

A Spiritual Growth Cycle  
Sept 3, 2017

I spent a few minutes pulling up oak trees this past week. They were only a few inches tall. Even so they can be tough to pull up. Do you ever wonder how an acorn turns into an oak tree? They don't look anything alike. Scientists tell us that the DNA in the genes of the acorn determine what the final tree will look like. The DNA tells the bark cells how rough or smooth to be, what color to be, and what shape the leaves should be. But that doesn't explain how it works. There is a lot about the growing of plants that we do not know.

There is even less that we know about how humans are shaped from a seed into an adult person. Science will never discover it all because God is involved in the process. We are more than a physical human body. We have a spirit. Only God can produce a new human spirit. He does so every time a new child is conceived. Science will never discover how that works.

Just as the body is meant to grow, so the spirit is meant to grow. God has revealed in the Bible things that contribute to our spiritual growth. We will look at one of them this morning. But first, we're going to look at one of the most powerful statements in all the Bible. You would do well to mark it in your Bible and to memorize it. When you memorize spiritual truth you give the Holy Spirit a tool to use in your development.

Turn with me to Romans 5:1-5, please.

**Romans 5:1-2 (NIV)** Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

This is one of the most significant sentences in the entire Bible. Let me unpack its meaning for you today. You need to understand it and use it in order to grow spiritually mature.

First note that he is speaking to and about Christians. He says we have been justified and have peace with God. That only applies to Christians. Only through Jesus is anyone justified and gains peace with God.

This is not inner peace. This is not peace of mind or lack of stress. No, this is relational peace. **This peace is a ceasing of hostilities with God.** You see sin makes us enemies of God. Only when our sin is paid for can there be peace between us and God. And that is what Jesus did for us, He paid the price of our sin. He died for us on the cross. When we believe, God declares the war over. In Jesus we are at peace with God.

The word justified is a legal term. **When someone is declared "not guilty" (justified) in a court of law, it means they are declared to be right with the community.**

That means the person is at peace with the community. Criminals are enemies of the community. If caught and found guilty they must pay their debt to society so they can be at peace with us again.

Picture yourself in God's court, on trial for all your sins. You are found guilty. But Jesus declares that He paid the price of your sin and testifies that you are His follower. God then declares you justified and you are released.

This is the picture of justification. By your faith in Jesus God declared you justified and at peace with Himself. You can now grow that relationship deeper and stronger. That is the process he then describes for us in the rest of today's passage. But it relies on the truth of verses 1-2.

**Romans 5:3-5 (NIV)** And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Here we see a spiritual growth process. It involves hope, suffering, perseverance, character, and then a stronger hope. Let's look more closely at what is taking place.

We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. When Jesus returns to earth, we are going to see Him in His glory and we will share in it. This is the glory he writes of at the end of verse 3.

When you first become a Christian, all you have is that promise. You have not experienced it yet. You have made it your hope, but you cannot prove that it is true. No one who has died and gone to heaven has come back to tell us that it is true. We won't know it is true until it happens to us. For now it is a hope. But it is based on our justification and peace with God.

### **So how does our hope grow?**

**It starts with suffering.** There are different causes of suffering in our lives. I shared those in a sermon a few weeks ago and will not repeat them today.

**This calls for perseverance.** Whatever the reason for your suffering, it calls for perseverance. We must persevere in our faith, persevere in our hope, persevere in our love, and persevere in our obedience to Jesus. We must persevere despite whatever suffering we are facing.

Let's go back to our passage. Paul writes that we are to rejoice in our sufferings. Notice he does not say to rejoice that you are suffering.

Some people do enjoy their suffering. They use it to get attention. They want people to take notice of them, to feel sorry for them. This is how they have learned to get attention and so they repeat it over and over again. Paul does not mean for us to be like this.

Others gripe and grumble about their sufferings because they like to gripe and grumble. If not suffering, they'll gripe and grumble about something else. Some people are not happy unless they are miserable. That sounds odd, but you may know someone like that. Paul does not mean for us to be like these people either.

Nor does he mean for us to pretend. Some people pretend they like suffering while others pretend that suffering doesn't bother them, like it is no big deal. Both of these are forms of lying. This is phoniness. Christians are called to be truth tellers. God wants us to be genuine. There is no shame in admitting that you are going through something painful and difficult.

Paul is not expecting us to rejoice that we are suffering. He wants us to rejoice for what suffering can produce in us.

**Rejoice in what suffering can lead to.**

**Romans 5:3-4 (NIV)** "...we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Let me illustrate first with a personal experience. My wife and I had a tough time as parents. Both of our sons rebelled strongly against all authority. We lived through some tough years. I did not enjoy life much then. I would not choose to go through such a time again. But I grew a lot through that suffering. My character was changed for the better. I experienced the presence of God in many different ways, my character and hope growing stronger.

Paul could say the same thing. He experienced a lot of suffering as a missionary. Paul's suffering exceeded anything most of us will ever face. He had been stoned, beaten, whipped, and more, all for the cause of spreading the Christian faith. None of those things were pleasant at the time. He did not enjoy being hit with rocks or whips. He bruised just like anyone else. He felt pain just as we do. He did not rejoice that he suffered. But he did rejoice for what the suffering accomplished in him. His character changed and his hope strengthened. And so can yours

The reaction of most of us to suffering is to get out of it. We want to run from it if possible. But if we run from the suffering instead of persevering through it, we will interrupt the growth cycle. Perseverance is the opposite of bailing out.

**Perseverance requires several important things from us.**

**1. Perseverance requires faith.**

Christian faith is always focused on God. The facts of the Christian life are that God is all knowing and wise, all powerful, all present. God is always with us. Our faith is in this God, the God of the good news of Jesus. We put our faith in the facts of this good news: Jesus paid for our sins, He was raised from the dead, He offers us forgiveness of sin, eternal life and much, much more. And in verses 1-2 we learn that we are justified through Christ and have peace with God. These are facts to put your faith in.

Whenever doubts come to your mind, remind yourself that you are justified and have peace with God. Whenever feelings of inadequacy or fear or guilt come to your mind, remind yourself that you are justified and have peace with God.

Use these truths to subdue any feelings of fear, worry, guilt, or doubt. Remind yourself of the facts of the Christian life. Remember what Jesus did. Remember what you gained. Remember what is coming. Remember the power of God to accomplish all of His plans.

Make a choice to keep on trusting in God instead of your feelings. Your feelings are real, but they do not always reflect truth. Learn to trust the truth that you are justified and have peace with God. Don't let fear or other feelings defeat you. Rely on the facts of your justification rather than on your feelings.

**2. Perseverance requires prayer.**

Don't just remind yourself of God's promises. Ask God for help to persevere. Listen, Christian, you are not to be living this life in your power for God. You are to be living this life in His power with God. Whenever we try to live in our own power we take credit for any success and our pride grows. We shortchange God of the glory He deserves. Such pride becomes a barrier to receiving spiritual truth. So don't face suffering on your own. Ask God for help to persevere.

**3. Perseverance requires us to take the next step of obedience.**

Perseverance means to keep on keeping on. Put your faith in God, ask for His help, and then take the next step of obedience. That is what perseverance requires. And after that first step take the next step, and then the next step. This is the pattern of perseverance.

Now when we face suffering like this, what happens? Our character gets better.

**God uses our obedient perseverance to develop the character of Jesus in us.**

In the book of Galatians, we have a list of characteristics that the Holy Spirit is producing in us through our obedience. They are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This is not an exhaustive list. A different list is in 2 Peter.

Now, when you or others see such character growing in you, this is evidence of the Holy Spirit working on you. This is proof of the power of God. And the result is that your hope grows stronger. We all need hope. People can die without hope. Let me define Christian hope for you.

**Christian hope is a longing for the fulfillment of God's promises.**

Let me explain the difference between Christian hope and non-Christian hope. Non-Christian hope is just a wish. This past week a company came out and seeded my lawn. What I want is for all that grass seed to germinate and grow into grass. But the seeding company did not make any promises about the seed germinating and growing into grass. So my desire for the seed to germinate is a wish.

Compare that to my hope. God has made promises to me as a Christian. My hope is for those promises to come true. This hope is based on the promises of God, on God's character, His faithfulness. My desire for these things is not a wish, but a hope because someone has made a promise to me for their fulfillment. Christians are hoping for the fulfillment of God's promise of resurrection and eternal life, of glory and freedom from the power of sin.

When your hope grows stronger, it becomes the super glue that cements all the aspects of your faith together. This is God's spiritual growth cycle for strengthening your hope.

Again, it rests on the truth of being justified and at peace with God. This promise is for everyone. You can leave here justified and at peace with God. I urge you to believe on Jesus, and receive Him as your personal Savior and Lord.