to those around them who are more mature, who are believable, for help. Often times, they will turn to us in the midst of the storm to be steadied, because they see we have proven to be steady in the storms of life. It's why I have told some who have been through deep waters and wonder if they can make it, "Hold on to my faith, and we will get through this together. Lean on me." That's what it means to bear one another's burdens.

The third product produced by pressure in the believer's life has to do with "**hope**." Pain in life develops endurance or steadiness amid difficult times. And through endurance over time, we prove our veteran-like character in the faith. And this faith, as it continues to grow, produces hope. And that takes us back to where all this began in **verse 2**, hope. We have come full circle back to hope again.

However in **verse 2**, it was a hope for our future and sharing the glory of God beyond death. But here, this "**hope**" refers to the sharing in some of the likeness of God, becoming more like Christ right now, in this present life. This hope is not just a possibility, it is a certainty.

God, right now, is transforming you more into the Christ-like person He wants you to be. We don't have to wait for the future to see our lives transformed. It happens now, as we walk with and depend upon the Lord to live His life through us right here.

This brings us to the fourth product of pain. Paul says in **verse 5** that "**hope does not disappoint**" or let you down or cause you to be ashamed of the One in Whom you have put your trust. In other words, hope makes us more confident that what God says is true, and that He will deliver on all of His promises.

But how does hope do this? Paul goes on to tell, "**And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our heart**," our inner man. Our new nature is realizing how much God loves us. And how is He teaching us this? "**Through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.**"

Once again, it is important to note that God's love, meaning the reality that He loves the believer, has been "**poured out.**" This is literally a continuing understanding of how much God loves us, and it takes place as we understand more of the lengths to which God went to make us right with Him, and of His commitment to transform our lives and help us to grow up. The understanding of God's love for us grows as we understand all the supernatural provisions and enablement He has given to us so that we might live life more fully, even in the midst of tragedy.

In the end, these four products remind us what we read about in **Romans 8:37**. "**But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.**" Hence, when the pressure is on and troubles come our way, the Biblical truth is that we are not helpless victims, but empowered victors in Christ.

Often however, times of heartache do not bring about growth and a sense of God's increasing love toward us or a victory. Many feel abandoned. You and I know Christians who are suffering, but they are not being strengthened or becoming steadier in the midst of it. They are not growing in their love for the Lord. Instead, due to pain, they are becoming bitter, angry, and resentful to the point that some are denying their faith. They are allowing their pain to drive them away from God, not to Him. In other words, suffering does not always produce these qualities of perseverance, proven character, hope, and boldness in every Christian's life. Why? What makes the difference between becoming a defeated Christian under pressure and a victorious Christian under pressure?

Those who live defeated in the midst of tragedy or the pressures of life are those who are questioning the love of God. If you believe that your troubles are the result of God venting His spleen on you or the lie of Satan that God has turned his back on you, then you are on the road to discouragement. But if you realize and believe that a loving God who will never leave you or forsake you will use the painful situation for a good purpose, then you will be better able to face your difficulty.

Andrew Murray, the great reformed theologian and missionary of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, once wrote words of encouragement that I found so helpful that I paraphrased them, and put them at my desk as a reminder. These words

helped remind me of bedrock Christian truth during the pressures of forty years of pastoring. Here's how I rewrote his words for my use:

- A. God brought me here; therefore it is by His will that I am in this difficult place. In that fact I will rest. I am not here by accident. I am not lost from God's sight. He has brought me to this time and place in my life for a reason, and I will trust Him with that.
- B. God will keep me here in His love and will give me grace in this trial to behave as His child.
- C. God will make the trial a blessing, teaching me the lessons He intends for me to learn.
- D. In God's good time, He will bring me out again. How and when, only He knows.

So, I'm here:

By God's appointment.

In God's keeping.

Under God's training.

For God's time.