

JOY IN SUFFERINGS - ROMANS 5:3,4

BLESSINGS OF JUSTIFICATION #4

The Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation in New York City is a depressing place for most people. That large structure on 34th Street is the place where many quadriplegics go in New York City for their rehabilitation. Almost everyone who wheels through those doors has just been in a tragic accident, paralyzing a major portion of his or her body. Almost everyone who wheels through those doors has had his or her life turned upside down. Almost everyone who wheels through those doors is not only wrestling with physical debilities, but is also battling anger and depression. But everyone who wheels through those doors comes face to face with a bitter reality of life and a choice of how the remainder of his or her life is to be spent.

On the wall in the reception room on the Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation is a large, bronze plaque. It is riveted to the wall, giving the impression that it has always been there and will always remain there. On that plaque is a message dating all the way back to the Civil War, a message written by a Confederate soldier. This unknown soldier was obviously a Christian man, and was obviously one who suffered greatly. This is what is written on that plaque which someone has entitled "A Creed for Those who have Suffered".

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.

I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health, that I might do great things.

I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.

I asked for riches, that I might be happy.

I was given poverty, that I might be wise.

I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men.

I was given weakness, that I might feel the need for God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.

I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing I asked for - but everything I had hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I, among men, am most richly blessed.

We have been studying 7 blessings of Justification that are given by the Apostle Paul in Romans 5:1-11. We have already looked at the blessing of having peace with God. When we have been justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, when we have surrendered unconditionally to our creator God confessing our sinful condition and trusting in Jesus Christ alone for our eternal salvation which is the basis for justification, when we have been declared to be 'not guilty' by God and have been granted the very righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ which is what justification really is, then and only then can we know peace with God. And because we have peace with God, we can also have access to God. The wall of enmity and alienation has been broken down so that we can fulfill our created purpose, to fellowship with God and enjoy communion with him. So we are invited to come boldly before the throne of grace, anytime, day or night, to fellowship and commune with God in prayer. Having peace with God, we also have the hope of the glory of God. Because we are now children of God, we know that our destiny is to receive glorified, resurrected bodies after physical death and dwell in the presence of the glory of God in heaven for all eternity. Now we come to a fourth blessing of being justified by faith which also flows logically from the former blessings.

Before we were saved, while we were still enemies of God, we always had the suspicion that God was angry with us and punishing us when something disastrous happened to us in life. Now this was logical reasoning on our part. For God is infinitely more powerful than we are. So it is not a comforting thought to realize that we are enemies with such an omnipotent being. We tried to hide this fear and we tried to deny this fear, but it was always there. Whenever some unwanted intrusion came into our lives, we always wondered deep inside, "Is God punishing me for something that I did?" The result was a desperate aversion of any unwanted circumstances. Trials, afflictions, tribulations were to be avoided at all costs. For they not only brought difficult situations into our lives, but they also brought the guilt of wondering if God were punishing us for something. The frustration that we all faced, of course, was the impossibility of keeping trials and afflictions and tribulations out of our lives. For as Job 5:7 says, "Man is born to trouble as surely as the sparks fly upwards". So our lives were complicated by the impossible task of totally controlling the circumstances of our lives so that we wouldn't have any trials or suffering, with every failure bringing not only the frustration of dealing with the affliction but also the guilt of wondering if God were punishing us for something.

Now one of the blessings of being born again into God's family through being justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is that we now can have a whole new perspective on the sufferings that are inevitable in this life. Now, being at peace with God, having access to God, and having the hope of the glory of God, we can have the absolute assurance that suffering is not the mark of God's angry displeasure towards us. We have been born again into God's family. We have been accepted in the beloved. We are now God's children. Yes,

God has committed himself to chasten us when we stray from His will, but even that chastening hand of God is a mark of His love for us. God never brings suffering into our lives to punish us or hurt us. Rather, He promises that all things (even trials and afflictions and tribulations and sufferings) work together for good in the lives of those who love him. So as Christians we can have the confidence to face every circumstance in life (even the unwanted intrusions) knowing that everything is contributing to God's purpose of making us to be better people, fashioned into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The 4th blessing found in Romans 5:3,4 addresses this process that we want to look at together this morning.

READ PASSAGE ROMANS 5:1-4.

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. 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.

What a wealth of spiritual truth is found in this passage. And how different God's wisdom here is from the wisdom that is offered by the world around us.

The world tells us to avoid suffering or adversity at any cost.

- *get control of circumstances around us
- *set goals for quick achievement
- *the achievement of these goals gives happiness
- *and happiness brings a measure of hope for the future

Now there is nothing wrong with seeking a measure of control of circumstances that are under our areas of responsibility. There is nothing wrong with setting goals for achievement. But such an idealistic life really sets forth unrealistic expectations that eventually lead to disillusionment and despair rather than hope.

God's word thru Paul offers a different path to us.

- *Accept the suffering that cannot be avoided and endure it
- *the patient endurance of the suffering will produce perseverance in your life
- *Your patience and perseverance will then refine your character
- *As your character grows, you will be filled with God's hope, because you will see him working in your life.

Let's look at these steps that Paul gives together.

1. Paul first of all speaks of rejoicing in our sufferings.

Now it is very important to see the Greek construction here. Paul is not saying that we are to seek out suffering and expect that we will be filled with happiness while enduring thru them. Rather he is saying that we are to rejoice on account of our sufferings for we see God's purpose in them. Let me quote a paragraph from Charles Hodge's commentary on Romans:

"Since our relation to God is changed, the relation of all things to us is changed. Afflictions, which before were the expressions of God's displeasure, are now the benevolent and beneficent manifestations of his love. And instead of being inconsistent with our filial relation to him, they serve to prove that he regards and loves us as his children. Tribulations, therefore, although for the present not joyous, but grievous, become to the believer a matter of joy and thankfulness. The words (and he quotes the Greek phrase) do not mean that we glory in the midst of afflictions, but on account of them. They are themselves the matter or ground of the glorying."

Now it is very important that we see this point. For often, Christians set forth unrealistic expectations for themselves. They feel that as Christians, they should feel no pain and be emotionally happy all of the time, even in the midst of suffering. This is not taught in the Bible. Christians feel pain just like every other human being. The pain hurts, and we recoil from it. But the difference for the Christian is that he or she can see the big picture. We can realize how God uses even suffering to bring about blessing in our lives. So we do not rejoice in the suffering itself- but we rather rejoice because of the suffering. For we see the good that the suffering is going to produce in our lives.

2. This brings us to the second step. As the Christian realizes the good that can come from suffering, he is led to endure it patiently.

There are 2 Greek words that are used for patience or perseverance in the bible. Both are compound words. One, makrothumia, comes from the 2 Greek terms makro, to restrain or hold back, and thumos, which means anger or wrath. Very literally, makrothumia is the restraining or holding back of anger. This word is used exclusively in having patience towards people, living human beings. God desires for his children to reflect his character in responding to other human beings. God is a longsuffering, a patient God. He is even at this time holding back his righteous wrath against sin. Peter said of the Lord, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." God wants us to reflect his character in our response to others- to restrain anger, to be patient and longsuffering with them.

But in responding to situations or circumstances, there is a completely different word that is used. That is the word found in Romans 5:3,4. This is the term *hupomeno*, coming from *hupo* (under) and *meno* (to live or abide or remain). Literally, *hupomeno* means to remain under, or to endure the suffering with perseverance.

When I was a boy, I loved picnics in the summer. Perhaps it was because you didn't have to be so careful with eating manners. And it seemed that every picnic included some watermelon, and every picnic seemed to end with a watermelon seed fight. You know what I mean, don't you? You take your thumb and put it on the watermelon seed and squeeze it down and what happens? That seed shoots out like a bullet.

The natural response to suffering is to respond just like that watermelon seed.

*stress at school- drop out

*pressure at work- get another job

*conflict in the home- get a divorce

But God's desire is for us to remain under that suffering until He delivers us from it. Why?

3. Because the suffering will refine our character. The word that is translated character is *dokimos*. It is used often throughout the N.T. in the sense of an evidence or a proof. Let me briefly give 3 instances of the Apostle's usage of this term that will help us to understand the completeness of its meaning. Paul said to the church at Corinth: "On my return, I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me." (2 Cor. 13:2,3). That word "proof" is the same word that Paul uses in Romans 5:4. Again, Paul said: "The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything." (2 Cor. 2:9). That word "test" is our word. Again in Phil. 2:22: "But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel." Here, the word proved is our word.

I think that you are getting the idea.

*As we endure suffering, remaining under it, our character is strengthened and this becomes an evidence, a proof, a test.

1. It gives evidence to the faithfulness of God who will in His time bring deliverance to us.

2. It gives evidence to the unsaved world that we are different from others. A Christian's suffering can be one of the best testimonies offered of God's power to change lives.

3. But in the context here, the evidence is to ourselves. As we bear under suffering with perseverance, and as we see our character refined, this gives evidence to us that God is working in our lives, that we truly are a child of his and that he loves us very much, and this brings hope to us.

"Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

As the suffering produces perseverance in our lives, and we experience growth in this most important area, this becomes an evidence, a proof to us that we are indeed a member of God's family and that God is working within us - and this results in hope.

Now in conclusion, we must remind ourselves that having joy in suffering is a blessing of justification. Only those who have the confidence that they have been declared 'not guilty' by God and have the righteousness of Christ given to them have a foundation for having joy in their sufferings.

It would be foolish to speak to those in the world about the truths that we have spoken of this morning. To encourage them to bear up under suffering so that character might be tested and they might have greater hope- they would just laugh. Because there is no relationship with God- there is no peace with him. There is no access to God- there is no communion there. There is not hope - there is no confidence of eternal life. So there is no confidence of God working in their lives because they are not his children.

But for those of us who know Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord- we realize the power of God working in our lives. And this gives to us an entirely different perspective. We realize that nothing comes into our life without passing thru the loving fingers of God. True- there might be difficult circumstances- but even these have the potential of becoming a blessing to us or God wouldn't allow them into our lives for He has the ability to work all things together for good in the lives of those who love him. So, we have the confidence to accept suffering in his will, to endure it with patience, to allow it to test our character, and this gives us great hope for the future.

In conclusion, I would like to illustrate what we have been talking about with a Biblical character.

James wrote to those who were suffering persecution. His encouragement to them was to not give up, but to endure the persecution until the coming of the Lord. In the 5th chapter of his epistle, he used 2 illustrations- one from nature, the farmer waiting patiently for the growth of his crop- so we must be patient with the growth of our character- and the other in human form using the example of Job.

READ James 5:7-11

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

Now let me ask you a question- do you think Job was happy going thru that intense period of suffering in his life? Let me read some of his own comments for you:

*May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, a boy is born. That day- may it turn to darkness; may God above not care about it; may no light shine upon it. 3:3,4

*Why is light given to those in misery and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come. 3:20,21

*If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales. It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas. 6:2,3

*I loathe my very life. 10:1

Doesn't really sound like a man who was enjoying life, does it? Of course Job didn't enjoy his suffering. It was painful. It was agony. He even wanted to take his life. But he didn't. He didn't curse God, and he didn't die. He didn't give up, but he endured his suffering. And thru his suffering, his character was so refined that when he came to the end of it- God could trust him with double the riches and blessings that he had in the first place.

After Job got thru this horrendous ordeal in his life- what do you think his attitude was towards the future. I believe that Job was filled with hope. After all, if God had been faithful in getting him thru such a tragedy as this, what else could possibly come into his life that God couldn't handle? Job had proven something to himself - and this would have given to him great hope for the future.

Sufferings are going to come into our lives. Most here in our Worship Center this morning have gone through some deep waters of suffering. If you haven't yet, just wait - you will some day. For we all have been born to suffering as sure as the sparks fly upward. You don't have to expect yourself to like sufferings, to desire them or even be happy when you are enduring them- but you can rejoice that God allows you to have suffering in your life. For as you endure thru the suffering, your character will be tested and proven, and this will give to you great hope for the future.

Malcolm Muggeridge was once invited to speak at All Souls Church in London, England. The church was packed to hear the famous author and thinker. And many atheists had come to ask him hard questions during the discussion time. Malcolm answered all of the questions with wisdom and finesse, and was just getting ready to conclude when he noticed a young man in a wheelchair who had been trying to ask a question but had not been able to get it in. Muggeridge said to the crowd, "There is one more person who wants to ask a question, and then we will go to a time of refreshments." The young man began to struggle to get the

question out, but was obviously having a difficult time physically. "Take your time, the speaker said, I want to hear your questions and will not leave until you ask it." Then, as the young man's struggle only produced agonizing contortions, Malcolm stepped down from the platform and walked to where the man sat in his wheelchair. He put his arm around his shoulder and reassured him to take it easy. We'll just wait here until you ask your question. Finally, the young man got his question out. "You say that there is a God who loves us. Then why - me?"

The room hushed immediately in silence. And Muggeridge was silent for a long time as well. Finally, he just asked the question, "If you were in a different state, would you have come to this meeting tonight to hear about the love of God?" The young man shook his head in honesty. Then Malcolm continued, "God has asked a hard thing of you. But always remember, he asked something even harder of Jesus Christ. Christ died for you. Maybe this was His way of making sure you'd hear of his love and come to put your faith in Him."

Tears filled the eyes of that young man in the wheel chair, and he gave his heart to the Lord that evening.

Life is not always easy. God never promised that it would be. In contrast, the Bible warns us that there will be suffering in this life. It cannot be avoided. It must be endured. But as Christians, we must all remember one thing - God will never ask more of us than he asked of his one and only son, Jesus Christ. And God promises that he will bring eternal good out of our temporal suffering. So we can have joy in suffering. Not that we enjoy the suffering itself. But that we have the assurance that the suffering will bring eternal benefit to us.